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Paul Hamilton

## A French Connection: From Empiricism to Materialism in Writings by the Shelleys

Materialism might be called the unacceptable face of empiricism: unacceptable, because it draws the reductive conclusions suggested by the thesis that all our experience originates in the senses. Empiricism might *imply* atheism, hedonism, and a political equality based on our common physicality, but materialism *proclaimed* these heresies. As a philosophical doctrine it also appeared to leave little room for concepts apparently central to Romantic ideology: imagination, reduced to the play of sensation, must forego any claims to transcendental importance; organicism in life and art is no different from machinery; perception need no longer strive to find in poetry symbols for a supersensible vocation. Major British Romantics, therefore, dutifully took up the task of refuting materialism as a prerequisite for establishing their own credentials. Refusal to take materialism seriously fed on anti-Gallic prejudice. While French followers of Locke, *philosophes* and *idéologues*, attracted condemnation, their materialist systems rarely provoked the extended discussion accorded native, English, spiritualised versions. In traditions shared by Hartley, Priestley, Darwin and the usual suspects, materialism could be argued not to deny but to give an alternative account of an animated, active universe ostensibly more congenial to, or building a more helpful launching pad for, the idealist adventures of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Rousseau inevitably straddled both camps: the target of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism and of Coleridge's critique in *The Friend* is Hazlitt's Romantic touchstone. But Diderot and the Encyclopaedists rarely figure in English Romantic discourse. A "novel" of Voltaire is the *sign* of the Solitary's moral destitution in *The Excursion*, a discarded book whose symbolic resonance overrides any enlightened discussion of Voltaire's work (ii, 444,485). Hazlitt's longer debate with the systems of Helvetius and Condillac was unusual.

Materialism, in other words, makes an acceptable intrusion into mainstream late 18th-Century British philosophical theory in the form of native associationism and pantheism; but by then its sting has already been drawn.

An English Romantic keen to sting again, was Percy Shelley. He is a rare example of a Romantic poet who utilised the French materialists, although I believe he is usually thought to have participated in the common abandonment of materialism for a contrary view of the mental formation of experience. "Nothing exists but as it is perceived", said the young Shelley in his "Essay on Life", a statement which could certainly mean with Berkeley that existence is a function of perception. It could also have the implication that anything genuinely existent must be perceivable, through the senses, and so must have a material nature – a reduction in keeping with his contemporary enthusiasm for Holbach and Laplace. Already, in Spinozistic vein, Shelley is describing personal differences as "the different modifications of the one mind": articulations of a common substance which itself exists only as it is perceived. He continues to square his empiricism, with its overtones of Berkeleyan or Humean idealism, with the French materialist derivation of thought from the movement of material particles<sup>1</sup>.

Percy Shelley can be read consistently from a materialist point of view, and such a reading interestingly brings Mary Shelley into play not merely as expiatory mechanism, or even collaborator, but as giving the lead in important ways to Percy's thought. Read from this angle, these two authors embarrass a half-hearted empiricism by being unabashedly insistent on the sufficiency of bodily existence. Out-and-out materialism prescinds opposition, each spiritual objection being translated back into a compliment to the body that produced it. You have vigorously to demonise that source in order to make credible the detachment from it of any high-minded effects.

1 *Shelley's Prose, or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, edited by David Lee Clark, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1954, 174. Shelley's French argument against thought as an independent substance is clearest in his "Essay on A Future State", 175-178.

The easy urbane materialism of a Hume, a Voltaire or a Diderot argues against such debasement of the body, but only indirectly, through its discursive suavity and range. Their lack of explicitness, however, elides the initial shock materialism perpetrates on dominant ideologies, and I want to argue that this trauma was perceived to be more important and was countered more straightforwardly at some points in French materialism in a manner lending definition to the Shelleys' otherwise elusive but persistent materialism.

Empiricism is constitutionally unhappy with its own subject-position. Its stress on the primacy of sensuous input as the source of experience eventually exerts intolerable pressure on the idea of subjectivity which crumbles into a sentimental inference drawn from the patterns of data received. Hume retreats gracefully from the problem of locating personal identity elsewhere; Diderot dramatises the same embarrassment in the figure of Rameau's nephew, a shameless replicator who can apparently transform all interiority into brilliant pantomime, outward display. However disingenuously, both Hume's reticence and Diderot's irony still express the desire to be able to describe the self as other than simply a material effect. One of the 18th-Century materialists willing to encounter the dissolution of subject into object head-on, the generally unacceptable conclusion to which empiricism seemed to be leading, actually predated the *philosophes* and scandalised even them. Julien Offray de La Mettrie, the 'centre' of French materialism according to Marx, combined an Epicurean delight in nature with Spinozistic monism to seek explanatory analogies for being human in machinery and vegetable nature<sup>2</sup>. *L'Homme Machine* and *L'Homme Plante* enlist the scientific imagination of the day to invade and explicate subject-areas in ways immediately proclaimed to be reductive and crass by their traditional philosophical and theological guardians. Not that La Mettrie saw his own initiatives as being politically or socially subversive. In fact, the complaint of the *philosophes* was always that he

2 *The Holy Family*, in Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, 150.

considered humankind abstracted from the shaping institutions they wished to reform<sup>3</sup>. *L'Homme Machine* opens by specifying La Mettrie's desired audience as an elite capable of shedding prejudice in the pursuit of untrammelled truth (I, 63; 3). His methodological starting point is his experience as a doctor; and his materialism is frequently backed up by case-studies and biological generalisations based on experimental proofs independent of the social context so dear to the explanations of the *philosophes*. Nevertheless, his scientism seems for almost all his readers to be charged by what it might not necessarily be expected to possess – passion, resistance, eroticism and wit. He can, that is, be read as dealing with the shock to the readers whom he forces to confront a nature thought obscene when stripped of its ideological overlay. His provocative but infectious complacency with physical circumstance aims to overcome their false consciousness, their alienation from and disgust at their material selves, as much as it tries to further the scientific investigation these responses have traditionally impeded.

