

R. Cairns Craig

The Continuity of the Associationist Aesthetic: from Archibald Alison to T.S. Eliot (and beyond)

The great figures in our histories of literature exert a kind of gravitational pull on all that was going on around them: what preceded the arrival of the major writer or thinker can only be a prelude to his appearance; what follows him without showing the imprint of his work is anachronistic—it has missed the tide of history. The way we pattern the past very often reflects a desire that the development of ‘thought’ in general should match what we now recognize as the most significant individual contributions. Nowhere is this more so than in the case of Coleridge. We look back to him as the source of so much of our own aesthetic theory that we depreciate all who came after him and failed to acknowledge the enormity of the change in sensibility that his theories represented. Our standard account of nineteenth century literary theory is founded on the centrality of Coleridge’s thought; indeed, it is such a fixed assumption that Isobel Armstrong, in her study of Victorian criticism, can express an almost pained surprise at the lack of awareness of Coleridge even in the 1840s and ‘50s.¹ And it is one of the ironies of modern criticism that I.A. Richards, whose general philosophy is entirely at odds with Coleridge’s, should have done more than anyone to enhance his reputation.² It is ironic because the writers with whom Richards has much in common, the eighteenth century associationists and their nineteenth century followers, are the ones who are almost entirely ignored because of our attention to Coleridge.

It is generally assumed that associationist theory is of use only in the understanding of eighteenth century pre-romantic notions of art and that it was demolished when Coleridge showed that it might be relevant as a description of the realm of ‘fancy’, but not as the foundation of ‘imagination’. Associationist theories are presented, even by such studies as M.H. Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp*, as the ‘mechanistic’ background against which we can measure the advance

represented by an 'organic' theory of art. Such an opposition does less than justice to the attempts—particularly in the Scottish Enlightenment—to develop a coherent associationist aesthetic that would go beyond the terms set by David Hartley from whose philosophy Coleridge was to be such a notable apostate. And it commits a great injustice in that it casts into a kind of historical limbo the work of Archibald Alison, whose *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* of 1790 was the culmination of the theories of art that tried to build on David Hume's sceptical empiricism and his placing at the centre of the mind's workings of the process of association.³

Several writers have tried to rectify our neglect of Alison but with little success. Walter J. Hipple has suggested that the *Essays* were to 'revolutionize aesthetic speculation in Britain' and that they 'exhibited an originality, complexity and logical coherence unmatched in British aesthetics'⁴, and Samuel Monk argued that the *Essays* represented 'the rise of a totally new attitude towards art.'⁵ Despite the acknowledged influence of Alison on certain other major writers—Wordsworth and Hazlitt for instance⁶—he has remained a marginal figure in literary history because his theories are regarded as the last flowering of an eighteenth century conception of art that was to be rapidly supplanted by Romanticism and which was to have no significant influence on later developments in literature. I want to suggest in this essay some of the ways in which the theory of which Alison is the best exponent continues through the nineteenth century to stimulate both critical theory and creative practice, and how it has remained, in many ways, more central to modern attitudes than our usual obeisance to the idea of 'organic unity' and the 'creative imagination' would suggest.

Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* were published in Edinburgh in 1790. Edinburgh was Alison's birthplace and he was to lead a distinguished career there as a preacher from 1797, but the book received little attention on its first publication and did not require a second edition until 1811. After that, however, aided by a laudatory discussion in the *Edinburgh Review* by Francis Jeffrey⁷, it gained a large public and was reprinted in 1812, 1815, 1817, 1825, 1853, 1871 and 1879. Jeffrey's review was to be equally influential since it was incorporated into the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, from 1824 till 1875, as its article on 'Beauty'. Alison's theory was a constant presence in aesthetic thinking, therefore, throughout the nineteenth century and though Hume was still to be rediscovered as a philosopher, his psychology, based on the associa-

tion of ideas, was to remain a central element in aesthetic debate. Hume had used his concept to justify his own neo-classic taste in literature, but in Alison's work Hume's theory becomes the justification for a dynamic, subjectivist approach to literature.

