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This paper aims to elucidate some questions at the heart of Shelley’s thought on love by way of Byron’s satire, Lucretius’ atomism, and Shelley’s own baffling Lucretian poem, Epipsychidion. Part of a larger project on the Orient and the Young Romantics.

In December of 1818 Byron was in Venice, having moved earlier that summer to “the Grand Canal” where he “presided over a household of fourteen servants and a menagerie of monkeys, a wolf, a fox, two mastiffs, and caged birds. What Byron called his “miscellaneous harlotry” included “nine whores” at this time by his count,” and by later in the year he had taken so many that even the Venetians were talking. But that’s not all that he was doing—he was also writing the first two cantos of what would become his greatest poem, *Don Juan*. Having just fled England on account of his affair with his half-sister, and living estranged from his daughter Allegra (then in the care of the Shelleys), Byron’s evaluation of love was—needless to say—somewhat cynical. This bitterness made its way into Byron’s verse when a seasick Juan pines naively after his lost and beloved Julia: **“And, oh! if e’er I should forget, I swear -- / But that’s impossible, and cannot be -- / Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air, / Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea, / Than I resign thine image, oh, my fair! / Or think of any thing excepting thee; / A mind diseased no remedy can physic / (Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick). // Sooner shall heaven kiss earth (here he fell sicker), / Oh, Julia! what is every other woe? / (For God’s sake let me have a glass of liquor; / Pedro, Battista, help me down below.) / Julia, my love! (you rascal, Pedro, quicker) -- / Oh, Julia! (this curst vessel pitches so) - - / Belovéd Julia, hear me still beseeching!” / (Here he grew inarticulate with retching.)”**

Byron’s satiric juxtaposition of spiritual love and material retching, while perhaps an innovation of sorts in the airy Romantic era, actually isn’t all that new. In Book IV of *De Rerum*

Natura, to name an example that will become important for Shelley, Lucretius launches perhaps the most scathing attack on love in the classical age. All that exists in the universe, for Lucretius, are matter and void, and so love becomes an “unnecessary need” for him, a sort of sickness or madness rather than a transcendent communication between souls: “When a man [writes Lucretius] is pierced by the shafts of Venus... he strives towards the source of the wound and craves to be united with it [OK] and to ejaculate fluid out of his body and into that body... This, then, is what we term Venus. This is the origin of the thing called love... Though the object of your love be absent, images of it still haunt you... you should keep well away from such images... Ejaculate the build-up of seed promiscuously and do not hold on to it” (p. 122). One could go far in disentangling the gendered nuances of this description (that, for instance, it is an incredibly “masculine” theory of love, and yet it is the men who are “pierced by the shafts of Venus”), but basically this is the Venetian Byron’s reading of love. Love is a symptom of physical need that can drive you mad, and the best way to avoid madness is through promiscuity: hence Byron’s letter to Shelley where he claimed it was “impossible” for him to leave Venice because, and here I’m paraphrasing a little bit, “What happened in Venice, stayed in Venice.”

But for Lucretius, love is not merely a material sickness—it is also logically incoherent. Because “Venus teases lovers with images,” love is based upon the false premise that two lovers might somehow spiritually unite, an idea that Lucretius mockingly literalizes: “body clings greedily to body; they mingle the saliva of their mouths pressing them with their teeth. But all to no purpose. One can remove nothing from the other by rubbing, nor enter right in and be wholly absorbed, body in body... In aimless bewilderment they rot away, stricken by a *secret* sore”—a *volnere caeco*, that is by / through / from an unseen and blind wound. Love tricks lovers through images, and for Lucretius, images are not composed of light bouncing off of objects. Rather, images are composed of a particular species of atom that objects and bodies are continuously sloughing off. These composites, what Lucretius calls simulacra, are constantly flying through the air, and our brains can perceive them through the eye, or, when in a weakened state such as

sleep, the brain can also “absorb” them. This is why we can dream of something unreal, like a unicorn: a phantom composite of a horse floats into our brain at the same time as the simulacrum of a horn, and maybe some wings or a monocle and then *bing*, the image of a unicorn pops into your head. Literally. The simulacrum of a unicorn is *actually* in your head, just like the image of your lover is *actually* within you. The problem is that the atoms of actual flesh and blood bodies don’t work like that, but the madness of love makes you think that they do because you have become fixated on one thing. Love is a bodily need like hunger or thirst in that it is a demand to fill a void, but it is an incoherent demand in that it is unclear exactly *what* void is being filled, or even *what* you’re trying to fill it with, because that void is both blind and unseen. Juan’s involuntary retching is the perfect satiric counterpoint to the irrational demands of love: what is needed is not to fill a void, but to evacuate one.

