

# *Here Are the Materials Strewn Along the Ground -* **Skepticism, Autonomy and Education in Kant and Romanticism**

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### **Abstract:**

It is widely acknowledged that Kant's work presents an argument against modern skepticism (see Guyer 2008). However, it is less clear what this argument turns out to be and why, after Kant, skepticism blooms again (see Franks 2014). I argue that for Kant, skepticism is a certain disappointment of the human with its own intelligible powers, being torn between the actual and the ideal. Hence, his response to skepticism implies a limitation of knowledge as well as his image of the human as being of two worlds. The overcoming of skepticism implies the recovery of its voice as intelligible being in following the moral law, a constitution he calls autonomy. However, the image of two worlds, the sensual and the ideal, continues skepticism's most prominent image of two disparate realms (mind vs. body). After Kant, romanticism transforms Kant's two realms into the idea of the transformability of the human in a process they call *Bildung* (education). Evoking the literal project of "building" according to an image (*Bild*) or ideal, romanticism imagines a recovery from skepticism as the "up-building" of man out of fragmentation as aesthetic-educational task; a secularized salvific history by replacing God through man as author of one's existence.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Education, Kant, Romanticism, Skepticism

### **Introduction: Skepticism after Kant**

In 1794, Karl Friedrich Stäudlin published one of the first works concerning the history of modern skepticism, which he began with the following words:

Skepticism begins to be a sickness of this age [...]. This sickness caused the newest revolution in philosophy which turned it into an object of deepest philosophical inquiry. This revolution should have brought it down, yet, after a certain discovery, [...] it should have fortified it. (Stäudlin 1794, iii)<sup>1</sup>

This "newest revolution in philosophy" is, of course, a reference to Immanuel Kant, whose

image decorates Stäudlin's text on the front page, next to David Hume's. Kant's philosophy aimed to bring skepticism to an end but, in the eyes of Stäudlin, seems to have failed in doing so. But this evaluation of Kant's work depends on what we take "bringing skepticism to an end" to mean and what we understand as Kant's accomplishment. Recently, Paul Franks (2014) tries to show how skepticism remains a problem *after* Kant and how a specific form of skepticism arises precisely *because of* Kant's philosophy in Jacobi and Maimon. In this way, skepticism remains a problem – of philosophy. However, 4 years after Stäudlin's text, in 1798, German (Jenaer) Romanticism is established in the first publication of the *Athenäum* journal. And famously, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy claim that "Kant opens up the possibility of romanticism" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988, 29). By connecting both thoughts, Stäudlin's as well as Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's, I claim that *skepticism after* Kant opens up the possibility of romanticism. In other words, against Kant's own conviction to have emptied skepticism of pull, he showed skepticism's necessity and that romantic authors write under this necessity. Skepticism here means the idea that the human being is necessarily torn between two disparate worlds, mind vs. body, the sensual vs. the intelligible, and that my claims of knowledge do not reach the world outside of me. Romanticism after Kant is governed by this image but also attempts to overcome it in the idea of the world's and the human's "transformation," which romantic writers imagine as a process of an aesthetical education of the human.

In order to show this, I will demonstrate how Kant's argument with skepticism leads to a subjectification of the world that culminates in his idea of autonomy. Kant challenges the image of two distinct worlds not by refuting skepticism's claim but by changing our idea of the human. For Kant, as he says in his *Prolegomena*, skepticism is a way of thinking ("Denkungsart") in which reason violently goes against itself (P 271)<sup>2</sup>, something he describes in the foreword to his first *Critique* as the burden of reason to be tormented with questions it can neither answer nor stop asking, since it is reason itself which poses them, and which cause metaphysical illusions. In one word, skepticism is human reason's dissatisfaction with itself. Kant's project of a limitation of knowledge aims at this disappointment of the human with itself. Therefore, he introduces the idea of the human as being capable of viewing herself from two standpoints or worlds, the sensual and the intelligible. The latter is the realm of the moral law, and to follow this law for its own sake, without subjective interest, is to enact one's autonomy and the achievement of the human. Kant calls this autonomy to speak with an objective voice.

Romanticism takes up Kant's idea of autonomy as well as the accompanying image of two worlds but rejects Kant's way of completing this ideal. The abandonment of subjective interest is no overcoming of skepticism, but an instance of it. If skepticism is the disappointment of the human with the human, hence with the ordinary life of human beings, then the overcoming of skepticism requires the reawakening of *interest in* the human. The image of two worlds can function as instance of skepticism, if these two worlds are seen as distinct worlds, or as attempt to overcome skepticism, if they are seen as certain *perspectives on one* world, a shift that equally requires a change

