There are Lies, Damned Lies and Romanticism:
A Classical Approach to the Problem of Theoria

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In a railway station in the north of England, some years ago now, three nuns left the train and moved towards the ticket barrier, feeling in the folds of their garments as they did so. When they reached the barrier, the first nun said to the ticket collector: ‘We’re Sisters of John the Baptist…’. ‘Well, there’s a bloody lie for a start’, said the ticket collector. Had the ticket collector read Sir Walter Scott’s novel, Redgauntlet, Chapter XIII, he would have said: ‘Tell that to the marines …’.

Now there are nuns and nuns (some of them singing) and there are sisters and sisters (some of them blood-related). And both nuns and sisters – and perhaps ticket collectors – are capable of making category mistakes.

But speaking of John the Baptist prompts me to say, that, if you’re not Socrates and you’re not dead, then you’re probably not telling the truth.

But gestures, too, can tell lies – and sometimes lies can tell the truth. It is said that the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was, together with his friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, at a rally where Hitler, the Great Dictator, was to appear and to speak. As the rally began, Bethge turned to his friend and was astonished to find that his hand was raised in an enthusiastic Nazi salute. Bonhoeffer turned to Bethge and said, ‘Put up your hand, you fool.’

Not every occasion for telling the truth is an occasion worth dying for – it might be right to resist Adolf Hitler, but maybe not right to resist him here and not right to resist him now.
Truth and the lie: ‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.’ In the novel, The Master and Margarita, by Mikhail Bulgakov, there is a scene in which Jesus and Pilate confront one another; a scene in which (if I read the chapter aright) Pilate does not so much ask Jesus, ‘What is truth?’ as Jesus ask Pilate what he (Jesus) can best do for him (Pilate). The pressures to which Pilate is subject, pressures personal and political, indicate that there is only one way that Pilate should make up his mind. Jesus is not there to protect himself. He is there to see what he can do for Pilate. ‘Being there for others’ is what Jesus is there for – and what anyone is anywhere for.

And the rest is history; or something not altogether unlike it.

Perhaps the truth can never be told. Perhaps what is said can never be adequate; perhaps there can never be adequacy between intellectus and rei, intellect and thing, between you the thinker and what you are thinking about.

In what sense does the novelist tell the truth? In what sense does Goethe, the dramatist, tell the truth? Or Goethe, the autobiographer in his autobiography? How do Truth and Poetry go together?

In Speculum Mentis, Or The Mirror of the Mind, R. G. Collingwood tells us that the artist does not set out to tell the truth, nor, for that matter, to tell lies. He (or she) sets out simply to tell. And to tell beautifully.

But that is early Collingwood (1924). But we also have Outlines of a Philosophy of Art (1925) and The Principles of Art (1938). There, especially in The Principles of Art, we find that the business of the artist is the imaginative expression of emotion. In a process of labour, of parturition, the artist struggles to get something off his chest, or her bosom. Insofar as the expression is adequate, it is true. The pen, the brush, the chisel have moved truly. It is like, for the philosopher, the solution of a philosophical problem, except that the task of the philosopher is to think, while the task of the philosophical poet is to express what it feels like to think:

The poet converts human experience into poetry … by fusing thought itself into emotion … Thus Dante has fused the
Thomistic philosophy into a poem expressing what it feels like to be a Thomist.\(^6\)

However, before descending into hell, or passing through purgatory, or rising into paradise, we must stick with the earth a little longer.

Before Margaret Fuller left the USA for England and the Continent, where she would seek out Wordsworth, Carlyle, George Sand and the Brownings, she was reported to have said: ‘I now know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own’. To this should be added the well-known story, that, when it was reported to Carlyle that she had said that she had decided to ‘accept the Universe’, he had said: ‘Gad, she’d better!’

It is to the Universe that we now pass.

On these our Romantics, the Universe implodes – the Universe, with capital U – or the Universe with capital W; W, that is, for the Whole.

