

# Coming to terms: scepticism and the philosophical essay

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Erin S. Plunkett

Royal Holloway, University of London

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## Declaration of Authorship

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I, Erin Plunkett, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Plunkett', is centered on the page.

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## Abstract

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This study aims to link the essay form in a novel way to the philosophical problem of scepticism and to suggest the ways in which analytical philosophy can benefit from the employment of literary reading strategies, including generic or stylistic approaches to philosophical texts. While a number of literary studies link the essay to a broadly sceptical worldview, the term scepticism has not been employed with any philosophical rigour, and so the precise connections between this form of writing and an epistemological position have yet to be made.

The authors in this study, an exemplary rather than exhaustive sampling of essayists from Montaigne to Cavell, adopt a therapeutic approach to the sceptical problem that resonates with ancient Pyrrhonism in rejecting foundationalist attempts to justify knowledge claims and instead situating the will to know within a broader frame of meaningful human activity. This performative response takes shape in texts that are open-ended, dialogical, and heterogeneous, resisting systematisation or reductionism. Embodying Hume's 'league betwixt the learned and conversable worlds', the essay decisively rejects specialisation or any attempt to separate philosophy from its wider social and ethical context. Rhetorical strategies of discontinuity are used to call attention to the conditions of time, subjectivity, and language under which reason operates and by which philosophical activity is constrained. In this way essayists redefine the stakes of the problem of knowledge and offer ways of coming to terms with the limitations of the will to know. For Stanley Cavell, the sceptic's error is to deny the 'human conditions of knowledge and action'. If the denial or disappointment that underlies the sceptical project creates the *task* of recovering the world, then the essayistic tradition can be seen as the therapeutic project of *calling* philosophy back to common life.

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*Il Disinganno*, Francesco Queirolo, 1753-54, Museo Sansevero, Naples.

## A note on methodology

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The title of the present work links the philosophical problem of scepticism to a way of writing, an essayistic mode. Adopting a generic approach to a philosophical question may strike some as counter-intuitive, as if a literary methodology were being misapplied or the fundamental differences between philosophy and literature were being ignored. Despite the broad application of the term ‘text’ in literary and cultural criticism and despite Richard Rorty’s (1978) still-timely reminder that, whatever else it may be, philosophy is a kind of writing, there remain few philosophical studies within the Anglophone tradition dedicated to questions of genre or form in modern philosophical texts. In the classroom too, the formal qualities of philosophical works are too rarely addressed. The lack of generic variation in contemporary Anglophone philosophy, as opposed to the enthusiastic experimentation with genres in previous centuries, goes hand in hand with the lack of attention to philosophical works as *texts* in current pedagogy. This resistance to the literary dimension of philosophical texts has been thoroughly diagnosed, both by Rorty and by the subject of his 1978 essay, Jacques Derrida, as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of language and a misguided attempt by philosophy to borrow its legitimacy from the objectivity of the sciences (the fiction of the transparent, authorless text), while distancing itself from ‘rhetoric’. In recent years, Beryl Lang (2010) has tried to popularise the study of rhetorical strategies as expressions of ethical and epistemological commitments, pointing to a blind spot in contemporary analytic philosophy. Jonathan Lavery (2007, 2010) has argued that genre in particular is a useful lens through which to read philosophical texts, one that can supplement logical or semantic analysis and bring to light features of a text that would otherwise remain hidden.

There are a number of ways in which philosophy can benefit from the employment of literary reading strategies. Focussing on the message in the medium, on the mode of writing as a vehicle of meaning, is a way of expanding philosophy’s analytical vocabulary and gaining fresh perspective on long-standing philosophical debates. Grouping texts together by form can also yield productive connections between disparate thinkers, opening up the field of philosophical history beyond a set of philosophical ‘problems’ identified in advance. Lastly, forms of discourse do not exist *a priori* but unfold in time, and linking philosophical ideas to concrete,

historical forms helps to contextualise philosophical assumptions about the real, the rational, and the true and to make us more aware of our own ways of speaking: what they take for granted and what they cover over.

This study explores essayism as a performative response to the sceptical problem, a way of writing that attempts to do justice to the anti-foundationalist insights of ancient scepticism and that, in the process, brings into focus the everyday conditions that underlie speculative doubt. While textual form is an important consideration for any philosophical text, scepticism presents a specific set of challenges related to justification and authority that for many writers has necessitated open-ended, dialogical forms of writing through which a subject may be explored from multiple, incongruous points of view, leaving the reader to take an active role in weighing the merit of these views. In the preface to *Johannes Climacus*, Kierkegaard promises to ‘combat The System by means of [literary] form’, (1985, p. 117) and this serves as an apt description of the therapeutic scepticism of the authors considered in this study. Essayistic form constitutes a serious response to sceptical doubt, one that does not attempt to ‘solve’ the problem but redefines the stakes while suggesting a different way of relating to being. The periodic eruption of essayistic texts within the history of philosophy marks moments of historical or disciplinary crisis, when prevailing modes of philosophical discourse and the aims of philosophical inquiry are called into question. The marginal or sub-genre of the essay, which as Lukács (1974) argued exists between science and art, is uniquely positioned as a critical form capable of standing both within and outside of the philosophical tradition. In formally representing the becoming of truth, the temporal nature of thought, the essay offers an alternative vision of knowledge and of the relationship of subject to world, both key issues in the history of scepticism and in the wider practice of philosophy.

## Chapter 1: Knowing and essaying

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<p><i>Habe nun, ach! Philosophie, Juristerei und Medizin, Und leider auch Theologie Durchaus studiert, mit heißem Bemühn. Da steh ich nun, ich armer Tor! Und bin so klug als wie zuvor; Heiße Magister, heiße Doktor gar Und ziehe schon an die zehen Jahr Herauf, herab und quer und krumm Meine Schüler an der Nase herum- Und sehe, daß wir nichts wissen können! [...] Dafür ist mir auch alle Freud entrissen, Bilde mir nicht ein, was Rechts zu wissen . . .</i></p>	<p>Ah! Now I've <i>done</i> Philosophy, I've finished Law and Medicine, And sadly even Theology: Taken fierce pains, from end to end. Now here I am, a fool for sure! No wiser than I was before: Master, Doctor's what they call me, And I've been ten years, already, Crosswise, arcing, to and fro, Leading my students by the nose, And see that we can know - nothing! [...] Instead all Joy is snatched away, What's worth knowing, I can't say . . .</p>
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-Goethe, *Faust*, Part I: Scene 1<sup>1</sup>

### What do we know?

'Scepticism' and 'essay' are each in their own way contentious terms that require some explanation and context. In its most basic form, scepticism is a term that indicates a doubt about the ability of subjects to know the world, or other minds—a doubt that can extend to the *existence* of the phenomena in question (Cartesian metaphysical scepticism), or, at the very least, to their nature, what the world is like in itself. As it has been conceived in the history of philosophy, scepticism is an epistemological problem of never being able to sufficiently justify one's beliefs about the world. The task of distinguishing between opinion and truth, appearance and reality, is foundational to how the philosophical tradition understands itself, and in this sense scepticism can be seen as *the* philosophical problem. Disputes over what constitutes genuine knowledge are at the heart of nearly every philosophical debate: Plato versus the Sophists, rationalism versus empiricism, Kant versus Hume, positivism versus post-structuralism.

One way the sceptical problem has played out is in a search for reliable criteria on which to base one's knowledge claims. In the modern sciences, claims about the world can be tested using the experimental method, which relies on individual researchers reaching a broad consensus through independent, controlled experimentation. Scientific hypotheses are empirical and provisional – true in the

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<sup>1</sup> A.S. Kline translation (2003, p. 19: 354-371).

sense that they are supported by overwhelming evidence, but improvable and open to change if new instruments make more reliable evidence available or new discoveries suggest different interpretations of existing data. Philosophy, historically, has not been satisfied with merely provisional truths. Identifying and challenging presuppositions to achieve stable, universally valid principles has long characterised the philosophical project. Foundationalism, the attempt to find some absolute ground for knowledge claims, takes many forms: from Plato's doctrine of Ideas to Kantian apperception, Fichtean idealism, and logical positivism. These efforts are motivated by a desire to preserve the distinction between false and true, and further, to preserve the ability to make normative claims. If what people accept as truths are ultimately groundless, then it is difficult to see how normative claims (ethical imperatives) could exercise any force, a principle that is reflected in Ivan Karamazov's suggestion that if there is no God, everything is permitted. Greek scepticism is a valuable resource for understanding the foundationalist imperative that stands behind sceptical doubt and the problem of infinite regress that plagues foundationalist efforts. It also raises the crucial ethical-political question of the relationship of philosophical doubt to common life and about the kinds of knowledge that could enable one to live well.

Scepticism arose in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE as a critical response to the positions of other philosophical schools such as the Stoics and Epicureans regarding what constituted knowledge and what sort of knowledge would lead to the good life.<sup>2</sup> There were three main schools of scepticism over a span of roughly four hundred years.<sup>3</sup> Few sources have survived to give a picture of the positions and methodology to which each school was committed; the most comprehensive source text is Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, which, after a period of obscurity, resurfaced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Stephanus' Latin translation (1562) in France and became a decisive text in the French Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> The brief but rich text outlines a rigorous dialectical

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed treatment of the history of scepticism, framed in terms of contemporary analytic philosophy, see Gascoigne, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> 1) The Practical Scepticism of Pyrrho (c.360-c.270 BCE); 2) the Academic Scepticism of Arcesilaus (315-240), who took over as head of the Academy in 264 BCE, Carneades (c. 214-129) and Clitomachus (c.187-c.110); and 3) the Neo-Pyrrhonian school comprising Aenesidemus (c.100-40 BCE), Agrippa (c. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE), and Sextus Empiricus (c. 160-c.210 CE).

<sup>4</sup> As Popkin outlines in his comprehensive study *The History of Scepticism* (1979), the first revival of scepticism can be located in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century France as the *nouveaux pyrrhoniens*, including, most notably, Montaigne, looked to Sextus' work as model for how to challenge dogmatic claims, be they scientific or religious. Popkin couches this renewed interest

method for diagnosing dogmatism and exposing the internal inconsistencies of any criterion of truth. Where other Classical schools make positive (dogmatic) knowledge claims about the impossibility of knowing, Neo-Pyrrhonian Sceptics, as presented by Sextus, adopt a radically agnostic epistemological stance, characterised by the systematic dismantling of any positive position, either for or against the possibility of certain knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Taking a cue from Socrates, they describe themselves as ‘aporetic’, their method issuing not in a new theory of knowledge but in a state of *aporia*, finding oneself ‘at a loss whether to assent or to deny’ (2000, p. 4: 7).

Sextus identifies the sceptical goal as suspension of belief or *epoché*, and his manual outlines ten ‘modes’ to achieve this end, ten ways to demonstrate the unreliability of any ground that an opponent may attempt to claim as justification of their position. The scope of his critical method is admirable, in that it applies equally well to the two extremities of the philosophical continuum—what can broadly (if somewhat anachronistically) be called empiricism and rationalism. The possible criteria of knowledge are on the one hand empirical – information conveyed through sense impressions – and on the other hand rational or logical, claims that are thought to be true because they are self-evident or internally consistent. Sextus argues against the reliability of sense data by appealing to common errors of perception, such as optical illusions; to the relativity of sense perception among different bodies (animals, insects, people suffering from illness, those with a high tolerance for heat or cold or pain); and to the limitations of the five sense organs

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in Pyrrhonism in the social context of the Reformation and the rise of rationalist arguments for religion. In Protestantism and its various sects, the individual believer was endowed with the power to understand the Scriptures and to question Church doctrines through, in part, the exercise of his or her rational mind, rather than relying entirely on the authority of Church elders or of the weight of doctrinal tradition. Many of the *nouveaux pyrrhoniens* were Counter-Reformationists who used classical sceptical methodology like the infinite regress argument to demonstrate the fallibility of reason with the goal of restoring a non-rational faith, a *credo quia absurdum*, based on the established traditions of the Church. Others used sceptical arguments to challenge religious belief altogether (as Popkin shows, it is a matter of some debate which of the *nouveaux pyrrhoniens* were intent on saving the Church and which were using the sceptical method ironically to demonstrate the absurdity of religious belief. The arguments are the same in either case.). As it was essentially a method for bringing about the suspension of belief, scepticism could be used as a critical weapon by either side in a debate, and Popkin convincingly shows that there is nothing spurious about using scepticism for fideistic ends. Kierkegaard will later do the same, using irony as a way to clear the path to receiving divine grace. The importance of Popkin’s analysis is to demonstrate that there are many ends to which scepticism might be applied, many different answers to the question of what philosophy ought to do if it is unable to provide a ground for justified true belief.

<sup>5</sup> Sextus identifies as his target both those who ‘think they have discovered the truth—for example the schools of Aristotle and Epicurus and the Stoics, and some others,’ and those (the Academic Sceptics) who assert that truth about things ‘cannot be apprehended’ (2000, p. 3: 3-4).

(‘other qualities can exist, impressing other sense organs in which we have no share’) (2000, pp. 26-27: 97).<sup>6</sup> Those tempted to turn away from sensory evidence and instead to seek a rational criterion for knowledge claims are likewise led into *aporia*, as Sextus lays out the first recorded version of the infinite regress or Agrippan argument (*Ibid.*, pp. 30-31: 114-118) wherein any criterion used to justify a claim itself requires further justification and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein, two millennia on, offers a pithy summary of the consequences of the infinite regress problem: ‘My reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act without reasons’ (Wittgenstein, 2009, pp. 90-91: 211).<sup>8</sup> This predicament, the ‘because I said so’ moment in the process of justification, clearly presents a problem for the examined life. Giving reasons and examining presuppositions is fundamental to philosophical reasoning, yet philosophy offers no way of saying *what counts* as sufficient justification if the process is in principle endless.

The Pyrrhonian critique of foundationalism is presented not as a set of propositions but as a dialectic, bringing different points of view into relation with one another in order to demonstrate the limited or provisional nature of each.<sup>9</sup> This rhetorical choice is significant in that it demonstrates an awareness of the problem of conveying a sense of *aporia* through positive, i.e. dogmatic propositions and the need instead for a kind of *via negativa*. Sextus defines the sceptical method as:

an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence (*isostheneia*) in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement (*epoché*) and afterwards to tranquillity (*ataraxia*) (2000, p. 4: 8).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This refutation of anthropocentrism has since been bolstered by the scientific discovery of senses like echolocation, magnetoception, and electroception in other species.

<sup>7</sup> ‘For a proof always requires a standard, and a standard always requires a proof in order to be true. A proof cannot be sound if there is no standard there already, nor can a standard be true if a proof has not already been made convincing. In this way standards and proofs fall into the reciprocal mode, by which both of them are found to be unconvincing’ (2000, p. 30). For a thorough treatment of the Agrippan argument in 20<sup>th</sup>-century analytic philosophy, see Gascoigne (2002).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Wenn das heißt “Habe ich Gründe?“, so ist die Antwort: die Gründe werden mir bald ausgehen. Und ich werde dann, ohne Gründe, handeln’.

<sup>9</sup> The dialectical method that Sextus describes includes comparing beliefs from different periods to demonstrate how what is understood as knowledge changes over time. This historical approach will be revived and employed to great effect by 19<sup>th</sup>-century dialecticians, including Hegel and Nietzsche.

<sup>10</sup> An alternative translation: ‘A disposition to oppose phenomena and noumena to one another in any way whatever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence among the things and statements thus opposed, we are brought first to *epoché* and then to *ataraxia* (tranquillity)’ (Mates, 1996, p. 89).

The dialectical approach covers both ‘things which appear’, and ideas or internal representations (‘things which are thought of in any way’). In seeking to demonstrate that *all* criteria are of equal, which is to say indeterminate, value, Pyrrhonians undermine the ability to make knowledge claims and thus seem to undermine the very possibility of philosophical discussion, in which criteria are evaluated with a view toward affirming or denying whatever claims about the world are being made. With their rigorous agnosticism, reinforced by the open-ended form of the dialectic, Pyrrhonians were an exasperating adversary, and their contemporaries, along with philosophers from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, viewed their agenda as essentially hostile to philosophy. Yet one can also see Pyrrhonism as a meta-philosophy that promotes a non-dogmatic way of understanding philosophical activity and pits the goal of human flourishing against the goal of certain knowledge. Neil Gascoigne nicely summarises this ‘therapeutic’ approach, following Sextus’ comparison of scepticism to medicine and Wittgenstein’s notion of philosophy as therapy:<sup>11</sup> ‘Principally, the Sceptic’s view was that rather than *guide* us in the search for the knowledge that would enable us to live happy lives, philosophy should *cure* us of the disposition to believe that there is any such knowledge’ (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 31). Insofar as there was a positive, and not merely critical, agenda in this approach, the outcome was meant to be a kind of ‘tranquillity’ (*ataraxia*) afforded by the giving up of unjustifiable views. Sextus suggested that it was possible to do away with beliefs about how the world *really* is and instead to live in accordance with custom and habit, after which tranquillity follows ‘fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body’ (2000, p. 11: 29).<sup>12</sup> The therapeutic scepticism of the

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<sup>11</sup> The standard view (Popkin), which I adopt here for the sake of simplicity, is that the Neo-Pyrrhonians reject any dogmatic position and instead seek to lead people to *aporia* and finally to tranquillity or indifference (*ataraxia*). This is how Sextus characterises the sceptical project. Gascoigne makes the case, based on textual evidence from Cicero, that the Academic sceptics, rather than the Neo-Pyrrhonians, epitomise the therapeutic approach. The point of contention is the extent to which, for the Pyrrhonians, the suspension of belief is undertaken *for the sake* of *ataraxia* or whether it is a sort of unintended by-product. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘therapeutic’ is applied to the Pyrrhonians but otherwise does not differ from Gascoigne’s usage.

<sup>12</sup> These lines come at the end of a remarkable parable about a painter who tries, unsuccessfully, to depict the lather around a horse’s mouth. In frustration, he hurls a wet sponge at the canvas, which hits the painted mouth of the horse and leaves a mark that exactly resembles lather. Sextus suggests in this analogy that tranquillity is such that it cannot exist as a direct goal but only as a kind of by-product of one’s effort; one is granted tranquillity, as a gift or a blessing. The painter cannot bring about his desired effect through effort but only through a stroke of grace that comes after he has thrown up his hands. The relationship between giving up and being given to is central to the question of what philosophy is *for* and how it ought to proceed. As

Pyrrhonians is developed by later philosophers into sophisticated writing strategies that reject foundationalist efforts to rescue cognitive certainty – which is viewed as a philosophical fantasy – and instead promote a recognition of the conditions of everyday life and their philosophical importance.

If sceptical philosophy is envisioned as a cure for a misguided conflation of knowledge with happiness, the exact nature or success of the treatment is a matter of debate. Sextus sets out to demonstrate that the types of absolute judgement we seem bound to seek are impossible and lead to unhappiness, since any *a priori* or empirical grounding is insufficient. Yet in his account, the sceptic, apparently not content with habit and custom, perennially returns to the activity of philosophy. Read as a parable, this return to philosophy might suggest that, in applying the sceptical method, the search for foundational truths may be suspended but is bound to be taken up again, with the ‘cure’ applied repeatedly over time. This would mean that the lived suspension of belief advocated by Sextus could be achieved temporarily but is not sustainable; in other words, it is not possible to renounce the search for certain knowledge and to live in doubt. A second possibility is that being ‘cured’ entails giving up the search for foundational truths once-and-for-all, while continuing to be committed to some other understanding of philosophical activity.

What is at stake in these possibilities is whether our desire to know the nature of things is one that we need to be perpetually cured of, as Hume will later suggest, or whether we instead can envision a way of thinking philosophically that is first-and-foremost about *coming to terms with* our place in the world, rather than knowing. In the natural or naive attitude, the assumption is that our actions are guided by what we know, and that the more we know the better our choices and our lives will be. One might well fear that the systematic suspension of belief would lead to nihilism or indifference, since it seems to preclude any possibility of meaningful choice. Yet ancient sceptics are remarkably unconcerned by this possibility. In addressing the question of how it would be possible to sustain a lived suspension of belief, Sextus suggests that one live ‘in accordance with everyday observances’, including biological impulses such as thirst and hunger, cultural and societal conventions, and technical expertise or know-how (2000, p. 9: 24). This has

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Kierkegaard and Cavell will later suggest, control over language or the realisation of final accounts of knowledge lead philosophical inquiry astray and constitute a rejection of the world. It is only when attempts at getting reality right, finding the ideal representation of the world, are given up that the world is able to show itself, to give itself to us.

been read by some (Frede, Nussbaum) as a proto-pragmatist position, demonstrating the primacy of Wittgensteinian forms of life over the philosophical speculation that implicitly relies on them. Sextus' vision of the sceptic as utterly conventional suggests that everyday action in the world relies more on shared cultural practices than on the kind of theoretical knowledge he sought to discredit.

### **Getting reality right**

This apparent gap between theoretical knowledge and practical activity has led some to question the very impulse that motivates much of philosophical inquiry—what Richard Rorty calls 'getting reality right' (1991, p. 1). For Rorty, as for Nietzsche before him, the will to truth masks unpleasant psychological motivations—'craving for metaphysical comfort' and the 'desire to escape contingency'. Rorty expresses in no uncertain terms that 'traditional philosophy's search for final accounts of knowledge, if achieved, would result in the "freezing over of culture and the 'de-humanization' of human beings'" (Rorty, 1979, p. 377 quoted in Guignon and Hiley, 2003, p. 22). Rorty does not 'view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality,' including the goal of achieving solidarity with other members of a shared community (Rorty, 1991, p. 1).<sup>13</sup> Stanley Cavell shares the concern that an undue emphasis on what it is to know masks an anxiety about what it is to relate—to be with others and to be known by them, to take care of one's environment. Seen in this way, the need to ground knowledge claims in a philosophically rigorous way constitutes 'the rejection of the human conditions of knowledge and action and the substitution of a fantasy' (Cavell, 1979, p. 216). The psychological fantasy to which Cavell refers is the notion of the subject cut off from the world and from others by his insistence on a kind of inhuman(e) knowing.

[It] can be understood as an attempt to account for, and protect, our separateness, our unknowingness, our unwillingness or incapacity either to know or be known (1979, p. 369).

Cavell's reading of scepticism draws not only from the problems of foundationalism and infinite regress diagnosed by the ancient sceptics but also from the problem of 'other minds' in Cartesian scepticism. In the Cartesian version of the

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<sup>13</sup> See also Rorty, 1989, p. 51 for a summary of how foundationalist philosophy undermines the values of a liberal society.

sceptical problem, doubt is cast on the existence of the world with the simple, yet uncanny, thought that I might be dreaming or that I might be a brain in a vat, controlled by a *malin génie*. In contemporary philosophy, this is known as the argument from ignorance: if one cannot say for sure what one doesn't know (e.g. that one definitely is not dreaming), then one cannot make any specific knowledge claims. With the thought that the world might be an elaborate and well-painted illusion, the whole edifice of knowledge crumbles. Descartes famously attempts to rebuild it in on the one certainty he finds himself, as a thinking being, to hold, namely the existence of the I: *cogito ergo sum*. His scepticism thus involves an internalist understanding of cognition whereby the I has access only to internal representations of objects and not to the world as it is in itself, or to others in the world. There is no denying the tremendous influence of this argument, especially in modern epistemology.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, there is a sense in which Cartesian doubt and internalism seem entirely natural. The deeply human impulse to distinguish the true from the merely apparent can quite easily lead to a divide between the subject to which things appear and the object of appearance, the very existence of which can be called into question. Rorty and Davidson have argued that the Cartesian brand of metaphysical scepticism and the resulting predicament of loss (of the world) and alienation (from the other) arose as natural or obvious only at a certain moment in philosophical history, not surprisingly coincident with the rise of science and rational discourse as a challenge to traditional religious, moral, and social norms.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Cavell is quick to point out, we still occupy the historical moment that occasioned the subject/object split, and moreover, scepticism can in some sense be seen as the 'natural' or inevitable position of linguistic beings.<sup>16</sup>

Cavell diagnoses sceptical doubt – comprising both the knowledge problem and the problem of other minds – as a perverse though all-too-human fantasy. He develops this notion of fantasy in *In Quest of the Ordinary* (1994) through explorations of Romantic literary works on the perverse – Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Poe's 'Black Cat' – both of which feature characters who actively reject the state of indebtedness to the world, who reject the claim of others upon

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Gascoigne, 2003, pp. 156ff for an overview of how these themes play out in the work of Thomas Clarke, Barry Stroud, and Michael Williams.

<sup>15</sup> See also Dewey's *Modern and Unmodern Philosophy* (2012).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Cavell, 1989, p. 50.

themselves. This psychological reading of the sceptical problem gets at the larger question of what determines *what counts* as valid or relevant to philosophy, or to a philosophical argument. Cavell makes the phenomenological point that the frame in which something appears relevant is assembled from a set of unconscious commitments and assumptions, or fears. Another way of characterising the critique of knowledge in therapeutic scepticism is to say that philosophy's commitment to knowing the world, to justified true belief, risks supplanting an obligation to form better relationships to others, to the environment, and to oneself if it fails to bring to light the human conditions of knowledge and rational discourse. Such conditions form our common frame, the possibility for any kind of knowing, or doubting.

### Language and world

From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century on, the project of reconciling philosophy with what Cavell calls the 'human conditions of knowledge and action,' has largely played out in analyses of the determinative role of language – or language communities – in philosophy. Charles Taylor (1985, p. 215) remarks that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'philosophical understanding is essentially bound up with understanding the medium of language.' J.G. Herder (1744-1803) and his contemporary J.G. Hamann (1730-1788) were among the first to properly raise the issue of philosophy's language problem, with Hamann claiming, 'Not only the entire ability to think rests on language [...] but language is also the *crux of the misunderstanding of reason with itself* (2007, p. 211).<sup>17</sup> The responses to this problem are well known to anyone familiar with 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy. On the analytic side, positivists aimed at a purely scientific or logical language that, unlike ordinary language concepts, would accurately represent the world. Language was envisioned as a tool that could bridge the gap that modern scepticism had opened up between subject and world, and empirical verification was to take the place of the *a priori* foundationalist efforts of Platonic and German idealism. This developed into the contemporary analytic approach, which subjects isolated parts of speech and speech acts to logical analysis.<sup>18</sup> On the other side, continentals and ordinary language philosophers

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<sup>17</sup> This is the precursor of Wittgenstein's famous dictum, 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world'.

<sup>18</sup> The originator of speech act theory J.L. Austin pushed back against the impulse that stands behind the analytic approach to language, which he linked, in *Sense and Sensibilia* (1964), to a flawed notion of sense-data, proposed by Ayer and others: 'they wish to produce a species of statement that will be *incorrigible*; and the real virtue of this invented sense of perceive is that,

sought to immerse philosophy in its untidy linguistic medium by exploiting the expressive and performative dimensions of language, at the same time arguing for the primacy of these aspects against the designative function championed by the positivists. One of the central goals of this latter group was to show that many codified philosophical problems fall out of wrong ways of speaking and are best addressed with new vocabularies that allow us, not to more accurately mirror the world or get the world right, but to better say what we mean to one another and to get at the conditions that lead us to ask certain questions rather than others. This constitutes a performative and therapeutic response to the sceptical problem, bringing to light the ways in which language is constitutive of world and the conditions within which philosophical enquiry is carried out.

The immersion of the subject in language forms a large part of the anxiety about other minds that Cavell describes, since the effort to know and be known takes place largely in language. It includes the nagging sense of disappointment that characterises daily exchanges with others, the sense that one has not quite said what one has meant or that language has a life of its own, an awareness of the conventions which frame our conversations and interactions with one another, including philosophical discourse. For Cavell, the sceptical – and here he would include both positivists and idealists – error is to try to remove oneself from the condition of being ‘*of* a world’ and to occupy a fictional place ‘outside language games’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 224).

### **The essayistic mode**

The constellation of concepts that make up the sceptical problem – foundationalism, the subject/object split, and conventional and contingent nature of language – present a unique challenge to the philosophical author. 20<sup>th</sup>-century continental and some ordinary language philosophers chose to respond to this knotted problem in a performative way, using the form of their texts to help readers recognise the everyday conditions that determine the exercise of reason. But there is a long tradition of self-reflective, quasi-literary philosophical composition that predates these efforts, of philosophical authors who sought forms of writing that would affirm the temporal, historical nature of truth as it is revealed to the subject.

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since what is perceived in this sense *has* to be as it appears, in saying what I perceive in this sense I *can't be wrong*' (p. 103).

The essay has a long and rich history as a mode of philosophical expression. It is a genre that has often been said to exist somewhere between philosophy and literature, science and art. Lukács (1974) frames his discussion of the essay in terms of the divergent aims and methods of art and science, arguing that the essay is scientific in its fidelity to the object and artistic in its commitment to the formal qualities of presentation, in the style of writing as a vehicle of meaning. The essayist is able, through fragmentary, polyphonic form, to conceptually reorder life without freezing it into philosophy's 'icy, final perfection' (1974, p. 1). In this reading, the essay is the genre that comes the closest to fulfilling Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic imperative to unify philosophy and poetry. But this marriage has caused some discomfort for both poets and philosophers. 'From the point of view of science or philosophy, the essay is too "artistic", too concerned with the strategies of writing itself; yet this does not suffice boldly to admit the genre into the realm of so-called creative or imaginative literature' (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 6). The essay then occupies the uneasy territory between the methodological assumptions of two different disciplines, which have many reasons for wanting to remain separate from one another. Yet for philosophy, resistance to the idea that truth is embodied in modes of representation that are *inherently* meaningful – one of the principal insights of the essay – threatens to undermine philosophy's ability to challenge received wisdom and to speak to what is essential or universal.

The history of the essay as a genre has more often been the subject of literary criticism than philosophical study. Literary studies have pointed to the difficulty of affixing the label 'genre' to the essay, since essayistic writings fall outside of the division into lyric, epic, dramatic that defined genre study from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and since, moreover, essays cannot be defined either by subject matter or style. O.B. Hardison and other critics have described the essay as Protean: 'there is no genre that takes so many shapes and that refuses so systematically to resolve itself, finally, into its own shape' (Hardison, 1998, p. 612). Though certain works are universally identified as essays, the openness of the essay form presents a challenge to any classificatory system. To complicate matters, 'genre' itself became a highly disputed term in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as deconstruction challenged both the hierarchies implicit in generic distinctions as well as the very ground for making those distinctions, through concepts like intertextuality and textual indeterminacy. Such disputes are not central to this study,

but they form part of the anxiety of choosing what texts to include under the label ‘essay’. I follow Claire de Obaldia in *The Essayistic Spirit* (1995) in her use of the adjective ‘essayistic’ to describe a set of texts and a way of writing, even if these texts can be said to belong to another genre (e.g. an ‘essayistic’ novel, such as Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*). De Obaldia employs Alistair Fowler’s useful distinction between a ‘kind’ (genre) and a ‘mode’ (Fowler, 1982, p. 5): ‘Modes involve a more elusive generic idea than kind,’ including a diachronic aspect that is lacking the former term (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 6). In Fowler’s account, genres can grow out of modes, but modes can outlast genres and can thus be applied across history to periods with different generic conventions, making ‘mode’ a handy comparative tool. The term ‘essayistic mode’ best describes the tradition of writings that I hope to delimit within the philosophical tradition, though I will sometimes use the term ‘essay’ as shorthand, since the adjectival form can be cumbersome. The advantage and the drawback of using the concept of ‘mode’ is that it has a much wider purview than ‘genre’. De Obaldia groups, under the heading ‘essayistic’ (which she identifies with Fowler’s concept of literature *in potentia*), a number of genres that appear to exist somewhere between philosophy and literature, including biography, autobiography, dialogue, history, sermon, maxim, aphorism. One might well argue that these genres belong together because they are all ‘non-fictional prose works of a limited length (*Ibid.*)’; the use of ‘essayistic’ as a master term to describe them all is somewhat arbitrary. Similar groupings have been made under the headings of the open form (Kazin, Eco, Oscar Kenshur), the fragmentary (Marjorie Levison and others), the unfinished (Balachandra Rajan), the dialogic (Bakhtin). The choice of a master mode of course has some effect on what particular works come to be seen as examples of this mode, as the diversity of works treated in the above list can attest, though the same features tend to be emphasized.

My choice of the essay as a master mode follows that of the two primary theorists and champions of the form in philosophy: Lukács and Adorno, for whom the word ‘essay’ encompasses not only traditionally recognised essayists such as Montaigne and Bacon, but also Plato’s dialogues, the writings of religious mystics, and Kierkegaard’s imaginary diaries and short stories.<sup>19</sup> My preference for the essayistic, or what Robert Musil called *Essayismus*, over, say, the ‘fragmentary’, is that

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<sup>19</sup> See Lukács, ‘On the Nature and Form of the Essay’ (1910, 1974) and Adorno, ‘Essay as Form’ (1958, 1984).

it captures a sense of activity, of attempt, and of thought in motion as well as an essential lack of closure.<sup>20</sup> Under this heading, I follow Lukács in including not only essays in the conventional sense (problematic in itself) but also the fragments of the Early German Romantics, which have sometimes been treated a singular genre in their own right, and Kierkegaard's imaginative discourses. I hope to demonstrate that the formal and philosophical 'family resemblances' of the essay, the fragment, and the imaginative discourse justify grouping them together into a single mode of essayistic philosophical writing. One of the aims of this study is to outline an alternative quasi-literary philosophical tradition existing alongside a more familiar, dogmatic tradition of attempting to 'get reality right'. By looking at these texts together, we see the periodic eruption, over the course philosophy's history, of responses to foundationalist, dogmatic ways of thinking, of critical voices that step out of the stream of the theoretical debates of their time and insist on the primacy of ordinary experience, on the credulity or faith that underwrites everyday communication as well as, they want to insist, philosophical discourse. This alternative tradition does not, as a consequence, promote an unconscious or pre-reflective attitude. The perceived excesses of philosophical speculation give rise to a number of different remedies, but they have in common the call to the everyday—to the existing subject, to the shared practices of linguistic and cultural communities, to the practical demands of common (social) life. The authors within this tradition share the conviction that philosophy, conceived as *a kind of writing*, has a unique role to play in this call; open-ended, essayistic ways of writing are uniquely suited to the task of taking on the philosophical tradition in terms that both belong to it and stand outside of it, and of engaging the reader as an active part of the philosophical process.

Montaigne (1533-1592) was the first to use the term '*essais*' – literally 'tries' or 'attempts' – to refer to his own work, and much of the history of the term within in the philosophical and literary tradition is tied up with the particularities of Montaigne's writings. His choice of title reflects a certain modesty about his

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<sup>20</sup> 'Fragmentary' is a narrower term than 'essayistic' and comes with considerable critical baggage from 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist literature and criticism. While concerns about the loss of a divinely or naturally given whole or totality undoubtedly motivate the Romantic and post-Romantic works in this study, it is limiting to see fragmentary works only within this frame. The standard view of Romanticism (Beiser, Levinson) as an attempt to create in art a transcendental unity that is no longer available in life is inadequate to understanding the philosophical import of 19<sup>th</sup>-century German fragments, which take part in a more extensive philosophical tradition of sceptical, anti-dogmatic writing.

endeavour, a sense that the thoughts he presented were not fully worked out. At some points in the text Montaigne presents this lack of systematicity as an accidental feature of his writing, a product of his inability to organise his thoughts; he professes to have the worst memory of anyone living (2007, I: 9, p. 55) and apologises for presenting *only* essays (*ne que essais*). But these gestures of authorial self-effacement are outweighed by the sense that the fragmentary nature of the essays is a *necessary* feature, one that falls out of the author's commitment to portraying the 'how' of thought: '*Je ne peinds pas l'estre, je peinds le passage*' (2007, II: 2, pp. 907-8). Montaigne finds a favourable model in Sextus, whose *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* had been rescued from obscurity and translated into Latin in 1562. Montaigne's *nouveau pyrrhonisme* is reflected not only in his questioning of the scope and value of knowledge, but also in his way of writing. Montaigne adapts the critical method of the ancient sceptics – which was defined earlier as a setting out of oppositions 'by which, because of the equipollence (*isostheneia*) in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquillity' – into the textual strategy of examining a singular subject from multiple, often conflicting, points of view, without resolution. Like the Pyrrhonians, Montaigne rejects the notion that knowledge can lead to happiness and instead embarks on a therapeutic – and poetic – project of describing and coming to terms with the limits of human understanding, which, among other factors, are fixed by time itself.

*Finalemēt, il n'y a aucune constante existence, ny de nostre estre, ny de celui des objects : Et nous, et nostre jugement, et toutes chose mortelles, vont coulant et roulant sans cesse: Ainsi, il ne se peut establir rien de certain de l'un à l'autre, et le jugeant et le jugé estans en continuelle mutation et branle.*

There is no permanent existence either in our being or in that of objects. We ourselves, our faculty of judgement and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly: nothing certain can be established about one from the other, since both judged and judging are ever shifting and changing (2007, II: 12, p. 639/2013, p. 234).

Montaigne's emphasis on the temporal structure of both subject and world is shared by later essayists such as Friedrich Schlegel, who develops the idea of philosophy as a circle, beginning in the middle of things rather than with first principles.

Kierkegaard too seeks a way of writing that is appropriate to the existing subject and

that does not, like speculative thought, attempt to smuggle the subject out of its temporal position of becoming.

The irreducible temporality of human existence is also reflected in Montaigne's starting point for the essays. Like the Pyrrhonians, Montaigne begins with the words and arguments of others – in the form of quotations, maxims, sayings, and accepted wisdom – which he proceeds to interrogate. Lukács describes this *a posteriori* starting point as crucial to the essay form in general.

[I]t is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak 'the truth' about them, must find expression for their essential nature (Lukács, 1974, p. 10).

