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Exploring the Enlightenment from Intellectual History and Critical Theory: A Case Study of Hybrid Methodologies in Literary Criticism

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This essay is a reflection on the methodological problems that arise when critical theory and intellectual history are brought together in the study of the Enlightenment. Taking my own PhD research as a case study, I explore the tension between the different conceptions of the Enlightenment employed by these methods, and assess the possibility of articulating them together in a single argument.

Introduction

The following piece is a reflection on the main methodological problems that have arisen, and the tentative solutions I have devised for them, during the writing of my PhD dissertation. This reflection is therefore bound up with the specific nature of my research topic, as well as with the personal influences and inclinations that have led me to pursue it in the way I have. It is a forced stop in the middle of an unfinished process, an attempt to make that process move in a new direction, out of the methodological deadlock in which it seems to find itself, and towards conclusions which I can now perhaps only vaguely glimpse. Despite its inevitably confessional and provisional character, however, this reflection on method has a general interest insofar as it addresses the concrete problems raised by two different ways of approaching the Enlightenment (critical theory and intellectual history), and assesses the possibility of articulating them together in a single argument. It can also in this way be read as a case study of the general challenges posed by bringing together historicist and theory-based methodologies in literary criticism, which may inspire similar reflections in different periods and fields of research.

This reflection has its origin in the study of the conceptions and uses of myth in the work of the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) in the intellectual context of the late Enlightenment. The methodological difficulties I have faced in this study arose, in the first place, from the inherent limitations of my original conceptual framework, taken from one of the central texts of critical theory, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1947) by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, I had recourse to intellectual history in order to fill in some of the gaps left by my initial approach to the subject. This, in turn, raised further questions of method concerning the compatibility of the newly introduced material with my previous work as well as the methodological limitations inherent to intellectual history itself. There are, therefore, two different kinds of questions involved in this reflection. The first is a question of *capability*, of what can and what cannot be done with the specific toolkit provided by each of these methods. The second is a question of *compatibility*, of whether and to what extent they can be successfully combined in a research project. In what follows, I will present these issues as they

appeared to me in the course of my research, as parts of the narrative of my vicissitudes as a PhD student.

Critical Theory: The Dialectic of Enlightenment

As I was doing my Masters in Literature and Society: 1688-1900 at the University of Edinburgh, I became fascinated by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer. My mind back then was fertile ground for those ideas, since I had been interested in Marxism and German idealist philosophy for some years, and had already read other works of the Frankfurt School. What was most appealing to me at the time, more than any particular insight into Enlightenment ideas or their relation to past and future developments, was Adorno and Horkheimer's general understanding of myth and enlightenment as two terms within a dialectic, that is, as two different and incommensurable ways of understanding and interacting with the world which do not have an independent existence but rather come into being and develop negatively through their opposition. They represent myth and enlightenment as anthropomorphised forces that have struggled for dominance within the human mind since the origins of Western civilisation, and show how their power correlation varies according to changes in society and its relationship to nature. This inspired me to change my initial research proposal on Shelley's engagement with an early form of socialism (usually called "Utopian") to one that aimed at exploring the interrelation and interaction of myth and enlightenment in his work. With the conceptual framework provided by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I thought I could do justice to the Romantic conception of poetry as a form of knowledge,[1] and shed some light on the deep epistemological implications of Shelley's rewriting of Greek myths—something which could be easily overlooked by the structural definitions of myth that dominated the literary criticism of the Romantic period during the twentieth century.[2] Thus, I set out to show how the modern concept of myth was produced in Shelley's writings by the enlightened critique of the truth-value of myths (which in his case included the Bible), and how simultaneously his enlightened consciousness, originally a purely negative impulse, defined itself in this process of negation. In this way, I expected to demonstrate that, as Shelley worked out an enlightened worldview, he became plagued with insoluble contradictions which derived from the original suppression of myth, and that eventually he had to return over his own steps and reconsider the nature and value of myths in an attempt to overcome them.

