Allegories of One's Own Mind

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Notes

Chapter One

1. The phrase “the eternal I AM” is from Coleridge’s definition of the imagination in chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*, and “Nature’s holy plan” is a late variant from Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in Early Spring” (*Lyrical Ballads*, 76n). See also Coleridge’s discussion of “The Poet, described in ideal perfection” in chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*. For a full discussion of the development of poetic authority in Wordsworth and Coleridge, see Riede, *Oracles*.

2. T. S. Eliot may well have been thinking of Arnold’s rejection of *Empedocles* when he described the problem of Hamlet as “an emotion which can find no outlet in action. . . . The intense feeling, ecstatic and terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known” (“Hamlet,” 102).

3. A critical element in the discourse about melancholy from the time of the ancient Greeks, of course, had been the notion that melancholy is the disease of scholars and poets and, in general, that it is the distinctive mark of men of genius. As Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl discuss at length in their classic *Saturn and Melancholy*, the belief that melancholy is the invariable condition of exceptional men had its origins in Aristotle’s “Problem XXX.I,” which began with the simple question “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics?” (18). With the beginnings of humanism in the early Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino and other neo-Platonists definitively established the modern idea of “genius” based on the melancholy humor, particularly describing the “self-sufficient ‘homo literatus’” as “torn between the extremes of self- affirmation, sometimes rising to hubris, and self-doubt sometimes sinking to despair; and the experience of this dualism roused him to discover the new intellectual pattern, which was a reflection of this tragic and heroic disunity—the intellectual pattern of ‘modern genius’” (247).

4. James’s comments notwithstanding, however, psychology never entirely displaced spiritual concerns with materialism. Jenny Bourne Taylor has pointed out that “‘Psychology’ was firstly understood as the ‘study of the soul’ and although by mid-century the emphasis had shifted to the mind and the brain, this centrality of the soul, underpinned by many of the assumptions of natural theology, remained essentially intact” (197).

5. In *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867), Maudsley did
momentarily entertain the notion that insanity and genius might be related, but he quickly rejected the notion that “a morbid state of nervous element is the condition of genius” with the observation that “any one so constituted is nowise an example of the highest genius; for he lacks, by reason of his great sensibility, the power of calm, steady, and complete mental assimilation, and must fall short of the highest intellectual development” (quoted in Radden, Nature, 243).

6. The idea that the Victorians were troubled by a sense of the mind divided against itself is not a new one, of course. See Miyoshi’s important overview of the topic.

7. As Christopher Herbert has compellingly demonstrated, a sense of fragmented or fractured consciousness, which he describes as anomie, is endemic in Victorian thought. My point in suggesting that this Victorian state of mind be recognized as melancholia rather than (or in addition to) anomie is not simply to provide an alternative label, but rather to provide an analytic structure in the polarization of self and character, and to suggest a psychological and cultural discourse that enables us better to see how the loss of a sense of unity with oneself could be seen not only by Victorians like Arnold and Carlyle as a disabling pathology but simultaneously by Victorians like Browning, Hallam, and Tennyson as a source of poetic meaning.

8. David Adams links Freud, Nietzsche, and Benjamin in a tradition of melancholy:

Nietzsche’s Übermensch belongs to a long line of belated figures characterized by the inhuman demands placed upon them. The Übermensch, like Freud’s Über-ich burdened ego and Walter Benjamin’s angel of history carry within their names an indication of the extra-human nature of their desire to exercise a redemptive memory. The melancholy and horror to which each succumbs is a symptom of the human will divided against itself, unable to make whole the accumulating wreakage of history. (85)

For a discussion of the guilt associated with melancholy, see Benjamin, Origin, 224–25.


10. Wordsworth did not specifically mention modern journalism, but he was evidently describing it when he argued that the “most effective” causes of the “savage torpor” were “the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing [sic] accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies” (Prose Works, 1: 128).

11. For a powerful reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgment in these terms see Davis, 59–97.

12. For a full discussion of Arnold’s thwarted attempt to represent inwardness fully in this poem, see Riede, Matthew Arnold, 175–95.