As a result, symmetries between La Mettrie and the Shelleys' project are easier to detect than affinities with other French Enlightenment materialists. For Diderot and others, La Mettrie had unhelpfully impressed the vested interests of Church and State they were out to subvert as being someone highly dangerous or mad; he had, by association, given their materialism a bad name. And yet La Mettrie spoiled the *philosophes*' attempt to persuade society of the rationality of adopting a new order because his outrageous scientific frankness appeared quite compatible with his conservatism. He eventually held a sinecure at the Prussian court of Frederick II where he felt

3 See the "Introductions" by Ann Thomson to her translation of *Machine Man and Other Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, and by Justin Leiber to *Man A Machine and Man a Plant*, transl. by Richard A. Watson and Maya Rybalka, Indianapolis, Indiana, Hackett, 1994, as well as Ann Thomson, *Materialism and Society in the Mid-Eighteenth Century, La Mettrie's "Discours Préliminaire"*, Geneva, Librairie Droz, 1981, Part III. References to La Mettrie will be to the *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, ed. Michel Serres, Paris, Fayard, 1987, 2 vols., followed by references to Thomson's *Machine Man and Other Writings*.

considerably more at home than did Voltaire. The aura of sexual licence popularly attaching to La Mettrie was less the strategic rubbishing which, for example, Rousseau's *Confessions* attracted to his theories and was more connected with his actual intellectual stance<sup>4</sup>. La Mettrie shows that uninhibited investigation of sexuality highlights the common ground humans share not only with animals but with still more unconscious life-processes. Hence came his and Linnaeus' better known sexual classification of plants and, in La Mettrie's case, vegetable classification of man – *l'Homme Plante*. In this "sensitive plant", physical organisation displaces psychology, anticipating the practice of Lavater's art of physiognomy or Spurzheim's phrenology, both trashed by a Romanticism which had located the source of emancipatory knowledge rather in the priority of consciousness to scientific reduction. La Mettrie's pragmatism, though, his insistence on identifying reason in good practice, rather than in immaterial isolation supported by an untenable distinction between mind and body, held more political resonance for a later age more alert to the diversity of forms ideology could adopt. Certainly the Romantic substitution of aesthetic feeling for bodily aethesis bolstered a transcendental psychology which La Mettrie might have happily attacked. He could have reassured us against the need for such Romantic sublimations, as he did his first readers after dissolving the mind/body distinction: "Ce n'est pas être Philosophe, que de rougir avec Pline, de la misère de notre origine" (I,65; 4).

For La Mettrie defines his target as above all *a priori* reasoning. And, confusingly for those of us conditioned by Romantic ideology, he found his strongest ally in the imagination. Soul is not a philosopher's assumption we have to make concerning what it is to be human. Soul is something we deduce retrospectively from the rational organisation of the body to discernible purposes. This immateriality of reasoning in the world is the result of imagination.

4 See Thomson's "Introduction" to *Machine Man and Other Writings*. For Rousseau's reputation, see Edmund Duffy, *Rousseau in England, The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979.

Je me sers toujours du mot *imaginer*, parceque je crois que tout s'Imagine, et que toutes les parties de l'Ame peuvent être justement reduites à la seule imagination... Par elle, par son pinceau flateur, le froid squelette de la Raison prend des chairs vives et vermeilles; par elle les Sciences fleurissent, les Arts s'embellissent, les Bois parlent, les Echos soupirent, les Rochers pleurent, le Marbre respire, tout prend vie parmi les corps inanimés. (I,81-2; 14-15)

Experience becomes intelligible to La Mettrie as it is perceived to be made up of signs given in imagination. Initially this semiotic move seems to allow nature itself to drop out of the equation. Words, as in Locke, start by taking their meaning from the ideas they supposedly represent, but this relation transposes almost immediately into another relation, one holding *between* words themselves and not between words and something else. La Mettrie berates the use of words “auxquelles on n'a attaché aucune idée, ou *distinction réelle*” and describes the brain as touched by words when it “ne peut pas ne pas voir leurs images *et leurs différences*” (I,84-5,80; 17,14 – my emphases). But the collocation of idea or image with distinction and difference removes the representational function of the former: now they only exist as points in a differential system of significance which does not require them to gesture beyond it in order to generate meaning. To avoid a linguistic idealism out of keeping with his materialism elsewhere, though, La Mettrie has to claim that the linguistic structure of our understanding is “marqués ou gravés dans le cerveau” (I,80; 14). This explains, for La Mettrie, that just as we cannot look without seeing (just as seeing is involuntary), so seeing is impossible without a prior linguistic organization of data simultaneously the production of imagination and the involuntary, physical modification of the brain. Whereas Locke seems to think that we can receive impressions and then, acting on them, produce significance, La Mettrie argues that we could only recognise such elements of knowledge, we could only be impressed by them, if they came to us already organised as forms of signification, each bearing the “traces” of other elements from which they differed in meaningful relations (I,81; 14)<sup>5</sup>.

