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Two Bodies in Shelley's *Queen Mab*

Kimiyo Ogawa

The role of scepticism in Percy Shelley's thought is explored by C.E. Pulos¹ in conjunction with the sceptical tradition of David Hume and his empiricism. Hume's empiricist approach founded on Lockean sensational-psychology pursued epistemological and ontological inquiry, and has profound bearing upon the emergence of the Romantic imagination. It had appealed not only to the radical enlightenment thinkers such as William Godwin or Mary Wollstonecraft, but Edinburgh-trained physicians or physiologists amongst whom Erasmus Darwin is an exemplar physician, and also a botanist and poet. His medical treatise *Zoonomia*² elaborates as much on the treatment of diseases as on the ontological inquiry that departs from the material body which "senses" various stimuli and stores in its "sensitive sensorium." Darwin's influence on Shelley is well documented by critics such as Desmond King-Hele,³ Nora Crook and Derek Guiton,⁴ and Richard Holmes.⁵ The materialist premise that the source of one's knowledge or imagination is sought in one's nerve-impression that connects the external reality to the body and then to the mind was shared by the leading eighteenth-century philosophers, physicians, theologians and botanists. In this paper, I will show that this theory of "sympathetic" interaction between the body and mind, which was expounded by Darwin, collapsed the Cartesian dualism of body and mind and was consequently ubiquitous amongst the sceptic thinkers. I will argue that this sceptical tradition could

contribute to explaining Shelley's "inconsistency" between his idealist notion of the "spirit" and his materialist idea of the "body."

Erasmus Darwin was much immersed in the cult of sensibility, and his approach to poetry and his medical language later influenced Percy Shelley's thought. It is attested that Shelley came across Darwin's writings in his youth following the guide of Dr James Lind (1713-1812),⁶ who had close friends in Darwin's social circle, though the former may not have been directly acquainted with the latter. Darwin's linking of body and mind has, in addition to its practical importance, earned him a small niche, next to David Hartley,⁷ in the history of philosophy.⁸ Darwin's interest in the nerves and "sensitive sensorium" was probably due to his two-year training at Edinburgh. Assuming that there is a system of nerves in all animal bodies,⁹ he compares the physiological operation of human body to plants. Darwin's botanical interest is expressed in his *Economy of Vegetation*, the first part of *Botanic Garden*.

Starts the quick Ether through the fibre-trains
Of dancing arteries, and of tingling veins,
Goads each fine nerve, with new sensation thrill'd
Bends the reluctant limbs with power unwill'd;
Palsy's cold hands the fierce concussion own,
And Life clings trembling on her tottering throne. — "10

His concern with the sympathetic interaction is observed in the way he portrays the anatomy of plants. The motion of the leaves or flowers is caused not simply by irritation on the muscles themselves but by the "connection of those muscles with a sensitive sensorium or brain existing in each individual bud or flower." Darwin calls this sympathetic interaction of the body the "chain of animal motions."¹¹ "Ether" here refers to the Newtonian ethereal spirits, the source and cause of animation

or animal motions. The term "fibre," in the medical discourse, signifies both muscular fibre and nervous fibre, which in part constitutes the material body. When the "sensible" nerve is acted upon by such spirits, "sensation" arises.

I will not discuss in depth the political and ideological ramification of the medical discourse on "sensibility" which is crucial to the Romantic tradition. However a close examination of Darwinian "materialism" (that imagination is attached to the body), I suggest, will shed light upon Shelley's nascent development of the theory of poetry which persisted throughout his life.

In Erasmus Darwin's works, both prose and verse, the notion of the body plays a central role in valorising the materiality of the universe, hence assuring not only "the consciousness of the existence," but also the existence of the material bodies. Like Hume and Berkeley, Darwin was fascinated with the power of mind, its ability to "repeat ideas in the absence of the external body, by which they were first excited"; which he termed "ideas of imagination." The oscillation between these two modes of existence can be observed in his notion of "reverie," which later influenced the Romantic poets. *Zoonomia* has the chapters on "Sleep," "Dreams" and on "Reverie," and these led to Wordsworth's idea of poetical reverie, Coleridge's concept of dramatic illusion, and later fed into Shelley's mind, which helped him conceive the narrative of *Queen Mab*.

