**Locke and Addison’s “Pleasures of the Imagination”**

One of the most interesting and challenging aspects of reading *The Tatler*and *The Spectator*from the cultural perspective of the 21st century is that the reader has to be constantly aware of the extent to which his or her modern bourgeois perspective has been shaped by the sentiments expressed in their pages.  This is especially true when it comes to Addison’s three part series of essays on “Pleasures of the Imagination.”  The sentiments they express have become so normative and so “common sense” to a modern audience that it would be easy to miss the fact that they were really relatively new at the time.  Addison’s definition of the pleasures of the imagination as “only such Pleasures as arise originally from Sight” (388), is deeply Lockean in its opinion that imagination is ruled and bounded by the external images perceived through the five senses.  This idea, clearly based on Locke, was relatively new at the time it was written – certainly before the second half of the 17th Century imaginative and artistic production was not bounded simply by what could be perceived sensually; and thus Addison is really expressing and solidifying a new formulation of imagination and, by extension, aesthetic taste.

The basis of Addison’s Lockean philosophy if the Imagination is most clearly seen in the way he describes the essential connection of sight to imagination:

We cannot indeed have a single Image in the Fancy that did not make its first Entrance through the Sight; but we have the Power of retaining, altering and compounding those Images, which we have once received, into all the varieties of Picture and Vision that are most agreeable to the Imagination. (387)

Similarly in his *Essay on Humane Understanding*, Locke claims that the only means we have of both experiencing the world and obtaining the material for the imagination is sensation:

These simple ideas, the materials of our knowledge, are suggested and furnished to the mind only by those ways above mentioned, viz. sensation and reflection.  When the understanding is once stored with these simple ideas, it has the power to repeat, compare, and unite them, even to an almost infinite variety, and so can make at pleasure new complex ideas.  But it is not in the Power of the most exalted wit, or enlarged Understanding to invent or frame one new simple Idea in the mind, not taken in by the ways before mentioned: nor can any force of the understanding destroy those that are there. (Chapter II, Section 2)

Thus, for both Addison and Locke, the human mind is incapable of inventing or creating any sort of idea.  The raw material for the imagination can only be gathered from the five senses, and especially sight.  This sensory data can then be recombined and juxtaposed in pleasing ways through the power of the imagination – but both men are absolutely clear that sensory experience is the basis of all imaginative activity.

Likewise, though sight is the primary means through which we gain imaginative material, both Addison and Locke argue that it ultimately the combination of sensory experience that makes imaginative production pleasurable.  Addison’s sentiment that the imagination is “capable of receiving a new Satisfaction by the Assistance of another Sense… for the Ideas of both Senses recommend each other, and are pleasanter together than when they enter the Mind separately”(393), is a clear echo of Locke’s assertion that “it is not possible for any man to imagine any other qualities in bodies, howsoever constituted, whereby they can be taken notice of, besides sounds, tastes, smells, visible and tangible qualities” (Chapter II, Section 3).  Thus Addison, following Locke, is concerned primarily with limiting imagination to sensation and what can be empirically experienced in the world.

Not only does Addison follow Locke in limiting imagination to the five senses, but implicit in his text is an endorsement of the Lockean individual subject based on inherent rights and property.  This subjecthood is furthermore explicitly connected to the power of the “polite imagination. “A Man of Polite Imagination, is let into a great many Pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving,” Addison writes, “It gives him, indeed, a kind of Property in every thing he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated parts of Nature administer to his Pleasure” (388).  Notice that the power of the imagination gives the subject “a kind of Property” in everything he sees.  The imagination is thus not only based on sensory experience by through experiencing Nature the individual subject thus makes it his property.  I don’t think the use of this term is merely coincidental on Addison’s part. This kind of social order based on individual ownership of property is the specifically Lockean idea that would come to shape the rest of the 18th Century.  The fact that Addison, in an essay on the imagination, would explicitly link imaginative production to property rights thus indicates that he is participating the production of the bourgeois subject through imaginative power that would reach its apotheosis in the 1790’s in the political radicalism of Thelwall and Paine and the aesthetic production of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, however, this idea of the individual imagination as situated solely within the bounds of the five senses hardly seems radical to us.  This opinion has come to dominate western thought so thoroughly that it is difficult to separate ourselves from it.  Nevertheless, a closer examination of the culture in which this idea was founded indicates that the connection between imagination and sensory experience was not always so clear cut and, indeed, may even bear interrogation – especially as it relates to the propertied individual subject this idea would come to create.

For example, one of the crucial ideas Locke’s philosophy propagated was a clear body-spirit dichotomy.  For, if the spiritual world cannot be perceived by the five senses it very well may exist (and for Locke it certainly did), but it must exist completely separate from the world of sensation.  Translated into aesthetic terms any representation of the spiritual in artistic form would be impossible, for there could be no possible model within sensual experience.  However, this was not the case for many artists before Locke and some after.  Shakespeare’s plays, for example, are populated by spirits, ghosts, and specters that take on human form.  In *The Tempest* a whole host of other worldly spiritual forces interact and are conflated with human beings.  These are just some quick examples, but even a cursory glance at literature prior to the Restoration indicates that authors and artists had few qualms about conflating body and spirit.

After Locke, this kind of imagination would become increasingly difficult.  The spiritual was confined strictly to the untouchable, ineffable spiritual realm, while artistic imagination was tied down to the world of sense and individual subjectivity.  These sensibilities would reach their height with the Romantic poets, whose sense of self as authorial subject made possible their project of portraying the scenes from real life based on natural sense.  Artists who deviated from this dominant sensibility (like William Blake) were largely ignored or considered insane.  In fact, the chief criticism of Blake’s paintings after his first and only public exhibition in 1809 was that, as Robert Hunt wrote in *The Examiner*, the “work was a futile endeavour by bad drawings to represent immateriality by bodily personifications of the soul, while its partner the body was depicted in company with it, so that the soul was confounded with the body” (497).  Thus, what Hunt objected to was not so much the content of the work (though he certainly did not understand it) but the fact that Blake confused body and soul by representing the spiritual world in bodily form.  In other words, he failed to conform to the standards of imaginary expression laid down by Locke and Addison (for more information on this check out Saree Makdisi’s excellent book *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790’s*).

All this to say that the very elements that make Addison’s essays on “The Pleasures of the Imagination,” seem like common sense today were the very elements that made them revolutionary at the time they were written.  Furthermore, this emphasis on the imagination being based on sensual experience had implications far beyond aesthetics.  The sense of individual subjectivity that was founded on this philosophy became foundational to the political and social changes that occurred over the rest of the 18th century.

Works Cited

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