Robert Dale Owen As A Mystic

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The new psychology is more sympathetic than the old toward the abnormal. It is more humble in recognizing that there are more things in heaven and earth than Horatio dreamt of. In the light of this new spirit among psychologists, may it not behoove historians and biographers to modify their verdicts concerning the unusual men of the past? If such revision be in order, who more worthy of its care than those great men whose sanity was questioned by some of their contemporaries? In this category belongs Robert Dale Owen, of Indiana, whose attempts to pierce beyond the veil of terrestrial experience have clouded the record of his closing years, and in some sense impaired the place in history of one of the most versatile and gifted of men.

Robert Dale Owen as an historical figure labors, in fact, under the additional handicap that his father, Robert Owen, as a pioneer in the Industrial Revolution, has become so completely the property of economists, and of historians of the economic school, that his son, though essentially more capable and more sensible, suffers from an unfair competition. Yet a brief examination of the son’s career will indicate that, unlike his father, who goes down in history as a man of one idea—namely that labor, when treated decently is more efficient and productive than when it is unconscionably exploited—Robert Dale responded to every liberal current of his day. Reform in subjects as divergent as marriage, libraries for country people, newspapers for laboring men, feminism, and architecture, found in him an ardent champion. Yet he so far kept his feet upon the ground that as a practical politician he could reinforce democracy in New Harmony, win himself a seat in Congress, or make for five years a most acceptable minister to an
Italian kingdom. It was, in fact, during his residence at Naples, 1853 to 1858, that Robert Dale Owen, who previously had been, like his father, wholly skeptical of religious matters, turned from agnosticism to an active belief in spiritualism. Seances conducted for Prince Luigi, a brother of the King, first awakened Owen's interest. Once aroused, it never slumbered, and Owen, whose pen was ever active, became a contributor to the literature of this spiritualistic movement. Three volumes constitute his output. *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World*, published in 1865; *Village Life in the West, or Beyond the Breakers*, published in 1870; and *The Debatable Land Between this World and the Next with Illustrative Narrations*, published in 1872. These three works, with occasional excerpts from his other writings, are the chief exhibits for a judgment on the author's sanity. That one verdict is already in, need not prevent a reopening of the case.

In the present analysis of Owen's views, the works above enumerated will be treated in their chronological sequence in order to give the fairer basis for evidence of the author's waning intellect, if, indeed, such a verdict shall be reached. In the first of these works, Owen makes a solemn profession of faith when he declares:

> There is a corner, even in our work-a-day world, where the IDEAL lurks, and whence it may be called forth, to become, not a mere barren fancy, but the prolific parent of progress. And from time to time it is thus called forth, to ennoble and to elevate. It is not the enthusiast only who aspires. What is civilization but realization of human aspirations?¹

And again:

> I was conversing one day with a French lady of rank, intelligent and thoughtful beyond the average of her class, and happened to express the opinion that progression is probably a law of the next world, as of this. "You really believe, then, in another world?" she asked.

> "Certainly, Madame la Comtesse."

> "Ah! you are a fortunate man," she replied, with some emotion. "How many of us do not!?²

In the early stages of the spiritualistic movement, there was more outspoken sentiment than now against the impiety of seeking to penetrate what God had expressly designed to be a mystery. Owen's reply to such a challenge is that:

In prosecuting that research [spiritualism], if any fear to sin by overpassing the limits of permitted inquiry and trespassing upon unholy and forbidden ground, let him be reminded that God, who protects His own mysteries, has rendered that sin impossible; and let him go, reverently indeed, but freely and undoubtingly, forward. If God has closed the Way, man cannot pass thereon. But if He has left open the path, who shall forbid us entrance?

In his own researches into spiritual phenomena, Owen guards against the haphazard or occasional. “Suffice it for the present to express my conviction, based on experimental proof, that, if the Deity is now permitting communication between mortal creatures in this stage of existence and disembodied spirits in another, He is employing natural causes and general laws to effect His objects; not resorting for that purpose to the occasional and the miraculous.”4 In the prosecution of his own researches, Owen has met so many persons who have had dreams with warnings later fulfilled, that he believes that a majority of people have had such an experience.5 One such dream related “by a member of the A——— legion, one of the most intelligent and agreeable acquaintances I made in that city,” [Naples] seemed to him undeniably authentic.