Darwin's definition of sleep curiously calls into question the independent operation of the mind without the intervention of external stimuli, and how imagination works. Sleep, Darwin states, "consists in the abolition of all voluntary power," namely the person's will, "both over our muscular motions and our ideas, for we neither walk nor reason in sleep." However, "many of our muscular motions, and many of our ideas

continue to be excited into action, in consequence of internal irritations, and of internal sensations."¹² The sensibility, when one is asleep, is only "internal" and is precluded from the perception of external objects. Likewise, reveries and imagination are no more grounded on mere fancy or illusion than dreams. Thus, Darwin's notions of sleep, reverie and imagination are complex, and he holds an ambivalent view on the power of mind. So much so that the body takes on the role of agency and human consciousness becomes curiously estranged. Reverie, for example, is considered as a "disease of the epileptic or cataleptic kind."¹³ There seems to be a paradox that while the mode of perceiving reality depends upon an acceptance of the passivity of sense impressions and on a merely imitative theory of imagination, the active mind is endowed with the power of creation.

Darwin's fascination with the power of mind is expressed in his *Temple of Nature*; "Call'd by thy voice contiguous thoughts embrace / In endless streams arranged by Time or Place."¹⁴ He employs Hume's theory of association, namely contiguity, causation, and resemblance. Hume's proposition that ideas are associated in the brain was no surprise to Darwin, for "those who have combined an extensive class of ideas by the contiguity of time or place, are men learned in the history of mankind, and of the sciences they have cultivated." Hence Darwin celebrates those who have stored a great class of ideas of resemblances as possessing the source of the ornaments of poetry. His carefree style in presenting his verse, we may say, is his exemplification of a kind of genius he sought, a skill to "connect a great class of ideas of resemblances."¹⁵

A greater emphasis is put on the power of vision and the manipulation of it by the skillful hand of an artist. For Darwin, the "fallacy" or the illusion such art as metaphorical

devices can create is occasioned by an artist's cautious manipulation of the audience's somatic response, in this case the visual reception.

The eye's clear glass the transient beams collects;
 Bends to their focal point the rays that swerve,
 And *paints the living image on the nerve* ...
 And the mute language of the touch is sight.
 "Hence in Life's portico starts young Surprise
 With step retreating, and expanded eyes;"¹⁶

Thus Darwin fully exploits the "inverted" Ovidian style where a porch is made into one aspect of human physiology. In the opening poem sequel to the Preface of *Botanic Garden*, Erasmus Darwin describes his project of reversing the process of transmuting men into trees and flowers: "Whereas P. Ovidius Naso, a great Necromancer in the famous Court of Augustus Caesar, did by art poetic transmute Men, Women, and even Gods and Goddesses, into Trees and Flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions."¹⁷ Darwin's rhetorical body of plants is personified, and is as it were re-animated. The spirits of originally men, women, gods and goddesses, which previously were "prisoners" are vividly portrayed as having life in his poem.

As the metaphor of the *camera obscura* shows, although uncontrollable reverie and imagination generate precarious physical reality, sometimes suggesting pathological features, the internal sensation that repeats itself when triggered by the connected ideas, for Darwin, is the locus of creative power. The passage from *Temple of Nature* "The eye's clear glass collects the transient beams" and "paints the living image on the nerve" alluding to Lockean notion of *tabula rasa* are reproduced in Shelley's *Queen Mab* in a slightly varied form.

O Spirit! Through the sense
 By which thy inner nature was apprised
 Of outward shows, vague dreams have rolled
 And varied reminiscences have waked
Tablets that never fade;
 All things have been imprinted there....
 (QM 52, Italics added)

Mab lectures the spirit of Ianthe on how "outward shows" are presented to her "inner nature" through the sense impression. So long as the "ideas" or records of sight are "painted" or "imprinted" and operated within the realm of the sensible body, the "spirit of animation"¹⁸ or the "sensorial power" is neither material nor immaterial. Darwinian poetical imagination is here inferred in Mab's didactic verse.

Shelley's usage of the word "spirit" is more rhetorical or metaphorical both in his prose and verse. A passage from *A Defence of Poetry* is reminiscent of associationism of Hume and Darwin.

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling sometimes associated with place or person.... These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination.... Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined organization, but they can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world.... [Poetry] lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the *spirit* of its forms.¹⁹

These two "spirit(s)" are not just a repetition of Darwin's mind's sympathetic interaction with body. Within the narrative framework of *Queen Mab*, each spirit represents the soul without its body, Ianthe, and the source of creativity, Mab

respectively. In *Queen Mab*, the spirit of Ianthe, a sleeping girl, rises from her earthly body, and guided by the Fairy Mab, ascends to the palace. She passively watches the world picture of the past, present and future that Mab chooses to show. Like *The Sensitive-Plant*,²⁰ the focus is on the fallibility of human perceptions, and the poem is concerned with the illusion created by Mab. Illusion though it may be, Shelley stresses that "Twas not an earthly pageant: ... but the fairy pageant."²¹ There was a need for him to distinguish Ianthe's pageant from the "visioned poet in his dreams" in which "silvery clouds float through the 'wildered brain'" (QM 17). Dreams were considered to be "not more endowed with actual life / Than this phantasmal portraiture / Of wandering human thought" (QM 58). The delusive nature of dreams echoes Darwin's "epileptic" reverie.