13. See Bronfen for a full discussion of this image and related issues.

14. For a pertinent discussion of the relation of sound in poetry to inwardness, see Ong.

15. “The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets,” in
The Shell and the Kernel, 158. For Abraham and Torok, Reality, with a capital R, is “defined as what is rejected, masked, denied precisely as ‘reality’; it’s that which is, all the more so since it cannot be known; in short, reality is defined as a secret” (157).

16. See Benjamin’s comment that allegory corresponds “perfectly to the commodity fetish” (Arcades, 368).

17. Carlyle characteristically berates surface “truths” as superficial “formulas” and “hearsays,” and he argues that heroic minds pierce to the “mystic deeps of man’s soul” (Works, 27: 30). See, for example, the argument in “Characteristics” that “of our thinking, we might say, it is but the mere upper surface that we shape into articulate Thoughts; underneath the region of argument and conscious discourse, lies the region of meditation; here in its quite mysterious depths, dwells what vital force is in us; here, if aught is to be created, and not merely manufactured and communicated, must the work go on” (Works, 28: 4–5).

18. Demogorgon in Prometheus Unbound speaks of the impossibility of expressing the secrets beneath the veil of life: “If the Abysm / Could vomit forth its secrets: but a voice / Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless” (iv. 114–16). Shelley anticipated a Nietzschean view of the symbolic or der as the human construction of what we call empirical reality—the veil that those who live call life does not correspond to the deep truth of the ding an sich.

19. Despite his usual dismissals of Shelley, Carlyle here combines his allusion to Hamlet with an allusion to Shelley’s account of melancholy in modern poetry in “To a Sky-Lark”: “We look before and after, / And pine for what is not—/ Our sincerest laughter / With some pain is fraught—/ Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.”

20. Benjamin is seemingly inconsistent about the relation of allegory to the veil or the vesture of deep truth. Usually he regards the veil of representation as mere semblance, as in his comment that “allegory, as the sign that is pointedly set off against its meaning, has its place in art as the antithesis to the beautiful appearance (Schein) in which signifier and signified flow into each other” (Arcades, 374). In this view allegory is a destructive, even deconstructive, mode. As Stanley Corngold has shown, however, Paul de Man recognized in Benjamin’s work a sense that allegory may also incarnate an outward appearance that effectively communicates the deep truths of the inner self. Corngold notes that in Blindness and Insight, “de Man composes an unacknowledged paraphrase of Benjamin’s thesis on obscurity: ‘[T]he outward appearance [of the schöne seele],’ he writes, ‘receives its beauty from an inner glow (or feu sacré) to which it is so finely attuned that, far from hiding it from sight, it gives it just the right balance of opacity and transparency, thus allowing the holy fire to shine without burning’ (158). See W. David Shaw, The Lucid Veil, for a thorough analysis of the ubiquitous imagery of the veil to represent mystery in Victorian literature.

21. The painted veil is of course most famously Shelley’s image, but Carlyle used it as well: “only on a canvas of Darkness, such is man’s way of being, could the many-coloured picture of our Life paint itself and shine” (Works, 28: 26).

22. See Benjamin, Origin, 175–76, on the dialectic of sound and content in poetry.

23. In Allegories of Reading de Man, fortuitously echoing Adorno, claims that Benjamin’s Origin of German Tragic Drama fails to produce the “truly dialectical”
history of Romanticism that de Man evidently saw himself writing because, like Hegel, Benjamin bypasses the Romantic moment.

24. In *Arcades* Benjamin quotes this phrase from *Origin* to elucidate the meaning of Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century allegory (324).

25. *Letters*, 1: 35. The editors of the letters point out that this is partly a recollection of Sir Thomas Browne’s remark in *Christian Morals* that “The created world is but a small parenthesis in eternity,” and that the specifics of the “shelf” are apparently recollected from reading Lyell.

26. For Benjamin’s arguments about redemptive language, see Pensky, 122–23. For a compelling argument that Benjamin’s redemption of ruins in allegory follows a strict secular, even Marxist, logic, see Buck-Morss, 115–24.