Now Ms Fuller and Carlyle are not alone. Childe Harold belongs here, too. Byron writes:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar:
I love not man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne’er express, yet cannot all conceal.\(^7\)

In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher (his name means ‘Veil Maker’ – aptly, for a theologian) wrote *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*.\(^8\) Schleiermacher became known, in later life, for the notion of *Schlechthinnige Abhängigkeit* or ‘Absolute Dependence’ (sc. of humankind on God, or of humankind on the Universe – there is a kind of approximate identity between the two terms: God and Universe – Schleiermacher and his circle were certainly influenced by Spinoza).
Hegel was a philosopher who said many things, but one of the things he was unkind enough to say was that this notion of ‘Absolute Dependence’ made Schleiermacher’s dog a better theologian than his master. But this book of Schleiermacher’s, *On Religion*, comes near to being or is at least one candidate for being the beginning of the Romantic movement – or of what (see below) should perhaps rather be called the Romantic Revival Movement.

Meanwhile here are one or two examples of the use by Schleiermacher of the word ‘Universe’. They come from the sterling translation of Schleiermacher by that sterling Scot.

The quotations are introduced by a well-known quotation from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. As Johnson was once the greatest living Englishman (now dead), the extract can bear repetition:

> After we [sc., Boswell and Johnson] came out of the church [this was in Harwich, England], we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley’s ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I shall never forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, “I refute it thus.”

(The definition of ‘rebound’, in Johnson’s *Dictionary*, is as follows: ‘to fly back in consequence of motion impressed and resisted by a greater power’ – Johnson was, after all, dealing with the reality of a portion of the universe – and with Bishop Berkeley.)

Schleiermacher belonged to a Berlin Wednesday Club, a club to which ‘everyone’ belonged – everyone, who was anyone, everyone, who was a Romanticist, everyone, if you were Schlegel, the translator, or Schlegel (Junior), [Friedrich], both of them ‘great theorists of romanticism’; or if you were Tieck, story-teller and poet, or Wackenroder, who wrote in the 1790s that music ‘shows us all the movements of our spirit, disembodied’; or (lastly) if you were ‘that divine youth who too early fell asleep, to whom all that his spirit touched became immediately a great poem’, if you were, that is:
Georg Friedrich Philipp von Hardenberg, *alias* Novalis (which means ‘pathfinder’, or ‘pioneer’).

‘The true intellectual father’ of this ‘Romantic School’ writes Oman, ‘was Goethe, and his Wilhelm Meister was their ideal.’ And Oman goes on:

The germ of much of Schleiermacher’s thought is here—! [in this Romantic School] the importance of the individual, the place of intuition, everything a revelation of the Universe [again, the capital U], the Universe itself one glorious, eternally active whole.

What with Goethe was art with the younger generation was criticism. By *critical* resolve they determined to be the *uncritical* Aeolian harp of every feeling.\(^{14}\)

But what, we might ask, is it to be, or to become ‘by *critical* resolve … the *uncritical* Aeolian harp of every feeling”? Aeolus, the ruler of the winds, lived on an eponymous island; and the eponymous harp was a box with strings across it, which made musical or quasi-musical sounds, when the wind blew over it. What Homer tells us is this:

[Aeolus’] twelve children too abide there in his halls, six daughters and six lusty sons; and, behold, he gave his daughters to his sons to wife. And they feast evermore by their dear father and their kind mother …\(^{15}\)

Rose’s *Handbook of Greek Mythology* offers here a brief note: ‘*Od.*, X, I foll., where no one is in the least shocked at the family arrangements.’

But, however these arrangements may have been, to say that the Wednesday Club was ‘by *critical* resolve … determined to be the *uncritical* Aeolian harp of every feeling’ is tantamount to saying that with this Romantic group we are dealing with a rebirth of the imagination. Through religion, says Schleiermacher, ‘the universal existence of all finite things in the Infinite lives immediately in us.’
‘[R]eligion,’ he says, ‘is sense and taste for the Infinite.’\textsuperscript{16} Or again:

\begin{quote}
[The phenomenon of your life] is fleeting and transparent as the vapour which the dew breathes on blossom and fruit, it is bashful and tender as a maiden’s kiss, it is holy and fruitful as a bridal embrace … It is the holy wedlock of the Universe with the incarnated Reason for a creative and productive embrace.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

And somewhere, behind all this, no doubt, lies the ‘God-intoxicated man’ [\textit{der Gott-betrunkener Mensch}], as Novalis is said to have called Spinoza.