of perspective. Romantic authors often imagine the former possibility as humanity's Fall from nature which produces shame about our condition and disappointment with the current state of culture. The latter possibility, however, expresses the same disappointment with culture; yet, it sees its overcoming not in a reinstallation of nature but in a transformation of culture. Schiller imagines this transformation as aesthetical education, Schlegel calls it *Bildung* (education), Novalis calls it the "romanticization" of the everyday. In both visions, the human is fragmented, but this fragmentation is inhabited differently. The romantic idea of fragment is, as Blanchot says, "a totally new mode of fulfillment (*accomplissement*) [...]" (Blanchot 1983, 172) Romanticism strives, like Kant, for an ideal but, opposed to Kant, this ideal is not fixed objectively. The Romantic idea of *Bildung*, self-cultivation, transformation etc., entailing the word "Bild" for "picture" or "image," attempts to find an idea or image of the self that is neither transcendental, nor objective. The task is, therefore, to distinguish between an image of perfection, conceived as the "end" of *Bildung*, and "false" images of completion. In other words, Romanticism searches for a new form of subjectivity, that is deeper than the traditional sense of subjectivity, the latter remains in the opposition to objectivity, publicity, and therefore in the grip of skepticism. The romantic quest precisely is to recover the subjective voice of the human that is suppressed by skepticism (seeing subjectivity as a lack of objectivity) or by Kant's idea of an objective voice as the adequate expression of our humanity. In this sense, Bloom can announce that "Wordsworth's Copernican revolution in poetry is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity, the loss of what a poem is 'about.'" (Bloom 1970, 9)

### 1. Kant, Skepticism, Morality

Kant calls his accomplishment in philosophy a "Copernican Revolution." Before him, philosophers have assumed that all knowledge must conform to objects whereas now all objects must conform to our knowledge. The result of such an investigation is that, since knowledge depends on experience, human knowledge can only work under certain conditions of experience, which Kant calls space and time as pure *a priori* concepts. Only objects that fit these conditions can be known, which he calls "appearances." Whatever these appearances represent, however, cannot itself appear, hence cannot be experienced and cannot be known. Kant calls these objects "things in themselves." These transcendental objects or "ideas" must be *assumed* because they "cause" the appearances, although they escape any human knowledge. These objects are the objects of metaphysics, e.g. God and freedom. At the end of the first *Critique*, Kant shows how any proof of God's existence must remain improvable, and how freedom, although unknowable, is a practical idea. We are constantly confronted with two worlds, the world of sensual causation, or appearances, and the world of intelligible causes, or things in themselves, or freedom.<sup>3</sup>

If the modern epistemological discourse was determined by the representation *of* objects, the visuality of the world<sup>4</sup>, knowledge after Kant is determined by the mind's projection *onto* "objects." Kant marks the shift from the mind's passive mirroring of an independent reality outside to an

active structuring of the world. Knowledge in pictures is replaced by knowledge in words or concepts. This Kantian revolution, together with the already existing rationalistic (Leibniz, Wolff) as well as empiristic (Locke) doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, makes representation obsolete. The more surprising is the tendency of the “aesthetical” discourse of 18<sup>th</sup> century Classicism to focus on *mimesis* as the ideal of literature, e.g. in Gottsched’s poetics.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the triumph of the word over the image, the intellectual over the sensual, is not without costs. The uncertainty about representation accompanies the *desire* for such visual experience, which is now impossible because of the subject’s removal from the sensual world. Instead of compensating the failure of the “ocular proof,” language intensifies the sense of the world’s inaccessibility, which causes skepticism.

Certainly, the matter is more complicated than suggested here. What is Kant’s relation to skepticism? First, the famous interruption of his dogmatic slumber in reading Hume, as he calls it in the *Prolegomena* (P 260), did not motivate him to *refute* Hume’s skepticism concerning cause and effect. He takes skepticism in a different tone: instead of asking “how could we possibly know that effect B is caused by A?”, he asks “under which *conditions* can we reasonably speak of cause and effect?” Skepticism is not a specific claim but a mood in which a claim is made. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant calls skepticism a *way of thinking* in which reason violently goes against itself (P 271).<sup>6</sup> Kant’s treatment of skepticism, therefore, can only be to restore *hope*, to make room for faith, as he says, in the pursue of knowledge. For him, the limitation of absolute knowledge (representation) is the condition for knowledge. The intellect’s triumph over the senses implies the split of the human being as inhabitant of two worlds. The limitation of knowledge opens the possibility of freedom as transcendental *idea*, which is not an object of knowledge but of morality. Kant shows how skepticism cannot be refuted but must be undermined, changing *the way* humans think about their own capabilities. However, Kant is convinced to have brought an end to the possibility of despair human beings feel about their own constitution. His moral philosophy is the expression of this conviction.

Kant’s ultimate question in his ethics is: “How we can be sure to follow the moral law for its own sake (its ideal) and not out of mere conformity (in appearance to it)? How can we connect these two worlds, which were introduced by Kant himself, and act freely? It is important to see that Kant’s philosophy was invested in this question from the beginning of his “epistemological” first *Critique* and that his introduction of these two worlds or standpoints, as he calls it, is essential to his limitation of reason, hence to his rescue of knowledge, which is his settlement of skepticism. But how can such limitation not appear to be skepticism itself since it “shuts us off” from our desired transcendental ideas and things in themselves? The direction of Kant’s conclusion solely depends on our *standpoint*.<sup>7</sup> And taken this standpoint as crucial element throughout Kant’s philosophy, we can agree with Paul Guyer in arguing against John Rawls, Thomas Hill and Karl Ameriks that far “from being indifferent to skepticism, then, Kant organized his entire philosophy as a response to the varieties of skepticism *as he understood them*,” (Guyer 2008, 29) which refers to epistemological skepticism in his first *Critique* and to moral skepticism in his Practical Philosophy.