In this study, provisionally entitled *Myth and Enlightenment in Shelley's Work: Rethinking History and Political Agency in the Aftermath of the French Revolution,* I look at Shelley's engagement with the Enlightenment in a threefold manner. Firstly, with the discourse on the nature of knowledge and reality (what today we would call epistemology and ontology) as he found it in the works of John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776), Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), William Godwin (1756-1836), and William Drummond (1770-1828). Secondly, with the new historiographical model that was developed in Scotland by William Robertson (1721-1793), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Adam Ferguson (1723-1816), and John Millar (1735–1801). And thirdly, with the radical political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), William Godwin, and William Cobbett (1763-1835).

The interpretative and explanatory power of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* resided in the fact that it could show how the specific strategies employed by enlightened discourse to prove the falsity of myths decisively shaped its own principles and determined its development. The main argument at an early stage of my research was that necessitarianism developed as an inherent tendency in enlightenment thinking as it criticised myth by advancing the empirical study of nature. One of the conceptions of myth I identified was what Hume in the *Natural History of Religion* (1757) called "prosopopoeia" (141), and what Shelley in the atheistic note to *Queen Mab* (1813) called "anthropomorphism" (*Poetical Works*, 1: 312). Adorno and Horkheimer assisted me in doing this, since they considered this conception of myth as central to enlightenment: "Enlightenment has always regarded anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature, as the basis of myth" (4). This way of understanding myth may be tracked back to Bacon's critique of final causes, and even further back to some fragments by Xenophanes,3 but it seems to have come to Shelley from Hume by mediation of d'Holbach's *The System of Nature, or, The Laws of the Moral and Physical World* (*Système de la Nature ou Des Loix du Monde Physique et du Monde Moral*, 1770). At the same time, Adorno and Horkheimer talk about of myth and enlightenment as if they were persons or characters, and can therefore been seen as reclaiming anthropomorphism for enlightened thinking at a later stage of the dialectic. According to them, myths are based on a projection of human attributes onto nature, and what they basically do is understand natural phenomena as intended and produced by invisible intelligent agents when they are actually the result of unknown blind natural causes. By resorting to the dialectic of enlightenment, I could argue that this conception of myth caused a backlash to the nature of enlightened thinking itself. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it, "enlightenment […] equates the living with the nonliving as myth had equated the nonliving with the living" (11). As it endeavoured to expel supernatural agency from nature and history, enlightenment also came to understand human thinking and behaviour as determined by natural causes (passions, needs, instincts, propensities, etc.), and thus created a continuum between moral and natural phenomena.

This collapse of the moral into the natural, I argued, gave rise to necessitarianism. Necessitarianism is a strong form of determinism according to which necessity rules over the moral as well as the natural world, and unites their events as links in a great uninterrupted chain of causes and effects. Godwin famously defined it in Book IV of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793) as "an idea of the universe, as of a body of events in systematical arrangement, nothing in the boundless progress of things interrupting this system, or breaking in upon the experienced succession of antecedents and consequents" (351). This is the worldview Shelley developed and argued for in *Queen Mab*, quoting from both Hume and Godwin in the notes to the poem (this time from Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748))4 (*Poetical Works*, 1: 305-309). Needless to say, this philosophical outlook rendered moral and political agency highly problematic. It led from enlightenment's critique of myth as anthropomorphism to the belief that, as Godwin put it, "[m]an is in reality a passive, and not an active being" (354). Every single action he performs in his life has been already determined aeons before his birth by natural forces against which he is absolutely powerless:

In the life of every human being there is a chain of events, generated in the lapse of ages which

preceded his birth, and going on in regular procession through the whole period of his existence, in consequence of which it was impossible for him to act in any instance otherwise than he has acted. (Godwin 351) Ironically, then, in its attempt to "disenchant[...] the world' and 'install[... human beings] as masters" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1), enlightened thinking ended up threatening if not altogether suppressing the capability of human beings for free agency or conscious self-determination. In a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener of October 1811, Shelley remarkably expressed the mixed feelings of pride and pressure he harboured in conceiving human history and his own life as ruled by a strict necessity:

> Certainly every thing is connected, both in the moral & physical world there is a train of events, & tho' not likely, it is impossible to deny but that the turn which my mind has taken, originated from the conquest of England by William of Normandy. (*Letters*, 1: 150)

The uneasiness latent in passages such as this, I concluded, would eventually awaken Shelley to a sense of enlightenment's contradictions, and spur him to return to myth in an attempt to solve them.