In his autobiography: \textit{Truth and Poetry}, Goethe has the following passage on Hamann and action. It goes like this:

\begin{quote}
The principle to which all of Hamann’s expressions can be reduced is this. “All that man undertakes to perform, whether by deed or word, or otherwise, must come from all his powers united; everything individual, dismembered, is worthless.” A splendid maxim! but hard to follow.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

According (I think) to Paul Valéry, thinking is like walking; a perpetual move from one point of imbalance to another, much as by Collingwood’s “Theory of the Forms of Error”,\textsuperscript{19} thought advances by the correction of corrections by correction.

Thinking is, like Rodin’s \textit{Penseur}, a muscular activity. So too the expression of thought, of thought and emotion: ‘Poetry,’ says Hamann, ‘is the mother-tongue of the human race’.\textsuperscript{20}

And Collingwood \textsuperscript{21} expands Hamann here: ‘Every kind of language’, he says, ‘is … a specialized form of bodily gesture, and in this sense it may be said that the dance is the mother of all languages.’

Collingwood, that is, expands from tongue to body, to the whole body as an expressive unit.

If all reality can be divided into two parts or attributes; divided (so Spinoza) into mind and body, it is clear that language to do with the mind is inter-penetrated by language that has to do with the body, with
the extension of matter. A classic study is R. B. Onians: *The Origins of European Thought.*

The word *phren* (s.v. Liddell and Scott) produces meaning 3: ‘mind’, meaning 2: ‘heart’, and meaning 1: ‘midriff’. From *phren* we get ‘phrenology’: the study of the brain, its surface and configuration. ‘Midriff’ means the ‘middle of the *hrif*’ (Old English) – the *hrif* is the ‘belly’.

When Odysseus arrives home and finds that others have arrived home too, the narrator comments:

... even as a bitch stands over her tender whelps growling, when she spies a man she knows not, and she is eager to assail him, so growled his heart within him in his wrath at their evil deeds. Then he smote upon his breast and rebuked his own heart, saying:

‘Endure, my heart; yea, a baser thing thou once didst bear ...'

An essential concern of Romance and Romanticism is the ‘heart’. But ‘heart’ is also linked to ‘head’. And ‘thought’ to ‘thought’.

Take the word: ‘reflect’. By etymology it goes back from the Latin *flecto* to ‘bend’ to the Greek word *pholkos*, which means (probably) ‘bandy-legged’ and to another related word *phalkes*, which means ‘the bent rib of a ship’; and then goes forward again to the Latin word *falco*, ‘a falcon’, with its curved claws and beak – and perhaps also to *falx* which means ‘sickle’ or ‘pruning-hook’.

Reflection, that is, is the bending back of thought upon itself, to see whether that thinking has or has not been well and truly done.

But to return, briefly, to Hamann.

Of the sensitive and complex matter of Hamann’s ‘marriage of conscience’ (*Gewissensehe*), Gregor Smith says the following:

About the same time as Herder came to Königsberg, the second of the two new figures began to dominate Hamann’s passions. This was Anna Regina Schumacher, a peasant girl who had entered [Hamann’s] father’s household at Easter 1762 ...
was twenty-four, and, as Hamann later described her, “of full-blooded and blooming health, and a just as robust and stupid honesty and stedfastness”\textsuperscript{24}

To Nicolai, one of the leading figures of the Enlightenment in Berlin, Hamann wrote of ‘a left-handed marriage’ with Anna Regina; and, to Herder, that there was to be no official marriage, “not because I am too proud, for I am too thankful, but because I am convinced that this situation [marriage] would lessen her own happiness …” … Hamann feared that … (t)he reality of marriage … could only be preserved in circumstances which did not permit the intrusion of civil and ecclesiastical forms’.\textsuperscript{25}

The whole question of sexuality was not a question that Hamann avoided. According to Martin Seils it ‘constitutes the basic element of life (sexus) and language (genus)’ \textit{[das Grundelement des Lebens (sexus) und der Sprache (genus) bildet]}\textsuperscript{26} And the Magus of the North, furthermore, gives himself to extended lallation, to extended \textit{glossolalia} on the ‘rhapsody of fig-leaves’ of Adam and Eve.

And Hamann quotes, for example, Manilius \textit{Astronomy} Bk IV: ‘Everyone is a representation of God, in a miniature image’ \textit{[Exemplumque DEI quisque est in imagine parva]}. For Hamann, the language of which mankind is in search can be found everywhere – in the Bible, of course, but not only there, but throughout nature and history.

