

history based on changes in the material means of production would have made no sense to him; even in a land of dark Satanic mills, he maintains, our manacles are “mind-forg’d,” and only through mind, in renewed imaginative vision, can they be broken. Wordsworth and Coleridge – and Carlyle – on the other hand, not only made peace with the Establishment but became important apologists for it, by denigrating “abstract,” analytic, reformist reason; by emphasizing organic, unconscious, and evolving tradition; and by giving this tradition sanction in a vision of transcendence.

This “idealist” tradition has perhaps always had more critics than apologists – also, as David Simpson’s preliminary essay in this volume documents, in our own century. One can certainly argue, for instance, that in the “Ruined Cottage” – a poem Coleridge praised as one of the greatest in the language – Wordsworth and his spokesman, the Pedlar, overlook or evade the (in some respects) remediable material and political causes of Margaret’s suffering: indeed, even the reactionary De Quincey complained that the Pedlar ought simply to have written a letter to the War Office on Margaret’s behalf. Wordsworth’s purposes, however, were not those of social or political protest; the Pedlar presents Margaret’s suffering as a part of a larger pattern, as inexorable as the passing of the seasons and the gradual encroachment on cottage and garden of the “calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature.” And surely the power of the poem lies in the persuasion of consolation in the Pedlar’s final “image of tranquility,” of “the high spear-grass on the wall, / By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o’er,” so that

all we feel of sorrow and despair  
From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
The passing shews of being leave behind,  
Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
Where meditation was... (514–24)<sup>9</sup>

We have surely become more, not less, aware, in our own century, that there is indeed that in Nature which transcends merely human purposes, an infinite order and creativity we perceive only dimly and ignore at our peril. The greatest works of High Romantic Idealism restore some sense of wonder, even of reverential awe, to such visions of transcendence and attempt also to find a place for man within them. A noble purpose, at least, and one that can never be made quite irrelevant, whatever the pressures of practical science or of political praxis.

<sup>9</sup> I quote from the reconstructed “Ruined Cottage” as printed in *William Wordsworth, The Oxford Authors* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 31f.

## 5 Romanticism and language

QUESTIONS about linguistic theory have assumed striking prominence in recent work on Romanticism. This is in part because literary criticism over the past two decades, like philosophy for a much longer time, has taken a distinctly linguistic turn. But in addition to the pervasive preoccupation these days with theoretical understandings of the linguistic sign and of verbal representation, more particular circumstances, at least in the United States, have focused attention on Romanticism and language. Romantic texts, most notably Wordsworthian texts, were among the first to be read through the linguistic turnings of poststructuralist criticism in its American guise. Jacques Derrida’s extended critique of Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* in *Of Grammatology*, along with his readings elsewhere of Shelley and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, have cast an even greater glamor on Romanticism’s role in current theory. And since many Romantic texts, verse as well as prose, turn out to contain powerful, agitated broodings on their own status as language, poststructuralist readers have often found their theoretical concerns anticipated, not merely reflected back to them, in Wordsworth or Coleridge or Shelley.

Important as the poststructuralist focus on Romanticism and language has been, it has at the same time encouraged attitudes or dispositions that now need to be put under more consistent, more exacting historical pressure. On the one hand, in our eagerness to accommodate Romanticism to our own linguistic turn, we sometimes obscure or minimize crucial differences between ourselves and writers who suddenly seem modern or relevant in new ways – differences of philosophical assumption or terminology, differences of broader cultural placement or determination. On the other hand, our discovery of similarities between our own thinking about language and that of Romantic writers may still be distorted and restricted by persistent misconceptions about British Romanticism itself – misconceptions about a Romantic repudiation of Enlightenment ideas and achievements, about the alleged preeminence of German idealist philosophy in shaping British

Romantic values. Another way of putting this latter point is to suggest that our current theoretical investment in language is as tellingly anticipated in Enlightenment as in Romantic writing, and that British and French rather than German linguistic theory generates the most important lines of continuity running from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through Romantic into modern (including poststructuralist) thinking.

The primary aim of this essay is to establish a historical sense of how Romantic writers themselves conceptualized key issues of verbal representation – how they thought about the relation of words to thoughts and to things, about the social and historical processes through which language is formed and changed, about the connection of ordinary speech to formal prose and verse. Such a historical sense can make us critically aware of our distance from Romantic theorizing about language, while at the same time giving us a fuller, more accurate understanding of the ways in which important, unresolved questions in current theory and criticism were already at stake in the Romantics' rethinking of the philosophies of language they inherited from the Enlightenment. With its emphasis on the empiricist<sup>1</sup> tradition in Britain and France, my approach here is deeply indebted to Hans Aarsleff, whose *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860* (1967) and *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (1982) have established the historical basis from which all subsequent work on Romanticism and language must proceed. Aarsleff's work is polemical as well as informative, and in claiming this kind of centrality for it I am not urging endorsement of all its particular judgments and emphases. Crucially important alternative approaches need to be recognized: Olivia Smith's revealing analysis of the struggle between "vulgar" and "refined" discourse in *The Politics of Language 1791–1819*, Murray Cohen's and Stephen K. Land's contributions to the history of linguistic theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Michel Foucault's provocative epistemic "archaeologies" in *The Order of Things*. But anyone who cares about Romanticism and language needs to begin with, or go back to, Aarsleff's indispensable scholarship.

<sup>1</sup> I have used "empiricist" and "empiricism" throughout because they are the common modern terms for the philosophical tradition stemming from Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke. But it is worth noting that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these words (along with "empiric" and "empirical") had pejorative meanings and were used to designate outmoded, unscientific medical practice, or any practice guided by mere experience, without scientific knowledge (see Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* no. 183). Only in the nineteenth century did "empiricist" and "empiricism" develop their modern philosophical senses; the first such use of "empiricism" cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from an 1803 number of the *Edinburgh Review*.

## I

*From Locke to Saussure*: Aarsleff's collection of essays begins with Locke because *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and especially the third book entitled "Of Words," created the central tradition in the philosophy of language for subsequent centuries, including our own. But for students of Romanticism, beginning with Locke as anything other than a foil for Romantic ideas about the creative imagination may seem very strange. After all, Blake rages prophetically against the cold mechanistic universe of Locke and Newton, and Coleridge condemns Locke for making the mind an essentially passive receiver and arranger of sense data. The Blakean and Coleridgean characterizations, or caricatures of Locke are so powerfully embedded in received notions about Romanticism that it comes as a shock to learn that Wordsworth and Shelley shared little if any of this antipathy to the most influential philosopher of the preceding era. Whatever its strengths and weaknesses, Locke's account of language in the *Essay* was still the most influential force in British Romantic thinking about the topic. With this acknowledged, we should go back to the *Essay*, as many Romantic writers themselves did, for a fresh look.