And since all of Kant's *Critiques* end in an investigation of human freedom, the way Kant sees this freedom enacted must be a response to the threat of skepticism.

Therefore, we need to understand Kant's idea of autonomy as the expression of such freedom. Autonomy means to act in accordance to as well as to give the moral law. This entails some problems. E.g., actions can be "in conformity with duty," without being "from duty," for the sake of the moral law. That means, there are actions that are "in conformity with duty" and to which the subject has "immediate inclination," in which case it is impossible to know whether the subject acted for the sake of the law or in mere conformity to it.<sup>8</sup> And Kant famously, scandalously claims that there is no *moral* worth of an action out of compassion. He claims that the principle of morality cannot follow from any form of "interest" (GM 449)<sup>9</sup> or subjective "incitement", which would be a heteronomy, but from the respect towards oneself as person (GM 427, 432). To fail to act for the sake of the law is to fail to recognize oneself as "person," as "end in itself," opposed to a thing or "means" (GM 427-428). And he then ends with one famous description of the categorical imperative: "*So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*" (GM 429) Therefore, autonomy is directly connected to my state as a human being; to fail to enact my autonomy is to fail my humanity. The fulfillment of the unconditioned moral imperative is the realization of the "Realm of Ends" in which any rational being gives the law *and* obeys it (GM 432-433).

This leads us to the crucial point for Kant that I cannot have any interest in fulfilling the moral law. Which also means that Kant is unable to provide any reason to follow it. The moral law does only apply to mixed beings that are object of temptation. The condition of the possibility of autonomy is that the human being *can* perceive itself from two standpoints. Without this double nature, there will not be any need for the call for autonomy. The "ought" of the categorical imperative would be pointless if we would already act in conformity to it (see GM 454). Human beings can only be autonomous if they can fail to do so. But *how* can we fail here? Kant acknowledges above all that philosophy cannot provide any explanation for the freedom of will, and that it fails to provide any "interest" as motivation to follow the moral law. Yet, he remarks, "[the human] actually does take an interest in them [...]." (GM 460) The moral law is not incentive *because* it interests us (which is heteronomy) but because *it cannot fail* to interest us *as human beings*: "the law interests because it is valid for us as human beings, since it arose from our will as an intelligence, hence from our actual self [...]." (GM 461) That means, for Kant, the accomplishment of autonomy requires the acknowledgement of one's humanity. If we consider Kant's word "Interesse" from its Latin root, we will get an interesting picture. "Interesse" is the present active infinitive of "intersum" which literally means "to lie between," "to be apart," "to differ", "to take part in." Failing to take an interest in the moral law, in the intelligible world, is failing to recognize oneself as human being, since, for Kant, the human being is the one "in between" these two worlds.

However, while Kant sees this as the end of our moral conversation, it should be the beginning. At any point of Kant's investigation, he must assume that we already "know" about our "ought" that constraints us in our vision of the moral world. Yet, such ideal creates the precondition of our morality in the first place, without which we exist morally voiceless. Kant always needs to presume that we *have a voice*, that we *have the ability to decide* between duty and incentive, and hence must choose what we *ought to do*. What we lack is not the law but *interest*. The opposite to a moral life, envisioned by Kant, is not an immoral (or evil) one, but one of indifference towards this life. Hence, what we need is not the law but education. Or as the German Romantics call it: "Bildung."

## 2. The Concept of *Bildung* in Romanticism

John Rawls interprets Kant's "main aim as deepening and justifying Rousseau's idea that liberty is acting in accordance with a law that we give to ourselves" which "leads not to a morality of austere command but to an ethic of mutual respect and self-esteem" and that "Kant speaks of the failure to act on the moral law as giving rise to shame and not to feelings of guilt" (Rawls 1999, 225). In his text *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (1786), Kant describes how the first development of freedom in the human being takes place as the disobedience towards the instinct, "God's voice" (CB 111). Despite the convenience to follow the voice of nature, the human listens to the voice of reason and is free, standing "on the edge of an abyss [...]" (CB 112) Although Kant takes the biblical account as holy "document" (CB 109) of the Fall of man, he does invert the occurrence of shame. Shame is no longer effect of man's knowledge but of man's failure to know, of man's lack of courage to think and instead wishing to return to a state of nature.

