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0521471354 - Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World

Timothy Morton

Excerpt

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Introduction: prescriptions

Shelley and the Revolution in Taste discusses the significance of diet for Percy Bysshe Shelley and his circle, in the period of the French, American and Industrial Revolutions. Drawing on the aversive rhetoric of vegetarianism, Shelley refashioned taste, in revolt against what he conceived to be the hierarchical powers which controlled consumption, production and culture. The revolt in taste delineated new relationships between bodies and their environments.

In literary criticism, the study of historical context has become topical. I would like to direct inquiry towards issues in material culture (such as food). Eating, drinking and literature are all intensely lived aspects of cultural history, part of what Braudel called ‘the structures of everyday life’. Food and literature both involve ethical and aesthetic choices and patterns which are imagined and played out constantly. Questions of sympathy, humanitarianism, ecology, social change and even revolt mattered on a quotidian basis to the vegetarians. My aim has not been simply to record recipes, or cite instances of vegetarian argument; I have tried to detail the subcultural and counter-cultural structures of feeling in which vegetarianism was deployed. This was a period when nature, the body and consumption became highly charged political issues.

Some work has already been carried out to trace the development of discourses such as vegetarianism in the late eighteenth century. My subtitle is designed to draw attention to the most groundbreaking of these studies, Keith Thomas’ *Man and the Natural World*. In adding to the existing work on the subject, I have tried to maintain a sense of four priorities about what kind of material I have been analysing, and how I interpret it. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* is not simply a collection of textual evidence about vegetarianism, but a discussion of this evidence in relation to its socio-historical contexts. Moreover, to understand the evidence involves not just reading vegetarian texts

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mimetically (for their content), but also reading closely and figuratively, in order to talk about how figurative language constructs the body.

Why 'The Body and the Natural World'? This book attempts to be a work of 'green' cultural criticism, mapping different strands of culture in the 1790–1820 period under the aegis of the politics of the body in its environments. By green cultural criticism, I mean ways of showing how the body and its social and natural environments may be interrelated. The body, perceived through its consumption of food, is an interface between society and natural environment. Since this book is about the politics of nature, I have decided to stress the importance of the politics of the body.¹ Consider the rhetorical power of a language in which revolution could be linked to revulsion: if at the sight of tyrannical cruelty or tyrannical gluttony, one's very tastes rebelled. Such powers would be associated with that language's capacity to *naturalize* certain ethical norms.

My research straddles five traditions of cultural work. In literary studies of the Shelleys and Romanticism, I have found especially helpful Dawson's political reading of Shelley, Hogle's study of meaning-production through 'transference' and Leask's work on orientalism.² I have drawn upon the analysis of consumption in sociology, anthropology and intellectual history, exemplified by Appadurai's approach to 'the social life of things' and Bourdieu's work on modes of social distinction.³ I have used the following contextual sources: the growing range of literature on food and drink in culture, in particular Drummond's and Wilbraham's history of English food, and Salaman's social history of the potato;⁴ the 'wo/man and the natural world' tradition of texts on animal rights and vegetarianism, from the cultural history of Keith Thomas to the feminist work of Carol Adams;⁵ and studies of the body in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Foucault, Outram and Stafford).⁶ Ecological theories, and the concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari for understanding the social field in a post-Marxist, non-dualistic way, are used where necessary. The bibliography contains a full listing of all the authors named here.

This is no totalizing history; indeed I wish to explore particular cross-sections of 1790–1830 culture. I have employed a methodology of rich, deep contextualizing detail, inspired by Geertz's 'Thick Description',⁷ and supported by the following words from *Anti-Oedipus*: 'Let us remember ... one of Marx's caveats: we cannot tell

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from the mere taste of wheat who grew it; the product gives us no hint as to the system and the relations of production.⁸ The relations of cultural production and consumption cannot be understood by the mere taste of food either. I want to show how the personal and the political are intertwined, in a way which takes account of how individual acts of consumption are always caught up in something larger.