It will come as no surprise to anyone to see that Locke's approach to language is grounded in his empiricism, in his assumption, as he says at the beginning of book II of the *Essay*, that "From *Experience*...all our Knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives it self" (II.i.2). What students of Romanticism may find surprising, however, is that Locke's concept of experience is not limited to the senses, as so many commentators on his work have claimed. Experience, he goes on to say, is double; it generates ideas from two "Fountains of Knowledge" – from "*external, sensible Objects*," and from "*the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves*." Locke designates the mental activities that produce ideas from these two sources "Sensation" and "Reflection." While ideas of sensation have a kind of genetic or temporal priority in that simple ideas of this sort are what our minds are first capable of producing, ideas of reflection soon come to have equal status and increase in significance for Locke as he directs his analysis to more complex mental operations.

Locke's empiricism, it has often been remarked, is a "way of ideas"<sup>2</sup>: nothing is immediately present to the mind but its own ideas of sensation and reflection. Locke assumes the existence of an external physical world of things, but that world can be perceived and known only through its trans-

<sup>2</sup> See John Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

formation into the mental world of ideas. And while the mind has immediate access to its own ideas, it can have only mediate access to ideas produced by other minds. This mediate access happens through language. The first founding principle of Locke's treatment of language in book III of the *Essay* is that it originates in the human capacity for social as well as for individual experience: "God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society" (III.i.1). What does it mean for Locke to say that humanity is endowed with the capacity for language? It means not just that we are "by Nature. . . fashioned, as to be *fit to frame articulate Sounds,*" but also that we "should be able to use these Sounds, as Signs of internal Conceptions; and to make them stand as marks for the Ideas within [our] own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others" (III.i.2). These remarks pave the way for the second major founding principle in Locke's philosophy of language: "*Words... come to be made use of by Men, as the Signs of their Ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain Ideas, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea*" (III.ii.1).

Locke's insistence on the "arbitrary" relation between the two aspects of the linguistic sign – the phonetic mark and the idea it signifies – may sound strikingly modern, but it was not original even with him. Hobbes had used the same term, and so had other seventeenth-century philosophers. It is Locke, however, who most conspicuously establishes this principle and passes it on to subsequent theorists of language. And it is in Locke's *Essay* that the potential instability of this notion of the "arbitrary" becomes apparent. Is the distinction between "natural" and "arbitrary" adequate to cover all the ways in which language may be connected to the material world? And how does the "arbitrary" institution of particular words square with Locke's assumption of a social impulse to communicate? It is often taken for granted that Locke's phrase "by a voluntary Imposition" refers to linguistic convention or compact. But he never directly says so – and in English usage "arbitrary" is a very different kind of word from "convention," "compact" or "common use" (see John Barrell's discussion in chapter 2 of *English Literature in History 1730–80*). The arbitrary sign is such an important – and for many later thinkers troublesome – concept not just because it denies that linguistic meaning is a matter of any "natural connexion" between words and the world, but because it also harbors powerful tensions about the social and political formation of language.

In Locke's system words stand primarily for ideas and only secondarily for things, and he was aware that this view gave language a precarious purchase on the material world. He recurrently attacks simplistically optimistic assumptions of a "double conformity" between our ideas and the words we use to represent them on the one hand, and between our ideas and the things or actions from which they derive on the other. Though originating in a social impulse, language for Locke has an irreducibly subjective aspect: "*Words in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*" (III.ii.2). Given a claim such as this we can understand why Stephen Land designates the theory of language expounded in Locke's great empiricist *Essay* as "idealism."<sup>3</sup> We can also see links between Locke's theories of language and epistemology and the liberal individualist ideology that underlies his theories of economy, politics, and government. In Locke's view, language is always threatening to become merely subjective or private. It can fulfill the social impulse from which it springs in the first place only through a continuous process of clarification or rectification, in which one individual's grasp of the correspondences between word and idea and between idea and thing is compared to and tested against, that of other individuals. Locke places little confidence in the ongoing practice of ordinary common speech as a context in which significant clarification or rectification can take place, a point we shall return to later in the discussion of Wordsworth. Instead, Locke appeals to the systematic rational analysis of correspondences among terms, ideas, things – and in this crucial respect his empiricism is entirely consistent with the values and practices of Cartesian rationalism, to which it is so frequently contrasted. For Locke, it would seem, the common human capacity for communicating through language can only be realized in philosophical discourse, and even then it is susceptible to the inevitable limitations of having to depend on words established by arbitrary imposition.

Language in Locke's *Essay* is at once an indispensable and an inherently imperfect means for communicating thought. At times it is also more – it is indispensable or intrinsic to thinking itself. For while Locke often writes as if ideas in the mind preexist the words we use to represent them, he sometimes gives words a constitutive role in our having ideas in the first place. The positive account of this constitutive function of language emerges most clearly in the discussion of those complex ideas Locke calls "Mixed Modes and Relations." Such ideas, he says, illustrate most fully "the Workmanship of the Mind" and are entirely "of Men's making" (III.v.4): "this union,

<sup>3</sup> See *The Philosophy of Language in Britain*, pp. 31–78.

which has no particular foundation in Nature, would cease again, were there not something that did, as it were, hold it together, and keep the parts from scattering. Though therefore it be the Mind that makes the Collection, 'tis the word which is, as it were the Knot, that ties them fast together" (III.v.10). Locke is a nominalist in his conviction that the reality of complex general ideas consists entirely in the mind's drawing together and giving a name to otherwise unconnected qualities or phenomena. Some of his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century followers will go further in showing how far language is intrinsic to thinking, but it is important to recognize that in doing so they are extending an impulse already there in the *Essay*. Locke's favorite figure of words as knots that tie together otherwise scattered external or internal perceptions, homespun though it is, carries fascinating implications for later theories of how versions of reality get woven together in language, and of how they get undone.

