

Tabula Rasa: Shelley's Metaphor of the Mind

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WHEN Shelley, in a much-quoted passage of *A Defence of Poetry*, likened man to "an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre,"¹ he was consciously seeking the safe middle ground between two antithetical theories of cognition. The analogue of the wind-harp (as M. H. Abrams has shown,² a critical commonplace with the Romantics) afforded Shelley a commodious means of affirming at once the sensationalism of Locke and the intuitionism of Descartes and Leibnitz. Through its use, the patent contradiction between two conflicting epistemologies could be circumvented, if not logically reconciled, and the simultaneous participation of both object and subject in the cognitive process — the very solution propounded by Kant³ — plausibly argued.

There was good reason for Shelley to seek a compromise between the two schools, for though his own beliefs had inclined him in both directions at different times, he made no final commitment to either. The scientific materialism of Holbach ("a seducing system to young and superficial minds," he would later confess in his essay *On Life*⁴) had left him permanently dissatisfied, with a deepening sense that perceptible things were the shadows, not the stuff, of reality. "I may not be able to adduce proofs," he declared in a letter to Hogg, in 1811, "but I think that the leaf of a tree, the meanest insect on which we trample, are, in themselves, arguments more conclusive than any which

can be advanced, that some vast intellect animates infinity."⁵ For an empirico-materialist such as Shelley fancied himself at the time, the admission must have been humbling indeed; only a few months later he would take Elizabeth Hitchener to task for voicing similar unscientific opinions:

Locke *proves* that there are no innate ideas, that in consequence, there can be no innate speculative or practical principles, thus overturning all appeals of *feeling* in favor of Deity, since that feeling must be referable to some origin. . . . Since all ideas are derived from the senses, this *feeling* must have originated from some sensual excitation, consequently the possessor of it may be aware of the time, of the circumstances, attending its commencement . . . Locke proves this by induction too clear to admit of rational objection.⁶

Despite the seeming self-assurance of Shelley, here at his best magisterial style, doubts continued to prey on his mind. Less than one week after chiding Miss Hitchener for relapsing into orthodoxy, he wrote to Hogg in a mood of desperate candour: "Alas! Where is virtue? Where is perfection? Where I cannot reach. Is there another existence? No! Then I can never reach it. Is there another existence? Yes! Then I shall live there, rendering and rendered happy."⁷ Of these momentary changes of mind Miss Hitchener might be blissfully unaware; yet even she must have wondered at Shelley's mutable views when a few short months after his letter commending the doctrine of Locke, he frankly confided:

I have considered it in every possible light; and reason tells me that death is the boundary of the life of man, yet I feel, I believe the direct contrary. . . . The senses are the only inlets of knowledge, and there is an inward sense that had persuaded me of this.⁸

What impresses the reader of Shelley's remarks is not the inconsistency of his opinions but his monumental integrity in discerning the flaws and yet upholding the truth of a philosophical system founded in contradiction. None but a most exceptional mind could have held two irreconcilable doctrines in a willing suspension of disbelief for so

long and at such great personal cost to itself. In the years that followed, the agonizing debate between sensationalism and intuitionism went on in Shelley's mind, though the certainty of belief he sought remained, as ever, elusive. "It is an axiom in mental philosophy," he remarked in *Speculations on Metaphysics*, Part I,

that we can think of nothing which we have not perceived. When I say we can think of nothing, I mean, we can imagine nothing, we can reason of nothing, we can remember nothing, we can foresee nothing. The most astonishing combinations of poetry, the subtlest deductions of logic and mathematics, are no other than combinations which the intellect makes of sensations according to its own laws. A catalogue of all the thoughts of the mind, and of all their possible modifications, is a cyclopedic history of the Universe.⁹

It is odd that one who could so convincingly argue in favour of Locke's theories, and maintain (as Shelley did in his poem "On Death") that

This world is the nurse of all we know,
This world is the mother of all we feel,¹⁰

could also, when the occasion arose, proclaim his belief in innate ideas. "The mind of a new-born infant," he once admitted to Hogg, his Oxford companion, "so far from being, as Locke affirms, a sheet of blank paper, is . . . a perfect encyclopedia, comprehending not only the newest discoveries, but all those still more valuable and wonderful inventions that will hereafter be made."¹¹ If so, it is little wonder indeed that Cythna, imprisoned in her submarine cave, in *The Revolt of Islam*, Canto VII, can find ready access to all the knowledge she seeks by studying no other volume than this:

'My mind became the book through which I grew
Wise in all human wisdom, and its cave,
Which like a mine I rifled through and through,
To me the keeping of its secrets gave —
One mind, the type of all, the moveless wave
Whose calm reflects all moving things that are,
Necessity, and love, and life, the grave,
And sympathy, fountains of hope and fear;
Justice, and truth, and time, and the world's
natural sphere. (VII, 3100-8)

The conception of man's intellect as a mine ready-laden with innate ideas — ideas brought to consciousness by the senses, but neither engendered nor modified by them — was one of Shelley's particular debts to the mathematician and philosopher Leibnitz. The soul at birth, as Leibnitz explained in a treatise written in refutation of Locke,¹² was not of the nature of a *tabula rasa* on which experience recorded its lessons; rather, it might be compared to a block¹³ of unhewn marble, within which there lay, concealed but determined, the shape of the statue. Sense-experience was merely the means of actualizing potential ideas, of stripping away from the indwelling form the accidental irrelevancies that masked it.