Alison's main intent in writing the *Essays* was to heal the breach between conceptions of the 'beautiful' and of the 'sublime' which left eighteenth century aesthetics in such a fractured condition. In order to produce a unitary account of aesthetic experience he denies that there is a single emotion corresponding to either of these responses and he denies, equally, that there is anything in nature which has the property of being beautiful or sublime. The experience is neither directly subjective nor objective, but arises from the trains of associated images and ideas—operating by the usual connections of contiguity, resemblance and causality—which the object sets moving in the observer's mind. It is the experience of our own associative processes, held together by a single emotional tone, which, for Alison, actually constitutes aesthetic experience. Thus, as Jeffrey summarised it,

the emotions which we experience from the contemplation of sublimity or of beauty, are not produced by any intrinsic quality in the objects we contemplate, but by the recollection or conception of other objects which are associated in our imaginations with those before us and consequently suggested by their appearance, and which are interesting or affecting, on the common and familiar principle of being the natural objects of love, or of pity, or of fear or veneration, or some other common and lively sensation of the mind.⁸

By such a theory Alison felt he could overcome the outstanding problems of eighteenth century aesthetics—the division between the beautiful and the sublime—and at the same time account for the major problem that Hume had bequeathed his Scottish followers, how one established a standard of taste. Alison's position I summarise in the following four propositions for the sake of brevity:

- 1) what we experience from art or natural beauty is emotion; Alison's intention was to account for people's experience and not to alter it and he therefore accepts the prevailing emotivist explanation of art and the division into the beautiful and the sublime, but his purpose was to show that there was no essential dichotomy between them.
- 2) our emotions in such contexts are not simple, having a single mode or component; rather they are a combination

of sentiments experienced already in non-aesthetic contexts. What distinguishes them in aesthetic experience is that they are suspended in a contemplative regard—Alison's term is 'reverie', later used by Wordsworth and Yeats—and so demand neither decision nor action.⁹

- 3) this contemplative state of mind is characterised by the complete freedom of the imagination in the production of associated trains of images and ideas: it acts according to the laws of association but it is in no way determined by the pattern of relations imposed by memory.¹⁰
- 4) we can distinguish the quality of aesthetic experience by the quantity of associations generated; there are difficult cases here, but in general Alison holds that the best work will produce the greatest number of associations in those minds most capable of producing the appropriate kinds of associations.¹¹

Thus all aesthetic experience has the same basic structure, association, and the power to generate associations, either in the work or in the reader, will be the distinguishing feature of their value. Alison's own taste remained largely neo-classical, but he saw this as a function of cultural training and therefore prepared the way for a shift from 'educated' to 'natural' tastes in the arts by revealing that there was no essential difference between them. If a wild landscape could generate as many associations as references to the classical deities then it was equally fitted for use by the poet.

What distinguishes Alison's work from Coleridge's is that he is not interested in the creation of poems, but in their reception. For Alison the artist's work does indeed seem somewhat mechanical in comparison with Coleridge's presentation, but for Alison the real creative effort is that of the reader, because the aesthetic object is only the stimulus to the real aesthetic experience, which is not *of* the object in itself but of the accumulated contents of one's own mind as it reveals itself in the process of association. It is the reader in whom the real operations of the imagination are to be found: 'the first lines we meet with take possession of our imagination, and awaken in it such innumerable trains of imagery, as almost to leave behind the fancy of the poet.'¹² Alison concentrates, therefore, on those whom he sees as being in the best position to develop such imaginative ability, 'the vacant and unemployed'¹³, the leisured class who can exercise associations uncorrupted by pressures of business or profession or limited

educational background. Where Coleridge was essentially concerned with justifying the validity of the artist's apprehension of the spiritual meaning of the world, Alison was concerned with the processes of reception, with how we, as readers, respond to works of literature. The problem which Alison posed for those who followed in his wake was that of communication: how could the poet ensure that the reader would be able to generate associations from what he, the poet, offered? How could the poet prevent his readers producing associations entirely at variance with the original impulse of the work? Such questions did not arise within Coleridge's poet-oriented aesthetic theory and yet they were to be staple questions of nineteenth century debates about the value and the place of poetry in the community.