5 For a discussion of the materialism of this view of “difference” see Jay Bernstein’s discussion of comparable philosophical turns from idealism in Schelling and Derrida, in *Textual Practice*, I, i Spring 1987, pp. 99-101.

To go on to ask the questions of La Mettrie, “Well, which came first – imagination or brain?” is to ask a question he thinks is nonsensical. There is one substance, thinks La Mettrie with Spinoza, which can precipitate modes of consciousness without itself being conscious. “ayant fait, sans voir, des yeux qui voient, [la Nature] a fait sans penser, une machine qui pense” (I, 361; 97). This last aphorism comes from a work eventually collected in La Mettrie’s philosophical works under the title *Système d’Epicure*. Epicurean philosophy was primarily transmitted through Lucretius’ poem *De Rerum Natura*, an intertext for understanding Percy Shelley’s earliest and latest long poems, *Queen Mab* (1813) and *The Triumph of Life* (1822). As much as them, the poem most obviously founding Shelley’s poetic career, *Alastor: or, The Spirit of Solitude*, shows the futility of trying to recover a sense of self prior to its practical manifestations in reasoning and action. In *L’Homme Machine* La Mettrie insisted that “l’excellence de la Raison ne dépend pas d’un grand mot vuide de sens (*l’immatérialité*); mais de sa force, de son étendue, ou de sa Clair-voyance” (I, 65; 4). To search out a sovereign consciousness anterior to all physical manifestations, and to make this *a priori* reasoning *the* object of poetic quest, is bound to be frustrated. All you could arrive at is an awareness of basic physical movements upon which everything subsequent depends. Since there is no subjectivity to be unveiled by the questing poet, his journey back to his own origins concludes in this lack of consciousness, in death. “Everyone leaves life as though he had just been born”, says Epicurus<sup>6</sup>. The Poet’s assumption that the “veiled maid” of his vision, self-generated, is someone he must pursue rather than reproduce in actual personal relationship, is his mistake. His movement in quest of her is all that there is to her, to him. The extensiveness of his efforts shows the “generosity” of his error, as the poem’s “Preface” has it, but it is the physicality of this spectacularly expressive movement which finally counts. The narrator’s infatuation with the Poet repeats the desire for a sovereignty other than that of natural neces-

6 “Collections of Maxims”, in *Hellenistic Philosophy, Introductory Readings*, transl. by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, Indianapolis, Indiana, Hackett, 1988, 31.

sity, but the last stages of the poet's journey have mimed a medically precise return through various anatomical passages towards the womb, a description Shelley could have found in *L'Homme Machine*. Here such travel is totally self-defeating as it closes on the moment of inspiration, the source of self-production, only to show that it is the same as the moment of conception. To approach conception from the reverse direction, leading away from physical diversity of imaginative movement and back to its cause is to retreat from consciousness, not to approach it. Equally, when the poet of *Alastor* finishes in blindness and decomposition, he has only become integrated with a world he might have affected in other ways. The narrator claims the Poet's future for his "simple strain" (1,706)<sup>7</sup>, but this cannibalism only repeats the poet's delusion that his scrutiny of nature might reveal any other source of conscious movement. Nature does not require help to preserve, or, in La Mettrie's Epicurean idiom: "Tout se succède, tout disparaît, et rien ne périt" (I, 371; 104).

The Poet is obliged to prove this thesis: nothing else could have happened, could it? Had he and the narrator acknowledged that his "mystic" sympathy with nature did not require alchemical or magical alternatives to natural science for its demonstration, they might together have described not an attempt to flee the inevitable but an attempt to face up to it, undiminished. Much of Percy Shelley's own poetry confronts the shock of our subordination to natural process and the self-alienation and despair resulting from such shock. Grasped materialistically, our life can feel like a triumph over other aspirations, paradoxically equally ours. The reduction of our sphere of influence to a single principle of life is like an incestuous imposition. Fastened to the dying animal, we not only imagine other worlds and dispensations in compensation, but conspire in a disgust for this life; scenarios in which the ingenious imaginative organisation of experience is detached from a physicality stigmatised rather than celebrated for being mechanical or biological. Percy's political analogy

7 All references to Shelley's poems are by line reference to the texts given in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, New York and London, Norton, 1977.

for this impossible discontent is an unwillingness to sacrifice autonomy for the better communal good. The agony of self-dissemination of the bourgeois subject in the interests of humankind can only find an adequate analogue in the thought of death. Shelley could present this exaggeration sympathetically, as in "The Ode to the West Wind", or through the suffering of the poetic madman in "Julian and Maddalo". Or he could exhibit the intolerableness of imagined exemption from proper political obligation in his many figures of tyranny. Or he could, hardest of all, try to evoke an exemplary mobility in reaction to the demands of death and its others, at the ends of *Prometheus Unbound* and *Adonais*.