‘There is one man,’ writes Isaiah Berlin (and he means Hamann), ‘who in my view, struck the most violent blow against the Enlightenment and began the whole romantic process … [His] fundamental doctrine was that God was not a geometer, not a mathematician, but a poet …’.\textsuperscript{27} The first three words of the Septuagint are these: \textit{en arche(i) epoiese}, ‘In the beginning he made… \textit{epoiese} means: ‘he made’. And \textit{poiesis} means ‘poetry’. Poetry is \textit{par excellence} God’s business.

The movement of which Schleiermacher and Hamann were major figures was called Romantic, because it stemmed ultimately from the language of the Romans, as that language had developed into Languedoc and Provençal and Occitan in the period from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Romance was the language that they spoke.
And romance was what they got up to. Bernart de Ventadour, for example, writes in his Languedoc or Provençal tongue; and he says:

La dousa votz ai auzida
del rosinholet sauvatge,
et es m’ins el cor salhida …

I have heard the sweet voice
of the nightingale in the woods
and it has pierced to the depths of my heart …

[and the poem continues:]

Every man who does not dwell in a state of joy
and does not direct his heart and his desire
towards love, leads a base life …

In these *troubadours* Gregor Smith sees a sign of major developments to come, of the process of secularization, of the emergence of mankind, autonomous and free – and together with all that, an invitation to the proper validation of the earth. Within history, Gregor Smith thought, and thought that the Troubadours were beginning to think – within history and nowhere else was real life to be found.

And next, chronologically, after the Troubadours, we get the *Chanson de Geste* (early twelfth century), the Song of Roland, who along with Oliver and ten Paladins perished in their attempt to defend Charlemagne’s rearguard – fading at Roncesvalles on the blowing of a horn.

And next again, the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes (in the second half of the twelfth century) and some lines (II.175 ff.) from *Yvain* by Chrétien de Troyes, which are included in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, his classic account of *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*:

*Il avint, pres de set anz*
*Que je seus come païsans*
Aloie querant avantures,
Armez de totes armeüres
Si come chevaliers doit ester...

It happened seven years ago
that, lonely as a countryman,
I was making my way in search of adventures,
fully armed
as a knight should be …\(^{30}\)

In his biography of Coleridge, Richard Holmes has occasion to quote from one of his letters:

Should children be permitted to read Romances, and
Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii? – I know all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative. I know no other way of giving the mind a love of “the Great” and “the Whole” …\(^{31}\)

This remark of Coleridge is just another reminder, if we need one, that what we are dealing with is not simply the Romantic movement, but the Romantic Revival movement. And Sir Walter Scott belongs here too, for he betrays his debt to these earlier movements, of which the Arthurian Romances are, perhaps, the paradigm, in his contribution to The Supplement to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1818), of three Essays – the first on Chivalry, the second on Romance, and the third on Drama.\(^{32}\)

Coleridge and Scott, that is, have been walking in the footsteps of the Troubadours and have been embroiled in the loves and hates of King Arthur’s Court. It is immeasurable, infinite love that makes both worlds go round: the world, first, of medieval romance and, second, the world of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic revival. And in The Heart of Midlothian (Chapter XLII, at the beginning in the first paragraph) Scott betrays his awareness of the tradition within which he is working, when he writes: ‘Arran, a mountainous region, or Alpine island, abounds with the grandest and most romantic [sic!]
scenery …’ In writing a romance, he finds it necessary to use the adjective ‘romantic’.

But the Romantic Movement of, say, 1770–1830 is no mere revival! In his assessment of this Movement, Isaiah Berlin is very bold. He says, in the beginning:

The importance of romanticism is that it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world. It seems to me to be the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all the other shifts which have occurred in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it.

And towards the end:

You create values, you create goals, you create ends, and in the end you create your own vision of the universe, exactly as artists create works of art …

And he says this:

[T]here is no structure of things. There is no pattern to which you must adapt yourself. There is only, if not the flow, the endless self-creativity of the universe.

