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## BIOPOWER: BODIES, MINDS AND BIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTION IN VICTORIAN LIVES OF THE POETS

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### *Abstract*

This article discusses the diagnostic and exhibitionary character of nineteenth-century biographical discourse, with particular attention to Percy Bysshe Shelley. The article proposes that suggestive parallels between the life of the individual body and the textual materials of the written *Life* were often made in the nineteenth century. These parallels can be related to Foucauldian arguments about pastoral power and the individual subject, medicine and the case history, irrationality and juvenescence. The article argues that poetic subjects discussed as eccentric or pathological ‘genius’ were the ideal subjects and exemplify the proliferation and operation of forms of ‘biopower’. With these arguments in mind, the article analyses biographical writing about Shelley up to 1860. Specifically, the article discusses how Shelley’s biography moved from the somatic diagnosis of the poet’s ‘constitution consumptive’ in sketches by William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, to taking his thoughts, behaviour and writing as symptomatic of psychosomatic pathology. Looking in particular at the biographical productions of Thomas Jefferson Hogg and Thomas Medwin, the article suggests how ‘biopower’ compensated for the absence of the diagnosable body by concentrating on and disciplining the embodied mind, in line with nineteenth-century “moral management”, “domestic psychiatry”, and the construction of “the mind of the child”. Finally, the article considers Victorian biography’s rhetoric of rational disenchantment and disillusionment, and suggests that it was conversely highly significant in establishing a version of beautifully and ineffectually irrational Romantic poetry. Looking forward to later periods, the article also proposes a pre-history of psychoanalytic or psycho-biographical criticism, and its ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, in nineteenth-century biography.

‘The structure of biography is biology’, Terry Eagleton has written in a frequently quoted remark; ‘even the most wayward of geniuses have to get themselves born and educated, fight with their parents, fall in love and die’.<sup>1</sup> This ‘structural’ parallel had a historical moment of formation and development across the nineteenth century. The turn of the century saw the disciplinary naming, and swift adoption, of *biology* and its cognates in European languages (1799 in English, 1802 in French and German), alongside the contemporary coining of various new terms for the written life, such as *autobiography* (1797). Although *biography* is an older word, it was only at this moment that its meaning broadened semantically to include ‘the events or circumstances of a person’s life, viewed collectively [. . .] the course of an individual human life, or the life cycle of an animal or plant.’ (The *OED* dates this sense to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘First-Class Fellow Traveller’, *London Review of Books*, 2 December 1993, p. 12.

1806.)<sup>2</sup> Two very different disciplines of ‘life-writing’ taking βίος as their common object were named, if not born, together. Over a century in which ontogeny, or individual history, was often thought to recapitulate phylogeny, or the natural history of the species, a parallel between the embodied natural history of an individual and the material of their written life was felt increasingly strongly.

For some Victorian thinkers, written biographies, in addition to forming the basis of a Carlylean heroic national pantheon, were entangled with the taxonomy of life history as natural history, a science both of the individual and of race or culture. For the educationalist Edwin Paxton Hood, writing in 1852, ‘Biography forms the Museum of Life. Well-written lives are as well-preserved mental fossils, and they subserve for us the purpose of a collection of interesting petrefactions; they illustrate the science of life; they are the inductions of moral anatomy’.<sup>3</sup> This sort of rhetoric will inevitably remind contemporary readers of Foucauldian accounts of the ‘history of the body’, and the ways in which the ‘moral anatomy’ of scientific or pseudoscientific discourse constitutes human bodies in terms of panoptical power, visual exhibition, and normative ideology. Indeed, Hood’s extended metaphor is perhaps best understood within the late-Foucauldian interpretation of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century biography expounded by William Epstein.<sup>4</sup> Epstein discusses biography as a locus for what Foucault had identified as the Enlightenment secularization of ‘pastoral’ power; that is, the observational, disciplinary power of society over the individual, previously largely expressed through religious offices such as confession, power which is ‘coextensive and continuous with life’, ‘linked [at every point] with a production of truth—the truth of the individual.’<sup>5</sup> Foucault saw life-narratives as extending the power which determined life-meaning, power which ‘does not look after just the whole community, but each individual in particular, during his entire life [which] cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets’.<sup>6</sup> The biography would seem to be the ideal vehicle for this variant of the panoptical vision and its ‘moral anatomy’. As Foucault wrote, ‘to

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<sup>2</sup> *OED* s.vv. The neologism *biology* is often credited to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, although it was used earlier in English by Thomas Beddoes. Another suggestive overlap in the lexicon is that *biology* is an early, rare synonym for *biography* in its primary sense (the written life).

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Paxton Hood, *The Uses of Biography: Romantic, Philosophic, and Didactic* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1852), pp. 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987). See also David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (London: Harvester, 1993) for an account of the later period in similar terms.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Epstein, ‘The Subject and Power’ (1976), in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. by Paul Rabinow & Hubert L. Dreyfus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 213–215.

<sup>6</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 252.

reconstitute all the sordid detail of a life in the form of knowledge, [is] to fill in the gaps of that knowledge and to act upon it by a practice of compulsion'.<sup>7</sup> Epstein discusses examples such as Boswell's *Johnson* and also Johnson's *Life of Richard Savage* as points in the growth of structures of narrative power over the (largely literary) life, which he calls 'biographical subjection'.<sup>8</sup>

There is a further parallel to be drawn between several historical conjunctions at the beginning of the Victorian age. First a 'movement toward clinical medicine [was] accompanied in 1820s medicine by both an ethical and scientific stress on the importance of studying patients and biological organisms [. . .] as individuals in their particularity.'<sup>9</sup> At the same time the textual form of individual bodies 'in their particularity', the medical case history, began to develop rapidly: as Kathryn Montgomery Hunter has argued, 'the scientific medical case history [was] "invented" in the 1830s, when the early advances of human biology were beginning to enable the scientific physician to identify disease and accurately describe its workings in the body'.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in the 1820s and 1830s popular print culture had begun to disseminate an increasingly fraught and significant account of heightened individuality in the idea of literary celebrity or creative 'genius'. David Higgins has suggested that a massive increase of biographical material and habits of biographical reading took place in the periodical culture of these decades: 'an emphasis [...] placed on the individual consciousness behind aesthetic creation [...] contributed to an explosion of literary biography in the 1820s and 1830s'; 'literary magazines were feeding the demand for information about the private lives of authors and other public figures with a variety of memoirs, literary portraits, *ad hominem* reviews, conversations, reminiscences, and recollections'.<sup>11</sup> Reviews of books became longer and more loaded with biographical data, passing into a genre of short biography, amenable to publication in magazines, but also rather like the case history.