It is important to detect the political idiom here; otherwise other kinds of acceptance of death-in-life loom, in particular Sade's. When La Mettrie writes his *Anti-Sénèque ou Discours Sur Le Bonheur*, he attacks a stoical contempt for mortality and advocates Epicurean acceptance and pleasure. But he is far from recommending an erotics of excess. It is the Stoics who are excessive, who "s'évertuant au sublime... s'élève au-dessus de tout les événements, et ne se croient vraiment hommes, qu'autant qu'ils cessent de l'être" (II, 238; 119). La Mettrie appears able to criticise in advance the inhuman, postmodern destination of the sublime. In *The Triumph of Life*, "Life", the figure in the chariot who leads a procession of almost all the worthies of Western civilisation from Plato onwards similarly represents an inhuman compulsion into which people are self-propelled towards their own destruction. Yet this agency is only constructed for life by those who have tried to rule it from above by *a priori* prescription, thinkers driven into disabling self-abuse by the realisation that the object of their science actually dwelt immanently within them, organising all their supposedly individual responses. As Timothy Morton has shown, Shelley's vegetarianism loses its eccentricity and becomes central to his thought where his materialism is at stake<sup>8</sup>. Meat must be roasted because of its horrific aspect when looked on as food; a taboo as strong as the incest taboo forbids carnivores from thinking

8 Shelley and The Revolution in Taste, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

of the flesh they eat as the same thing as the body they inhabit. The abjection of the body as food is a striking paradigm of subject-object relations in which the difference between the two also licenses the mastery of one over the other. Such ascendancy requires the casting of the inferior object in a character suppressing the nature it shares with its supposed opposite.

According to Harold Bloom's classic idealist reading, the "devastation" a long time coming in Shelley's oeuvre, is the tragic homelessness of our transcendental vocation experienced as the triumph of life. By contrast, on a materialist interpretation, this triumph criticises the artificial alienation felt by those for whom the materialist *reductio* is traumatic – an undeniable, destructive possession, but still "life". Shelley's Rousseau, unlike Dante guided by Virgil, cannot *love* his dispensation, cannot, that is, see in materialism the image of the body politic, a republic of people in virtuous relationship with each other (for Dante, of course, a theodicy translating Virgilian imperium). Lucretius had described as *foedera naturae* the compacts by which atoms naturally bind themselves together, as if in a republic, to produce such things as "mind"<sup>9</sup>. The Rousseau of *The Triumph* instead sees only a vain "deluded crew" (l.184). He is overcome "by [his] own heart alone" (l.240), an individualism whose accompanying misery and the affront of mortality could not "temper to its object" (l.243). I am suggesting that the quickest way with this obscure formulation is to think of the difficulties that most provocatively egotistical of writers, Rousseau, would have had with the idea of himself *as* an object, as part of a larger physical organisation in which he played a democratic part. Rousseau would then stand for a

9 Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, transl. by R. E. Latham, revised with new introduction and notes by John Godwin Harmondsworth, London, Penguin, 1994, Book 5, ll. 55-64. See D. P. Fowler, "Lucretius and Politics", in Miriam Griffin and Jonathan Barnes, *Philosophia Togata; Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, "The behaviour of the atoms is not governed by an external law laid down by a divine ruler but is controlled by pacts they have freely entered into. In this respect atomic society is strongly republican" (147).

subjectivity typically extinguished by an egalitarian materialism to which it partly subscribed<sup>10</sup>.

I will have more to say on the poem's alternative to Rousseau's agonised materialism later on. Meanwhile, we can get a firmer idea of its implications from those novels of Mary Shelley written during or just after her time with Percy which take up this theme. I will try to say least about *Frankenstein*, the obvious novel of *l'Homme Machine*. In the context of this argument, one could stress polemically that *Frankenstein* is not about overstepping boundaries but about accepting them; not about scientific over-reaching but about the need to tailor our expectations of human beings to what their physical organisation is capable of producing. When the individual beauties of the monster's physical components do not survive his compo-

10 Edward Duffy's major study, *Rousseau in England; The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979, reads Rousseau's self-division as one of genre. He mediates through *rêverie* the different receptions accorded his theoretical and his confessional writings, dialectically working to discredit each other, the autobiography showing the dire consequences of the radical political ideas and the political theory leading readers to expect the worst of the biography, "[Shelley] sat down to write a poem that would be a reclamation of Rousseau's work from the corrosive influence of his life and hence a model for the way the benign impulse of the French Revolution ought to be similarly distinguished from its pragmatic failures" (151). I am trying to argue that to see the life as something to be reclaimed from Enlightenment interests is what Shelley's poem opposes. I think a materialist, Lucretian reading tries to dissolve "the choice between stances allowed by transference", which the poem poses for J. E. Hogle in *Shelley's Process, Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, 340, by identifying knowledge with its own material production. Better to get away from critical categories of Freudian aetiology altogether and opt for a Deleuzean/Guattarian confidence that "There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made...the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into, in order to work", Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, transl. and Foreword by Brian Massumi, London, The Athlone Press, 1992, 4. Tim Morton's *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* shows the possibilities here. See especially, "Introduction, Prescriptions", 7 *passim*.

sition, these aesthetic virtues should be relocated without loss in the human expression, need and appeal which only the *society* of these parts can produce and which Victor ignores. The monster exemplifies La Mettrie's materialist language, a physical semiotic in which, as we have seen, neither of these categories is intelligibly separable. Victor devalues the effect of organisation championed by La Mettrie over any privileged individual organ, material or immaterial.