In fact, it is worry about thought being undone by language – what we might call the negative perspective on language's constitutive relation to thinking – that dominates Locke's linguistic theory. At the end of book II, he explains why he will devote all of the following book to questions of language: "I find, that there is so close a connexion between *Ideas* and Words; and our abstract *Ideas*, and general Words, have so constant a relation one to another, that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our Knowledge, which all consists in Propositions, without considering, first, the Nature, Use, and Signification of Language..." (II.xxxiii.19). Throughout the *Essay* Locke is concerned with what he calls "the Abuse of Words" because he understands it also as the abuse of thinking, particularly of the kind of formal, systematic philosophical thinking implied in the aim "to speak clearly and distinctly of our Knowledge, which all consists in Propositions."

Locke's terms here indicate strongly the broader intellectual and cultural context of his treatment of language. They should remind us both of Descartes' rationalism and of the spirit of late seventeenth-century scientific discourse. Locke was himself a qualified physician and deeply interested in physical science. He became a fellow of the recently created Royal Society in 1668 and was close to men such as Thomas Sydenham, a pioneer in modern clinical research and epidemiology, and Robert Boyle, the founder of modern chemistry. Locke's concern with language does not, it must be said, attribute priority to observation and experiment. His primary concern, as we have seen, is the relation between words and ideas, and only secondarily between words and things. Nevertheless, his preoccupation with the ways in which so much of what we say and write interferes with the formation of

clear and distinct ideas articulated as propositions does reflect his participation in the ideology of the Royal Society. That ideology is obvious in Locke's notorious denunciation of figurative language in the last two chapters of book III: "if we would speak of Things as they are, we must allow, that all the Art of Rhetorick, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat" (III.x.34). The fellows of the Royal Society may have been pleased to read this, and we need to imagine that Locke had them very much in mind when he wrote it. But the passage does not fully reflect Locke's attitude towards language, or his own reliance on "artificial and figurative application of Words." "Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters" (II.i.2); "'tis the word which is, as it were the Knot" (III.v.10) – some of the pivotal moments in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* turn upon figures of speech self-consciously deployed ("as we say," "as it were"). Locke's concern with the "abuse of words" does not blind him to the fact that what may look like abuse to those intent on speaking "of Things as they are" may be necessary to the philosopher whose central aim is to show "whence the Understanding may get all the *Ideas* it has" (II.i.1).

Locke left much to be worked out in what he calls, at the very end of the *Essay*, "σημειωτική [semeiotike], or the *Doctrine of Signs*, the most usual whereof being Words, it is aptly enough termed also λογική, Logick" (IV.xxi.4). The suggestive indeterminacy of Locke's "Doctrine of Signs" is part of its pervasive influence. In his introduction to the standard edition of the *Essay* Peter Nidditch calls attention to some of its more familiar rifts and discrepancies and observes that "the divisions and oppositions in his thought...may well have been creative: without them, he might not have been driven to pursue his problems as persistently and devotedly as he did" (p. x). The comment is worth bearing in mind as we move on to imagine how he was read by later eighteenth-century and Romantic writers.

## II

The century that separated Locke's fourth revised edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700) and the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) produced an astonishing amount of theorizing about language – about its epistemological status, its origins, its relations to other modes of thinking and practical behavior. Locke had set the main direction and principal terms for the most important developments, but not to the exclusion of alternative,

even antagonistic, approaches. A traditional Christian view of language continued to be variously asserted and would eventually find new life in the speculations of some Romantic writers. According to Christian tradition language was not a system of signs arbitrarily established through the workmanship of the human mind, but rather a nomenclature or inventory of creation divinely established by God and first given to man – only secondarily to woman – in the original state of Edenic innocence. The “Adamic” view held that before the Fall there was a single language that perfectly represented the created universe. This original Adamic language was lost in the confusion of tongues after Babel, but it might someday be recovered through proper spiritual insight.

Such ideas were often held literally by the naive and the mystical. But they were also explored with philosophical sophistication by Leibniz and his followers. Leibniz read Locke’s *Essay* with remarkable intensity and formulated his agreements and disagreements with it in *Nouveaux Essais sur l’entendement humain* (“New Essays on the Human Understanding,” written 1703–5 but not published until 1765). In opposition to Locke’s principle that words are arbitrary and not natural signs of ideas, Leibniz argues that many words have their origin in imitations of natural sounds (onomatopoeia), and more generally “that there is something natural in the origin of words that indicates a relation between things and the sounds and movements of the vocal organs...words have come into being as occasion arose from the analogy of sound with the disposition of the mind that accompanied the perception of the thing. I am inclined to believe that Adam did not impose names in any other fashion.”<sup>4</sup> Leibniz’s resuscitation and transformation of Adamic theory in opposition to Locke’s “Doctrine of Signs” looks forward to an important strain in romantic thinking, and to Coleridge in particular.

Other philosophers and theorists of language departed from Locke in ways that were not overtly Adamic. Berkeley begins his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) by attacking Locke’s account of the role played by language in forming abstract general ideas. And in a passage that anticipates Edmund Burke’s emphasis on the affective or emotive capacity of language in *A Philosophical Enquiry Concerning the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Berkeley denies Locke’s premise that words are necessarily signs of ideas: “...passions...arise, immediately in [the] mind upon the perception of certain words, without any ideas coming

<sup>4</sup> “Brevis designatio meditationum de Originibus Gentium ductis potissimum ex indicio linguarum,” *Miscellanea Berolinensia* (1710), p. 2; quoted in the English translation by Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 91.

between” (introduction, paragraph 20). Of still broader potential significance is the place of language in Berkeley’s account of reality as composed entirely of mind and its ideas and notions. For Berkeley as for Locke, language is composed of signs for ideas and other mental events. But those ideas and mental events have no relation to a nonmental material world. They derive instead from a world that exists as the continuous creative perception of God’s infinite mind – a world whose order Berkeley repeatedly characterizes as the divine language of nature. Reality is determined less importantly by individual signs within this divine language of nature than by the regular ways in which its signs are related, by what we might call a divine grammar. In Berkeley’s view, human language is but an imperfect reflection of the signs and grammar of a world whose mode of existence is already linguistic.

