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# PART I

## Introduction

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# 1

# Locke, literary criticism, and philosophy

For that is a great thing – when a book has once got a character, if it should be so dull that nobody should read it afterwards, it saves the reputation for centuries; this we have had instances of in others [besides Locke's *Essay*].

Coleridge, "Philosophical Lecture XIII"

## (i)

The practice of literary criticism in the last fifty years is both a precedent for the contemporary literary critic's concern with Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and a goad to intensify that concern. This is because major critics of eighteenth-century literature and Romanticism have not only presented or assumed readings of Locke's *Essay*, but have made these readings instrumental to arguments regarding the shape of post-Renaissance literary genres, aesthetic theory, and, most generally, literary history. A brief survey of this criticism will serve to highlight this procedure as the common ground of otherwise distinct critics, establish the specific issues and assumptions in readings of Locke which are most crucial to the writing of literary history, and define the revisionary power of the reading of Locke presented in Part II of this study.

In *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (1936), Kenneth MacLean presents what he takes to be the main ideas of each of the four books of the *Essay* and cites a range of eighteenth-century texts as evidence of the extensive "literary biographies" these ideas undergo.[1] His practice of reading eighteenth-century literature in general as a direct response to Locke is also evident in Basil Willey's older but still current *The Seventeenth-Century Background* (1934). After conceding that we owe much first-rate satire and the *Essay on Man* to Locke's standard of truth, Willey, like Coleridge, makes a place for Locke in the post-Renaissance dissociation of sensibility: it was "the cold philosophy" which destroyed

[1] Kenneth MacLean, *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936) vii.



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"the union of heart and head, the synthesis of thought and feeling, out of which major poetry seems to be born."[2] For Willey, the attempt by eighteenth-century poets to animate the dead universe of Descartes and Locke by means of the symbols from an obsolete mythology "ended in fiasco" (302). This is why the final chapter of his book is not about eighteenth-century literature but Wordsworth, who "was working in the spirit and tradition of Locke when he rejected gaudy and inane phraseology and devoted his powers to the task of making verse 'deal boldly with substantial things'" (289). Eighteenth-century poetry is essentially a failed response to the Lockean account of a dead world, while Romantic poetry is a successful response grounded in the fabrication of new mythologies (Shelley and Keats) or a poetry of common (Lockean) language describing how mind and heart interact with the world (Wordsworth). The Romantic accomplishment, then, is both a reaction against Locke's empiricism and some kind of extension or fulfillment of it. Willey's understanding of empiricism as something which both poses and resolves the essential issues of the eighteenth century and Romanticism is one example of the extraordinary explanatory power it has held for literary historians.

This power is clearly evident in M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). In his preface, Abrams explains that one of the methodological and experimental premises and experiments of his work is that he takes metaphors of mind such as the mirror and the lamp "no less seriously when they occur in criticism than when they occur in poetry."[3] This procedure allows Abrams to show that particular metaphorical identifications of the mind conform with particular aesthetic theories: the representation of mind as a reflecting mirror suits a mimetic theory of art; the representation of mind as an emanating lamp suits an expressive theory of art (viii, 31, 53, 57, 69, 158). Locke, as the philosopher who more than any other "established the stereotype for the popular view of the mind in the eighteenth century" (57), is hence a principal figure in eighteenth-century literary theory. His imaging of the mind in the *Essay* as a mirror, a *tabula rasa*, and a dark room defines the mind as a passive receiver of images from without and establishes the psychology which dominates the primarily mimetic aesthetic theory of the eighteenth century. Moreover, even the notion of active creative perception which Abrams traces back from "Tintern Abbey" to Young's *Night Thoughts* is "an interesting aspect of the Lockean tradition." For Abrams, the distinction between primary and secondary

[2] Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth-Century Background* (1934; New York: Doubleday, 1953) 288. Further page references are included in the text. The book has most recently appeared as an Ark paperback, 1986. Coleridge's criticisms of Locke are more complicated than is generally thought. For his critique of the Subject/Object dualism in Locke, see *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1955) 104.

[3] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953) viii. Further page references are included in the text.