Mary Shelley's novels ring the changes on this bodily logic with more variety than Percy's poetry could ever manage. *Matilda* is a novel of sensibility. By letting sensibility call the tune, Mary Shelley risks, as her mother did in her novels, writing in a manner in which, because the expression of emotion rules all other considerations, plot seems sacrificed to coincidence, narrative development to the repetition of affective situations, and character to neurosis. Either art of this kind is simplistic in its pursuit of intensity of feeling, or else it is disingenuous, calculated and strategic. In the latter case, such novels have adopted the later Romantic tactic of a higher realism, in which failures at one level of representation are redeemed as successful portrayals at another level of experience. *Matilda*, for example, tells the story of a daughter forced to confront her father's incestuous passion for her<sup>11</sup>. Her shortcomings as a narrator, therefore, and the obsessively foreshortened and predictably catastrophic world the novel builds around her, depict by default the disorientation and loss of any sense of authority nowadays routinely ascribed to the victim of abuse of this kind. The novel, so understood, realistically conveys the horrible traducing and betrayal inflicted by abuse, picturing it as being like living in a bad novel – bad in the sense that all its artificiality and narrative conniving are felt as crude and intolerable impositions. The discrediting of the art of the novel images a loss of faith in authority in general. A "mimetic fallacy" looms, but is itself made part of the novel's thought or plot.

To exonerate *Matilda*'s emotional luxuriance from lack of sophistication with claims of its successful depiction of Matilda's fate is

11 All references are to *Matilda*, edited by Pamela Clemit, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 2, London, William Pickering, 1996.

to explain an extreme case of the more general condition under which novels of sensibility labour. Novelistic catastrophe and coincidence provoke extreme emotion when they shockingly corroborate a physically hostile world. Curiously, this world is at its most contrary and opposite to our purposes when it seems to display a design of its own. Its “chain of necessity” (to use Matilda’s phrase) is most imposing when least subtle, just as the expression of emotion may be most powerful when an involuntary condition. An abrasive and coercive world repeats itself in the importunacies of physiology. Recalcitrant bodies – hysterical, consumptive, overwrought in any number of ways – then presume over other controls, mental or psychological. The resulting emotional disarray is thus truer to our subjection to physical restraint than any response based on Cartesian distinctions between mind or body.

*Matilda* can be read, through the cult of sensibility, as an extreme version of this recovery of a materialist perspective. The novel adds Matilda’s pathological, self-debilitating but understandable isolation to a common critique of gratuitous Wordsworthian solitariness discerned by recent commentary in so much of the early writing of the second generation of English romantics<sup>12</sup>. It connects also with Percy Shelley’s continuous interest in empiricist and materialist philosophical traditions, in apparent contrast with the idealism usually attributed to mainline romanticism. It is a reading which proves that the reflexive habit of an increasingly ironic literary practice need not just show a romanticism refining itself out of existence but also the search for ways to image the determining power of the material world. Along with its use of its own generic restraints go Romantic literature’s expressive indications – such as the extreme or limiting case of incest – of the strangeness of arguing for such materialism in an intellectual climate dominated aesthetically by a cult of imagination and ideologically by religious otherworldliness. Self-consciousness, or “self-anatomy” as Percy Shelley called it, foregrounds the

12 I’m thinking of the contextualising work of studies taking their lead from Marilyn Butler’s, Jerome McGann’s and Marjorie Levinson’s critiques of Romantic ideology.

ubiquity of plot and narrative; the prescribed patterns observed by apparent spontaneity let a sense of being produced prevail over any pretensions to independent authority.

In keeping with this project, *Matilda* remorselessly engineers its repeated convergences. Matilda's mother dies after the birth of her only child. Her father, half-deranged by the bereavement, abandons home and country for travel overseas. Brought up by an emotionally unresponsive and snobbish aunt, the solitary Matilda makes her father "the idol of my imagination", alleviating her isolation by imagining his return to "claim her" (10,14). He does so when she is sixteen, comforting her when her aunt dies by comparing her grief to his own now manageable despair. Subsequently, however, he grows forbidding and melancholy, and, after a year, Matilda elicits his confession of an incestuous passion for her. Horrified, she initially spurns him, and he sets off for the coast to drown himself. She follows and arrives too late to save him. Her later verdict – "my folly destroyed the only being I was doomed to love" – shows that guilt at his suicide grows to encompass guilt at his passion for her, surely a classic symptom of the victim of abuse. She unreasonably believes herself to be "polluted by the unnatural love" she had "inspired" (60). To be in love with her father is in fact, she admits, to be "in love with death", not only in the sense that death would be required to "unite" her with the drowned man, death's insuperable barrier here euphemising the incest taboo; she has also sacrificed any will for autonomous agency to her emulative desire for him, now grown disasterously mimetic. She is now as uprooted as he was; she now becomes a solitary traveller, her whole life programmed to re-enact his inconsolable affections. She meets Woodville, a brilliant young poet who just happens to have recently lost the love of his life. Woodville plays to Matilda the role she played to her father; he elicits *her* confession of the source of her misery, but only inadvertently to confirm her in her sense that her life is utterly determined by it. Any sympathy from him sharpens her conviction of being in "a tragedy; a character that he comes to see act" (56). His attempt to change the script to Spenserian chivalry – "Come, as you have played Despair with me I will play the part of Una with you and bring you hurtless from his dark cavern" (59) – only confirms that a

script is inescapable, a further emblem of Matilda's recognition of being marked by another's carcinogenic sign, eating away at her identity (60-61): "perhaps he is already planning a poem in which I am to figure. I am a farce and play to him, but to me this is all dreary reality" (56). The logic here is comparable to that of the debilitating Miltonic and Coleridgean role-models testifying to the monster's acculturation in *Frankenstein*.