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<sup>7</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> *Recognizing Biography*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Louise Penner, 'Medicine of the 1820s', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2004), pp.1–5 (p. 2).

<sup>10</sup> *Doctors' Stories: the Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 170; see also Stanley J. Reiser, 'Creating Form out of Mass: The Development of the Medical Record', in *Transformation and Tradition in the Sciences* ed. by Everett Mendelsohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 303–316 (p. 304).

<sup>11</sup> 'Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* and the Construction of Wordsworth's Genius', in *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture*, ed. by Kim Wheatley (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 122–136 (p. 123); *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 60; esp. chapter 3, 'Magazine Biography in the Late Romantic Period', pp. 60–90, on 'the emergence of a new sub-genre that straddles the genres of biography and criticism—the literary portrait' (p. 61) in the 1820s. Annette Wheeler Cafarelli's *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) also stresses the importance of the 'fragmentary, allusive, iconographic' short life in the period (p. 2).

It can be difficult to find obvious examples, outside of comments such as Hood's, where nineteenth century literary biographies were openly 'scientific' in their orientation, at least before the advent of degeneration and a flush of pathological readings of artists, especially concentrating on the infirmities of 'poetic genius', at the *fin de siècle*. If the medical case history became an explicit model for literary or historical biography, it was not until after the *fin de siècle* that this trend peaked.<sup>12</sup> The positivistic side of biography earlier in the century should also not be overplayed by giving undue prominence to works such as James Stanfield's *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (1813), with its serried ranks of comparative biographical tables and supposedly scientific method. This is a favourite example for historians of life-writing, but its contemporary reputation was slight and it was in many respects an outlier.<sup>13</sup> But even when biography is not explicitly linked to natural science or medicine, its power over what Foucault calls 'biodata' is constituted in similar terms; both are discourses which lay claim to the facts and meaning of the body and βίος in its 'natural' order. Biographical practice and discourse (at least in their popular forms) compel linear or ordered explanation more generally; so again, even when it is not explicitly scientific in its attitude or somatic in its emphasis, biography is part of a general discourse of *organisation* about the irrational, ineffable, or stubbornly material parts of life. And here, as Foucault wrote of the clinical gaze, or the moral management of the insane, 'a moral perception [. . .] would secretly serve as a nucleus for all the concepts that the nineteenth century would subsequently vindicate as scientific, positive, and experimental'.<sup>14</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the growth of biographies about the obscure, neglected, or pathological genius can be seen as the operation of the moral ordering of 'biopower' over its 'ideal' subjects: the morally *derangé*.<sup>15</sup> 'Wayward genius' was

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<sup>12</sup> The earliest examples of historical biographies being written as explicit case histories are found in the first decades of the twentieth century: see Judson Bennett Gilbert and Gordon E. Mestler, *Disease and Destiny: a Bibliography of Medical References to the Famous* (London: Dawsons, 1962). A fascinating section of the Wellcome library (shelfmark BZPX) brings together many such biographies, which have a notable preoccupation with royalty in earlier works and political leaders in more contemporary writing, and combine differing levels of anxiety and curiosity towards figures of power and their bodily infirmities. The 'great man' in history had a corollary shadow-self in this tradition of feet of clay and 'mere mortals', the title of a series of 'medico-historical' lives published by Jonathan Cape in the 1920s.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Darcy makes this point effectively in 'Contesting Literary Biography in the Romantic Period', *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), pp. 1–18 (p. 5).

<sup>14</sup> *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Routledge Classics [2001], 2005), p. 187.

<sup>15</sup> From recent critical work, my sense of this trend draws partly on Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), which addresses the popularity of 'hidden lives' in the nineteenth century, and James Gregory's account of 'Eccentric Biography and the Victorians', *Biography*, 3 (2007), pp. 342–376; from older work, see also Joseph Reed's

not the outlying test for the rule but at its centre. To some extent this has been suggested by existing critical work. Jennifer Wallace has discussed the images of Keats's body sustained by the biographical tradition which followed his premature death.<sup>16</sup> But while she uses a generally Foucauldian frame of reference for 'the social and political construction of the body', and discusses the way that 'myths about Keats's body' encoded contemporary political reaction and gendered ideology, this is viewed as particular to Keats rather than something that nineteenth-century biographical writing did more widely, or did by virtue of being biographical.

As I have suggested, the embodied life of the subject and the material of the written *Life* have often been linked, especially in the age of 'lives and letters' when the 'privy papers' which made up large proportion of many Victorian *Lives* were often felt to be an extension of the person, and practices of literary celebrity and memorialisation closely linked to biography 'became increasingly focused on collecting [. . .] personal effects', such as locks of hair or other reliquary objects.<sup>17</sup> These practices naturally suggest a set of complicated and ambivalent desires. One needs only to think of Henry James's celebrated story of skulduggery in Romantic literary biography, *The Aspern Papers* (1888), with its biographical 'publishing scoundrel' 'looking for materials' and admitting 'a kind of ferocity' in his 'desire to possess them.' The 'materials' of desire for the narrator include not only the letters that would allow communion with the long-dead Shelleyan poet, but also the bodies touched by his vanished presence: 'The old lady's voice was very thin and weak, but [...] there was wonder in the thought that that individual note had been in Jeffrey Aspern's ear [...] I felt an irresistible desire to hold in my own for a moment the hand that Jeffrey Aspern had pressed'.<sup>18</sup> In the story, however, the 'desire to possess' is frustrated, to the narrator's 'almost intolerable' chagrin. The body of the biographical subject will always be absent; and the affective and power relations that biographies inaugurate over their subjects or 'materials' have consequently found egress through

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sense of the 'wave of biographical works devoted to the notably obscure', in his *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 23. A. O. J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Collins, 1974), and Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Knopf, 1965), the most enduringly useful survey of (mostly) Victorian biography, make similar observations.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Wallace, 'Keats's Frailty: The Body and Biography', in *Romantic Biography*, ed. by Alan Rawes and Arthur Bradley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 139–151 (p. 140). Wallace begins her article with the same quote from Terry Eagleton that I have used, but does not break it down in the same way, focusing instead on contemporary biological essentialism.