Chapter Two

1. The bride abandoned by her lover is also one of Freud’s examples of the inferior female melancholic.

2. Christ’s *The Finer Optic* discusses the significance of a heightened attention to detail across a broad spectrum of Victorian works, conspicuously including the poetry of Tennyson and Rossetti and the discussion of pathetic fallacy in Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*.

3. For a fascinating discussion of the afterlives of words in Tennyson’s poetry, see Douglas-Fairhurst, 182–269.

4. For an excellent discussion of Tennyson’s contribution to the conception of Englishness, see Lucas, chapter 8.

5. See the editorial comments in Tennyson, *Poems*, 1: 148n.

6. Tennyson’s focus on commodity culture is also representative of nineteenth-century allegory as Benjamin understood it. Benjamin’s emphasis on allegory as a record of ruin and decay is even intensified in his shift from German baroque drama to the modern world. As Kelley puts it, “whereas decay was [in German baroque culture] a melancholy, plodding affair, in [the “commodified world”] it is very nearly instantaneous and, as such, a shocking sign that decay and ruin, not continuity, make history” (253).

7. For a discussion of Arthur as conscience see Reynolds, 246–47.

Chapter Three

1. Citations of contemporary reviews refer to the convenient reprinting in *Correspondence*.

2. In a lucid discussion that I need not rehearse here, Schiesari analyzes feminist versions of the psychoanalytic tradition from Luce Irigaray’s denial of female melancholia to Kaja Silverman’s argument that melancholy is an especially female “pathology”—“a psychic condition which is somehow endemic to the female version of the positive Oedipus complex” (69)—and to Julia Kristeva’s assigning of an “asymbolic” depression to most women, while attributing the powerful symbol-making capacity of melancholia primarily to male genius (78–95).

3. According to Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Lake School expires in Keble and Faber and Cardinal Newman” (quoted in Fraser, 12).
4. The attempt to reconcile admiration for Byron with a belief in the intrinsic morality of poetry is evident in a letter of 1828: "I think that, humanly speaking, Lord Byron's extraordinary sensibility of heart & mind was his bane. He could not stand unhurt in that burning fiery furnace—for 'the likeness of the Son of God' was not in the fire! Religious knowledge he had none; but every real poet must have natural devotion—and he was a real poet! . . . A relation of mine was in St Peters at Rome as Byron entered it,—& saw him throw himself in a transport of enthusiasm, on the earth before a cross, & kiss the feet of the Crucified. You see—the knowledge was not there—but the feeling was there!" (Correspondence, 2: 139).

5. Barrett wrote that "Through the whole course of my childhood, I had a steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman, and a determinate resolution to dress up in men's clothes . . . & go into the world to 'seek my fortune.' 'How' was not decided; but I rather leant towards being poor Lord Byron's PAGE" (Correspondence, 6: 42).

6. For a discussion of the poem as subversive of "the acquiescent female tradition" (79), see Cooper, 73–79.

7. A whimsico-serious letter to Mary Mitford about her dog Dash makes it clear that the poem's moral brought Coleridge to mind. She advised Mitford not to "let the Cynics laugh at the dog-lovers—seeing that philo-dogism (if the dog may stand as a representative of all other 'blessed living' soulless things—) is far better & higher & holier than their philosophy. Do not men dishonour their own natures in casting scorn upon the creatures of their Creator?" (Correspondence, 3: 240).

8. Helen Cooper has pointed out the likeness to Tennyson's subjects, and she has also pointed out that Barrett had apparently not read Tennyson's poetry at this point. Much to Barrett's annoyance, contemporary reviewers also noted the resemblance to Tennyson and pointed out the evident "influence." Immediately after reading "The Poet's Vow," Mary Mitford wrote to Barrett, saying, "Do read Tennyson's 'Ladye of Shalot'" (Correspondence, 3: 195).