An emphasis on grammar rather than individual signs links Berkeley’s radical Christian idealism to the rationalist idealism of “universal grammar,” a tradition in Enlightenment language theory that became freshly famous with the publication in 1966 of Noam Chomsky’s *Cartesian Linguistics*. Chomsky was looking to find historical antecedents for his own belief in rules or norms common to all languages and deriving from innate organizing principles in the human mind. He found them, plausibly, in seventeenth-century theories of “universal grammar,” and particularly in the *Grammaire generale et raisonnée* of Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot (1660), commonly known as the Port Royal grammar. Chomsky’s celebration of Descartes as providing the philosophical foundations of “universal grammar,” and especially his denunciation of Locke as having consolidated a tradition in which language was the product of a mind passively dependent on sense data, have been decisively challenged by Aarsleff, who shows that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Cartesian rationalism and the Lockean “way of ideas” were accurately understood to have much in common.<sup>5</sup>

An inventive return to classical metaphysics – to Aristotle and Anaxagoras as well as to Plato – distinguishes the *Origin and Progress of Language* (1774–92) of James Burnet, Lord Monboddo, another eighteenth-century theorist whose acceptance of many of Locke’s principles is sometimes belied by a distinctively un-Lockean vision of mental life. Neither of Monboddo’s premises – that language is “the expression of the conceptions of the mind by articulate sounds” (1, 3) and that language is not “natural” but “acquired” (1, 12) – conflicts fundamentally with Lockean convictions. But Monboddo

<sup>5</sup> “The History of Linguistics and Professor Chomsky,” first published in *Language* 46 (1970): 570–85 and reprinted in *From Locke to Saussure*, pp. 101–19.

attacks Locke's distinction between "ideas of sensation" and "ideas of reflection;" arguing that all ideas, as ideas, arise reflexively from the operations of the mind. And he works from the above premises to the conclusion that language itself is the most elaborate of all the human "arts," that it is a purposive creation of rational thought, and that as such it could not have come into being in the first place without a vast amount of prior social and intellectual development. Monboddo denies language the degree of constitutive relation to thinking already attributed to it in Locke's *Essay*: not only sensation and recollection, but comparison, abstraction, and generalization must all have existed in human culture before language could have been invented. This position is in some respects reactionary. But by treating thought and language as sequential and separate rather than as reciprocal and interdependent, Monboddo took an important step towards isolating the formal system of language as an object of study *per se*. In this respect his work points beyond Romanticism to the nineteenth-century science of philology.

The most powerful and influential thinking about language in the eighteenth century came not from writers whose metaphysical commitments were at odds with or skew to Locke, but from those who deliberately set out to explore the full implications of what he had done. The key mid-century figure is the greatest of Locke's many followers in France, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac. Condillac's *Essay sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) takes as its main task an attempt to show that in the evolution of human consciousness, Locke's two sources of ideas – sensation and reflection – have a common origin in sensation. But in arguing for what Aarsleff calls "a gradual rise from sensation to reflection,"<sup>6</sup> Condillac does not deny that reflection remains for him, as it was for Locke, a source of knowledge in its own right. Reflection is the condition of the mind in its full potential, and its emergence from sensation and perception is unimaginable, according to Condillac, without the simultaneous development of linguistic signs. The mental progress from simple perception through selective attention, imagination (the retrieval of absent sensations), and memory to reflection parallels the linguistic progress from a primitive, involuntary "language of action" through "natural cries" used involuntarily and then voluntarily as "natural signs" to the voluntary institution of arbitrary signs. Reflection becomes possible only when the mind learns to invent signs for its own use.

<sup>6</sup> *The Study of Language in England: 1780–1860* (Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 19; see Aarsleff's essays on "The Tradition of Condillac" and "Condillac's Speechless Statue" in *From Locke to Saussure*, pp. 146–224. Condillac's *Essai* was translated into English as *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* in 1756 by Thomas Nugent; it was subtitled *A Supplement to Mr. Locke's "Essay on the Human Understanding."*

And in turn, the subsequent development of a system of "instituted signs" depends upon the very powers of reflection such signs make possible. In contrast to Monboddo's hierarchical insistence on the priority of highly developed thought to the invention of language, Condillac shows that thinking cannot evolve beyond the elaborations of memory without the creation of language as we know it. His argument, the complex suggestiveness of which has attracted Derrida (*The Archaeology of the Fricolous*), is a brilliant genetic exfoliation of the suggestions in Locke's *Essay* about language's constitutive relation to thinking.

Near the end of the century Locke's theory of language underwent a second and in several respects more radical revision in John Horne Tooke's *"ΕΠΕΑ ΠΤΕΡΟΕΝΤΑ, or, the Diversions of Purley* (volume I appeared in 1786, volume II in 1805). Horne Tooke's point of departure is a distinction latent in Locke's assertion that the purpose of language is not only to communicate thoughts, but "To do it *with* as much ease and *quickness*, as is possible" (III.x.23). Not all words, Horne Tooke says, are "*immediately*. . . the signs of ideas" – "many words are merely *abbreviations* employed for dispatch, and are the signs of other words" (I.i.14). Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is really an essay on one of the primary functions of language, Horne Tooke goes on to say: "if he had sooner been aware of the inseparable connexion between words and knowledge" (i.e., before coming to this awareness near the end of book II), Locke "would not have talked of the *composition of ideas*; but would have seen that it was merely a contrivance of Language: and that the only composition was in the *terms*" (I.ii.18, 19). Horne Tooke attempts nothing less than to prove that all mental activity is really linguistic activity.

This radical reduction of Locke was to pose a major challenge to Romantic writers such as Coleridge and Shelley, who read and responded directly to *The Diversions of Purley*. The challenge, as Olivia Smith shows in chapter IV of *The Politics of Language 1791–1818*, was political as well as philosophical: Horne Tooke was a well-known radical activist, several times tried and once imprisoned for views hostile to the government. Although his pursuit of linguistic and political principles led at times to eccentric extremes (much of *The Diversions* is given over to elaborate etymologies, some of them outrageously contrived), Horne Tooke released a potential in the Lockean philosophy of language that unsettled Romantic writers, and should unsettle us.