The reader so far has not had, or not precisely had, a Spinozistic series of propositions demonstrated in geometrical order (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata), but something very much more like the following short extract from Collingwood’s Essay on Metaphysics:

In unscientific thinking our thoughts are coagulated into knots and tangles; we fish up a thought out of our minds like an anchor foul of its own cable, hanging upside-down and draped in seaweed with shell-fish sticking to it, and dump the whole
thing on deck quite pleased with ourselves for having got it up at all.\textsuperscript{34}

Nevertheless, a concluding attempt must now be made to provide a \textit{dos moi pou sto} (‘Give me a place to stand’) – or rather (with Simplicius in his \textit{Physics}) a \textit{pa(i) bo kai kino tan gan} (a ‘Where am I to go and move the earth?’). There is perhaps just a space to provide, not a \textit{catena}, but some loose links.

In the \textit{Inferno}, IV.131, Dante speaks of \textit{il maestro di color che sanno}, ‘the Master of those who know’.

Finding a place to stand, or finding a platform as a preliminary to engaging in movement, on a great white horse like Sir Walter Scott, being chivalrous and romantic and, perhaps, too, dramatic – all that is very necessary at a time when not all truths are convenient, when what is required is the moral equivalent of war.

But if you’ve had an allusion to one President more or less, you might as well have two or three more, in one way or another. We can do without: ‘\textit{Ich bin ein Berliner}’, but we can do with a different John Kennedy sentence: ‘Our problems are man-made, therefore they can be solved by man …’. Who the third is, I think I need not tell this audience: ‘Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is the fear of fear itself.’

You’ve had one clue already from Spinoza’s \textit{amor Dei intellectualis}. And you’ve had Madeleine Bassett on ‘the stars as God’s daisy-chain’. But my title included, advisedly, the word ‘classical’, and that entitles me to turn to ‘the Master of those who know’.

Aristotle has three terms or formulations. He speaks of ‘the [books] next after the \textit{Physics}’, of ‘First Philosophy’, and of ‘Theology’ (\textit{theologike}). And to these may be added ‘Wisdom’, or \textit{Sophia}. He writes in an extremely spare, sparse or lapidary style. On Aristotle, in his contrast with Plato, the literary critic, F. L. Lucas says this:

\begin{quote}
It remains, to me at least, an enormous relief to come back from Plato to common sense – even that somewhat prosaic and pachydermatous common sense which may at moments give the reader of Aristotle a vision of a very large and sagacious elephant picking up very small pins.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}
One of these small pins is God, who or which, for Aristotle (according to T. S. Eliot’s teacher, Joachim) is ‘the only form without matter’. Such a god, to Spinoza, of course, would simply not matter, would, that is, simply not exist, as being without the essential or necessary attribute of extension.

Most thinkers are agreed that the shape, dimension and characteristics (and perhaps numerical quantity) of the Deity is a puzzle or a mystery. The Christian myth is very commonly boiled down to what Collingwood would call three ‘absolute presuppositions’, namely: incarnation (or embodiment in a person or persons or all persons), crucifixion (or agony and death, to which all persons are in some sort subject), and lastly resurrection (or awakening, or immortality). Or one might simply speak of affirmation, negation, and super-affirmation, perhaps of a romantic, or even romanticist kind.

One of the things that Aristotle speaks about is enjoyment and the ‘apolaustic’. To these should be added, of course, the Shir haShirim, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge have to say about hilaritas and the question that Collingwood puts in Speculum Mentis:

How would you like to enjoy for ever what in the highest art you glimpse, half-concealed in the torrent of sensation?

To which Bultmann’s imperative may finally, may eschatologically be added:

In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.

Let the conclusion be English:

For I that am lord of lif, love is my drynke,
And for that drynke today, I deide upon erthe.
I faught so, me thursteth yet, for mannies soule sake;
May no drynke me moiste, ne my thurst slake,
Til the vendage falle in the vale of Josaphat,
That I drynke right ripe must, resurreccio mortuorum.
And thanne shal I come as a kyng, crownd, with aungeles,
And have out of helle alle mennes soules.
Notes

1 This is a shortened version of a paper given to a conference at the Rochester Institute of Technology – December 13–15, 2007 on ‘The Fate of Romanticism: From Faust to the Present’.


6 Ibid., 295.


12 Ibid., 129.


16 Schleiermacher, On Religion, 103.

17 Ibid., 43.


21 Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 244.


23 *Odyssey*, XX, 14–19, p. 330.

24 Gregor Smith, *J. G. Hamann*, 34.

25 Ibid., 34–5.


33 Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, 1 f.

34 Ibid., 119.