<sup>17</sup> Alexis Easley, *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850–1914* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), p. 42. Easley notes that by the end of the century literary-biographical relic collection had become the subject of satire: see Harold Macfarlane, 'The Value of a Dead Celebrity', *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s. 8 (March 1900), pp. 367–371.

<sup>18</sup> Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* (New York: Macmillan, 1888), pp. 112, 65, 23.

other channels. I would like to suggest that the principal way that this happens in the nineteenth century is through intense attention to the embodied *mind* of the biographical subject. That is to say, unlike the clinical gaze, the biographical gaze never has a somatic object squarely in front of it. But it can and does take textual objects or reported speech to be embodiments of a state of mind, and hence to have symptomatic power. The ‘universal trust in documents’ in nineteenth century biography gave the genre great evidentiary power.<sup>19</sup> Pathological thought in particular (in a period when psychopathology was persistently somaticised) gave this power something to work with and on.

Among writers and artists in general, modern poets in particular have come to expect a posthumous biographical dissection using what Philip Larkin once referred to, in gloomy (and prescient) anticipation of its coming indignities, as ‘that crummy textbook stuff from Freshman Psych’.<sup>20</sup> ‘Psychobiography’ has occupied a specific niche somewhere between psychology and literature, and various more or less psychoanalytic models have been proposed or practised.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, even when a specifically psychoanalytic framework is not used, as Anthony Storr has observed, ‘many ideas and concepts originally derived from psychoanalysis have become so incorporated into intellectual discourse that biographers automatically employ them without realizing whence they came’.<sup>22</sup> The main tide of psychobiography followed the rise of Freud, naturally, partly through his own retrospective analyses of the lives of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, and was swelled though the influence of Erik Erikson and others.<sup>23</sup> But an alignment of the biographer with the psychiatrist can still be seen in the wake of Freud, and now fading assumptions about drives and ego. In Diane Middlebrook’s 1991 life of the poet Anne Sexton, not only are the attitudes and vocabulary of psychoanalysis used, but also the techniques and materials of the psychiatrist’s working process; transcripts of audio tapes of analysis sessions were incorporated wholesale into the biography. Middlebrook later wrote:

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<sup>19</sup> Cockshut, *Truth to Life*, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Posterity’, in *Collected Poems* (London: Marvell Press/Faber, 1990), p. 170.

<sup>21</sup> See William Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Alan Elms, *Uncovering Lives: the Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Handbook of Psychobiography*, ed. by William Todd Schultz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Storr, ‘Psychiatry and Literary Biography’, in *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. by John Batchelor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 73–86 (p. 73). See also Richard Ellmann, ‘Freud and Literary Biography’, in *Freud and the Humanities*, ed. by Peregrine Hordern (London: Duckworth, 1985), pp. 58–74.

<sup>23</sup> Donna Arzt, ‘Psychohistory and Its Discontents’, *Biography*, 1 (1978), pp. 1–36 surveys the major Freudian and Eriksonian biographies. See also Louise E. Hoffman, ‘Early Psychobiography, 1900–1930: Some Reconsiderations’, *Biography*, 7 (1984), pp. 341–352.

[T]he tapes provided far more than information; they provided intimacy. The scepticism I had brought [. . .] vanished as, her captive, I struggled to grasp both the manifest and the latent meanings in what she confided to her doctor, and unwittingly, to me. Such intimacy is never without costs. Invaded by Sexton's voice, I was also invaded by her pain and despair—and by the rage she cunningly triggered in her search for punishment. My respect for her psychiatrist intensified as I sat invisibly between the two of them, witnessing the resourcefulness of her pathology.<sup>24</sup>

Here the biographer not only signals her 'respect' towards the psychiatrist, but also aligns herself with the clinician as panoptical, 'invisible' authority on Sexton's 'unwittingly' 'latent meanings': the poet is reified as 'her pathology'.<sup>25</sup> Yet Middlebrook also disavows clinical detachment by placing the writing of biography in the realm of emotional heroism, dangerous but productive intimacy, and shared pain and struggle. Finally, she suggests that the power relations of biographical subjection, captivation, or possession are reversible. Nevertheless, the 'resourcefulness' of the mind clearly offers a more satisfying possession than that allowed to the biographical inheritors of Jeffrey Aspern.

This apparently contemporary confusion of modes pervades those Victorian biographies which likewise addressed the minds of wayward 'poetic genius': on the one hand, they attempted to stress the biographer's disciplinary authority, or else identified with an objective or analytical praxis drawn from medicine, psychology, or elsewhere; on the other, they made sensational or sentimental appeals to a value-laden idea of genius transcending material circumstances or rational analysis, to personal and emotional ties to the subject, and to the personal task of redeeming a damaged reputation or correcting popular misrepresentations. I would like to propose that we can trace the prehistory of psychobiography in this blend of pathological diagnosis and biographical sympathy. We might also add one more strand to the complex genealogy of psychoanalytic thinking in the nineteenth century. This claim concerns not so much psychoanalytic ideas as a general attitude: the constitution of the creative mind as an object of analytical exegesis. This formation has had effects not only for avowedly psychoanalytic readers, but also for the half-examined ways that modern readers assume access to the mind of the author and historical *mentalités* in our biographical reading and interpretative habits generally: Victorian biography pioneered the hermeneutics of suspicion.

The second half of this article presents some specific examples for these broad claims from early Victorian biographical writing about Percy Bysshe Shelley,

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<sup>24</sup> *The Literary Biography*, ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 86–90; p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> 'Manifest and latent meanings' is a perfect example of the automatic employment of popular Freudian terms; probably the less said about the 'search for punishment' the better.

although similar trends could be charted in the biographical afterlives of John Clare, Blake, Chatterton, and other emblematic Romantic *enfants du siècle*.<sup>26</sup> There has been a fine tradition of scholarly work on Shelley's biographical afterlife.<sup>27</sup> In particular the political 'declawing' of Shelley via late-Victorian biography has also been addressed, although this 'emasculatation' has also been complicated by Julian North's recent account of a Romanticism already entangled in the assumed femininity or domesticity of its biography.<sup>28</sup> The following discussion does not seek to include all the complexities of the biographical response to Shelley, especially this political whitewash, although 'irrational Shelley' did play a part in this. Nor does it even seek to list all instances where his image as 'mad poet' is returned to through the century: Engelberg has already done something of this nature.<sup>29</sup> His conclusion is that 'biographical evidence of Shelley's mental instability provided ['moralistic' and 'apologetic'] critics with a common framework for their discussions'.