The experience of nature as irretrievable loss is one of romanticism's most common images, often taken to be the problem of self-consciousness. J. H. Van den Berg writes that the "factualization of our understanding – the impoverishment of things to a uniform substantiality – and the disposal of everything that is not identical with this substantiality into the 'inner self' are both parts of one occurrence. The inner self became necessary when contacts were devaluated." (Van den Berg 1970, 57) As causes for the invention of the inner self, Van den Berg lists the rise of Protestantism and Luther's distinction between the "inner" man and the outer. This diremption of the self runs like a thread from Luther to Rousseau's alienation from nature in his *Confessions*, foreshadowed by Petrarch's climb of Mount Ventoux (1335), to Schleiermacher and finally to modern psychology and Freud's discovery of the unconscious, which "became possible because of an interiorization of all human realities." (Van den Berg 1970, 63) Van den Berg's observations stand in one line with other renowned critics and their diagnosis that romanticism's central problem is, as Bloom phrases it, "subjectivity or self-consciousness" (Bloom 1970, 1), i.e. that "the dominant form of Romantic tragedy [is] the tragedy of self-awareness, the sense of losing the spontaneity of one's relationship to nature and becoming an isolated and subjective consciousness." (Frye 1970, 40) Sometimes, this loss of innocence is imagined as a re-enactment or secularization of the Fall

(see Fry 1970, 26), or as the linkage between consciousness and self-consciousness as knowledge and guilt (see Hartman 1970, 49), so that Romanticism is either defined by “anti-self-consciousness” (Hartman 1970) or as the quest to lose self-consciousness by enacting consciousness, a quest “downward and inward” (Frye 1970, 33).

However, I would interpret the “problem of self-consciousness” as skepticism, the feeling of an unbridgeable distance between two realms, the inner and outer, which nonetheless remain intimately connected, like Descartes’ mind and body, and Kant’s sensual and intelligible realm. Then, it is questionable whether this “problem” is the cause for skepticism or its effect. It seems that the set up of this problem already implies skepticism’s self-interpretation of the alienation of two distinct realms from one another, self-consciousness and nature, the claims of knowledge and the world that is claimed to be known. The former, consciousness, is related to subjectivity, whereas the latter, the world, to objectivity. If we understand skepticism as the problem of subjectivity as opposed to objectivity, as e.g. Isaiah Berlin sees it, by focusing on Hume’s influence on Kant as the original birthstone of romanticism, which he calls, for reasons, “Irrationalism” (see Berlin 1999), we are nonetheless captivated in the same problem.

Instead, I would suggest that the question of self-consciousness already is an instance of our shame and not the attempt to overcome it, because it implies that this loss has actually taken place. Instead of seeing the “loss” (of nature, of immediacy, of innocence) as a metaphysical part of our condition, it is *merely* our perspective onto ourselves, our standing to ourselves, something romantic writers address as melancholy.

Schiller was the first writer who described this melancholy in terms of an actual literary mode, which he calls sentimental poetry. In his text *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Schiller claims that there are two kinds of poetry, “naïve” and “sentimental.” The former is ancient poetry (Homer), whereas the latter is modern. Naïve poetry describes a world in itself (in its totality), it is an absolute depiction, whereas sentimental poetry describes an ideal, it is a depiction of the absolute. Naïve poetry takes the point of view from inside the same world, whereas sentimental poetry is reflective and looks back onto a world, hence it posts an ideal onto the world it describes. The ultimate goal of Art, for Schiller, is the reconciliation of all oppositions between the real and the ideal which, however, remains unachievable:

Nature unifies itself with the human, Art separates and disunites him, he returns to the unity through the ideal. But since the ideal is something infinite, which the cultivated human will never achieve, he cannot become complete in his sense, as the natural human is able to. (Schiller 1962, 717)

No culture can be perfected. As Richard Eldridge puts it, the sentimental “poet lives in this world of antagonisms [...]” (Eldridge 1997, 78) Although the ideal does not lose its attraction to the sentimental poet, she realizes that she will fail to fulfill this task. That is why the sentimental poet chooses the elegy as textual genre:

Nature and the ideal either are objects of mourning if the former is depicted as lost and the latter as unachieved. Or both are objects of joy by representing them as real. The first possibility is the *elegy* in a narrow sense, the other the *idyll* in a broader sense. (Schiller 1962, 727)

The figure of this struggle between two genres is the child. At once, the image of an undisfigured nature in civilization, a pure innocence, *and* the source of an experienced loss. If Rousseau has discovered childhood, Schiller has discovered the loss of childhood, adolescence; maturity or autonomy is not given but must be achieved in the reunification of the real and the ideal.<sup>10</sup> And Schiller makes clear that this process is not only an aesthetical one but an educational one as he described it in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* concerning the idea of *Bildung* (“education”):

Forever bound to one small fragment of the whole, man builds himself as a mere fragment, forever the univocal sound of the wheel, which he moves, in his ear, he will never develop the harmony of his being, and instead of creating humanity within his own nature, he becomes the imprint of his business, of his science. (Schiller 1962, 583)