In the first thirty years of the nineteenth century Alison's *Essays* were the source for several influential works on aesthetics, most importantly Payne Knight's *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805) and Dugald Stewart's discussion of art in his *Philosophical Essays* (1810). The most significant direction that Alison's influence was to take, however, was the use of his analyses of art by psychologists as a buttress to their associationist accounts of mental activity in general. Alison is extensively used both by Thomas Brown, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820), and by James Mill in the *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829). Mill, in fact, had read Alison's work shortly after its publication—he borrowed it on two separate occasions from Edinburgh University library in the early 1790s¹⁴—and in the *Analysis*, written thirty years later, he still saw Alison's work as sufficiently central to construct his section on the beautiful and the sublime almost entirely out of quotations from Alison. It was in these general psychological works that Alison's theory found continuing acceptance during the period of Victorian transcendentalism when Carlyle could comment that 'Parson Alison provided us with a theory of taste which demanded that we judge of poetry as we judge of dinner.'¹⁵ For those who, like Carlyle, thought of art as a spiritual enterprise, the poet had to have the power that 'transports us into a higher and holier world than our own'¹⁶, but Alison, with an earlier age's less problematic belief in 'higher and holier worlds', had little to offer such desire for secular revelation. However, precisely because his theory held no transcendental imperative, it remained valuable to those unconvinced by the philosophies derived from German idealism.

The most important of such sceptics was John Stuart Mill. Mill's interests were not, of course, primarily literary, but he maintained a

keen involvement in the development of the psychological theories laid down by his father. What Mill did, however, was to attempt to reorientate associationist criticism around the role of the artist and to give a purely associationist account of the creative process. In 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties', for instance, Mill answers the central Victorian question, 'Whom, then, shall we call the poets?' in terms that derive directly from Alison: 'Those so constituted that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together.'¹⁷ Mill had to prove, though, that an empiricist, associationist analysis of the creative process could account as fully for it as an idealist, organic one, and Mill consistently emphasized that his father had answered this problem by the analogy of the wheel with seven colours, which, when spun, appeared white. In a similar way, Mill argued, multiple associations could produce results which would be qualitatively different from any of its components.¹⁸ Mill also used his own analogy of chemical combination in his *Logic*: 'When impressions have been so often experienced in conjunction, that each of them calls up readily and instantaneously the ideas of the whole group, these ideas melt and coalesce into one another, and appear not several ideas, but one. . .'¹⁹

John Stuart Mill was so confident of the validity of this account of the mind's workings that he felt he could fully adopt Coleridge's account of the artist's creative processes without accepting his denial of associationist psychology. In the artist's mind,

Thoughts and feelings will be linked together, according to the similarity of the feelings which cling to them. A thought will introduce a thought by first introducing a feeling which is allied with it. At the centre of each group of thoughts or images will be found a feeling; and the thoughts or images will be there only because the feeling was there. The combinations which the mind puts together, the pictures which it paints, the wholes which Imagination constructs out of the materials supplied by Fancy, will be indebted to some dominant *feeling*, not as in other natures by some dominant *thought*, for their unity and consistency of character. . . .²⁰

Such a translation of transcendental into empirical terms was to be Mill's usual way of meeting the challenge from what he called the *a priori* school of philosophy. He did not deny their insight into the nature of creative activity, but denied their explanation of its workings. Ruskin, for instance, in this as much else a follower of Coleridge, attacked Alison's theories because they presented art as self-contained, in need of no moral or metaphysical commitment in the

artist. The attack suggests to what extent Alison's thought was still alive in the mid-Victorian period, but Mill's answer was to find in Ruskin's description of the creative process 'an unconscious witness to the truth of the Association theory'.²¹ In a review of Bain's psychology he wrote:

Mr. Ruskin would probably be much astonished were he to find himself held up as one of the principal apostles of the Association Philosophy in Art. Yet, in one of the most remarkable of his writings, the second volume of 'Modern Painters', he aims at establishing, by a large induction and searching analysis, that all things are beautiful or sublime which powerfully recall, and none but those which recall, one or more of a certain series of elevating or delightful thoughts.²²

Delivered of its metaphysical superstructure, Ruskin's theory reveals the validity of associationist accounts of the mind and of art.