The Shortcomings of this Approach and the Turn to Intellectual History

This formed the essence of the argument of the first chapter of my dissertation, an excerpt of which I submitted for the first year review. As I was preparing for this submission, however, I gradually became aware of the problems arising from using the categories of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to analyse certain tendencies in Shelley's writing, while at the same time trying to establish a genealogy of those tendencies in Hume, d'Holbach and Godwin. The main problem I then identified was that the concept of enlightenment developed by Adorno and Horkheimer is highly dehistoricised, and therefore to a great extent useless for historical criticism. Hence, I decided to point out that it refers to something of the nature of a mental process or type of consciousness, and that it does not coincide with the cultural phenomenon or intellectual movement that we refer to as the Enlightenment (with a definite article and capital E, and usually with an accompanying demonym), which developed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe together with the advent of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. In fact, it can be said that in this respect, like in many others, Adorno and Horkheimer were not technically speaking very good Marxists. To make their concept of enlightenment reach back to the origins of Western subjectivity and civilisation, they committed evident historical mistakes from the point of view of historical materialism. For example, in order to show that "[m]yth is already enlightenment" (xviii), they regarded Odysseus as "the prototype of the bourgeois individual" (35), and claimed that "[c]onnections with reason, liberality, and middle-class qualities do indeed extend incomparably further back than is assumed by historians who date the concept of the burgher from the end of medieval feudalism" (36). Furthermore, throughout the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they jump from Homer and Xenophanes, to Bacon and Kant, to Sade and Nietzsche, to fascism and the culture industry, without any significant historical contextualisation or mediation. However, this lack of historicity in my working concepts did not jeopardise the overall validity of my research project, since the dialectic of enlightenment is, regardless of this, very insightful when approaching the works of Hume and Shelley, and its use could be supported by fairly recent scholarship on the subject, which enabled me to place it within a rich and

nuanced historical discursive context.[5] The problem was that, while this conceptual framework enabled me to track certain elements and processes through different texts and authors, it failed to give a satisfactory account of how those elements and processes were historically related.

In order to show how the dialectic of enlightenment was played out in Shelley's early writings, a necessary stage of my argument consisted in building up a genealogy of the conceptions of myth Shelley inherited from different Enlightenment thinkers with at least a modicum of historiographical plausibility. In doing this, I was starting to tread on the grounds of history. The first step was to point out the basic factual connections between all these authors, whether they knew each other, read each other's works, and drew upon them, acknowledging it or not. These connections were quite easily ascertained: d'Holbach had known Hume personally, and had read his works; and Shelley had read both authors and quoted liberally from them, explicitly or implicitly, in the notes to *Queen Mab* (although from Hume's *Enquiry* rather than from his *Natural History of Religion*). The same operation could be performed concerning Shelley's ideas on necessity. Godwin had founded his necessitarian philosophy on Hume's arguments on liberty and necessity, and explicitly referred the reader to the *Enquiry* in a footnote to Book IV of *Political Justice* (345). Shelley deeply admired Godwin's thinking throughout his life, met him when he was twenty, and became his son-in-law two years after eloping to Switzerland with his daughter Mary. The materialist teachings of d'Holbach's *System of Nature*, although not dependent on Hume's epistemology, also contributed to shaping Shelley's early deterministic beliefs. Obviously, these basic connections were not sufficient to provide any significant historical support for my argument. They could only point out the actual provenance of Shelley's ideas about myth and necessity, referring them to this or that source, which thus appeared as two unrelated developments. These connections could by no means substantiate the claim that the critique of myth as anthropomorphism led by an inherent logic in enlightened thinking to the development of necessitarianism and to the consequent suppression of human agency. The interdependence of Shelley's ideas on myth and necessity, as well as the logic of their development, could only be grasped within the conceptual framework of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, from which I had developed my argument in the first place.