My work is similar to John Barrell's remarkable *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey*, in that it tries to account for the psychic investment of the social field in the Romantic period. In other words, it tries to broaden our ideas about what role the psyche comes to play in social life, and the importance of social power in the life of the psyche. In *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Miller boldly linked 'personal' acts of consumption with the social field, through a politicized reading of the psychoanalysts Winnicott and Klein, and the behaviourist Piaget: 'The most interesting element in this analysis is, however, the complex nature of the mechanisms themselves, whose twists and cycles are able to capture a sense of dynamic interaction in a manner which may escape that vulgarized version of the dialectic [for example, versions of Hegelian or Marxist theories] which is commonly used to represent processes of this kind.'⁹ While sceptical about the rather privatized psychoanalytic theorization of such projects, Miller and I share an interest in the machine-like intricacies, the 'twists and cycles', which such approaches suggest in a wider social context. The polis is recycled in the psyche.

I have chosen to call this introduction 'Prescriptions' to explain how figurative language works in many of the texts I have discussed. Prescriptive language is one of the central ways in which the body and society are linked together. Prescription, simply understood, is a way of doing things with words. Percy Shelley's pamphlet, *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813), the main text under discussion, ends with the following exhortations, in block capitals:

NEVER TAKE ANY SUBSTANCE INTO THE STOMACH THAT ONCE HAD LIFE.

DRINK NO LIQUID BUT WATER RESTORED TO ITS ORIGINAL PURITY BY
DISTILLATION.¹⁰

The capitals interrupt a discursive flow: the essay has ceased to vindicate and enquire, and now *prescribes*. The discourse becomes a command to establish certain forms of consumption. The two

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sentences encapsulate the qualities of many of my textual sources. I am fascinated by such didactic forms, those now rather underrated rhetorics considered highly from Hesiod's *Works and Days* to Thomson's *The Seasons*.

How does didacticism work? By aspiring to a plateau of ideological conflict, it contests the very configurations of the body, thought, habit and morality. Shelley's pamphlet would have clashed quite explicitly with the various manuals on hunting (both prose and poetic) appearing in the period, which prescribed other forms of consumption of nature and property for a wealthy audience (Peter Beckford's and Somerville's spring to mind). Society's virtual models, its codes of virtues, are constantly contrived and revised in the didactic genre.

English literary study has been hesitant to discuss prescriptive language in anything more than a mimetic way. Other sorts of literary language (especially what we think of as Romantic poetry) have been read as exemplifications of pure figurative play, as far away as possible from the nuts and bolts of prescription. 'Rhetoric' has been 'returning' in English studies for over a decade; but which sort of rhetoric? I have tried to elaborate and challenge overtly textualist or deconstructive approaches, to stretch them until they touch the social field. Shelley's statements refuse to be 'merely' descriptive or 'purely' figurative. The archive of medical, literary and humanitarian texts is read primarily as exemplifying such a refusal. The texts are prescriptions: medical books quote didactic poetry, and Shelley quotes medical literature. One may place Shelley firmly in a tradition which revises the didacticism of the eighteenth century, despite his own self-proclaimed criticisms of the genre, and despite Romantic ideologies of anti-rhetoric.

Global flows of money, symbolism, happiness and misery may congregate in one's acts of consumption. Mapping the linkages of these acts involves a teasing-out of figurative streams which serve to activate prescriptive norms – in short, ideology. One eats ideology while consuming a McDonald's hamburger; and ideology is not just a matter of corporate image but of millions of cattle. Or in digesting a British 'Ploughman's Lunch', one is digesting ideology, for the Georgic myth of hearty labour figured in the cheese and Branston pickle is a marketing ploy.¹¹

To study ideology is to examine how figuration meshes with prescription. Certain syntactical structures and anti-structures, such

as ellipsis or *aporia*, or aversive rhetorics of disgust and distaste, are found to generate more than just images or embellishments, or an epistemological vacuum/plenitude (the thrills and spills of *mise-en-abîme*). The study of ideology is not limited to the ‘history of ideas’ or to deconstruction. Breakdowns like aporias or ellipses, as well as more positively-functional passages of description or citation, operate within a larger prescriptive network. When the doctor hands over a ‘prescription’, he enables our consumption of certain prestige-laden or ‘enclaved’ commodities (to use Kopytoff’s term).¹² *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* is about the prescriptive fashioning of consumers.