Mill wrote to Bain, in 1859, about the publication of his review of Bain's work in the *Edinburgh Review* that 'it was a considerable thing to have got the Ed. to say that the experience philosophy and the association psychology are getting up again, and to praise and recommend a book on that side of the question.'²³ Within a few years the scientific naturalism which, after Darwin, became the prevailing temper of the age, gave new impetus to empirical and generally associationist conceptions of the mind. In 1864 Mill wrote to Herbert Spencer that it was 'very gratifying to see how you and Bain, each in his own way, have succeeded in affiliating the conscious operations of the mind to the primary unconscious organic actions of the nerves, thus filling up the most serious lacuna and removing the chief difficulty in the association psychology.'²⁴ He was so confident in the correctness of his father's work that he arranged for the republication in 1869 of *The Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, with notes by himself and Bain to bring it up to date.

From these general psychological studies associationism was to re-enter the literary scene. It had two useful properties for the late-Victorian period. It made, as Ruskin had complained, no metaphysical or moral demands and thus allowed the writer to leave behind that baggage of public responsibility which so burdened the mid-Victorian writer's imaginative journeys. By leaving the work to the reader's own associations the poet could discard his responsibility for the reader's state of mind and get rid of what Yeats called the 'curiosities about politics, about sciences, about religion'²⁵ with which Browning and Tennyson had laboured. At the same time it

opened up a new kind of subject matter by justifying as the true aesthetic experience those 'impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them'²⁶ that Pater had described in the 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*. Pater's impressionism also had its foundations in Hume and association psychology,²⁷ and the combination of a reawakened interest in the scientific value of associationism with an aesthetic impulse to emphasize the fleeting and momentary trains of thought which Alison had made the essence of imaginative experience gave associationism a new and striking contemporaneity for the 1890s. Alison's own work, of course, with its basically neo-classical taste, could not be a source of direct inspiration, but the theory which he had brought to its most complete realization in the last decade of the eighteenth century had survived through the nineteenth to become the most fruitful theory of the opening years of the twentieth.

In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, written in 1915-16, W.B. Yeats describes the proper procedure for reading a poem:

One must allow the images to form with all their associations before one criticizes . . . If you suspend the critical faculty, I have discovered, either as a result of training, or, if you have the gift, by passing into a slight trance, images pass rapidly before you . . . linked together by certain associations, and indeed in the first instance you have called them up by their association with traditional forms and sounds.²⁸

Yeats's description accords perfectly with Alison's conception of how we actually do experience poetry—Alison too thinks that critical awareness impedes full experience by limiting associative flexibility²⁹—and, in 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry', Yeats gives a working model of how such a reading develops:

Because the wolf is but a more violent symbol of longing and desire than the hound, his wolf and deer remind me of the hound and deer that Oisín saw in the Gaelic poem chasing one another on the water before he saw the young man following the woman with the golden apple; and of a Galway tale that tells how Niamh, whose name means brightness or beauty, came to Oisín as a deer, and of a vision that a friend of mine saw when gazing at a dark blue curtain. . .³⁰