This turn to history in my research, however, made visible other dimensions of the Enlightenment which had been obliterated by the highly dehistoricised concept of enlightenment I had taken from Adorno and Horkheimer, especially its national differentiation. It highlighted the cultural mediations that took place when the ideas on myth and necessity travelled from one country to another, especially when they took a long detour through France to reach England from Scotland. The fact that these ideas were very similar, and in most cases related by means of direct influence, made all the more evident that they were coming from very different places, and being put to very different services in the different works in which they appeared. To appreciate this, it is useful to consider how d'Holbach's naturalistic account of the origin of religious belief differed from Hume's. On one hand, it was both backed by and put to the service of French materialism, of which d'Holbach was one of the fiercest advocates. This was a highly mechanistic form of materialism that aimed at reducing all phenomena, including mental processes, to the fundamental laws of matter. On the other hand, it was full of militant and outspoken bursts of an atheistic and anti-clerical rhetoric that

astonished Hume, who in keeping with his scepticism had a more measured and sober style.[6] This undoubtedly had a very different significance in a Catholic country where the Church still had considerable economic and political power, as was the case of eighteenth-century France. In addition to this, d'Holbach's natural history of religion could also be referred to a native intellectual tradition which preceded Hume, namely Fontenelle's *History of the Oracles* (*Histoire des oracles*, 1687) and *Of the Origin of Fables* (*De l'origine des fables*, 1724), and Voltaire's *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations* (*Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 1756). D'Holbach's materialism and atheism significantly influenced Shelley's reading of Hume, not only of the *Natural History of Religion* in *Queen Mab*, but also in the way he later reworked the arguments of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) in *A Refutation of Deism* (1814). Some particular developments of the English Enlightenment also contributed to Shelley's congenial reception of d'Holbach's materialism, especially the materialism and associationist psychology[7] of thinkers such as David Hartley (1705-1757) and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). A similar case could be made to explain the way in which Godwin produced his necessitarian philosophy out of Hume's arguments on liberty and necessity, which were originally based on his sceptical account of our knowledge of causation. All these subtle but significant differences could only be understood in relation to the concrete social, cultural and intellectual contexts which made the Scottish, French and English Enlightenments nationally differentiated phenomena. But just as they were readily perceivable from a historicist perspective, they tended to go out of focus as soon as I adopted the concepts and the grand perspective of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Of course, by merely pointing at it the problem was not solved, and both of my examiners addressed these methodological issues at the first year panel. The first examiner framed the problem in the way I have presented it, as a mixture of or hesitation between two different kinds of methodology:

> It seems to me that this is the key tension within the work so far: is the aim to produce a piece of historicist criticism charting influences on Shelley, or is there a stronger philosophical project at stake which, although less persuasive in terms of direct influence, is still entirely legitimate?

It was an observation of my second examiner, however, who viewed the issue in a different light, and his thoughts were what gave me the cue to start devising a solution for this problem:

> Part of the problem here is that "myth" does not seem to be a category used by Hume [...] there is a gap between the critical vocabulary that this work wants to adopt from Adorno and Horkheimer, and the language actually being used by the texts it discusses. The connection needs to be explained and justified; at the moment it is rather taken for granted.