One further development in late eighteenth-century thinking about language, roughly contemporary with Horne Tooke's, needs to be acknowledged before we turn directly to British Romantic writers themselves. Following the violent upheavals of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror in

France, during the government of the Directory (1795-9), intellectual life was dominated by a group known as the *idéologues*. The most prominent and influential member of the group was the politically progressive aristocratic philosopher Destutt de Tracy, who in a presentation before the reorganized Institut National des Sciences et Arts in 1795 proposed that the new term "ideology" be used to designate the analysis of sensations and ideas that was to be central to the work of the Institute's division of moral and political sciences. For Tracy, Locke was the Copernicus and Condillac the Kepler of the tradition of philosophical analysis that he and his colleagues sought to extend and institutionalize. Foremost in Tracy's understanding of that tradition was Condillac's conviction that, as Tracy puts it, "language is as necessary for thought itself as for giving expression to it."<sup>7</sup> Tracy and the *idéologues* made the debate over the constitutive function of language absolutely fundamental to the Institut National's program of intellectual and educational reform. Although they varied in their degree of materialist or sensationalist emphasis, the *idéologues* agreed on two closely connected and potentially antagonistic principles: the ineluctable subjectivity of language on the one hand, and the impulse towards social communication that rectifies or redeems the inherent limitations of language on the other. The ascendancy of Tracy and the *idéologues* was short-lived. Napoleon distrusted their critical, antireligious rationalism and soon after his *coup d'état* in 1799 set about discrediting and marginalizing them. But their impact on Continental and British thinking about language was already considerable and would extend into the early decades of the nineteenth century.

### III

William Wordsworth first visited France in the summer of 1790 when, as he says in *The Prelude*, the country was "standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again" (1850, VI.340-1). He returned in November 1791 and stayed for more than a year, during which time it is quite likely that he was exposed to the philosophy of Condillac, then at the height of its importance in French revolutionary intellectual culture (Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, pp. 372-81). He may also have become familiar with the elaboration and extension of Condillac's ideas about

<sup>7</sup> "Memoire sur la faculté de penser" (1796, 1798), *Memoires de l'Institut National. Sciences morales et Politiques* 1, 318, quoted in the English translation by H. B. Acton, "The Philosophy of Language in Revolutionary France," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 200. Acton's account of Tracy should be supplemented, and in some instances corrected, by Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, pp. 344-5, 375-6.

language in the early thinking of the group who would come to be known as the *idéologues*. The preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), for all its claims to signaling a new departure in poetic practice rooted in a new conception of poetry's authentic linguistic base, bears the stamp of Lockean and Condillacian principles. When Wordsworth begins the preface by saying that "a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written" would depend on his showing "in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other" and on his "retracing the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself" (*Prose*, I, 120), he is echoing a conviction that had dominated theorizing about language since the appearance of Locke's *Essay*. Throughout the preface Wordsworth adheres, if only implicitly at times, to the view that words, like thoughts themselves, are at once inherently private or subjective and dependent on a process of communal validation or "rectification" (the latter is Destutt de Tracy's term). Language necessarily reflects its social determinations as well as the individual acts of mind of a particular speaker or writer; speech and writing are to an important degree relative productions of a particular language culture, whether local or national. Although these ideas were prominently articulated in Germany by Johann Gottfried Herder and developed later by Wilhelm von Humboldt, they were first broached by Locke, Condillac and their followers, and it is on them that Wordsworth is drawing in the preface.

Yet to insist that what has long been regarded as the founding critical document of English Romanticism is importantly indebted to empiricist thinking is not to deny that Wordsworth is at the same time resistant to, mistrustful of, certain tenets and practical consequences of that thinking. Aarsleff puts the complications this way: "Wordsworth rejected the poetic practice and the dominant poetic theory of the last century, but he built his own critical theory on the philosophy of the same century that had given language a central role in our understanding of the ways of knowing, communication, and the potentialities of expression" (*From Locke to Saussure*, p. 373). But the situation would seem to be even more pointedly conflicted than this. Consider the fundamental Lockean principle that words are arbitrary signs of ideas. Wordsworth continually appeals to an ideal that words may be naturally rather than arbitrarily related to thoughts, and through thoughts to things. For him, the arbitrariness of language is viciously evident in "what is usually called poetic diction" (*Prose*, I, 130) and in self-consciously new poetic artifice. He sets himself defiantly against those who "indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (*Prose*, I, 124), against "false refinement or arbitrary innovation." His poems in *Lyrical Ballads* may be "an experiment," but their innovations are grounded in two principles meant to

counter the arbitrariness of language. One of these is emotive and expressive: "all good poetry" takes its origin in "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (*Prose*, I, 148). The other is, or would appear to be, social: Wordsworth's poems are written "as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men" (*Prose*, I, 123) – particularly by "men" from "Humble and rustic life" who "speak a plainer and more emphatic language," whose "passions...are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature," who "hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (*Prose*, I, 124). In an attempt to escape from "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression," Wordsworth has revised the two cardinal assumptions of empiricist theory. He makes a special virtue of the ineluctable subjectivity of language by assuming that genuine feeling can either transcend or transvalue the arbitrariness of language. At the same time, he offers an account of the social "rectification" or valorization of language by appealing to an idealized rustic community whose thoughts and words are both "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" – that is, with a Nature that exists beyond or outside language and can therefore legitimize authentic references to it.

But Wordsworth is not naively optimistic about the power of language to incorporate thoughts and feelings, or to be incorporated with or by nature. Near the end of the preface he acknowledges that his own language, even in being "a selection of language really used by men" from "Humble and rustic life," may nevertheless "frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself" (*Prose*, I, 152). This is the characteristic Wordsworthian attitude towards language: a desire on the one hand for a new kind of natural link among words and thoughts and things, and on the other a recognition of what in *The Prelude* he calls, at a moment when the imagination is forced to recognize its separation from nature, the "sad incompetence of human speech" (1850, vi.593). It is an attitude most arrestingly articulated in the remarkable *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810–12), where Wordsworth locates in verses inscribed on tombstones in provincial country graveyards instances of what he calls "the general language of humanity" (*Prose*, II, 57), by which he means language expressive of unembellished powerful emotion and at the same time sanctioned by particular communities living close to nature.

The complications implied in Wordsworth's looking to commemorations of the dead as embodiments of his linguistic ideal are finely drawn out in Frances Ferguson's *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (1977).

Ferguson's title derives from a crucial passage in the third of Wordsworth's *Essays*:

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (II, 84–5)

Having haunted graveyards, with their instances of language that seem to him "like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe," Wordsworth is himself haunted by recognitions of an antithetical vision of linguistic power. This antithetical vision is not that of Locke and Condillac, with their sense that arbitrary, humanly instituted linguistic signs are intrinsic to thought, but of Dryden and Pope, for whom (as Wordsworth has previously pointed out) words are "a clothing" for thought ("True wit is nature to advantage dress'd"). Wordsworth's longing for words to be "an incarnation of the thought" is so strong and yet so vulnerable that he opposes it not to alternative ways of conceiving the reciprocal interdependence of language and thought, but to commonplace views that words are powers as "external" to thought as clothes are to the body. The underlying irony of Wordsworth's asserting that words must incorporate or embody thoughts in essays where the bodies in question are all corpses suggests just how unresolved his attitude towards language can be.