The experience of Shelley's poem is, for Yeats, not an experience of the particulars of the poem itself, but of the personal associations which it generates in him. In fact, the associations become so personal as to have no evident connection with Shelley's emblematic

creatures, but for Yeats, as for Alison, the 'real' poem is the one the reader experiences in following the pattern of associations that his own memory makes available to him. For this reason, Yeats insists, poets must concentrate on a traditional symbolism that will have associations for any reader; otherwise he may fall into 'the appearance of idle fantasy.'³¹ What makes communication between poet and reader possible despite the apparent arbitrariness of the associational process is that both are in contact with that universal unconscious Yeats calls 'the Great Memory', a storehouse of humanity's most potent symbols because it 'associates them with certain events and persons'.³² Where Alison depended on a common human nature and a background of shared education in the classics to produce conformity between people's associations, Yeats perceives universal forces maintaining traditional associations through occult connections available only to the spiritualist, the medium and the magus:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions.³³

Each individual following out the pattern of his associations is, for Yeats, only performing in miniature what the whole universe is governed by. For Yeats associationism is not a psychological, but a cosmological, theory.

Such occult speculation is a long way from Alison's urbane rationalism, but Yeats's associationism derives from one of the most famous associationist theories of the nineteenth century, Arthur Hallam's 'On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry', which first appeared in 1831 as a defence of Tennyson's early poetry. Yeats wrote in 1893 that 'if one set aside Shelley's essay on poetry, and Browning's essay on Shelley, one does not know where to turn in modern English criticism for anything half so philosophic—anything so fundamental and radical—as the first half of Arthur Hallam's essay.'³⁴ Hallam argued that Tennyson's work was a poetry of 'sensation' as opposed to a poetry of 'reflection' like Wordsworth's, and the characteristic feature of a poetry of sensation is that it links together images in unusual and unusually rapid associational trains. The difficulty that such poetry presented for the reader, Hallam suggested, was a func-

tion of the fact that the reader's own associative processes were so much more limited and stereotyped that he could not follow the development of the poet's thought:

. . . since the emotions of the poet during composition, follow a regular law of association, it follows that to accompany their progress up to the harmonious prospect of the whole, and to perceive the dependence of every step on that which preceded it, it is absolutely necessary to start from the same point, i.e. clearly to apprehend the leading sentiment in the poet's mind, by their conformity to which the host of associations are arranged. Now this requisite is not willingly made by a large majority of readers.³⁵

For Hallam it is the reader who needs the capacity that Keats described as 'negative capability' as he seeks to find the sympathetic understanding of the poet's mind that will unlock for him that pattern of the poem's associations. Like Mill, Hallam is concerned to use associationist principles to describe the poet's mind, but at the same time he makes the understanding of the poem dependent on the reader's own capacity to rehearse the poet's original trains of association in his own mind.

Hallam, later the subject of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, was a student at Cambridge, which remained constantly more inclined to the empirical basis of associationism than Oxford, but his father had been a reviewer for the *Edinburgh Review* and had written a long and detailed account of Payne Knight's aesthetic theories (which are themselves largely derived from Alison) for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1806.³⁶ Hallam often echoes these earlier accounts, revealing how close he was to Alison's own associationism:

The fine or imaginative arts . . . have for their end the production of a mood of delightful contemplation with the sense of beauty. A vivid impression of some mental state, as beautiful, tends to bring in a train of associated states, which will be under the same mood of lively emotion, as the first in the train.³⁷

One particular sentence of Hallam's was to prove seminal for later writers: the poet, he wrote, presents us with 'vivid, picturesque delineation of objects', and his 'peculiar skill is that he holds all of them *fused*, to borrow a metaphor from science, in a medium of strong emotion.'³⁸ The metaphor of chemical combination seems to have come to Mill through Hallam and was, from then on, to be a regular component of associationist theory since it overcame the 'mechanical' element in Hartley's associationism without giving up the empirical bias that all associationist theory shows.