The autobiographical hits and misses in all this only add to the sense of an imagination working within predetermined bounds. Matilda even repeats Mary Wollstonecraft's death-bed words (57). By the time that a galloping consumption finally bears Matilda towards an "eternal mental union" with her father, her goal appears already achieved, established on the physical evidence of her life, the enhancement of which by any further "mental" translation looks redundant. In *Matilda*, rather as in Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc", reflection on nature redescribes an independent, mental, idealist viewpoint as an effect which nature itself typically produces. Matilda, we are told, is one of nature's "fragile mirrors, that ever doted on thine image". The "of", though, must signal a natural property when we further hear that Matilda's coming dissolution points up nature's power to "create another and another" such mirror, so losing "nought by [her] destruction" (65). In Percy Shelley's later play, *The Cenci*, Count Cenci's incestuous tyranny over his daughter Beatrice similarly transforms her self-reflection from the sign of autonomous agency into further evidence of his own reproductive power. The tragic convergence the play dramatises is one where Cenci's abuse leads Beatrice to repeat his murderous unscrupulousness as the condition of escaping it – a paradox leaving the reader unhappy with the supposed sufficiency of tragedy.

On a materialist reading of the Shelleys writings, then, this determinism is morally and politically discredited whenever it is personified. But rather than the tragic condition of life to be ineffectually overcome by poetic myth, this demonising of our conditions of production might, I am suggesting, represent a mischievous and destructive attitude towards materialism, one which the Shelleys saw as historically symptomatic. Mary Shelley's novels frequently set up singular protagonists whose extraordinariness of situation or charac-

ter symptomatically disguises an ordinariness from which we have become estranged. She observes the Romantic paradigm of the concrete universal, but in order to erode the division symbolically overcome. In her novel *The Last Man*, the lastness of the last man renders in singular fashion a picture of what is true, but taken from an impossible angle. No implied reader can ever hear Verney's words, except as a sibylline prophecy. Yet his isolated mortality is unproblematically true to the unshareable destiny of each one of us. And it seems only human, if culpable, to disguise this incommunicable fate in terms casting it as extraordinary or fictionally distanced from what we know is the scientific norm. Wittgenstein reworks the conundrum in his well-known, Lucretian aphorism, about death not being a fact of life; or, putting it another way, it can hardly be a precedent for anything. Blanchot, who also wrote a novella called *The Last Man*, had his Heideggerian version of this paradox, claiming that once dead we lose "the right to death", or the limiting condition arguably making sense of all our actions<sup>13</sup>. Mary Shelley's intervention in what was a voguish topos in the 1820s represents in extended form the difficulty of this commonplace. When *The Literary Gazette*'s reviewer wrote in 1835 that "with that terrible future we have nothing in common", he gets it exactly wrong<sup>14</sup>.

This kind of writing-strategy gives Mary Shelley a new take on domesticity, transforming it from the vocational confinement so tricky for subsequent feminist criticism to valorise, into the representative of a fundamental condition men fearfully consign to a feminine or lowly sphere. Astutely sceptical of this sublimation, her writings have usually been read as a source of horror or of the uncanny. But they might easily be redirected against that exaggerated immaturity which can only come to terms with the classical proportions of human life by casting them in the outlandish forms of fantasy or

13 See "The Right to Death", in *The Gaze of Orpheus*, transl. by Lydia Davis Barrytoen, New York, Station Hill Press, 1981.

14 No. 949 1835, p.194. Quoted by Morton Paley in his "The Last Man: Apocalypse Without Millenium", in Audrey Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, Esther H. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley, Beyond "Frankenstein"*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, 107-123.

nightmare. The worst nightmares are those in which you are to die, a dream which, like history, will of course remain undispersed by awakening. The nightmare, from a Lucretian point of view, would be to have become so unreconciled to one's limitations as to find their inevitable measurements nightmarish. The longeuous Sir Timothy Shelley, one remembers, was for Mary Shelley a Struldburg, a figure whose faults were all figured in his pointless survival beyond the material proportions of human life. Materialism is equally about what is material in the sense of relevant or germane. But Mary Shelley also shows this repressing of material limitation projected on to female characters.

In *Valperga: or The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, the last novel she wrote in Percy's lifetime, female agency is only imaginatively admitted into literary consciousness as an agonised dependency. The historical truth in this fulfils a male desire to project on women alone a physical dependency common to both sexes because it implies an egalitarianism male characters wish to repress. The title itself alternates between the Prince of Lucca, his lover the Countess Valperga, and the castle of Valperga which he rases to the ground to enforce her natural subordination while inadvertently symbolising his own. *Valperga*, emblematic of the "other" Mary Shelley, the one who didn't just write *Frankenstein*, has attracted good feminist readings often troubled by worries like Barbara Jane O'Sullivan's when she writes that "Despite her triumph in creating strong female characters, she undercuts her own achievement by her complicity in the repression and discrediting of the voices she herself has created"<sup>15</sup>. But Mary Shelley is also using women to show the male characters' need to project away from hegemonic ideas of experience and on to heretics, prophetesses, and power-mad witches what men too easily escape accountability for. The ghastly determinism of the women's lives abjects limitation in general, redoubling its distance from the men. Valperga herself, closer to initiating political