So arresting an analogue of the soul could not fail, of course, to make an impression on Shelley, a poet already halfway inclined to mysticism; and two poems, the "Ode to Liberty"¹⁴ and *Epipsychidion*,¹⁵ in fact attest to his familiarity with it. But what is remarkable is that Shelley, despite his search for an accommodation between the intuitionist and the empirical view of the origin of ideas, should not have discerned the possibilities of a solution in Leibnitz. The metaphor of the German philosopher had, after all, admitted the agency of two contributory sources of knowledge — intuitive impulse and sensory stimulation — both of which played determining roles (however unequal) in the genesis of ideas. With a minimum of necessary adjustment, the analogue might have served Shelley's need for an archetype of the cognitive process, as adequately as the Aeolian harp did in *A Defence of Poetry*. Yet, for reasons that we may never discover, he chose to make use not of Leibnitz, but Locke, whose *tabula rasa* he adapted to treat both categories of mental phenomena, those externally and those internally caused.

As early as Shelley's juvenile period, his imagery shows a tendency to define the consciousness as an impressible surface — whether sand, or tablet, or book, or the like —

on which sensation and inspiration inscribe their lessons.
 "O Spirit!" the Fairy Queen cries,

. . . through the sense
 By which thy inner nature was apprised
 Of outward shows, vague dreams have rolled,
 And varied reminiscences have waked
 Tablets that never fade;
 All things have been imprinted there,
 The stars, the sea, the earth, the sky,
 Even the unshapeliest lineaments
 Of wild and fleeting visions
 Have left a record there
 To testify of earth. (*Queen Mab*, VII, 49-59)

Although Shelley ostensibly takes Locke's tablet for his analogy of the mind, his own use of it is conspicuously at odds with that intended by the English philosopher. If the latter employed the image restrictively, to ascribe all knowledge to the experience of the senses, Shelley himself repudiates this restriction: for him, inspiration no less than sensation plays a significant part in shaping the consciousness. In doing violence to Locke's metaphor, the poet does not, however, lose sight of the difference ("not in kind, but in force") between sensory and visionary experience. The first, derived from the fixed and determinate objects of the phenomenal universe, is itself bounded, fixed and determinate; it is indelibly impressed on the mind, waking (as Shelley declares in *Queen Mab*) "Tablets that never fade." But the second, "fleeting" and "evanescent" in nature, "arising unforeseen and departing unbidden," is "elevating and delightful beyond all expression:"¹⁶ although its imprint on the mind is less permanent, it is more dynamic, vital and valuable. "It is," in the words of Shelley's *Defence*,

as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over a sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it.¹⁷

Distinct as they are in the poet's own mind, the two categories of mental impression — the sensory and fixed, and the extrasensory and ephemeral — are each associated

'Arise and quench thy thirst, was her reply.
And as a shut lily stricken by the wand
Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,

I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,
Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
And suddenly my brain became as sand

'Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador;
Whilst the wolf, from which they fled amazed,

'Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore,
Until the second bursts; — so on my sight
Burst a new vision, never seen before,

'And the fair shape waned in the coming light,

'More dimly than a day-appearing dream,
The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep; . . .

(400-12, 427-8)

The rapidity with which dream follows dream, and inspiration succeeds inspiration, wiping the surface of consciousness clean and moulding its own shifting patterns upon it — all this is powerfully evoked by the image, in all its variant forms.¹⁸

By its very rationale, Shelley's distinction of two categories of mental impressions, each arising from a different source and differing in intensity, duration and value, evidently necessitated his use of correspondingly discriminate metaphors. The sand-and-wave analogy of the mind, however apt it might be to describe the soul's receptivity to intuitive notions, was clearly not adequate to convey its susceptibility to sensory stimulation. What was required in its place was an image capable of representing at once the durability of the impressions acquired through the channels of sense, their cumulative effect on the consciousness of the passive observer, the greater forcefulness of sensory presentations, and lastly their inferior value. With characteristic ingenuity, Shelley found once again the solution in Locke, in a group of images closely modelled upon the analogue of the *tabula rasa*: chronicle, register, book of account, and other such forms of immutable record.