Schiller contrasts the idea of “humanity in oneself,” Kant’s formula of autonomy, as a process of forming or building, with a state of fragmentation, an absorption into the everyday. He diagnoses that *culture* has turned man into a copy or fragment. However, Schiller does not see the redemption of man’s “wholeness” in a state of nature but in a redemption of culture or Art: “therefore, it is our task to rebuild this totality in our nature, which Art has destroyed, through a higher Art.” (Schiller 1962, 587) Man itself becomes a work of Art, an idea famously ascribed to Shaftesbury. This discourse of authorship and *Bildung*<sup>11</sup> is part of a secularization of the theological image of the human as *ens creatum*, created by God in his image (*imago dei*); man replaces God as the author of his/her existence.<sup>12</sup> Or as Abrams has called it: “the course of human life [...] is no longer a *Heilsgeschichte* [salvation history] but a *Bildungsgeschichte* [history of education]; or more precisely, it is a *Heilsgeschichte* translated into the secular mode of a *Bildungsgeschichte*.” (Abrams 1973, 188) The image of the human changes from *ens creatum* to *opus artis*. That is significant regarding the problem of skepticism. In his second Meditation, Descartes makes the famous claim “[...] that this proposition I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind.” (Descartes 1901, 226) In other words, the fact that the human is *ens creatum* tells Descartes that it needs a proof of its existence, that it must be created. He, therefore, envisions the human being as metaphysically dependent or incomplete or unfinished; and that means, the proof of my existence requires the proof of God’s existence. In romanticism, the individual replaces God as the author of one’s existence. And this authorization takes place in the process of “Bildung” (education) in and through literature. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy remark, “programmatically, the philosophical *organon* is thought as the product or effect of a *poiesis*, as work (*Werk*) or as poetical opus [...]. Philosophy must effectuate itself – complete, fulfill, and realize itself – as poetry.”

(Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1981, 36) God, however, could not fail to authorize my existence, whereas the human can. Therefore, from now on, human existence is imagined not as a state or property but as an achievement, precisely because I can fail to do so. Despite the sudden enhancement of man's powers, the burden to claim one's existence is loaded onto the individual as well. But how can a dependent creature bear the weight of God? It cannot, and so skepticism remains and must remain a possibility in human life for romanticism. That means, human existence cannot be *completed*. This is one way in which romanticism receipts Kant's idea of limitation. Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis invent a whole new literary genre in order to address this problem: the fragment. *Bildung* is part of this discourse since it can never be an actual goal in itself. The idea of *Bildung* implies that it cannot be completed. Romanticism will, therefore, try to transform the concept of completion or *poiesis*. As Richard Eldridge calls it, the "movement toward *poiesis* as the site and inconclusive vehicle of philosophical thinking about our powers, is the central thematic thread of post-Kantian German romanticism." (Eldridge 1997, 71)

In his famous fragment no. 116, Schlegel calls romantic poetry a "progressive universal poetry" and that it continuously remains in a state of "becoming." (Schlegel 1967, 182) The fragment is the genre of choice to "realize" such vision of art because it expresses this paradox in its form. Peter Szondi remarks that "the fragment is conceived as 'the subjective embryo of a developing object,' i.e. as preparation of the longed-for synthesis. Rather than the not-yet-achieved, or what has remained a detached piece, the fragment is perceived as anticipation, promise." (Szondi 1978, 20)

In fragment no. 206, Schlegel says: "A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine." (Schlegel 1967, 197) How can a fragment be "completed" in itself? It seems that, whether fragments are opposed to any form of "system" or not, Schlegel attempts to overcome such a distinction in establishing the genre of the fragment. That means, he does not try to overcome "objectivity" (system) through "subjectivity" (fragment), by showing how any system remains fragmented. Instead, he proposes a different idea of "completion," that does not mean "completion" but "perfection." This distinction is crucial for evaluating Schlegel's argument with Kantian philosophy, or romanticism's investment in Kant's discoveries, circling around the threat of skepticism, which either states that there can be no completion or that there must be a completion.

Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, e.g., claims that Schlegel goes deeper than Jacobi and Fichte in his critique of Kant's thing in itself "by not only criticizing the notion of a thing in itself but also to reject the accompanying ontology based on permanent substance," in which "thing" signifies "some static, lifeless, ahistorical bearer of properties" (Millán-Zaibert 2007, 142). For her, the "deal of such philosophical methods is 'some state of perfection,' which, as we saw earlier, was disavowed in Schlegel's emphasis on infinite becoming." (Millán-Zaibert 2007, 146) But Schlegel clearly avows or even welcomes the fragment as "some sort of perfection." To be sure, Schlegel's criticism does entail a rejection of Kant's noumenal realm, and hence of Kant's whole idea of

freedom, so that Schlegel's project seems to be the harmonization of Kant's two worlds in a combination of subjective Idealism and objective Realism (see Beiser 2003, 150). However, Schlegel also *inherits* Kant's notion of two worlds.<sup>13</sup> The romantic quest searches for a way to inhabit this double nature of human beings. Stanley Cavell makes this point in relation to his own work:

I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic. [...] The everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat; but since that very habitation is from time to time perceptible to us – we who have constructed it – as extraordinary, we conceive that some place elsewhere, or this place otherwise constructed, must be what is ordinary to us, must be what romantics [...] call 'home.' [...] Romantics are brave in noting the possibility of life-in-death and what you might call death-in-life. My favorite romantics are the ones (I think the bravest ones) who do not attempt to escape these conditions by taking revenge on existence. But this means willing to continue to be born, to be natal, hence mortal. (Cavell 1988, 154)