Madness elided oppositions of sympathy: initial hostility and moralism were increasingly

voiced in a context which significantly curtailed the extreme conclusions to which they had led in discussions during the first decade after Shelley's death. By 1860 most critics saw him as a nervous, sensitive man who had committed a number of errors as a man and as a poet. This view allowed them to pardon some of his outrageous opinions and actions and to praise the poems which they found most successful. It allowed for a considerable variety of

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<sup>26</sup> See for example Deborah Dorfman's discussion of the biographical handling of Blake's 'insanity' in her *Blake in the Nineteenth Century: His Reputation as a Poet from Gilchrist to Yeats* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), which despite its title offers coverage of the situation before and through Gilchrist, in chapters 1–2; especially pp. 16–19; 40–49; 72–78.

<sup>27</sup> See in particular Sylva Norman's quixotic *Flight of the Skylark: the Development of Shelley's Reputation* (London: Reinhardt, 1954); and the more laborious survey offered by Karsten Klejs Engelberg's *The Making of the Shelley Myth: an Annotated Bibliography of Criticism of Percy Bysshe Shelley 1822–1860* (London: Mansell, 1988), pp. 1–108. (Oddly Engelberg nowhere mentions Norman.) Both of these writers are concerned with the turn in sympathies that made Shelley's reputation the object of a rescue mission as the nineteenth century progressed; a transition from 'disrepute to popularity' (Norman) or a shift from 'moralistic' to 'apologetic' readers (Engelberg). See also Miriam Allott, 'Attitudes to Shelley: The Vagaries of a Critical Reputation', in *Essays on Shelley*, ed. by Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), pp. 1–38.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Kipperman, 'Absorbing a Revolution: Shelley Becomes a Romantic, 1889–1903', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 47 (1992), pp. 187–211; Julian North, 'Biography and the Shelleys', in *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 101–146 (pp. 102–103).

<sup>29</sup> 'Shelley, the Mentally Deranged Poet', in *The Making of the Shelley Myth*, pp. 44–60.

interpretation, but it also prevented critics from discussing the intellectual aspects of Shelley's poetic vision.<sup>30</sup>

Engelberg is right in that an ambivalent reappraisal followed the early hostility of reviewers towards Shelley's poetry as contagious revolutionary disorder, and remade its great fall into dangerous insanity into alluring miniatures of flight from reason and reality. But he does not fundamentally question (in fact tacitly accepts) the 'biographical evidence' of Shelley's 'overwrought imagination', or the diagnostic claims of the *Lives*. Neither has any other critic of Shelley's reputation drawn out the thematic and rhetorical continuities between the major biographical texts' constructions of the poet's 'mad' image, or placed them in terms of the types of argument made above. One only has to look at later biographies, even the most scholarly, to see the importance and persistence of the ultimately unverifiable stories, images, or interpretations suggested here.<sup>31</sup> An examination of the 'evidence' of Shelley's eccentricities, as presented by Medwin, Hogg, Peacock, and others, shows that what is common to these accounts is less a consensus, and more a shared rhetoric of biography's diagnostic and corrective power over the passive, pliant, and correctable image of the poet that it forms. This was to have lasting consequences for Shelley's reputation.

William Hazlitt's magazine sketch of 1821 established the core of early biographical representations of Shelley. Hazlitt presents a diagnostic account of the poet using a strong rhetorical claim to empirical observation and deduction of symptoms from visual and aural sensory evidence. With a 'fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech', Shelley is violently 'sanguine-complexioned and shrill-voiced'; this supports Hazlitt's prognosis that 'as is often the case of religious enthusiasts, there is a slenderness of constitutional *stamina*, which renders the flesh no match for the spirit.'<sup>32</sup> (Shelley's strident atheism is mischievously allied with the fixed ideas of the religious melancholic.) But already a half-step has been taken away from a mode of presentation squarely focused on the body; here the psychosomatic nervous body of genius, its spirit-flesh, is the ambiguous substrate of Hazlitt's sketch. His emphasis on Shelley's pathological lightness, his freedom from earthly 'ballast', is noteworthy, and foreshadows later images of Shelley's unworldly mental 'flight' from his body, later staged first

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<sup>30</sup> *The Making of the Shelley Myth*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> As John Mullan has noticed, even the most skeptical and cautious of modern Shelley biographers, Newman Ivey White, still relies so heavily on perhaps the most factually wayward and 'most careless of biographers', Thomas Medwin, 'the naughty Captain' (Silva Norman), that his index admits it has too many debts to Medwin to fully record.

<sup>32</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On Paradox and Commonplace', in *Table Talk; or, Original Essays* (London: John Warren, 1821), pp. 347–372 (p. 355).

negatively as delusional insanity, then positively as spiritual distance from the sublunary:

There is no *caput mortuum* of worn-out, threadbare experience to serve as ballast to his mind [...] Bubbles are to him the only realities:—touch them, and they vanish. Curiosity is the only proper category of his mind, and though a man in knowledge, he is a child in feeling.<sup>33</sup>

The most immediately fruitful seed of future influence in this passage, however, was Hazlitt's verdict on Shelley as a 'child in feeling.' As Julian North notes, drawing from Mary Shelley's account of Percy:

The representation of Shelley as immature [...] was often repeated by other biographers. It was one, influential, manifestation of the more widespread Victorian construction of the Romantic poet and the Romantic age as perpetually youthful: a way of reconciling readers to controversial political, social, sexual, and religious views by consigning them to the past.<sup>34</sup>

This stress is particularly apparent in the case of Shelley: for Medwin the 'Eternal Child', for Hogg the 'child of genius' and the 'youthful dreamer', and likewise in his other early *Lives*.<sup>35</sup> For Hogg, especially, the point about disguising radical youth is well taken. In relation to nineteenth-century biography more widely, as discussed above, a sense of the biographical 'minor' as a fit subject for the pastoral power which life-writing exerts, or for the scientific taxonomy of an organically-imagined progression of national life from childhood to maturity (ontogeny reflecting phylogeny) are yet more resonant. But it cannot be so for the almost contemporary Hazlitt; nor indeed for Thomas Love Peacock, who pre-empted all biographical writing on Shelley as marvellous boy with his distinctly adolescent 'Scythrop Glowry', a thinly veiled portrayal of the poet, in his coterie satire *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). The Romantic poet as biographical minor also came from ideas about mental vagary. An association between childhood and madness was particularly strong in the period: for Foucault, especially, the madman under moral management became a