Wordsworth was of course not alone in being caught between a desire to embody his thoughts in language as essential to human existence as gravity or air and a recognition of "the sad incompetence of human speech." Some versions of this tension may characterize all Romantic poets – maybe even all poets. What is distinctive about Wordsworth's linguistic practice are the powerful swings in its implied attitudes towards its own resources. Wordsworth can, of course, give us a profound sense of the pressure and action of the material world and of the physical significance of writing itself – what Christopher Ricks has called (borrowing Wordsworth's own line) "A pure organic pleasure from the lines." But for all his appeal to language as the incarnation or incorporation of thought, Wordsworth's words frequently gesture towards a realm of pure spirit where gravity and air move with the power of mind. This is especially the case when he is writing about writing. In book v of *The Prelude*, the book on "Books," he wonders, "why hath not



the Mind / Some element to stamp her image on / In nature somewhat nearer to her own?" (1850, v.45-7). The answer to this speculative question comes to be located in an ideal of books as "things that teach as Nature teaches" (v.231), in "the great Nature that exists in words / Of mighty Poets" (v.594-5). But as this latter passage continues, the Nature to be found in poetic language dissolves into a force strangely like the "counter-spirit" of the *Essays upon Epitaphs*:

Visionary power  
Attends the motions of the viewless winds,  
Embodied in the mystery of words:  
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host  
Of shadowy things work endless changes, – there,  
As in a mansion like their proper home,  
Even forms and substances are circumfused  
By that transparent veil with light divine,  
And, through all the turnings intricate of verse,  
Present themselves as objects recognised,  
In flashes, and with glory not their own. (v.595-605)

The "transparent veil" of words here, working "endless changes" in a mysteriously paradoxical realm of "darkness" and "shadowy things," is disturbingly akin to the image of words as "poisoned vestments...unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve." We have come a long way from the ideal of a poetic language selected from "the real language of men" – unless that "real language," no less than the language of "mighty Poets," has the power to dissolve into darkness as well as bring to light the thoughts it would embody. A book, even a book like *Lyrical Ballads*, may be but a "Poor earthly casket of immortal verse" (v.164).

#### IV

Coleridge shared Wordsworth's desire that words be more than arbitrary signs of thoughts. On September 22, 1800 he wrote to William Godwin:

I wish you to philosophize Horn Tookes System, and to solve the great Questions ...Is thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? & – how far is the word "arbitrary" a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of their Growth? – In something of this order I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too. (Letters, 1, 625-6)

This letter echoes a sentence from Wordsworth's note to "The Thorn" in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, where "repetition and apparent

tautology" are seen to be capable of becoming "beauties of the highest kind" because of "the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion" (*Prose*, II, 513). Coleridge's insistence that words can embody and not just stand for thoughts and things is, however, consistently more exuberant and untroubled than Wordsworth's. Where Wordsworth can find an ultimate linguistic integrity in silent inscriptions commemorating the dead, Coleridge puts his linguistic faith in words as "living Things" – as plants, as live bodies: "The focal word has acquired a *feeling of reality* – it heats and burns, makes itself be felt. If we do not grasp it, it seems to grasp us, as with a hand of flesh and blood, and completely counterfeits an immediate presence, an intuitive knowledge."<sup>8</sup>

In the letter to Godwin we can see Coleridge resisting "Horn Tooke's System," even as by implication he takes that system to represent the most advanced formulation of recent linguistic thinking. In his recent study of *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (1986), James C. McKusick traces Coleridge's "close intellectual relationship" to Horne Tooke, a relationship that began in the mid 1790s when Coleridge came to know Tooke personally and developed an admiration for his progressive politics as well as for his work on language. By 1801 Coleridge was changing his mind about Tooke's politics, but according to McKusick, "his admiration for Tooke's scholarship remained unaffected by these feelings." Unaffected? Here is an entry from Coleridge's *Table Talk* for May 7, 1830:

Tooke affects to explain the origin and whole philosophy of language by what is, in fact, only a mere accident of its history. His abuse of Harris [James Harris's *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Universal Grammar* appeared in 1751] is most shallow and unfair. Harris, in the *Hermes*, was dealing – not very profoundly, it is true, – with the philosophy of language, the moral and metaphysical causes and conditions of it, &c. Horn Tooke, in writing about the formation of words only, thought he was explaining the philosophy of language, which is a very different thing.<sup>9</sup>

The fact of the matter is that Coleridge rejected Horne Tooke's radical effort to understand all mental processes as processes of language. Coleridge certainly exploited *The Diversions of Purley* for metaphysically suggestive etymologies – of "mind" from "the motion of the Scythe in mowing," or of

<sup>8</sup> From a notebook entry in MS. Egerton 2801, fo. 145, quoted in *Inquiring Spirit: A Coleridge Reader*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H.N. Coleridge (London, 1835); see McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 43.

the noun “thing” from the verb “to think.” But this latter etymology clearly shows Coleridge’s opposition to Tooke, who had derived the verb “to think” from the noun “thing.”

Coleridge repudiates the cardinal principle of the Lockean tradition, that language is the arbitrarily and historically contingent “workmanship” of the human mind. Instead, he elaborates a conviction that words can become at once natural things and the thoughts we have about things, and that their being so is an expression of the coalescing of things and thoughts, of nature and mind, in a transcendent power called “the Logos.” In the famous condensation of his thinking on these matters in chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge defines both the Primary and Secondary Imagination as essentially linguistic, or more specifically vocal, powers – as a repetition and an echo, respectively, of that originary reflexive utterance, “I AM,” through which the infinite divine mind expresses itself as the existing universe and thereby creates it. The summarizing formulations of chapter XIII are offered, Coleridge tells us via a patently fake letter of advice “from a friend,” in place of – by way of deferring – a full articulation of his ideas, which will be reserved for his “announced treatises on the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity.” These “treatises” were never published, but Coleridge did leave behind a manuscript which has come to be known as the *Logic*, and which was finally published in 1981 as a volume in the ongoing Princeton University Press-Routledge edition of his works. In his illuminating chapter on the *Logic*, McKusick regards it as a systematic philosophy of language. Despite the fact that long sections are translations or paraphrases of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is the most sustained and philosophically erudite treatment of language by any British writer of the Romantic period. That Coleridge at one point considered calling his treatise ἘΠΕΑ ζῶοντα (“living words”),<sup>10</sup> an obvious variation on the Homeric epithet (“winged words”) used by Horne Tooke in the title of his great work, *ΕΠΕΑ ΠΤΕΡΟΕΝΤΑ, or, the Diversions of Purley*, shows that he still conceived of his project in part as a reply to Tooke.