Vectors of prescriptive force in the discourses of food and diet set up and take apart boundaries, limits: between the stomach and society, politics and poetics,¹³ nature and nurture, national and transnational commodity flows. How might one read a text like *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, which combines comparative mythology and anthropology, ‘sociopathology’, medicine, revolution, imperialism, orientalism, trade and literature, with questions about diet? With a certain bloody-minded and non-dualistic kind of literalism, I have traced relationships within those conglomerates of metastable physical and social states that we often call the body politic and the political body. These bodies are less monolithic organic unities than multiple processes.

It is necessary to stress just how material a concept ideology is. Tester’s *Animals and Society* showed very well how limit-setting discourses on animal rights are an operator in specifically human political disputes: every hunt sabotage could be a potential *Animal Farm*-style allegory. But as my work on Shelley’s *Swellfoot the Tyrant* shows (chapter 5), we would be begging the question if we refused to acknowledge the worm-tracks which link real animals to real dinner plates. These worm-tracks were created by productions, consumptions, and recordings. Recorded debates in the late eighteenth century between hierarchy and authority, monarchy and republicanism, despotic codes and disciplined axioms, involved discourses on nutrition and hygiene. These recordings were linked to consumption: the middle classes began to consume authoritarian structures by following their prudent vegetarian recipe books.

The worm-tracks pass through the lives and works of Percy, Harriet and Mary Shelley. My arrangement of material from their lives and works is thematic rather than chronological. The book moves from what may crudely be termed ‘materials’ to ‘interpre-

tations'; though 'materials' are really hardened interpretations, and the latter are materially determinate. The first three chapters show the cultural context of 1790–1820, the biographical evidence, and the literary texts which discuss the 'natural' or vegetarian diet. The last three chapters interpret Percy Shelley's prose on vegetarianism, the theme of intemperate consumption in the Shelley canon, and the broader questions of 'nature' and ecology.

The recent work of Thomas, Adams, Tester and Fiddes is part of a rapidly-growing field of interdisciplinary research into human relationships with animals and the 'natural' world, consumption, value and power. I would like *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* to contribute to this field. Thomas' *Man and the Natural World* provided a treasure-trove of configurations between human culture and natural environments, suggesting that the period around the French Revolution marked a shift in European attitudes towards nature.¹⁴ Tester's study of how human discourses about animal rights were expressive of political interests between humans paid special attention to the period exemplified by Rousseau and Shelley. Fiddes' *Meat* charted the shifts in the cultural value of the privileged, value-rich food, against which vegetarianism had to define itself, both counter-culturally and in more mainstream ways: 'The new ideology, in contrast to tradition, regards unrestrained domination of other creatures as a sign not of civilised elevation but of regrettable backwardness.'¹⁵ Adams' powerful and pleasurable *The Sexual Politics of Meat* was a striking intervention in ideologies of consumption and gender. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* should develop the field in three ways: by offering more primary material, more literary and ideological interpretation, and more emphasis on the politics of the body.

There is no isolated causal relationship which will neatly describe why the data I have studied came into being. 'Food' is an ensemble of beliefs, texts, practices, materials. 'Vegetarianism' is an ensemble of such elements. My evidence is presented less as an object or a subject than as a terrain of conflict, a contested map. The study of food raises questions about aesthetics and economics, the natural and the cultural, the social, the psychic and the biological. There are *determinate but non-linear* relationships between these sets: 'fractal' relationships in which there is no single fundamental determinant but numerous attractors of material, social, textual and psychic tendencies.¹⁶ As Massumi explains, the "'random walk'" which

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describes the proliferation of these determinants looks haphazard on one level, but on another it describes the “‘cosmos’” or weaving-together of ‘nature-culture ... monism in its other aspect’.¹⁷

This knowledge alters our understanding of the binary pairs like ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, which we frequently use to describe the social and environmental aspects of the body. Recent ecocultural work on the body and society, and concepts of ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’, have been influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s elaboration of multi-levelled, multi-causal relationships, and Bataille’s concepts of ‘general’ and ‘restricted’ economy.¹⁸ In chapter 4 I show how ‘culture’ is quite a naturalistic concept, but also how this naturalism does not abolish distinctions between nature and culture on another level (indeed, a certain dissimilarity is functional on both levels).