The curious thing about Lucretius’ cynical, material theory of love is that it shares so much with Shelley’s idea of love. This is problematic because a) Lucretius is arguably *the* key philosophical touchstone for Shelley, a lifelong skeptic and atheist; and b) Shelley’s ethics, politics and poetics are founded upon a notion of love that fundamentally contradicts that of Lucretius. And yet, Shelley’s notion of love is almost always posed within a Lucretian framework, most obviously in what has become Shelley’s “standard” definition, from the fragmentary essay “On Love”: *love is that “powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves”* (*On Love*, 503). This “chasm of an insufficient void” is inarguably Lucretian.

Shelley goes on to break this vague “experience” down into three categories, reason, imagination, and feeling: “If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and

burning with the heart's best blood. This is Love," asserts Shelley, echoing Lucretius' cynical *Haec Venus est nobis*, severing the relativist "to us." Thus Shelley's love is not a sort of sickness or madness. Rather, it "is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists." It is, in other words, sort of important.

In 1818 and 1819, while Byron was living in Venice with his menagerie of monkeys and his miscellany of harlots, Percy and Mary were becoming more and more estranged. When Shelley wrote in "On Love" of "lips of motionless ice," he was likely referring to his own experience. In another fragment, entitled "Misery," Shelley gave reign to his *ressentiment* to an extent unique in his verse: "Kiss me;--oh! thy lips are cold: / Round my neck thine arms enfold-- / They are soft, but chill and dead; / And thy tears upon my head / Burn like points of frozen lead... //... Clasp me till our hearts be grown / Like two shadows into one;" (ll. 36-50). It is easy to see the verbal echoes between his fragment "On Love" and "Misery," his thinly veiled address to Mary, but what interests me here is the haunting image of their two hearts growing "like two shadows into one." What blend together are not two material bodies, nor exactly two *images* of material bodies like Lucretius' simulacra, but two *shadows*, the *negative* images of bodies, the absence of light like two unseen wounds. This is categorically *not* love, and yet its image foreshadows by about a year Shelley's most extended poem about love, *Epipsychidion*—a love poem written to Teresa Viviani, a nineteen year old girl confined by her tyrannical father in a convent.

The central conflict of *Epipsychidion* is an ontological conflict. It is a conflict between an inhuman Lucretian universe governed by atoms, voids, and chance, and a Platonic universe governed by spirit, plentitude and polarity. And if this is its fundamental conflict, then its fundamental question is Byronic: can a union exist which is *not* predicated on a violent overwhelming of the weaker by the stronger? [I'm referring here to a speech Byron gave at the House of Lords against the Imperial "Union" of Britain and Ireland—there's actually a political subtext to this whole debate]. To put it mathematically, can one and one make two, or do one

and one always collapse into the stronger? Now, we should not assume that in every case the stronger overwhelming the weaker is simply a stronger entity (such as, say, *Epipsychidion's* narrator or Great Britain) absorbing and assimilating a weaker one (such as the beloved Emily or Ireland). Rather, and this perhaps explains the narrator's death at the end of the poem, each is absorbed by *the One*: death. This *One* un-differentiates not merely the victim, but also the offender—each are placeholders in a larger and more serious game. The perhaps impossible goal of the *Epipsychidion*, therefore, is to avoid subsumption beneath the One while still breaking free of solitude, of sustaining “difference without discord” (144) by allowing Love to create an “unentangled intermixture” (93-4). The degree to which the grammar of this phrase strains to describe something beyond description should indicate the difficulty of such a task. Indeed, the poem fails to give us a working model of an “unentangled intermixture,” just as “On Love” leaves Shelley feeling abandoned in a “savage and distant land.”