I guess, a sense of this romanticism lies in Novalis' fragments in which he calls for a "romanticization of the everyday", to make the ordinary extraordinary, and the extraordinary ordinary, so that the beginning achievement of romanticism would be a form of *estrangement*. Estrangement implies a loss of orientation, to not know one's way about. And if that loss of orientation happens within what appeared to be familiar and ordinary, Romanticism is itself uncanny. One could say that Romanticism keeps skepticism's possibility open by warning for too much knowledge. Schlegel makes this point in his short and extraordinary text *On Incomprehensibility*: "Truly, you would be scared if the world, as you demand, would become comprehensible in all seriousness. And isn't this infinite world created by reason from incomprehensibility or chaos?" (Schlegel 1967, 370) Eldridge calls this "Schlegelian nihilism" (Eldridge 1997, 85). In fact, this is Schlegel's reception of Kant's early claim that the "I think" must accompany all my thoughts or representations and therefore must remain irrepresentable. Schlegel claims that the "inner happiness depends [...] on such an aspect that must remain in the dark but also carries and holds the whole, and which would lose this power in the moment it is dissolved in reason." (Schlegel 1967, 370) Schlegel consequently continues Kant's project. Therefore, he does not propose a form of "undecidability" (Eldridge 1997, 83), but a limitation of knowledge and the inhabitation of such limitation, on which inner happiness depends, which classically is seen as the highest good (Aristotle).

Further, Schlegel announced in 1799 in one of his *Ideen* fragments the following: "The highest good and the alone useful is education [Bildung]." (Schlegel 1967, 259) *Bildung* as the education of humanity was the central goal of early romanticism, including Novalis, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Tieck, Wackenroder, Schiller. And the emphasis of *Bildung* certainly was due to the social and political climate of these thinkers. The catastrophe in which the French Revolution ended in 1793 raised the question of how to attain political change including free,

modern citizens without falling into terror and chaos. Even before this cataclysmic event, thinkers thought about the idea that *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) alone fails to provide the means to guide people to fulfill the ideas of *Aufklärung*; it lacked education. Rousseau, Herder and Hamann tried to provide this concept of education or perfection, as well as Goethe, Leibniz, Mendelssohn etc. Especially for the former two, education's goal was the perfection of one's sentiments and feelings, along reason, whereas for Leibniz education was a matter of cultivating one's intellect. How does the romantic idea of education differ from these? All these ideas think of education in terms of perfection, excellence, self-cultivation, but only romanticism thinks of it as aesthetic education, and only romanticism develops this perfectionism in a direct argument with Kant. The latter sees the highest good in a good will alone, that means aside of any "inclinations," "incitements" etc. Similarly, he defines the pleasure of beauty as "pleasure without interest." Schlegel directly contests Kant's idea by calling *Bildung* the highest good *and* the only thing that is useful. The affront for Kant lies here in both categories: 1. The highest good is the final end (all means lead to this end) and the complete end (nothing can be added to it), although *Bildung* describes a process. 2. The highest good, for Kant, has this status because it is *not* useful.

Further, Kant's problem is that he necessarily is unable to provide any motivation for following the moral law, since it must deprive any such incitements, so that the moral law will only be followed by already morally acting people. Hence, what he leaves out precisely is the process of becoming a moral being. And since his idea of morality or autonomy is the expression of our humanness, Kant leaves out how to become human. The romantic idea here is that we *must* take an interest in our moral life in order to be willing to act morally. To define the experience of beauty as "without interest" seems to be as scandalous as describing the compassionate act of a mother for her child as without moral worth. Hence, the task is to awaken this "interest" in our life, in ourselves, and *not* in a specific topic.<sup>14</sup> Novalis calls this the "romanticization" of everyday life as well as the "logarithmization" of the sacred. To romanticize the world is to see the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite (see Beiser 2003, 101). Novalis asks for nothing less than a transformation of the world. Novalis' "operation" creates distance between us and the ordinary life by showing the latter as unfamiliar; we lack interest in our everyday life *because* it is too close to us.<sup>15</sup> The unknown, mystical, including Kant's transcendental idea of freedom, becomes familiar. The claim to know these ideas caused skepticism. Novalis' cure for skepticism is to discover the sublimity of everyday life. To be sure, however, this "operation" does not have an end, although it can come to an end at any point. This is the typical paradoxical attitude of all of Novalis' fragments; it is the fragmentary structure itself. Novalis' circumscription of this operation, the identification of a lower self with a better self, expresses this potentially never-ending process; there is always a "better" self. He writes in fragment no. 22: "In every moment, the human is capable to be a supersensible being." (Novalis 1981, 433) And later, he writes: "The highest task of education [*Bildung*] is to take control of one's transcendental self, to be the I of one's I." (Novalis 1981 437) Novalis combines this transcendental