The Shelleys’ ideas about food are not read as the sole determining factor of other ideas which they held. That tradition in the ‘history of ideas’ which searches for a primary cause in the social field, is highly problematic. I will consider my work to have succeeded if it manages to show, as if in slow motion, the doh-see-doh between the attractors listed above as opposing pairs (nature, culture ...). One might be tempted to call this analysis a kind of intellectual Lego rather than the Monopoly-games of aesthetics and economics, a sort of ‘prosthetics’ perhaps, that blithely considers desire to be immanent in the social field. If ‘food’ can be both subject and object, there is little point in using subjectivism or objectivism to describe it.

It should be noted that explosions of the categories of nature and culture are not new to anthropology. Since the 1970s, interpretive anthropology has sought to provide a contextualized analysis of practices and norms associated with the concept of ‘culture’. The work of Mary Douglas has brilliantly shown how categories such as ‘dirt’ and ‘cleanliness’ may be culturally coded.¹⁹ However, this method may loop us back to the ‘substantialism’ of ‘culture’, with its concomitant models of expressive or reflexive ‘mediation’.²⁰ It is possible to modify Douglas’ substantialist understanding of rituals, which seem at once both to be a symptom of society and to be a cause of society.²¹ Dirt may be ‘matter in the wrong place’, but this begs the question of place. This substantialist thought resembles Shelley’s root-and-blossom model of poetry, or his idea of vegetarianism as the cause and/or symptom of justice, and meat-eating as the cause and/or symptom of injustice. A mystical ‘mediation’ transubstan-

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tiates the substances of nature into the trans-substances of culture. These 'culturalist' modes of thought are ultimately part of my field of enquiry, rather than part of the analytical tool kit.

In writing the book, I found myself struggling towards revised ideas of culture and ecology. The playful Lego-method will not do for long. Cultural studies is not only the study of cultures, but also the study of 'Culture'. The struggle is urgent, given the racism, sexism and class oppression with which 'Culture' confronts us. In the wake of the Second World War, the Euro-American 'left' (this is a very fuzzy term) has developed various forms of culturalism in the wake of fascist ideology. For example, there is the cultural-nominalist approach, the rich and diverse examples of 'the linguistic turn'. Speak of the body, within the confines of this discourse, and one risks courting fascism. There is a politicized anxiety about speaking of the relation between totality and particularity within aesthetics and economics. The notion of totality has been criticized and substantially re-written in twentieth-century thought in response to totalitarian politics. But this reaction to the moment of fascism is in danger of discarding the very historical particularity and difference that it strives to celebrate in the present so-called 'condition of post-modernity'. Part of a progressive theory is a usable understanding of the past.

To understand the body is to understand how it was hijacked by fascist ideology and ignored or rejected (as a synecdoche for fascism) in left thinking for long enough to permit the widespread, popular and unchallenged adoption of beliefs associated with biotech, the 'Chicago gangster' theory of the selfish gene,²² and the manipulation of birth control and population issues by the ruling class. 1790–1820 is a fraught arena of intellectual debate in relation to this subject, ever since the Frankfurt school's warning that there was a straight line between some of the period's theories and the death camps. However, if academics do not do their work, the banks and corporate machines, with their powerful stake in appropriating the history of technology and the body, will do it for us. There will be no way of answering back, only the cataloguing of the body amongst the vaulted treasures of cultural capital. This might not be the right way of handling questions of alienation in the Industrial Revolutionary period. In this sense I agree with Haraway that some understanding of science and technology is necessary, beyond the mere 'history of ideas' approaches developed in history-of-science institutions.²³