The aim of the essay is thus contrasted with philosophy's perennial goal of seeking out necessary truths as a starting point from which a coherent philosophical system can be constructed. Yet, Lukács wants to argue, in rejecting a certain understanding of truth, the essay does not give up on the desire for truth altogether. Indeed, as the above passage suggests, the essay is necessarily historical. The truth that it reveals takes the form of a fidelity to objects as they appear, not only in the rich, phenomenological description of an essay like Merleau-Ponty's *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, which takes Cezanne's work as a starting point, but also in the representation of individual experience itself, the 'how' of truth. Adorno glosses this point by contrasting the fidelity of the essayist to that of the positivist, in a manner that illuminates the sophistication of the essay form. For positivism, he argues, presentation is meant to be indifferent to its content, in order to remain objective—'an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject' and the subtraction of the contingency of forms of discourse (Adorno, 1984, p. 153). The rejection of the subjective dimension of knowledge and of the inherently meaningful nature of representation is tantamount to 'running away' from the conditions of human knowing, what Cavell diagnosed as the fantasy of being unconditioned and outside of language games. But 'if truth in fact has a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in truth; the *a posteriori* becomes concretely the *a priori* [...] The relation to [subjective] experience [...] is a relation to all of history' (*Ibid.*, p. 158). For Adorno, individual experience and concrete forms of communication are part of the historical unfolding of truths.

In its fragmentary, dialectical form and its *a posteriori* starting point, the essay represents thought in motion, which includes the historical processes in which concepts are ‘temporally embedded’ (*Ibid.*, p. 160). The essayist thus stands in a closer relationship to truth than the positivist in beginning with the actual conditions of knowledge rather than adopting a fictional view from nowhere. Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ is an example of this commitment to the temporal or historical core of truth; his sophisticated rhetorical strategy raises the question of what counts as relevant to philosophical justification by focussing on ordinary language use and the culturally contingent process of consensus building.

We begin to see then in precisely what ways the essayistic mode can be described as a sceptical form of discourse, and as a therapeutic response to a certain kind of overweening speculative philosophy. The link between essayistic writing and philosophical scepticism has been made by others, both in individual studies on Montaigne and in scattered works of 20<sup>th</sup>-century criticism on the essay. However, within these accounts there is some ambiguity surrounding the nature of the sceptical position that the essay is supposed to embody. Part of this comes down to the ambiguities of the term ‘scepticism’ itself, which can refer to widely divergent philosophical positions: the suspension of all belief, the dogmatic belief that nothing can be known, foundationalist attempts to resolve the sceptical problem, or the anti-foundationalist, anti-dogmatic response summarised here. The latter way of thinking about the role of knowledge in philosophy – which I have called ‘therapeutic scepticism’ – is what emerges from the essayistic tradition. It combats both dogmatism and the excesses of a certain kind of sceptical tradition that, in its demand for inhuman certainty, makes a dogma of doubt.

One difficult question that arises in this context is whether essayism is a proto-form of deconstruction – in other words, whether the scepticism of the essay is the same as that of the writings of the deconstructionists, which share many formal features: irony, textual indeterminacy, the deferral of meaning, the rejection of perspectival neutrality and of ontotheological foundationalism. There are obvious differences between the two forms, most notably the humanist underpinning to the essay tradition that is radically called into question in deconstruction. Deconstructionists are far less likely than their essayist forbears to give credence to notions such as shared human experience on the one hand or first-person experience on the other, since these are thought to rely on discredited metaphysical

concepts. Graham Good (1988) argues that the ‘textualism’ of the post-structuralists, by which he means the position that any notion of what reality is like is only a construct with no ultimate ground, can be contrasted with the essay’s fundamental belief in individual experience.

As we have seen, the essay is sceptical in its traditional attitude; but it is sceptical precisely about general laws, even general laws of scepticism. Textualism, at least in its deconstructive form, is a universal, even dogmatic scepticism. The essay is sceptical about other forms of reality but not its own, which stem from personal experience. That is the essay’s ultimate ‘ground’; but that, or any other ground for discourse, would be rejected by deconstruction. [...] Deconstructive scepticism, on the other hand, carried to its extreme, turns into a form of credulity, a naive *unrealism* believing that we can perceive nothing but our own constructs (Good, 1988, p. 181).

It is true that for essayists like Montaigne, the project of criticising prevailing wisdom is bound up with a project of observing and understanding oneself, which takes place in very personal terms. However, Good appears to underestimate the anti-dogmatic rigour of the essay – perhaps because the focus of his study is essayists that are most often classed as ‘literary’ rather than philosophical – and unfairly treats deconstruction as univocal. Using Montaigne as a paradigm case, the critiques presented in the *Essais* rely to a certain extent on faith in the author’s own powers of reason and observation, yet these are also mercilessly subjected to scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> On the deconstructionist side, Good’s identification of deconstruction with dogmatic scepticism would be more compelling if it did not ignore the *form* of deconstructionist texts, which negate the possibility of an authoritative position from which this dogmatic rejection of all ground could come. The forms of discourse taken up by Derrida and others systematically question foundationalism of any kind, including an idealist conception of self-presence, but they do not exempt themselves from critique, nor do they negate the significance of or need for such ‘transcendental signifiers’. Rather than a flight toward the unconditioned, there is instead a recognition that *all* knowledge is conditioned or interested. Deconstruction fosters an awareness of how signifiers function and of meaning-

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Paradoxically, then, the birth of the subject or consciousness which coincides with the rise of both novel and essays seems to be inextricably linked with the questioning of the knowing subject, with its discontinuity or dislocation’ (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 32, quoting from Kauffman, 1989, pp. 234-235).

making activities more broadly. In this way, deconstructionist texts can be seen as a continuation of the philosophical tradition of essayism and the essay as the ‘critical form *par excellence*’ (Adorno, 1984, p. 166). ‘The fact that “all thought is circumstantial”, that there is “no unconditioned standpoint” – objective or subjective – from which reality can be apprehended explains why the essayist “must continually reflect on the content or circumstances of his own discourse, and why in its very form the essay will bear traces of that contextuality”’ (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 32). Deconstruction and essayism share a deep suspicion of authority and objectivity, and one of the purposes of the open-ended forms they both employ is to reject the notion of definitive, authoritative accounts by requiring the active participation of the reader in the critical process.

Engaging the reader as part of the meaning-making activity of the text is a central feature of the essayistic mode, whether in more traditional essays like those of Montaigne or in other essayistic writings like Romantic fragments or novels. Engagement is required by the *discontinuous* nature of essayistic texts, the various strategies whereby unified, naive readings of the texts are interrupted. These include a shift in perspective on a singular subject, a shift in rhetorical register – such as the German Romantics’ use of highly-technical Fichtean terminology alongside informal, conversational aphorisms, or Kierkegaard’s tendency to weave key Hegelian concepts with fairy tales and biblical allusions – the treatment of unexpected subjects side-by-side, or the use of parody or irony to undermine the literal level of the text. These strategies enact a dialectical process, whereby the text constantly reflects on its means of representation. The essayistic text offers no master frame or definitive gesture of sublation to resolve the dialectic but rather functions as what Barthes called a *scriptible* or writerly text.

The writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages (Barthes, 1995, p. 5).

The essayistic text thus relies on the reader as a site for the construction of a text’s meaning – the conceptual organization of the plural or discontinuous structure – with the understanding that this meaning could be construed differently by another reader, or even the same reader at a different time. The self-reflective dialectic

initiated by the text continues with the individual reader, who becomes more aware of the way she is conditioned by discourse. In this way the essay constitutes:

the rejection, described by Berel Lang, of the ideal of a context-free or neutral medium characteristic of a philosophy which models itself on scientific discourse. In the latter case, the reader is confronted with a ready-made truth, with the ‘static or unified whole’ of a philosophical system which ‘intends to describe the world, not to change it, much less to be changed by it’ (Lang 1990, p. 35, in de Obaldia, 1995, p. 32).

There is an ethical dimension to the rhetorical strategy of the essayistic mode, in that it not only involves the reader in ‘renewed evaluation, deduction, and interpretation of the matter at hand (*Ibid.*)’ but also puts author and reader on the same footing, as conditioned subjects trying to find ways to meaningful ways of speaking about the world.

We have seen that essayism can be read as an alternative philosophical tradition that offers life-giving forms of expression able to navigate the risk of freezing concepts and becoming trapped in the pseudo-problems to which certain forms or philosophical vocabularies seem to lead. Essayistic writers reject the project of building a logically consistent philosophical system from a self-evident ground, and instead respond to the sceptical problem by disclosing the historical and linguistic conventions that shape human understanding, thus opening up the possibility of a better philosophical response to those conventions. If the ‘world-consuming’ (1994, p. 5) disappointment that underlies the sceptical project creates the *task* of recovering the world or, like Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith, getting the world back, then the essayistic tradition can be seen as the therapeutic project of as *calling* philosophy back to common life.

## Chapter 2: *Reciter l'homme* in Montaigne's *Essais*

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*Nous cherchons d'autres conditions, pour n'entendre l'usage des nostres : et sortons hors de nous, pour ne sçavoir quel il y faict* [We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own; and, having no knowledge of what is within, we sally forth outside ourselves].

-Montaigne, *De l'experience*

As I briefly suggest in Chapter 1, one way to characterise Montaigne's work<sup>22</sup> is as an attempt to develop a language of becoming, capable of capturing the lively, discontinuous, open-ended nature of thinking<sup>23</sup> that had been obscured by the formulaic conceptual debates of the Scholastics and more generally by philosophy's tendency toward the timeless and universal. Influenced by the sceptical arguments of Cicero and Sextus – whose *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* enjoyed a resurgence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with a new Latin translation – as well as by the Christian understanding of human fallibility, Montaigne cultivated a way of writing that could give voice to uncertainty and difference, while remaining committed to truth and the project of self-fashioning. Within this frame, the provisional quality of his *Essais* can be read as a necessary feature of the work, one that attempts to preserve and make philosophically relevant the features of experience that are generally ignored or suppressed in systematic or dogmatic philosophical accounts. Montaigne offers '*des fantasies informes et irresolues, comme font ceux qui publient des questions douteuses, à débattre aux écoles : non pour établir la vérité, mais pour la chercher [...] je me mesle ainsi temerairement à tout sort de propos* [notions that have no form and reach no conclusion. Like those who advertise questions for debate in our Universities I am seeking the truth not asserting it [...] I am emboldened to treat all sorts of subjects]' (2007, I: 56, p. 335).<sup>24</sup> In their presentation, the *Essais* emphasise, rather than seek to overcome, the dialogical, negative and *irrésolu* character of thinking, thus challenging assumptions about presence and identity that underlie traditional metaphysics.

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<sup>22</sup> All references to Montaigne's work in the original French are taken from the 2007 *Pléiade* edition of the *Essais*. English translations are from M.A. Screech's 2013 revised edition of the complete *Essays*, unless otherwise noted. I have included book and chapter information for each essay for the convenience of readers using other editions. Where the French and English versions are given together, the page reference for the French edition is listed first, followed by the reference for the English edition.

<sup>23</sup> However, Montaigne is not, with Descartes, '*une chose qui pense*'; rather his writing is emphatically that of an *embodied* subject, plagued by varying humors, appetites, desires, bodily pleasures and pains.

<sup>24</sup> My own translation. See also II: 10.

Claiming to study himself as his ‘physics and metaphysics (III: 13, p. 1119/p. 429),’ Montaigne shifts the site of truth away from external authority or a god’s-eye view and toward the experience of the individual subject, whose representation within the text is a hallmark of the essayistic and prefigures developments such as the modern novel. Montaigne claims in the preface to the reader: *je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre*, and indeed all of the *essais* are written in the first-person, offering the portrait of a distinctive, if not always philosophically consistent or reliable character. The deliberately discontinuous, non-identical nature of the writing subject within Montaigne’s texts further highlights the temporal nature of experience and the way in which truth can be grasped only in succession, never all in a single view or a single moment. ‘*Pour juger d’un homme, il faut suivre longuement et curieusement [attentivement] sa trace* (2007, II: 1 p. 356). Adorno’s claim that the essay ‘does justice to the consciousness of non-identity, without needing to say so [. . .] in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total (1984, p. 157)’ is an apt characterisation of Montaigne’s preference for the fragmentary and of the pains he takes to avoid a univocal account of his own subjectivity.

The formal representation of subjectivity in the *Essais* – specifically the subject as defined by language and time – is an essentially Pyrrhonian move that highlights how contingent, extra-rational factors impinge upon judgement and make it unreliable. For Montaigne, reason, as exercised by individual subjects, is always embodied and always interested. Like the Pyrrhonians, he is wary of positive assertions either about natural laws or human nature, since all knowledge comes from a certain *regard* and subjects are incapable of transparency about their own perspective—what they fail to see and what they actively suppress. His therapeutic strategy as a writer is to present as many disparate views as possible—his own, as they shift over time, those of the Classical authors from whom he quotes liberally, and those that fall out of his exploration of different cultures and historical and literary scenarios. This approach allows for contradiction and complexity and enables Montaigne to avoid some of the falsehoods that he admits he is prone to in heat of live philosophical debate. The resulting work is a textured exploration of what falls through the gap between theoretical accounts and lived experience and of the advantages of a writing style that insists on the difference between the two.

## Montaigne and ordinary language

The first striking feature of the *Essais* is Montaigne's use of the French vernacular. His French, even to the modern reader, is surprisingly earthy and colloquial, and though he engages with a range of philosophical texts and weighs in on a number of philosophical arguments with the command of a specialist, his language is decidedly un-technical. Claiming that an author should allow his subject to demand its own form, he clarifies: '*Je ne dis pas moyen scholastique et artiste, je dis moyen naturel, d'un sain entendement* [I don't mean in a scholastic or artificial way but naturally, with a sound understanding]' (2007, III: 8, p. 970). He does not shy away from vulgar words such as *crotte*, *chier*, and *fienter* ('*Les rois et les philosophes fientent et les dames aussi* [Kings and philosophers shit, and so do ladies]' (2007, III: 13, p. 1133). The choice to express himself in ordinary, non-specialist language constitutes a shift of focus from the rarefied academic debates of the Schoolmen to how the ordinary man, possessed of no special knowledge or talent, might go about trying to understand himself. The sceptical '*que scay-je*' carved into Montaigne's library ceiling and the '*qui suis-je*' that runs throughout the *Essais* can be read as questions which arise for any language speaker, any being for whom understanding takes place in language. Montaigne's approach defies the notion that more precise or philosophically refined ways of speaking could solve the problem of understanding oneself or the world. Indeed, he suggests at times that language should be *less* precise. In 'On the Lame', he recommends 'terms which soften and tone down the rashness of what we put forward, terms, such as "perhaps", "to some extent", "they say", "I think" and so on' (2013, III: 11, p. 410).

*Qui a pris de l'entendement en la logique ? où sont ses belles promesses ? Nec ad melius vivendum, nec ad commodius disserendum. Voit-on plus de barbouillage au caquet des harengeres, qu'aux disputes publiques des hommes de cette profession ? J'aymeroy mieux, que mon fils apprint aux tavernes à parler, qu'aux escholes de la parlerie.*

Has anyone ever acquired intelligence through logic? Where are her beautiful promises? She teaches neither how to live a better life nor how to argue properly. Is there more of a hotchpotch in the cackle of fishwives than in the public disputations of men who profess logic? I would prefer a son of mine learn to talk in the tavern rather than in our university yap-shops. (III: 8, p. 971/p. 370).

Montaigne's preference for the common talk of the tavern over the subtleties of Scholastic disputation is in part motivated by the concern that logic imposes an

inorganic structure on thought, one that, it is suggested, is in danger of obscuring rather than clarifying what one sets out to know. The alternative to a deductive structure cannot simply be bare experience or the natural attitude, since one would otherwise never be led to pose the questions of what one knows or who one is: the answers would be obvious. But Montaigne's preference for common talk suggests that nevertheless we *should* understand ordinary experience, rather than academic speculation, as the site of any possible disclosure of the truth, despite the ways in which the ordinary is capable of covering over truth. The question of what *is* or who 'I' am may not be a question of knowledge at all, but of learning to see anew what is already before one's eyes, or learning to acknowledge the significance of one's own words.

*Moy qui suis Roy de la matiere que je traicte, et qui n'en dois compte à personne, ne m'en crois pourtant pas du tout : Je hazarde souvent des boutades de mon esprit, desquelles je me deffie : et certaines finesses verbales dequoy je secoue les oreilles : mais je les laisse courir à l'avanture, je voys qu'on s'honore de pareilles choses : ce n'est pas à moy seul d'en juger. Je me presente debout, et couché ; le devant et le derriere ; à droite et à gauche ; et en tous mes naturels plis.*

I, who am monarch of the subject which I treat and not accountable for it to anyone, do not for all that believe everything I say. Sometimes my mind launches out with paradoxes which I mistrust and with verbal subtleties which make me shake my head; but I let them take their chance. [...] I describe myself standing up and lying down, from front and back, from right and left and with all my inborn complexities (III: 8, p. 989/p. 376).

Montaigne recognises that he sometimes falls prey to the ways in which language breaks down, obscures, or betrays—moments he is unable to say what he means or to know what he means to say. 'Not believing everything I say' is a feature of ordinary communication, and one that Montaigne is keen to preserve in his writing. In contrast to logic, where what is said is determined and necessitated by the principles from which one begins, Montaigne's ordinary language allows him to be inconsistent, to contradict himself, and so to show the various ways in which the self fails to be fully present to itself as well as the way the 'I' changes in the process of investigation and articulation. His decision to allow his words to stand and to 'take their chance' is a rhetorical strategy by which he hopes to bring into view the existential features of diversity and inconstancy that philosophical ways of speaking tend to suppress.

The *Essais* reveal Montaigne's preoccupation with communication, both with the ways in which language can obscure what one wants to say and with the ways in which debate and argument can lead one to exaggerate and deceive for the sake of winning over an opponent (2007, II: 11, p 1074). He was influenced by the Pyrrhonian method of argumentation, which involved levying critiques against any positive claim in order to reach *aporia*, but he was keenly aware of the problems in formulating a non-dogmatic account of human behaviour, or of himself, in language.

*Je voy les philosophes Pyrrhoniens qui ne peuvent exprimer leur generale conception en aucune maniere de parler : car il leur faudroit un nouveau langage. Le nostre est tout formé de propositions affirmatives, qui leur sont de tout ennemies.*

I can see why the Pyrrhonian philosophers cannot express their general conception in any manner of speaking; for they would need a new language. Ours is wholly formed of affirmative propositions totally inimical to them (II: 12, p. 556/p. 205).

In contrast to his championing of ordinary language elsewhere, Montaigne here emphasises the way in which language, characterised by affirmative propositions, can distort what one sets out to explain. In 'On the Lame', Montaigne supplements this point by admitting the extremes to which he is driven in the heat of debate, when he often ends up exaggerating or lying to make a stronger case. Writing, and writing in the informal, free-wheeling style of the *essai*, is a way for Montaigne to avoid the dodges and falsehoods to which he is prone in arguments with actual interlocutors. Because composition takes place over longer periods of time and outside the context of wanting to 'win', it is better suited to Montaigne's task of allowing – and not attempting to solve – complexities. The reader in this way is made a part of the conversation without being involved in a dispute in which either party might be tempted to hide or distort the truth for the sake of *amour propre*.

### **Montaigne and the Renaissance**

Montaigne's insistence on ordinary language lends itself to the provisional, experimental form of the *essai*, which is conceived as a means of illuminating the structure of the self by allowing heterogeneous reflections and perspectives to exist alongside one another and to 'take their chance'. Montaigne's essayism is both part of the wider historical shift in discursive mode that took place during the

Renaissance and a deliberate rhetorical strategy to turn away from the kind of philosophical models that flourished in Medieval Europe. The significance of the *Essais* can thus be understood as part of the clash between two different textual models at a particular historical moment as well as a clash between two different approaches to philosophy.

Montaigne is typically portrayed as writing against the grain of Scholasticism, moving away from the systematic approach of the *summa* and away from the commentary model that enshrined significant philosophical figures of the past by appealing to the authority of tradition. Recent critical studies suggest that Scholastic methods were more complex, diverse, and dialogical than has been previously acknowledged. The argumentative method of *disputationes*, a widespread feature of higher education in Medieval Europe, is a good example; what has long been portrayed as a formulaic and slavish imitation of authority figures reinforcing a static worldview in fact encouraged questioning of received arguments after the fashion of Socratic dialogues.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the ‘modern’ notion that authority resides in individual conscience, rather than in collective received wisdom, can be found in a number of early Christian works, most notably in the genre of confessions, which shares many of the features of the modern essay. But while the dynamism and diversity of pre-modern, and especially Medieval, thought has often been flattened out to serve as a foil to ‘modernity’ or the ‘modern essay’, there remain substantive differences between Scholasticism and the kind of writing in which Montaigne was engaged, differences which in part have to do with wider innovations in Renaissance thought and culture.

The provisional quality that defines Montaigne’s writing was in some measure occasioned by material changes in the publishing industry. The rise of commercial printing in the early 16th century opened up the possibility of publishing works outside of the strict framework of patronage, allowing for more stylistically diverse texts and changing the relationship between author and reader. Terence Cave (1979) argues that cheap printing shifted generic boundaries by enabling works of a more provisional quality, ‘functionally primitive extrasystematic texts’ to be published. These ‘works-in-progress’ formed part of a comprehensive body of knowledge in the process of being born, the encyclopaedia of all

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<sup>25</sup> See Novikoff (2013).

knowledge. They existed as fragments of a yet-to-be-articulated whole. Montaigne frequently reflects on the provisional nature of his works, and he leaves open the possibility that they might fit into some larger whole.

*Les sçavans parlent, et denotent leurs fantasies, plus specifiquement, et par le menu : Moy, qui n'y voy qu'autant que l'usage m'en informe, sans regle, presente generalement les miennes, et à tastons. Comme en cecy : Je prononce ma sentence par articles descousus : c'est chose qui ne se peut dire à la fois, et en bloc. La relation, et la conformité, ne se trouvent point en telles ames que les nostres, basses et communes. La sagesse est un bastiment solide et entier, dont chaque piece tient son rang et porte sa marque. Sola sapientia in se tota conversa est.*

The learned do arrange their ideas into species and name them in detail. I, who can see no further than practice informs me, have no such rule, presenting my ideas in no categories and feeling my way, as I am doing here now. I pronounce my sentences in disconnected clauses, as something which cannot be said all at once all in one piece. Harmony and consistency are not to be found in ordinary base souls such as ours. Wisdom is an edifice solid and entire, each piece of which has its place and bears its hallmark. *Sola sapientia in se tota conversa est.* Wisdom alone is entirely self-contained (III: 13, pp. 1123-1124/ p. 379).

Montaigne contrasts his experience or 'practice'-based insights with the methodology of the learned, who, it is implied, gain their wisdom from the study of authoritative works rather than through an examination of their own experience. 'Disconnected clauses', Montaigne suggests, are conducive to the representation of the latter. The claim that experience cannot be expressed *à la fois et en bloc* points to the disjunctive temporal aspect of experience, the unfolding of successive moments in contrast to the all-at-once perspective of a transcendental or divine view. Yet Wisdom, like God, is self-contained, described as an edifice both solid and complete. Montaigne thus raises the question of how his own '*decousus*' fragments relate to the harmonious and internally consistent 'whole' of wisdom. While he discounts the possibility that 'souls such as ours' could possess wisdom as such, precisely because 'harmony and consistency' strictly speaking can't be attributed creatures who exist in time, there remains the possibility that the disconnected insights of the writer could be read as 'pieces' to be assimilated into the eventual production of a more perfect literary or philosophical whole. On Terence Cave's reading of Renaissance literature, Montaigne's essays form the provisional notes of the Book of Books, or the Book-to-come. "Thanks to the extended and on-going process of addition and revision made possible by the advent of printing, these

open-ended texts are thus said to function as the “shapeless raw material for future literature”, as the “disconnected entries of this new system, as fragments which will be discarded with the advent of the Book” (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 30).<sup>26</sup>

The conception of the essay as a potential rather than a stand-alone work constitutes one of the two main strands of essay criticism. Yet the tendency to see the essay as a subgenre destined to be superseded by a more systematic or comprehensive form such as the novel, encyclopaedia, or the philosophical treatise ignores the historical resilience of essay: essays continue to exist alongside and even within novels, most notably the essayistic novels of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, within philosophy, the essay cannot be confined to a historical period. Claire de Obaldia (1995) suggests that this resilience has to do with the philosophical advantages of the form: its ability to present ideas in non-systematic way that is consistent with the anti-foundationalist insights of scepticism (p. 30). Seen from a philosophical perspective, a purely teleological reading of the essay suppresses the possibility that the fragmentary, diverse, and particular insights of the essay are not in fact translatable into a coherent whole.

How did Montaigne understand his own *essais* and their relationship to a comprehensive account of human nature? His architectural metaphor in the above passage suggests that the house of Wisdom, though solid, is composed of pieces; ‘each piece has its place and bears its hallmark’ (*chaque piece tient sa rang et porte sa marque*). This conveys the notion that each piece<sup>27</sup> remains itself and retains its shape while also being part of a larger whole. The most straightforward way to read ‘*porte sa marque*’ is as a physical mark on a stone.<sup>28</sup> The ambiguity of the phrase comes from the use of the possessive, which could either imply that each stone carries its

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<sup>26</sup> Claire de Obaldia, expanding on Cave’s understanding of the Renaissance text and Alistair Fowler’s concept of literature *in potentia*, unfolds how historically the essay indeed did make way for the novel, which borrows its primary stylistic features, yet she argues that seeing the essay as not-yet-novel suppresses certain historical facts of the essay’s development as well as a more radical philosophical reading of the essay’s import. De Obaldia also makes the case that while the novel exploits the essay’s concern with form, it leaves behind the equally characteristic expository or scientific dimension of the essay, which has to do with ‘speaking the truth’ about some feature of the world. De Obaldia gives equal weight to the two distinctive features of the essay, its receptive or critical dimension – its concern with the inherited world or with existing cultural products – and its poetic dimension, the concern for the ethics governing presentation. The tendency in one strand of essay criticism to see the essay as raw material for a novel thus downplays the feature that makes the essay properly philosophical.

<sup>27</sup> *Piece* can of course be understood both in the sense that the English word ‘piece’ is understood, as a section or part of something, but also has the sense of a ‘room’, which is an equally plausible way of reading Montaigne’s metaphor, since a building is both made up of individual stones and of individual rooms.

<sup>28</sup> It would be harder to conceive of a room as ‘marked’.

own mark or that all of the stones carry the ‘mark’ of wisdom. A *marque* can also be understood as a ‘trace’ of something, and in this sense, each *essai* could be said to bear a ‘trace’ of the wisdom of which it is a part, a wisdom that in some sense already exists – or else it could not be said to leave a trace behind – but in another sense does not yet exist, since it requires each and every stone in order to be ‘*solide et entier*’. The relationship between Montaigne’s fragmentary thoughts and the possibility of an orderly whole thus remains ambiguous. The passage continues:

*Je laisse aux artistes, et ne sçay s'ils en viennent à bout, en chose si meslee, si menue et fortuite, de renger en bandes, cette infinie diversité de visages ; et arrester nostre inconstance, et la mettre par ordre.*

I leave it to the graduates—and I do not know if even they will manage to bring it off [...] to arrange this infinite variety of features into groups, pin down our inconsistencies and impose some order (III: 13, p. 1149/p. 379).

Montaigne’s caveat ‘I do not know...’ conveys a sense of doubt that our (the *nostre* includes both Montaigne and human beings more generally) inconsistencies could ever be arrested, or even marshalled into categories. While not expressly denying the possibility of a more ordered presentation of his ideas, Montaigne’s irony in this passage opens up the more radical way of reading the essay’s potential or its not-yet that constitutes an alternative to the notion of the essay as mere raw material. Following Cave, ‘The Renaissance text’s difference from itself which the essay epitomises turns out to involve not so much a temporary difference due to be resolved (like the draft of a finalised work) as a potentially endless deferment or *différance*, in the Derridean sense, of a Book which is at once embodied and endlessly gestured toward’ (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 30). This reading keeps alive the more profound possibility that the heterogeneity and lack of closure in Montaigne’s *essais* are *necessary* features unable to be translated into a solid and complete work. While Montaigne’s own statements about the metaphysical status of his ‘attempts’ are ambiguous – in part because they are coloured by the self-deprecating remarks of an unreliable narrator about his own failings as a systematic writer and thinker – reading the discontinuous structure of the *Essais* as a necessary rather than an incidental feature supports Montaigne’s consistent emphasis on temporality and the ‘*passage*’ over against being: ‘*je ne peinds pas l'estre, je peinds le passage*’ (2007, II: 2, pp. 907-8). While Montaigne’s portrait of himself can in some sense ‘stand in’ for a

portrait of man in general, it does so by virtue of its provisionality and discontinuity, not by its ability to be translated into a more systematic form.

The rejection of the possibility of subsuming the particular ‘pieces’ into a totality can also be understood as a rejection of a systematic or deductive method in which a pre-existing conceptual structure determines in advance ‘both the interrelation between the parts and the function of each part within the whole’ (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 31). The sense of attempt, ‘essays “trying themselves out” without resolving themselves,’ acts to performatively counter what Montaigne sees as the truncating tendency of Scholastic philosophical accounts (*Ibid.*).<sup>29</sup> With the social upheavals in 16<sup>th</sup>-century France and new technologies like the printing press, the *Essais* reflect a ‘generalised epistemological anxiety’ (*Ibid.*, p. 30) in which traditional top-down structures of knowledge and authority are undermined. In contrast to a systematic or closed model of truth, the *essai*’s truth is based on a wealth of experiences structured only very loosely around a theme (e.g. names, fear, cannibalism, virtue...) or an occasion (‘some lines of Virgil’). The thematic or lyrical rather than deductive or logical structure preserves the inherently excessive nature of experience (and of language) against the simplification and clarity afforded by a systematic account. Rather than getting to the bottom of a matter or seeing from above, the *Essais* multiply outward with the addition of ever more (yet always horizontal) perspectives. ‘*Qui ne voit, que j’ay pris une route par laquelle sans cesse et sans travail, j’iray autant, qu’il y aura d’ancre et du papier au monde?* [Who does not see that I have taken a road along which I shall go, without stopping and without effort, as long as there is ink and paper in the world?]' (Montaigne, III: 9, p. 989/p. 376). Cave contends that Montaigne’s writing of experience must carry on indefinitely because the fullness of experience that he seeks to represent is never available within time. ‘All that the *Essais* can do, with their ineradicable self-consciousness, is to posit paradigms of wholeness of features of a discourse which, as it pours itself out, celebrates its own inanity. The Montaignian text presents the emptying of the cornucopia by the very gesture of extending itself indefinitely [...] Figures of

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<sup>29</sup> Understood diachronically, the Scholastic approach, like the essayistic approach, is not confined to a period but is manifest throughout the history of philosophy as ideas become calcified and certain rhetorical procedures become established as properly philosophical (vs. ‘sophistic’ ‘literary’, ‘scientific’). In this sense, essayistic texts can be seen as perennially pushing back against the System, whether that is the Christianised Aristotelianism practiced in Medieval educational institutions, the positivism of 20th-century analytic thought, which Adorno attacks ‘Essay as Form’, or entrenched forms of scepticism.

abundance play a prominent part in the closing pages of [the final essay] *De l'expérience*' (Cave, 1979, p. 321).

While the *Essais* fail to conform to the Whole that is *solide et entier*, they represent an abundance or inexhaustibility of experience that serves to counterbalance the weight that philosophy has traditionally given to the completed edifice,<sup>30</sup> and they point instead to the irreducibly provisional nature of any attempt to know. Drawing from several texts in which Montaigne describes his choice of subjects as '*egallement fertile*' or '*toutes enchesnées les unes aux autres*,' Laurence Kritzman describes the *Essais* as an 'attempt to submit knowledge to discourse without a centre' in a 'perpetual process of expansion' (Kritzman, 1983, p. 85). If the Renaissance shift in discursive mode amounts to a recognition that any individual account or perspective is *necessarily* provisional and unable to attain a comprehensive or god's-eye view, the *Essais*, in thematising provisionality and making it part of the form of the work, provide a critical, philosophical reflection on this shift.

### The shape of experience

*Les autres forment l'homme: je le recite; et en représente un particulier bien mal formé, et lequel si j'avois à façonner de nouveau, je ferois vrayment bien autre qu'il n'est* [Others form man; I narrate him, and portray a particular, very ill-formed one, who, if I could fashion him anew, I would make quite different from what he is] (III: 2, p. 845).<sup>31</sup>

The contrast in this familiar passage between telling or narrating (*reciter*) on the one hand and forming or shaping on the other helps to further elucidate Montaigne's choice of form. The essayist sets himself the challenge of presenting experience in a way that does not alter what it seeks to describe by turning it into a concept or a unified system divorced from time and everyday experience, that describes without (mis)shaping. '*Former*' also mean to educate, and Montaigne plays with both senses in describing himself as *mal formé*. Yet his enterprise is not to *façonner de nouveau* either himself or his experience but to faithfully recount what has been experienced (*'je n'ay besoing d'y apporter que la fidelité: celle-là y est, la plus sincere qui se trouve'* (*Ibid.*, p. 845)) by an admittedly imperfect and imperfectly educated subject.

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<sup>30</sup> Diderot defended the essay form by pointing to the truncations necessitated by the orderly treatise. '*J'aime mieux un essai qu'un traité ; un essai où l'on me jette quelques idées de génie presque isolées, qu'un traité où ces germes précieux sont étouffés sous un amas de redites*' ('Sur la diversité de nos jugements' in *Oeuvres complètes*, 1972, p. 874).

<sup>31</sup> My own translation.

Montaigne's claim to 'fidelity' cannot be read in a straightforward way, as the text itself undermines any claim to have found a means of representation that is purely descriptive or transparent, that does not 'shape' its subject. The reflexivity of Montaigne's *Essais* coupled with his reflections on the arbitrariness of language<sup>32</sup> argue against any notion of the unmediated. Rather, fidelity in this case amounts to a new kind of *form* and so a new possibility of *formation*: a heterogeneous presentation in which features of experience often treated as philosophically trivial – eating and drinking, bowel movements, sexual habits, etc. – are interspersed with more traditional philosophical and moral reflections, and in which the inconstancy and diversity of self and experience are everywhere emphasised.

The *Essais* do 'not form something new out of formlessness' but instead 'order anew' things which were 'once alive'.<sup>33</sup> Through the choreographed 'free association' of the writing subject, for whom all ground is '*égallément fertile*', the *Essais* bring contingency into focus as a feature of thought and as relevant to the project of self-understanding. Montaigne begins with artefacts: quotations from other works, socially embedded concepts and laws, and existing artistic or cultural products. The assemblage quality of the *Essais* preserves the *ad hoc* nature of experience, but what is received is transformed and reordered according to the imaginative association of the writer. Montaigne thus does not simply imitate the way in which thought proceeds but presents that process, consciously, to the reader. He 'proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically' (Adorno, 1984, p. 161). This joining of contingency and creativity serves as a formal representation of the combination of receptive and imaginative faculties that enables experience or world; the performance of the structure of experience is wielded as a 'weapon against the spell of beginnings' (Adorno, 1984, p. 166) or against any philosophical or rhetorical structures that inorganically impose order on experience. '*Je n'ay point d'autre sergent de bande a renger mes pieces, que la fortune*' (2007, II: 10, p. 429).<sup>34</sup> In Montaigne, the formal presence of the given in the form of existing texts and cultural artefacts is a reminder of the role of luck and chance in human life, the hand of 'fate' that provides the conditions and limits of human action and understanding.

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<sup>32</sup> See 2007, I: 46, pp. 296-301; III: 13, p. 1116. See also Campagnon, 1979, p. 288-290.

<sup>33</sup> '[I]t is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak "the truth" about them, must find expression for their essential nature' (Lukács, 1974, p. 10).

<sup>34</sup> 'I have no sergeant major to put my writings in order except Fortune'.

*Mais à le bien prendre, il semble que nos conseils et deliberations en despendent bien autant; et que la fortune engage en son trouble et incertitude, aussi nos discours. Nous raisonnons hazardeusement et temairement, dit Timaeus en Platon, par ce que, comme nous, noz discours ont grande participation à la temerité du hazard.*

But it seems, if you take it right, that our counsels and decisions depend just as much on Fortune and that she involves in her turbulence and uncertainty even our reasoning. ‘We argue rashly and unadvisedly,’ says Timaeus in Plato, ‘because in our reasoning as in ourselves, a great part is played by chance’ (I: 47, p. 307-308/p. 107-8).

Montaigne’s rhetorical strategy is one way of understanding Hume’s (and later Wittgenstein’s) admonition that Philosophy should strive to ‘leave everything as it is’. This task, far from naive or self-evident, involves both *deciding* how everything is, or what aspects of experience to emphasise, and at the same time deciding how to represent this conception of experience rhetorically. The essay’s reflection on its own means of production, its concern for the conditions under which truth is approached and attempted, is a reminder that choices of form have the function of supressing or emphasising different features of experience. This is a ‘problem’ for philosophy in that the choice of how to write necessarily comes with decisions about what is philosophically relevant. The self-critical dimension of Montaigne’s *Essais*, which exposes the rhetorical, material, and subjective conditions under which the work came to be, amounts to a philosophical argument for the relevance of these conditions to philosophy. To ignore them, Montaigne insists, is to open the door to a distorted conception of humanity. As philosophy has historically tended to emphasise timelessness, universality, unity, and necessity, Montaigne counters with a style that allows for diversity, contingency, subjectivity, and cultural and historical specificity.