In the *Logic* Coleridge is preeminently concerned not with the semiotic dimension of language, with the ways in which words signify thoughts or refer to things, but with “grammatical discourse,” with grammar as a formal relational system that “reflects the forms of the human mind” (p. 18). He thus positions himself squarely within the line of thinking that runs from the doctrines of universal grammar expounded in the *Port Royal Grammar* and in

<sup>10</sup> From Notebook 29 (the “Clasped Vellum Notebook”), Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, fo. 39v.; quoted in McKusick, *Coleridge’s Philosophy*, pp. 123–4.

Harris’s *Hermes* to Chomsky’s recent work. Coleridge’s postulation of universal linguistic categories bypasses the pseudo-historical reliance on an original Adamic language in favor of a more technically elaborate appeal to the “infinite I AM” – to a divine, transcendental act of language in which subject and object, mind and world, are eternally united. “This primary mental act,” he writes, “which we have called the synthetic unity or the unity of apperception, is presupposed in...all consciousness” (*Logic*, p. 76). The original word of God is constitutive at once of all existence and of all thinking. Berkeley is an important influence on this idealist conception. But where Berkeley asserts that human language is “arbitrary,” unlike the divine language of nature to which it imperfectly referred, Coleridge entertains the belief that human language too, in its highest forms, echoes or reflects transcendently constituted links between ideas or perceptions and things. It is most emphatically in the “symbol,” with its “translucence of the special in the individual or of the general in the especial or of the universal in the general,” and “Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal,” that human language triumphs over those “empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter” (*Lay Sermons*, p. 30).

The theoretical speculations worked out during the 1820s in the prose of the *Logic* begin to take shape early in Coleridge’s career – not just in lectures, letters, and notebook entries, as we have seen, but in his poetry as well. The ideal of a divine natural language emerges at a key moment in “Frost at Midnight,” as the speaker imagines that his infant son will have an upbringing far different from his own childhood “In the great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim”:

But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

(54–62)

Coleridge might seem to come close here to Wordsworth’s conviction in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that people from “Low and rustic life...communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived.” But already we can discern the grounds for Coleridge’s differences with Wordsworth, differences elaborated in the famous attack on the linguis-

tic tenets of the preface in the *Biographia Literaria*, chapter xviii: "The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination" (*Biographia*, II, 54). The argumentative formulations of 1815–17 are latent in the poetic longings of 1797–8. While the child in "Frost at Midnight" is situated along with the rustics among what Wordsworth calls "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature," he learns to speak not by listening to the language of rustic society, but by communicating directly with a natural world that is already linguistic – with the "eternal language" that is nature understood as God's self-utterance. And that "eternal language" of nature in "Frost at Midnight" is figuratively seen to contain those "reflection[s] on the acts of the mind itself" which, for Coleridge, constitute the "best part of human language": the child will perceive not just "lakes and sandy shores," "craggs" and "clouds," but the "processes and results of imagination" by which these natural forms echo or reflect each other: "the clouds, / Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores / And mountain crags." Yet, the conventions of ordinary, arbitrary human language resist this drive towards an all-encompassing "eternal language." The "voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts" in which the child in "Frost at Midnight" will participate may not be as untroubled as his father wishes: "Great universal Teacher! he shall mould / Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask" (63–4). But "ask" in what kind of language? In an immediate echo of the Great universal Teacher's "eternal language" of natural forms? The father's fond hope obscures difficulties that his child will be given to asking, difficulties registered in the grammatical tension of the father's own idealizing verse.

### V

It is a distinctive sign of Percy Shelley's differences from and with Wordsworth and Coleridge, and of his very different intellectual relationship to empiricist philosophy, that he exuberantly accepts the arbitrariness of language. Early in *The Defence of Poetry*, comparing the expressive potential of language to that of "colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action," he says that "language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone" (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 483). Nowhere is Romanticism's positive appropriation and transformation of empiricist discourse more striking than in this passage of the *Defence*. Shelley takes the Lockean insistence on the ineluctable subjectivity of language ("Words in their primary or immedi-

ate Signification, stand for nothing, but the ideas in the Mind of him that uses them") a radical step further with his insistence that it is "the Imagination," not just the understanding, that produces language. There is considerable evidence to suggest that it was Locke to whom Shelley was responding. He had read Locke avidly, along with Hume, very early in his career, when he thought of him as a sensationalist, as the predecessor of the French materialists whom he admired (Holbach, Volney, Cabanis). Then, in the autumn of 1815, he appears to have begun a serious rereading of Locke's *Essay*, at a time when the new skeptical and idealist philosophical reading he had done since 1812 – the year in which he met William Godwin and ordered the writings of Monboddo, Horne Tooke, and Sir William Jones from his bookseller – was beginning to open up new questions about language and the mind's experience of the world and of itself. Shelley returned to Locke after the famous Switzerland summer of 1816 and, according to Mary Shelley's journal, read the *Essay* regularly from mid-November 1816 to January 1817. He read Locke again in March 1820, less than a year before beginning the *Defence*.