The interesting fact here is that Hume does indeed deploy the words "mythology", "mythological" and "mythologist" very profusely in the *Natural History of Religion*, but that, despite this, I had not considered it necessary to quote any passage in which he did so. I was then consciously although warily imposing my own categories in my readings of the texts, trying to illuminate certain aspects of them, which can be readily perceived within this theoretical framework but may have been altogether unknown to their authors. Focusing too much on the theoretical side, then, I had skipped a necessary

step in my argument. This was not, however, merely a personal mistake on my part, but one bound up with the nature of the method I was employing. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a whole was driven by a political agenda that sought to deal with the pressing issues of the present. Its concept of enlightenment was instrumental to "demonstrate" that there are "tendencies which turn cultural progress into its opposite" (xiii), and more concretely to explain the rise of fascism in Europe and of the culture industry in America in the first half of the twentieth century. As Gunzelin Schmid Noerr has pointed out, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* "historical analyses are intended to elucidate the present" (218). Its study of the past, therefore, was highly interested and subordinated to the needs of the present. Faithful to its Marxist roots, critical theory does not strive for a disinterested contemplation of reality, but is actively involved in its transformation. As Horkheimer had said in 1937, critical theory "never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery" (246).

This sense of urgency informing critical theory explains to a certain extent its tendency to conflate past and present, or to focus predominantly on those elements of the past that are relevant for current struggles. The remaining part of this tendency can be explained by its strong component of German idealism. There is a wilful arbitrariness in the way in which Adorno and Horkheimer used the concepts of myth and enlightenment. This practice rested on the belief that reality is not something given, but produced; and that arbitrariness is therefore a necessary moment in all knowledge. They expressed this belief in the preface to the *Dialektik* saying that the mind's "sublating character [*aufhebenden Charakter*]"—its ability to "set[...] out negatively from the facts"—is essential to "its relation to truth" (xvi-xvii). Consequently, they decided to shape their object according to their own needs rather than let it be handed to them as "given" by the dominant ideologies of the times. I defended this principle at the first year panel, and argued that if we reject it we must also reject most of our critical vocabulary. "Romanticism" itself, for example, seems to have been for the most part an invention of the Victorian period.[8] But, if we are to judge by our current academic and institutional practice, this fact does not seem to make it a less valid aesthetic or historiographical category in any significant sense. Yet at the same time I knew I would disprove of other conflations of past and present, such as the projection of modern disciplinarity onto eighteenth-century moral philosophy. Thus the question arose: Why and how was I making these distinctions? Was this a mere arbitrary inconsistency in my proceeding, or was there some sort of unconscious rationale I was using which needed to be explicitly stated and developed?

Intellectual History: The Enlightenment as Natural and Moral Philosophy

I cannot provide a full answer to this question yet, but can point at the direction in which I hope to find it by explaining how I have faced these issues in the second chapter of my dissertation, which is predominantly a piece of intellectual history on Shelley's historical writings and their relation to the historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment. So far as I understand it, intellectual history endeavours to read texts within the social, political, economic, cultural and institutional contexts in which they were written. Myth does not have a prominent place in this approach, and usually it does not figure in it at all. The closest we find to the dialectic of enlightenment is the issue of secularism

and religion, and the struggle between ecclesiastical and civil power. However, for intellectual history it is not simply a matter of opposing the Enlightenment to Christianity, either as a system of beliefs or as a social organisation. This enables it to give a better account of figures such as Robertson and Priestley, who were prominent enlightened thinkers and church ministers at the same time. A fundamental step in this approach is the reconstruction of the worldview of the authors whose history it writes, that is, the reconstruction of their intellectual landscape and institutional framework, and of their ideas and methods, so far as it is possible, as they themselves understood them. The projection of our own categories and institutional contexts in the reading of the texts is therefore avoided, and regarded as an "anachronism". This is especially the case in what we can call narratives of disciplinary history. In these narratives, the Enlightenment appears as divided into two great disciplines: natural and moral philosophy, the study of external and of human nature, both of which were variously subdivided into several subdisciplines. For example, Hume divided the study of human nature into the "sciences of *Logic, Morals, Criticism and Politics*" (*Treatise* 43); whereas, according to John Millar, Adam Smith divided his lectures on moral philosophy into "natural theology", "ethics", "jurisprudence", and political economy (Stewart 274-275).