*Nous cherchons d'autres conditions, pour n'entendre l'usage des nostres : et sortons hors de nous, pour ne sçavoir quel il y faict. Si avons nous beau monter sur des eschasses, car sur des eschasses encores faut-il marcher de nos jambes. Et au plus eslevé throne du monde, si ne sommes nous assis, que sus nostre cul.*

We seek other conditions<sup>35</sup> because we do not understand the use of our own; and, having no knowledge of what is within, we sally forth outside ourselves. A fine thing to get up on stilts: for even on stilts we

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<sup>35</sup> Screech: ‘attributes’.

must ever walk with our legs! And upon the highest throne in the world, we are seated, still, upon our arses (III: 13, p. 1166/p. 449).

### Representation of the subject in the essay

*'Je m'étudie plus qu'autre subject. C'est ma métaphysique, c'est ma physique [I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics; that is my physics]'* (2013, III: 13, p. 374).

Montaigne's representation of himself as a writing subject within the *Essais* is perhaps the central conceit through which he calls attention to the conditions under which philosophical reflection takes place. What might be called the psychological realism of the essay, its formal representation of thought and of the subject, offers an intimate sense of the writer—indeed it is a hallmark of the form that whatever subject an essay might ostensibly be about, it is at the same time about subjectivity itself, as reflected through form. Despite the heterogeneity of the *Essais*, Montaigne's voice as the 'I' in the text is unmistakable: the voice of a generous, unpretentious, uncommonly insightful, and immensely likeable<sup>36</sup> character, ready to ironise his own pretensions and those of his fellows and ever willing, as he says, to contradict himself for the sake of truth (2007, III: 2, p. 845). Yet to take the 'I' of the text as straightforwardly biographical or mimetic would be to miss the philosophical significance of what is, finally, a poetic construction. As Montaigne himself reminds us, the act of writing 'selves' as much as a self can be said to be writing, and in a work whose stated aim is self-knowledge, the self is necessarily a co-creation of the text rather than something that exists in advance of it. *Je n'ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m'a faict. Livre consubstantial à son auteur [I no more write my book than my book writes me. Book and author are consubstantial]'* (2007, II: 18, p. 703). The analogy between writing and self runs throughout the *Essais*, supporting a reading that sees the two as co-extensive rather than seeing the self as an entity existing prior to writing which is then *represented* in written form. 'The genre foregrounds, perhaps as no other genre does, the relationship between imagination and writing, between the person of the essayist made of flesh and blood and the essayist as defined or created out of words' (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 8).

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<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche reacted to reading Montaigne with the declaration, 'that such a man has written, joy on earth has truly increased'.

Montaigne's claims to 'honesty' and 'telling it like it is' should not make one blind to the fact that the subjectivity portrayed in the text is anything but straightforward, and that the choice to be honest about oneself, like the choice to 'leave everything as it is' involves decisions that are both rhetorical and philosophical. Before examining the nature of the self as portrayed in Montaigne's text, it is worth considering Montaigne's reasons for turning the mirror on himself as his 'physics and metaphysics'. We have seen that Montaigne rejects the deductive, systematic approach of the Scholastics in favour of the open, disjunctive structure of the *essai* that better enables him to present the complexity of his own experience. It is also significant to note that his turn toward self-reflection entails the rejection of any unconditioned 'god's-eye' point of view which might be invoked to ensure a generally coherent, stable universe. The upheaval of social and intellectual structures during the Renaissance tended to relocate the site of the comprehension of the world from a transcendent divinity to the rational human subject, without altogether eliminating the notion of a divinely ordered universe. Montaigne to some extent reproduces this duality of perspectives, yet he takes pains to counter the optimistic picture of human reason as quasi-divine, championed by Luther and by some in the Catholic tradition. He seizes on the sceptical and Christian frameworks of human fallibility in order to separate out the Wisdom of God that is 'solid and entire' from the inherently limited perspective of human beings, claiming that harmony and consistency '*ne se trouvent point en telles ames que les nostres, basses et communes*'. Having drawn a clear division between the human and divine, Montaigne resists the temptation to either recreate God in man's image or to approximate the divine perspective in his own work. '*Les hommes, dit Sainct Paul, sont devenus fols cuidans estre sages, et ont mué la gloire de Dieu incorruptible en l'image de l'homme corruptible* [Men, says St. Paul, have become fools thinking themselves wise and have changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the image of corruptible man]' (Montaigne, 2007, II: 12, p. 559). Montaigne fully embraces the limited perspective of the human subject by taking up the inherently provisional and *décousu* form of the *essai*, for it is only by understanding one's conditions, rather than 'sallying forth outside ourselves' to a higher or purer plane, that one can hope to get any purchase on self or world.

Understanding the material and psychological conditions under which thought takes place also prevents the all-too-human error of believing that one has achieved 'objective' truth when in fact one has merely made a universal law of one's

own contingent circumstances. Montaigne is wary of this tendency to approach objectivity by generalising from particulars, and he sees philosophers as especially prone to this error of judgement. In ‘*Apologie de Raimond Sebonde*’, he rejects ‘natural law’ as no more than an artistic production, and he replaces a conceptual account of human nature with the presentation of multiple points of view. Though to him ‘*il n’est rien si horrible à imaginer, que de manger son pere,*’ he attempts to understand the perspective of the cannibal who (he argues) sees himself as honouring and revivifying the father in the act of eating him.

*Il est croyable qu’il y a des loix naturelles : comme il se voit ès autres creatures : mais en nous elles sont perdues, ceste belle raison humaine s’ingerant par tout de maistriser et commander, brouillant et confondant le visage des choses, selon sa vanité et inconstance. Nihil itaque amplius nostrum est: quod nostrum dico, artis est [C’est pourquoi rien n’est plus nôtre ; ce que j’appelle nôtre est une production de l’art]. Les sujets ont divers lustres et diverses considerations : c’est de là que s’engendre principalement la diversité d’opinions. Une nation regarde un subject par un visage, et s’arreste à celuy là : l’autre par un autre..*

It is quite believable that natural laws exist: we can see that in other creatures. But we have lost them; that fine human reason of ours is always interfering, seeking dominance and mastery, distorting and confounding the face of everything according to its vanity and inconsistency. Nothing of ours is left: what I call ours is really artificial. Any object can be seen in various lights from various points of view: it is chiefly that which gives birth to the variety of opinion: one nation sees one facet, and stops there; another sees another. (II: 12, p. 616/p. 226).

Given that every society and indeed every person sees the world under a certain *regard*, privileging some aspects while ignoring or diminishing the importance of others, and given the propensity for self-deception – ‘*brouiller et confonder le visage des choses au gré de sa vanité et inconstance*’ – the human as such cannot be grasped through generalisation but only through the multiplication of different limited, subjective views, including the views of a singular subject – the author himself – at different times. If human nature is a ‘*production de l’art,*’ and a poor production at that, then Montaigne’s response is to develop a better medium through which to represent human experience.

In the *Essais*, the possibility of a universally accepted, god-given nature or human nature falls away and is replaced by an artistic production. By turning the mirror onto himself as his ‘physics and metaphysics’, Montaigne suggests that the subject is the site of the disclosure of the world, and that the attempt to know the

world must pass through self-knowledge. To reflect this principle, Montaigne as a writer ‘does not *think*, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it’ (Adorno, 1984, p.161, emphasis mine). Because the *form* of thought – rather than a conceptual account of consciousness – is stressed, the writer’s personal experience is able to serve as an exemplar of the human being in general without the pretence of becoming a universal law.

The sense of the writer offered by the *Essais* is complicated by the fact that any representation of the writing subject within a work is bound to be fictional, as only a possible subject, which points to the mechanism of self-knowledge more generally: the subject defines itself and knows itself only by moving through the other, that which it is not, or not yet. In the *Essais*, the project of self-knowledge takes place largely through others’ words, specifically through the words of Classical texts, from which Montaigne quotes liberally. Montaigne’s remark that ‘*On ne fait que nous entregloser* [We can do nothing but gloss one another] (2007, III: 13, p. 1115)’ amounts to a recognition that the process of self-understanding, and indeed the very ‘self’ at stake in the investigation, involves an assimilation or digestion of existing material. One’s own ‘text’ takes its place in the web of other texts, given shape by existing words and forms. While Montaigne uses a wealth of quotations from Classical and contemporary authors, he does so not to uphold their authority or to lend authority to his own arguments but to serve as fodder for his own self-understanding. Just as the movement through subjectivity is envisaged as necessary to the disclosure of the world, so this movement through exteriority (here represented by the words of others) is crucial to his entire project, as it is a way of stressing the role of extra-rational, contingent factors in rational understanding (here the understanding of self) and of situating the self in the world. The latter is accomplished in large part by an emphasis on the internal diversity or changeability of his own self, in which Montaigne conceives of texts and selves as an assemblage of diverse *pièces* rather than self-identical totalities.<sup>37</sup>

*Toutes le contrarietez s’y trouvent [...] Je n’ay rien à dire de moy, entierement, simplement, et solidement, sans confusion et sans meslange, ny un mot. Distinguo, est le plus universel member de ma Logique.*

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<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, he describes his book as ‘*Ce fagotage de tant de diverses pièces*’ (2007, II: 37, p. 796).

*Nous sommes tous des lopins, et d'une contexture si informe et diverse, que chaque piece, chaque moment, faict son jeu. Et se trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de nous à autrui.*

Every sort of contradiction can be found in me [...] There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole simply and completely, without intermingling and admixture. The most universal article of my own Logic is DISTINGUO.

We are entirely made up of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people (II: 1, p. 355; 537/pp. 126-127).

Montaigne declares himself unable to utter a word about himself '*entierement, simplement, et solidement*', repeating the terms he uses to describe divine wisdom (*solide et entier*) elsewhere. In contrast to divine unity, the position of the human subject is that of diversity and contradiction, within which different impulses war with one another and pull in different directions. The self is an admixture, not fully one's own possession, and our identity with ourselves is just as fractured as the difference 'between us and other people'.

Montaigne's internally diverse and intertextual or con-textual self contrasts sharply with the abstract Cartesian 'I' that it would later inspire. Montaigne and Descartes both suffered from the anxiety of influence; both attempted to separate themselves from inherited wisdom and to judge things 'according to their own [individual] estimate' (Montaigne 2013, III: 8, p. 376). But where Descartes deduced an 'I' mathematically, by subtracting all that is given or contingent in his constitution (including his own physical body), Montaigne plunged himself into the given in the form of extensive quotations from other works and in his extended reflections on his own physical body. In contrast to Descartes' internalist conception of knowledge that sacrifices the world for a unified 'I' and creates the problem of how to recover the world, Montaigne's non-identical subject is inextricably linked to the world precisely in its difference from itself. If there are no rigid boundaries between self and other, between one's own text and the text of others, then self and other, subject and world, cannot be thought separately from one another. Before the question of knowledge of the world arises, Montaigne's 'I' is already *in* the world, as a body (his 'I' is resolutely physical) and as a language user—as the site of others' texts. The principle of 'distinguo' that Montaigne cites is particularly apt to his method. In formal logic, the *distinguo* is a distinction that

challenges the terms of a given proposition, demonstrating that the real subject of the argument is other than what it was thought to be. Montaigne's writing continues to function as a *distinguo* in relation to the version(s) of scepticism that developed from Descartes and that continues to exert force over discussion in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

Montaigne's writing subject is granted integrity precisely through the refusal to sacrifice diversity. This is the import of his claim: '*Tant ya que je me contredis bien à l'avanture, mais la verité, comme disoit Demades, je ne contredy point* (2007, III: 2, p. 845).<sup>38</sup> The weaving of existing text into an intertext is at the same time the weaving of the self that Montaigne claims he is trying to understand. The underlying insight is that the process of understanding is also a creative process, and this is true both for the writer of the *Essais* and the reader. The mimetic representation or performance of self-reflection offers an occasion for the reader to creatively take up the task of self-reflection for herself.

### Challenging norms of authority

Through his unauthorised borrowing from other texts,<sup>39</sup> Montaigne places himself and his readers on a par with those authors whom he quotes, challenging traditional notions of authority both as they relate to *authoring* and to the right or ability to know more generally. Kierkegaard would be the first to develop a comprehensive account of how different styles of philosophical writing express different ethical positions vis-à-vis the reader, and how, viewed Socratically, authority is a stumbling block to helping others to the truth. Montaigne claims no great pretensions about the significance of his work for readers; in his preface to the reader he declares that he composed the *Essais* for '*aucune fin que domestique et privée*' giving '*nul consideration de ton service [celui du lecteur]*' (2007, p. 27). Yet these feints of a self-effacing author cannot disguise the philosophical ambitions of the *Essais* and in fact express precisely the kind of disclaimer one would expect from a work of philosophical therapy. The author offers no credentials; he makes no argument for the value of his text. He speaks to the reader intimately as '*tu*' and promises only to give an honest portrait of himself: '*je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre*' (*Ibid.*). In

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<sup>38</sup> 'I may happen to contradict myself, but the truth, as Demades said, I never contradict'.

<sup>39</sup> This is sometimes taken to the point of not including the author's name. Montaigne takes ownership of these borrowed texts by remembering them, but allowing himself to forget where they come from.

choosing himself as the subject of his book, and in developing a lively and unpredictable form that emphasises the plasticity of the self, Montaigne provides a model for self-examination that refuses to decide the outcome in advance of the investigation. Staging the process of judgement as in a drama or a novel, the reader is able to exercise her powers of discernment in a quasi-fictional context.

Montaigne offers a number of model exercises of this kind within the work, and he often reflects explicitly on the problem of judgement, which had particular interest for him as a former magistrate. In *'De l'expérience'* he gives examples of legal cases in which the law – standing in for any system of general concepts – is inadequate to the empirical particulars of a case, arguing that no matter how many laws are created, they can never account for the complexity of particular situations. In one such example, Montaigne is approached by a group of labourers on his estate who have left behind a dying man in the woods. The man had been stabbed and left to die by an unknown assailant and begged for aid when the peasants passed by. Fearing they would be accused of the crime if they stopped to help, the peasants continued on their way and informed Montaigne of the man's plight. Montaigne expresses pity for the dying man and feels disturbed by the lack of human feeling the peasants showed in refusing help to a fellow human being. Yet he is unable to condemn them; because of inequalities in the application of the law during the time, showing a kindness in this instance would almost certainly have led to the peasants being accused of having a hand in the stabbing. Montaigne follows this example with another case in which men condemned to death are later proved innocent through empirical evidence, but rather than set legal precedent for reversing judiciary decisions, the magistrate decides to let the sentence stand. These cases reveal the inadequacy of general (here legal and moral) notions and the pitfalls of judgement, showing how easily one can be go astray either by failing to imaginatively take up the perspective of others or by stubbornly insisting on a particular way of seeing, even when it is revealed to be inadequate. While erring is an inevitable part of judgement, Montaigne seeks to provide a framework in which one becomes responsible for failing to see.

*De cecy suis-je tenu de responder, si je m'empesche moy-mesme, s'il y a de la vanité et vice en mes discours, que je ne sente point, ou que je ne soye capable de sentir en me le representant. Car il eschappe souvent des fautes à nos yeux: mais la maladie du jugement consiste à ne les pouvoir appercevoir, lors qu'un autre nous les descouvre.*

What I am obliged to answer for is for getting myself tangled up, or if there is any inanity or defect in my reasoning which I do not see or which I am incapable of seeing once it is pointed out to me. Faults can often escape our vigilance: sickness of judgement consists in not perceiving them when they are revealed to us (II: 10, p. 429/p. 154).

Learning to see anew and being able to change one's perspective are the abilities that Montaigne most values in his own activity of self-examination, which is held up as a model for the reader. He warns against holding onto positions out of pride or habit, of dogmatically refusing to see. The ever-changing self that the provisional form of the *essai* allows Montaigne to present also warns the reader against the ethical pitfalls of understanding oneself as a fixed identity—a temptation that systematic accounts of human nature reinforce. The dialectic of selves and perspectives in the *Essais* thus not only serves to mirror the process of thought in motion but also trains the reader to become a better judge of herself and of the wider world.

## Chapter 3: Concepts in conversation in the Humean essay

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Just this: not text, but texture, not the dream  
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,  
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.  
 Yes it sufficed that I in life could find  
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind  
 Of correlated pattern in the game.

- Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

In his very brief essay *Of essay writing*, Hume bemoans the hermetic quality of philosophy of ‘the last Age’ and envisions a ‘League betwixt the learned and conversible Worlds’ that would unite philosophical discourse with the lively, social, and dialogical features of conversation. His goal of relating philosophical discourse to a wider social and cultural context, a conversation already in progress, quite naturally leads him to adopt the genre of the essay, the modern form of which was inaugurated by Montaigne two hundred years earlier. Hume’s development of the philosophical essay, is, furthermore, a self-conscious response to foundationalist efforts to ground claims about the world, specifically in Academic or sceptical philosophy, a target he identifies directly in both the *Essays* and his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. In addition to the essay’s grounding in the sceptical tradition, Hume’s choice of the essay also anticipates the shift of focus in 20<sup>th</sup>-century pragmatic and ordinary language philosophy away from abstract, foundationalist arguments and toward descriptive accounts of everyday kinds of knowing. The rhetorical features of Hume’s essays open up new ways of understanding how knowledge relies on prior social and linguistic conditions, and how philosophy ought to relate to these conditions. Where Montaigne focused primarily on the *inconstance* of temporal life, Hume turns his attention to demonstrating how arbitrary social practices in fact possess a relative stability over time, and, accepting the ancient sceptical problem of infinite regress, he sets out to rescue normative judgements in the absence of an absolute ground.

### Hume and scepticism

Like the other authors in this study, Hume’s choice of style is bound up with the particular challenges of sceptical philosophy. Hume fits into the tradition I

have called therapeutic scepticism in that his goal is not to rationally dismantle sceptical arguments or to dispel doubt by producing a reliable first principle but instead to find some way of coming to terms with the conditions and limitations of knowledge.

Hume pits his own ‘mitigated’ scepticism against the ‘excessive’ nature of Cartesian theoretical doubt and Hobbesian moral scepticism as well as ancient scepticism under the label of ‘Pyrrhonism’. This might place some strain on the notion that Hume belongs to a tradition modelled after the Neo-Pyrrhonians, since Hume attacks Pyrrhonism in no uncertain terms. However Popkin has argued (1951) – and the *Treatise* supports – that Hume understood the Pyrrhonian position to be equivalent to dogmatic (Academic) scepticism: the belief that certain knowledge is impossible because knowledge claims cannot be grounded in any adequate, that is, rational, way.<sup>40</sup> Hume’s rejection of Pyrrhonism thus leaves open the possibility of linking Hume to the non-dogmatic, therapeutic reading of Pyrrhonian scepticism that I suggest in the first chapter. On the one hand, Hume accepts the conclusion of the dogmatic sceptics as inevitable given a certain kind of speculative philosophical approach: there simply is no way to prove the truth of one’s beliefs about the world beyond a shadow of a doubt. Yet like the ancient sceptics he fits the inevitability of doubt into a larger frame of common life and everyday kinds of justification.

Hume’s investment in the practical questions of common life is evident in the sharp dichotomy with which he begins his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* between the moral philosophers, who view human beings as ‘chiefly as born for action’, and that ‘other species of philosophers’, who regard ‘human nature as a subject of speculation; and with a narrow scrutiny examine it, in order to find those principles, which regulate our understanding [...]’ (2007, p. 3).<sup>41</sup> Hume’s

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<sup>40</sup> As we saw in the Chapter 1, Sextus Empiricus differentiates Pyrrhonism from this dogmatic position; the positive claim that one *cannot* know would contradict itself (if you can’t know, how do you know you can’t know?) and usher in an infinite regress, a problem that Sextus claims the Pyrrhonian sceptics were keen to avoid. Sextus’ account of Pyrrhonism, as described in the first chapter of this study, is in fact consistent with Hume’s own project, taking a therapeutic approach that seeks to cure people of the idea that foundational truths could ever be adequately established. In both cases, this is achieved not by offering rational arguments for the claim that absolute truths are impossible, but by criticising dogmatic claims of any kind as a way of getting back to practical life.

<sup>41</sup> This vision of two species of philosophy is deliberately overstated for rhetorical effect, yet Hume’s opposition of a philosophy oriented toward speculative knowledge and one aimed at ethical formation still has relevance for the contemporary situation. The question of

primary target under the latter heading is ‘Academic or Sceptical’ philosophy, both in its ancient form – the dogmatic position that he associates with Pyrrhonism – and the Cartesian form, which:

recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful (2007, p. 3).

Hume denies that any such foundational, self-evident principle can be found (2007, p. 109), an assertion that could be regarded as self-refuting if it were pronounced as part of a positive proof, since the denial of the possibility of certain knowledge would then become dogmatic. However, Hume is well aware of the contradiction in this approach, which he describes in *Enquiry* Book XII Part II as using rational arguments to destroy reason (2007, p. 113). While recognising that scepticism is the logical outcome of a certain mode of philosophical argumentation and is ‘impossible’ to refute (2007, p. 115), Hume will critique the position from *outside* of these conventions, by posing the question of the relationship between philosophical doubt and common life—chiefly by exposing the role of convention in human understanding and by undermining the philosophical tendency to look for the essential or necessary beyond the everyday. This shift in frame is key to the therapeutic task of reclaiming practical activity from the threat of doubt.

In *Enquiry*, Hume portrays sceptical doubt primarily as a form of amusement, which can be useful only insofar as it shows how little human beings actually rely on philosophically sound knowledge claims when acting in the world. He pokes gentle fun at the armchair philosopher<sup>42</sup> who abandons his rigorously deduced positions in the face of any practical demands, as a sleeper waking from a dream. ‘The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life’ (2007, p. 115). While sympathetic to the project of rooting out prejudice and questioning received wisdom, Hume finds comedy in the sceptic’s pretence to doubt everything while at the same time continuing to live and act in the world.<sup>43</sup> For the good-natured

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whether therapeutic scepticism is philosophy or anti-philosophy hinges on whether one sees the goal of philosophy as knowledge or some more fundamental, practical orientation.

<sup>42</sup> Burnyeat’s ‘country gentleman’. Burnyeat, 1984, p. 231.

<sup>43</sup> *Enquiry* 12:2:4. The precise target of these remarks is likely Descartes, who in *Discours de la Méthode*, Part III, feels compelled to establish moral guidelines for himself while

Hume, the ‘whimsical condition of mankind’ – moved to seek out rational foundations for human experience and yet always already bound by ‘natural’ (including social and linguistic) conditions<sup>44</sup> – requires forbearance, and a healthy measure of irony, rather than despair.

Yet what if the speculative metaphysical project of grounding knowledge claims were, after all, to be held consistently—if the sceptic attempted to live in accord with his own theoretical views? To Hume such a category error would be catastrophic since, if theoretical doubt held anything but a temporary influence on the mind, or exceeded its proper purview of speculative concepts, ‘all discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence’ (2007, p. 116). The descent into nihilism and inaction that Hume describes indeed seems the logical outcome of a certain understanding of scepticism whereby all of one’s foundational commitments must be abandoned because they are insufficiently grounded. It is significant that Hume includes ‘discourse’ among the activities that would fall away if the sceptic were to take his own ideas seriously. He implies that communication relies on some background of shared assumptions that the sceptic rejects, an idea that will be developed in greater detail in 20<sup>th</sup>-century ordinary language philosophy.<sup>45</sup> Yet after introducing the danger he adds that, happily, ‘so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded’ (2007, p. 116). For Hume, the ‘natural’ will always assert itself against a philosophical principle (*Ibid.*)—which can demand rational assent but not the force of conviction or habit.<sup>46</sup> ‘Nature’ for Hume has a double valence as both biological constitution – the basic needs that arise from

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he undertakes the project of speculative doubt. Having razed the great edifice of knowledge to the ground, Descartes seeks a place he can be ‘*logé commodément pendant le temps qu'on y travaillera*’. Descartes does not appear fazed by this glaring gap between practical life and philosophical activity.

<sup>44</sup> ‘When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them’ (2007, p. 117).

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>46</sup> ‘If belief, therefore, were a simple act of the thought, without any peculiar manner of conception, or the addition of a force and vivacity, it must infallibly destroy itself, and in every case terminate in a total suspense of judgement’ (*Treatise*, 1:4:1:8, 2007, p. 123). Neil Gascoigne summarises Hume’s insight: ‘It is a feeling – something that the theoretical attitude cannot accommodate – that rescues him from his scepticism. This discovery leads to the awareness that custom and habit have obscured a general feature of our practically oriented beliefs: feeling and not cognition of some indicator of truth is a mark of assent’ (2002, p. 92).

being the kinds of creatures we are – and habit, which is shaped by social institutions and carries the force of a second nature.

The figures of the armchair sceptic and the fanatical doubter are part of a rich rhetorical strategy by means of which Hume makes the reader complicit in the notion that the practical attitude is more primary than the theoretical attitude and thus that the latter must in some sense acknowledge the former. Hume counts on his readers seeing something amiss in a philosopher who, in the first case, does not live as he thinks, and, in the second case, is so devoted to thought that he forgets to eat and eventually expires. Recognising the humour in both cases requires a sense that there is something erroneous or ridiculous about thinking that is cut off from what Hume calls ‘natural necessities’. It appears to be either hypocrisy or an extreme form of self-denial, a radical rejection of the conditions of life. Hume uses humour here to call attention to the practical attitude as the shared human condition, one that not only forms the *sine qua non* of conceptual thought but that, further, fixes the bounds of meaningful enquiry. Hume’s first example – that of the sceptic who, though he may doubt the existence of the world or the possibility of ever knowing what is true, still takes his tea, votes, falls in love, avoids walking into traffic<sup>47</sup> – is a reminder that actions are not grounded in rational certainty about what is the case. Furthermore, beliefs *cannot* be grounded in this way, since beliefs about the nature of things form part of a pre-existing web of commitments – conscious and unconscious – from which the subject can never fully be extricated. Hume calls into question the value of a tradition that seeks to ground knowledge claims in a logically consistent way while overlooking the background of empirical, historical, and emotional grounding that gives to these claims their force and significance.

It is important to note that Hume does not simply take for granted the primacy of the practical attitude or quotidian existence but offers a way of talking about the everyday philosophically, as the condition of possibility within which the activity of investigating the world takes place. For Hume, a philosophy that ignores or seeks to overcome ‘the necessities of nature’ is prone to self-deception. The kind of grounding sought in foundationalist philosophy does not take into account the prior empirical (biological, linguistic, and institutional) ground of beliefs and actions

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<sup>47</sup> This is a variation of Johnson’s refutation of Berkley’s idealism: kicking a stone and proclaiming, ‘I refute it thus!’. It also calls to mind G.E. Moore’s notorious refutation of Cartesian metaphysical scepticism in which he proves the existence of the external world by holding out his hands and declaring, ‘Here is one hand. And here is another’.

and thus is blind to the effect this prior environment might have on the investigation itself. The risk for Hume, as for Montaigne, is that whatever ideal or systematic accounts philosophy is able to produce will smooth over and so fail to comprehend and account for the complex ways in which people actually behave.

On this reading, the demands of common life provide the limits of meaningful philosophical investigation, and, in a manner similar to ancient scepticism, the aim is to be cured of the worry that life is contingent on right knowledge. As Hume declares, ‘we must submit to this fatigue [a critique of sceptical philosophy] in order to live at ease ever after’ (2007, p. 8). Hume’s remark, though tinged with irony, recalls the ancient sceptical notion that the ‘healthy’ are able to come to terms with a lack of certain knowledge and achieve tranquillity through the continual suspension of belief. While many readers of Sextus, including Hume, have found this notion of a lived suspension of belief unintelligible on the grounds that beliefs of some kind are required in order to act, it can be argued that what Sextus meant by this attitude is in fact quite similar to what Hume eventually proposes. For Sextus, the suspension of belief is characterised by living in harmony with the conventions of one’s society, or ‘living naturally’. Hume devises a similar state of affairs in which what is called a belief ‘is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures’ and ‘derives force from repeated experience’ (*Treatise*, 1:4:1:8, 2007, p. 123). While Hume provides more room for the critique of societal convention than does Sextus, he constantly appeals to habit, custom and ‘common sense’ (often under the guise of ‘human nature’ or ‘the natural’) as a practical ground for action in lieu of a rational foundation. But where Sextus merely points to the practical attitude as the foil of ungrounded philosophical speculation, as that which everyone already understands and agrees upon, Hume devotes himself to understanding the conditions of ‘living naturally’, thereby representing the natural attitude as something of philosophical relevance in its own right.

Hume faced the challenge of showing that social practices and agreed upon linguistic conventions had priority over speculative arguments and that philosophy ought to allow everything to ‘remain precisely as before’ (*Treatise* 1:4:5, 2007, pp. 164) rather than inadvertently making the world conform to philosophical fantasy.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Compare to Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 55: 124. ‘*Die Philosophie darf den tatsächlichen Gebrauch der Sprache in keiner Weise antasten, sie kann ihn am Ende also nur beschreiben. Denn sie kann ihn auch nicht begründen. Sie [Die Philosophie] läßt alles wie es ist* [Philosophy

The very bounds of what is considered relevant to philosophy, what constitutes a valid deductive argument or what counts as sufficient reason, are shown by Hume to be a matter of convention, historical accident endowed with the weight of necessity. This should not lead us to think that the alternative to excessive scepticism is a blind acceptance of cultural and biological imperatives. For while Hume often appeals to human nature, he also insists upon interrogating the various ways in which we come to regard practices and responses as natural, thus providing the possibility of a critical awareness of one's own conditions.

### **Writing therapeutically**

Part of Hume's strategy to reconcile philosophy with common life involves finding a way of writing to replace what he viewed as an exhausted vocabulary of scepticism. Instead of refuting the sceptical tradition directly, by way of philosophical arguments against scepticism, he responds indirectly by endeavouring to change the kinds of questions that philosophy asks and the kinds of answers that are deemed philosophically satisfactory, much in the same way as later pragmatists, such as Wittgenstein and Rorty.<sup>49</sup> As a result, Hume is often described as rhetorically sidestepping or dodging philosophical problems. This is frequently the charge against those who take aim at the very terms or vocabulary of a philosophical problem. Yet, as Timothy Engström (1997) points out in his pragmatic reading of Hume, the Humean essay turns the tables by establishing 'a framework and an ethos within which the philosopher risks becoming a comic figure unless sufficiently aware of the rhetorical and communal nature of his or her exercise' (Engström, 1997, p. 150), just as the sceptic becomes ridiculous by rejecting the conditions of life that make doubt possible. The difficulty facing Hume in his attempt to write his way to a new kind of philosophising can be imagined in terms set out by Richard Rorty (1991), writing about his own pragmatic response to the inherited problems of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy.

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must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is]'.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> The numerous intellectual affinities between Hume and the pragmatists has been argued for convincingly elsewhere by Simon Blackburn (2008), Dennis C. Rasmussen (2013), and Leo Damrosch (1991), among others. On the level of form too, Hume's essays anticipate this later tradition by addressing questions and evidence that lie outside traditional philosophical concerns about what is true.

The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honoured vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are ‘inconsistent in their own terms’ or that they ‘deconstruct themselves’. But this can never be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or ‘merely metaphorical’ is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. For such use is, after all, the paradigm of coherent, meaningful, literal speech (1991, p. 9).

Hume faces the problem of an entrenched vocabulary of scepticism, one that cannot be refuted from within because it would merely beg the question of the ground on which this refutation could be based, thus opening up the *abime* of infinite regress described by the ancient sceptics. Faced with a vocabulary that has outlived its usefulness, Rorty asserts that ‘interesting’ philosophy simply begins to describe things in new ways in an attempt to demonstrate that this new vocabulary could be more useful or fruitful than the old.

It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and the new language games, for just insofar as the new language is really new, there will be no such criteria (1991, p. 9).

The rejection of antecedent philosophical criteria is a helpful way of framing Hume’s choice of the essay. Though Rorty is not primarily interested in generic distinctions, textual form is a part of ‘vocabulary’ and helps to shape ways of reading and thinking. For Hume to point out the limitations of the deductive, scholastic style of argument that he found objectionable, and particularly for him to take on the difficult knot of foundationalism, he had to find an alternative way of writing that valorised experience and experimentation—one that would allow for an approximation of the truth through the testing and comparison of different perspectives. In its trying out of different approaches and points of view, the essay is the empirical genre *par excellence*.

A number of studies in recent years have taken a genre-conscious approach to Hume’s work, notably Richetti’s study of English empiricist rhetoric in *Philosophical Writing* (1983), the Lacanian-Deleuzian analysis of Hume’s essays in Robyn Ferrell’s *Genres of Philosophy* (2002), and Timothy Engström’s thoughtful

pragmatic reading of the Humean essay (1997). I share with Engström the concern that the prevailing reading practices in philosophy, which ‘privilege a particular kind of conceptual systematicity’, fail to appreciate the crucial role of the performative dimension of texts such as essays. This is particularly true in readings of Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, which has been the subject of numerous misguided critiques in analytic aesthetics centring on the idea that Hume’s account is circular or insufficiently grounded.<sup>50</sup> Hume’s calculated rhetorical strategy challenges many contemporary ideas about what a philosophical text ought to be, ideas that can in fact be traced back to Hume’s philosophical contemporaries. For J.S. Mill, Hume’s writings revealed an author for whom:

regard for truth formed no part of his character [...] His mind was too completely enslaved by a taste for literature; not those kinds of literature which teach mankind to know the cause of their happiness and misery, that they may seek the one and avoid the other; but that literature which without regard for truth and utility, seeks only to excite emotion.<sup>51</sup>

Though commentators on ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ are unlikely now to couch their criticisms in such nakedly Platonic terms, contemporary philosophers continue to be confounded by the use of ‘literary’ strategies in philosophical writings.<sup>52</sup> Essayistic modes of writing that exist on the margins between the literary and philosophical pose significant interpretive problems, with a tendency in academic philosophical analysis to extract *essential* conceptual content from non-essential form and so to miss the philosophical implications of ways of writing.

Hume’s empirical, inductive approach to philosophical questions is reinforced by his use of the essay form, which rejects *a priori* reasoning in favour of an experience-based dialectic that unfolds in time. As in Montaigne, Hume’s essaying makes a display of the provisional nature of all knowledge claims by appealing to and preserving the contradictions in everyday experience. Furthermore,

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<sup>50</sup> See analyses of Hume’s essay in S.G. Brown (1938), Anthony Savile (1982), Mary Mothersill (1984), Jerrold Levinson (2002).

<sup>51</sup> Quoted from Norman Kemp Smith, 1966, p. 519. See also Barnouw, 1978, pp. 852-870.

<sup>52</sup> Engström deals deftly with Savile’s attempt to translate Hume’s essay into a series of logical propositions. ‘Savile reduces the rhetoricity of Hume’s prose to logical form, assumes that form to be a better and clearer representation of Hume’s attentions, then makes a passing gesture toward Hume’s “elegant” style so as to skip over altogether the philosophical consequences of Hume’s choice of style, and finally ends of writing something that Hume expressly avoided. In effect, the logical formalism is an attempt to avoid writing’ (1997, p. 152).

the essay's grounding in the first-person experience of the writer is, for the empiricist tradition and its aspiration to practice philosophy scientifically, a reminder that the subject's role in holding the world together is crucial for any notion of objectivity. Starting from the singular observations of an individual subject, essays move toward inter-subjective consensus, with the voice of the one becoming the voice of many: the essay writer draws not from any particular authority but from a 'common sense' or from the powers of observation common to all. This emphasis on shared, conditioned experience, rather than an abstract 'view from nowhere', is a key feature of the Humean essay and helps to reinforce Hume's post-foundational vision of knowledge as historically and socially determined.

### **'Of the Standard of Taste'**

'Of the Standard of Taste' is a case study in how Hume's literary aim of uniting, in the essay form, two distinct vocabularies – that of the 'learned' and of the 'conversable' world – serves Hume's wider pragmatic project of connecting philosophical inquiry to everyday practices by justifying ordinary ways of speaking and knowing. In the essay, Hume attempts to get to the bottom of a paradox: while common sense tells us that 'all sentiment is right', or, 'everyone is entitled to their opinion', common sense also tells us that some judgements are better than others, and experience tells us that we're likely to forget 'the natural equality of tastes' as soon as someone makes an aesthetic claim that we find offensive, e.g. J.K. Rowling is superior to Virginia Woolf. Philosophically, the problem with taste is that admitting the validity of subjective judgements ('all sentiment is right') threatens the possibility of any objective aesthetic standard (Woolf is better than J.K. Rowling). Hume's approach is to step outside of the subject/object opposition, examining the linguistic and social conventions that contribute to pronouncements of taste with a view toward developing an account of their inter-subjective validity and relative stability over time. In seizing on instances of 'what has been found – universally, in all countries and at all times – to please' (p. 9) to establish a *pragmatic* standard, Hume's essay is similar to a number of other 18<sup>th</sup>-century works on aesthetics, especially those of Addison and Shaftesbury.<sup>53</sup> What makes Hume's work of

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<sup>53</sup> 'In his essay on taste in Number 409 of *The Spectator* (an important model for Hume's essay), Addison expresses confidence in the normative consensus established by works 'which

particular interest is his performative strategy. Rejecting the method of establishing philosophical definitions of aesthetic terms, he sets out to describe how aesthetic concepts are *used* in ordinary speech in the context of the interests of a particular community. He then stages these concepts in a play of mutual refinement: a series of attempts and qualifications. His adherence to the conventional meanings of concepts such as ‘taste’ and ‘human nature’ and to the temporal, dialectical process whereby these meanings are established in practice constitutes a rejection of the foundationalist imperative to establish an absolute starting point. Yet without reverting to the any *a priori* absolute to ground moral or aesthetic claims, Hume also offers a method for establishing norms based on purely empirical criteria and on the shared background of consensus upon which language games rely.