Hallam's essay posed clearly what had all along been the implicit problem of associationist aesthetics, that it seemed to divorce the reader entirely from the author. How can the associational pattern that creates the work and the possibly very different associational pattern that is generated in response to the work constitute two sides of a significant act of communication? Yeats, in a little essay called 'The Emotion of Multitude' (which was his 'poetic' terminology for association), argued that the writer directed the reader's associations by incorporating into his work the first steps in an associational pattern that would carry the reader far beyond the work itself:

The Shakespearean drama gets the emotion of multitude out of a subplot which copies the main plot, much as a shadow on the wall copies one's body in the firelight . . . Lear's shadow is in Gloucester, who also has ungrateful children, and the mind goes on imagining other shadows, shadow beyond shadow, till it has pictured a world . . . Ibsen and Maeterlinck have, on the other hand, created a new form, for they get multitude from the wild duck in the attic, or from the crown at the bottom of the fountain, vague symbols that set the mind wandering from idea to idea, emotion to emotion.³⁹

For Yeats the work of art must acknowledge the subjectivity of the response it will engender and seeks only to give the train of associations it will inspire a particular initial direction. By such a tactic the playwright or poet can bridge the gulf between his own associations and his audience's. The other alternative is that the poet turns his back on communication altogether. Such, of course, was the tactic of the symbolist poets in France in the late nineteenth century, and much has been written about their influence on modern Anglo-American poetry⁴⁰, but when British writers came to explain symbolism to themselves they did it largely through their inheritance from associationism, so that they transformed what they received to fit the pattern I have been examining.

The most important instance of this is Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Symons was a close friend of Yeats and the book is dedicated to him, but more importantly Symons seems to be drawing much of the time on Hallam for a terminology by which to describe symbolist poetry. This is particularly so in his essay on Mallarmé. Symons suggests that the poet begins to write his poem from a 'sensation' and he derives the initial structure of his work from the associations which this sensation generates in him. At this point most poets stop, leaving their readers to follow out for themselves the associational connections which the poem embodies: the poem still

shows 'the links by which it has been riveted together' and in which 'the whole process of its construction can be studied.'⁴¹ Mallarmé, however, in Symons' description of his working methods, is not satisfied: he works at the poem till every appearance of his own associative connections has been removed; until, 'by the time the poem has reached, as it seems to him, a flawless unity, the steps of the progress have been only too effectually effaced; and while the poet, who has seen the thing from the beginning, still sees the relation of point to point, the reader, who comes to it only in the final stage, finds himself in a not unnatural bewilderment.'⁴² Symons, therefore, sees Mallarmé as cutting off the only access the poet allows to the reader in Hallam's description of their relationship, access to the 'leading sentiment of the poet's mind.' Cut off from following or being able to enter sympathetically into the poet's associative processes, the reader is thrust back upon what Alison had argued to be his essential reaction—following the pattern of his own associations as triggered off by the poem. What had begun as an explanation, in Alison, of how people actually experience poetry has led, through the work of Hallam, Mill, Yeats and Symons, to the propagating of a kind of poetry written to encourage that kind of reading experience. The shape of the poem changes to meet the expectations of how the reading experience is structured.

The modern movement in poetry is usually taken to begin—in the English speaking world at least—with Imagism, and Imagism is often described as a revolt against the 'poetry of suggestion' that is characteristic of the early Yeats. It would seem, therefore, that Imagist poetry would be antithetic to the kind of poetry Symons was describing, a kind that left the reader totally to his own devices in following out the pattern of his associations. And certainly in one of his most famous descriptions of Imagism Ezra Pound makes an attack on symbolists and their use of 'association':

The symbolists dealt in 'association', that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word, they made it a form of metonymy. One can be grossly symbolic, for example, by using the term 'cross' to mean 'trial'. The symbolist's symbols have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2 and 7. The imagist's images have a variable significance like the signs a, b and x in algebra. . . .⁴³

The interesting thing about Pound's apparent attack on 'association' is that he sees it as a mere replacement of a word by its more 'poetic',

suggestive equivalent, whereas his own theory is of an image which will have no such equivalence and whose meaning therefore, it would seem, is dependent on the context into which it is put or the material to which it is made to refer. The context in which 'a, b and x' gain their varieties of significance can only be that of the reader's individual response, and when Pound describes the image as a 'vortex or cluster of fused ideas . . . endowed with energy'⁴⁴ he returns to Hallam's analogy. Pound's actual technique as an Imagist seems to correspond to Symons's description of Mallarmé, since a poem like the famous 'In a Station of the Metro'—

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

—was originally a much longer poem from which 'the links in the chain of association' have been removed. Instead of a unified train of associations emanating from a work with a single emotional tone, as Alison demanded, we have a discordant work whose two images, by their refusal to submit to a single meaning, insistently generate new associations as we, the readers, try to fill the gap between the images.