Of course, intellectual history can always have recourse to context, and refer disciplinary developments to the different pressures and struggles, norms and ideologies, practices and power relations, etc., under whose influence each author wrote, and which they opposed, transformed or reproduced, whether knowingly or not. Nevertheless, it can be said that under the form of disciplinary history it usually tends to commit the opposite mistake to that of critical theory described in the previous section. Focusing too much on the reconstruction of past consciousness, it effaces its relation to the present, and conceals the arbitrariness of its own categories, that is, the extent to which they are being imposed on the texts under study. Let us take "The Enlightenment Science of Society" (1995) by David Carrithers as a case study for this methodological phenomenon. There Carrithers starts by "remind[ing] us that the formal development and specialization of distinct social science disciplines was a nineteenth- rather than eighteenth-century phenomenon" (232). He goes on to say that the terms "social science" and "sociology" were coined after the Enlightenment era, and that therefore it is "anachronistic" to use them to refer to the eighteenth-century discourse on society (233-234). Accordingly, he also rejects "the once-popular arguments of Roy Pascal and Ronald Meek for the presence of economic determinism in products of the Scottish Enlightenment" as projecting Marxism back onto the eighteenth century (234). Although I personally side with Pascal and Meek on this issue,[9] I can acknowledge that Carrithers has a point here, especially regarding the survival of civic humanism in the Scottish Enlightenment.[10] But his approach becomes extremely problematic when without further qualification he starts talking about the "functionalism" of Montesquieu and the "conjectural history" of the Scots. I will focus on the latter as it is the subject of the second chapter of my dissertation. Of the former, I will only mention that it was developed by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The term "conjectural history" was coined by Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) in *An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.* (1793), and has been widely employed to refer to a historiographical genre of the Scottish Enlightenment ever since. Despite its ubiquitous currency, H.

M. Höpfl pointed out in 1978 that:

> Stewart's witness […] is somewhat suspect, for he wrote very much *post festum*—he may in fact be said to have been constructing mausolea—and we would do well to suspend our judgement until we have surveyed the evidence. (20)

He stressed the fact that, "[i]f Stewart was able to distinguish conjectural history from other sorts of history, the group of writers that concerns us was not" (Höpfl 21). And he also added that "the distinction [cannot either] be made by reference to specific works", poignantly arguing that

> It is plain that Ferguson's *Essay*, Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man*, several of Hume's *Essays*, and his *Natural History of Religion* conform closely to Stewart's account of conjectural history, whereas Hume's *History*, Robertson's *History of Scotland*, Kames's *Historical Law Tracts*, and Millar's *History of the English Government* do not. But Smith's *Wealth of Nations* cannot be classified in this way, and Robertson's *History of America* moves with astonishing facility between conjectural and narrative, document-based history. (21)

In a similar way, Ronald Meek had complained two and a half decades earlier that to call the Scottish historians'

> work *Theoretical* or *Conjectural History*, as Dugald Stewart did, is really to miss one of the main points about it—that it tried consciously to base itself on the study of concrete historical facts, in opposition to the abstract speculation and conjecture (particularly with regard to the so-called "state of nature") which had so often been employed in the past. ("Scottish Contribution" 38)

In fact, Dugald Stewart is better understood as the first interpreter or critic of Smith's work than as his spokesman—and an excellent critic at that, one whose influence in our understanding of Smith's work cannot possibly be overstated. His terminology and penetrating analysis of Smith's practice have become part of the common ways in which we think and talk about the Scottish Enlightenment. Yet Stewart was of a later generation than Smith, inhabited a very different world, and was to a great extent a transitional figure to the Victorian period.