Whatever Shelley's motives might have been for taking Locke's metaphor for his own, the effect of his choice was profoundly ironic, for it served merely to bring into focus his ambivalent view of empirical knowledge. As a student of Locke and a man of his times, Shelley assumed almost without question, as "an axiom in mental philosophy," that organic perception played a large part in the constitution of abstract ideas. From Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Rousseau's *Emile* and Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* he had learned of the crucial formative influence of early impressions on the infantine mind. Quite in keeping with the taste of the times, he himself ventured on frequent, if minor, excursions into the *Bildungsroman*, that flourishing *genre* of Romantic invention. In work after work — *Alastor*, "Prince Athanase," *The Revolt of Islam*, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" — he painstakingly detailed the spiritual biography of his heroes, going occasionally so far as to press on the reader his own poetic credentials. "There is an education peculiarly fitted for a Poet," he wrote, "without which genius and sensibility can hardly fill the circle of their capacities."

The circumstances of my accidental education have been favourable to this ambition. I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes and the sea, and the solitude of forests: Danger, which sports upon the brink of precipices, has been my playmate. I have trodden the glaciers of the Alps, and lived under the eye of Mont Blanc. I have been a wanderer among distant fields. I have sailed down mighty rivers, and seen the sun rise and set, and the stars come forth, whilst I have sailed night and day down a rapid stream among mountains. I have seen populous cities, and have watched the passions which rise and spread, and sink and change, amongst assembled multitudes of men. I have seen the theatre of the more visible ravages of tyranny and war; cities and villages reduced to scattered groups of black and roofless houses, and the naked inhabitants sitting famished upon their desolated thresholds. I have conversed with living men of genius. The poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, and modern Italy, and our own country, has been to me, like external nature, a passion and an enjoyment. Such are the sources from which the materials for the imagery of my Poem have been drawn.¹⁹

Indeed, experience (as Shelley believed, in harmony with the early Romantics) was the raw material of the adult sensibility, charging the nascent intellect of the child with its "store" or "treasure" of useful impressions. It could make the mind, as of Ahasuerus in *Hellas*,

... a chronicle
Of strange and secret and forgotten things (133-4)

till, to the piercing glance of intelligence,

... heaven's utmost deep
Gives up her stars, and like a flock of sheep
They pass before his eye, are numbered, and roll on
(*Prometheus Unbound*, IV, 418-20)

or, as the Daemon in Calderon boasts,

... in [his] wisdom are the orbs of Heaven
Written as in a record; ...
(*Magico Prodigioso*, II, 162-3)

And yet — herein, too, Shelley fully concurred with the view of his immediate predecessors — experience also deadened and stultified, constricted and corrupted the consciousness. It "binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions,"²⁰ "blunt[ing] the discriminating powers of the mind" (in Wordsworth's phrase)²¹ and (as Coleridge declared)²² offering "no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites." Hence, the intellect fraught with experience could become, in the terms of Shelley's ambivalent image, "A book of blood, whence in a milder day / Men shall learn truth,"²³ a register of shame wherein "Dark time . . . its evil legend wrought / In characters of cloud which wither not,"²⁴ "the book of fate"

... dark with many a blazoned name
Of misery — all are mirrors of the same;
But the dark fiend who with his iron pen
Dipped in scorn's fiery poison, makes his fame
Enduring there, would o'er the heads of men
Pass harmless, if they scorned to make their hearts his den.
(*The Revolt of Islam*, VIII, 3372-78)

In Shelley's romantic view of experience, evil and misery — both inflicted and suffered — left their dark and indelible marks on the minds and faces of all they had touched.

I see the curse on gestures proud and cold,
 And looks of firm defiance, and calm hate,
 And such despair as mocks itself with smiles,
 Written as on a scroll:

says Prometheus, inspecting the features of Jupiter's Phantasm;²⁵ for, as the Titan realizes with horror, in the state of untranscended experience (the hellish London of Blake and of Shelley²⁶) the same lineaments of evil disfigure the faces both of victim and tyrant. They are visible in the Wandering Jew, the archetype of the sufferer, whose

... port and mien bore mark of many years,
 And chronicles of untold ancientness
 Were legible within his beamless eye:

(*Queen Mab*, VII, 73-5)

and in Ozymandias, the archetype of the tyrant,

... whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed: ...
 ("Ozymandias," 48)

Under the weight of reiterated impressions, man's moral nature sickens and withers into a moribund likeness of its own former self, a prisoner of its own bounded experience, and turned (as Shelley declares in *The Cenci*) into an immovable and insensitive

... form,
 A rite, a law, a custom: not a man.