15 Barbara Jane O'Sullivan, "Beatrice in *Valperga*, A New Cassandra", in *The Other Mary Shelley*, 151. All references to *Valperga* are to the edition edited by Nora Crook as Vol. 3 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*.

action than any of the other women, is nevertheless granted in her death by drowning a dramatic dissolution which is yet again projected on to a feminine process – “the barren bosom of the sea, which, as an evil step-mother, deceives and betrays all committed to her care” (322). This reflex or pathological gendering of determining processes surely knows its own ideological function and epitomises its own satire of it in Valperga’s Christian name of Euthanasia. In contrast to her brave and serene acceptance of all the neurotic luggage heaved her way, the efforts of characters like the usurer Pepe of Cremona to mortgage the future can only appear disgusting, a letting-down of the male conspiracy to hand death and other constraints over to the women and villagers. Pepe reduces his native city of Cremona on paper by lending money to its rich but beleaguered inhabitants on condition they cite their fortunes and properties as collateral. He has impoverished himself to ensure this indebtedness. His credit, though, exists entirely on paper, in the shape of bonds, deeds, and affidavits stored in a chest in an underground cellar. Castruccio’s rage at this when taken into Pepe’s confidence leads him to call Pepe “not human”; but, revealingly, this judgement on Pepe’s attempt to live entirely on the superior level of imagination is elaborated in opposite terms of physical subordination and degeneracy – “in these filthy vaults thou hast swollen, as a vile toad or rank mushroom...” (161). Pepe’s real crime, the rhetoric seems to be saying, is to discredit the imaginative life by showing it to be complicit in the blind animal drives it is its normal function to discredit. The contradiction can only produce loathing and revulsion. By contrast, Euthanasia’s fate keeps everything in place, but ironically, surely?

If Percy Shelley learns from this sophistication, then maybe it enables his materialism to reach its apogee as do so many things Shelleyan in his last uncompleted poem, *The Triumph of Life*. His use of Lucretius here at last allows his narrator, Rousseau, a vision matching Dante’s which a materialist reading can try to make climactic rather than just interrupted. According to Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*, we shed our images like skins: insubstantial, flimsy but nonetheless atomic particles of the same order as our physical make-up emanate from all objects. These images or films (*imagines*,

*simulacra, effigiae* translating Epicurus's *eidola* or *tupoi*<sup>16</sup>), penetrating the perceiver usually through the eyes but, if asleep, through pores, render their originals visible. Lucretius' theory is commonly thought to be intended to counter contemporary scepticism or Pyrrhonism. Our senses never lie; what they receive are always "replica", true to life, although we err in our opinions of them. Lucretius gives a literal or materialist theory of metaphor. When we *imagine*, we either apprehend flimsier images, as in the "decaying sense" of Hobbes' account, or else we perceive the exotic results of collisions and amalgams of different images in their varied atomic flights. The vision displacing Dante's towards the end of the poem, then, is the sensuous production of all experience, a material production which gives the lie to scepticism and religious transcendentalism alike. Lucretius' trumping of Dante takes place despite the former's cynical view of "love", with which Shelley could not have agreed, perhaps indicating further the still partially alienated form in which Shelley's Rousseau is obliged to represent materialism.

In *The Critique of Judgement* Kant argued that genius was inimitable: those who claimed to rationalise experiences in excess of our material nature were fanatics. Fanatics need not be revolutionaries, they could just as easily be conservatives<sup>17</sup>. *The Triumph of Life* comparably attacks those who repress for ulterior reasons knowledge of the physical source of our ideas in a common material nature, a shared constitution. Shelley exonerates Dante and Milton from such ideological machinations in *A Defence of Poetry* because they so visibly produce their Lucretian membrane, that mask and mantle in which they approach us across the centuries. A Christianity pretending to a transcendental origin is refuted by the historical imprint of each of its formulators and defenders. In *A Defence*, Lucretius is relegated from the first rank of epic poets – Homer,

16 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, transl. by W. H. D. Rouse, London, William Heinemann, and Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1947, 251n.

17 See Simon Schaffer's placing of Kant's notion of genius in scientific historical context in "Genius in Romantic Natural Philosophy", in *Romanticism and the Sciences*, ed. by Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 82-101.

Dante and Milton – because he “had limed the wings of his swift spirit in the dregs of the sensible world”. But by *The Triumph of Life*, the danger of idealism’s consignment of the sensible world to “dregs” is foremost. “The sleepers in the oblivious valley” have (like Beatrice in *Valperga*) been awoken with horror to the physical exigencies of their lives; an enlightenment they should have been prepared for by life, but were shielded from as it shaped human expression to mask rather than replicate its origins:

And of this stuff the car’s creative ray  
 Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there  
 As the sun shapes the cloud – thus, on the way  
 Mask after mask fell from the countenance  
 And form of all, and long before the day  
 Was old, the joy which waked like Heaven’s glance  
 The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died,  
 And some grew weary of the ghastly dance  
 And fell, as I have fallen by the way side...(l. 533-541)