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qualities implicitly grants to the mind a "partnership in sense-perception." In Young's conversion of this into an active partnership, Abrams sees "Locke's sensationalism in the process of converting itself into what is often considered its epistemological opposite" (63). On Abrams' view, then, Locke's epistemological writings assert a conception of mind which dictates the prevailing eighteenth-century mimetic aesthetic but also ground the empirical tradition within which the concept of creative perception and an expressive aesthetic develop. Although Abrams sees Romantic poetry as a confrontation with Lockean dualism, he here presents the Lockean doctrine of perception as a seminal statement of both eighteenth-century and Romantic responses to this dualism. Like Willey, Abrams ultimately finds in empiricism both the postulation and the solution of the major problems of post-Renaissance aesthetics.

The other major and influential work which gives pride of place to Locke in post-Renaissance aesthetics is Ernest Tuveson's *The Imagination As a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (1960).[4] Here, too, it is Lockean epistemology and psychology, but along with enthusiasm for nature, which form the basis of an essentially continuous tradition of literary theory running from the early eighteenth century through the Romantics. Tuveson's acknowledgements that it is the chapter on the association of ideas in the *Essay* which revolutionizes literary theory, that "in fact, Locke makes no provision for aesthetic values," and that Locke's theory of understanding cannot accommodate the notions of beauty, the sublime, and imagination do not deter him from making his point: the post-Renaissance project of making imagination a major mental faculty and a means of grace within the world of sense impressions is the natural and inevitable development of Locke's concept of mind (77–78). The implication of this claim is that as the co-father of a "cult of nature and imagination" (164), Locke was in an essential way deluded regarding the nature of his accomplishment:

> When Locke narrowed the understanding to an efficient organ for knowing facts and forming accurate opinions from sense impressions, he thought he was eliminating those misty and unfruitful fancies about the higher reaches of the mind, which More had called the *mens*, the power of transcendent knowledge. Locke thought he was establishing common sense on its throne; but in fact he simply drove the *mens* elsewhere, to a nonrational area of the mentality. (139)

The coherence of eighteenth-century and Romantic aesthetics, then, resides in the displaced but natural return of a power which the deluded Locke thought he had eliminated. For Tuveson, Locke is a founding figure

[4] Ernest L. Tuveson, *The Imagination As a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). Further page references are included in the text.

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of post-Renaissance literary theory, but in the sense that Oedipus is a founding figure in the Theban plays, since he is blind to the real configuration of his eliminations, enthronements, and offspring.[5]

It is well known that both Earl Wasserman and Abrams presented more finely argued positions on these issues in articles of the sixties. Wasserman differentiates between eighteenth-century descriptive poetry and Romantic poetry in terms of their response to the epistemological issue of the subject/object dualism opened by the empiricists: driven to confront this issue by the eighteenth-century empiricists, the eighteenth-century poets resorted to analogy and so produced a "dualistic poetry ... a poetry of hobbling simile, rather than symbol"; driven to confront this epistemological issue by both eighteenth-century philosophy and the neglect or incompetence of eighteenth-century poets, the Romantics produced distinct epistemological positions which generated a poetry of symbol.[6] Though Abrams points to continuities in what he calls "the greater romantic lyric" with both eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry and seventeenth-century devotional poetry, he, too, stresses the Romantic reaction against the dualism which is seen to be instituted by Descartes and Locke: "the central enterprise" of Wordsworth and Coleridge was "to join together the 'subject' and 'object' that modern intellection had put asunder, and thus to revivify a dead nature, restore its concreteness, significance, and human values, and re-domiciliate man in a world which had become alien to him."[7]

What must be seen about de Man's celebrated attack on these positions is that far from disqualifying dualism as an issue of Romanticism, it confirms it as a major dimension of the confrontation of consciousness with its own temporality. Once he has generalized the results of his discovery of allegory in a passage from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* into the claim that allegory is the authentic voice of European Romanticism as a whole, de Man dismisses the dialectic of subject and object as simply "a passing moment in [another] dialectic, and a negative one at that, since it represents a

[5] In *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), James Engell corroborates this view (17–18). A precedent for the Abrams/Tuveson line is Walter Jackson Bate's *From Classic to Romantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946). Though he rightly sees that empiricism in the early eighteenth century augmented the anti-imaginative and anti-emotional bias of neo-classicism, Bate ultimately sees British empiricism as the groundwork of Romanticism. For an account of the founding position of Locke's version of the association of ideas in eighteenth-century critical theory, see Martin Kallich, *The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory In Eighteenth-Century England* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). It should also be noted that Locke's statements on association, the difference between judgment and wit, and the difference between primary and secondary qualities have been canonized as eighteenth-century aesthetic texts.

