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IN OTHER WORDS

From *Perceval's Narrative*

Selected by Femi Oyebo

John Thomas Perceval (1803–1876) was an army officer and son of the British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval. From 1831 to 1834 he was confined in private asylums, first in Brisslington House near Bristol, then in Ticehurst Asylum in Sussex. His two-volume autobiographical account, *A Narrative of the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman, during a state of Mental Derangement; designed to explain the causes and the nature of insanity, and to expose the injudicious conduct pursued towards many unfortunate sufferers under that calamity*, was published in 1838 and 1840. It was reprinted as *Perceval's Narrative* (ed. G. Bateson) in 1962 by the Hogarth Press. On his recovery, he spent the rest of his life campaigning for reform of the asylums and the lunacy legislation.

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Tie an active limbed, active minded, actively imagining young man in bed, hand and foot, for a fortnight, drench him with medicines, slops, clysters; when reduced to the extreme of nervous debility, and his derangement is successfully confirmed, manacle him down for twenty-four hours in the cabin of a ship; then for a whole year shut him up from six a.m. to eight p.m. regardless of his former habits, in a room full of strangers, ranting, noisy, quarrelsome, revolting, madmen; give him no tonic medicines, no peculiar treatment or attention, leave him to a nondescript domestic, now brushing his clothes, sweeping the floors, serving at table, now his companion out of doors, now his bed-room companion; now throwing him on the floor, kneeling on him, striking him under all these distressing and perplexing circumstances; debar him from all conversation with his superiors, all communication with his friends, all insight into their motives, every impression of sane and well-behaved society; surprise him on all occasions, never leave harassing him night or day, or at meals; whether you bleed him to death, or cut his hair, show the same utter contempt for his will or inclination; do all in our power to crush every germ of self-respect that may yet remain, or rise up in his bosom; manacle him as you would a felon; expose him to ridicule, and give him no opportunity of retirement or self-reflection; and what are you to expect. And whose agents are you; those of God or of Satan? And what good can

you reasonably dare to expect? And whose profit is really intended?

... By soundness of mind, I do not mean any unerring powers of judgment, or any invincible moral strength: I know too well, as the wise man says, that madness is in the heart of all men. But I use the terms in the ordinary sense in which they are employed, to denote a man against whom there is no true ground for the charge of being able to manage his own affairs – unfit for liberty through mental incapacity. A man who knows who and what he is, his position in the world, and what the persons and things are around him; who judges according to known, or intelligible rules; and who, if he has singular ideas or singular habits, can give a reason for his opinions and his conduct; a man who, however wrong he may act, is not misled by any uncontrollable impulse or passion; who does not idly squander his means; who knows the legal consequences of his actions; who can distinguish between unseemly and seemly behaviour; who feels that which is proper and that which it is improper to utter, according to the circumstances in which he is placed; and who reverences the subject and the ministers of religion; a man who, if he cannot always regulate his thoughts and his temper and his actions, is not continually in the extremes, and if he errs, errs as much from benevolence and hesitation, as from passion and excitement, and more frequently; lastly, a man who can receive reproof, and acknowledge when he has needed correction.