9. Her main criticism of Letitia Landon (L. E. L.), her only real rival as a woman poet, was that she lacked sincerity, that she failed to express her genuine individuality and fell into mere "convention," that "Her genius was not strong enough to assert itself in truth": "She was the actress and not Juliet" (Correspondence, 5: 72). Both as a poet and as a woman, sincerity—truth—was a moral imperative. L. E. L. "believed that great lie, that poetry is fiction—and it was fatal to her not merely as a poet but as a woman. It is a creed desecrative of the soul, & of nature, & of 'supernal spirits.' The ruin of it, extends beyond literature" (Correspondence, 5: 97). Because of the Victorian belief that women were closer to God than men in the simplicity and openness of their nature, anything other than fully sincere self-expression smelled of artifice, a sin against nature and against God. Presumably it was not by self-assertion but by fictionalizing oneself, by playing a role, that the poet might set herself in opposition to God's creation.

10. Helen Cooper, similarly, argues that by adopting the voice of Eve, Barrett "first challenged" the Romantic disenfranchisement of women poets by treating women as "the Other in male poetics" (6).

11. The desire to return to Eden is the theme of such poems as "The Deserted Garden," "The Lost Bower," and "Hector in the Garden."

12. Writing about mesmerism to Mary Russell Mitford, Barrett said, "I would give a great deal, not to believe a word of it: & I do believe, in spite of my repulsion. Some people say . . . 'If there's anything in it, the devil is in it'—and my
feeling is something approaching to *that*. If I believe, I tremble. Not that, in so many words, I set it down for Satanic influence—do not mistake me—: but that there is something horrible & cold to me in the whole matter & mystery—like the undressing of the soul from its familiar conventions & plunging of it, shiveringingly, into a new element. In fact the whole Temple of Human nature seems rent from the top to the bottom, & to tremble before the flood of the agency. They may well call it,—as some mesmerists do,—a *modification of death*" (*Correspondence*, 9: 283). Here and elsewhere, Barrett's comments on mesmerism indicate a mixture of awe and horror at the possibility of an agency that could actually and literally provide the kind of absolute spiritual apocalypse for which she saw poetry striving but never fully achieving under the existing conditions of mortal existence.

13. See introduction, 32–33.

14. Looking at Barrett’s specific allusions to the beloved Caterina of the Portuguese poet Camoens and at a 1678 translation of five letters written by a Portuguese nun, Leighton makes this point generally about the sonnets:

Thus the title, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, is one that teases with a wealth of literary connotations. It proposes a translation; it remembers another poem; it echoes, perhaps, the highly literary disposition of the Portuguese nun herself. However, the sense of derivativeness—the sense of a text remembering some other original—is a connotation which finds support, not only in these specific references, but also in a recurring anxiety about the language of feeling, expressed in the letters of both poets. The “dust of figures stirring” in the title of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is not just a dust flung in the eyes of “Peeping Tom” readers. It is not just a decoy. It is also a quiet revelation. The idea of translation—of mediating what is remote and foreign—of writing at a distance from the original—is an idea that finds considerable support in certain preoccupations of both Robert’s and Elizabeth’s letters. (“Stirring,” 229)


**Chapter 4**


2. Shaw explores Kierkegaardian elements in Browning’s work at length throughout his *The Dialectical Temper* (1968).

3. Bagehot notes that he is quoting from “Locke on the Human Understanding,” book iv, Chap. iii. i.2.

Chapter 5

1. A proof of artificial intelligence seems to be the mean-spirited critic in the software who also, ludicrously, calls the wine-bibbing “Rubaiyat” the “liver biopsy” and hears “Keatsian” as “cutesy.”

2. See Jameson’s definition of ideology as “the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘resolutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (79). The unresolvable contradiction in this case is the impossibility of reconciling the erotic poetic imagination with the requirements of chaste, manly self-control.


4. See chapter 1, 29.

5. See Decker for the full printing and publishing history, 30–45.

6. Due to his difficulty getting the volume published in England, the first edition was published in America under the title *Laus Veneris and Other Poems and Ballads*. The English edition was more simply called *Poems and Ballads*.