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<sup>33</sup> 'On Paradox and Commonplace', p. 356

<sup>34</sup> *The Domestication of Genius*, p. 133.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 332; Thomas Jefferson Hogg *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1858) I, p. 212; II, p. 118. Medwin took this phrase from an 1845 piece by Thomas De Quincey, who notes in turn that he has borrowed it from George Gilfillan's 'Gallery' in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*: see De Quincey's *Sketches Critical and Biographic* (Edinburgh: James Hogg & Sons, 1857), pp. 1–29, p. 28n.

refractory child, and madness the ‘minority status’ of childhood, ‘organized so that the insane are transformed into minors. They are regarded as children who have an overabundance of strength and make dangerous use of it’.<sup>36</sup> It was not only that Shelley was a child, but ‘an overgrown child with the power of a man’ (Hazlitt).

Biography also became a form of moral management, an arena in which the irrational man-child was confronted with his own delusions. Unreason was summoned drawn up to be diminished or dismissed, yet constantly played on. For Shelley, the principal practitioner in this mode was Thomas Jefferson Hogg. Immediately following Shelley’s death, the embargo on biographical writing maintained by Sir Timothy Shelley had been almost total. But biography began to creep in regardless, with Thomas Medwin’s clumsy and error-strewn footnote to his widely-criticised *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (1824). Medwin gave an account of Shelley the child at Eton, his ‘character of great eccentricity’ in childhood standing in for the whole ‘wild and visionary’ life of the man.<sup>37</sup> This partly reflected the moralistic hostility of early reviewers; but Shelley’s ally Leigh Hunt, in a similar publication, also provided a picture of an unhealthy poet doomed not to ‘have lived many years’ by ‘constitution consumptive’ (there is no evidence to support Hunt’s conjecture).<sup>38</sup> But it was Hogg who made the first biographical move to cement ‘eccentric Shelley’, in the series of articles on ‘Shelley at Oxford’ published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1832–33.<sup>39</sup> This rapidly supplanted diagnoses of the absent and dubiously consumptive body of the poet with his eminently diagnosable mind. Hogg exhibited a ‘remarkably youthful’ poet at university, ‘even [...] where all were very young’:<sup>40</sup>

It would be easy to fill many volumes with reminiscences characteristic of my young friend, and of these the most trifling would perhaps best illustrate his innumerable peculiarities. [...] A familiarity with the daily habits of Shelley and the knowledge of his demeanour in private will greatly facilitate [...] the full comprehension of his views and opinions. Traits that unfold an infantine simplicity, the genuine simplicity of true genius, will be slighted by those only who are ignorant of the qualities that constitute greatness of soul: the philosophical observer knows well

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<sup>36</sup> *Madness and Civilization*, p. 252.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Medwin, *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (London: Henry Colburn: 1824), pp. 248–259.

<sup>38</sup> Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries* (London: Henry Colburn: 1828), pp. 174–176.

<sup>39</sup> Also published by Henry Colburn, who cornered the market for Shelley anecdote early on.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Shelley at Oxford’, *New Monthly Magazine*, January 1832, pp. 91–96 (p. 91).

that to have shown a mind to be original and perfectly natural, is no inconsiderable step in demonstrating that it is also great.<sup>41</sup>

The stress on ‘innumerable peculiarities’ (and Hogg later tried at least to fill several volumes with reminiscences of these) goes hand in hand with the construction of the ‘philosophical’ biographical reader, who is expected to align himself with Hogg’s voice of moderation and reason within the scenes presented, appreciative yet corrective. Later, in his rather partial account of their expulsion from Oxford, Hogg blames the University, accusing it of a failure of moral management: it neglected the corrective attention and power that his biography provides, the ‘right institution’ that would ‘have mitigated the rigorous austerity of his course of living, and [...] would have remitted the extreme tension of his soul by reconciling him to a liberal mirth, convincing him, that if life be not wholly a jest, there are at least many comic scenes occasionally interspersed in the great drama’.<sup>42</sup> This becomes his own task. Hogg’s essentially comic account of Shelley’s ‘infantine simplicity’—the crestfallen return from the geology lecture on ‘stones, stones, stones! Nothing but stones!’, the rescuing of donkeys, the ‘primeval chaos’ of Shelley’s room and his scorched scout, the Platonic interrogation of the baby with regard to its pre-existence on Magdalen Bridge—is familiar to readers of all later Shelley biography. These anecdotes proved to be ineradicable. But what is less often noticed is this serious purpose to which Hogg thought his *comédie des mœurs* could be put. Principally, Hogg repeatedly returns to the originality found in the ingenuous ‘simplicity of true genius’, despite his instinct to mock or to play the rational biographer set above the irrational poet, and within the frame of this primitivism takes Shelley’s ‘genius’ seriously. But there is also a cautionary pseudo-medical prescription about ‘ardent’ over-study embedded in the farce. This is most apparent in the vivid anecdote where:

On the evening of a wet day, when we had read with scarcely any intermission from an early hour in the morning, I have urged him to lay aside his book. It required some extravagance to rouse him to join heartily in conversation; to tempt him to avoid the chimney-piece, on which commonly he had laid the open volume. “If I were to read as long as you do, Shelley, my hair and my teeth would be strewed about on the floor, and my eyes would slip down my cheeks into my waistcoat pockets; or at least I should become so weary and nervous, that I should not know whether it were so or not.” He began to scrape the carpet with his feet, as if teeth were actually lying upon it, and he looked fixedly at

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Shelley at Oxford II’, *New Monthly Magazine*, February 1832, pp. 137–145 (p. 144).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Shelley at Oxford IV’, *New Monthly Magazine*, July 1832, p. 67–73 (p. 73).

my face, and his lively fancy represented the empty sockets; his imagination was excited.<sup>43</sup>

These were standard medical worries about educated, middle-class, youthful ‘genius’: J.-É.D. Esquirol’s ‘nombreux écarts de régime’: not sleeping correctly, little physical exercise, reading too much, and above all, the excited imagination.<sup>44</sup> Hogg seems entirely to look past Shelley’s own sense of humour.<sup>45</sup> Instead he becomes retrospectively a literal-minded watcher for those early symptoms which he *knew* would *end badly*. This is a slightly different aspect to the ‘domestication of genius’ suggested by Julian North. The Victorian readers of biography she describes wanted depoliticised and personalised authors; but there was also a strong clamour for cautionary tales of weakness and illness.<sup>46</sup> Exemplary lives could show where the health and inheritance of the bourgeois family could be imperiled. If only, like the university, Sir Timothy Shelley had seen and acted on the signs earlier, Hogg implies.