[6] Earl Wasserman, "The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge," *Studies in Romanticism* 4 (1964) 20–21.

[7] M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. F. Hilles and H. Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 546.

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temptation that has to be overcome."[8] But this only means that the dualism which Abrams and Wasserman see the Romantics attempting to negate or transcend remains as an essential truth spoken by the rhetoric of temporality: "the prevalence of allegory always corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny. This unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in turn, it bears no resemblance" (206). That allegory is in an essential sense an assertion of dualism and that this recognition is primary to the hard-nosed Romantics is again made clear when de Man claims that allegory "prevents the self from an illusory identification with the nonself, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a nonself. It is this painful knowledge that we perceive at the moments when early romantic literature finds its true voice" (207). Allegory entails the temporality of consciousness because it is a form of *allusion* to preexistent texts, *and* because it makes an epistemological assertion. That is to say, de Man sees allegory as the rhetoric of temporality not only because the allegorical sign refers to another sign that temporally precedes it, but also because it insists on the difference between a subject who knows and an object that is known (the object is known, at least, to be a nonsubject which bears no resemblance to the subject). Allegory negates symbol, in part, by affirming the dualism of self/nonself which symbol attempts to transcend or efface in a spatial, nontemporal totality. For the early de Man, then, the central Romantic experience consists in the conflict between the allegorical representation of the self which affirms the temporal predicament by both referring to previous signs and recognizing the self to be distinct from the natural world, and a symbolic representation of the self which is simply a defence against this affirmation. Because he understands allegory to include the assertion of dualism and makes this assertion essential to the definition of the temporal self, de Man here remains congruent with Abrams' and Wasserman's most general conception of Romanticism as an engagement with an issue that is seen to lie at the heart of empiricist tradition.

It would be a mistake to think that more recent discussions of post-Renaissance literary tradition have abandoned this conception. In *Shelley and the Sublime* (1984), Angela Leighton makes the commonplace that the empiricists' principal metaphor of mind is the eye a premise in an argument that defines eighteenth-century theory and representations of the sublime as a critique or collapse of empiricism.[9] By regarding Shelley's poetry as the *agon* of his empiricism in matters of religious belief and his

[8] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd. edn., revised (1971; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 204–205. Further page references are included in the text.

[9] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

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sublime aesthetic, Leighton provides a version of the empiricism–sublime–Romanticism connection which is also articulated by her predecessor, Thomas Weiskel. In *The Romantic Sublime* (1975; 1986), however, this connection is defined quite differently. First, Weiskel regards the experience of the natural sublime in which the presence of God in nature is perceived by the senses as, "in one sense," a response to Locke's postulate that the only way to mind is through the senses.[10] Moreover, the mid-eighteenth-century transference of sublimity from the perceived object to the soul is regarded by Weiskel as a response to the Lockean view of mind as a fillable but essentially vacant space. And although the poetry and theory of the sublime appear to be "a radical alternative to the visual emphasis of Lockean psychology and to the decorous precision of neo-classical diction," they are in fact fundamentally aligned with Lockean premises. The eighteenth-century sublime, for Weiskel, merely plays out the logic of what he calls "the classical or Lockean semiotic" which postulates the relation between words and things as being neither necessary nor natural but arbitrary (14–17). Having argued that the Lockean account of language and the mind is the ground of various aspects of the early sublime, Weiskel proceeds to document the psychology and structures of the Romantic sublime in which this account is seen to persist and undergo modification. Again, it seems that empiricism can account for everything. It is not just that Locke is the basis of major dimensions of both eighteenth-century and Romantic aesthetics, but that he is regarded as such even when semiotic concerns come to dominate critical practice. While differing in important respects, the positions of Leighton and Weiskel are allied in the urge to regard post-Renaissance literature and aesthetic theory as some kind of response to Locke and the empiricists: differences in the nature of this response are taken as criteria for the postulation of literary-historical categories. So that while they modify the view of such critics as Abrams and Wasserman, Leighton and Weiskel are still operating under the same overarching premise when they make Locke a touchstone of their descriptions.[11]

Although he claims to be arguing against Abrams' understanding of the relation between eighteenth-century empiricism and Romanticism, Hans Aarsleff ultimately only reaffirms it: Abrams' real claim is not, as Aarsleff

[10] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (1975; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 14. Further page references are included in the text.