‘Of the Standard of Taste’ opens, in essayistic fashion, with a supplement, an ‘aside’ on the language of moral terminology – virtue and vice, good and bad – offering a sort of genealogy to demonstrate the ways in which moral judgements can be reduced, in practice, to statements of praise and blame.<sup>54</sup> Hume does not go as far as Nietzsche to show the ways in which the material practices of power and punishment underwrite the meaning of these concepts; rather, he aims to show that general terms such as virtue, goodness, beauty, etc., are apt to confuse us into thinking that we have achieved some harmony in moral and, by analogy, artistic judgements when, in the particulars, we differ significantly.

The sentiments of men often differ with regard to beauty and deformity of all kinds, even while their general discourse is the same. There are certain terms in every language, which import blame, and others praise; and all men, who use the same tongue, must agree in their application of them. Every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy: But when critics come to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes; and it is found, that they had affixed a very different meaning to their expressions (1987, p. 168).

Hume resists a definition of beauty that would provide the essence of the beautiful behind all individual uses of the term. He instead offers a description of how beauty

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have stood the Test of so many different Ages and Countries’ and recommends (in *Spectator* 29) that the arts ‘deduce their Laws and Rules from the general Sense and Taste of Mankind, and not from the Principles of those Arts themselves; or in other Words, the Taste is not to conform to the Art, but the Art to the Taste’ (David Marshall, 1995, p. 324).

<sup>54</sup> The analogy between moral and aesthetic judgement runs throughout Hume’s essay. The implicit assumption is that our moral terms, like our aesthetic judgements of good and bad, are used to express praise and blame within a context of socially negotiated desires and ends.

is employed in practice as a term of praise, of the same order as the moral concept 'good'. This descriptive account of moral-aesthetic terms anticipates Wittgenstein's insight that understanding a concept means knowing how it is used, rather than being able to define it clearly or precisely. The person who pronounces a work of art beautiful expresses her approval of it within the context of ends valued by members of her linguistic community, while that which offends within this same context of values is called ugly.

Hume goes on to give examples of works from different cultures whose use of terms such as 'justice' appears to align with his own until the particular behaviours being described as 'just' are scrutinised; it becomes clear that barbarous acts are called just by those who benefit from them. From what perspective then are they barbarous? From the writer's own, and from the norms of culture to which he belongs, which he assumes from the outset his readers share. Barbarity is just as relative to those it harms as the concept of good is to those it benefits.<sup>55</sup> The relative understanding of moral terms must be borne in mind when examining any apparent moral agreement between cultures. One cannot, Hume argues, simply claim that the proper exercise of reason will lead all people to agree on what is good or beautiful. Difficulties arise in part from the nature of language itself, particularly in the use of general concepts.

This great unanimity [of moral opinion] is usually ascribed to the influence of plain reason; which, in all these cases, maintains similar sentiments in all men, and prevents those controversies, to which the abstract sciences are so much exposed. So far as the unanimity is real, this account may be admitted as satisfactory: But we must also allow that some part of the seeming harmony in morals may be accounted for from the very nature of language (1987, p. 168).

Hume's remarks here suggest that concepts are misleading when frozen from the particular contexts in which they are applied, since it is the nature of concepts to synthesise what is different under a single name: language organises individual experience into conceptual categories. One philosophical approach to concepts – which Hume rejects – is to rein in the confusing and often contradictory ways they

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<sup>55</sup> However, Hume balances this relativist perspective elsewhere by positing the shared biological and social needs of human beings that operate across cultures. Richard Rorty's norm of reducing cruelty would be one way of thinking about a natural moral principle, since it relies only on the experience of embodiment and the desire to avoid pain, something that all human beings (and other animals) share.

are employed in everyday speech by providing clear definitions. These definitions then serve a prescriptive function as rules that clarify debates about the appropriate use of specific terms by rooting out those uses that stand in conflict with a precisely formulated definition. By contrast, Hume's pragmatic approach to concepts does not admit of right or wrong usage per se, but rather describes the way concepts are used by different groups of speakers within an existing web of commitments or goals. The suggestion is that there is no way to get beyond or behind particular uses of language to a truer or more precise understanding of concepts. On the contrary, our most precise understanding of concepts comes from understanding how they are concretely embodied and authorised. Hume does not claim that barbarous acts are indistinguishable from acts of heroism, but underlines that all such judgements take place within a cultural horizon, and that to ignore how concepts are culturally embodied leads to a covering over of real differences between cultures and peoples. The consequence of this smoothing over of difference, which for Hume is all-too-common practice in philosophy, is the substitution of a convenient fantasy of universal consensus for an inconvenient reality. Hume at times appears to be guilty of just this kind of error in his reliance on terms like human nature and the 'natural', but there is a difference between Hume's rhetorical attempt to persuade by finding or creating common ground and a philosophical claim of unanimity that, in Adorno's words, seeks 'to eliminate the irritating and dangerous elements of things that live within concepts' (1984, p. 160). Difference can be a destabilising force, and the recognition of real difference where it exists opens the way for a philosophy that is better able to forge meaningful, non-totalitarian models of consensus.

In Hume's account then, a definition that offered specific qualities of beauty, such as 'beauty is the form of the good' or 'beauty is harmonious arrangement' would simply be tautological, since the predicates attached to the word beauty would function as synonyms, specifically terms of praise for what gives pleasure, which would still leave one at a loss for how to apply the term in a specific context. The difficulty with judgements of taste, or indeed any conceptual judgement, is precisely in knowing when it is appropriate to apply a general concept. How does one attach the word 'love' to a particular experience or 'beautiful' to a particular object? Hume declines to provide any *a priori* rules for this process and instead offers examples of what is 'obvious'<sup>56</sup> or what 'everyone knows', appealing

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<sup>56</sup> The word and its variants occur many times throughout the essay.

to the concrete social practices that shape a subject's application of concepts.

Speaking about the norms of artistic composition, Hume claims:

Their foundation is the same with that of all of the practical sciences: experience; nor are they anything but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages (1987, p. 170).

While pointing to the unconscious rules that govern language use and composition, Hume expresses disdain for the kind of conceptual clarity that would dismiss non-philosophical language as imprecise or set up a standard by which artistic works ought to be judged.

To check the imagination's outbursts, and reduce every expression to geometrical truth and exactness [...] would produce a work of a kind that universal experience had shown to be the most insipid and disagreeable (1987, p. 170).<sup>57</sup>

Hume's lack of interest in purifying concepts from their everyday use or in prescribing how specific concepts ought to be used puts him at odds with much of the philosophical tradition, for whom his arguments appear circular and lacking in rigour. Yet Hume insists that the 'merit of delivering true general precepts in ethics [and by extension in aesthetics] is indeed very small. Whoever recommends any moral virtues, really does no more than is implied in the terms themselves,' suggesting that, at least for ethical-aesthetic concepts, a 'true' or useful account will have to incorporate the many contingencies of lived experience. Indeed, Hume is careful in his account of taste to emphasise all of the 'delicate' springs of perception and judgement, which can differ from person to person (1987, p. 171). He at times suggests that if the human form were to achieve machine-like perfection and regularity, everyone could agree on what is beautiful (1987, p. 172). But in the progression of the essay, he tempers this passive notion of perception with the

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<sup>57</sup> Hume shares this insight with Herder, who, writing about the origin of language (1767-1768) expresses his relief that the Creator was not a grammarian who would have 'ordered what he saw into classes and washed away the excess' (Herder, 2004, p. 64). Every effort should be made to understand how language games function—but the goal of conceptual clarity should not be to proscribe speech and should not be the basis for a misguided attempt to make ordinary language more precise.

active practices of the critic,<sup>58</sup> and, further, suggests that differences in personality and the dispositions arising from different stages of human life will always lead to some ‘innocent’ variation of taste (1987, p. 179), which no singular standard can resolve. ‘At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty’. Hume’s unwillingness to smooth over these empirical differences in order to make the grounds of aesthetic consensus more solid is not an oversight but an essential part of his rhetorical strategy. In exploring the empirical conditions of aesthetic judgement, Hume also offers a ground for deciding which variations of taste are worth arguing about and thus what species of justification are philosophically useful.

What is seen by some as Hume’s failure to provide a philosophically rigorous account of how aesthetic judgements might have a dimension of universality is in fact a misreading of the genre of the essay, which is defined by a mistrust of the kind of conceptual rigour that is being demanded. In essayistic writing, *process* is truth, and Hume’s essays, perhaps more than any other example of the genre, gain their precision through a gradual refinement of (often contradictory or apparently contradictory) ideas that unfolds in the process of reading, not shying away from contradiction. The rigour that is achieved in an essay has to do, in the terms set out by Lukács, with the *fidelity* to the phenomena that one has set out to better understand. Hume’s method is to faithfully describe how aesthetic terms are used and how disagreements about taste can be adjudicated in common life. This rhetorical move points to the philosophical insight that, 1) while norms cannot be given *a priori*, practical rules of engagement exist which govern a community’s use of terms and forms of justification, rules which will met with recognition if one is made aware of them, and that 2) drawing back from the historically-specific norms of a given culture, one in fact can recognise relatively stable aesthetic norms across time (1987, p. 178, 181)—for example the enduring worth of Homer or Milton. Within this approach, Hume is able to account for the wide variety of taste as well as provide some necessary, though not *a priori*, conditions for judgement.

The challenge of such an account is that, viewed from within the traditional philosophical aims of conceptual clarity and systematicity, the essay simply mirrors back the imprecision and variability of everyday kinds of knowing and speaking, in effect, ‘betraying the intended matter to the arbitrariness of previously decreed

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<sup>58</sup> For an account of the tension between these two claims, see Carroll (1984).

significations' (Adorno, 1984, p.160). Where speculative philosophical accounts err in subtracting the transitory in order to achieve the eternal and universal, Hume's alternative, in its fidelity to the transitory or contingent, threatens to unravel into total relativity or incomprehensibility. In contrast to the 'geometrical truth and exactness' of speculative philosophical works, the concepts in Hume's essay gain precision only through their relation to and difference from one another, existing as part of a conceptual web. This rhetorical choice is not a failure to recognise the standards that the tradition imposes, but rather a performative way of challenging those standards. In Hume, the contingent, ephemeral forms in which ideas appear are not separable from the ideas themselves. These forms are not only relevant but crucial to rigorous philosophical investigation, since it is only by acknowledging them that philosophers are able to get any purchase on their own presuppositions and avoid unwitting dogmatism. Essays stand apart from other genres of philosophical composition in elaborating concepts 'as part of the process in which they are temporally embodied' (Adorno, 1984, p. 160). In Wittgensteinian terms, concepts are embedded in the specific language games of a community, and, rather than possessing fixed meanings, they are constantly refined as part of an on-going dialectic with other concepts and with broader social aims. Hume's introductory 'aside' on moral language is meant to emphasise our cultural, practical investment in concepts such as 'beautiful' and 'good', lest we lose sight of these ends in the attempt to clarify these concepts philosophically.

A helpful formulation of the philosophical significance of Hume's dialectical or contextual approach in essay is found in Adorno, who in 'Essay as Form' lays bare the ways in which meaning is or might be constructed:

The essay perceives that the longing for strict definitions has long offered, through fixating manipulations of the meanings of concepts, to eliminate the irritating and dangerous elements of things that live within concepts (1984, p. 160).

The danger of a certain kind of philosophical rigour, a certain conception of what it means to know, is that the everyday practices that lend meaning to our words and provide the ground for any kind of understanding whatsoever are cast aside for a more precise method of forming propositions and justifying claims. As in Montaigne, the worry is that what the philosopher sets out to know is changed, in the process of adopting a conceptual and rhetorical scheme, into something

unrecognisable, a fantasy. This is not to suggest that there is any natural or transparent means of representation, any neutral model that philosophy could adopt. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that representation always involves philosophical choices, and that the essay's dialectical, contextual presentation of concepts retains a dimension of the complexity and ambiguity of everyday language and of 'things'. The 'irritating and dangerous elements of things' is a reference to the disturbing fact, which Hume acknowledges, that the world could be otherwise than our way of imagining it, that our understanding of what *is* is a reflection of habit and is in constant negotiation.

### **The ethics of essaying**

Hume's conversational style also reflects an interest in the ethics governing discourse as such—as an encounter between human beings, author and reader. He recognises the motive force of emotion at the root of judgement, and so part of the aim of the implied author is to develop the sentiments of the reader through performance or example, drawing the reader into the conversation by creating opportunities for agreement and dissent and thereby staging the kind of conversations we can have about matters of taste (Engström, 1997). We have already seen how he uses humour, specifically irony, to create a sense of common ground with the reader from which flows his critique of the excesses of speculative thinking that ignores this common ground of 'natural necessities'. Through the use of irony, he sets a tone for the discussion, 'a context, an ethos, an attitude in which on-going argument does or does not take root' (Engström, 1997, p. 168). This contrasts with the authoritative form of the systematic or deductive argument, which demands consent through the rigorous application of method. He also appeals to the shared experience of reader and author by offering examples of common sense that are meant to be immediately recognisable. To return to the beginning of the essay, Hume opens with the observation that everyone knows there is great disagreement of taste among individuals. But he then makes the apparently contradictory claim, also authorised by common sense, that there is vast agreement about which artworks are worthy of being passed down from one generation to the next. On the one hand, this is a neat rhetorical trick that creates the sense that we are talking about the same thing when we're talking about common sense, when in fact common sense – the mechanism of consensus – is

precisely what is being interrogated. In addition, in alternating between conflicting common senses, the essay offers a sense of progression in the form of an ever more detailed and faithful survey of the terrain, and what Adorno calls the ‘texture’ of the concepts at play, exemplifying an essayistic mode of expression that ‘rescues, in precision, what the refusal to outline sacrifices’ (Adorno, 1984, p. 160). ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ preserves the value of the things ‘everybody knows’ and the process of coming to consensus while at the same time refining our understanding of what it is that we (readers) all know and agree to be true. The sense of progression in Hume’s essay relies in large part on a spatial trope of moving from the general to the particular to the general, switching the focus back and forth from particular empirical differences of delicacy, attention, humour, impartiality, etc. to wider agreements in aesthetic judgement between individuals and over time. This movement suggests that general principles or truths are born out of these particulars, and that patterns can be discerned, some sense amidst individual difference. The human nature to which Hume frequently appeals is not something to be delimited through definition; rather it is the collected weight of history, of convention: a kind of on-going game in which everyone participates.<sup>59</sup> We recognise, through the presence of regularities over time, that the game is governed by rules of some kind, though we make up the rules as we go along and are often entirely unaware of what they are. These rules, while not grounded in *a priori* principles, carry the weight of necessity, since they make meaningful communication possible. Indeed Hume claims that a ‘very violent effort is requisite to change our judgement of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarised’ (1987, p. 181). Hume reminds us that conventions, second nature, are the product of our own activity, the activity of individuals, yet when we draw back from our ‘narrow circle’ (1987, p. 171) to look at group activity across time and space, we see patterns emerge, like a school of fish collectively changing direction. This account offers a sense in which the ‘natural’ or the ‘necessary’ can be understood without dogmatically appealing to foundational principles and without ignoring the real differences between individuals and cultures. It also allows for the

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<sup>59</sup> Human nature then could be understood as a collective fate, a pattern seen only in retrospect, in history.

possibility of change by insisting that norms have no other source or authoritative force than the experience of human beings.

Hume describes the ideal critic or judge as a person possessing ‘strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice’ (p. 177). But no sooner does he offer this definition than he immediately raises the ‘embarrassing’ question of how such a critic could ever be known, and thus how an ultimate arbiter of taste could be established (*Ibid.*) He comes to the conclusion that there is no way to positively identify a good critic, and that when ‘doubts occur, men can do no more than in other disputable questions, which are submitted to the understanding: They must produce the best arguments, that their invention suggests to them [...]’ (p. 178). While some have read this as a problem of circularity or regress in Hume’s work, moving the problem of how to adjudicate disagreements about taste back one level to the problem of how to identify a reliable critic (see Carroll, 1984), Hume’s own claim is that in arguing for the criteria such a critic would need to have, he has shown that ‘such a character is valuable and estimable’, which is a pronouncement that ‘will be agreed in by all mankind’. By extension, ‘it is sufficient for our present purpose, if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing [...]’ (p. 178). Viewed in this way, Hume’s essay can be read as a staging of the kind of judgement and process of consensus that he views as ideal, without departing from the ordinary conditions of conversation. In focusing on the ideal conditions under which to view a work or art, he is at the same time describing what is required to make good judgements in general, and in the progressive, shifting *form* of his essay, he engages the reader in a constantly renewed process of evaluation, thus providing a training ground for the reader’s judgement. In addition, through his use of terms such as ‘common sense’ and ‘natural’, which rhetorically bring readers to common ground, he is able to stage the kind of consensus he argues is necessary to move from individual judgement to the level of inter-subjective consensus that provides a measure of stability and a normative force to second nature.

## Chapter 4: Infinite approximation in the German Romantic Fragment

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Clov: Do you believe in the life to come?

Hamm: Mine was always that.

-Beckett, *Endgame*

*Jedes System ist nur Approximation seines Ideals. Die 'sx' [Skepsis] ist ewig*  
[Every system is only an approximation of its ideal. Scepticism is perennial].

-F. Schlegel, fragment 1149<sup>60</sup>

Montaigne and Hume occupy two points on the spectrum of the essayistic mode, both positioning themselves against 'neutral' philosophical language and against speculative structures that would impose order on experience *a priori*, rather than interrogating the conditions of experience from within those very conditions. We saw in Hume a reaction, in particular, against the notion of a 'single principle' that would act as the criterion in claims of knowledge or judgements of taste. The early German Romantics follow Hume in rejecting the possibility of a single foundational principle and, like Montaigne, opt for a mode of writing that allows for difference and emphasises the temporal unfolding of knowledge through experience and comparison. The fragments<sup>61</sup> of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and the other members of the *Athenäum* circle can be situated within a larger genre of therapeutic essayism, though they must also be understood within their immediate idealist context, which shapes the foundationalist conception of knowledge to which they objected as well as the kind of writing they envisioned as a cure. One of the difficulties confronting readers of Romantic fragments is that the texts are steeped in the technical vocabulary of Kantian and Fichtean philosophy, often used playfully or ironically, a feature that sometimes renders them obscure. Some effort must be made to explain the rather dense philosophical milieu in which the fragments are

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<sup>60</sup> KFSa XVIII, 2006, p. 417: 1149

<sup>61</sup> To avoid clutter, I have omitted the full references for the *Kritische Fragmente* and the *Athenäums-Fragmente*, which are hereafter referred to as KF and AF. Those wishing to read the KF and AF in the original German should consult KFSa II, 1967, pp. 145-163, 165-255. Citations of other material from the Early Romantic authors include a reference for the original German and, where a translation has been used, for the English reference as well.

situated, yet without losing sight of the larger context of the anti-foundationalist, anti-systematic essayism to which I will argue the fragments belong. The challenge in this chapter will thus be to balance an account of the particular innovations of the Romantic fragment – which are significant – with an account of its membership in a larger generic (or, more properly, modal) whole. As in Montaigne, the relationship between part and whole, between attempt and completion is one of the central questions occasioned by the Romantic fragment collections. In their effort to give meaning or shape to the everyday through its relationship to a horizon of being as a whole, they guard against dissolution into absolute difference on the one hand and false unity on the other.

The early Romantic period (*Frühromantik*) is datable to around 1797-1800, the years of the publication of the avant-garde literary, philosophical, and critical journal the *Athenäum*, which was conceived by brothers Friedrich Schlegel and A.W. Schlegel and featured contributions from a circle of (mostly very young) writers and intellectuals including Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The publication of the *Athenäum* marks a turning point in the history of philosophy, which can be characterised as the moment at which philosophy becomes self-critical, becomes, in Friedrich Schlegel's words, 'the philosophy of philosophy' (KA XVIII, 2006, p. 37: 197). This critical impulse involved an examination of the conditions under which certain philosophical questions came to be asked or under which understanding was possible at all, including – with the rise of modern language theory in J.G. Hamann (1730–1788) and J.G. Herder (1744-1803) – questions of presentation or form that had for the most part been relegated to the study of rhetoric or aesthetics. One of the central ways in which the *Athenäum* lived up to its self-critical imperative was in its focus on the appropriate presentation (*Darstellung*) of ideas or the relationship between ideas and form. The rhetorical self-awareness of the *Athenäum* gave a distinctly literary cast<sup>62</sup> to many of the writings, putting them stylistically at odds with the idealist

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<sup>62</sup> The literary character of the writings and the (false) assumption of a generally anti-rational, mystical bent among early Romantic practitioners led to German Romanticism being cast as a literary movement, insufficiently serious to warrant philosophical study. It is only with the publication of some of the primary and secondary texts into English and French\* in the past four decades that English language studies of these authors have begun to appear alongside them and to demand that the Romantics be taken seriously as a philosophical movement. Chief among those writing about the philosophical relevance of the Romantics in English are Andrew Bowie and Fredrick Beiser, both of whom take pains to explain the 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical context out of which Romanticism was born. Additionally, Bowie traces the legacy of these thinkers to debates in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Along with German sources such as

philosophical treatises of their mentors Reinhold and Fichte and with the type of systematic philosophy in which Hegel was engaged during the same period. They cultivated a variety of formal techniques to deliberately and methodically upset the expectations of their readers. The tone of the *Athenäums-Fragmente* is worldly, ironic, paradoxical, and polemical, and they treat a diverse range of subjects from philology to Greek literature to logic, metaphysics, politics, sexual emancipation, and moral theory. The writing style is a pastiche of vocabulary from Kantian and Idealist philosophies, the aphoristic tradition of the French *moralistes*, and what would now be recognised as ‘literary criticism’. Fragment collections in the *Athenäum* were composed collectively<sup>63</sup> and anonymously, in a complete rejection of the ‘authority’ and self-identity of the author.

The peculiarities of the fragments make it tempting to treat them as a genre in their own right, a ‘law unto themselves’, as they indeed claim to be (KF 66, *AF* 116). This was the approach of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, who argued that, ‘In fact, only a single ensemble, published [in the *Athenäum* journal] with the one-word title *Fragments*, corresponds entirely (or as much as possible) to the fragmentary ideal of romanticism, notably in that it has no particular object and in that it is anonymously composed of pieces by several different authors’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1988, p. 40). While the authors briefly mention the influence of the French *moralistes*, particularly Chamfort and La Rochefoucauld, on F. Schlegel, they opt to treat the *Athenäums-Fragmente* as something radically new, different in kind even from the other fragment collections – either unfinished or intentionally fragmented – that Schlegel and Novalis left behind. When they gesture toward any

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Walter Benjamin, Hans Dieter, Peter Klaus, Ernst Behler, and Manfred Frank and the exceptional French contribution, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s *L’absolue littéraire*, the terrain for the study of the *Frühromantik* has been given a definite shape, with a clear set of epistemological, linguistic, aesthetic, and ethical considerations coming to the fore.

\*A by no means exhaustive sampling of these texts includes: Schlegel’s *Lucinde* and a selection of his fragments translated into English by Peter Firchow in 1971; the *Athenäum* materials translated into French by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy for their 1976 study *L’absolue littéraire* (unfortunately the English version of this text includes only the analysis and not the source materials themselves); Ernst Behler’s English translation of Schlegel: *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms* in 1968; a range of Frühromantik texts translated in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: the Romantic Ironists and Goethe*, ed. Kathleen Wheeler, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); the English translation of Ernst Behler’s *Philosophy of German Idealism*, published in 1987; Novalis’ philosophical writings translated in 1997 by Margaret Mahoney Stoljar; Andrew Bowie’s translations of Schelling in 1993 and Schleiermacher in 1998; and the 2003 English translation of Manfred Frank’s lectures on the ‘Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism’.

<sup>63</sup> The extent to which this collective ideal was realised is called into question by the fact that Friedrich Schlegel was responsible for the bulk of the fragment contributions as well as for the editing of others’ contributions.

wider conception of (literary) genre, *essais* are treated as a subset of fragments, a genre of ‘essential incompleteness’ that ‘includes 18<sup>th</sup>-century works such as Lavater’s *Physiognomical Fragments* and Lessing’s *Fragments of an Anonymous Person*’ (1988, p. 42). The authors’ limited comments about genre largely cohere with the framework of the ‘essayistic mode’ elaborated in the present study and reflect a degree of arbitrariness in the designation given to the ‘master mode’, discussed in the opening chapter. My preference for the term ‘essayistic’ over ‘fragmentary’ has to do with emphasis on *attempt* in the former. The Romantic fragments are conceived by F. Schlegel as part of an ‘infinite’ attempt to achieve totality. That the activity is infinite implies an ultimate failure to achieve what is sought, but the failure is not viewed tragically, as it came to be viewed in modernism. Rather, it is seen as an impossibility that breeds creativity, that spurs subjects on to ever more attempts. In this sense, the term essayistic seems more appropriate to describe Romantic authorship, though ‘incompleteness’ is a defining characteristic of both fragmentary and essayistic writing, and the three terms have been used interchangeably in this study. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s treatment of the *Athenäums-Fragmente* as singular ultimately proves unsatisfying even on the texts’ own terms, and the decision to bracket a number of questions about the relationship of the *Athenäums-Fragmente* to previous literary-philosophical hybrids has relegated to other scholars the task of establishing this relationship. I will try to further the authors’ constructive and thought-provoking work of reading the Romantic fragments through a post-Kantian lens while also insisting on the value of seeing fragment collections as part of a wider performative strategy of essayism. The therapeutic end of essayism – to cure readers of the idea that certain knowledge is the ultimate aim of philosophy – appears here as rejection of foundationalist thinking. But the Romantics also bring into focus the limits and temptations of essayism by committing themselves to the ever-receding goal of unified or total understanding.

### **Anti-foundationalism and thinking in circles**

Some understanding of the philosophical environment in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany is required to appreciate how the Romantic project might be considered therapeutic in the sense used in this study and how the stylistic choice of fragments contributes to this end. The group that came to be known as the *Athenäum* circle first met while studying in Jena, an intellectual hub in the 1790s boasting two

prominent lecturers in idealism, Karl Reinhold and J.G. Fichte. Both sought to further Kant's transcendental project by finding a grounding principle that would bridge the divide between subject and object, mind and world, which Kant was seen to have left open<sup>64</sup> and which made Kantian philosophy vulnerable to the problems of scepticism on the one hand or determinism on the other: how can we know that the world conforms to our ideas about it, and how can we be sure that all of our actions aren't determined (finally caused) by the world?

Fichte conceived of his *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794-1795) as a re-presentation of Kant's system in a different form, one that would successfully introduce into 'the whole human being that *unity* and *connection* that so many systems lack' (Fichte, 1971, p. 295, quoted in Reid, 2003, pp. 243-244). The way that both Reinhold and Fichte set out to establish this unity was by locating a self-evident first principle (*Grundsatz*) in subjectivity itself, from which a coherent system of philosophical propositions could be derived.<sup>65</sup> The idealist project promised both to unify mind and nature and to lend philosophy more scientific rigour by deriving objectivity from the process of self-reflection. During their time as students at Jena, members of what would become the *Athenäum* circle took part in debates about the possibility of a foundational starting principle or absolute ground for philosophy, in direct conversation with Reinhold and Fichte. Novalis, who was a student of Reinhold in the early 1790s, was part of a group of students who began to doubt the tenability of foundationalism (Frank, 2003, pp. 33ff), while maintaining the aim of a unified philosophical system. In his notebooks from the period, Novalis suggests that the absolute unifying principle should function more as a regulative ideal, as a goal toward which to orient philosophy rather than a grounding principle given at the beginning of the system.

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<sup>64</sup> Kant's emphasis on the conditions of possibility of the phenomenal world of appearances had stressed the fundamental role of the subject in all truth claims. However, he was logically forced to admit the presence of a noumenal world of '*das Ding an sich*', which was not available to consciousness as such: 'though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvi-xxvii).

<sup>65</sup> Reinhold and Fichte sought a starting point that would be clear and available to everyone as a general feature of consciousness and settled on the basic experience of self-conscious or self-positing structure of the I. In self-consciousness, the I represents itself to itself, becoming both a subject, the I doing the thinking, and an object, the I being thought about. For a more detailed discussion of this philosophical position, see Paul Redding, 2009, pp. 103-113 and Manfred Frank's *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik*, Vol. 1 (1997).

*Was thu ich, indem ich filosofire? [...] Alles Filosofiren muß also bey einem absoluten Grunde endigen. Wenn dieser nun nicht gegeben wäre, wenn dieser Begriff eine Unmöglichkeit enthielte – so wäre der Trieb zu Filosofiren eine unendliche Thätigkeit [...] Durch das freywillige Entsagen des Absoluten entsteht die unendliche freye Thätigkeit in uns – das Einzig mögliche Absolute, was uns gegeben werden kann und was wir nur durch unsre Unvermögenheit ein Absolutes zu erreichen und zu erkennen, finden. Dies uns gegebne Absolute läßt sich nur negativ erkennen, indem wir handeln und finden, daß durch kein Handeln das erreicht wird, was wir suchen. Dis ließe sich ein absolutes Postulat nennen. Alles suchen nach Einem Princip wär also wie ein Versuch die Quadratur des Zirckels zu finden./ Perpetuum mobile. Stein der Weisen./*

What do I do by philosophizing? [...] All philosophising must terminate in an absolute foundation. If this were not given, if this concept contained an impossibility,—then the urge to philosophize would be an infinite activity [...] Through the voluntary renunciation of the Absolute, infinite free activity arises in us—the only possible Absolute which can be given to us, and which we find only through our incapacity to arrive at and recognise an Absolute. [It] may only be recognised negatively, in that we act and find that through no action do we arrive at that which we seek. This much could be called an absolute postulate. All searching for a *single principle* would be like the attempt to square the circle [...] *Perpetuum mobile*. The philosopher's stone (Novalis, 1978, II: p. 180ff: 566/Frank, 2004, p. 32-33).

Novalis recasts unified totality as an end toward which philosophy is always oriented but can in practice never achieve. His conception of the Absolute is essentially negative; it is that which is sought but never found—‘through no action do we arrive at that which we seek’. What is crucial in Novalis’ account is that the very *impossibility* of grasping a totality that would unify subject and world, freedom and receptivity, is the source philosophy’s productivity, of ‘infinite free activity.’ Novalis’ language of ‘infinite free activity’ in his remarks on the absolute echoes Kant in the third *Kritik*, where he elaborates a theory of free play of the cognitive faculties, guided by an ‘aesthetic idea’ that provides direction but not closure. The Romantics seized on this ‘purposive’ behaviour of aesthetic experience to describe the possibility of an endlessly deferred totality. Kant says of the artist that he creates freely yet ‘does not know how he came by the ideas for [the work]: nor is it in his power to devise such products at his pleasure, or by following a plan, nor to communicate [his procedure] to others in precepts that would enable them to bring

about like products' (2000, II: 5: 307, p. 187). The interplay of receptivity and spontaneity in the creation of a work of art forms a powerful analogy to the 'creative' process of experience, of seeing a world. Both processes involve a production – in one case a tangible artwork in the other case an intelligible world – but in neither case is the ground of this production cognisable conceptually. The idea then is that aesthetic experience may offer a non-conceptual way for the subject to represent itself to itself as a simultaneously creative and receptive being. While this exists as a possibility for all artistic and literary forms, it is my contention that essayistic writing, in its emphasis on the contingent 'occasion', brings special attention to the creative and receptive capacity of human subjectivity. This activity is not merely conceptual but poetic; it necessitates a particular kind of writing that resists homogeneity and closure and invites the reader to participate in the production of meaning, which is without end.

Novalis' worry that establishing an absolute foundation is finally impossible is shaped by a live debate in the 18<sup>th</sup> century over the problem of infinite regress, specifically as it played out in the 'Pantheism Dispute' (1783) involving Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and Friedrich Jacobi (1743-1819), and eventually Kant himself. The focus of the debate was Spinoza's monist philosophy, which posited an absolute, unified reality underlying all appearances, including the apparent division between subject and object, mind and world.<sup>66</sup> Jacobi claimed that Spinoza's position led to an infinite regress, since in his system everything was conditioned by everything else and there was no unconditioned principle outside this coherentist picture that could ground knowledge claims.

In raising the ancient sceptical problem of infinite regress, Jacobi challenged the idea that knowledge could ever be grounded in a purely logical or rational way, as the idealists thought it could. The basic problem of regress runs as follows: When I believe X, I justify my belief in X to another person by giving a reason, which functions as the cause or condition of my belief—what *makes* me believe x or what *makes* x so. The proffered cause necessarily takes place within a chain of causes, and the reason or explanation for any particular phenomenon, or any belief about a phenomenon, would have to involve the totality of this chain, which is not

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<sup>66</sup> Spinoza's position was highly controversial, given its religious implications, which threatened the Christian notion of a personal God who intervened in human affairs while also remaining different in kind from His creation. In Spinoza's vision of ultimate substance, the world itself was divine, and any division between God and creation – indeed any divisions at all – were merely illusory.

empirically or rationally available since it extends, in principle, infinitely. What I call a reason or a cause merely plucks a link out of the chain, isolating, arbitrarily, one moment in a long process. In order to really ground any particular knowledge claim, there would need to be an absolute beginning to the chain, and this beginning would have to be a cause that is in itself uncaused, that does not rely on anything else for its being. In other words, the possibility of absolute knowing would require an unconditioned (*unbedingt*) first principle. Short of this, any belief, including the simple belief that the sun will rise tomorrow, is dogmatic in the strict sense of not being ultimately justifiable. As Hume demonstrated in the *Treatise* (1738), such beliefs are justifiable only pragmatically, grounded not in necessity but in the normative force of habit. For Jacobi, infinite regress pointed to a flaw in rational thought: reason cannot grasp its own foundation or its own condition of possibility, since any examination of these conditions already takes place within the (conditioned) space of rational thought; ‘as long as we can conceptually comprehend, we remain within a chain of conditioned conditions’ (Jacobi, 1994, p. 376). Claims made about the world, or ways in which the absolute is carved up into finite beings, ‘modes’, or causes, are never objective in the sense of being verifiable outside of consciousness, since they are only meaningful for thought. As a result, ‘the unconditional must lie outside of nature and outside of every natural connection with it [...] therefore this unconditioned must be called the supernatural’ (Jacobi, 1994, p. 376).

Jacobi argued that the only way to relate to the absolute was through a *salto mortale*, a leap or somersault outside of the chain of conditions (Pinkard, 2002, p. 96). This movement was conceived in religious terms, anticipating Kierkegaard’s leap of faith some 50 years later. But, like Kierkegaard’s leap, it pointed to a deeper philosophical problem of conviction. Only a belief possessing immediate truth and meaning for the individual subject, as opposed to a rationally justified claim, could escape infinite regress and could account for the basic fact of human orientation and motivation, since, as Jacobi asserts in a letter to Mendelssohn, ‘Conviction based on argument is secondhand conviction’ (quoted in Frank 2003, p. 204). Jacobi’s argument is that to claim certainty about anything, to claim to have reached the ultimate principle of justification, amounts to resorting to an immediacy that is no longer subject to ‘the mediation of further reasons or states of consciousness. To want to justify the assumption of such a fact once again means that one has not

understood what is involved in our having to make recourse to an infinite regress in the language of justification. Therefore immediate consciousness (Jacobi calls this “feeling”—Novalis and Schleiermacher will follow him in this terminology) must be understood literally to be a ground-less, unjustified assumption, that is, as a belief (*Glauben*)’ (Frank, 2003, p. 205).

While the early Romantics rejected Jacobi’s overtly religious solution of a *salto mortale*, they shared his sense that conceptual knowledge failed to account for the whole of human experience, and that any project of absolute justification or grounding from within a philosophical system was doomed from the start. The philosophical import of Jacobi’s leap for the Romantics is the idea there exists a non-conceptual, pre-reflective commitment or orientation that cannot be reduced to or grasped by the mediated understanding of conceptual thought. In other words, scientific or philosophical understanding relies on a prior capacity of the world to be intelligible or for the subject to orient himself toward the world (see Bowie, 1996). The early Romantics’ shift toward poetic form was an attempt to bring Jacobi’s feeling into focus as fundamental to the practise of philosophy, and their experimentation with the part/whole structure of fragments provided further reflection on the intelligibility of being as a whole. Manfred Frank stresses that this poetic solution was arrived at through purely immanent and philosophical means. In Novalis’ critique of Fichte: ‘The thesis that the Absolute is inaccessible to reflection indeed opens the gates to poetics and invites it to achieve what philosophy was incapable of achieving; but the thesis itself is not a piece of poetic thought, but rather a work of genuine and rigorous philosophical speculation’ (Frank, 2003, p. 248).<sup>67</sup>

Novalis’ ‘voluntary renunciation’ of a self-evident foundational principle amounts to a rejection of the kind of conceptual schema that his mentor Fichte had sought. Andrew Bowie explains that Novalis’ ‘basic objection to Fichte is summed up in a later fragment: “Fichte has, as it were, chosen the *logical schema* of science as the pattern of a real construction of humankind and the world (Novalis 1978 p. 684)”, thereby, as Hölderlin suggested, inverting the relationship between being and thought’ (Bowie, 1990/2003, p. 88). Although Novalis did not subscribe to Jacobi’s *salto mortale*, he recognised that the dimension of prior belonging to or commitment

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<sup>67</sup> For more on feeling and its relationship to intellectual intuition, see Frank, 2004, p. 171.

within the world, something which Jacobi's solution was intended to address, was missing from Fichte's idealist schema. The problem for Novalis was that the reflection of the I on itself that served as the *Grundsatz* in Fichte's system in fact made self-knowledge or self-representation impossible, since what was reflected on was altered in the process of reflection (*Ibid*). Similar to Jacobi's argument that any attempt to understand the unconditioned subject already takes place within the (conditioned) space of rational thought, Novalis argued that in the structure of self-reflection:

*Sie hängt von der ersten Handlung ab – die werden wir nicht gewahr, folglich fühlen wir diese nichtfrey. Warum wir sie nicht gewahr werden – weil sie das Gewahrwerden erst möglich macht, und folglich dis in ihrer Sphäre liegt – die Handlung des Gewahrwerdens kann ja also nicht aus ihrer Sphäre herausgehn und die Muttersphäre mitfassen wollen.*

We do not become aware [of the 'first action'], in consequence we feel it as not-free. Why do we not become aware of it [?] – because it first makes becoming aware possible, and consequently this [becoming aware] lies *in* its sphere – the action of becoming aware therefore cannot go out of its sphere and wish to comprehend the mother-sphere [because it depends upon it, is within it, in the manner of subject and object in relation to Hölderlin's 'being'] (Novalis, 1978, II: p. 9/ Bowie, 1990/2003, p. 89).