To see how Stewart's view differed from that of those who are now called "conjectural historians", let us take a look at the opening section of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) by Adam Ferguson. In a passage, which rightfully deserves to be called a "manifesto of the scientific method" (Forbes "Introduction" xx), Ferguson said:

> In every other instance, however, the *natural historian* thinks himself obliged to *collect facts, not to offer conjectures*. When he treats of any particular species of animals, he supposes, that their present dispositions and instincts are the same they originally had, and that their present manner of life is a continuance of their first destination. He admits, that his *knowledge* of the material system of the world *consists in a collection of facts*, or at most, *in general tenets derived from particular observations and experiments*. It is only in what relates to himself, and in matters the most important, and the most easily known, that he *substitutes hypothesis instead of reality, and confounds the provinces of imagination and reason, of poetry and science*. (8, emphasis added)

Ferguson, then, would not have been very happy to know that his *Essay* was going to be referred to by the term coined by Stewart three decades later. In his view, what Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau did could be properly called "conjectural", "theoretical", or "hypothetical" history. His was a "natural" history of society, based on the cornerstone of the scientific method. What counted as experience and evidence for him is a different matter.[11]

Closing Remarks

What do I want to say with all this? I am not completely sure, but I think it points in the direction of a solution to the methodological issues I have faced during my PhD. I am certainly not suggesting that we reject either of these methodologies, but rather that we embrace both while being aware of the specific problems that attend them. In this case, critical theory and intellectual history have not proven to be exclusive or incompatible, but rather complementary and productive. Bringing them together has helped me understand each other's limitations, and provide a mutual corrective for them. Critical theory enabled me to identify and relate elements and processes in Shelley's writing that would have otherwise remained unconnected or even unnoticed, such as the relevance of his conception of myth for his understanding of necessity. Intellectual history, on the other hand, helped me realise that Shelley took these elements from very different contexts in which they performed different functions, and that the way he articulated them, whether consciously or not, was not easily equatable with a mode of thinking common to the Enlightenment understood as a cultural phenomenon or an intellectual movement. From this perspective, however, Shelley's ideas on myth and necessity appeared as independent developments, and the relation between them, which formed the core of my argument, as imposed from without by the theoretical framework of t*he Dialectic of Enlightenm*ent. This did not invalidate my argument as such, but only pointed out the limits of its claims—that it does not describe any historical pressures or norms Shelley or any writer of his time might have been under, but only traces certain processes and problems discernible in his writing from a very specific theoretical point of view. Furthermore, the theoretical frame of mind in which this project was first conceived made me particularly sensitive to the fact that neither do the concepts of any historicist approach strictly coincide with those of the intellectual landscape it attempts to reconstruct, such as is the case with "conjectural history". Thus, as I regarded intellectual history from a critical-theoretical point of view, the need to historicise its historicist concepts of analysis became particularly evident to me.

Indeed, it can be argued that no study of the Enlightenment can possibly be completely historical or completely theoretical. As Adorno puts it, "[j]ust as little as a simple fact can be thought without a concept, because to think it always already means to conceptualise it, it is equally impossible to think the purest concept without reference to the factual" (158). Yet the concepts themselves provided by critical theory and intellectual history are of a different nature. Hitherto I have used optical metaphors to describe their relation to their object: methodologies are like lenses; what seems to go out of focus in one can be perfectly focused when we shift to the other. We must not forget, however, that intellectual history and critical theory do not see the same thing in different focuses or perspectives, but rather two different things altogether, namely a cultural phenomenon or intellectual

movement on one side, and a mental process or type of consciousness on the other. These images of the Enlightenment are of a different nature, and cannot simply be stitched together in a collage. Perhaps these methods are better compared to machines that measure different aspects of light, such as its wavelength and intensity. Their outputs are to a considerable extent incommensurable, and we have to write out the necessary mediations each time we move between them.

The distance between our situation and concepts and those of the texts we study is what is productive of knowledge. We always have to work upon this distance; we should never pretend to overcome it. Both of these methods have an opposite liability to obliterate this distance, either by simply conflating past and present or by striving to reconstruct the past exactly as it was. For dealing with this problem there are of course no easy formulas, but we can at least point out the extremes between which we can move. On the one hand, if we really read the works of the Enlightenment exclusively in their own terms (which is never the case), we would be doomed to the literal and mechanical repetition of the very works we are studying, and thus we would incur an anachronism of a different, deeper nature—not the imposition of our own categories to the works of the past but the pretension to be able to think like the people who wrote them. On the other hand, teleologies of any kind are always dangerous, and we would surely also be on the wrong track if we find that every turn of phrase we read seems to accommodate all too well to our concepts of analysis.