While Shelley's boldly optimistic appropriation of Locke's principle that words arbitrarily signify "thoughts alone" is characteristic of his intellectual bearings and allegiances, it is at odds with his prevailing attitude towards language. When focused on the actual temporal and historical condition of language rather than on its ideal potentiality relative to other media of expression, he tends, like Locke, to emphasize its limits and imperfections. "You say that words will neither debauch our understandings, nor distort our moral feelings," he says in a letter to Godwin:

But *words* are the very things that so eminently contribute to the growth & establishment of prejudice: the learning of *words* before the mind is capable of attaching correspondent ideas to them, is like possessing machinery with the use of which we are so unacquainted as to be in danger of misusing it. But [although] words are merely signs of ideas, how many evils, & how great spring from the annexing inadequate & improper ideas to words. (*Letters*, I, 317)

Although this letter, written July 29, 1812, shows Shelley's thinking about language at a very early stage, it demonstrates a profoundly mistrustful recognition of the constitutive power of language that will prevail and complicate itself in his later writing. On the one hand, Shelley wants to maintain a clear distinction between words and ideas, and to insist on the latter's independent priority; on the other, the passage is energized by his acknowledging, in what he believes to be opposition to Godwin, that words commonly hold a devastating power over "correspondent ideas" – that the

machine of language, to turn a Coleridgean phrase in the Shelleyan direction suggested here, is diabolical rather than blessed.<sup>11</sup>

This troubled apprehension of language's power over thought haunts some of the most famous passages of Shelley's *Defence*, such as the celebration of the creative authority of "poets, in the most universal sense of the word":

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 482)

Shelley's account of the generative cultural force of metaphor deviates from its apparent celebratory trajectory at the temporal conjunction "until," with its anticipation of the historicizing phrase "through time." The history of discourse, for Shelley, follows the institutional consolidation and normalization of vital metaphor into the signs of ordinary language. The arbitrary production of language by the imagination, which two paragraphs later Shelley will claim as an originary power for the individual poet, comes to be seen here, in the course of a single sentence, as an arbitrary power of a very different kind. Once the "before unapprehended relations" marked by poetic metaphor get absorbed into the language they perpetually enrich, they lose their generative vitality. The passage from imaginative life to death is inherent in the historical condition of language; the possibility of poetic revitalization is, in this crucial moment of the *Defence*, precariously and challengingly tendered as a conditional "if."

Shelley encourages us to believe that "new poets" will always arise. But they will necessarily have to work as much "to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized" by the inevitable process of linguistic institutionalization as to originate "vitally metaphorical" language. Another way of putting this would be to say that the poet in history must take advantage of the potential in the arbitrary relation between words and thoughts to turn language against its own tyrannical and capricious "dominion" (Wordsworth's word) over thinking. This aspect of the poet's work is both artistic and political, and it becomes increasingly difficult when, as is often the case, Shelley's understanding of "the before unapprehended

<sup>11</sup> In *The Friend* (1818), Coleridge claims that one of the purposes of his metaphysics is "to expose the folly and the legerdemain of those who have thus abused the blessed machine of language." This last phrase provides the title of Jerome Christensen's provocative book, *Coleridge and the Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

relations of things" contradicts common cultural assumptions about what "things" are.

"[N]othing exists but as it is perceived," he says in the fragmentary essay "On Life," following the seemingly nonsensical but nonetheless irrefutable claims of empiricist philosophy in its radically idealist (Berkeley) and skeptical (Sir William Drummond) modes against the "shocking absurdities of the popular [dualistic] philosophy of mind and matter" (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 476). What Shelley attempts to confront in this essay, and recurrently in his poems, is the fact that language as it exists does not and perhaps cannot be made to conform to "the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy." The dualism of mind and matter inheres in the very structure of our language, and Shelley's or any other writer's desire to dissolve it must risk violating not only such formal coherence but such practical social and cultural efficacy as existing language may be deemed to offer: "By the word *thing* is to be understood any object of thought, that is, any thought upon which any other thought is employed, with an apprehension of distinction" (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 478). What becomes of those "before unapprehended relations of things" that are "mark[ed]" by "vitally metaphorical" language when the distinctions or differences essential to such relations are entirely a matter of perception or "apprehension," without any other ontological ground? Shelley's provoking such a question is an indication of why his writing has been the focus of so much deconstructive criticism – some of it, particularly Jerrold Hogle's *Shelley's Process* (1988), brilliantly revealing. But his own attitude towards what is at stake in trying to dissolve false differences and the identities they depend on is very different from the characteristic deconstructive appeal to the play of language:

The words *I*, and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of – how little we know. (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 478)

Shelley may sometimes push his writing towards "that verge where words abandon us" because he delights in playing on the brink. But even there we find him working – not just desperately, but with determined resourcefulness – to overcome the sheer dizziness that his skeptical intellectual convictions produce in himself and in his readers.

The categories of distinction and unity built into language that Shelley wants to undo and replace with "before unapprehended" distinctions and unities are political as well as grammatical and philosophical. Language can

only be revitalized from within, by making a virtue rather than a vice of the arbitrary signifying processes on which language depends. One of Shelley's most striking political representations of this activity of liberating the potential of language from within its very constraints occurs in canto VII of *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), a poem that addresses itself, in the words of the preface, to the "panic which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all classes of men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution." And all classes of women too: Cythna, the poem's heroic female protagonist, recalls her long isolated imprisonment in a cave beside the sea:

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...

And on the sand would I make signs to range  
These woofs, as they were woven, of my thought;  
Clear, elemental shapes, whose smallest change  
A subtler language within language wrought:  
The key of truths which once were dimly taught  
In old Crotona.

(VII.3100-13)

Cythna's creative linguistic activity here is inseparable from her condition of isolated imprisonment, and in this respect she is a figure of the poet – of Shelley himself as he recurrently imagines his own position within language. That Cythna's activity is historical is made evident by her unlocking "truths which once were dimly taught / In old Crotona"; that it is textual (a matter of "mark"-ing, as Shelley says in the *Defence*, not just saying) is suggested by the precarious image of making signs on the sand to articulate her weavings of thought. Weaving, an image traditionally associated with the work of confined women, is here woven into a new text of self-sustaining power and subtlety (the word "subtle" once meant "woven fine," Latin *subtilis* from *sub-tela*, and has its root in the verb *texere*, "to weave"). Shelley sees Cythna's liberating herself from within language as it comes to her historically not as an act of violent repudiation but as an expression of "Clear, elemental" difference, as an elaboration of "smallest change" into her own self-empowering idiom.

This moment in *The Revolt of Islam* engages in complicated ways the central questions about women's place in romantic writing that are currently being posed by Margaret Homans, Mary Jacobus, and other feminist critics. Cythna is undeniably a male writer's image of women's access to linguistic power; her weaving "A subtler language within language" is itself woven by Shelley into the Spenserian stanzas of an epic tradition and of a visionary

political allegory that set the terms for what she can and cannot accomplish. Yet Cythna offers a very different figure of women's relation to language and writing from anything we find in Wordsworth or Coleridge. In saying that the terms of her working within language, including her working in isolation, are Shelley's own, we are recognizing that those terms extend even as they question and reimagine the empiricist view of language as an inherently constrained yet incompletely determined and therefore transformable product of human culture.