The shedding of masks has become a depleting and repressive search for truth rather than its Lucretian increase in outgoing self-expression. Understood as a revelatory denuding, it points us in a direction opposite to the positive communication described by the Lucretian projection of simulacra. “Life’s” naturalising of this swerve away from natural understanding, “As the sun shapes the clouds”, fixes us in an unreal, dreamlike state in which all terrors and tyrannies are possible. Poetry, on the other hand, appears in *A Defence* to show the wrong-headedness of the pursuit of unadorned, naked truth into phantasmal realms: the removing of veils gives way to the overflowing of a fountain, or is indifferently exchanged for the spreading of a figured curtain. Poetry recovers a universe annihilated by our ideas of it by locating ourselves in its production: “[Poetry] reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients”. Poetry’s purging “from our inward sight the film of familiarity” again uncovers ourselves – “the wonder of our being” – but as creatures inseparable from the affective responses with which we clothe the world anew. Poetry does more than implicate subject

in object; it displaces them with a non-dualist language of creativity. Read with this emphasis, *A Defence* collaborates with *The Triumph of Life* by showing that poetry frees us from “Life” when that word signifies the “one sad thought” of those submitting to definitions of it rather than constantly recreating it from their own historical resources. The poem demonises, as a Petrarchan triumph, the idea that life is one thing, a single truth to be uncovered by an invariable scientific procedure. Modern relativistic alternatives accept the historical variability of truth, but then have to rescue their own materialism from comparable demonisations of it as decay, degeneracy, the extinction of higher vision, mechanical subordination, and so on. Shelley’s poem’s complex survival of its narrators’ drive towards a single answer to the question “what is life?” thus problematises the question itself, suggesting that the distance between subject and object which the question assumes is the mistake. This is the error which allows life to be felt as an intolerable imposition from without, and our best self to be conceived of as a consciousness anterior to all physical circumstance.

This Lucretian or Epicurean account might seem to bleach the poem of its political colouring. Epicurus’s wholescale dismissal of politics and politicians, recorded in epistles and fragments, is deceptive where not understood as itself clearing the way for a political theory properly founded on a just estimate of human possibility. This is the step La Mettrie’s theory implied but did not take along the Epicurean high road. The Epicurean belief that nature is unguided by a teleological principle certainly excludes Platonic and Aristotelian notions that those of us who don’t make the grade as philosophers may still be naturally guided towards fulfilment in political life. But there remains an alternative politics to be based on the philosophical acceptance of the absence of such purposiveness; one which was historically productive of its own Epicurean communities<sup>18</sup>. This looks quite close to the communal vision at the end of

18 See D. P. Fowler, “Lucretius and Politics”, in Griffin and Barnes, pp. 120-150, for a good review of the state of scholarship on the subject of Lucretius’ politics. Very helpful also is James H. Nichols, Jr., *Epicurean Moral Philosophy; The “De rerum natura” of Lucretius*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1976.

“The Mask of Anarchy”, for example, often thought unrealistic or patronising. The final stanzas’ retrieval of ancient law, and their advocacy of a passive resistance shaming aggressors into sympathy, take a common *constitutional* stand. The mistake (which Shelley first described in *The Necessity of Atheism*) is to think that mental passiveness leaves the mind supine before an external world (empiricism) rather than empowered to participate in the natural excitation and productivity of that world of which it is a part (materialism). An Epicurean or Lucretian reading, though, would again highlight a vision which does not so much refute the anarchic establishment of Shelley’s day as seize upon this arbitrariness as its warrant for changing (even abandoning) the rules and locating political authority in that authentic creativity.

*The Triumph of Life* tempts a similar glossing. Shelley’s diagnosis of error then retains political significance. We cannot be expected to subscribe to a political theory if it is completely out of keeping with the truth of what we are. Non-materialist theories of how we should live are founded on misconceptions of the animal they try to accommodate. If we let mortality and the primacy of physical organisation dictate our common possibilities for happiness then we might more easily see through the ideologies which either falsely promise something else, or else demonise our physicality in order to keep us in fearful thrall to an alternative, unjustifiable authority.

## Résumé

Percy Shelley offre l’exemple rare d’un poète romantique anglais qui eut recours aux matérialistes français dans son oeuvre, alors même qu’il est généralement considéré comme partiellement responsable du remplacement du matérialisme par la doctrine contraire sur la formation mentale de l’expérience. Une lecture à la fois matérialiste et cohérente de son oeuvre est néanmoins possible. Cette lecture, c’est intéressant, passe par la présence de Mary Shelley, non seulement comme élément d’explication ou comme collaboratrice, mais en tant que guide orientant les choix philosophiques de Percy. Lues sous cet angle, les œuvres de ces deux auteurs, de par leur insistance sans complexe sur l’autonomie de l’existence du corps, s’avèrent gênantes pour un empirisme tempéré. Ce matérialisme consommé coupe court à toute opposition, toute objection spirituelle étant réduite à un compliment rendu au

corps dont elle émane. Pour justifier le rejet de l'origine physique des produits élevés de l'esprit, il faudrait pouvoir en démontrer la nature démoniaque ou du moins la discréder moralement. Or l'urbanité tolérante d'un Hume, d'un Voltaire ou d'un Diderot exclut cet avilissement du corps, quoiqu'indirectement, à travers le caractère suave et infiniment varié de leur discours. Leur approche non explicite amortit le choc initial que fait subir le matérialisme aux idéologies dominantes. Je soutiens dans cet article que le matérialisme français a réussi à contrecarrer ce traumatisme de façon néanmoins plus directe grâce à un style qui a influencé le matérialisme vague mais persistant de Shelley.