When Ianthe's soul is beckoned, her spirit becomes disembodied. "Wrapt in the depth of slumber" and her "glowing limbs" motionless (QM 16), the body's features were "fixed and meaningless" like "worn-out machine" (QM 19). The body, previously "chained" by "earth's immurement" (QM 20), is now allowed the privilege of "a wonderous sight" (QM 23). The body as being "immured" in the "prison" (QM 23) echoes Darwinian imagery of the body as a mansion for prisoners.

Why then did Ianthe's body have to be divested from her soul? For the sake of clarity, I would like to make distinction between two crucial representations of the body in *Queen Mab*: sensation (QM 41) and sensualism (QM 37, 39, 41). Shelley's consciousness of the body as a "sentient being" (QM 36; DP 480) and that as "flesh" or the sense of strong desire or lust for luxury and lassitude (QM 43) are two metaphorical bodies with profoundly different implications. The former meaning is embedded in Shelley's empiricist approach to the body and the appraisal of the sensibility of the internal world (DP 503), and

the latter is a critique against excessive desire or consumption of the materials of external life.

Shelley's severe attack on "sensualism" is juxtaposed with his critique of the corrupt and selfish commercialism. Mab shows how society has long "fattened" (*QM* 30) corruption, and despite man's innate goodness, all the "chains" of morals, law and custom were "forged Long ere its being" (*QM* 36). The pursuit of selfish gain and calculated mind has only produced utility and pleasure which are "transitory and particular" (*DP* 500), exasperating the extremes of luxury and want: "we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world.... The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it" (*DP* 502-03).

Like Shelley's another poem, *Adonais*, an elegy on the death of John Keats, in *Queen Mab* the contrast between purified soul aspiring to heaven and stained or corrupt earthly body come to the fore. It shares a similar structure with *Adonais* in that, morally, the poem concerns the release of the soul from the corruptions of earthly existence.²² On the allegorical level, however, *Adonais* concerns the plight of the visionary in a society controlled by tyrannical forces, and *Queen Mab* the exemplary role of the poet as the intermediary between the divine and the human.

While disparaging the concept of transitory "utility," Shelley tries to re-define the word to mean something "durable, universal and permanent" (*DP* 500). The "true utility," according to Shelley, is produced and preserved by Poets or poetical philosophers (*DP* 502) rather than by the mechanist and political economists (*DP* 501). Soul, Shelley asserts, "is the only element;

the block / That for uncounted ages has remained / The
 moveless pillar of a mountain's weight / Is active living spirit"
 (QM 36). Mab teaches the Spirit that its "will / Is destined an
 eternal war to wage / With tyranny and falshood, and uproot
 / The germs of misery from the human heart" (QM 67):

Shelley's negative view on the "sensual" body does not entirely reject his empiricist proposition that the "sentient" body is the source of all knowledge and imagination, which was a perennial interest to Darwin. Shelley elevates the spirit and soul to the realm of idealism and refutes the excessive "appetite" of the body that devours. His notion of spirit however does not escape matter and body. He inherits to a great extent empiricist theory of epistemology, which cannot do away with bodily sensation. There is, for example, a constant reference to the sense organs of the spirit of Ianthe. She "sees" with a "spirit's eye" (QM 24), and "hears" with her "ear" and "touches" (QM 45) the world that is shown by the Fairy. The spirit sees with "cloudless brain," "untainted passion," and "elevated will" (QM 43) "a wild and miserable world" (QM 46). Vision, for Shelley, is no mere physiological function, but a metaphorical one. The rhetoric of sensibility cult that privileges the "heart" and the way it "feels" had penetrated Shelley's imagination. One's eye is not blind, but one's "heart." In the present corrupt state, Mab shows how

The spirits of the air, the shuddering ghost,
 The genii of the elements, the powers
 That give a shape to nature's varied works,
 Had life and place in the corrupt belief
 Of thy *blind heart*: yet still thy youthful hands
 Were pure of human blood. Then manhood gave
 Its strength and ardour to thy frenzied brain;
 (QM 47-8, Italics added)

There is a Rousseauvian tinge to the portraiture of the innocent youth. The empiricist premise that one's experience in the world forms both knowledge and self is now extended to affect the heart.

In thinking about dreams and reveries, the delusive imagination becomes a threat to stable world picture, while the poet's or artist's "shows" or illusions paint the imagination of Ianthe and also the reader. This has profound bearing upon the notion of "being" and reality, which baffles the ontological certainty.