perspective, one might call it “sane madness,” with the question of interest: “The transcendental viewpoint for this life awaits us – there it will become quite interesting.” (Novalis 1981, 444)<sup>16</sup> This transcendental viewpoint is, of course, not transcendent; it is a perspective on *this* life. It seems that Novalis suggests that the goal of *Bildung* is to retrieve an interest in one’s life, that we should see the ordinary as extraordinary, and acknowledge the transformability of this ordinary realm. It is our ordinary life that is the object of such a transformation. The possibility of such transformation is given by Kant’s discovery, “that reason has insight only into what it produces according to its own design; that it must [...] force nature to answer its questions [...]” (CPR BXIII) And further, let us suppose that this mode of asking questions, although it guarantees the success of our claims of knowledge, creates our disappointment with knowledge; because it is unable to provide us with “nature” independent from our mind. Therefore, it causes our indifference towards this realm. This indifference is caused by our feeling of two distinct realms, the sensual and the ideal. It is the latter’s perspective that causes the disappointment in the former. Kant’s idea of the human as inhabitant of these two worlds was meant to overcome this disappointment in the human and its limitation, but it merely strengthened the human chagrin with itself. Romanticism abolishes these two worlds but only in order to show how the world below, what they call the ordinary, is object of transformation; a transformation they call *Bildung*.

### 3. Outlook beyond Romanticism

At this point, instead of a conclusion, I would like to present some ideas on how the romantic idea of *Bildung* continues to be significant in other works outside of (German) romanticism. E.g., Emerson says the following in his *The American Scholar*: “This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground.” (Emerson 1893, 40) “Upbuilding” in Emerson’s text echoes the German *Bildung* as standing for education and culture or cultivation. And the idea of “building” takes a literal connotation with “building a house” in Emerson’s “materials are strewn along the ground,” which, back in Germany, Nietzsche takes to be an Aesthetical project, seeing an “expanse of rubble of the most valuable sculptural designs.” (Nietzsche 1954, 328) And for all the differences between Nietzsche as the author of *Schopenhauer as Educator* and of a work like *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, where the idea of a higher culture of man turns into the overcoming of man and an image of the future, the initial position of both texts seems almost identical. Zarathustra says: “Truly, my friends, I walk among men as among fragments and limbs of men!” (Nietzsche 1954, 392)

The idea of “upbuilding” and the strewn materials on the ground, which are fragmented men, reconnects to Emerson’s other statement that man “is no longer upright,” as he says in *Self-Reliance* (Emerson 2009, 59). That means, the human walks bent over, feels ashamed, is not trustworthy, not honorable. In any case, it signifies that the human is not standing. Stanley Cavell, a strong voice in revisiting Emerson as well as romanticism in contemporary criticism, reads this image this way:

We know uprightness names the posture of the human being standing on hind legs, eyes toward heaven (as in a famous outburst of Kant's praise of our moral capacity), namely as having just evolved out of the trees and come to earth. So the resultant force of "man is no longer upright" becomes: man has as it were suffered a setback (another fall, one could say), which has left him everywhere less than human (Mill will say: distorted, crippled; Nietzsche will say: degenerated), and in such a way that he is incapable of the necessary condition of morality (according to Kant, the capacity to stand on his own, that he be autonomous). (Cavell 2005, 217)

If Kant presents the problem of morality as a struggle between incitement and duty and that to choose the latter is a fact of reason, since there cannot be doubt about the "righteousness" of duty, then Kant needs to presuppose the necessary condition of such a choice, that the human already is attracted to a moral life, already stands upon its own legs and, therefore can choose. After leaving the realm of nature and joining the course of reason, there cannot be any doubt about the goal of humanity, for Kant. But what if the human fails to be attracted to a moral life? Or what if duty itself becomes a mere expression of conformity and hence an expression of heteronomy? If that is the essence of what romanticism imagines as the Fall, not as a unique event in the history of mankind, but as an everyday event, as our own apologetics, our fragmentation, then the reversal must be an everyday event as well. Emerson calls the former constitution "conformity" and its opposite "self-reliance": "The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion." (Emerson 2009, 44) And this is to say, in Kantian terms, that to act in conformity with the law is the opposite of acting for the sake of the law. Without the latter, human beings are not autonomous but heteronomous and therefore unable to reclaim their own humanity. So, Emerson, quite arrogantly, claims that "I will stand here for humanity [...]" (Emerson 2009, 53), evoking Kant's earlier phrasing of the categorical imperative. And Nietzsche connects this claim to represent humanity to the question of his identity or existence as a writer in his autobiographical *Ecce Homo*:

As it is my intention within a very short time to confront my fellow-men with the greatest demand that has ever been made upon them, it seems to me above all necessary to declare here who and what I am. [...] I live on my own credit, and it is probably only a prejudice to suppose that I am alive. (Nietzsche 1980, 257)

And if we take Nietzsche's idea of his own voice as a writer as a further contribution to the task of *Bildung* as aesthetical achievement and acknowledgement of the fragmented human constitution, we could see here Nietzsche's inheritance of the romantic quest to "become who you are" (the subtitle to his *Ecce Homo*). In any case, the existence of this discourse in Emerson and Nietzsche might be able to reveal untaken paths in their work as well as hidden continuances.