Biographical writing of this type sat alongside ‘domestic psychiatry’, where ‘supervision of the child became supervision in the form of deciding on the normal and the abnormal; one began to keep an eye on the child’s behaviour, character, and sexuality’.<sup>47</sup> Shelley’s biographers are constantly assessing ‘the child’ against introduced standards of normality, where he is found wanting. The biographies also seek to criticise ‘normal’ morality, of course, but it is the repeated emphasis on the disjunction between the two that is significant. By 1858, Hogg’s main trope for this rhetoric became food: it is by reference to his dietary habits that Shelley was shown to be unworldly, and perhaps admirable, but also sub-normal. Shelley’s real dietary heterodoxy is well known.<sup>48</sup> But critical discussion often depends on the numerous examples that Hogg presents of Shelley’s eating as embodied insane thinking, tangible delusion. The horror of butter he burlesques in a teacake-centred episode

<sup>43</sup> ‘Shelley at Oxford IV’, p. 70.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, *Maladies Mentales* (Paris: Baillière, 1838), *passim*.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Holmes notes that other biographer-friends such as Peacock ‘always understood this side of Shelley better than Hogg and [were] prepared to write about it more carefully.’ Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> Memorably found in the sub-genre of Victorian biography devoted to, in the title of one volume, *Wrecked Lives; or Men Who Have Failed* (London: SPCK, 1880).

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973–1974*, trans. by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 124. See also Akihito Suzuki, *Madness at Home: The Psychiatrist, the Patient and the Family in England 1820-60* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) for ‘domestic psychiatry’, and Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) on the development of mental science preoccupied by adolescent sexuality, precocity, and unhealthy imagination.

<sup>48</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: the Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

when Shelley visits Southey at Keswick is typical.<sup>49</sup> It is presented in such an exaggerated way that it begins to read more like those cases in contemporary psychiatric writing where the bizarre hallucinations of the mad are deliberately framed in terms of domestic goods, which make them both more tangible to the general reader, and more *unheimlich*, in need of the expert common-sense of the alienist. Both John Conolly and George Man Burrows have cases of men thinking they are *made* of butter; the latter suggests that they should be gently guided away from the fire. Conolly discusses this as example of that ‘insanity on this one subject, but only as regards the impression: the rest of his conduct is rational enough.’<sup>50</sup> Diet, for Hogg, was Shelley’s monomania. By contrast, Hogg sees himself moderate and sensible, but without illusions about his predilections to ‘roast potatoes, chestnuts, and the like; to boil an egg, to make coffee, toast, and other good things’. Meanwhile Shelley, in Keswick, ends up hungrily devouring the supposedly wicked butter and teacakes, so the poet is granted his unworldly ideas, yet brought down to earth as greedily human after all. The episode of Shelley backsliding from his vegetarianism to cry ‘So this is bacon! [...] Bring more bacon!’ soon after has a similar dynamic, and Hogg conveys an even greater sense of spurious triumph at catching the poet out in his deluded notions.<sup>51</sup> The butter and the bacon, significantly, come shortly before perhaps the key passage of the biography, where Hogg describes Shelley as

an elegant, beautiful, odoriferous parasitical plant; he could not support himself; he must be tied up fast to something of a firmer texture, harder and more rigid [...] some person of a less flexible formation: he always required a prop, [...] some ordinary every day person with whom he was familiar.<sup>52</sup>

While the reporting of the odd personal tastes or behaviour of artists was nothing new, this emphasis certainly is, as is the collusion of biography’s writers and readers in the domestic ‘everyday’ to diagnose and correct irregularity. Hazlitt had also commented on Shelley’s ‘bending, flexible form’, which ‘appears to take no strong hold about him’.<sup>53</sup> But Hogg’s image is more reminiscent of the picture of a bending sapling tied to a straight stake, taken from the frontispiece of Nicholas Andry’s *Orthopædia: or, the art of correcting and preventing deformities in children* (1743)

<sup>49</sup> *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, pp. 31–34; cf. II, pp. 322–323.

<sup>50</sup> George Man Burrows, *Commentaries on the Causes, Forms, Symptoms, and Treatment, Moral and Medical, of Insanity* (London: Underwood, 1828), pp. 268–269; John Conolly, *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* (London: Taylor, 1830), pp. 303–305.

<sup>51</sup> *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, pp. 34–36.

<sup>52</sup> *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, I, p. 30; II, p. 46.

<sup>53</sup> ‘On Paradox and Commonplace’, p. 355.

and deployed as an emblem of disciplinary power by Foucault (once again) in *Discipline and Punish*.

More could be said about Hogg's presentation of the 'mad Shelley' in the 1858 text of his biography. There is the constant presentation of letters as evidence of Shelley's 'wild' state of mind, often edited to make them more so, the height of Hogg's manipulation of the documentary record being his notorious use of the correspondence surrounding his break with Shelley to cook up the fragment of a Werther-esque novel.<sup>54</sup> Hogg, while criticising Shelley for his paranoia, takes him at face value when the claim is advanced that he had a narrow escape from confinement in a private madhouse while at school; equally, the biographer feels free to decide that some of the things Shelley described to him from his childhood must never have happened, and were therefore obviously delusions. He elides the poet with his poetry, describing poems on the subject of madness as themselves 'strange delusion', in the case of the Margaret Nicholson poems. Melancholy and humourless, stricken by 'poet's sadness', Hogg's Shelley is at the mercy of his wayward body as manifest through the transparently legible content of his wayward mind. Various 'hallucinations' are dwelt upon in repeated returns to a Shelley generally 'completely and universally under the influence of inspiration' or 'the absolute, despotical empire of a vivid, fervid fancy.'<sup>55</sup> But by 1858 much of Hogg's material in this domain, beyond that reprinted from 'Shelley at Oxford', came from biographical work by other hands, which had emerged in the meantime. To examine the episodes often cited in the period, and beyond, as incontrovertible biographical evidence of Shelley's madness (the incident at Tan-y-rallt, the vision of the woman with 'elephantiasis') we must take some account of these.