Morality is at the core of *Queen Mab*. While both goodness and evil co-exist in Darwin's evolutionary world picture, for only the fittest survives,²³ Shelley's idealism aspires to goodness that brings forth universal happiness:

The consciousness of good, which neither gold,
Nor sordid fame, nor hope of heavenly bliss
Can purchase; but a life of resolute good,
Unalterable will, quenchless desire
Of universal happiness, the heart
That beats with it in unison, the brain,
Whose ever wakeful wisdom toils to change
Reason's rich stores for its eternal weal. (*QM* 45)

Only the heart that beats in unison with the brain can desire universal happiness. His ultimate goal was this organic harmony. In this sense, Darwin's theories of evolution and organic happiness explicated in Canto IV ("Of Good and Evil") of *The Temple of Nature* may have had some source for Shelley's idealist vision of future. The pageant of nature's progress is presented by 'the Hierophant,' who is also called Urania and the Priestess of Nature. Through the mouthpiece of Urania, a female goddess, Darwin tells us that good and evil are nicely balanced. Human enjoy the pleasure of consciousness, the

delights of natural scenery, the warmth of sunshine, the fragrance of flowers, the taste of fruits, the charms of music, painting and all the imaginative arts. Shelley follows Darwin in using the dominant female figure as the guide to the spirit. The mystery of the evolutionary nature as well as the long debated issue of imagination is disclosed.

Above all, the narrative framework of *Queen Mab* and Shelley's materialism we may say departs from Darwin's philosophical inquiry into the theory of knowledge and being, but integrates the current social problems which, to Shelley's eye, undermine individual sensibility that "feels" the moral good and evil. Ianthe's earthly body had to be divested so as to cure the spirit's sensibility. Shelley's ambivalence on moral ramification of the metaphorical body is embedded in two conflicting undercurrent thoughts in the early nineteenth century. The long empiricist tradition that avows the body as the agent of motion continued to threaten the rational control over bodily sensation, and there was an increasing awareness of the evil that material excess could do to numb one's sensibility. Shelley's materialism greatly influenced by Darwin's philosophical exploration was translated into his poetical imagination which is intact with his scepticism.

NOTES

- 1 See C. E. Pulos. *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism*. (University of Nebraska Press, 1954).
- 2 See Erasmus Darwin. *Zoonomia*. (London: J. Johnson, 1794).
- 3 See Desmond King-Héle. *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets*. (London: Macmillan, 1986) and Desmond King-Héle. *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984).

- 4 See Nora Crook and Derek Guiton. *Shelley's venomous melody*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 5 See Richard Holmes. *Shelley: the Pursuit*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974).
- 6 See King-Hele. (1984), 5.
- 7 Hartley, David. *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*. 1749. (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1966).
- 8 See Desmond King-Hele. *Erasmus Darwin*. (London, MacMillan & Co Ltd., new York, St. Martin's Press, 1963), 56.
- 9 See Erasmus Darwin. *Economy of Vegetation*. Vol. I of *Botanic Garden* (Lichfield: J. Johnson, 1789) Canto I, ln. 365.
- 10 See Erasmus Darwin. *Economy of Vegetation*. Vol. I of *Botanic Garden* (1789), Canto I, ln. 437-440.
- 11 See Erasmus Darwin. *The Temple of Nature*. (A Scholar Press Facsimile, 1903), Additional Notes, 30.
- 12 Erasmus Darwin *The Loves of the Plants*. Vol. II of *Botanic Garden* (Lichfield: J. Johnson, 1789), 94.
- 13 Erasmus Darwin (1794), Vol I, 225-6.
- 14 Erasmus Darwin (1903), Canto IV. ln. 299-300.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Erasmus Darwin (1903), Canto III ln. 131-146.
- 17 Erasmus Darwin (1789), vi.
- 18 Erasmus Darwin (1794), 64.
- 19 See Percy Bysshe Shelley *A Defence of Poetry in Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman, and S. B. Powers. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 505. Italics added. Hereafter, the reference will be cited as *DP* with the page numbers in brackets.
- 20 In *The Sensitive-Plant*, Shelley propounds the obscurity (dark, dim) of "our organs" (sensation), and shows that the pictures he shows in parts First, Second, and Third may not be true. "That garden sweet, that lady fair / And all sweet shapes and odours there / In truth have never past away— / 'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed—not they. For love, and beauty, and delight / There is no death nor change: their might Exceeds our organs—which endure / No light—being themselves obscure." See *The Sensitive Plant* in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and S. B. Powers. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 17. Hereafter,

the reference will be cited as *QM* with the page numbers.

- 22 See Ross Woodman "Adonais" (First published in his *Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley*) in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and S.B. Powers. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 659
- 23 Nonetheless, Darwin does celebrate the spirit of the good in *The Love of the Plants*. See Canto II. ln.459.