(V, iv, 45)

With "all the code of Custom's lawless law / Written upon the brows of old and young" (*The Witch of Atlas*, 493-4), morality becomes a "catalogue of sins" ("Fiordispina," 12), "tomes / Of reasoned wrong, glozed on by ignorance" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III, iv, 166-7); "Religion Christless, Godless — a book sealed" ("Sonnet: England in 1819," 11); conscience, a "stern, unflattering chronicler" (*Queen Mab*, I, 171), an "accuser" observing man's every act (*The Cenci*, II, ii, 120); Heaven, a legal "record" (*Queen Mab*, VII, 58) wherein the "decrees" of a vengeful, punitive God are "en-registered" (*The Cenci*, II, i, 147) and where the curses of

men are "chronicled" for immediate execution (*The Cenci*, IV, i, 158-9); and the history of man's existence itself, ignominious annals on which "deadly power / Has fixed its seal" of oppression,

. . . the blood-stained charter of all woe,
Which Nature soon, with re-creating hand,
Will blot in mercy from the book of earth.

(*Queen Mab*, VI, 48-9, 55-7)

To sum up: the permanence of acquired experience, consistently associated in Shelley with the implements, processes and products of writing, came thus to be identified as the source of man's moral and intellectual self-enslavement. Experience was the nurse and sustainer of inspiration, and also, by an ironic inversion, the instrument of its extinction and death. Worse still, as Shelley knew only too well, the paradox had a particular application to the art of poetry, for poets themselves were unwitting accessories to the process whereby the vital impulse of inspiration passed into the fixity of experience. Not only were "poets . . . the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" for Shelley; they were also, in the closing phrase of his *Defence*, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," who recorded and codified what they had apprehended. This was the basic ambivalence on which Shelley seized in his "Fragment on Keats," when, for once bringing into imaginative conjunction his two variants of Locke's *tabula rasa*, he wrote: "On Keats, who Desired that on his Tomb should be Inscribed —"

'Here lieth One whose name was writ on water.'
But, ere the breath that could erase it blew,
Death, in remorse for that fell slaughter,
Death, the immortalizing winter, flew
Athwart the stream, — and time's printless
torrent grew

A scroll of crystal, blazoning the name
Of Adonais!

(1-7)

NOTES

¹R. Ingpen and W. E. Peck, eds., *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: Gordian Press; London: Ernest Benn, 1965), VII, 109.

- ²M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958), pp. 61 ff.
- ³By Shelley's own account in *Peter Bell the Third*, VI, 61-75, he had attempted to read "Kant's book" but had laid it aside in disgust at what he called the *furor verborum* of "German psychologies."
- ⁴Ernest Rhys, ed., *Essays and Letters by Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Walter Scott, 1887), 73.
- ⁵R. Ingpen, ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1909), letter 20, dated Field Place, January 3, 1811, I, 29.
- ⁶Ingpen; letter 55, dated Field Place, June 11, 1811, I, 91.
- ⁷Ibid., letter 56, dated Field Place, [June 16, 1811], I, 96.
- ⁸Ibid., letter 82, dated Field Place, October [10], 1811, I, 142.
- ⁹Ingpen and Peck, VII, 59.
- ¹⁰Lines 13-4. This and all subsequent quotations from the poems and prefaces are based on Thomas Hutchinson, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).
- ¹¹T. J. Hogg, *Shelley at Oxford* (London: Methuen, 1904), 166-7.
- ¹²*Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (1696), in *Leibnitii opera philosophica quae extant Latina, Gallica, Germanica, omnia*, ed. J. E. Erdmann, Berlin, 1840, 196.
- ¹³For what might well be the earliest instance of Shelley's use of this image, see *Queen Mab*, IV, 139-43.
- ¹⁴Lines 54-8 of the Ode read:
 And, like unfolded flowers beneath the sea,
 Like the man's thought dark in the infant's brain,
 Like aught that is which wraps what is to be,
 Art's deathless dreams lay veiled by many a vein
 Of Parian stone; . . .
- ¹⁵Fragments, 57-61. The passage alludes to the sculptor of the Hermaphrodite who, in fashioning "that sweet marble monster of both sexes," "lifted from her limbs the veil of stone."
- ¹⁶*A Defence of Poetry*, in *Complete Works*, VII, 136.
- ¹⁷VII, 136.
- ¹⁸For two further versions of this analogue, see *The Witch of Atlas*, 617-21 and "Ode to Liberty," 211-5.
- ¹⁹Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, in *Complete Poetical Works*, 34.
- ²⁰*A Defence of Poetry*, 137.
- ²¹Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *English Literary Criticism: Romantic and Victorian*, ed. D. G. Hoffman and S. Hynes (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 17.

²*Biographia Literaria*, Chap. XIII, in *ibid.*, 43.

³*The Revolt of Islam*, XI, 4408-9.

⁴*The Revolt of Islam*, VIII, 3454-5. See also Cythna's address to the Mariners (VIII, 3346-51).

⁵*Prometheus Unbound*, I, 258-61.

⁶See William Blake, "London," 3-4; Shelley, *Peter Bell the Third*; III, 247-58.