As Richard Cronin has observed of Hogg and other biographers of Shelley, one 'peculiarity' is that their 'admiration tends to soar to a height precisely corresponding to the depth of [their] contempt.'<sup>56</sup> Admiration was initially professed in the productions of Medwin, the childhood acquaintance who was to become a dreaded guest in Italy and a much worse nuisance to Mary Shelley long afterwards, ultimately (according to Mary) running nastily to blackmail. Like Hogg, Medwin initially provided sketches for the periodical press, partly in competition with Hogg. His 'Shelley Papers' ran in the *Athenaeum* in 1833 before he reused and reshaped the material for an exploitative and repetitive two-volume *Life* in 1847. As far as contempt goes, it has mostly been directed at Medwin himself: his standing has always been poor. Buxton-Forman's introduction to his edition of 1847 *Life* claims that it is scarcely possible to record each 'bungle' and 'theft', and memorably has him

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<sup>54</sup> See Richard Cronin's fascinating account of Hogg's 'untrustworthiness', in his *Romantic Victorians: English Literature 1824–1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 27–34.

<sup>55</sup> *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, I, pp. 27–41; II, pp. 68–71; I, pp. 264–269; II, p. 114; II, pp. 344, 350.

<sup>56</sup> *Romantic Victorians*, p. 34.

as a ‘shifty adventurer’, ‘more a sharper than an idiot’; Sylva Norman calls him a ‘thick-skinned opportunist’ and an ‘arrant rascal’ characterised by a ‘ceaseless exertion to grope for gold down every alley that shows its gleam’.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless Medwin was an important early mediator of Shelley’s image. He also began with the psychosomatic body. His 1833 version of the poet has ‘too much imagination’, ‘shattered’, ‘irritable nerves’, and a weak body ‘bent by study and ill health.’ Shelley is presented in this account with much more sentimental gloss than in Hogg, however. Medwin sees ‘a spirit of benevolence’ over all Shelley wrote and ‘a mind in which selfishness never entered’, although qualifying criticisms often trail behind his parade of panegyrics (‘the sincerity of his opinions, however erroneous’). The general portrait of 1833 concludes with the ominous judgement that ‘insanity hung as by a hair suspended over the head of Shelley.’<sup>58</sup> This phrase, in contrast to Hazlitt’s bodily diagnosis of Shelley’s fever, expands and re-inscribes the poet’s visionary (or delusional) characteristics in the reading of the scene. Medwin ends with a comparison of Shelley and Byron’s ‘madness’; Byron was more in control of his imagination, Medwin thought, but both men were ‘unconscious’ of the total extent of its hold over them and their literary output.<sup>59</sup> Medwin’s 1847 *Life* needed to bring more to the table than old physiology or this vague speculation. Its author responded by producing a discussion of what he claimed to be evidence of Shelley’s ‘overheated imagination’ and ‘delusion’, the ‘attack’ at Tan-y-rallt in 1813.<sup>60</sup> Again biography turned from diagnosing Shelley’s absented body to diagnosing his abstracted mind.

In this incident, Shelley had claimed that an intruder had entered his rented house near Tremadoc in North Wales and shot at him in a sustained assassination attempt. For Medwin and for Hogg following him, it was obvious that the poet’s imagination or hallucinations were responsible; there was no possibility that an attempt on Shelley’s life might really have happened. Later biographers have been more cautious about a still very obscure incident, although their treatment of the Tan-y-rallt episode provides a useful test-case for Shelley’s ongoing status as the object of psychobiography and its vicissitudes and shows the importance, or at least the persistence, of early biographical insinuations. Edward Dowden (1886) and Edmund Blunden (1946), intent on Shelley’s canonical propriety, took his account more on trust, but then biographies by Newman Ivey White, Kenneth Neill Cameron, and Richard Holmes, with a sense of ‘modern’ psychology (i.e. psychoanalysis) reverted

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<sup>57</sup> *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1913), pp. ix, xi; *Flight of the Skylark*, pp. 173–175.

<sup>58</sup> *The Shelley Papers: Memoir of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Original Poems and Papers* (London: Whittaker, Treacher, and Co., 1833), pp. 29, 58, 63, 104–5; pp. 93, 96–97; p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> *The Shelley Papers*, pp. 100–102.

<sup>60</sup> *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1913), pp. 116–117.

to viewing it to various degrees as delusional psychodrama.<sup>61</sup> The most recent major life, by James Bieri, asserts with confidence that it was one in a series of ‘transient psychotic episodes with paranoid overtones’, a ‘panic attack with delusional and hallucinatory aspects’ (Bieri is a psychologist).<sup>62</sup> This blanket of authoritative jargon does not address the fact that the only real new data in the twentieth century, the investigations of H. M. Dowling, highlight the fraught local political atmosphere and the distinct likelihood that the incident was real, but stage-managed, to scare Shelley off.<sup>63</sup> Richard Holmes has added that no early biographer realised the extent of Home Office spying on Shelley, nor his real subversive activity, and that ‘their understanding of Shelley’s political fears and commitments, and how serious they were, suffered in consequence’.<sup>64</sup> What really happened, in any event, is secondary to the alacrity Hogg and Medwin showed in ignoring suggestions (from figures such as William Madocks) of the attack’s possible reality. As Holmes suggests, the early biographers found hallucinations too ‘convenient to cover up those parts of his career which they did not know, did not approve of, or which they simply did not understand.’<sup>65</sup> So Medwin piled onto Shelley’s image details of his own apparently substantial medical knowledge, referring authoritatively to somnambulism and ‘severe erethism of the nerves.’<sup>66</sup> As the archaic medical terminology suggests (erethism is ‘excitement of an organ or tissue in an unusual degree; also *transf.* morbid over-activity of the mental powers or passions’, *OED*) this was a mode of presentation which rooted all imaginative or poetic behaviour in the nervous body and all its defective, twitching organs and tissues.

The medical presentation of Shelley’s psychological symptoms is also found, somewhat surprisingly, in the biographical writings of Thomas Love Peacock. Drawn late and reluctantly onto the contested terrain of Shelleyana, Peacock published several instalments of his ‘Memoirs’ in *Fraser’s Magazine* from 1858 onwards, beginning as a review of Hogg and Medwin. Peacock’s ambivalence towards the existing biographies’ combination of forensic pretensions and domestic confinement is evident in his opening remarks on ‘the departed author’ as ‘a fair subject to be

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<sup>61</sup> Newman Ivey White, *Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (London: Gollancz, 1951), pp. 210–211; Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: the Golden Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 90–95.