[11] Other instances of this premise, both old and new, may be found in "The Case Against Locke," the opening chapter of Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); Alan Grob *The Philosophic Mind* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973); Richard Brandtley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984); Andrew Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). For a discussion of Romanticism in connection with a de Manian reading of Locke, see Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

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would have it, that Romanticism rejects eighteenth-century empiricism, but that different dimensions of empiricism ground both eighteenth-century and Romantic aesthetics. Aarsleff is hence restating part of Abrams' claim when he writes that the philosophy of Locke and Condillac is the foundation of "Romantic aesthetics at large," and that "the cleavage of subject and object was irreparable, but the remedy, though imperfect, lay in the very philosophy that had created the cleavage."[12] This conception of Lockean epistemology as a ground of post-Renaissance literary tradition in general is again affirmed in Steven Knapp's passing observation of Locke as an important figure in what he perceives as the emergence after Milton of a strong concern with the distinction between literal and figurative language. Such a concern is only a manifestation of an ambivalence Knapp finds in English aesthetics from Addison to Coleridge: "the ambivalence consists in a desire to possess the power of alien or archaic belief while at the same time avoiding its absurd or violent consequences."[13] Locke figures in the resolution of this ambivalence because his insistence on sensory perception as the legitimate grounds of belief and his denigration of enthusiasm as grounds for religious and political action could serve as a means of defusing the power of certain beliefs. The eighteenth-century solution is a notion of literature as epistemological leisure, "a way ... of holding beliefs one knows to be false – or can't admit one holds" (140); Coleridge's response is a notion of literature as a mediation of fiction and literal belief. Since both notions are basically the same, Locke ends up being a major figure in the articulation of an aesthetic which is continuous from the eighteenth century through the Romantics. Like Bate, Willey, Abrams, Tuveson, and Aarsleff, Knapp suggests that the eighteenth-century/Romantics divide in aesthetics is less pronounced than the Renaissance/post-Renaissance divide which is prominently marked by Locke. While Locke is seen to constitute a ground of literary continuity and so weaken certain historical rifts, the attitudes of which he is a central spokesman are also seen to entrench other more general demarcations.

Critics who have tried to specify the characteristics of narrower areas of eighteenth-century literature and their relation to Romanticism have also made an understanding of empiricism, and of Locke in particular, a basis of their project. Patricia Spacks' well-known characterization of the mid-

[12] Hans Aarsleff, "Wordsworth, Language, and Romanticism," in *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 377, 380. Aarsleff not only simplifies Abrams' claim but fails to recognize that other critics of Romanticism, such as Bate and Willey, assert the congruity between empiricism and Romanticism.

[13] Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 140. Further page references are included in the text.

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century poetry of sensibility as a "poetry of vision," for example, claims authority in the fact that Locke models the mind as an eye. And after carefully documenting Locke's growing concern with abstraction in drafts of the *Essay*, William Youngren proceeds to observe that the conceptualist doctrine that is ultimately articulated by Locke (and the other empiricists) "made it perfectly natural" for Restoration and eighteenth-century poets to write what Youngren calls a "poetry of exemplification" which is characterized as the buttressing and exemplification of general statements "by vivid and striking particular portraits or phrases or single words." Christopher Fox has more recently gone to the controversy surrounding the chapter on personal identity which Locke added to the second (1694) and following editions of the *Essay* in order to discuss the work of the Scriblerians. And S. H. Clark predicates his understanding of the central mid-century poet on Locke: Gray's English poetry is "a series of rigorous meditations on the Lockean self"; the *De Principiis Cogitandi* is "the epic of Lockean empiricism." In asserting the centrality of Locke to early and mid-eighteenth-century literature, these critics buttress the understanding of later eighteenth-century sentimentalism as a reaction against Locke. But Alfred Cobban's old claim that English sentimental literature after the mid-eighteenth century is essentially a gushy reaction against what were felt to be the dehumanizing mechanisms of Lockean psychology is countered by accounts of Sterne as both sentimentalist and qualified Lockean. G. S. Rousseau goes so far as to invoke Kuhn's notion of a paradigm in order to characterize the centrality of Locke's *Essay* to both the eighteenth-century project of a science of man and the literature from Richardson to Sterne which is the belated literary manifestation of the revolution in sensibility.[14] Though various constructions of Locke under-