Novalis recognises that it is not possible to *become aware* of the supposedly foundational action of the self-posting I, since the act of becoming aware would rely on precisely the self-consciousness that is being posited. The basic problem formulated by Jacobi still stands—'as long as we can conceptually comprehend, we remain within a chain of conditioned conditions' (Jacobi, 1994, p. 376) so we have failed to reach either an ultimate ground for knowledge claims or to account for human freedom, which must be stand outside of the chain of conditions and conceptual thought altogether. The idealist notion of the subject as the cause of itself and also the source of appearance of the world (not-self) *as* world was intended to both explain the ability of human actions to be free (uncaused, unconditioned, spontaneous) and to connect mind and world. However, Novalis' critique, in pointing to the dimension of existential awareness or feeling, shows the inadequacy of a purely logical solution to the problems at stake. As Schlegel expresses elsewhere, 'the I cannot ultimately be proved (*beweisen*) but can only be found (*gefunden*)' in existence (Frank 2003, p. 186; KFSX XII, p. 334: 2). As a result 'intelligent people' recoil from philosophers who 'try to explain everything. They

feel certain (even if perhaps they cannot express this) that there exists something incomprehensible; that they themselves are incomprehensible (*unbegreiflich*)' (Frank, 2003, p. 186).<sup>68</sup> There remains a gap between thought or rational reflection and the existing I.

The ultimate failure of the reductionist strategy in idealism led the Romantics to consider a different approach to the unrepresentability or incomprehensibility of the subject from within rational reflection. In 1796 in his study of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Novalis sketched out an alternative to the standard philosophical proof. He argued that the process of truth-seeking ought to proceed not by fitting experience to *a priori* truths but by way of what he designated a '*Wechselbestimmungssatz*' (reciprocal proposition of determination); a pure law of association, it seems to me, must be the highest principle, a hypothetical proposition' (Novalis, 2003, p. 75). The notion of a dialectical relation or reciprocal determination of different hypotheses<sup>69</sup> is a rejection of the idealist focus on a single, founding principle, since 'all searching for a *single principle* would be like the attempt to square the circle'. Instead, Novalis' dialectic emphasises the contextual and temporal dimension of truth-seeking, whereby a progressive refinement of ideas is made available through the interchange of self and other, of an idea and its opposite.<sup>70</sup> Association is a lyrical or aesthetic principle, the logic of metaphor, rather than a mathematical principle of deduction, and shows the extent to which the early Romantics had assimilated the 18<sup>th</sup>-century language theory of Hamann and Herder, who argued both that language is primarily metaphorical or poetic (rather than descriptive or conceptual) and that the misunderstanding or misappropriation of language is at the heart of philosophy's misunderstanding of itself (Hamann, 2007, p. 211; N III, 286: 1-10). Kant's critics put into relief the real site of tensions between the idealist and the sceptic, with the early Romantics falling into the latter group. It is the inability to control language itself, language's ineluctable remainder, that prevents the establishment of any coherent, definitive

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<sup>68</sup> '*Dies Rätsel des Selbstgefühls, welches uns immer begleitet, ist auch wohl die Ursache, warum sich bei nachdenklichen Menschen, wenn Philosophen gewisser Art alles erklären wollen, immer ein Zweifel erhebt und erhält. Sie fühlen es zu gewiß (wenn sie es auch vielleicht nicht aussprechen), daß es etwas Unbegreifliches gibt, da sie sich selbst unbegreiflich sind*' (KFSa XII, p. 334:1).

<sup>69</sup> This is developed more fully in the Saussurean conception of language in which the identity of concepts is a function of their difference from other concepts.

<sup>70</sup> Hegel would describe this process in a systematic way a few years later. For the differences between the Romantic and Hegelian understanding of dialectics, see Bowie 1990/2003, pp. 140-178.

system.<sup>71</sup> Romantic fragments call attention to the medium of language – both on the thematic and performative level – making one aware of language as a ‘problem’ rather than a transparent medium for the transmission of ideas, or still more problematically, of truth. Hamann and Herder’s insights about language are reflected in the many Romantic fragments calling for philosophy to learn from poetry or be transformed into poetry (e.g. AF 115, 116, 131). The fragments are a rallying cry for philosophy to adopt the mimetic, affective dimension of poetry, its concern with language and form, lest philosophy risk being blind to the way in which it is determined by language and thus fail in its critical project of uncovering the conditions of understanding.

In correspondence with Novalis, Schlegel developed his own alternative to foundationalism he called the *Wechselerweis*, the alternating or reciprocal proof.

*Es muß der Philosophie nicht bloß ein Wechselbeweis, sondern auch ein Wechselbegriff zum Grunde liegen. Man kann bei jedem Begriff wie bei jedem Erweis wieder nach einem Begriff und Erweis desselben fragen. Daher muß die Philosophie wie das epische Gedicht in der Mitte anfangen, und es ist unmöglich dieselbe so vorzutragen und Stück für Stück hinzuzählen, daß gleich das Erste für sich vollkommen begründet und erklärt wäre. Es ist ein Ganzes, und der Weg es zu erkennen ist also keine grade Linie, sondern ein Kreis. Das Ganze der Grundwissenschaft muß aus zwei Ideen . . .*

Philosophy must have at its foundation not just a proof assuming the form of reciprocal determination, but also a concept subject to reciprocal interchange. In every concept as in every proof, one can ask again for a concept or proof of the same. Thus philosophy, like epic poetry, must begin in the middle, and it is impossible to convey and dissect it in such a way that the original and first might immediately and itself be completely grounded and explained. The original and first is a whole, and the way to recognise it is therefore not a straight line but a circle. The whole of foundational theory must be derived from two ideas . . . (KFSA XVIII, 1963, p. 518: 16/Frank, 2004, p. 32).

Schlegel alludes to the problem of infinite regress in his remark that for any given proof, one can ask for an additional proof, just as a child, when offered an explanation for something, can force the explanation one level deeper by continuing to ask ‘why?’. As Jacobi argued, there is no *natural* stopping point to the process of justification, which raises the troubling question of whether beliefs can ever be adequately justified, or whether, as Jacobi suggested, the truth of a belief must be

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<sup>71</sup> It also argues against the continued analytic approach to language, which subjects isolated parts of speech and speech acts to logical analysis.

based on some species of non-conceptual insight or conviction. Schlegel's solution is to reject the logic whereby one moves in a straight line from one cause to a more fundamental cause and instead to embrace the hermeneutic form of a circle, wherein regress can be viewed as infinite progress. Since for Schlegel 'the beginning point in philosophy is just one part of an infinite chain,' it is ineluctable that philosophy begin *in medias res*. What he proposes is, in effect, to call attention to the fact that one always stands in the middle of things, in the space of conditions, and therefore not to indulge in the fiction of an 'indubitable first principle will enable us to spin a web of certainty' (Millán-Zaibert, 2012 p. 135).

This admission of one's own existential position takes the form of an interest in the *Darstellung* of philosophy, particularly with experiments in fragmentary writing. In the fragment, any contingent starting point – an observation on moral life, an artwork, a philosophical concept, a national characteristic – can open itself up to the totality of which it is a part, '*ein notwendiger Teil im System aller Wissenschaften* [a necessary part in a system of all the sciences]' (AF 77). Indeed, it is precisely because a *Grundsatz* 'does not contain its consequences epistemically *in nuce*' that totality remains a goal toward which to strive (Frank, 2004, p. 183). The 'motive to philosophise is not a successful intuition of an *omnitudo realitatis*, but rather (as had been the case with Novalis) the "feeling" of a lack' (Frank, 2004, p. 183). Spurred on by the desire to understand the world as a Whole, rather than merely analytically, the Romantics gesture toward an ever richer 'infinite' approximation of truth by multiplying different ways of seeing, a strategy that is not only philosophical but rhetorical, and is one of the hallmarks of the essayistic.

The concept of alternating proofs in the early writings of Novalis and Schlegel goes some way toward explaining how Romantic philosophy will proceed—a new *shape* has to be created to allow this new kind of philosophising to unfold, 'not in a straight line but a circle'. The conclusion that there must always be more than one principle or idea in play for thought to progress leads the early Romantics to embrace an essayistic form of writing that stresses difference and a multiplicity of perspectives. In the choice to publish the *Athenäums-Fragmente* anonymously, even the identity of a singular author is denied. This latter move, rather than arguing against the fragments' membership in the essayistic, can be seen as an extension of the gestures toward the non-identity of the self already seen in Montaigne's *Essais*, where it is claimed that 'there is as much difference between us

and ourselves as there is between us and other people'<sup>72</sup> and where the 'voice' of the I is polyphonic. While one of the features that distinguishes the essayistic is its subjectivity, this does not entail that essayistic texts uphold traditional notions of the subject as a coherent whole (otherwise the father of the modern essay could not be considered an essayist!); rather, the essay is subjective in its rejection of a god's-eye view or scientific 'view from nowhere' that aims at legitimisation through neutrality or transparency.

The *Athenäums-Fragmente*, while anonymous, can be distinguished from the 'objective' neutralist view by their reflexivity—they constantly call attention to the rhetorical and historical conditions of their own production, according to the principle that 'a philosopher must talk about himself just as the lyric poet does' (KF 413) and that a work must be 'at once *Poesie* and a theory of *Poesie*' (AF 238). Schlegel exposes the fiction of neutralism in *Athenäumsfragment* 226, which stresses the need to begin with hypotheses or concepts in order to understand anything at all.

*Will man es nicht anerkennen, so bleibt die Wahl dem Instinkt, dem Zufall, oder der Willkür überlassen, man schmeichelt sich reine solide Empirie ganz a posteriori zu haben, und hat eine höchst einseitige, höchst dogmatizistische und transzendente Ansicht a priori.*

If one refuses to recognise this, then the choice is surrendered to instinct, chance, or fate; and so one flatters oneself that one has established a pure solid empiricism quite *a posteriori*, when what one actually has is an *a priori* outlook that's highly one-sided, dogmatic, and transcendental (AF 226).

The hermeneutic insight that it is impossible to begin from nowhere can also be read as pointing to the dangers of ignoring style or perpetuating the fiction of transparent representation. If philosophy proceeds without an understanding of the meaning with which language and textual forms are always already imbued, the result is not a 'pure solid empiricism' or 'objectivity' but dogmatism. The anonymity of the *Athenäums-Fragmente* thus has less to do with projecting a flawed notion of objectivity than with asserting the autonomy of the text (Kubiak, 1994, pp. 426-427), or, in Montaigne's words, recognising how texts write the author (*'mon livre me fait'*). While the 'subjective' dimension of Romantic essayism is clearly different to

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<sup>72</sup> 'On the Inconstancy of our Actions' in *Essays*, II. I, 2013, p. 380 and 'On experience' in *Essays*, III. 13, 2013, p. 1210.

the voice of the writing 'P' in Montaigne, this difference can be seen as an elaboration of the philosophical critique of identity that was already present in the *Essais*, informed by the debates of 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy and by the emerging German language theory of the time, which saw language as constitutive of subjectivity and thought.

### **Fragments of what?**

We have seen that two features – a sense of lack or incompleteness and a desire for wholeness – serve as motivation for Romantic philosophy as an activity. It is worthwhile to explore in more detail the relationship between these two impulses, particularly as they play out in the logic of the fragment. Wholeness, as it is conceived and performed in Romantic writing, never entails the dissolution of difference or plurality; rather '*ein System von Fragmenten*' takes the place of a self-identical unity (AF 77). Difference, even considered *sub specie aeternitatis*, is not an illusion to be transcended.<sup>73</sup> Schlegel's trope of the circle is a rejection of foundationalism in favour of a hermeneutic model in which understanding is conditioned by time. As a result the whole is not imagined as something that already exists for cognition, as it had existed for the Greeks, but as a possibility to be realised, even created. The 'system of fragments' extends well beyond the bounds of the *Athenäums-Fragmente* or the other Romantic fragment collections; the whole of which they are a part becomes an on-going task in which the reader is called to participate. As literary critic Christopher Kubiak demonstrates in his thoughtful reading of early Romantic fragments, the logic of a fragment entails a relationship to a whole, and working out the contours of this relationship yields crucial insights into the Romantic vision of philosophical and political collectivity as well as the need for and the dangers of thinking wholeness.

Critical of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Kubiak in his article on the Romantic fragment form (1994) sees no philosophical or textual grounds for separating the *Athenäums-Fragmente* from Novalis and Schlegel's other – intentionally or unintentionally – fragmentary writings. He begins by situating the fragments within the aphoristic tradition that flourished in 18<sup>th</sup>-century salon culture, modelled

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<sup>73</sup> Contrast with Hegel, from whom particular actuality and the difference between particulars is abstract because the concrete is the whole. 'What is true is rather found in motion, in a process, however, in which there is rest; difference, while it lasts, is but a temporary condition, through which comes unity, full and concrete' (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1955, I, pp. 23-25).

on Montaigne's *essais* and embodying Hume's imagined 'league between the learned and conversable worlds'. Aphorisms form part of the essayistic in their essentially anti-systematic, anti-foundationalist motivation and their interest in the psychological and social conditions of human existence, under the umbrella of *la morale*. Dubious of systematic treatments of moral life, the great French *moralistes* such as La Rochefoucauld fashioned themselves after Montaigne to produce a portrait of *le coeur de l'homme* that included self-interest, hypocrisy, sociality, sexuality, and embodiment—in short, 'debunking the autonomy of *l'esprit*' (Kubiak, 1994, p. 414). The aphorism tradition relied on a social framework (the salon) to come to full development and which valued wit as a way of grasping complex ideas intuitively.<sup>74</sup> The Romantic fragments share many of these characteristics, and Schlegel depended on his contemporary readers' familiarity with the aphoristic tradition—if only in order to more effectively upset reader expectations by departing from this tradition in significant ways.

One of the consequences of the Romantics' use of the word '*Fragmente*', rather than, say, aphorisms or *pensées* is that the relationship of the texts to one another and to some larger whole of which they are a part becomes problematic. In choosing the title of *Fragmente* for the collection that appears in the *Athenäum*, Schlegel immediately raises the question: fragments of what? In this way, 'totality is determined – and this is the crucial point – determined from within and in advance – unilaterally – as the union of the *Fragmente* and this missing complement [...] the Fragment would reach out to encircle their exterior, naming and appropriating it as their own' (Kubiak, 1994, p. 420). On Kubiak's reading, the *Athenäums-Fragmente* already point outside themselves to a larger, unrealised totality, and they cannot be delimited except arbitrarily. These remarks call to mind Terrence Cave's reading of Montaigne's *Essais* and the Renaissance tradition more broadly wherein the provisionality of the texts was seen as taking part in a larger Whole or Work, but one that would be forever in the process of becoming, forever deferred. For the Romantic fragment, one can never be said to have finally achieved or grasped the whole; the essence of romantic poetry is '*daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann*

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<sup>74</sup> Wit was a key philosophical concept for the Romantics. Kubiak provides a fascinating analysis of wit as the systematising and unifying feature of the fragment collections, the *Blitz* that offers 'a network of witty associations that would traverse the entire scope of thought uniting it an endlessly fertile process of recombination' and guaranteeing that the Romantic '*Universalsystem der Philosophie*' is always in the making' rather than dissolving into *Systemlosigkeit* (pp. 443ff).

[that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected]’ (AF 116).

Kubiak elaborates on the part/whole logic of the fragments, explaining that since what is missing from a series of fragments must itself be a fragment, ‘every fragment series must always have at least one more member than it is possible to count [...],’ making it possible for fragments to ‘possess the paradigmatically organic capacity to reproduce their own kind *ad infinitum*: hence the title *Blüthenstaub* for Novalis’ first published collection and the phrase *fermenta cognitionis*, which appears in *Athenäums fragment 259* as a synonym for “fragments” (p. 420). The notion of fragments as ‘leaven’ or ‘pollen’ points to the tendency – even imperative – of fragments to multiply. This open-endedness with regard to the number of fragments that would make up a totality is a performative counter-move to the reductionist tendency in idealism as well as an assertion of the inherently productive and excessive nature of language itself, as Herder and Hamann had conceived it.<sup>75</sup> Alongside the fragments published in the *Athenäum*, Schlegel’s *Kritische Fragmente* and *Ideen* and Novalis’ *Blüthenstaub*, there were a number of other fragment collections planned for publication, including Novalis’ *Logologische Fragmente*, *Poetizismen*, and *Teplitzter Fragmente*; to these can be added Schlegel’s *Philosophische Lebrjahre*, an unfinished collection of thousands of fragments from 1796-1806, and Novalis’ unfinished *Allgemeine Brouillon* or ‘Universal Draft’, a collection of notes that he envisioned as a new kind of encyclopaedia of fragments, ‘not simply a compendium of current knowledge but ‘*ein lebendiges wissenschaftliches Organon* [a living, scientific organon]’ that would ‘generate new knowledge by fostering contact between various particular sciences’ (Kubiak, 1994, p. 418). The sheer volume of fragments produced by Schlegel and Novalis in this brief span testifies to the logic of multiplication by which they were governed and to the productivity of deferred totality.

The disjunctive, heterogeneous, and endlessly multiplying *Fragmente* are meant as examples of ‘collective organization that affiliate without homogenizing, that unite individuals without suppressing individual differences, that produce order without imposing it’ (Kubiak, 1994, p. 423)—concerns that are manifest not only in

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<sup>75</sup> Herder celebrates the excesses of language while mocking the philosopher’s efforts to tame and refine it: ‘And where was the philosopher who would have ordered what he saw into classes and washed away the excess? New subject matters, new objects, conditions, circumstances, yielded new names – and in this way language became only all too rich. Sensuous objects were referred to sensuously – and from how many sides, from how many view- points they can be referred to! In this way language became full of crazy and untamed word transformations, full of irregularity and stubborn idiosyncrasy’ (Herder, 2004 p. 64).

Romantic poetics but in their political views as well (see e.g. Novalis' *Blüthenstaub* 43 and 65). *Kritische Fragment* 65 offers a key analogy between republican political structures and the Romantic poetic project: '*Die Poesie ist eine republikanische Rede ; eine Rede, die ihr eignes Gesetz und ihr eigener Zweck ist, wo alle Teile freie Bürger sind, und mitstimmen dürfen* [Poetry is republican speech: a speech which is its own law and end unto itself, and in which all the parts are free citizens and have the right to vote]'. This analogy raises the question of whether a 'republic' of pure difference is possible, or even coherent. Can the fragments, in their multiplication of different perspectives, be thought together at all? If they are a 'law unto themselves' by what order are they held together as parts of a republican collectivity or instances of a form? The heterogeneity of the fragments is a performative rejection of any antecedent forms that would impose order externally, for example, the division between critical and philosophical fragments that Schlegel eventually abandoned (Kubiak, 1994, p. 422) or the distinction between philosophy and poetry, which was likewise challenged (KF 155, AF 255). The diverse subject matter and the pastiche of writing styles employed blur the boundaries between established genres or disciplines in order to suggest the blind spots in all established ways of seeing. But with the rejection of any order under which particular fragments could be placed, there seems to be no distinction between a particular fragment and the concept of fragment, leaving the Romantics with the difficult idea of a form that cannot be said to exist separately from the instantiation of it, akin to Aquinas' claim that every angel is its own species. Indeed, the idea that every fragment is at the same time a theory of the fragment runs throughout the fragment collections. '*Auch in der Poesie mag wohl alles Ganze halb, und alles Halbe doch eigentlich ganz sein* [In poeise too every whole can be a part and every part really a whole]' (KF 14). This is reflected in the infamous 'hedgehog' Fragment, which declares that a fragment '*muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke [...] ganz abgesondert und in sich vollendet sein wie ein Igel* [like a miniature work of art has to be [...] complete in itself like a hedgehog]' (AF 206). So what is it that makes individual fragments into a 'system of fragments', and, by extension, individual perspectives or persons into a 'republic'? Is the 'manifold unity' (Novalis, 2003, p. 188) that Novalis imagined a coherent concept?

To answer these questions, it may be fruitful to examine the conceptions of unity that the Romantics oppose to their own. While working toward the notion of a collectivity of difference, they take pains to guard against false unity of various

kinds. Novalis, in his *Blüthenstaub* (1797-1798) collection, works out two notions of *Einheit* or oneness that prove helpful in this context.

*Vor der Abstraktion ist alles eins, aber eins wie Chaos; nach der Abstraktion ist wieder alles vereinigt, aber diese Vereinigung ist eine freie Verbindung selbständiger, selbstbestimmter Wesen. Aus einem Haufen ist eine Gesellschaft geworden, das Chaos ist in eine mannichfaltige Welt verwandelt.*

Before abstraction everything is one – but one as chaos is – after abstraction everything is again unified, but this unification is a free alliance of independent, self-determined beings. A crowd has become a society, chaos is transformed into a manifold world (1978, p. 271: 95/1997, p. 40).

There are two powerful suggestions in this passage. The first is that chaos is a kind of unity, since, in it, nothing has yet been differentiated. Nature beyond the sphere of thought can only be conceived in this way, since thought is precisely what provides the categories of intelligibility that allow the ‘manifold world’ to become manifest. The second suggestion is that the performative strategy of fragments aims at something other than the pre-reflective oneness of chaos.<sup>76</sup> Instead, the unity of fragments is imagined as a ‘free alliance of independent, self-determined beings.’ If chaos is like a *Haufen* (a crowd or mob), fragments are comparable to a *Gesellschaft* (society or fellowship). There is thus a sense of order in fragments, but the order of an alliance or an agreed-upon framework rather than simply the fact of existing in the same space (which is all that is required of a crowd). In rejecting the notion of a ‘crowd’ of fragments, Novalis also points to the poetic intention of the fragment collections. Like other essayistic texts, fragment collections are a way of representing the form or process of thinking. Yet the appearance of free associative thought that the fragments convey is achieved through literary craft and design, rather than by chance (KF 37).

Keen to avoid the undifferentiated unity of chaos and the accidental unity of the crowd, the Romantics also sought to interrupt the natural hermeneutic impulse to create unity by ignoring difference.

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<sup>76</sup> This argues against Fred Beiser’s argument that the Romantics thought it possible to grasp the whole in moments of intellectual intuition. See Benjamin (1974, I: 1: pp. 7-122) for an account of Schlegel and Novalis’ rejection of Fichte’s reliance on intellectual intuition.

*Viele Werke, deren schöne Verkettung man preist, haben weniger Einheit, als ein bunter Haufen von Einfällen, die nur vom Geiste eines Geistes belebt, nach Einem Ziele zielen. Diese verbindet doch jedes freie und gleiche Beisammensein, worin sich auch die Bürger des vollkommenen Staats, nach der Versicherung der Weisen, dereinst befinden werden [...] Manches Erzeugnis hingegen, an dessen Zusammenhang niemand zweifelt, ist, wie der Künstler selbst sehr wohl weiß, kein Werk, sondern Bruchstück, eins oder mehre, Masse, Anlage. So mächtig ist aber der Trieb nach Einheit im Menschen, daß der Urheber selbst, was er durchaus nicht vollenden oder vereinigen kann, oft gleich bei der Bildung doch wenigstens ergänzt; oft sehr sinnreich und dennoch ganz widernatürlich. Das Schlimmste dabei ist, daß alles, was man gediegenen Stücken, die wirklich da sind, so drüber aufhängt, um einen Schein von Ganzheit zu erkünsteln, meistens nur aus gefärbten Lumpen besteht. Sind diese nun auch gut und täuschend geschminkt, und mit Verstand drappiert: so ist's eigentlich um desto schlimmer.*

Many works that are praised for the beauty of their coherence have less unity than a motley heap of ideas simply animated by the ghost of a spirit and aiming at a single purpose. What really holds the latter together is that free and equal fellowship in which, so the wise men assure us, the citizens of the perfect state will live at some future date [...] On the other hand, many a work of art whose coherence is never questioned is, as the artist knows quite well himself, not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments, a mass, a plan. But so powerful is the instinct for unity in mankind that the author himself will often bring something to a kind of completion which simply can't be made a whole or a unit; often quite ingeniously and yet completely unnaturally. The worst thing about it is that whatever is draped about the genuine fragments that are actually there, in the attempt to artificially produce a semblance of unity, consists largely of dyed rags. And if these are made up cleverly and deceptively, and draped in reason, then that's all the worse (KF 103).

This is a puzzling fragment, not the least because the 'free and equal fellowship' that receives a sardonic treatment here, is elsewhere held up as the model to which the fragments aspire. But the warning is clear: the urge to unify what is in essence discontinuous and disparate is so powerful that the critical (Romantic) author must always be on guard against it, in both form and content. A false unity that covers over differences and freezes dialectical thinking into an idea is a constant temptation, one to which idealism succumbed in its positing of an absolute *Grundsatz*. Given that, in the Romantic view, 'Jedes System kann nur Approximation sein [Every system can only be an approximation]' (KFSÄ XVIII, 2006, p. 413: 1106), texts which strive to cover over their necessarily fragmentary or approximate nature fail in an acknowledgement of their own conditions of possibility and thus place themselves at a remove from philosophical truth. The diction in the last two sentences of KF 103 suggests an actor (or perhaps a prostitute) in costume and

heavily made up, emphasising artifice and deceit. The more technical term ‘*Fragmente*’ is not used in the above fragment but instead the more general terms *Bruchstücke* and *Stücke*, which translate to bits, pieces, parts, or scraps. This may be an attempt to separate the consciously and openly fragmentary nature of a Romantic fragment collection – which does not attempt to ‘cleverly and deceptively’ disguise its discontinuity– from texts that are only accidentally fragmentary: ‘*ein bunter Haufen von Einfällen*’.

The decision to compose the *Athenäums-Fragmente* collectively and to publish them anonymously is one of the ways in which the Romantics defended themselves against the ‘*Trieb nach Einbeit*’, since it removes the possibility of uniting the texts as the product of a single mind. Schlegel in fact urged the other members of the group to *find* or excerpt fragments from letters they had written or from dinner table conversation, suggesting that fragments need not even be intentionally composed as such (Kubiak, 1994, p. 426). In this way the fragment collections could avoid the ‘*Schein von Ganzheit*’ that is little more than ‘*gefärbten Lumpen*’. The Romantics use a variety of other textual strategies to interrupt the hermeneutic process and introduce points of contradiction or incomprehensibility to thrust readers back on themselves. The prevalence of the ‘*göttlichen Hauch der Ironie* [divine breath of irony]’ (KF 42) in the fragments exploits the power of paradox (KF 48) to keep alive tension and fruitful ‘antagonism’ between the finite and the infinite, between the impossibility of communicating ‘completely’ and the pressing need to do so (KF 108). Kierkegaard will adopt these same disjunctive strategies in his writings for similar epistemological and ethical ends.

### ***Systemlosigkeit, in ein System***

In his third *Kritik* Kant conceives of nature as analogous to a work of art: ‘Their structure is the same since both involve the idea of an organic whole, where the identity of each part is inseparable from the whole, and where the identity of the whole is inseparable from each of its parts’ (Beiser, pp. 81-82). The Romantics were inspired by this analogy and by Kant’s attempt to think a whole, which also motivated the German idealists. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, the Romantics worked toward organicity in the first place by insisting on the difference and autonomy of the constituent fragments, rejecting any existing forms that would impose order externally. In conceiving of fragment collections as a ‘law unto themselves’ or, in Kantian language, as giving the law to themselves, the Romantics

saw in fragments a capacity to enact and affirm the human capacity for spontaneity. The fragments were seen as the only possible vehicle for constructing a philosophical system that possessed any kind of spontaneous, organic unity, rather than a unity merely imposed from the outset. A number of essayistic genres are described and discarded in AF 77 before the ideal fragmentary form that would take part in a *System aller Wissenschaften* is posited.

*Ein Dialog ist eine Kette, oder ein Kranz von Fragmenten. Ein Briefwechsel ist ein Dialog in vergrößertem Maßstabe, und Memorabilien sind ein System vom Fragmenten. Es gibt noch keins was in Stoff und Form fragmentarisch, zugleich ganz subjektiv und individuell, und ganz objektiv und wie ein notwendiger Teil im System aller Wissenschaften wäre.*

A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments. But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences (AF 77).

In an age that saw the rapid rise of science, industry, and various nationalisms, the organic whole comprising the subjective and objective and understood as a creative task was important for ethical and political reasons, as Andrew Bowie explains in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*:

The dissecting capacity of the Understanding in analysing an organism destroys the integrity of what it analyses. The plant which has become an object of scientific dissection can no longer exist as an organism because it has been taken apart as an object in terms of its other, the subject. Similarly, the procedures of scientific analysis of nature do not make nature into a coherent whole. Instead, nature is threatened with disintegration into endless difference. Applying such a conception to society means that the goals of society can only be legitimate if they sustain the integrity of all members of that society (1990/2003, p. 24).

Without some concept of a whole, philosophy can offer no alternative to the analytical discourse of the sciences, yet the whole as such cannot be grasped cognitively, since, as the Romantics argued, it forms the horizon or condition of possibility of thought. The divinely given whole that had provided consolation to sceptics like Montaigne and Descartes in previous centuries was no longer available in the tumultuous period of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. The lack of any whole, of a reckoning of the place of the human in nature or an understanding of nature as 'home' (the site of our being) threatened – as Schelling and Heidegger would later

make clear – to turn all of nature into ‘goods’ to be used and likewise to turn human beings into nothing more than finite objects.<sup>77</sup> Though the Romantics were interested in a collectivity that would maintain difference, they did not want difference to spin out into meaningless repetition or ‘bad infinity’.<sup>78</sup> The multiplication of fragments was still intended as part of a singular endeavour or work, a new Bible (‘a system of books’ or ‘an infinite book’), even if this work was conceived as endlessly in the process of becoming.<sup>79</sup> Having a system and not having a system are, for the Romantics, equally dangerous alternatives.

*Das eigentliche Philosophische System muß Freyheit und Unendlichkeit, oder, um es auffallend auszudrücken, Systemlosigkeit, in ein System gebraucht, seyn. Nur ein solches System kann die Fehler des Systems vermeiden und weder der Ungerechtigkeit, noch der Anarchie bezogen [bezichtigt] werden.*

An authentic philosophical system must systematize freedom and unendingness, or, to express it more strikingly, it must systematize systemlessness. Only such a system can avoid the errors of system and be accused of neither *injustice* nor anarchy (Novalis, 1978, p. 200: 648/2003, p. 187: 648).

Contrasting a systematised systemlessness with anarchy again suggests that the union the Romantics set out to perform in the writing of fragments was one of a republican fellowship in which different members could work together toward some common goal.

A ‘rigid system’ (KF 41) risks imposing a structure external to experience and so radically altering what one sets out to understand. In a prescient analogy, AF 46 likens conceptual systematicity to ‘a march of soldiers on parade’. On the other hand, systemlessness threatens to simply leave one with the arbitrariness of unreflected experience. In the activity of systematising that never reaches a final system, akin to the ‘*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*’ structure of aesthetic experience in Kant’s third *Kritik*, the contingent or arbitrary is given meaning by becoming the

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<sup>77</sup> This is precisely the flaw of idealist self-reflection; the absolute I that is doing the reflecting only encounters the finite I as an object. ‘Everywhere we *seek* the unconditioned, but *find* only things’ (l.c., 412: 1).

<sup>78</sup> ‘*Als vorübergehender Zustand ist der Skeptizismus logische Insurrektion; als System ist er Anarchie. Skeptische Methode wäre also ungefähr wie insurgente Regierung [As a temporary condition scepticism is logical insurrection; as a system it is anarchy. Sceptical method would therefore more or less resemble a rebellious government]*’ (KFS II, 1967, p. 179: 97).

<sup>79</sup> *Ideen* 95.

point from which to access and take part in the infinite. This is clearly carried over into the Romantic concept of *Bildung*—the formation of an entire person that made living into an artistic production of oneself. The hermeneutic structure of the fragment provides a performative engagement with the idea of creating oneself as an organic whole, a ‘manifold unity’; in so doing, as Sartre would later claim, the subject transforms being into *meaning* (Sartre, 1974, p. 160).

Romantic fragments thus exist between twin poles of temptation. On the one hand stands the false unity and coherence that is the risk of any systematising effort; on the other: the risk of the essayistic to dissolve into absolute discontinuity, meaninglessness, or sceptical *aporia*. The latter became a concern for the Romantics in a way that it had not been for earlier philosophers, who could still look to a divinely established order or at the very least to shared societal conventions for a coherent sense of the human. The Romantics signal a shift in the practice of therapeutic scepticism. Like previous essayistic authors, they make gestures to widen philosophy’s scope to include features of experience that get covered over in deductive or systematic accounts. They accept the basic sceptical argument, formulated by the Pyrrhonians and revived by Jacobi, that infinite regress is an inevitable part of the justification of knowledge claims. They seek a therapeutic remedy to this problem by removing the need for absolute justification, or at least the possibility of absolute justification at the beginning of a philosophical system. Schlegel proposes the trope of a circle rather than a vertical trope of uncovering the absolute as a ground. Novalis posits the impossibility of an absolute justificatory principle as the motor for philosophy as an endless activity. Like Montaigne and Hume, they embrace difference, the exception, and the individual. But in choosing the specific essayistic form of the fragment, they bring into focus the notion of a whole, of absolute knowing, toward which their various attempts are directed and as part of which they gain their meaning. By raising the possibility of the Whole as an impossible but at the same time necessary point of orientation – perhaps as a necessary fiction – the Romantics refuse to accept doubt as an ultimate position and keep alive a positive principle of hope, which infuses each attempt or fragment with meaning. Knowledge of the whole, an entirely classical notion of philosophy’s task, looks very different in the Romantics because the thinking of difference or non-identity is crucial to the kind of whole they imagine: a manifold unity. It is a whole of examples, but the usual relationship between a form and an example of a form is

skewed because each example is said to already contain the form in itself, yet the form does not pre-exist as such to give meaning to these examples. The Romantic model strains the limits of thinking about part to whole, provisionality to completion. Schlegel describes Romantic philosophy as an alternation between self-creation and self-destruction (KF 37), the production of meaning and the freedom of irony that enables, or perhaps forces, one to deconstruct and think against oneself in order to avoid the freezing or reification of experience. Philosophy thus becomes the art of alternating between hope and doubt.

Despite the nearly univocal optimism and lightness of tone of the fragments, one can read, as Kubiak does, a lurking anxiety in their insistence that fragmentary writing fit into some larger but always receding whole, as if absolute fragmentation were an ever-present spectre that needed to be warded off. Consider the following orgiastic description from Schlegel's *Ideen*:

*Als Bibel wird das neue ewige Evangelium erscheinen, von dem Lessing geweissagt hat: aber nicht als einzelnes Buch im gewöhnlichen Sinne. Selbst was wir Bücher nennen ist ja ein System von Büchern [...] Und es ist ja wohl ein ewig wesentlicher und sogar praktischer Unterschied, ob ein Buch bloß Mittel zu einem Zweck, oder selbständiges Werk, Individuum, personifizierte Idee ist. Das kann es nicht ohne Göttliches, und darin stimmt der esoterische Begriff selbst mit dem exoterischen überein; auch ist keine Idee isolirt, sondern sie ist was sie ist, nur unter allen Ideen [...] Auf eine ähnliche Weise sollen in der vollkommenen Litteratur alle Bücher nur Ein Buch sein, und in einem solchen ewig werdenden Buch wird das Evangelium der Menschheit und der Bildung offenbahrt werden.*

The new, eternal gospel that Lessing prophesied will appear as a bible: but not as a single book in the usual sense. Even what we now call the Bible is actually a system of books [...] And surely there is an eternally essential and even practical difference if a book is merely a means to an end, or an independent work, an individual, a personified idea. It cannot be this without divine inspiration, and here the esoteric concept is itself in agreement with the exoteric one; and, moreover, no idea is isolated, but is what it is only in combination with all other ideas [...] in a perfect literature all books should be only a single book, and in such an eternally developing book, the gospel of humanity and culture will be revealed (Novalis, 1978, p. 726: 95).

While Schlegel makes the philosophically significant observation that the sense of any single idea or concept relies a web of signification, and so in some sense all ideas are connected, this insight alone does not do the work of guaranteeing a unified 'gospel of humanity and culture'. Furthermore, the claim that the Bible – as absolute book – is itself a 'system of books', simply reiterates the fragmentary nature

of any literary or philosophical effort, begging the question of how to understand these efforts as unified. The appeal to a vague notion of ‘divine inspiration’ is unsatisfying. For Kubiak, such moments represent the staging of a conflict that the Romantic fragment collections ‘ultimately fail to resolve’ (Kubiak, 1994, p. 447).

On the one hand, the Romantics insist that the ground that reflection seeks for itself is forever lacking [...] This insight in turn opens up any writing with philosophical ambitions to the prospect of radical fragmentation. Philosophical writing, as the ‘result’ of reflection, can ‘begin’ and ‘end’ only with an arbitrary interruption of this endless activity, when the desire that inhabits it is temporarily satisfied. But for this desire to be satisfied – even temporarily – requires precisely that reflection forget or repress the knowledge that its satisfactions can only be temporary (*Ibid.*).