The problem of historical mediation between method and object becomes particularly acute and difficult while studying the Enlightenment, a period that witnessed the birth of many if not most of our own categories and methods of approaching reality. In striving to understand it, we are coming to grips with our own past, which constitutes our own conceptual frameworks and yet also in very important aspects differs from them. When I started my PhD, I was not aware of the great extent to which the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was rooted in German Enlightenment thinking about myth until I read *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (2007) by Nicholas Halmi. Only then could I properly justify the intuition that I was not simply imposing the concepts of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to completely alien material, but rather to passages in which concepts of "myth" and "enlightenment" similar to those I was using were being shaped. In dealing with the problem of historical mediation, therefore, it is always useful to historicise our own categories so far as it is possible, and to see to what extent they correspond and differ from those employed in the texts we study. This is a necessary component both of a self-reflexive historicism like that of James Chandler in *England in 1819* (1998), and of a historically informed theoretical criticism, to which my own research seems to conform.

¹ In Shelley's case, this conception is best expressed in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), where he defends the role of the imagination as a cognitive faculty, and states that 'Poetry is [...] at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred' (*Major Works*, 696).

² By structural definitions I mean those which only take into account the formal elements of myth as a literary genre, and altogether suspend the question of its relation to truth and knowledge. Northorp Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is paradigmatic of this approach: it defines myth according to its protagonist ('a divine being') and his or her 'power of action' within the plot (33). As late as 1999, Paul Wiebe's definition of 'mythopoem' conformed to this tradition, rejecting the 'definitions of myth that we find in other disciplines', and particularly Mircea Eliade's definition of myth as 'true story', on the grounds that 'literary works do not present realities but fictional worlds' (68). Nevertheless, for Shelley and the Romantics in general the problem of the truth of poetry went beyond the mere opposition between 'reality' and fiction.

³ For the history of the conception of anthropomorphism, see Guthrie.

⁴ See Evans for a detailed comparison of Hume's, Godwin's and Shelley's arguments on freedom and necessity, which appropriately highlights the key differences between them.

⁵ Duffy and Russell were particularly useful for this.

⁶ There is a famous anecdote by Diderot according to which at one of d'Holbach's dinner parties Hume declared he did not believe atheists existed, to which the baron replied that fifteen of the eighteen other people in that room were atheists, while the remaining three were undecided (Mossner 483; Topazio 19; Curran 46).

⁷ Associationism was a psychological model based on Locke's theory of ideas, especially on the chapter 'Of the Association of Ideas' of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). According to this model, all thoughts derive from sensory experience, and are associated in consciousness by certain simple principles or laws such as similarity, contiguity, and frequency. Hume had an important part in the development of this model, but it was David Hartley who popularised it, and related it to a materialist theory of the 'vibration' of the nerves in his *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* (1749).

⁸ For a classical account of this, see Whalley.

⁹ This is one of the central debates in the scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment. The main proponents of the materialist interpretation were, in chronological order, Werner Sombart, Roy Pascal, Duncan Forbes, Ronald Meek, and the early Andrew Skinner. It was also partially admitted by J. G. A. Pocock and Carrithers himself (259). Its main opponents have been H. M. Höpfl, Knud Haakonssen, Donald Winch, and the later Skinner.

¹⁰ See Pocock for an account of how natural jurisprudence and civic humanism developed as separate paradigms in the Scottish Enlightenment.

¹¹ At the time, ancient history and travel literature were thought to provide empirical evidence of the first stages of society, since, as Locke put it, 'in the beginning all the World was *America*' (qtd. Meek *Ignoble Savage* 3). For this, Höpfl, Carrithers, and Meek are a useful starting point.

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