[14] Patricia Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 2; William H. Youngren, "Conceptualism and Neoclassic Generality," *ELH* 47 (1980) 734–736; Christopher Fox, *Locke and the Scriblerians: Identity and Consciousness in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); S. H. Clark, "'Pendet Homo Incertus': Gray's Response to Locke. Part One: 'Dull in A New Way,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24 (1991) 274–275; Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century* (1929; New York: George Allen and Unwin, 1960) 254–255. On Locke and satire in general, see Peter Briggs, "Locke's *Essay* and the Strategies of Eighteenth-Century Satire," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 10 (1981) 135–151. William Dowling describes the eighteenth-century verse epistle, which he regards as the dominant form of eighteenth-century poetry, as a response to the problem of solipsism which "arose as an unintended consequence of Lockean empiricism." See *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 22. On Sterne as both sentimentalist and qualified Lockean, see especially John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954); Helene Moglen, *The Philosophical Irony of Laurence Sterne* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1975); Michael Bell, *The Sentiment of Reality* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983); Martin Battestin, *The Providence of Wit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) 215–269. On the Locke–Sterne connection in general, see also Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne: de l'homme à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) and Ernest L. Tuveson, "Locke and Sterne," *English Literature and British Philosophy*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago

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write these claims, the Lockean/anti-Lockean difference is one which proves adequate to defining the difference between major eighteenth-century literary modes. And given that Locke may be constructed in these various ways, the implication is that, dovelike, the variegated Locke sits brooding as the covering cherub over eighteenth-century literature.

Including the novel. Because Ian Watt saw the novel raising more sharply than any other form the essentially epistemological problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates, he appealed to Locke in order to clarify the nature of the novel's realism.[15] But Watt is more refined than Willey, Tuveson, and several later critics of the novel in his assessment of Locke's relation to literary tradition. First, Locke is only the major figure within a group of philosophers including Bacon, Hobbes, Hume, and Descartes, whose general outlook Watt calls "philosophical realism." And instead of characterizing the relation between philosophical realism and the "formal realism" of the novel as causation or determination, Watt generally identifies it as being one of analogy. Hence, the rejection of universals in favor of observed particular detail, the privileging of individual sensory experience, the understanding of personal identity in terms of memory, the more minute discrimination of temporal sequence, the privileging of denotative uses of language – these features of Locke's philosophical realism have not *effects* but *parallels* in the novel. Even so, Watt's definition of the distinctive narrative mode of the novel by means of an analogy with philosophical realism (of which Locke emerges as the major spokesman) is indicative of the importance of Locke to the account of the novel which has ruled the field since 1957.

Because later critics of the novel have shared Watt's premise that the novel is in an essential sense a response to or embodiment of epistemological problems, Locke's *Essay* has remained a crucial document in eighteenth-century novel criticism. Ronald Paulson sets the stage for his study by pointing to the demands for new procedures which Lockean epistemology posed for the satirist. From his understanding that Locke transferred the locus of reality from an objective material world to the perceiving mind, Paulson infers that the satirist was forced to shift his concern "from the objective action to the consciousness of it, and from the objective character to the dissolution of objective identity in consciousness."[16] The new epistemology, which made judgments regarding both the

Press, 1971) 86–108. G. S. Rousseau's article, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility," appeared in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century* vol. 3, ed. R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976) 137–157.

[15] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

[16] Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 7. For an interpretation of eighteenth-century literature in general in terms of the Christian humanism "which soon disintegrated under pressure of a new subjectivism implicit

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