Pound had been Yeats's secretary in the winters of 1912 and '13 and much of his theory reads like a secularised version of Yeats's essays. He was, however, indebted for many of his ideas to Rémy de Gourmont, the theorist of French symbolism. De Gourmont had begun as a Kantian with a mystical conception of the poet's role, but around the turn of the century he had shifted to a much more empirical attitude, influenced by the positivist philosophers who were connected with the *Revue Philosophique*.⁴⁵ De Gourmont developed a conception which he called 'dissociation': the breaking asunder of ideas that had become habitually connected by the processes of association. De Gourmont took it that the poet's role was to create new 'dissociations', ruptures in the habitual patterns of our associations that would force us into new and more personalised ways of perceiving the world. De Gourmont's term is used constantly by Pound and, of course, was to become famous in T.S. Eliot's phrase 'the dissociation of sensibility'. Eliot could transfer De Gourmont's conception from the psychological to the historical dimension—the 'dissociation of sensibility' is a break in the tradition of English poetry after the early part of the sixteenth century, a break which separated intellect from emotion, thought from direct experience⁴⁶—because he had himself adopted a fundamentally associationist conception of poetry.

Eliot had read Symons as well as de Gourmont and in the essay in which he outlined his conception of a dissociation of sensibility, 'The Metaphysical Poets', he several times discusses their poetry in terms of its ability to generate associations: Donne's imagery works 'by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader'⁴⁷ and,

some of Donne's most successful and characteristic effects are secured by brief words and sudden contrasts:

A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
where the most powerful effect is produced by the sudden contrast of associations of 'bright hair' and 'bone'. This telescoping of images and multiplied associations is characteristic. . . .⁴⁸

Later in his career, Eliot was to use associationist theory in defining what he took to be the very essence of poetry: words, he argued, were neither beautiful nor ugly in themselves, but their music is

at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely from the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association.⁴⁹

Just as the beautiful and the sublime for Alison depend on the reader's capacity to bring a significant store of memory into play as associations, so for Eliot the beauty of a word depends on the reader's capacity for invoking the memory of all its past usages.

Eliot's adoption of associationist terminology might be seen as a mere accident: the word 'association' has entered the language and will be used with no particular theoretical rigour. However, in one of his essays in the collection *The Sacred Wood*, 'The Perfect Critic', he outlines a theory which not only echoes Yeats' 'emotion of multitude' but, in its basic form, takes us right back to Alison:

The sentimental person, in whom a work of art arouses all sorts of emotions which have nothing to do with the work of art whatever, but are accidents of personal association, is an incomplete artist. For in an artist these suggestions made by the work of art, which are purely personal, become fused with a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience, and result in the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself.⁵⁰

Hallam's analogy of 'fused' elements returns in conjunction with a Yeatsian multitudinous experience': the qualitative is achieved out of the quantitative in a way which unites Alison with Coleridge, since the only reader who can fully experience the work of art is the artist, one whose associations are as rich and significant as the work itself. The perfect critic does not read *the* work of art, but *a* work of art, one that has the qualities of Coleridge's organic unity only because those are the qualities of the reader's mind. For Alison, the work of art could only be experienced fully—indeed, one might say could only exist fully—in the mind of the leisured gentleman; for Eliot the locus of social value has shifted but the essential preconditions for full experience of the work are the same: only someone free from any narrowing specialization of associative potential can make the work generate itself into its full existence and meaning, and the only person with such capacity in the twentieth century is the artist himself.