The body of the poem divides easily and logically into three distinct parts, each of which operates according to its own particular logic. Overall the movement between the three phases of the poem enacts a failed dialectic between these Lucretian and Platonic ontologies. We might call the three phases of the poem, respectively, 1) the *Lucretian phase* (lines 1-189) on account of its opposition to “the heart that loves, the brain that contemplates, / The life that wears, the spirit that creates / One object, one form” (170-2)—it's “ontological promiscuity”; 2) the *adolescent or Platonic phase* (190-407), in which the narrator regresses and worships “this glorious One” (336), an ideal image of a beautiful woman; and finally the *Imperial phase* (407-591) in which the narrator invites Emily to a solitary island in order to “become the same” (573). The result is a failed dialectic: $1+1=1$. A Lucretian worldview coupled with a naïve Platonic worldview yields, ultimately, an Imperial worldview: the stronger swallows the weaker and the One wins out, mirroring the narrator's (unconscious, failed) attempt to overtake his beloved Emily.

From the poem's epigraph it is clear that Emily has already been overtaken by *something*. Taking a cue from Mallarmé's *Coup de des*, we can read straight across the typefaces of the dedication and epigraph: "VERSES ADDRESSED TO THE NOBLE AND UNFORTUNATE LADY, EMILIA V—, NOW IMPRISONED IN THE CONVENT OF — [dash]" "HER OWN WORDS." Thus the dashes disguising the convent's name can work as a hinge, bridging two divided parts of a sentence and trapping Emily within "her own words." Her "own words," printed in Italian, are what separate these two halves of the divided sentence: "The loving soul launches beyond [*fuori*, outside] creation, and creates for itself [*si crea*] in the infinite a World all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf." The confining convent then becomes not merely the house of her tyrannical father, but perhaps that "World all its own." That World is a "soul within the soul" (455), "this soul out of my soul" (238) also referenced in Shelley's essay "On Love" and twice within *Epipsychidion*—indeed, it is precisely an *Epi-psychidion*. Over the course of the poem that soul narrows and becomes the island within which Emily and the narrator become imprisoned.

1. Lucretian Phase: In the beginning of the poem, however, Emily is described as something entirely incapable of being imprisoned or contained—she is, in fact, something that borders on the ethereal. Throughout this section, and into the next, the narrator keeps trying to push back the limit of what can be properly described as matter, and he does this through a minute and multifarious examination of varying conceptions of mixture, blending and entanglement. Throughout the poem there are, in fact, too many different examples and descriptions of the ways in which Love can combine two beings to list all of them here, and the reason for this multiplicity is that matter keeps getting in the way. When matter combines it threatens to turn all difference or identity into something resembling the "lump of death" or "chaos of hard clay" in Byron's "Darkness" (72). Hence early on Emily is described as a "Seraph of Heaven! too gentle to be human, / Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman / All

that is insupportable in thee / Of light, and love, and immortality!” (21-4). At first, such a hyperbolic description appears to be the result of the fact that the beginning of the poem echoes the classical invocation of a muse, like Lucretius’ invocation of Venus at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura*—but Shelley’s ironic hyperbole continues for nearly six hundred more lines. One could in fact say that it is this exaggerated, transcendental attribution given to Emily that is the central problematic of the poem. Just as many have criticized Lucretius for invoking a god at the beginning of a work that sets itself to the task of breaking apart gods and idols, Shelley’s transcendental description of Emily as harbinger and carrier of Love fundamentally clashes with the Lucretian background that informs his entire poetic thought.

Lucretius himself actually faces this same problem—not in his cynical examination of love, but in his description of sensation and thought. After concluding that “the soul... has a threefold nature” (i.e. is composed of atoms of air, heat and wind), Lucretius suddenly backs up: “But all these three components together are not enough to create sentience” (238-40). Then, like any good philosopher in the midst of a logical crisis, Lucretius posits “a fourth [substance]” (241): “Than this there is nothing more mobile or more tenuous—nothing whose component atoms are smaller or smoother. This is it that sets the sensory motions coursing through the limbs” (243-6). In skeptical, materialist fashion Lucretius pays careful attention to remind us that “this one has no name” (242), but that it is nevertheless matter. *Epipsychidion* is a narrative search after this fourth substance under the auspices of love and light.