<sup>62</sup> James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: a Biography. Youth’s Unextinguished Fire, 1792–1816* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp. 281, 289.

<sup>63</sup> H. M. Dowling, ‘The Attack at Tanyrallt’, *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 12 (1961), pp. 28–36; H. M. Dowling, ‘What happened at Tanyrallt?’, *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 2 (1955), pp. 540–542.

<sup>64</sup> *Shelley: the Pursuit*, p. 162n. There was also an outstanding debt of £400 to be avoided.

<sup>65</sup> *Shelley: the Pursuit*, p. 187.

<sup>66</sup> *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p. 27.

dissected at the tea table of the reading public.’<sup>67</sup> Peacock also discusses Tan-y-rallt, agreeing that it was ‘imaginary’, but moves quickly to say that ‘the mental phenomena in which this sort of semi-delusion originated will better illustrated by one which occurred at a later period [. . .] more perseveringly adhered to’. This was Shelley’s supposed fixed perception that he might catch elephantiasis, cured when he was directed by Peacock to a passage in Lucretius which claimed the disease was found only in Africa.<sup>68</sup> Peacock’s judgement that these were ‘semi-delusions’, the imagination amplifying a ‘basis in firm belief’ and possible fact, is in one sense the ‘characteristically English kind of compromise [. . .] an indefinite mixture of fact and fantasy’ that Richard Holmes discerns in many later biographers’ judgements on Shelley’s psychology.<sup>69</sup> But it is also squarely characteristic of the moral treatment of the mad in the early nineteenth-century, and the various typologies of partial insanity discussed as wrong reasoning from right perception, in the model passed down from a famous passage in Locke’s *Essay*, or from many other available concepts of *folie raisonnée*. Partial insanity also allowed the biographically amassed details ‘of each individual in particular, during his entire life’ to be opened to interpretation as incipient madness. Peacock’s prescription, like those before him, was both domestic and corporeal (‘three mutton chops well peppered’) and moral management of Shelley-the-patient’s fixed false perceptions and delusions: they ‘severally vanished under the touch of investigation’ which the rational biographer-friend provided. Peacock concludes that this disabusing would have been echoed on a much large scale had Shelley survived, his youthful inanities or insanities diminishing under the ‘attainment of reality’, and shrinking to the epitaph ‘DÉSILLUSIONÉ’.<sup>70</sup> It could be a motto for writers and readers of Victorian biographies of Shelley.

There remained those, in shorter biographical articles of the 1840s and 1850s, who stuck with the earlier view of Shelley as a pathological body infected by revolutionary mania or delusion. Indeed, almost any subject Shelley took interest in, especially political or religious, became in the eyes of conservative memoirists his ‘monomania’, rooted in the perversity of his psycho-physical temperament.<sup>71</sup> With the publication of the official *Shelley Memorials: from Authentic Sources* in 1859, and the beginning of the later Victorian campaign of Shelley idealization, the tide of

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 57 (1858), pp. 643–659 (p. 643).

<sup>68</sup> ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley’, pp. 654, 656.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Part II’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 61 (1860), pp. 92–109; p. 99 *Shelley: the Pursuit*, p. 187n.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley’ II, pp. 97; 99; 109.

<sup>71</sup> See for examples the anecdotes presented by John Dix, *Pen and Ink Sketches of Poets* (London: Bogue, 1846), p. 143; and J. G. Merle, ‘A Newspaper Editor’s Reminiscences’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 23 (1841), pp. 699–710 (p. 704).

apologetics, but also of disembodiment, began to turn more decisively. Here Shelley was referred to vaguely in terms of ‘the eccentricities of a wild but generous nature’, but any further details were dismissed, along with criticism of Shelley’s politics, morals, or elopements, as ‘a fantastical caricature’ (this referred mostly to Hogg, whose *Life* had given the younger Shelleys ‘the most painful feelings of dismay.’)<sup>72</sup> Edward Trelawny, the last of the major early biographers to have known Shelley, surely sensed this turn in his picture of Shelley as physically and mentally robust, all mention of ‘madness’ being shifted into a pure Platonic realm, part of the ‘ideal of what a poet should be.’<sup>73</sup> Trelawny’s *Recollections* (also 1858) and *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author* (1878) stayed remarkably consistent on this subject despite his (in John Mullan’s wry phrase) ‘remembering in ever greater detail as the years went by’ various other areas of Shelley’s life which Trelawney thought might be more worth embroidering.

In the background we can hear the beating of the wings of Matthew Arnold’s ‘beautiful and ineffectual angel’ approaching. This was, however, an image which can also be seen as a legacy of an early biographical tradition which took Shelley to be ‘an angel touched by lunacy’, itself an abstraction and idealization of earlier critics who held Shelley to be a dangerous lunatic and his ‘specimens of inspired composition’ as ‘derived from the white-washed walls of St. Luke’s or Hoxton’.<sup>74</sup> The process of abstraction, I have tried to demonstrate here, tells us something about Shelley in particular, and something more about nineteenth-century biography and the uses to which it put its troublesome Romantic youth.

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<sup>72</sup> *Shelley Memorials: from Authentic Sources*, ed. by Lady Jane Shelley (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1859), pp. 8, viii.

<sup>73</sup> Edward Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (London: Edward Moxon, 1858); *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* (London: Routledge, 1878). ‘Ideal of what a poet should be’ is from the preface to the latter (no page no.).

<sup>74</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Sketches Critical and Biographic*, p. 6; *Literary Gazette* (9 September, 1820), in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by James E. Barcus (London: Routledge, 1995), no. 49, pp. 226–235 (p. 231). I discuss the rhetoric of insanity in periodical reviews of Romantic poets, and the way that this segued into biographical mythologization and the image of the mad poet across the century generally, in *Madness and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), chapters 4 and 5. This work also discusses the cases of William Blake and John Clare in a similar context to the arguments and examples advanced here, and the way that the ‘the facts of biography’ concerning these writers and others directly fed into medical and not so medical writings on degeneration and genius late in the century. In the case of Shelley, these included especially the supposed visions at the Casa Magni, and physiognomic readings of his ‘small’ head.

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