### Endnotes:

1. Quotations from original German texts are given in my translations if not marked otherwise.
2. References to Kant's works follow the "Akademie Ausgabe." For Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, I refer to the English translation by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (2011). The other works follow my own translations.
3. Kant attempted to bridge this division between his *First* and *Second Critiques* in Aesthetics, in his Third Critique, in which the work of Art is an example of freedom. And the Romantics take Kant's Third Critique (Judgement, Genius, Sublime) and transform it into the idea of the autonomy of Art as the realization of freedom.
4. Richard Rorty argues for this in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980, 17-69), claiming that Descartes marks the "invention of the mind" as *mirror* of the world.
5. One exemption might be Lessing's *Laokoon* essay (1776) in which he distinguishes between the visual art's representation of figures and colors in space and the linguistic representation of actions in time. Yet, even this distinction remains governed by the idea of *mimesis*.
6. I thank Paul Franks (2014) for pointing to this passage in Kant's text.
7. Kant's idea of a standpoint, that is an ideal to which we can strive, seems to be Kant's perfectionist side. Paul Guyer specifically does "understand Kant's own moral philosophy as a form of perfectionism, as long as we are clear about what it is that is supposed to be perfected." (Guyer 2014, 196) It is interesting to see how Kant's moral philosophy, often described as dry, entails an element of transformation, almost utopian, in it. Guyer described it in the following way: "But even though the ideas of reason cannot give us theoretical cognition, Kant holds that they can give us *ideals*, that is unique conceptions of how reality *ought to be* rather than determinate cognition of how it *is*. Thus, Kant argues that while the theoretical use of pure reason can only lead to metaphysical illusion, the practical use of pure reason generates the ideals by which we ought to act in transforming the world." (Guyer 2014, 205-206)
8. Kant's example is a salesman who does not overprice his goods. He does so in accordance with the law, but he also has a direct motivation to do so.
9. A crucial point is Kant's distinction between two forms of interest. To have interest in acting according to the moral law, because it provides benefits, is an incitement, to take interest in the moral law is to follow the idea of the realm of Ends. Kant's idea is that morality is something ordinary human beings cannot fail to take an interest in (see GM 449).
10. Richard Eldridge remarks on this point: "The child now becomes an uncanny figure of both the ideal possibility, in its unselfconscious naturalness, and horror, insofar as in its spontaneity it is already one the way into competitive antagonisms." (Eldridge 1997, 81)
11. Gadamer delivers a thorough description of the the history of *Bildung* as one of the "guiding humanistic principles" in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1972, 7-16). However, notably, he goes from Herder's idea of an "Emporbildung zur Humanität" ("upbuilding to humanity") directly to Hegel's idea of the human as no natural being, because it is not what it should be, and therefore in need of *Bildung*. But that also means that Gadamer ignores all of Romanticism's writings and Hegel's own influence by these writings.
12. See Lichtenstein's entry on "Bildung" in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Band 1: A-C*, edited by Joachim Ritter et al. (1971), pp. 921–927.
13. Eldridge remarks: "Kantian antidogmatism begins by pointing us toward a sense of ourselves both as free and rational inquirers and agents [...] and as beings bound up in a causally determined course of nature. But it then fails to show us how quite to live out these two senses with or against one another." (Eldridge 1997, 61)
14. If Wordsworth's poetry demarcates the point when a poem loses its subject, and hence becomes "modern," then this either is the effect or the cause of a loss of interest in "subject," "things," "the

- world.” Wordsworth e.g. says in his *Prelude*: “all things were to me / Loose and disjointed, and the affections left / Without a vital interest.” (Wordsworth 2010, 476)
15. Wittgenstein famously says: “We want to understand something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand.” (Wittgenstein 1958, 42) And in context of this remark, he claims that his investigation does not look for “appearances” but for the “possibilities of appearances” (Wittgenstein 1958, 42), and therefore does not want to learn anything “new.” Wittgenstein, obviously, takes up Kant’s transcendental inquiry to look for the conditions of possibility of experience. It is true, since Kant “merely” coasts the island of pure reason, which conditions all experience, he does not make any “new” experiences. In limiting our use of reason, Kant does not teach us anything new. But he also does not just *remind* us of the limits of reason. His mode of informing us about such a condition is *new*.
16. Here is another fragment concerning “interest”: “The individual is the only thing of interest, therefore all classical is not individual.” (Novalis 1981, 447) What does that mean? That Classicism is not “interesting”? Or incapable of creating interest because it lacks individuality? But Novalis says, Classicism is not individual *because* it lacks interest, which is the opposite of what we would expect. But that can only mean that the individual is the goal and interest is the means to achieve such goal.

#### Abbreviations for Kant’s Works in the text:

- CB: *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*  
CPR: *Critique of Pure Reason*  
GM: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*  
P: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

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