The suppression of the truth that any philosophical effort can be no more than what Schlegel calls ‘a pile of notes’ is in some sense necessary to continue to engage in the practice of philosophy; the Romantics translate the ultimate absence of ground for reflection into a motivating force—Novalis’ philosophy as ‘infinite free activity’, part of the endless process of philosophy and of self-formation. Yet the youthful enthusiasm in this passage perhaps too neatly glides over the real threat of dissolution that it seeks to dispel. The *Athenäum* group disbanded after three years and Novalis died an untimely death just one year later at the age of 31. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on, optimism for the self-created, unified life that Romantic fragments were meant to represent waned in the face of industrialism, the ugly consequences of the French Revolution, and the expansion of the bureaucratic structures of modern capitalism. The spectre lurking on the margins of the Romantic fragments became harder to repress and the poetic unity-in-difference these works strove to achieve was overcome by more totalitarian structures of unification or by real, social mechanisms of fragmentation. Søren Kierkegaard’s response to the levelling political, philosophical, and theological structures that he recognised in his contemporary Denmark was to continue in the critical vein of therapeutic scepticism, but in a way that refused a purely immanent, poetic solution to the loss of given meaning. His solution is akin to Jacobi’s *salto mortale*. There has to be a passing out of the everyday and the horizontal in order to recover the world as something lost. Kierkegaard can be read as a way of thinking through some of the tensions in Romantic essayism and reviving doubt as a genuine existential crisis.

## Chapter 5: Possibility in Kierkegaard's imaginative discourses

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Belief and doubt are not two different types of knowledge that can be determined in continuity with each other, because neither of them is a cognitive act; they are opposite passions.

-Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Crumbs*, 1843-4<sup>80</sup>

From what does pure thinking abstract? From existence, consequently from what it is supposed to explain.

-Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs*, 1846<sup>81</sup>

When Lukács includes Kierkegaard's imaginary diaries and short stories in his pantheon of the great 'essays of life' one cannot help but think that Kierkegaard would have been pleased to find himself in the company of 'Plato's *Dialogues*, the texts of the mystics, [and] Montaigne's *Essays*' (1974, p. 3). Certainly, Kierkegaard saw himself as a Socrates for his age, and a brief glance at his pseudonyms – Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus, Anti-Climacus – reveals the influence of the Christian mystical tradition on his writings. Though scholars disagree about the level of Kierkegaard's direct engagement with Montaigne,<sup>82</sup> the similarities in form and sceptical method are undeniable. Yet Kierkegaard's writings also stand apart from the rest of the cited authors in his use of pseudonyms and fictional characters to advance his ideas. Might this move into the literary disqualify Kierkegaard as a philosophical essayist? As Lukács reminds us, essayistic writings as such already involve a literary element, which he calls, by turns, art or poetry—defined by a concern with the form of the text that is not shared by the scientific neutrality to which he opposes the artistic.<sup>83</sup> Claire de Obaldia argues further that the

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<sup>80</sup> Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 84.

<sup>81</sup> Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 328.

<sup>82</sup> See Grimsley (1966) and Landkildehus (2009) for more on Kierkegaard's engagement with Montaigne. Grimsley makes a stronger case for Kierkegaard's close study of the *Essais*, especially 'Apology for Raimond Sebond', while Landkildehus interprets the existing evidence to suggest that Kierkegaard was a more casual reader of Montaigne. Both acknowledge the similarities of theme and form in the two authors.

<sup>83</sup> While Lukács' distinction between the scientific and the artistic on the level of *form* is convincing, his too-neat division of artistic creation and the scientific truth both makes too little of the artist's claim to truth and too much of the scientist's, as Adorno notes in 'Essay as Form'. Lukács claims that although the essay is of necessity artistic or poetic, it is nevertheless distinguished from art by its concern with linking life as lived to life as such, moving from occasions and concrete images to the 'true life of the soul' or the 'ultimate questions'. However,

‘occasional’, polyphonic, and anti-systematic nature of the essay leads to the historical development of the novel, which transforms the multiple voices of a singular writing ‘I’ into fully-fledged fictional characters, dialogues, and situations. In their wholly imaginative frame, novels are a natural extension of the essay’s refusal to adjudicate in advance different ways of seeing. One recognises the seeds of this development in Plato’s dialogues, especially the more rhetorically complex dialogues like the *Symposium* that include frame narratives and other recognisable literary devices. F. Schlegel calls novels ‘the Socratic dialogues of our time’ (KF 26), and indeed, through a series of analogies, treats dialogues, novels, and fragment collections as a single generic family of Romantic poetry (e.g. AF 77). Schlegel’s *Lucinde* and Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* were experimental novels of ideas that staged the philosophical insights of German Romanticism in a dramatic way, offering an imaginative mode of reader engagement. Kierkegaard’s quasi-novelistic writings take part in this tradition of literary-philosophical hybrids that seem calculated to defy classification. By creating fictional ‘authors’ who embody particular life views, Kierkegaard advances existing strands of the essayistic, particularly polyvocality. The multiplicity of voices and the profusion of ironic, disjunctive structures within his texts furthers the anti-systematic, sceptical agenda of the texts we have already studied.

Kierkegaard is well-known for his critique of ‘the System’—a term that targets Hegelian idealism and the metaphysical tradition more broadly in its tendency to privilege being over existence or becoming, or to cover over the gap between the two. Like Montaigne and Hume, Kierkegaard worries that the temporal structure of everyday life is suppressed by certain ways of speaking (philosophically), that the imposition of a conceptual structure onto lived experience can distort what one sets out to understand. Kierkegaard’s stated aim of combatting the System ‘by means of form’ (1985, p. 117) works to exploit the literary possibilities of the essayistic in order to gesture toward those features of existence that escape conceptualisation: motion or becoming or possibility, the particular or subjective, and religious faith. Like the other authors in this study, especially the *Frühromantik* who (along with 18<sup>th</sup>-century ironists such as Lessing and Hamann) inspired his ironic-polemical tone, Kierkegaard took form to be a matter of the utmost concern

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Lukács fails to appreciate that this same dynamic can be operative in any example of poetic or pictorial representation.

for the project of philosophy, seeing the choice of presentation as both an assertion of the conditions under which philosophy ought to begin and, implicitly, an ethical judgement of whether and how the truth can be learned or communicated.

Kierkegaard emphatically rejects the notion that philosophical truth ought to be neutral or indifferent to the individual in the manner of scientific truth; like the great essayists and *moralistes* who precede him, he affirms that a subject's knowledge of himself in relation to his own historical moment – including existing conventions, structures, and texts – must form the basis for philosophical enquiry. Likewise, he rejects objective or neutral discourse, the discourse of disembodied, de-subjectivised authority, which covers over communication as a problem and denies the hermeneutic insight that all communication is *interested*, defined in advance by the cultural parameters of language use and by the commitments of an individual author/reader. For Kierkegaard as for the *Friibromantiker*, a philosophical writer who fails to recognise these commitments is left in a default position of dogmatism,<sup>84</sup> an offence for which he takes 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hegelian philosophy to task. Kierkegaard turns away from the project of establishing objective truth, the truth of 'the System', and instead asks the question of the significance of truth for the finite, existing subject, the ancient question of the value of knowledge for life. Rather than accept the false transcendence of abstraction or speculation, which achieves the eternal by removing the subject from time, he attempts to clear the way for a genuine opening or transcendence within the everyday.

### **Doubt and faith**

Kierkegaard is a writer preoccupied with the consequences of a tendency in both philosophy and in the prevailing religious attitudes of his time to ignore the fact of becoming, the subject as a possibility to be realised. In the preface to *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, mounts an attack against those who would attempt to 'go further' than doubt or faith. He attributes this desire to 'go further' to a failure to appreciate the difficulty of both doubt and faith in the contemporary intellectual and cultural climate of 19<sup>th</sup>-

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<sup>84</sup> Kierkegaard's rejection of the possibility of neutral discourse also takes to heart Jacobi's suggestion that non-conceptual conviction is a precondition for orienting oneself in the world, since it is only this kind of basic interest or passion that allows one to break free from the infinite regress of rational reflection.

century Denmark, which he describes as a ‘regular clearance sale’ of ideas (1994, p. 3). He saw a culture of scientific optimism, quick to treat the problems of philosophy and religion as if they had already been worked out and needed just ‘one more stone’<sup>85</sup> or one more commentary to reach completion; perhaps next Sunday the System – the total understanding of subject and world – would be finished (1992, p. 106).<sup>86</sup> In a move that is typical of Kierkegaard’s approach to philosophical questions, de Silentio translates the question of doubting to the level of the individual and asks how doubt is ever to be overcome – or even entered into – by the existential subject. Posing the same question about faith, de Silentio remarks, ‘Even though one were capable of converting the whole content of faith into the form of a concept, it does not follow that one has adequately conceived faith and understands how one got into it, or how it got into one’ (*Ibid.*). The equivalence of doubt and faith that runs through the preface, though never explicitly stated, is a significant rhetorical feature. De Silentio begins by considering the philosophical cheapening of doubt as an intellectual curiosity rather than a way of inhabiting the world, and proceeds to take up parallel discussion of faith in the same terms. The rationale for treating doubt and faith as twin movements is hardly self-evident from a philosophical perspective, since the foil of doubt is generally imagined to be certainty, certain knowledge. What Neil Gascoigne terms the ‘heroic’ response to scepticism purports to dispel sceptical doubt by establishing an ultimate ground for knowledge claims either in some rational principle or in direct access to sense data,<sup>87</sup> the assumption is that the problem of doubt could be solved by agreement on the proper criteria of justification.

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<sup>85</sup> In the preface to *Johannes Climacus*, the unnamed author declares, ‘Someone who supposes that philosophy has never in all the world been so close as it is now to fulfilling its task of explaining all mysteries may certainly think it strange, affected, and scandalous that I choose the narrative form and do not in my small way hand up a stone to culminate the system’ (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 117).

<sup>86</sup> As a religious thinker, Kierkegaard specifically rejected the notion that one could be born into the Christian faith by virtue of being born in a Christian country (Denmark), as opposed to ‘working out [one’s] salvation in fear and trembling’. The immediate philosophical target of de Silentio’s remarks is H.L. Martensen, a prominent Danish Hegelian who taught that the Hegelian dialectic represented a triumph over doubt, thus reducing scepticism to a mere moment in the system; within this framework ‘going further’ was conceived as integral to the practice of philosophy. See H.L. Martensen’s review of J.L. Heiberg’s ‘Introductory Lectures to Speculative Logic’, *Danske Maanedskrift*, No. 16 for 1836, pp. 515ff. For a discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of Martensen, see Stewart, 2003, pp. 261ff.

<sup>87</sup> Hegel, influenced by the *Frühromantik* critiques of idealism, saw the absolute principle as progressive, as the end toward which philosophy would strive, rather than something given at the beginning. But unlike the Romantics, he conceived of this end of absolute knowing as not only achievable but logically necessary.

De Silentio's performative aim in treating doubt and faith as interchangeable is to suggest that the philosophical understanding of doubt as a problem of knowledge is hopelessly skewed: the way to recover from doubt is not through more certain knowledge, nor through the progressive acquisition of knowledge, but through the twin movement of acknowledgement of the inevitable fracture between thought and being, and faith or radical openness, akin to Jacobi's *salto mortale*. Moreover, it is suggested that rather than 'going further' than doubt, we (readers) would be wise to attempt doubting in earnest. De Silentio admires Descartes and the ancient sceptics, for whom doubting was not only an achievement but also the task of a lifetime, requiring constant renewal in the face of what Kierkegaard in his journals describes as 'the inveiglements of cognition' (1985, p. 262/Pap. IV B 10: 18 *n.d.*).<sup>88</sup>

As Danish bishops such as Kierkegaard's former tutor H.L. Martensen were claiming victory over religious doubt as a mastered historical moment, as Hegel had done for scepticism, De Silentio proclaims that he 'has not understood the System, does not know whether it actually exists, whether it is completed' and insists that his own text 'has nothing whatever to do with the System.'<sup>89</sup> He denies readers a conceptual treatment of doubt or faith that would add to their knowledge and instead asks the question of what is at stake for the subject in these positions, or rather, *movements*. The worry with both doubt and faith is that one mistakenly tries to 'quantify oneself into' them and so changes what must be continually renewed 'into something else, into another kind of certainty' (1992, p. 11). In a move that is indicative of Kierkegaard's turn toward the subject as possibility, De Silentio aims to 'raise the price' of both doubt and faith by using a variety of rhetorical means to present them as live existential possibilities.

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<sup>88</sup> Kierkegaard takes up this subject in his 1842-1843 journals, the period during which he was composing *Johannes Climacus*, his most targeted treatment of sceptical doubt. 'It was life's task to keep on doubting despite all the inveiglements of cognition. Therefore, in a certain sense they were never finished [...] it is different when this doubting everything is supposed to be the beginning' (1992, p. 262). In a journal entry from the same period, Kierkegaard indirectly accuses philosophy of trying to wheedle its way out of the anxiety of doubt: 'has Descartes done it for all of us in the same way that Christ was crucified?' (1985, p. 246/Pap. IV B 2: 16).

<sup>89</sup> This remark should be read in light of Johannes Climacus' critique of Hegel in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: '[I]f the conclusion is lacking at the end, it is also lacking at the beginning [...] but if the conclusion is lacking at the beginning, this means that there is no system. A house can indeed be finished even though a bell pull is lacking, but in a scholarly construction the lack of a conclusion has retroactive power to make the beginning doubtful and hypothetical, that is, unsystematic' (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 13).

### **‘Interested’ communication**

The treatment of doubt and faith as poles of the same existential activity – which is consistent across the pseudonymous works and the journals – gives Kierkegaard’s writing a therapeutic shape. While his writings do not, like the therapy of the ancient Pyrrhonians, recommend falling back on the conventional practices of the everyday, or living ‘naturally’, both Kierkegaardian and Pyrrhonian therapy work to disabuse readers of the notion that there is any conceptual or philosophical solution to the question: when does one know enough to *really* know? Put another way, Kierkegaard shares with Pyrrhonism the insight that knowledge is inadequate to address the problem of how to orient oneself in the world.

Kierkegaard – both in the journals and through his meta-pseudonym Johannes Climacus – accepts the basic sceptical argument that positive knowledge claims are ultimately groundless, since ‘sense certainty’ is a ‘delusion’ (1992, p. 81) and, as Jacobi had argued, foundationalism does not offer a way of halting the infinite regress of rational reflection (*Ibid.*, p. 116, pp. 328ff). As a result, suspension or withholding of judgement is the only rational conclusion of philosophical investigation. Climacus adds to these critiques his own thesis that positive knowledge claims – sense certainty, historical knowledge, or speculative knowledge – are illusory because they ‘fail to express the state of the knowing subject in existence’ (1992, p. 81). Climacus’ objection centres on the temporal dimension of subjectivity as explored by Montaigne and the Romantics: the subject never exists as a fully realised actuality, is never fully present to itself, but *is* only in the process of becoming. Positive knowledge claims, which assert a truth about being or what *is*, thus stand in contradiction with the negative state of becoming that characterises subjectivity. In order to claim certain knowledge of anything<sup>90</sup>, one must transform oneself into a ‘fictitious object subject, and to mistake oneself for such a subject is to be fooled and to remain fooled’ (1992, p. 81). Transforming the I of the existing subject into an I that is an object for itself (an object for thought) is precisely the error for which Novalis and the *Frühromantiker* criticise Fichtean idealism;<sup>91</sup> this error is perpetuated in any system that locates its ground in the I of self-reflection

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<sup>90</sup> Climacus makes an exception for the claim ‘I exist’, which he finds consistent with subjectivity, but asserts that one cannot extrapolate from this claim a speculative I or a necessary I as various species of idealism attempted to do (1992, p. 81).

<sup>91</sup> Novalis, 1978, II: p. 9

but forgets that self-reflection is a process of ‘reciprocal determination [Wechselbeweis]<sup>92</sup> and so forgets that the I is always doubled, never self-identical.<sup>93</sup> The consequence of the non-identical, deferred status of the I for the *Frühromantiker* is that any hope of a closed philosophical system must be replaced with infinite striving or infinite approximation toward a poetic-philosophical Book of Books made of accumulated fragments. Kierkegaard is in some ways more radical – and far less optimistic – than his Romantic forebears, displacing the hope for a supreme Work with a more resolutely negative literary strategy of taking away knowledge, leading his readers to *aporia*. Infinite striving remains an apt characterisation of the subject’s position, but in Kierkegaard this requires a rupture from philosophy and an opening toward faith.

As we have already seen, the Romantics developed a heterogeneous ‘system of fragments’ to represent the necessarily open-ended structure of existence. Rhetorically, they used irony as a way of resisting the ‘urge to unity’ that would smooth over the real differences between the absolute and the existing subject. Kierkegaard too develops his style with the aim of keeping alive the tension of possibility and striving that defines existence. In praise of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century playwright and philosopher (and notorious ironist) Lessing, Kierkegaard’s Climacus declares that ‘Lessing and the systematician<sup>94</sup>, both speak of a continued striving—the only difference is that Lessing is obtuse or truthful enough to call it a continued striving, the systematician sagacious and untruthful enough to call it a system’ (1992, p. 108). To better illustrate the bad faith existential position of the systematician, Climacus offers a joke about a man who loses a silk umbrella and, in order to have the best chances of reclaiming it, advertises that he has lost a cotton umbrella instead. Climacus provides his own gloss on the joke: perhaps the ‘systematising’ philosopher hopes to sell more copies by advertising his work as an ‘absolute system’ rather than what it really is: the attempt at or approximation of a system.<sup>95</sup> In this case the parable is an odd fit, since the man with the missing umbrella advertises something cheaper than what he actually owns, whereas the philosopher advertises something more than he is able to deliver. However, the apparent

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<sup>92</sup> Schlegel, KFSX XVIII, 1963, p. 518: 16

<sup>93</sup> ‘Principien sind immer im Plural, konstruieren sich unter einander; nie nur Eins, wie die Grundwüthigen wähnen’ (KFSX XVIII, 2006, p. 395: 105).

<sup>94</sup> Kierkegaard does not give his ‘systematician’ a name, but Hegel, or some contemporary Danish Hegelian, is the most likely target.

<sup>95</sup> Kierkegaard had come to the same conclusion as F. Schlegel: ‘Jedes System ist nur Approximation seines Ideals. Die ‘Skepsis ist ewig’ (KFSX XVIII, 2006, p. 417: 1149).

discrepancy disappears when it is borne in mind that for Kierkegaard the object of greater worth is not 'the System' but the continual striving of the existing subject. Read on this level the systematic philosopher has 'lost' himself and has erroneously tried to recover the subjectivity that he has lost by transforming it into a speculative 'I-I'; the latter is much cheaper and requires far less effort than the task of becoming or realising oneself in existence, for 'to think abstractly is easier than to exist' (1992, p. 308). The joke is an illustration of the danger of systematic thought that replaces what it sets out to explain with an inferior substitute. The very terms of the investigation ensure that the object sought will never be recovered.

For Kierkegaard as for Jacobi and the Romantics, non-conceptual conviction or what Kierkegaard calls interest [*Interesse*] is a precondition for acting in the world. Climacus compares his understanding of the existential leap required for action to Jacobi's *salto mortale* and Schelling's notion of intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*). All three notions point to the need for a category of immediate existential awareness or decision to put an end to infinite regress, or, what amounts to the same thing, to enable one to begin (acting).<sup>96</sup> The gap between possibility and action, for which the leap is required, is described by Climacus as infinitely wide. Since rational reflection, as Jacobi demonstrated, can continue indefinitely, acting or beginning cannot be considered the result of reflection but only come about as the result of arbitrarily cutting off reflection: an act of will (1992, p. 116). Scepticism itself is, for Kierkegaard, a version of the *interested* commitment exemplified by faith. In his 1842-1843 journals, he distinguishes between ignorance, uncertainty, and doubt in order to establish the element of willing in doubt and to suggest that doubt, properly understood, cannot be insulated from the sphere of practical action. Doubt is described as 'a higher element of uncertainty' in that 'I determine my relation to a thing—[and] I do not determine it in uncertainty' (1985, p. 262). As a decisive orientation, doubting implies responsibility for my own possibility, giving meaning to contingency. 'Doubt is the beginning of the ethical, for as soon as I am to act, the interest lies with me inasmuch as I assume the responsibility and thereby acquire significance' (*Ibid*, p.

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<sup>96</sup> Climacus ultimately sees his conception of the 'leap' as prefigured in a passing remark by Lessing. Schelling's intuition lacks the notion of decisiveness or will that Climacus wishes to maintain, and Jacobi commits the error of trying to convince others to make the leap and thus of unwittingly becoming a stumbling block. See Climacus' touching account of Lessing's final hours when his friend Jacobi encouraged him to give up his Spinozism and embrace the Christian faith (1992, p. 101).

265). As it relates to communication, this insight leads to the conclusion that the object of philosophical writing is not to provide knowledge or to guarantee the truth of what is said by the elaboration of a method; rather, it is to address the subject's relationship or commitment to what is known. For 'even if the system were absolutely perfect, even if the actuality [*Virkelighed*] exceeded the advance reports, doubt would still not be overcome – it only begins – for doubt is based on interest, and all systematic knowledge is disinterested' (1992, p. 170).<sup>97</sup> This focus on the subjective and on doubt as an expression of interest is meant as a reaction against the notion that sceptical doubt could be overcome by a more philosophically rigorous process of justification that would ensure that one were 'getting reality right'. In opposition to this tendency, Kierkegaard's rhetorical strategy often takes the form of Socratically leading his readers *to* doubt, since doubt at the very least requires staking one's claim, which for Kierkegaard is the precondition for any kind of genuine philosophical or ethical engagement.

As the pseudonymous Climacus explores in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the gap between a neutral mathematical proposition such as  $2+2=4$  and an account of existence is a gap of interest, of something at stake for the subject; thus in the latter case, 'the object of communication is consequently not a knowledge but a realisation' (1967, p. 272: 649). The question of the *how* of truth raised by essayistic writing and, more proximately, by Jacobi and the German Romantic tradition, is paramount for Kierkegaard and his task of making readers aware of the commitments that shape their way of being in and interrogating the world. The same concerns about the existential *significance* of truth that led the Romantics to reject a *Grundsatz* for philosophy and to orient themselves toward a whole<sup>98</sup> leads Kierkegaard to emphasise the subjective appropriation of truth. Both recognised that idealism – in the case of the Romantics, that of Fichte and Reinhold, and in Kierkegaard's case that of Hegel – sacrificed an existential subject for a conceptual I, unwittingly giving up on the possibility of a philosophy grounded in and able to

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<sup>97</sup> See *Johannes Climacus*: 'In this respect he considered the conduct of the Greek sceptics far more consistent than the modern overcoming of doubt. They were well aware that doubt is based on interest, and therefore with perfect consistency they thought they could cancel doubt by transforming it into apathy (*ataraxia*). In this method there was a consistency, whereas it was an inconsistency [...] that motivated modern philosophy to want to conquer doubt systematically. Even if the system were absolutely perfect, even if the actuality [*Virkelighed*] exceeded the advance reports, doubt would still not be overcome – it only begins – for doubt is based on interest, and all systematic knowledge is disinterested' (1992, p. 170).

<sup>98</sup> See Chapter 4.

address itself to the existing person and unwittingly eliminating freedom or possibility. ‘For Kierkegaard, metaphysics, ethics, and theology – in short the length and breadth of the “onto-theo-logic” – shatter against the rocks of [subjective] “interest”’ (Caputo, 1987, p. 33).<sup>99</sup> The unity and coherence that Fichte and Hegel were able to achieve was for their critics nothing more than a philosophical sleight of hand; the ethical-aesthetic project of *Bildung* – in Kierkegaard the project of *opbyggelige* (edifying or upbuilding) – sought to redress this wrong with a philosophy that would acknowledge the open structure of existence and its absolute difference from conceptual thought.

### Plurality and irony

Kierkegaard realises the literary possibilities of the essayistic mode, developing the characteristic multiplicity of perspectives and voices into fully-fledged fictional characters—both his pseudonyms and the fictional characters within his works. The shift from discursive writing to fictional narratives is an example of the continuum of possibilities for essayistic writing and the ease with which the imaginative consideration of different points of view in authors such as Montaigne and Hume can be developed into novelistic techniques. Though Kierkegaard is the first of the authors examined in this study to use pseudonymous characters,<sup>100</sup> his motive for this development is familiar. Montaigne featured as a character in his essays in order to show the multiplicity or non-identity of the individual subject. The heterogeneous unity of the Romantic fragments was an attempt to represent the successive unfolding of truth for the subject in time. Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous characters allow for a polyphony of voices and a heterogeneity of perspectives on the same themes of non-identity and temporal existence. Furthering the Romantic move to combat the ‘*Trieb nach Einheit*’ (Schlegel, KF 103) or the appeal to objective authority by removing an author, Kierkegaard invents multiple authors, multiple personalities, none of whom claim any final authority. His richly conceived pseudonyms are an example of the focus on the subject as the site of truth; through heterogeneous perspectives, Kierkegaard raises the question, not of how we can know enough to be sure of what we know, but of

<sup>99</sup> See *Repetition*, 2009, p. 19.

<sup>100</sup> As noted in the beginning of this chapter, Schlegel and Novalis had already experimented with writing philosophical novels.

how we come to see the world under a certain aspect, as well as how we might learn to see in a new way.

Each of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms speaks in the first person, enacting his commitment to placing 'I's into the middle of life' since it is 'completely lacking in our age for someone to say: I' (1967, p. 302: 656/Pap. VIII. 2 B 88 *n.d.*). Yet it would be a mistake to read the pseudonyms as embodiments of stable identities or fixed ways of life, e.g. the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Rather, in every case, Kierkegaard uses the pseudonyms to explore a certain kind of movement: the possibility of becoming other than one is, which is a live possibility for the subject qua subject. Kierkegaard is above all a philosopher of becoming, for whom timeless, eternal categories such as identity can be of use only to logic, not to the existing subject.

As long as I live in time, the principle of identity is only an abstraction. Therefore nothing is easier than to delude oneself and others into thinking the identity of all by abandoning diversity. Nevertheless, one might ask such a person how he conducts himself with regard to living, since in identity I am beyond time [...] The confusion arises only from living in categories different from those used in writing books—O wretched book-writing! (1967, p. 329: 705).

The concerns about identity in this passage – both the identity that comes from transforming a subject into an object 'beyond time' through reifying reflection, and the dangerous urge to unify everything in thought by ignoring difference – resonate with those of the essayists we have already considered. As a means of combatting philosophy's tendency to abandon diversity and think everything under the category of an *eidos*, Kierkegaard adopts a rhetorical strategy of plunging the reader into the tension of temporal life and becoming through the use of conflicting perspectives (within and across works) and through gestures of ironic reflexivity. The inherent comedy of writing books to combat book writing does not escape Kierkegaard, who sometimes suggests that keeping silent would be the best response of all. Yet his version of 'book writing' is an attempt to maintain difference and to heighten, rather than level out, a sense of the self as possibility. The dialectical movements within each text strain the boundaries of how each pseudonymous author understands himself. As the characters end up revealing the limitations of their own perspectives, the reader is given a model for transformative self-reflection. Though Kierkegaard's ultimate aim as an author is to open the possibility of Christian

truth,<sup>101</sup> this takes place primarily through negative gestures of subtraction or breaking down, which strip away the illusions of self-presence and certainty that prevent genuine opening or transcendence.

The novelistic strategy of fictional characters involves what Kierkegaard describes as an ethical deception—a kind of lie that tells the truth or can lead to the truth. “To deceive into the truth.” [...] Ethical communication in character begins with placing a “deception” in between [the teacher and the learner], and the art consists in enduring everything while remaining faithful to character in the deception and faithful to the ethical’ (Kierkegaard, 1967, 1: p 288: 24). The development of characters that do not represent the author’s actual position but that may be able to help the reader to a moment of recognition reflects Kierkegaard’s heightened awareness of the hazards of communication, and written communication in particular. He conceives of communication as an art, in which truth or untruth resides in the form.<sup>102</sup> For Kierkegaard, in addition to the dangers of language, which as the medium of the universal threatens to erase the particular, an author faces the additional difficulty that ‘there is really nothing people want to do more than to mimic’ (1967, p. 274: 649: 24). In order to make philosophical writing existentially significant for the reader, Kierkegaard resorts to the art of irony, championed by the *Frühromantiker*.

Romantic irony, as it relates to the practice of writing, denotes gestures of self-consciousness or self-reflection in which an author goes beyond the established frame of the work. Texts like *Tristram Shandy* or *Don Quixote* that constantly comment on their own composition are frequently cited by the Romantics as the paradigm of romantic or ironic writing. The ability to abstract from one’s immediate circumstances is considered a measure of aesthetic and intellectual refinement. In the *Kritische Fragmente*, Schlegel cautions against the enthusiasm that simply wants to ‘blurt out everything’ and recommends aesthetic distance: ‘in order to write well about something, one shouldn’t be interested in it any longer’ (KF 37). Schlegel uses

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<sup>101</sup> See the posthumously published *Point of View for my Work as an Author*, in which Kierkegaard claims: ‘that I am and was a religious author, that the whole of my work as an author is related to Christianity, to the problem “of becoming a Christian”, with a direct or indirect polemic against the monstrous illusion that we call Christendom, or against the illusion that in such a land as ours we are Christians of a sort’ (Kierkegaard, 1998, pp. 5-6).

<sup>102</sup> ‘The man who says what is true can act as foolishly as the one who says what is untrue: we are talking about the way you say it not what you say. My humour is to consider the form as much as the substance, and the barrister as much as his case, as Alcibiades told us’ (Montaigne, 1992, p. 370, III: 8).

the more direct terms ‘deception’ and ‘dissimulation’ (KF 108) to describe the shape that Romantic works ought to take. For Kierkegaard as for Schlegel, irony is a licensed form of ‘deception’ because, as Schlegel explains, ‘it is meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included’ (KF 108). The deception involved in irony – the breaking of the narrative illusion in a fictional work or the humorous or disorienting introduction of incongruous perspectives in a discursive work – is thus a way of challenging the accepted terms of a discourse, since the opening up of a new perspective casts into doubt or relativises the existing frame. For both Kierkegaard and the Romantics, Socrates – ‘playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden’ (Schlegel, 1971, p. 155) – was the model for how irony could enrich the practice of philosophy, constantly shifting the terrain to take away the possibility of certainty or complacency.

In Kierkegaard’s works, the author – whether a pseudonym or Kierkegaard as a fictionalised writing subject in his ‘direct’ works – is present both in the use of the first person and in various narrative techniques of what Schlegel calls *permanent irony* or *parabasis*: intrusions of the author or ‘interruption[s] of a discourse by a shift in rhetorical register (de Man, 1996, p. 169, 178)’ that break up a unified reading of the texts and alienate text from reader. The philosophical import of such ironic gestures is that they demonstrate the freedom of self-reflection to always go beyond itself while at the same time exposing the necessarily limited nature of any given frame of reference. The ironist ‘remains faithful to the ethical’ in that the ultimate goal of irony is to make the reader aware of her own freedom. For Kierkegaard, this is the ‘highest relationship one human could have to another’ (1985, pp. 10-11). When Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors lack the appearance of earnestness (the author ‘first and foremost does not seem to be an earnest man’ (1967, p. 274: 649: 24)) and present perspectives that are ultimately limited or erroneous, the reader is put at a distance from the text, in much the same way as an unreliable narrator complicates the reading of a novel. The discerning reader cannot remain passive but is forced into an active role of determining the meaning of the text in a dialectical relationship with the narrator, who cannot be relied upon as an authority. Kierkegaard declares that ‘one can never mimic an ironist, for he is a Proteus who incessantly alters the deception’ (1967, p. 274: 649: 24). This Protean quality is

characteristic of the way in which he approaches his authorship: changing masks, alternating perspectives and rhetorical modes in order to force the reader into activity. Kierkegaard's preoccupation with form suggests the ethical impossibility of bringing another person along in any direct sense and the simultaneous impossibility of giving up on the task of communicating. According to F. Schlegel, irony, in constantly opening the possibility of other perspectives, 'contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism [...] between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication' (KF 108).

Kierkegaard's use of multiple perspectives, a feature of all essayistic texts, functions as *parabasis* in disrupting the possibility of a unified reading. One of the most distinctive features of Kierkegaard's style is the division of his texts into numerous sections that approach a problem from either a different philosophical or a different rhetorical angle and break with what came before, sometimes in the form of an explicit retraction.<sup>103</sup> *Either/Or* (1843), perhaps the work in Kierkegaard's oeuvre that most resembles a book of classical essays, exploits this disjunctive mode of presentation to great effect. The work offers no fewer than nine autonomous texts—in the 'Either' half of the work alone. From the aesthetically-minded author known only as 'A' or 'The Young Man', there are thematic essays on boredom ('The Rotation of Crops') and the role of chance in artistic production ('First Love'), a series of fragments after the fashion of the *Friibromantik* ('Diapsalmata'), and an essay of musical criticism on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* ('The Musical Erotic'). Also included in this half of the work is a series of letters and journal entries from a second character called Johannes and his lover Cordelia ('The Seducer's Diary'). Like the Young Man, Johannes embodies the aesthetic life, but in the more calculated form of a seducer, for whom actuality – and flesh-and-blood women – are valued only as material for aesthetic contemplation. The 'Or' half of the work presents a defence of marriage and the ethical life from a Judge Wilhelm, in response to the young man of the first half of the work. The last subdivision of 'Or' is a sermon, written by an unnamed pastor friend of the Judge, which introduces a

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<sup>103</sup> Kierkegaard's works include an excessive amount of paratextual material – prefaces, introductions, 'attunements', preambles, and 'preliminary exhortations' – that identify the author's point of view ('I am a poet' 'I am a midwife' 'I am not philosopher' 'I am not a Christian') and sometimes threaten to swallow up the whole of a work. In 1844 Kierkegaard published an entire book of prefaces entitled *Prefaces: Light Reading for People in Various Estates According to Time and Opportunity*. Elaborate subtitles – 'a mimical-pathetical-dialectical compilation', a 'Christian psychological exposition for edification and awakening' – also reflect an interest in experimenting with different generic approaches.

religious perspective into the work that departs from both the aesthetic and the ethical. Finally, the whole work is framed by an introduction from the editor Victor Eremita, who, having found the assembled papers in the drawer of an antique desk, offers his own interpretation of the good life, in tune with the Judge. Kierkegaard includes an additional frame narrative in the work, as 'A' accidentally discovers and then decides to publish the diary of his friend Johannes (the 'seducer'). The frame-within-frame structure is typical of the kind of highly reflexive novels that the *Frühromantiker* celebrated,<sup>104</sup> whose narratives are interrupted with digressions at every opportunity. The excessive multiplication of frames gives the reader a heightened awareness of points-of view without providing any direction for how to navigate or resolve the perspectives, thus reproducing the tension of lived experience and providing a fictional space within which to 'assay' different points of view. Kierkegaard's meta-pseudonym Climacus comments on the form of *Either/Or*: 'That there is no conclusion and no final decision is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge' (1992, p. 252). As with all instances of irony, and particularly the species of pervasive irony or *parabasis* in Kierkegaard's texts, the 'inward' work of appropriation is left to the reader. Climacus' separation of truth from knowledge in this remark reflects the overall therapeutic shape of Kierkegaard's project, which forms a part of the wider shift away from truth as certain knowledge in the tradition of essayistic writings.

Eremita's frame narrative is worthy of further attention, as it provides additional insight into Kierkegaard's authorial strategy. The frame narrative is a classic technique of epistolary, another genre in the essayistic mode; like his counterpart in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Eremita claims to have organised the papers he discovered in what he takes to be chronological order, but he otherwise leaves them unedited. Kierkegaard's use of the frame device is twofold. Firstly, he seeks to prevent the reception of *Either/Or* as a systematic, or even recognisable, work of philosophy. The reader is encouraged to see the text as the product of a chance series of events: 'A' saving the original papers, Eremita choosing to buy this desk and not another, finding a secret drawer, etc.. There is no attempt to fashion the

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<sup>104</sup> These are also the effects favoured by postmodern authors such as John Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges, and Thomas Pynchon.

‘dyed rags’<sup>105</sup> of textual integrity. In this, the work resembles Romantic fragments, which were also designed with a deliberately anti-systematic structure, and Montaigne’s *Essais*, which are peppered with declarations of their own *décousu* structure. Of course, as in these works, Eremita’s deflection from the artifice of the work is part of a highly sophisticated rhetorical strategy to incorporate contingency into the structure of the work.

Reflecting on the structure of essayistic texts, a rubric under which he includes Kierkegaard’s imaginative discourses, Adorno remarks that an essay is always constructed such that it could break off at any point.

It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over. The unanimity of the logical order deceives us about the antagonistic nature of that on which it was jauntily imposed. Discontinuity is essential to the essay, its concern is always a conflict brought to a standstill’ (1984, p. 164).

In this view, Kierkegaard’s ironic interruption of his texts through different existential perspectives or rhetorical/generic registers functions as an alternative to a logical or deductive ordering of life, in which order is imposed externally on processes which are essentially ‘antagonistic’ ‘fissured’ or conflictual.<sup>106</sup> Lukács suggests an additional way of understanding the significance of these gestures of interruption. After an essayistic text poses its essential question,

something comes from outside – from a reality which has no connection with the question nor with that which, as the possibility of an answer, brings forth a new question to meet it – and interrupts everything. This interruption is not an end, because it does not come from within, and yet it is the most profound ending because a conclusion from within would have been impossible. Such an interruption, however, can only be viewed humouristically. It has so little connection with that which it interrupts [...] But it is also a profound life-symbol – and, for that reason, still more profoundly humorous – that the essential is always interrupted by such things in such a way (1971, p. 14).