Owen repeatedly insists that spiritualism to be valid must rest on law, and not upon sporadic instances. A fine expression of this faith is contained in the following declaration: “I have already given my reasons for believing that if there be occasional communication between the dead and the living, it occurs under certain fixed conditions, perhaps physical, at all events governed by laws as constant and unchangeable as are those which hold the planets to their appointed course.”7

Then there is, of course, the inevitable argument of imposture. Owen’s reply to this is, “If, because we detect imposture in a single case, we slur over twenty others as equally unreliable, we are acting no whit more wisely than he who, having received in a certain town a bad dollar, presently concludes that none but counterfeits are to be met with there. It

8. Ibid., p. 88.
4. Ibid., p. 89.
5. Ibid., p. 153.
7. Ibid., p. 168.
ought to make him more careful in examining the next coin he receives; nothing more."

If spiritualism is accepted, "It may be regarded as a mere cutting of the Gordian knot to assume the theory of the spiritual guardianship. Yet if that theory be rejected, have we any other with which to supply its place?" Interestingly it is that the spiritualist, whom so many regard as somewhat of a radical, should stand on the doctrine of spiritual guardianship shoulder to shoulder with the most orthodox of Roman Catholics!

After relating a number of spiritualistic experiences, and confessing their generic resemblances each to each, Owen asserts that "It is an odd reason to allege against the credibility of such narratives that they are very numerous, and that in their general character they all agree. Nor is the short-cut by which the poet [Coleridge] reaches an explanation of the phenomena less remarkable. Wesley and his family, he admits, did see and hear what they allege they did; but they were all cataleptics. What! the mastiff also?"

If the more subtle manifestations of the psychic appear only to the few, that is no reason for the many to disbelieve in them. "There is nothing, then, absurd or illogical in the supposition that some persons may have true perceptions of which we are unconscious. We may not be able to comprehend how they receive these; but our ignorance of the mode of action does not disprove the reality of the effect." He follows this with an illustration of an Englishman who could always detect the presence of a cat. (To a modern, this has no other than a physical significance, certainly not a psychic.) The non-psychic majority are to the illuminated few in this regard much as deaf mutes are in our workaday existence, who are obliged "to await the enlightenment of death before we can receive as true except by faith in others' words, the allegations touching these superior perceptions."

Wilful refusal to admit the possibilities of the unseen places the objector in an irrational position. "In what a maze

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9. Ibid., p. 207.
10. Ibid., p. 239.
11. Ibid., p. 311.
12. Ibid., p. 312.
when governed by a settled predetermination to ignore the possibility of a future world, where our spirits may hereafter exist, and whence they may occasionally return.”  

Reflection on the character of these return manifestations leads Owen to believe that, not infrequently, the spirits of criminals return to the haunts of their crimes. Apparently they are moved by repentance, “and I shall not be deterred from bringing forward an example, in illustration, by the fear of being charged with Roman Catholic leanings. Eclecticism is true philosophy.”  

From it all there comes a moral warning “not to suffer the present and the temporal, necessary and proper in their places as they are, so completely to engross us as to usurp the place, and wholly to exclude the thoughts, of the future and the spiritual!”  

As the work progresses, and Owen feels that he has laid his foundations in what to him at least appeared a scientific fashion, he allows his pen a greater latitude. The speculations that ensue are majestic, and all the nobler for their adherence to what Henry Drummond would have called “natural law in the spiritual world.” “We may imagine,” says Owen, “that every thing in the next world is governed by principles totally different from those we see in operation here. But why should we imagine this? Does not the same Providence preside on the further as on the hither side of the Dark River?”  