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I draw my inspiration from Percy Shelley, who was very actively and vigorously concerned with re-imagining the body. His ability to model society as a body and simultaneously as a machine has not been adequately accounted for. In chapter 4 I read his addition to the notes in *Queen Mab*, an allegory called *Falsehood and Vice*:

Whilst monarchs laughed upon their thrones
To hear a famished nation's groans,
And hugged the wealth wrung from the woe
That makes its eyes and veins o'erflow. (1)

Shelley describes precisely and beautifully a despotic machine which wrings wealth from the overflow of blood and tears. Wealth is itself a flow (wrung like droplets of water from a rag), which becomes a despotic fetish to embrace. The quotation displays Shelley's supreme gift for depicting society as a machine which processes flows, linking together the materiality of psychic and physical pain. The nation is a tortured body, bleeding and weeping and excreting wealth, its stomach emptied. Shelley himself is actively participating in a discourse which understands despotism and religion to be caught up in the logics of capitalism. This book explores how he responds to this understanding in terms of his approach to consumption, not simply through anti-capitalism (for example in the rage against polluting industry), but through the rhetoric of reformed and improved capitalism.

As for the writing which associates Shelley either with the supposedly quasi-postmodern discourse of 'Romanticism', or the equally trenchant claims for his debt to a rational Enlightenment, these arguments take place within already mapped-out and fetishistic domains of aesthetics and/or economics. Additionally, the kind of socialist or Marxist reading which places a strong emphasis on his propagandistic poetry loses a lot by refusing to read the perhaps more 'lyrical' poetry politically, and by refusing to read the so-called political poems 'poetically' (beyond a form of allusion-hunting). The poetics of food will provide important political data.

While studies of *Frankenstein* seem bound to mention something about the body, not enough attention has been paid to the body in the criticism of Percy Shelley.²⁴ Two reasons may be offered to explain this. Shelley's enthusiastic figuration of the mental (consider *Mont Blanc* or the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*) has been overdetermined, elaborated and developed by critics, especially those

concerned to present him as a coherent thinker. Moreover, these critics form part of a literary history which privileges what is taken to be 'the mental', in their continued use of concepts like genius, intentionality, and the canon as a colloquium of geniuses. There is a need in Shelley studies to discuss the interaction between the body, society and nature, in order to assess his place as an individual writer in this field. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* re-imagines the body in Shelley studies and emphasizes the Shelleys' interest in reforming the body.

In addition, the book seeks to show how both Mary and Percy were collaborating in re-imagining the body. While there is less textual evidence from Mary Shelley, it is possible to show how *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are caught up within the same programmatic reconfigurations of the body as found in Percy Shelley's writing. It is a lamentable fact of Shelley studies that the collaboration of these two writers has not been fully discussed. I have not sought to demonstrate that 'collaboration' was an idiosyncrasy in which Percy Shelley 'helped' to write *Frankenstein*, as a debatable reading of the manuscript evidence might show.²⁵ Rather, I have tried to reveal a shared intellectual climate between these two writers. This is especially significant insofar as Mary Shelley's work critiques the work of Percy Shelley, by putting the 'intellectual climate' into novelistic question.

This book treats the interaction between its themes as mediated through the representation of food and consumption. It examines the political significance of figurative language as it constructs the discourses of diet (vegetarianism, temperance, intoxication, famine). To speak of a 'discourse' of diet is to allow for the analysis of a consistent repertoire of images, narratives and focalizing techniques which the texts display, and for their place in the self-presentation of Shelley the radical reformer. It is also capable of accommodating a politicized sense of the ways in which institutions construct the individual and allow certain kinds of articulation. I analyse the devices which transform 'food' into the discipline of 'diet'. A wide variety of texts are discussed, from the medical to the literary, including recipe books, diaries, journals, periodicals, biographies, letters, tracts, textbooks, poems, plays and novels. All of these texts are found to contain figurative strategies that can be described as discourses of diet.

I have tried to avoid forms of individualistic or psychologizing