That Eliot, despite all he must have read in Coleridge—not to mention Bradley⁵¹—against the principle of association, should use its terminology so frequently reveals the continuous pressure of associationist conceptions of art throughout the late nineteenth century. Anyone who wished to deny some transcendent metaphysical status to the artist—as Eliot did—would inevitably turn for support to the theory which had consistently maintained its focus on the relation between poet and reader rather than on the relation between the poet and God or the poet and the universal spirit. Eliot, however, by making the artist the only appropriate reader of poetry seems to have tried to defuse the explosive potential of the idea. Not perhaps in his work itself—what is *The Waste Land* but a poem that encourages the maximization of the reader's associative potential?—but in his criticism with its emphasis on ideas of tradition and order. Perhaps it is only in recent times that anyone has taken Alison's theory to its limits: one cannot imagine that Archibald Alison and Roland Barthes would have too much in common, but Barthes' theory of the 'text' as a work which permits the maximum play of multiple significations seems precisely to echo Alison's conceptions. Just as Alison had to separate the work as known through our critical procedures from our actual response to it, so Barthes separates the *work*, which seeks a meaning, demands from us an interpretation, from the *text*, which merely invites us into an interplay of multiple meanings:

The logic that governs the Text is not comprehensive (seeking to define "what the work means") but metonymic; and the activity of associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy . . . The Text is plural. This does not mean just that it

has several meanings, but rather that it achieves plurality of meaning, an *irreducible* plurality. The Text is not coexistence of meanings but passage, transversal; thus it answers not to an interpretation, liberal though it may be, but to an explosion, a dissemination.⁵²

What Barthes is demanding is work written to fit the kind of reading process that Alison was the first to adumbrate. Barthes denies that most literature of the past has achieved this status as Text, but for Alison all works equally could, indeed could not but, provoke such a reading. It is perhaps significant that Barthes' description of the reader has much in common with Alison's 'vacant and unemployed'—he is compared 'to an idle subject (a subject having relaxed his "imaginary")' strolling through an unfamiliar valley.⁵³ For Coleridge the poem grows out of the poet's own consciousness; for Barthes as for Archibald Alison it creates in the reader 'such innumerable trains of imagery, as almost to leave behind the fancy of the poet'; for Coleridge the poem is an organic unity, for Barthes and Alison it is merely a focus for a multitudinous meaningfulness.

History is patterned not only by the gravitational effect of the great figures of the past, but by the perspectives opened by what is apparently new in the present. In our present perspective Archibald Alison takes on, perhaps, a particularly central significance.

NOTES

1. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830-1870* (London, 1972), p. 14.
2. Richards's *Coleridge on Imagination* (London, 1934) uses the same tactics that I describe in relation to J.S. Mill: he translates Coleridge's insights into the terms of his own psychological empiricism.
3. Alison's work is often assimilated into Hartley's 'associationism': the fame of Hartley is largely owing to Coleridge, for his work was little known in the eighteenth century until the proselytising efforts of Joseph Priestly brought him to public attention in the 1780s, by which time Alison had already done his work. And as Walter J. Hipple points out in *The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque* (Carbondale, 1957), p. 168ff. Alison's work makes no materialist assumptions at all. Like Hume, Alison tends to an idealist conception of the real, and in fact Hartley's materialism was probably influenced by Hume's associationist philosophy (Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* was published in 1739, Hartley's *Observations on Man* in 1749) rather than Hartley presenting us with the central form of associationism in the eighteenth century.
4. Hipple, *The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque*, p. 8.
5. Samuel Monk, *The Sublime* (New York, 1935), p. 155. For a discussion of Alison's place in the development of the whole tradition of associationist thinking, see Martin Kallich, *The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory in Eighteenth Century England* (The Hague, 1970). Despite the geographical ineptitude of its title in relation to many of the authors he deals with, this is the best introduction to associationist thought.