Again, the author seems to be inherently reasonable when he pleads for the continuity of spiritual existence. “In other words Death destroys not, in any sense, either the life or the identity of man. Nor does it permit the spirit, an angel suddenly become immaculate, to aspire at once to heaven. Far less does it condemn that spirit, a demon instantly debased, to sink incontinently to hell.”  

Comforting, too, to a religious spirit is Oven’s interpretation of nature as the symbol of God’s plan. “We find every portion of God’s handiwork instinct with the principle of progression. The seed, the plant, the blossom, the fruit,—these are the types of Nature’s gradual workings. All change is a
Having reached this theme, the heart and center of his study, Owen's thought and its expression alike become magnificent.

"The conclusion," he declares, "is evident. He who conducts the soul to the brink of the Dark River deserts it not on the hither side. Nor is that river the boundary of His realm. His laws operate beyond. But these laws, so far as we know them, exhibit no variableness nor shadow of turning. And I see neither reason nor likelihood in the supposition that in any portion of creation they are suspended or reversed. I see neither reason nor likelihood in the theory that, in any portion of creation, progress and exertion will fail to precede improvement, or that man will ever be degraded by agency other than his own."20

Swept on by his theme, he becomes a transcendentalist indeed. The grave has lost its sting. "We have nothing to do with the grave. We do not descend to the tomb. It is a cast-off garment, encoffined, to which are paid the rites of sepulture."21 The same beliefs that reveal our future are not without their leaven on our present, for there is "not an aspiration after good that fades, not a dream of the beautiful that vanishes, during the earth-phase of life, but will find noble field and fair realization when the pilgrim has cast off his burden and reached his journey's end."22 The Scriptures themselves bear witness to the "verity of communication with the Invisible world."23 In conclusion, "The light may be imperfect, the disclosures insufficient to appease an eager curiosity. In the dimness of the present, our longings for enlightenment may never attain satisfaction. We may be destined to wait. That which human wit and industry cannot compass in this twilight world, may be a discovery, postponed only till we are admitted, beyond the boundary, into the morning sunshine of another."24

The critical student of theology, natural history, or philosophy may not accept Owen's premises. And he may remain very much on earth while Owen soars into his mystic flights. But he ought, it seems, to recognize the sincerity of Owen's endeavor to rest his case on scientific data. In the light of its

18. Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World, p. 482.
19. Ibid., p. 484.
20. Ibid., p. 608.
22. Ibid., p. 609.
23. Ibid., p. 610.
sincerity of purpose and nobility of expression, *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* would seem entitled to a creditable position in the literature of spiritualism.

*Village Life in the West or Beyond the Breakers* is a novel with a rather thin and transparent plot, bearing constant evidence that its author is a novice at this literary medium. In reality it is a vehicle for exploiting the author's views on spiritualism, and other subjects near his heart and as such it has an interest which must be denied it as a purely literary product. Much of the moralizing is in the best Victorian manner. Thus Owen causes the hero to reflect concerning evil that:

> We look at it through a glass, darkly. Had we not better postpone the inquiry?—it need not be for long. By and by the solution may be within our reach. In a short time a Friend—how strange that, because he translates us to a better world, he should have been thought an enemy!—will usher us into a phase of existence where we shall look over a wider periscope—where we shall enjoy keener perceptions and clearer skies.24

Spirits, who by this time had become a firm reality to the author, are represented as under the dominion of a higher power. "If guardian spirits there be," Owen puts it in the form of a condition for the purpose of the novel, "commissioned to watch over the welfare of mortals, where was Sydenham's then? Withheld, it may be, from interference by a Wisdom that sees deeper than ours."25 Death is our friend. "It is when he strikes us through others that Death thrusts home his dart. He is victor, not when he takes us hence, but when he wrests from us the life of our life, and leaves us here animate save only in the faculty of suffering."26

To one who follows the career of Owen through Indiana politics, New York newspaperdom, a European mission, and more of Indiana, *Beyond the Breakers* will seem almost an autobiography, with Owen himself speaking through the character of Sydenham. Many of his observations are singularly apposite, but only the minority possessing a transcendental or mystic bearing can be referred to here. Prophetic, perhaps,
is the declaration that "Human strife—even war itself, no doubt—has its mission, yet the peacemakers are to be the ultimate rulers of a civilized world."27 A dream vision receives the following narration:

And in his dream he thought: "Ah! if she were but here to rejoice with me in that glorious sunrise!" And, with that, there was a light step coming from within, and there was a gentle touch on his shoulder; and he turned to look into eyes that he had never yet ventured, except in dreams, fairly to encounter. Such eyes! He had found out their color at last! Then it all faded away, and he was out in the dim world again, talking to men, attending to business . . . . . . He awoke on the hillside by the edge of the forest, alone.28

Owen's first child, Florence, had died in infancy. She lies buried in the family plot at New Harmony. Above her head is an inscription of Owen's selection, which he reintroduces in Beyond the Breakers in an obviously autobiographical passage. The sentiment is genuine and touching:

A little farther on she passed a marble slab which she had not seen before, for it had been but recently placed. It recalled to her a melancholy incident. A few weeks before a German professor and his wife, friends of the Meyracs, had spent a few days at the doctor's house, on their way to Iowa. Their infant died there suddenly, of croup, and this was the grave. The inscription was in German; and Celia, struck with its grace, translated it.

"Ephemera all die at sunset, and no insect of this class ever sported in the rays of the rising sun. Happier are ye, little human ephemera! Ye play in the ascending beam and in the early dawn and in the eastern light; drink only the first sweet draughts of life; hover, for a little while, over a world of freshness and blossoms, and then fall asleep in innocence, ere ever the morning dews are exhaled."29

That Owen did not allow a belief in spiritualism to do other than strengthen his faith in Christian principles is attested in the following passage. "'See!' he added in a low, reverent tone: 'if every particle of historical truth set up in support of the Christian scheme of morals and eternal life were swept away tomorrow, it would still be to me the revelation of love and light it is—itself its own witness.'"30

Published later than the preceding, and undoubtedly the maturest expression of Owen's interest in the unseen, is The

27. Village Life in the West or Beyond the Breakers, p. 87.
28. Ibid., pp. 118-20.
29. Ibid., p. 152.
30. Ibid., p. 162.
Debatable Land between this World and the Next with Illustrative Narrations. Assembled from their various places in the work many of its passages constitute a creed of which the author need not be ashamed. "How heart sinking," he cries, "—how utterly unworthy—the conception that, under Divine Economy, that grand privilege of progress to which man owes all he ever was or ever will be is denied to the science of the Soul, while inhering in every other!"31 And a little farther on: Simple theism, shut out from the cheering warmth of spiritual revelations, is ungenial and unsatisfactory.32 So confident is Owen that the world to come is but a continuation that he writes: "Our state here determines our initial state there. The habitual promptings, the pervading impulses, the life-long yearnings, in a word the moving spirit, or what Swedenborg calls the 'ruling loves' of man—these decide his condition on entering the next world: not the written articles of his creed, nor yet the incidental errors of his life."33

A proper relation between spiritualism and Christianity as commonly accepted is set forth in Owen's declaration that "The idea is daily gaining ground that its occult agencies may richly repay earnest research. The essential is that the entire subject should be studied in its broad phase as one of the vital elements of an enlightened Christian faith."34 One of the most interesting passages in all of Owen's writings is his endeavor to reconcile biological science with his spiritualistic concepts. It deserves quotation at length:

So, again, in regard to the succession of animal life on earth, reaching back into historic time. Geology informs us that there was a period of untold duration when this world, occupied by the lower races, was uninhabited by man. An eminent modern naturalist [Darwin] exploring that period and investigating the principle of vital progress, has brought prominently forward a great, general law governing gradual improvement of species by means of natural selection and the preservation of the best out of each—both animal and vegetable—in the struggle for existence. But he has adduced no facts attesting change of one species to another; nor disclosed to us any link connecting brute and man. There remains, therefore, intact, the hypothesis—surely not an unreasonable one—that there inhered, in the law which regulated preadamite life, a condition according to which a creature endowed with reason and gifted