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<sup>105</sup> F. Schlegel, Critical Fragment 31: ‘many a work of art whose coherence is never questioned is, as the artist knows quite well himself, not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments, a mass, a plan. But so powerful is the instinct for unity in mankind that the author himself will often bring something to a kind of completion which simply can’t be made a whole or a unit; often quite imaginatively and yet completely unnaturally. The worst thing about it is that whatever is draped about the solid, really existent fragments in the attempt to mug up a semblance of unity consists largely of dyed rags.’

<sup>106</sup> Kierkegaard’s writing style is one of the key influences on Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics.

As in Montaigne's *Essais*, the disjunctive, apparently random structure of Kierkegaard's texts is a deliberate strategy meant to highlight the role of contingency in temporal existence. Lukács suggests that the structure of lived experience, which the essay attempts to preserve in its form, is one in which an organic conclusion or a reconciliation of antagonisms is impossible. Thus the way in which the various discussions or perspectives in Kierkegaard's texts come to an end without resolution is in fact 'the most profound ending' because this disjunction offers readers the occasion to reflect on the open-ended structure of experience in its difference from the structure of a conceptual system. Kierkegaard's ironic interruptions function more specifically as a polemical contrast to the Hegelian 'system', particularly the movement of the *Aufhebung*, which Kierkegaard viewed as logically and existentially incoherent. In Hegelian logic, particular actuality is conceived of as abstract and the whole is considered concrete, which renders difference an illusion. 'What is true is rather found in motion, in a process, however, in which there is rest; difference, while it lasts, is but a temporary condition, through which comes unity, full and concrete' (Hegel, 'Lectures on the History of Philosophy', 1955, I, pp. 23-25). The system reaches its conclusions only by 'smoothing over' the difference between thought and being and 'abandoning diversity'.<sup>107</sup>

There is much in Kierkegaard's work to suggest that he shared Lukács' view of the comedy of disjunctive structures deriving from the observation of these same structures in experience. Lukács opposes essays to works of tragedy, which function according to a logic of reconciliation that provides the meaning of the whole at the end. By contrast, the structure of the essay is occasional, with external accidents rather than an *a priori* fate or design determining its progression; the 'occasion' (*anledning*—that which leads to) is a major theme in *Either/Or* and appears in a number of Kierkegaard's works. The character Johannes laments in his diary the lack of opportunity to carry out his plans to seduce the young Cordelia because she rarely leaves the house of her aunt. In one journal entry, he pleads with chance, declaring:

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<sup>107</sup> While Hegel and Kierkegaard are both thinkers of motion, Kierkegaard, influenced by the readings of the Danish Hegelians, viewed Hegel's dialectic as effectively arrested by an overarching system. Hegel, for Kierkegaard, denied any distinction between thought and being and so failed to take seriously the structure of becoming.

You whom I love with all my soul, in whose image I form myself [...] I challenge you to a fight—why do you not make your appearance? Cursed chance, I am waiting for you! Just as a temple dancer dances to the honour of the god [*Guden*], so I have consecrated myself to your service; light, thinly clad, limber unarmed, I renounce everything. I own nothing; I desire nothing; I love nothing; I have nothing to lose [...] Surprise me—I am ready. (1987, p. 327).

Johannes declares himself ‘ready’ to be surprised by fate, having lightened himself through the renunciation of all desires and possessions. In this case, the chance occasion for which he waits is a poetic one, since Johannes relies on actuality as ‘material’ for his poetic reflections. Indeed, *Either/Or* links poetic composition in general to the ‘occasion,’ defined as ‘the nothing that lets everything come forth’ (1987, p. 236), ‘the extra element for an inner decision to become an outer decision’ (1987, p. 234). Within this framework, that which allows possibility to be actualised is entirely out of the subject’s hands, since chance, by definition, simply happens and cannot be willed. ‘This is a secret implicit in actuality—an offense to the Jews and a foolishness to the Greeks. The occasion is always the accidental, and the prodigious paradox is that the accidental is absolutely just as necessary as the necessary’ (1987, p. 234). The notion of the accidental as necessary is a formulation of the contingency of experience, as expressed by Lukács and Adorno, the comic element of existence that is reduplicated in the essay’s discontinuous structure.<sup>108</sup> Johannes describes it as God’s joke on mankind to have ‘something so insignificant and inferior, something people are almost ashamed to talk about in polite society, be absolutely part of it all’ (1987, p. 328). Thus Kierkegaard seems to suggest that Johannes’ preparation and readiness to be surprised, though in some sense paradoxical and comic, can also be read as a healthy openness toward the contingency of existence.

Johannes’ discussion of the occasion may also contain a clue, albeit in parodic or negative form,<sup>109</sup> about the role of grace in Christian faith and about the

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<sup>108</sup> The language of Johannes’ description of the occasion also makes it clear that Kierkegaard is targeting Hegel’s handling of possibility in the *Logic*, which Kierkegaard rejects in favour of an Aristotelian view.

<sup>109</sup> There is ample evidence within the text to suggest that Johannes’ openness to chance is intended to be parodic of the receptivity to divine grace in Christianity. Johannes’ plea is specifically a parody of Job’s conversation with God, a moment that receives parodic treatment in another of Kierkegaard’s 1843 writings: *Repetition*. Parody in Kierkegaard’s work tends to be used to express a partial truth from within the limited perspective of a particular life view. We are given clues in *E/O* that Johannes’ aesthetically orientated remarks are meant to open up a comparison with the parallel Christian notion of grace. Johannes, tellingly, links the occasion to the teacher/learner relationship (p. 258) in addition to associating it with composition. This

nature of Kierkegaardian communication. Across his signed and pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard insists that he cannot directly bring another to the truth or to faith, that this exceeds the bounds of what one person can do for another. But he nevertheless frequently refers to his work as an ‘occasion’. If one were to apply Johannes’ notion of the occasion to this disclaimer in other texts, it would seem that Kierkegaard in fact gives his texts quasi-divine status as the arbitrary yet necessary element that catalyses the subject as possibility into decisive action. However, this reading relies on Johannes getting the concept of the occasion right, and it is more plausible that, like Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms, Johannes the Seducer grasps *some*, but not all of the truth of his subject. This partial failure is suggested by the fact that the aesthete *suffers* from his dependence on chance, forced to receive from the outside what is essential to his being.<sup>110</sup> In the Christian framework by contrast, the ‘extra element’ of grace required for self-realisation is not wholly external to oneself, since it issues from the absolute in which the self is grounded, enabling one to become what one truly is (1983, p. 16). This is why, in *Fragments*, Kierkegaard replaces the aesthetic notion of ‘occasion’ with the Christian category of the ‘moment’—in which the eternal enters time. What Kierkegaard’s notion of communication seems to share with Johannes’ understanding of the occasion is a sense that a subject’s receptivity or openness to that which is beyond her ability to control or conceptualise functions as a necessary preliminary step to existential ‘actualisation’. Though in the Christian framework only divine grace can help the subject to realise herself through faith, Kierkegaard’s negative gestures help the reader to become ‘light, thinly clad, limber’ enough to receive the grace required to make the leap. The underlying dialectic seems to involve giving up in order to be given to, a ‘double movement’ that is also present in the Abraham story in *Fear and Trembling*.

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constellation of concepts will be familiar to readers of *Fragments* and the *Postscript*, as well as Kierkegaard’s journal entries on the subject of communication. In *Fragments*, Kierkegaard makes a crucial distinction between the Socratic and the Christian. In a purely immanent Socratic picture, one human being can serve as an occasion (and no more) for another to come to the truth, since all subjects possess the capacity to ‘unforget’ the truth. In the Christian picture, the subject exists fundamentally in *untruth*, so an ‘extra element’ is required before one is in a position to recognise the truth or make the ‘leap’ of faith. The Christian category for the external power that makes the faith possible is grace. Johannes makes a direct analogy between the occasion and grace in his declaration that anyone who denies the importance of the occasion in poetic creation is a ‘Pelagian autocrat’—a reference to the heretic Pelagius who emphasised free will to the extent of denying the role of grace in Christian salvation.

<sup>110</sup> This is why Kierkegaard identifies boredom as the ultimate existential risk or temptation of the aesthetic life.

Returning to Victor Eremita's frame narrative of *Either/Or*, one sees yet another example of the negative strategy of flawed perspectives, as Eremita's preface provides an additional – reflective – point of view on the essays that make up the work. Before the reader is able to begin, Eremita performs an initial 'reading' of the bundle of texts and, specifically, of the relationship between the aesthetically-orientated 'Either' reflections with the ethical advice of Judge Wilhelm that makes up the 'Or' part of the work. He offers what those familiar with Kierkegaard's other works, or those alive to the irony in the text, will recognise as a 'bad' reading, wholeheartedly endorsing the Judge's ethical perspective and recommending that subsequent readers follow his advice and get married. The irony in the text entails leaving open a possibility for the naive reader to think that the work of interpretation has already been carried out by the editor.<sup>111</sup> For the reflective reader, this device opens up a gap of understanding that can be overcome only by the reader's active involvement in the construction of textual meaning. Eremita's reading, dialectically qualified by the numerous other points of view presented in the work, functions as a *via negativa* that leads readers to a higher perspective not specified within the bounds of the text itself. This strategy is in fact characteristic of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, all of which involve degrees of 'getting it wrong' as part of what Kierkegaard deems a 'continual striving' toward the truth.<sup>112</sup>

### **A *via negativa* to faith**

Kierkegaard's negative gestures and intentional misreadings are part of a wider textual strategy in the pseudonymous works, described in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as the art of 'taking away.' Addressing himself to the upright bourgeois society of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Denmark, Kierkegaard points to the bounties of knowledge – scientific, medical, philosophical, historical, technological – achieved in his

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<sup>111</sup> 'It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke' (Schlegel, CF 108).

<sup>112</sup> *Fear and Trembling* (1843) follows a similar negative strategy, presenting the limited perspective of de Silentio who admits to being unable to understand Abraham. Though the text fails in its stated aim of making faith comprehensible to thought, it does so in a way that brings the reader closer to faith, even if getting closer takes the form of acknowledging that one does not understand or does not feel capable of the leap. Likewise in *Repetition* (1843), Constantine Constantius tries and fails to achieve 'repetition' in attempting to recreate *à la lettre* a trip to Berlin he took years earlier. Though neither of the two main characters in the narrative fully grasps what is at stake in repetition, which is ultimately a Christian and not an aesthetic category, their attempts put the movement into relief by showing what it is not: irony, recollection, mediation, hope, Heraclitian flux, Eleatic stasis.

lifetime but confronts the nagging sense that it hasn't been appropriated, that knowledge has piled up in a rapid and fragmented fashion.

When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat? Similarly, when a man is very knowledgeable but his knowledge is meaningless or virtually meaningless to him, does sensible communication consist in giving him more to know [...]? [...] When a communicator takes a portion of the copious knowledge that the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates it to him in a form that makes it strange to him, the communicator is, as it were, taking away his knowledge, at least until the knower manages to assimilate the knowledge by overcoming the resistance of the form [...] taking away is precisely communication . . . (1992, p. 275).

This remarkable passage elaborates a therapeutic textual strategy of writing as a kind of subtraction, set within the context of excessive knowledge or knowledge drained of significance. The critical tradition of the essay to which I argue Kierkegaard belongs is uniquely positioned to reflect this shift in focus from the content of knowledge to one's relationship to knowledge – with the characteristic first-person perspective and the variety of ironic strategies employed to call any discursive frame into question. Looking back to Socrates<sup>113</sup> and anticipating 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist and surrealist strategies of *Verfremdung*, Climacus describes his procedure as 'making strange' the knowledge to which one has become indifferent, presenting knowledge in a form that is unfamiliar and so forcing the subject to repeat or appropriate that knowledge, (as if) for the first time. The aim of digestion, appropriation, repetition then takes the place of the aim of discovery, penetration, and acquisition. Reckoning with one's actual position or condition, rather than 'going further' serves as a precondition for any genuine conversion or opening toward the future.

The description of communication as 'taking away' occurs within a work that takes as its central concern the question of how a finite subject can enter into a relationship with infinite Being, or how the finite can gain eternal significance. Cautioning against a world-denying transcendence, Kierkegaard faces the historical and temporal as a necessary part of the Christian dialectic, evidenced by the event of God entering time. Kierkegaard makes it his task to address his own historical

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<sup>113</sup> That Kierkegaard took the ironic Socrates as a model of communication is evident across the whole of his authorship, with *Fragments* proclaiming that midwifery 'remains highest relationship between human beings' (1985, pp. 10-11).

moment—in comic, sometimes bitter polemics—as a way of helping readers to begin where they are, to ‘digest’ or to acknowledge their position. Thus Climacus declares in the opening of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that in contrast to the systematisers: ‘I remain where I am’ (1992, p. 16). This kind of contingent starting point, rather than a speculative beginning from first principles, is typical of the essayistic, which seeks to relate itself to existence and so can only ever begin *in medias res*. In a complacently Christian society, the task facing Kierkegaard was to help his readers to remember what it was to be a Christian, as ‘the only unforgiveable high treason against Christianity is the single individual’s taking his relation to it for granted’ (*Ibid*). In such an environment, delivering the knowledge of Christianity in the unfamiliar form of an imaginative discourse on the relationship between Socrates and Christ (*Fragments*), a dialectic between the tragic hero and the knight of faith (*Fear and Trembling*) or a psychological study (*The Sickness unto Death*, *The Concept of Anxiety*) was a way to make readers acknowledge their own starting point and thus to open up the question of their relationship to the infinite, which familiarity and convention had closed off.

*Fear and Trembling* is exemplary of this strategy of reorienting the vision of readers so that they might see themselves anew as possibility, stripped of the usual pretensions and assurances. The work’s author, Johannes de Silentio, turns to the subject of Abraham as the father of faith, trying and failing to make the movement of faith comprehensible to thought. His initial Socratic admission that he is incapable of understanding Abraham offers readers an opportunity to likewise suspend – or at least re-evaluate – what they believe they know about one of the central figures in Judeo-Christian history. Rather than beginning from the position of the pastor’s sermon, in which doubt is condemned as failing to accept what ‘only the most ignorant would dare to deny’ (1992, p. 12), De Silentio’s rhetorical position actively encourages doubt, inviting readers to join the author in admitting to themselves their inability to understand the matter of faith. To reinforce this aim of suspension or questioning, de Silentio offers a number of conflicting perspectives in the text. The ‘Attunement’ section that opens the book presents imaginative versions of the biblical Abraham and Isaac story, each emphasising a different aspect of the narrative and a different way of understanding Abraham’s actions. In one moving version, Isaac sees the knife tremble in Abraham’s hand and is unable to ever have faith again, understanding that God has commanded his murder. In

another, Abraham goes through the motions of faith, offering up Isaac, but in his soul he ‘becomes old’ and loses his taste for life as a result of the strain of God’s trial. This strategy of different perspectives carries through the whole of the work, which unfolds as a series of essays to get closer to the reality of faith, each attempt ultimately failing.

In this way, as Climacus describes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the reader is brought ‘as close as possible’ to the question of how to live.

Instead of presenting the good in the form of actuality, as is ordinarily done, that this person and that person have actually lived and have actually done this, and thus transforming the reader into an observer, an admirer, an appraiser, it should be presented in the form of *possibility*. Then whether or not the reader wants to exist in it is placed as close as possible to him (1992, pp. 358-359, my emphasis).

We have seen a number of strategies by which Kierkegaard develops the inherent openness of essayistic writing, particularly with respect to the subject viewed as possibility rather than as a fixed identity or as part of a conceptual system. Possibility is for Kierkegaard the logical category of temporal existence or becoming, and part of his task as a writer is to actively engage his audience’s sense of the anxiety or uncanniness of becoming, since one is never fully present, fully at home; as long as one stands *in medias res*, rather than at the end, the significance of a life is always being worked out. Doubt – in *Fear and Trembling* – is the recognition of this uncanny feature of the human, a premonition that human existence is not merely finite but contains the possibility of the infinite or unconditioned.

### **The sublime in the everyday**

Finally, Kierkegaard’s essayism offers the possibility of the existential – though not conceptual – reconciliation of finite and the infinite. The pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* considers the leap into faith impossibly difficult, as it involves staking one’s life on that which is beyond conceptualisation, or, as Climacus later describes it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, on an ‘objective absurdity’. Yet, from the outside, the extraordinary knight of faith looks entirely pedestrian—so much so that De Silentio asks in amazement, ‘can that really be him? He looks just like a tax collector!’ The image of the faithful one chatting with shopkeepers and looking forward with relish to the humble domestic scene of dinner at home with his wife is certainly at odds with the arduous and angst-ridden

psychological effort that Kierkegaard, in his polemical attempt to ‘raise the price’ of faith, attributes to the process of becoming a subject. But the contradiction in Kierkegaard’s account of faith is a reminder that the leap of faith he envisions is not a leap into another world or a choice by which the subject, like the systematic philosopher, denies the conditions of temporal existence. On the contrary, the portrait of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* suggests that faith, unlike doubt or ‘infinite resignation’, is a movement of coming to terms with one’s own finitude in a way that allows one to live fully in the everyday, to evidence ‘the sublime in the pedestrian’ (1994, p. 52). Thus Abraham comes to resemble something like the ideal philosopher of the ancient sceptics, who, having questioned everything, is able to achieve tranquillity in common life. But where the ancient sceptic actively works to maintain his withholding of assent, Abraham maintains his passionate interest in or desire for the finite—embodied in the person of Isaac.<sup>114</sup> Like the sceptics though, whom De Silentio praises for maintaining doubt as a lifelong task, Abraham’s apparently effortless pedestrianism requires the everyday work of rejecting the inveiglements of cognition, an on-going dance of the temporal and eternal.

Crucially, the leap exemplified by Abraham does not come as a result of effort alone, though it indeed takes effort to become ‘light’ enough for the leap—that is, to renounce one’s own understanding. Kierkegaard helps in this task through his negative writing strategies of ‘taking away’. There are no guarantees in this approach that the reader will be led to faith, rather than to sceptical withholding of judgement or even to despair. The negative project can, at best, lead to a positive orientation of receptivity or radical openness, whereby I as a subject am able to take the leap and to accept otherness into myself. In purely immanent sense, this means accepting that I am always other than myself in time or becoming. In a spiritual sense it concerns relating myself to something radically other, something unthinkable and yet something that grounds my being. The tension of myself as the object of speculation and myself as I am, as a possible opening to the infinite, is one that Kierkegaard seeks to keep alive even for the believer, such that faith is not a transition into rest, which would for Kierkegaard be the equivalent of spiritual suicide. He introduces the category of repetition (*gentagelsen*), desiring what one

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<sup>114</sup> As Kierkegaard notes in *Fragments*, ‘belief and doubt are opposite passions’ (1994, Interlude). The sceptic achieves tranquility through the decisive act – constantly renewed – to withhold judgement about what presents itself to his senses. The Christian chooses, with ‘infinite interest’ to believe that for which there is not only insufficient evidence but which evidence positively argues against, that which is objectively impossible.

already has, in order to maintain the continued striving of existence against the temptation to become what Sartre would later call the *en-soi*, and what Kierkegaard refers to as death or fantasy existence. ‘Even if a person has achieved the highest, the repetition by which he must indeed fill out his existence, if he is not to go backward (or become a fantastical being), will again be a continued striving, because here in turn the conclusiveness is moved ahead and postponed’ (1992, p. 121). The only temporal dialectic available in which the subject does not either rush ahead to see herself as *already* actualised and reified (1992, p. 146) or does not try sneak backwards out of existence, as the Greeks recollected their way to union with the Ideal, is repetition—desiring to become what one is (2009, p. 3), which involves an opening to infinite possibility within time, within the humble scenes of daily life.

This dialectic is reinforced and encouraged in Kierkegaard’s writings. The movement of ‘going further’ that de Silentio criticises in *Fear and Trembling* is replaced with the spatial metaphor of beginning where one is, which, like becoming oneself, another key metaphor, is not a given but is something to be achieved. The task of working out where one’s *interest* lies can be understood as part of the larger aim in essayistic writing to ‘leave everything as it is’. In both there is an emphasis on the transformative power of seeing or acknowledging things as they are, with the understanding that this necessitates continual striving. The shape of these movements, and of essayistic writing more generally, is circular: what one is or knows is revisited or returned to in a gesture of repetition that entails both newness and what was already there as possibility. The next chapter will explore Stanley Cavell’s development of the theme of repetition into a notion of the everyday as a task or an achievement – a prize reclaimed from scepticism – reinforced through the philosophical form of the essay.

## Chapter 6: Scepticism and acknowledgement in Cavell's essays

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Everything glowed with a gleam;  
Yet we were looking away!

-Thomas Hardy, 'The Self Unseeing'

Readers familiar with Stanley Cavell will have recognised his influence in my approach to the problem of scepticism and in a number of themes – ordinary language, the everyday, seeing anew, coming to terms – that appear in earlier chapters. It is to Cavell's essays that I wish to turn in this final chapter, for his writings develop these themes – and the practice of philosophical writing – in a way that moves the guiding question of philosophy from one of knowledge to one of acknowledgement. In taking up the issue of scepticism as raised by 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic and 20<sup>th</sup>-century ordinary language philosophers, he moves the locus of discussion from the external world or the subject to the problem of human communication as such, maintaining that the sceptical impulse, at root, conceals the anxiety of beings who exist in language, an anxiety about relating to others under or within the conditions of language. This anxiety might be summed up, in Schlegel's words, as the 'Unmöglichkeit *und* Notwendigkeit *einer vollständigen Mitteilung* [*impossibility* and the *necessity* of complete communication]' (KF 108). The formal qualities of Cavell's work reflect this reorientation of the sceptical problem, with an emphasis on the negotiation between acknowledgement and transformation in the practice of philosophy – expressed by metaphors of seeing and reading – that opposes the gesture of denial or fantasy that he identifies in the sceptical impulse.

Cavell's significance to this study is his ability to explain the resilience and to some extent the inevitability of sceptical doubt, offering one answer for why, even in ancient Pyrrhonism, being cured of the impulse to engage in (a certain kind of) philosophy and opting instead to live naturally or conventionally never *takes*. The sceptical 'cure' envisioned by Sextus was not a method that could be applied once and for all, since the lure for a more perfect form of knowledge in some sense appeared as 'natural' to human beings as their biological and social inclinations. The enduring existence of sceptical debates in contemporary philosophy suggests that scepticism is at the very least a perennial, if not a natural impulse, and one that

demands a reckoning. Cavell, like Kierkegaard, views doubting not as something to be avoided, which would be another form of the denial of the human that he struggles against, but as an achievement—the beginning of an acknowledgement that one is not fully oneself or not fully at home in the world. But doubting, as Kierkegaard recognised, is also a risk: the risk of denying the conditions in which life is possible, an image suggested in Wittgenstein’s familiar aphorism 107: ‘*Wir sind aufs Glatteis geraten, wo die Reibung fehlt, also die Bedingungen in gewissem Sinne ideal sind, aber wir eben deshalb auch nicht gehen können* [We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk]’ (2009, p. 51-51e). As Cavell elegantly argues, doubting can become a demand for the perfect conditions – to begin to act, to interact with others, to make oneself known – but these conditions in no way resemble those we actually inhabit, and so they become an excuse to not take responsibility for – not to take our place in – the world around us. For Cavell, the uncanniness that doubt discovers has to be tempered by a simultaneous recognition of common ground and by the work of coming to feel at home, which exists as a task to be carried out through repetition, repeated assays within the ordinary. Wittgenstein’s aphorism continues: *Wir wollen gehen; dann brauchen wir die Reibung. Zurück auf den rauhen Boden!* [We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!]<sup>15</sup>. For the philosopher, rejecting the temptation to identify ideal conditions and instead thinking from within the roughness of the everyday is an endeavour largely carried out through writing; finding forms of writing that are able to maintain the ‘friction’ or tension of experience becomes paramount.

### **The prize of the ordinary**

In *The Claim of Reason* (1979)<sup>115</sup>, Cavell offers a reading of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) as a therapeutic response to scepticism’s inevitability, opposing the more standard reading that sees Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophical criteria and appeal to ordinary language as attempts to refute the sceptical problem outright. Resonant with the approach of the present study, which identifies direct refutations of the sceptical problem as an extension of scepticism, Cavell sees Wittgensteinian therapy as a way of doing justice to the sceptical problem while refusing to sacrifice the authority of ordinary experience.

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<sup>115</sup> References to this work will be taken from the second edition, published in 1999.

Wittgenstein, on Cavell's reading, affirms the thesis that it is impossible to rationally prove the existence of the world and others 'and so shifts its weight' toward the insight that 'our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain' (1979, p. 45). The motivation for this shift, and the discontinuous, anti-foundationalist form of *Philosophical Investigations* as a collection of fragments, reveals a by now familiar set of performative strategies, established by the essayists in the French, German, and English traditions. With Wittgenstein as an ally, Cavell sets out to redefine the terrain of the sceptical problem and what might count as an appropriate philosophical response. Taking Cartesian scepticism and 20<sup>th</sup>-century positivist and pragmatist attempts to solve or get around the sceptical problem as his starting point, he discusses the sceptical impulse along two related lines: a demand for certain knowledge that cannot be satisfied from within the conditions of human becoming, and a radical disappointment with the world and others for failing to correspond to some more ideal set of conditions. Scepticism as such is not just a misunderstanding of the conditions of thought and discourse but a *denial* of those conditions, one that it is not possible to remedy with philosophical argument. Since a lack of knowledge or certainty is not what gives rise to the sceptical question in the first place, shoring up knowledge philosophically cannot help the sceptic to come to terms with his doubt; on the contrary, such attempts are just another version of the sceptic's denial. 'The answer to scepticism must take the form not of philosophical construction but of the reconstruction or resettlement of the everyday' (1988, p. 176).

The everyday or ordinary is a key term in Cavell's writing, and the following discussion will attempt to circumscribe his sense of the everyday by differentiating it from other ideas with which it might be confused, namely the conservative appeals to 'convention' in Pyrrhonism (and to some extent echoed in Hume) and a pragmatic notion of common sense or common ways of speaking. Cavell wishes to distinguish his 'resettlement of the everyday' from a simple defence of prevailing wisdom or practice as well as from a certain strand of pragmatism that sets out to dismiss the sceptical problem by defending ordinary beliefs. Cavell is sympathetic to the latter line of argument and undertakes a similar kind of defence of the ordinary in his own work, bolstered by the understanding of language games that falls out of ordinary language philosophy. Yet he separates himself from the pragmatist

tradition, and even from his teacher J.L. Austin, in insisting on treating the sceptical problem as a serious and unavoidable aspect of modern consciousness. While pragmatic defences of everyday kinds of criteria serve as an important counterweight to demands for certain knowledge, they cannot effectively disarm sceptical suspicion. In taking up the issue of whether scepticism can be understood as natural in some sense or whether it is, as pragmatists claim, merely a pseudo-problem created by philosophy itself and best ignored, Cavell notes that the key move in philosophical scepticism is from discreet instances of doubting in particular situations, which are commonplace, to a global doubt about any empirical, practical, or rational criteria that might be invoked in claiming to know a thing is so. As Descartes describes it, ‘the removal from below of the foundation necessarily involves the downfall of the whole edifice’ (*Meditations*, I: 2). It is precisely this step from the ordinary experience of doubting (someone’s word or the evidence of one’s senses) within particular situations to all-consuming doubt or suspicion that makes scepticism so threatening, for it suggests that there could be no better or worse criteria for acting in the world, that all criteria of equal, which is to say indeterminate value. This is the conclusion that led the Pyrrhonians to give up on any philosophical attempt to weigh certain grounds against others and instead to withhold judgement and live according to convention.

Cavell’s agreement with the pragmatists has to do with limiting the context in which criteria for knowledge claims are applied, and the grounds on which credulity is granted. Cavell uses J.L. Austin’s example of the goldfinch in the garden<sup>116</sup> as a way of getting at how claims are evaluated in everyday life without ushering in the spectre of universal doubt. In the imagined scene, I mention to my neighbour that I have seen a goldfinch outside my window, and a conversation follows about how I know that what I saw was in fact a goldfinch—e.g. by discussing the criteria such as plumage, song, shape, etc. by which I made that determination. As the conversation continues, I may become more convinced that what I saw was a goldfinch or I may begin to doubt myself, if my neighbour raises sufficiently worrying objections: ‘the markings you describe correspond to a number of different birds’, ‘as an ornithologist, I can tell you that goldfinches have never been spotted in this region’, ‘yes, but you admit you weren’t wearing your glasses’, etc. Unlike the classic Pyrrhonian example in which all criteria are deemed ultimately

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<sup>116</sup> J.L. Austin, 1979, pp. 88ff.

insufficient to make a judgement, Cavell makes the point that everyday kinds of doubt (such as finding myself unsure of what it was I have just seen) are confined to discreet instances, and that the asking for and giving of criteria in such instances is a process limited by the horizon of what is deemed relevant given the circumstances. If my neighbour thinks the bird I saw may have been a yellow-bellied fantail, we can exchange justifications for our respective beliefs, but the idea that I actually saw a *stuffed* goldfinch or a dream goldfish, while not logically impossible, is highly unlikely in the context of watching birds outside my window and so is not likely to present itself as a real concern. In response to the efforts of some positivistic attempts to fix knowledge criteria absolutely, Fred Dretske (1970, 1971) makes the pragmatist, coherentist claim that justified true belief involves ruling out all of the *relevant* possibilities but not all of the *logical* possibilities (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 169). This is, in effect, an acknowledgement that truths are provisional and that doubts within everyday life can be addressed in a satisfactory, if not absolute way. Dretske's account of justification is echoed by Donald Davidson (1983), who argues that existence in the world seems to demand a natural credulity, in which I believe that I and others are right most of the time. In order for communication to be possible at all, it is necessary to start from the charitable assumption that most beliefs are true, that most of what other people say is true, since communication relies on a background of shared assumptions and mutual assent. Indeed, those for whom doubt or paranoia pervades all of life are considered mentally ill; they shrink into idiosyncratic meanings. In the context of ordinary language philosophy, Cavell notes that Wittgenstein seems astonished, not by how often communication fails, but how often it succeeds, given the many ways in which language can cover over and go astray (1979, p. 31). The operation of language games suggests that the breakdown of agreement on common criteria, and so the breakdown of our 'attunement' with one another, has to be considered within the larger frame of a system that largely goes right, which is a way of situating the anxiety of the doubter within a wider context of credulity in others. Cavell is sympathetic to this pragmatic claiming of common ground and often criticises philosophical thought experiments for treating linguistic utterances as if they took place in a vacuum, rather than acknowledging the wide variety of frames in which the things we say to one another are habitually understood.

Yet he recognises that rejecting the need for absolute justification in the first

place is not likely to satisfy sceptics who think such a justification is necessary, and he reads this same recognition in Wittgenstein. ‘Epistemologists who think to refute scepticism by undertaking a defence of ordinary beliefs, perhaps suggesting that there is a sense in which they are certain, or *sufficiently probable* for human purposes, have already given into scepticism, they are living it’ (Cavell, 1988, p. 4, my emphasis). Although those who wield such arguments consider them an adequate safeguard against the defining movement of Pyrrhonian scepticism – wherein discreet instances of doubt lead to the universal doubt about any and all criteria – they fail in accepting the very terms that sceptics themselves use to justify doubt. Such arguments merely reiterate the sceptical predicament that knowledge is a matter of justification and probability and that the human subject is essentially related to the world by means of (justified or unjustified) beliefs. Cavell offers a more sophisticated conception of the relationship of subject to world which takes into account the Romantic notion of the everyday as at the same time ordinary and uncanny (1988, p. 9)—captured by Novalis’ image at the end of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* of moving ‘*immer nach Hause*’, always homeward [but never home]. He asserts that the task of ordinary language philosophy, and by extension his own work, is not ‘to reinstate vulgar beliefs, or common sense, to a pre-scientific position of eminence, but to reclaim the human self from its denial and neglect by modern philosophy’ (1979, p. 154). Elsewhere, he formulates this task as wrestling with common sense or the natural attitude for the ‘prize of the ordinary’ (1988, p. 4).

To the extent that essayists like Montaigne and Hume can be understood as defending common beliefs or common sense, Cavell’s criticism may fall on their work as well as on 20<sup>th</sup>-century positivists like Charles Stevenson (see *Claim of Reason*, Chapter 10) or pragmatists like Dretske, Davidson, and Rorty. I have attempted to demonstrate in previous chapters that both Montaigne and Hume provide ample grounds for questioning the common or the natural, even as they defend a conception of what Cavell calls ‘the human conditions of knowledge and action’—primarily temporality, language or sociability, and subjectivity. The defence of *nostrre conditions* in Montaigne and the appeals to ordinary language use in Hume are, as I read them, not simple appeals to convention but philosophical forbears of Cavell and his concerns about the denial of fundamental features of human experience. However, Cavell’s remarks reflect an anxiety about his own writing and

about therapeutic philosophy more generally, which is that it could be seen – in its changing of both the terms of the sceptical problem and the shape of philosophical writing – as failing to take the threat of scepticism seriously, as simply giving up the sceptic, and perhaps the entire undertaking of epistemology and metaphysics, for lost. The worry is that these accounts ‘have already given into scepticism, they are living it’, in the sense that they have failed to recognise the significance of the sceptic’s ‘discovery of the everyday, a discovery of exactly what it is that scepticism would deny’ (QO, 1988, p. 170).

Cavell insists on taking the sceptic along with him—not to talk the sceptic out of doubt but to reckon with the perennial temptation to doubt and, like Kierkegaard, to suggest that those who do not recognise the threat of doubt miss something fundamental about human experience. He refuses to throw up his hands at the sceptic’s departure from common ways of speaking, and, unlike Hume, he is not inclined to laugh at the sceptic (or his twin, the dogmatic philosopher). For him, scepticism cannot be simply done away with or successfully ignored by speaking in an ‘ordinary’ way or by speaking in a new way, as Rorty sometimes suggests, though Cavell clearly agrees that the problem is insufficiently understood by those committed to upholding or refuting sceptical positions, and that a new way of writing is necessary for the task of ‘resettling’ the everyday. Cavell distinguishes himself both in his tone and in what he deems worth arguing about in philosophy. As Cavell declares, ‘[The sceptic] is neither the knave Austin took him to be, nor the fool the pragmatists took him for’, but a tragic figure (1988, p. 173) wracked with ‘world consuming’ or ‘philosophy-consuming disappointment’ (1988, p. 5). Thus even though pragmatism’s solution that criteria are ‘good enough’ does the important work of pointing out the provisional nature of our claims and contextual nature of our criteria, a purely pragmatist solution still falls short. Cavell’s work is to uncover the conditions of scepticism and in the process to show that these conditions are shared by all language speakers, such that there is room to convince the sceptic or to get the sceptic to see anew, rather than merely relegating the sceptic to the position of a ‘knave’ or a ‘fool’.

Cavell points out that the step from particular to global doubt in scepticism not only ‘undercuts the validity of our criteria’ but also ‘our attunement with one another’ (1979, p. 46) and so raises the question that will become central for him—that of ‘other minds’. It is telling that sceptical philosophers have so often invoked

the moral concepts of betrayal and trust to justify the move toward total scepticism. Montaigne contends that when an opponent demonstrates that I have been wrong in my judgement, it ‘is not so much a case of my learning something new he told me nor how ignorant I was of some particular matter [...] as of my learning of my infirmity in general and of the *treacherous* ways (*la trahison*) of my intellect’ (2013, II: 13, p. 430, emphasis mine). Descartes declares that ‘it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived’ (*Meditations* 1: 3). Cavell will show that ‘other minds’ scepticism – or moral questions about how we relate to others – helps us to see the heart of the wider sceptical impulse and what a genuine response might look like. Because scepticism is in the last analysis a wilful denial of something, responding to the sceptic entails the diagnosis or uncovering of his denial—on the one hand of commonality, of common ground, and on the other of difference or the uncanny. The dangers on either side are of thinking ourselves too different from others or erasing our separateness from others through false identification.