In a reference to both the Song of Songs and to his own *Revolt of Islam*, the narrator of *Epipsychidion* makes an impossible wish: “Would we two had been of twins of the same mother! / Or, that the name my heart lent to another / Could be a sister bond for her and thee, / Blending two beams in one eternity!” (45-8). Here the narrator makes an implicit reference to his current wife (Mary), and the metaphor of the “radiant form of Woman” begins to work as a vehicle for blending human souls—first Mary and Emily (the “two beams”), and then the narrator and Emily: “How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me! / I am not thine: I am part of *thee*”

(51-2). After this blending of lights, Emily turns from the “Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!” (26) to a “Sweet Lamp!” which lures the poet’s “moth-like Muse” to burn “its wings” (53). The poet quickly follows his Muse, and arrives at an puzzling account of this blending: “In her mild lights the starry spirits dance, / The sun-beams of those wells which ever leap / Under the lightnings of the soul -- too deep / For the brief fathom-line of thought or sense / The glory of her being, issuing thence, / Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade / Of unentangled intermixture, made / By Love, of light and motion” (87-94). Here we are given the first extended description of blending in the poem, and we should immediately notice that the problem is that of Lucretius’ unnamed substance: how does “a warm shade / Of unentangled intermixture... of light and motion” interact with an atomic universe composed of “dead, blank, cold air”?

The answer lies in Love, and yet the narrator misunderstands love because he fixed an image to Eternity: “Narrow / The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates, / The life that wears, the spirit that creates / One object, and one form, and builds thereby / A sepulchre for its eternity” (169-73). Shelley here advocates multiplicity (and free love), the contrary of which is the unity of the grave. According to the skeptical or Lucretian code, “True Love in this differs from gold and clay, / That is to divide is not to take away. / Love is like understanding, that grows bright, / Gazing on many truths” (160-3). Each description here is given either negatively (“to divide is *not* to take away”) or through overt simile. Love, like pleasure and thought, is fundamentally something to be shared (180-2)—they are active agents working against the One, against both ego-driven solipsism and material necessity.

2. *Adolescent of Platonic Phase*: The tension in the second phase of the poem is that of regression, that the narrator has not fully learned the Lucretian lesson about Love: “narrow the heart that loves... One object.” The terrain of this portion of the poem is not yet Prospero’s island, but rather Plato’s cave. The narrator’s remembrances constantly bring us back to “the caves / Of divine sleep” (194-5) and “the caverns of my dreamy youth” (217) where he sought

the Being of his “one desire” (219), “one form resembling hers” (254). In a word, he sought *One* (256, 271, 277) with a capital O, with whom he could blend his own being. The blending of souls too never succeeds, and with each unsuccessful attempt to describe what such blending might be like, we almost get the feeling that the blending cannot happen *until* it is properly described. We are given, again, comparison of the penetration to light, music and sound (329-31), magnetism (348), lightening (400), thought, temperature, radiation and flowering (325-9), though again none of these material modes of comparisons work because “words conceal” (319).

So here’s the poet’s basic problem by this point: how can you reconcile a Lucretian worldview wherein spirits and souls are material and diffused through the body with the hope of escaping solipsism? Shelley doesn’t know, and, had the poem simply been an exercise in the ontology of Love, he could have cut the poem off at the warning about the “one object, and one form” to which the spirit builds a sepulcher. Shelley’s aims in the poem, however, extend beyond mere ontology and into the ethical consequences of such ontologies, and so plays out the failed dialectic of soul and matter until the end: “we two shall rise, and sit, and walk together / .../ till to love and live, / Be one” (540, 551-2); Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound, / And our veins beat together; and our lips / With other eloquence than words, eclipse / The soul that burns between them” (565-8); “We shall become the same, we shall be one / Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?” (573-4). This series of impossible math problems finally ends in the crescendo that overwhelms the narrator: “One hope within two wills, one will beneath / Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death, / One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality, / And one annihilation. Woe is me! / The winged words on which my soul would pierce / Into the height of Love’s rare Universe, / Are chains of lead around its flight of fire -- / I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (584-91). As Byron would describe it: “the spoiler swallows up its victim, and thus they become indivisible.” Like Lucretius’ two bodies greedily clinging to each other, all of this “is to no purpose.” Shelley’s Lucretian skepticism both frames his poetic rendering of love and negates any sort of Unity that isn’t violent and consuming so that in the end we don’t even

have a mixture, much less an “unentangled intermixture.” Emily, meanwhile, remains trapped within her own World, her own words, and has remained there since the epigraph.