31. The Debatable Land Between This World and the Next With Illustrative Narrations, p. 49 (New York, 1872).
32. Ibid., p. 160.
33. Ibid., p. 172.
34. Ibid., p. 240.
with faculties and sentiments that enable him to conceive and desire a Hereafter, did, at a certain point of advancement, suddenly appear; a creature destined to subjugate earth and attain heaven.³⁵

Surely the man who penned the lines just quoted had a religious spirit, even though all his life he remained unorthodox. Alive to all the thought currents of his day, it was not remarkable that he was a pioneer in the endeavor to reconcile science and religion, an endeavor to which choice spirits are still committed. Lest his efforts be attributed to ought but friendliness to the Christian religion, he submits the following profession of faith:

Here let me be permitted to say a word with more personal reference to myself. I could not more religiously venerate than I now venerate Christ's teachings and his person; I could not more deeply feel than I now feel the bounden duty to heed his sayings and to do what in me lies toward following his example if the theologians had succeeded in beating into my brain all the perplexities that have crowded into the Athanasian creed. If others find, through such subtilities, comfort in affliction, warmth for sinking faith, motive to stir flagging zeal, incentive to religious duty, it is well: let them profit by what they are able to accept. The Alexandrian Patriarch does not speak either to my heart or to my understanding. They who can receive his doctrine, let them receive it.³⁶

That spiritualism could give its votaries that comfort in affliction which others find in Trinitarian orthodoxy Owen demonstrates by his account of his father's death. The elder Owen is usually accounted a religious radical, an agnostic to put it mildly. And it has been often urged that his enthusiasm for reform would have carried greater weight with pious folk had they not been so deeply shocked by his well known sentiments on religion. To persons not acquainted with his later years the following relation may prove surprising:

"I find," says Robert Dale Owen, "the following entry in my journal, written just after his [Robert Owen's] death: 'During the last seven or eight years of my father's life he was an unwavering believer in Spiritualism; though I doubt whether the same amount of evidence which convinced him would have satisfied me. To the last he spoke of a future life with the same undoubting certainty as of any earthly event, which he expected soon to occur. His death was the most peaceful I ever witnessed.'³⁷

³⁵. The Debatable Land Between This World and the Next, pp. 261-63.
³⁶. Ibid., p. 273.
³⁷. Ibid., p. 371n.
The Debatable Land contains a number of detailed accounts of spiritualistic manifestations. Some of them are of unusual interest, and there is no doubt that the author deemed them authentic. One interested in such testimony can find the stories without difficulty. The present paper is concerned chiefly with the generalizations which Owen drew from these investigations. One of the most beautiful of these is his vision of the welcome given to newcoming spirits by those gone on before. "Death is an Angel of Mercy there. He is Heaven's Herald of joy, for whose messages yearning souls wait. Through him, the Comforter, comes re-union in the many mansions that had been lonely, even amid celestial surroundings, till he brought the earthly wanderers home. Then satisfied hearts stray no longer from heavenly abodes." In this concluding passage lies, of course, the spiritualists' explanation of why it is that communication is established only with those more recently deceased, rather than with the dead of former ages.

From a Christian viewpoint the culmination of Owen's philosophy is his tribute to the risen Christ. "I, having, like the disciples, witnessed an apparition, know, as they did, that it is not impossible; and believe, as they did, that Christ showed himself to them. I can thoroughly understand, though I might not have imitated, that constancy of faith which braved sufferings and death."

The present study makes no pretense of weighing the spiritualistic argument. It is content to set forth the spirituality of Owen himself, and to reveal in this practical politician and man of affairs a vein of idealism which lifted him out of the rut of materialism into a mystic transcendentalism. That way madness lies, of course, and if some of his contemporaries thought him a trifle mad, they judged according to their lights. But men do live on different planes of thought and aspiration, and Owen's was a high one. If here he has been treated as a mystic, he could with equal profit have been studied as an educator and practical reformer. His was, indeed, a many-sided genius.

88. Ibid., p. 410.
89. Ibid., p. 463.