### **Language and others**

Cavell inherits from Wittgenstein, Austin, and the tradition of ordinary language philosophy a concern for language as the principal condition under which subjects experience and relate to the world and others. His interest in language is not primarily referential – how language does or does not accurately describe the non-linguistic world – but concerns the intricate performances involved in everyday communication: the ways in which we form and are formed by what we say. One of the formulations of the sceptical problem in Cavell’s work is the desire to remove oneself from the condition of being ‘*of a world*’ and to occupy a fictional place ‘outside language games’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 224). As outlined in the previous section, the operation of language games implies community, a shared frame of intelligibility that allows for meaningful exchanges. The shared frame is conventional and gains its force precisely from habit and practical necessity, rather than from any guarantee of similitude to things themselves. Without the import of others’ words – the existing conventions of a language – the capacity to experience a world or oneself is simply absent, since experience, even of oneself, inevitably moves through these ‘external’ forms, as the tradition of essay writing brings to the fore. In language we find ourselves always already *of a world*, and, to this extent, ‘grammar is our fate’

(1988, p. 40). The difficulty in responding to the sceptic is precisely that there can be – and frequently are – moments of breakdown in our communication and in how we ‘world the world together’ (1979, p. 126). Indeed a part of the sceptic’s ‘discovery of the everyday’ is that ‘criteria, for all their necessity, are open to our repudiation, or dissatisfaction [...] that our capacity for disappointment by them is essential to the way we possess language’ (1988, p. 5). We have already seen that the sceptical moment calls frames into question by moving from discreet instances of doubt in a particular situation – ‘She is nodding, but does she really understand what I am saying?’ ‘Those are just words’. ‘That was not what I meant at all’ – to a global doubt about the possibility of any common criteria. ‘We experience, at least in our sceptical moments, the *very things that give us access to a common world as barriers* to that world, seeing language, even our form of life, as empty of whatever it is we think necessary to establishing a satisfying connection to that world’ (my emphasis, Bertacco and Gibson, 2011, p. 108). The sceptic, in other words, comes to regard the conventions of ordinary language not as a means of disclosing the world but as an obstacle standing in the way of a more perfect access to or perspective on the world, a surer guarantee of connection between what is said and what is. In philosophy, this leads to ways of writing that attempt objectivity and authority by ‘subtracting’ the subject from discourse or by otherwise denying or suppressing the conditions of their own composition (Adorno, p. 153). Cavell understood, as Austin had, that the efforts of Ayer and other 20<sup>th</sup>-century positivists to dissolve scepticism by producing ‘a species of statement that will be *incorrigible*’ (Austin, 1964, p. 103), was not, as it appeared to be, an attempt to more precisely know the world, but rather a rejection of the ‘the human conditions of knowledge’ (Cavell, 1976 p. 61) under which the world comes to be available at all. Cavell’s ‘grammar as fate’ suggests a condition of suffering that the sceptic both identifies and tries to escape. ‘With each word we utter we emit stipulations, agreements we do not know and do not want to know we have entered, agreements we were always in, that were in effect before our participation in them [...] [We are] victims of meaning’ (Cavell, 1998, p. 40). Through language we inherit a common world, the forms of which are decided in advance of our participation, and so in a sense not entirely ‘ours’. The gulf that opens up in the sceptical moment between mind and world, between self and other, ‘originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a “stranger” to, “alienated” from) those shared forms of life, to give up

responsibility for their maintenance' (1979, p. 109). The conventions that form the basis for common ground ('attunement') or a world in common are thus rejected as inadequate, and the sceptic withdraws from the world's claim on him, locating his 'home' elsewhere. As Bertacco and Gibson (2011) note in their insightful article on the implications of Cavell for post-colonialism, the refusal to recognise another as sharing a common world with oneself drains one's relationships to others of their significance and absolves one of the ethical responsibility to care for or maintain one's environment. The consequences of such a position range from apathy or boredom to more violent forms of 'world-consuming' disappointment.

Cavell's most powerful expressions of this dynamic fall out of his discussions not of philosophical but of literary (or filmic) texts, particularly examples of suspicion and sexual jealousy in characters like Othello or Caliban, or examples of the perverse in Romantic literature that culminate in acts of violence and revenge. What becomes clear in these examples is not that the characters in question lack *knowledge* of their partners' fidelity, or the love of their children or pets (Poe's black cat), but that they fail to *acknowledge* what they do in fact know, and console themselves with the fiction that this failure is one of insufficient knowledge or evidence. 'What philosophy presents as doubt brought on by the (necessarily unsuccessful) quest for certain knowledge, literature interprets as tragedy and even murder, precipitated by an individual's need to deny something' (Fischer, 1989, p. 81).

I am filled with this feeling – of our separateness, let us say – and I want you to have it too. So I give a voice to it. And then my powerlessness presents itself as ignorance—a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack (Reverse Faust, I take the bargain of supernatural ignorance) (Cavell, 1976, p. 263).

The masking of metaphysical finitude – the linguistic and temporal conditions under which the world can be known – as an *epistemological* lack, as though there were some other, better species of knowledge to be had, is for Cavell an all-too-human mode of repression. He notes that it is 'as though we have, or have lost some picture of what knowing another, or being known by another, would really come to – a harmony, a concord, a union, a transparency, a governance, a power – against which our actual successes at knowing, and being known are poor things' (440). The desire hidden at the root of the claim not to know others is in fact a desire for greater proximity or intimacy – to others as they are, to the world as it is – but also an

anxiety of the real, disappointingly trivial, conditions under which intimacy develops. Michael Fischer offers the figure of the slave owner as representative of the gestures of denial that Cavell describes. ‘When I avoid others, knowledge does not fail me; like the slave owner, *I try not to face what I know* (Fischer, 1989, p. 74), the knowledge that the slave shares in my humanity. Although masked as the absence of knowledge, the failure is one of responsibility. Though Cavell does not (to my knowledge) directly discuss it, Milan Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) is a work that addresses this theme of ignorance and accountability in a political frame. Set during the Prague Spring of 1968 and the subsequent Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the work considers the response of Czech communist leaders to outcry over the country’s economic and social decline and to the government’s complicity in the murder of countless Russians and Czechs.

The accused responded: ‘We didn't know! We were deceived! We were true believers! Deep in our hearts we are innocent!’

In the end the dispute narrowed down to a single question: Did they really not know or were they merely making believe?

...[Tomas] said to himself, whether they knew or didn’t know is not the main issue; the main issue is whether a man is innocent because he didn’t know. Is a fool on the throne relieved of all responsibility merely because he is a fool? (Kundera, 1984, p. 176-177).

Tomas, in the satirical newspaper editorial that eventual results in his exile, contrasts the ruling party to Oedipus, who, although he carried out his fated crimes of patricide and incest in ignorance, plucks out his eyes when he discovers what he has done. In Cavellian terms, this voluntary blinding is a gesture of acknowledgement or holding oneself to account for failing to know, rendering the framing of the crimes in terms of knowledge or ignorance insufficient. Tomas asks, ‘this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you say that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what you’ve done [...] Have you no eyes to see?’ (p. 177). Ignorance is recast as not merely a lack of evidence but as a wilful failure to see, a failure for which one can be held accountable.

Cavell’s response to the sceptic lies in the *moral* category of acknowledgement as a rejection of the standard epistemological terms in which the sceptical problem is presented. The shift in vocabulary is meant to reveal knowledge as a way of relating oneself to the world and to suggest that the dangers of turning

the world and others into mere objects of knowledge threatens other, more rewarding kinds of relationship. Acknowledgement includes a sense of responsibility for the ‘maintenance’ of our shared forms of life, including, or perhaps primarily, our ways of speaking to one another. The everyday breakdowns in communication that the sceptic takes as evidence that the whole edifice of mutual trust must be pulled down become, in Cavell’s frame, occasions to better say what we mean,<sup>117</sup> or to do the difficult work of trying to overcome our sense of another’s incomprehensibility. ‘From Cavell’s point of view, we are separate, as the sceptic insists. But we are nevertheless still responsible for everything that comes between us. If we can be blind to one another, we can also see (even sometimes see through) one another; if opaque to one another, also clear; if hidden, also open; and so on’ (Fischer, 1989, p. 68).<sup>118</sup> The sceptic’s ‘drive to reach the unconditioned’ (Cavell, 1987, p. 17) is revealed as an immature response to the demands of real intimacy as they play out in ordinary interaction, often in repeated instances of frustration or embarrassment, of uttering half-truths, of pretending not to understand, of contenting oneself with superficial agreement. ‘From the sceptic’s point of view, repetition smacks of failure, or irony; it suggests our inability to get things right once and for all’ (Fischer, 1989, p. 130). In opposition to this ‘once and for all’, Cavell proposes a ‘diurnalisation’ (Cavell, 1989, p. 66) of the work of philosophy to come to terms with the everyday, or to make ourselves at home in the conditions in which we find ourselves. The work of ‘resettlement of the everyday’ is, in Romantic terms, an infinite striving, an effort daily renewed. As Fischer argues, the ‘goal is for scepticism to give way to the acceptance of repetition’ (Fischer, 1989, p. 130) through what Cavell calls ‘endless specific recoveries from it, endless as a circle’ (Cavell 1987, p. 30). ‘Instead of answering sceptical doubts, we thus undo them, “repeatedly, unmelodramatically, uneventfully”’ (Cavell, 1989, p. 76, in Fischer, 1989, p. 130).

Cavell’s examples of this process often involve banal scenes from married life or intimate relationships, when boredom or issues of fairness or trust arise that change the scope or meaning of how one partner sees the other, or herself. His analyses of Hollywood ‘comedies of remarriage’ from the 1930s and 40s deal with couples who marry and separate and marry again; this pattern, for Cavell, becomes

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<sup>117</sup> The sceptic denies his ‘responsibility for meaning [or failing to mean] one thing, or one way, rather than another’ (1988, p. 135).

<sup>118</sup> See Cavell, 1979, pp. 369-370.

indicative of a commitment to seeing another person (and so seeing oneself), a process that involves continually reviving the 'spirit' in which things are seen and refusing to look away or to become complacent. In the Tracy and Hepburn film *Woman of the Year* (1942):

The happiness of marriage is dissociated from any a priori concept of what constitutes domesticity ( [...] whether two people are married does not necessarily depend on what age they are, or what gender, or whether legally). Marriage here is being presented as [...] the scene in which the chance for happiness is shown as the mutual acknowledgement of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday (until our true minds become unreadable to one another) (1989, pp. 177-178).

The shift from an *a priori* concept of domesticity, to which a married couple succeeds or fails to conform, to the improvisational arrangement that Cavell describes offers a sense of what successful repetition might look like. It is a shift *into* becoming, an acknowledgement of the on-going nature of relationship and a willingness to 'stick it out' and renew the aspect under which one sees another and oneself. It is also an acknowledgement of inevitable difference or separateness, which is not allowed to become an excuse for withdrawal or disinterest.

### **Reading and responsibility**

Cavell uses figures of 'reading' and 'seeing' to work out the central theme of resettling the everyday and philosophy's role in this task. These metaphors are offered as an alternative to the purely cognitive terms in which the dilemmas stemming from scepticism are generally phrased, and they express – and promote – an element of receptivity or inheritance that scepticism, in its 'drive for the unconditioned' denies. One of the most salient features of Cavell's essays is the presence of other people's texts, a particular set of texts that recurs across his writings: Emerson, Thoreau, Wittgenstein, and Austin. The link between essays and commentary on the words of others was established as early as Montaigne, whose extensive borrowing and quoting from existing texts served as a representation – on the level of form – of the given that ineluctably shapes the subject (both in the sense of an agent and as the subject of a book). This practice was linked to Montaigne's many remarks about the internal diversity of the self, which is always constituted by the texts of others and which forms itself by interpreting and

‘glossing’ what is already there (2007, III: 13, p. 1115). In Hume, the appeal to ordinary language served a similar function of highlighting and attempting to preserve in the form of philosophical thinking the determinative role of the given—in contrast to speculative accounts beginning from first principles. The Romantics and Kierkegaard too, in their polemical responses to their immediate historical and philosophical contexts, chose other texts as their starting point, often employing the technical vocabulary of the idealists and the language of popular culture in parodic or ironic ways. Lukács reminds us that: “The essay is always concerned with something already formed, or at best, with something that has been; it is part of its essence that it does not draw something new out of an empty vacuum, but only gives a new order to such things as once lived” (Lukács, 1974, p. 10). Cavell’s commitment to ordinary language philosophy and to a Romantic notion of a contingent – rather than an absolute beginning – adds to this general feature of the essay a specific emphasis on negotiating between what is given or inherited and what is created; this is a theme that Cavell deals with explicitly in much of his work and can be seen as a third way between the sceptic’s denial of conditionedness – a denial of common ground – and the denial of human possibility or originality that might result from an appeal to the ordinary. Cavell’s vision of moral perfectionism involves the transformation of the given or contingent into that for which the subject holds herself accountable.

In *In Quest of the Ordinary*, Cavell relates this theme to the process of reading, where reading is ‘a way of accepting responsibility for one’s own discourse’.

But suppose what is meant by argumentation in philosophy is one way of accepting full responsibility for one’s own discourse. Then the hearing I require depends upon the thought that there is another way, another philosophical way (for poetry will have its way, and therapy will have its way) of accepting responsibility. This other philosophical way I am going to call reading; others may call it philosophical interpretation (1988, p. 14).

Cavell’s contrast between the work of reading or interpretation and argumentation calls to mind Montaigne’s separation of his *essais* from arguments—both the deductive style of argument from established principles that he disliked in Scholasticism and the conventions of oral debates in which the truth tends to be distorted for the sake of vanquishing one’s opponent. What Montaigne claims for his own writing, by contrast, is to ‘talk about [him]self’. Cavell’s work has the similar

quality of a writer who talks to and about himself, using the words of others in the attempt to better understand his own experience. In this sense, reading others' texts, or speaking in a language passed down from others, is part of the task of autobiography or coming into one's own. One's 'self' begins with a common inheritance and is expressed and realised through existing forms, as the idea of 'grammar as fate' from *In Quest of the Ordinary* brings to light. Cavell raises the question of responsibility in reading, but it is not (only) a responsibility to what or to whom one is reading, as if reading were a primarily passive activity. Rather, reading means taking 'responsibility for one's *own* discourse'—suggesting that reading is a way of acknowledging one's place 'in a world of other's words' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 143) and that the shape of one's own words, and one's own self, is a negotiation between receiving and creating.

Cavell extends his discussion of reading by examining the theme in Emerson and Thoreau. Thoreau's suggestion in *Walden* that one can 'read' the stars:

. . . interprets reading (dangerously invoking, to revise, the idea of the astrological) as a process of *being read*, as finding your fate in your capacity for interpretation of yourself. 'Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and you walk on into futurity.' What is before you is precisely not, if you catch Thoreau's tune, something in the future; what is before you, if you, for example, reading, is a text. He asks his reader to see it, to become a seer with it. Only then can you walk beyond where you are (1988, p. 16).

The co-extensiveness (Montaigne's 'consubstantiality'<sup>119</sup>) of reading with the process of self-interpretation is made explicit in this passage. Thoreau presents his readers with the question they must ask themselves about their relationship both to his text and to their own: student or seer? Reading could take on the academic sense of being 'a student merely', which suggests a lack of appropriation or a lack of essential interest in what one knows or in what there is to be learned. Alternatively, the reader is invited to become a seer of 'what is before [her]'. The temporal knot of 'fate', 'what is before', and 'futurity' needs some unravelling. 'Before' might mean prior to or it might mean in front of, an ambiguity that Cavell's reading exploits by deriving fate (which is set prior to one's reading of it) from what is in front of the subject—the conditions ('texts') given to her or inherited by her, including the agreements of language that we have always *already* entered into (1988, pp. 39-40) merely by virtue of existing. 'Walking into futurity' then means to realise oneself in

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<sup>119</sup> Montaigne, 2007, II: 18, p. 703.

the context of inherited social and linguistic conditions, to ‘take responsibility for one’s own discourse’. The activity of reading continues when we look up from our books, in the activity of seeing—seeing oneself and seeing a task for oneself in what is there. ‘That reading is a way, or a goal, of seeing, is something attested – as I found in *The Claim of Reason* – by the history of the word reading in a word for advising, which in turn contains a word for seeing’ (1979, p. 17).

Cavell has sometimes been reproached for reading within such a narrow range of texts, particularly the American Romantics and Wittgenstein. He admits that ‘reformulation seems forever an essential piece of my intellectual business’ (1988, p. 175), referring both to the core set of texts to which he frequently returns and his many rewritings and reworkings of his own texts. With a background of the essayist’s commitment to reshaping in view, his remark strikes one less as an excuse for intellectual laziness and more as a genuine commitment to uncovering, by repeated attempts, what there is to be seen differently in the same, Kierkegaard’s ‘possibility’ realised in the everyday. This movement of repetition is essential to how Cavell’s essays, and essays more broadly, develop what Adorno calls their ‘texture’ and what Lukács calls their ‘faithfulness’ to the existing words or objects that they reformulate. Beginning from a contingent somewhere and returning to the same contrasts with the usual sense of development in a philosophical text, which involves getting to the bottom (*Grund*) of a matter. Against this figure of development, Cavell cites Wittgenstein’s fragment 126:

*Die Philosophie stellt eben alles bloß hin, und erklärt und folgert nichts. a Da alles offen daliegt, ist auch nichts zu erklären. Denn, was etwa verborgen ist, interessiert uns nicht* [Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us] (Wittgenstein, 2009, pp. 55-55e).

This controversial claim has been read by many as the reduction of philosophical activity to a strict behaviorism, denying the dimension of the secret or private in human experience. On Cavell’s reading it suggests instead that what is to be seen is already visible, if only perhaps through a glass, darkly. For Wittgenstein, and for Cavell, the material of everyday life furnishes what there is for philosophy to know, but one is led astray in the typical metaphors used to express truth: ‘getting to the bottom of’ or ‘penetrating’. Literary critic John Hollander expresses the significance Cavell attaches to such descriptions.

Cavell constantly implies that there are parables to be drawn about the way we treat the objects of our consciousness and the subjects of parts of it. What is so powerful and yet so elusive of the nets of ordinary intellectual expectation in *The Claim of Reason* is the way in which the activities of philosophizing become synecdochic, metonymic, and generally parabolic for the activities of the rest of life itself (Hollander, 1980, p. 586).

Born out of a sense that the ‘getting to the bottom’ of a matter risks a denial of what is there to be seen for (enlightened) eyes, Cavell’s gestures of returning to the same philosophical and literary material thus suggest new figures for what activities might be of value—both for philosophy and for life with others.

### **The task of philosophical writing**

Cavell’s writing style develops out of a commitment to interrogating the everyday philosophically, while remaining faithful to ordinary experience: a project which he sometimes refers to as the ‘task’ of the everyday, or the ‘quest of the ordinary’—emphasising the activity of uncovering or unconcealing what is given, for which essays are particularly suited. His notoriously long, complex, and parenthetical sentences perform precisely the activities of shifting, qualifying, comparing, and emerging into view that he describes as operating within the everyday—the opening sentence of the *Claim of Reason* is a prime example.<sup>120</sup> A general lack of understanding of how form might inform epistemological and moral positions has led many philosophers to dismiss Cavell’s writings as insufficiently philosophical, or purposely obfuscatory. As Stephen Mulhall attests,

[The] standard line of criticism focuses upon Cavell’s style: his use of parentheses and qualification, his idiosyncratic modes of punctuation, his reliance upon complex, allusive, and endlessly reflexive rhetorical

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<sup>120</sup> I reproduce the sentence here for the convenience of the reader. ‘If not at the beginning of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, since what starts philosophy is no more to be known at the outset than how to make an end of it; and if not at the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*, since its opening is not to be confused with the starting of the philosophy it expresses, and since the terms in which that opening might be understood can hardly be given along with the opening itself; and if we acknowledge from the commencement, anyway leave open at the opening, that the way this work is written is internal to what it teaches, which means that we cannot understand the manner (call it the method) before we understand its work; and if we do not look to our history, since placing this book historically can hardly happen earlier than placing it philosophically; nor look to Wittgenstein’s past, since then we are likely to suppose that *Investigations* is written in criticism of the *Tractatus*, which is not so much wrong as empty, both because to know what constitutes its criticism would be to know what constitutes its philosophy, and because it is more to the present point to see how the *Investigations* is written in criticism of itself; then where and how are we to approach this text?’ (179, p. 3). For an analysis of this sentence, see the opening chapter of Mulhall’s *Inheritance and Originality* (2001).

strategies, his constant foregrounding of essentially personal or biographical matters—all of these seemingly self-indulgent features of his writing are taken to derogate from his claim to be engaging in philosophically rigorous work (1988, pp. 283-84).

Breaking down these critiques, the substantive charges are that Cavell's writing is unsystematic, that it takes poetic liberties with language, that it openly reflects on its own procedures, and that it is unabashedly rooted in the personal experience of the writer. These features are familiar hallmarks of essayistic writing, and, as we have seen, each is motivated by distinctly philosophical and ethical considerations, rather than by self-indulgence. It is precisely to counter the negative element of idiosyncrasy – being doomed to follow one's own prejudices without realising it – that essayistic writing takes the self-conscious and subjective shape it does (Adorno, 1984, pp. 153; 158). It is also the reason for the stress on particular cases and on the constant possibility of error that are expressed in Cavell's many parenthetical qualifications. Adorno contrasts these essayistic tendencies with the ambition of 'scholastic' or 'positivistic' philosophy to become 'objective' after the manner of the sciences. 'Every impulse of expression – as far as the instinct of scientific purism is concerned – endangers an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject' (Adorno, 1984, p. 153). But 'if truth in fact has a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in truth; the *a posteriori* becomes concretely the *a priori* [...] The relation to [subjective] experience [...] is a relation to all of history' (*Ibid.*, p. 158). On this reading, discourses that begin from the 'I' and that openly reflect on the relationship of form to ideas achieve a greater degree of reliability or truth than those that deny the contingent, historical starting point of philosophical enquiry and the meaning inherent in pre-existing linguistic forms. Mulhall, wishing to defend Cavell against critics of his writing style, contends that Cavell's 'may be a species of rigour that analytical philosophers are not accustomed to, but it is no less admirable for that' (1994, p. 283-84).<sup>121</sup>

Cavell's focus on his own experience and his return to the same themes is an attempt to guard against one of the primary ways in which philosophical inquiry

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<sup>121</sup> This echoes similar comments made by Cavell about Emerson and Thoreau '[They propose, and embody, a mode of thinking, a mode of conceptual accuracy, as thorough as anything imagined within established philosophy, but invisible to that philosophy because based on an idea of rigour foreign to its establishment . . . [they say] a work like *Walden* has nothing in it to call *arguments*' (1988, p. 14).

can go astray: the philosopher's lack of awareness of – and so lack of responsibility for – how her thought and her means of expression are conditioned, and how they condition the practice of philosophy. This is, on the one hand, an argument against the 'ideal of a context-free or neutral medium characteristic of a philosophy which models itself on scientific discourse' (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 33). Writing about the role of examples or paradigm cases in moral philosophy, Cavell asks:

Is there any case about which we will feel, as we felt about 'best' cases in epistemology, that 'If *any* case is one in which we can know something to be (or agree that it is) good or bad, right or wrong, we can know this to be?' [...] [W]e might feel that any agreement about the morality of the act will turn upon some agreement about how the act *is* to be described. Was it really *breaking a promise*? Is it fair *just* to say he lied when what he did was to lie *in order to...* or *as a way of...*? [...] Apparently what is the 'case' in question forms part of the content of the *moral argument itself* (pp. 264-265).

Here Cavell pushes back against the notion that there could be a neutral form of philosophical discourse for the moral concerns that most interest him—concerns which, as it turns out, accompany a whole range of problems that are generally described as purely epistemological. The promise of the philosophical example is the clarity it can bring to difficult subjects, but, as Cavell points out, this clarity, and any philosophical agreement that might issue from it, is achieved at the expense of overlooking the real philosophical – and moral – work to be done, determining the position one is taking responsibility for (1979, p. 268), which is a question of 'the nature or quality of our relationship to one another' (*Ibid.*).<sup>122</sup> Criteria then, are not merely a question of determining what can be known, as the sceptics claim, or what can be agreed upon, as the pragmatists claim, but are 'terms in which I *relate what's happening*, make sense of it by giving its history, say what "goes before and after". What I call something, what I count as something, is a function of how I *recount* it, tell it' (1979, p. 94). Cavell's interest in literature and film lie precisely in their ability to more richly describe the terrain of these relationships than philosophy has been able to do.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 'Attention to the details of cases as they arise many not provide a quick path to an all-embracing system; but at least it promises genuine instead of spurious clarity (Cavell, 1976, p. 41).

<sup>123</sup> 'The ability to produce more compelling models of what our moral-and even what our epistemologically and metaphysically wondrous-life is like has given major novelists and great poets, in the same three and a half centuries since Descartes, a disproportionate claim to human knowledge of the human' (Hollander, 1980, p. 582).

For Cavell, as for Kierkegaard, ‘valuing underwrites asserting’ (COR, 1979, pp. 94-95). *Interest* underwrites talking. If, in everyday conversation or in philosophical writing, we talk about things that interest us in a way that does not interest us, that does not really say what we mean, we are not only doing ourselves a disservice but slowly ‘stupefying’ (COR, 1979, p. 94) ourselves. Given that expressing ourselves amounts to making or constituting ourselves in the world with others, the fiction of the neutral text that exempts itself from the agreements into which the use of language forces us, amounts to a complicity in this stupefaction, an abandonment of the maintenance of ‘shared forms of life’. The task of maintenance as a response to and ‘restructuring’ of the everyday allows Cavell to maintain a place for the work of philosophy that guards against the tendency toward fantasy, understood as a denial of real constraints or conditions.

Cavell’s essayism is an attempt to better express the position of inheritance or embeddedness that derives from the basic fact of being linguistic creatures, precisely the feature which gives rise to the sceptic’s anxiety that our language, and so our world, is not our own. He reads the recognition of inheritance as the primary insight of Thoreau’s *Walden*, which he expresses with the formulation: ‘dwelling comes before building’ (1988, p.175). When Cavell stresses that ‘the answer to scepticism must take the form not of *philosophical* construction but of the reconstruction or resettlement of the everyday’ (1988, p. 176, my emphasis), he suggests that the error committed in many sceptical accounts (or attempts to solve or get around the sceptical problem) is one of failing in the responsiveness to one’s environment, of building without the foundation of knowing what it is to dwell (and so building structures unsuited to dwelling). The element of receptivity or response in ‘dwelling’, rather than rendering us ‘victims of [inherited] meaning’ (Cavell, 1998, p. 40), is crucial to how Cavell conceives of the moral task of philosophy and the kind of writing that is best able to carry out this task. ‘Instead of leading the passive reader “step-by-step”, in a logical and orderly manner, to an already established point of certainty and clarity, the essayist requires the reader’s active participation in the form of a constantly renewed evaluation, deduction, and interpretation of the matter at hand’ (de Obaldia, 1995, p. 32). Cavell’s watchword for philosophical writing – and reading – is: ‘Don’t say “must” *but look and see*’ (1989, p. 66).

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## Conclusion

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This study has been shaped by the idea that modes of writing contribute in significant and philosophically sophisticated ways to the kinds of questions philosophy is able to ask and to answer about the relationship between self, world, mind, and language. The specific example of essayism demonstrates a novel response to the problem of scepticism that changes the terms of the discussion from the attempt either to shore up knowledge (foundationalism and positivism) – by way of foundationalist arguments or a rigorously applied method – or to make knowledge a matter of sufficient probability (pragmatism). In place of these efforts, the open-ended, heterogeneous, and subjectively-rooted textual form of the essay brings to light the conditions of ordinary life under which philosophical inquiry takes place, and, like ancient Pyrrhonism, suggests that the ‘cure’ for an overzealous drive for knowledge lies in raising the question of the value of knowledge for *life*. This opens up an alternative understanding of philosophy’s task that is on the one hand critical or negative – Kierkegaard’s ‘taking away’ – and on the other hand therapeutic, concerned with uncovering, expressing, and taking responsibility for the conditions in which one finds oneself.

These considerations give rise to a style of writing that engages writer and reader as partners in the project of constructing meaning in the absence of any traditional epistemological or metaphysical guarantees. The activity of establishing timeless, universal truths – or the criteria that would allow for such truths – is replaced by more provisional efforts of essaying that reflect on their own context and circumstances of production – including the writer’s relationship to inherited discursive and historical forms. Such an attention to form is, for the essayist, integral to the project of understanding, since the possibility of a neutral interpretation or representation is categorically denied. As Cavell declares, ‘What I call something, what I count as something, is a function of how I *recount* it, tell it’ (1979, p. 94). Reflexivity is one of the hallmarks of the essayistic, and, rather than being motivated by playfulness or postmodern exhaustion, this feature serves as a reminder for philosophy of the meaning inherent in textual forms, and so of the importance of textual forms for philosophical reflection and pedagogy. As Jonathan Lavery notes in his ‘Philosophical Genres and Literary Forms’, ‘opening up

questions about genres of philosophy leads inexorably to questions about what philosophy *is*, about philosophy's understanding of itself (2007, p. 187).

Montaigne's essaying sets the standard for discontinuous, perspectival, and open-ended forms of writing that emphasise *nostra conditions*: time or becoming, subjectivity, and language as the shared horizon within which epistemological questions arise. He builds up a rhetoric of exemplification and multiple perspectives to replace the systematic, deductive structures of Scholasticism, diagnosing the tendency to 'sally forth outside ourselves' and 'seek other [more ideal] conditions because we do not understand the use of our own' as a form of avoidance and self-deception. The challenging, questioning, teasing form of the *essai* invites the reader's participation in weighing, assessing, and learning to see anew—staging the moral task of taking responsibility for oneself in the context of an inherited discourse. Hume further develops the essay as an arena of *experience*, both in its familiar sense and in its etymological link to experimentation, trying out and testing different propositions and frameworks. He works to cultivate and reflect upon sociability, linking philosophical questions to broader considerations of what human communities value and what is worth arguing about.

The *Frühromantiker*, like their predecessors, make gestures to widen philosophy's scope to include features of experience that are obscured by deductive or systematic accounts. Accepting the Pyrrhonian position, revived by Jacobi, that infinite regress is an inevitable part of the justification of knowledge claims, they seek a therapeutic remedy to this problem by removing the need for absolute justification, or at least the possibility of absolute justification at the beginning of a philosophical system. Schlegel proposes the trope of a circle rather than a vertical trope of uncovering the absolute as a *Grundsatz*. Novalis posits the impossibility of an absolute *Grund* as the motor for philosophy as an endless activity. Like Montaigne and Hume, they embrace difference, the exception, and the particular. But in choosing the specific essayistic form of the fragment, they bring into focus the notion of a whole, of absolute knowing, toward which their various attempts are directed and as part of which they gain their meaning. By raising the possibility of the Whole as an impossible but at the same time necessary point of orientation, the Romantics suggest that any natural connection to such a whole has been lost and must instead be constructed—perhaps as a necessary fiction. The thinking of difference or non-identity is crucial to the kind of whole they imagine – a 'manifold

unity' – and their poetic project involves the attempt to create organic structures of self, of society, and of philosophical activity that allow for difference. The fragment collection functions as a metaphor for such structures; each 'fragment' is infused with meaning as part of a collective activity of writing the Book of Books, the encyclopaedia combining all fields of human understanding. Difference is systematised or harmonised through the meaning-making activity of self-governing subjects, an activity that, as Schlegel says, alternates between creation and destruction, hope and doubt.

Kierkegaard turns his attention toward the critical side of essayism, multiplying disjunctive and ironic structures to lead his readers to, rather than away from doubt. Positioning himself polemically against the 'absent-mindedness' of his contemporaries, he attempts to revive sceptical doubt as a task, a way of refusing the levelling impulses of cognition that the Romantics describe as the *Trieb nach Einheit*. Doubt in Kierkegaard introduces a moment of the uncanny, a distancing of all that is from what might be; a realisation that what *is* is not what *necessarily* is. This 'fall', from complacency or certainty, provides an opening 'not to a higher realm, but to another inhabitation of this realm' (Cavell, 1989, p. 107), with repetition replacing transcendence as a way of overcoming doubt and coming to terms with the conditions of becoming. Kierkegaard's ironic textual structures, which explode any stable frame and call for constant re(e)valuation, can be read as a figure for the possibility of such a transformation.

Cavell describes a similar dialectic of loss and recovery in his own work (1989, p. 114). Like Kierkegaard, he conceives of sceptical doubt not merely as an epistemological position but as a mode of relationship to or orientation within the world, one that discovers structures of meaning to be inherited and so, in an unsettling way, not 'ours'. The negative sceptical moment that Cavell seeks to overcome is a cleaving of subject from world; this is expressed by the thought that because I can never *really* know the world and others *beyond* or *behind* appearances, then I lack a responsibility for maintaining my relationship to them; I become *disinterested*. Recovery means a 'turn' in my relationship to finitude.

The ancient task of philosophy, to awaken us, or say bring us to our senses, takes the form of returning to us the everyday, the ordinary, every day, diurnally. Since we are not returning to anything we have known, the task is really one, as seen before, of turning (1989, p. 66).

Cavell rejects the idea that the given is *merely* or *obviously* given (Sellars' 'Myth of the Given', 1956) and recasts – as an on-going task – Wittgenstein's notion that 'everything lies open to view' and that philosophy 'sets everything before us' (Wittgenstein, 2009, pp. 55-55e). The reflexive structure of the essay reveals the everyday as both something *received* and *constructed* under particular aspects. As such, the everyday is always the 'eventual everyday' (1989, p. 46), part of an unending activity of interpretation and 'resettlement'. One expression for this might be that the project of finding the ground beneath our feet cannot be satisfied all at once – and not by a philosophical construction – but must be renewed, as a matter of what we value or take interest in. Thus finding words and forms that better speak to the experience of losing one's ground or of discovering oneself or others to be strangers may be able to provide a more adequate, more rigorous response to the sceptical impulse than standard epistemological arguments. As Cavell says of Emerson and Thoreau, they offer a 'mode of conceptual accuracy, as thorough as anything imagined within established philosophy, but invisible to that philosophy because based on an idea of rigour foreign to the establishment' (Cavell, 1988, p. 14). Producing 'more compelling models of what our moral-and even what our epistemologically and metaphysically wondrous-life is like' is becomes part of the goal of 'knowledge of the human' to which philosophy lays claim (Hollander, 1980, p. 582).

Perhaps a better way of getting at what is really at stake in the sceptical problem to which we have been recurring in this study, is to ask, with Wittgenstein (no. 129) and Cavell, 'What *don't* I see when everything is in front of my eyes?' (1979, p. 370). Framed in these phenomenological terms, the challenge is not that it is impossible to 'get beyond' appearance but that appearances are all-*too* present, showing everything at once, while appreciating and interpreting what is there to be seen takes time, experience, insight, disappointment, what Kierkegaard calls 'interest' and Heidegger calls 'care'. The presence of the world or of others is thus experienced as hiddenness, in plain sight, rather than merely as an object of knowledge, subject to proof or probability. The essay brings this to light by 'setting everything before' the reader, showing the 'how' of thought along with its content, and resisting the urge to reduce or reconcile multiple perspectives. In the framework established by Cavell, revelation is possible not by knowing but by *noticing*, or seeing differently what one has already seen. In everyday experience, the face to which one

is indifferent can become ugly, or beautiful; an insignificant moment in childhood can become a precious memory after a parent has died. In philosophy, established questions and figures can lose their relevance. ‘There is a spirit in which things can be seen, as of a spirit in which words may be meant, and believed. And of course the spirit may die out’ (1979, p. 371). Renewing and resettling the framework in which philosophical activity takes place—re-evaluating what counts as relevant to philosophy, is a way of maintaining philosophy’s vitality.

For Cavell, giving expression to the ways in which we fail to see what is before us is part of the moral work of taking responsibility for our separateness – from our environment and from others – which scepticism reveals. He favours the essay for its circularity, the way it recurs to the same themes from different perspectives, suggesting that the work of uncovering is never a settled matter, and that any flight out of the circle amounts to a refusal of the conditions within which relationships to the world and others are formed and maintained.

The direction out of illusion is not up...but down, at any rate along each chain of a day’s denial. Philosophy (as descent) can thus be said to leave everything as it is precisely because it is a refusal of, say disobedient to, (a false) ascent, or transcendence. Philosophy (as ascent) shows the violence that is to be refused (disobeyed), that has left everything indifferent to me, as if there are things in themselves (1989, p. 46).

Cavell begins his essay ‘Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance’ with the suggestion that finding a better expression (or ‘parable’) for our relationship to the world is a critical part of philosophy’s work, since ‘false views of the inner and the outer produce and sustain one another’ (1979, p. 349). The essay recasts the inner and outer of Cartesian scepticism, the world ‘out there’ inaccessible (and ‘indifferent’) to the subject, in terms of the individual subject’s negotiation between inheritance and creativity. Being receptive to the inherited world – particularly in being attentive to the *words* which are ours and not ours – becomes key to the dynamic interchange involved in understanding self and world, or the enworlded (enworded) self.

One of the manifestations of this attitude of receptivity is the search for reading practices and discursive structures that allow for difference and heterogeneity, refusing to reduce texts to concepts. Related to this is a revised role for the author, who is no longer an omniscient narrator but rather a fellow reader, offering and consciously multiplying models of possible interpretation. Rather than

presuming that questions are set out in advance by established philosophical ‘problems’, essayistic texts stages the kinds of questions one might want to ask, often by allowing the reader to see the essayist in the process of reading others’ texts, where reading is a way of ‘taking full responsibility for *one’s own* discourse’ (1988, p. 14, my emphasis). The suggestion is that the hermeneutic model favoured by literary studies entails a greater degree of self-awareness and ethical and political potential than the neutralist textual model that dominates analytic writing and reading practices. Cavell explains that his approach is to ‘understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts. This means to me that the contribution of a philosopher—anyway of a creative thinker – to the subject of philosophy is not to be understood as a contribution to, or of, a set of *given* problems’ (1979, p. 3). These remarks recommend not only a way of *doing* philosophy but also a way of teaching it, one that expands the range of insights that it is possible to glean from philosophical texts and that may, in addition, change the canon of texts that are considered to be of philosophical value.

I began this study by remarking on the lack of interest in contemporary analytic philosophy in reading and teaching strategies that deal with questions of style and form. It is my hope that the brief sketches offered here have given some sense of what might be gained from a textual approach. Attending to the various features and possibilities of the essayistic mode yields an alternative picture of philosophical rigour that goes beyond the establishment of criteria or definitions or the employment of a consistent method. The essay’s insistence on interrogating its own means of production, and thus disclosing the historical and linguistic conventions that shape human understanding, opens up the possibility of better responding to those conventions, moving from denial to the acknowledgement of the possibilities within the everyday and our role in shaping and transforming them. The essay reminds us that there is no single narrative to be told, and that philosophy must, as a result, be various in its ways of recounting, moving beyond the ‘semantic and cognitive considerations’ (Bowie 2013, p. 188) that prevail in current discussions. As Cavell reminds us, ‘what is of philosophical importance, or interest – what there is for philosophy to say – is happening repeatedly, unmelodramatically, uneventfully’ (1989, p. 75).

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