

Gerold Sedlmayr (ed.)

Romantic Bodyscapes

Embodied Selves, Embodied Spaces
and Legible Bodies in the Romantic Age

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Gerold Sedlmayr

Introduction: Romantic Bodyscapes

In the fourth of his *Lectures on the General Structure of the Human Body*, which was delivered before the Royal College of Surgeons in London on 25 March 1823, Thomas Chevalier¹ explained to his students, the "[y]oung gentlemen" in the lecture hall, that "[i]n studying the anatomy and physiology of the human body, it is both customary and necessary to examine parts of like structure, and their arrangements, together" (102). When considering these "parts of like structure" in this manner, one after the other, Chevalier suggests, it is crucial to adhere to a meaningful sequence. Hence, it might be advisable to begin with the skeleton, since it provides the body with an inner scaffolding; its parts "compose the solid machinery, which gives the substantial form and stability to the whole" (102). Subsequently, the surgeon may look at the muscles, "the system of vessels", and the nervous system; afterwards come the "organs of mastication [...] digestion, secretion and excretion" (103). Last but not least, he must consider the organs of sense. Yet this "order of procedure" (104) may easily be reversed, as Chevalier affirms: instead of proceeding from the inside to the outside, it is equally valid to take the opposite direction. In fact, this is what he himself favours by giving a privileged role to the human skin, to which he dedicates more than half of his 1823 lectures. Still, no matter which direction is taken, what is most important is that, although the "analytic examination" of the body's various parts will usually "take the precedence" in any surgeon's endeavours, it is indispensable to likewise proceed synthetically, never to lose sight of the whole, "for [a surgeon's] mind is to go before, and to travel with his knife, through connected parts: he must give no commission to his instrument of which he does not foresee and understand the execution, and, as far as possible, the effect" (104).

It is a conspicuous metaphor which Chevalier employs here when he imagines the surgeon's mind to be a traveller that journeys through the interlinked parts of the body, with the knife functioning both as a sort of transportation device and instrument of discovery and exploration. As he makes quite plain, a correct notion of the complex interactions of the body's various structures and systems, of the mutual relations between exterior and interior, is methodologically based on a dialectics of analytic and "synthetic" (104) approaches: if the surgeon does not know where and how to travel with his knife, this might yield catastrophic consequences ("give no commission"). In an earlier lecture, he correspondingly claims that since the "body [is] made up of a

1 Thomas Chevalier (1767-1824) studied anatomy under Matthew Baillie and later became professor of anatomy and surgery at the College of Surgeons in London. According to George Thomas Bettany, "Chevalier was widely esteemed, not only as a surgeon and anatomist, but as a man of linguistic and theological erudition" (n. pag.).

combination of different systems or structures, interwoven with each other", it is "of the greatest importance to us in practice that we should possess and preserve a correct picture or map of them in their several relations [...] in our minds" (42). Obviously, the notion of mapping was not coincidental or unusual. For Chevalier and other surgeons and anatomists of the time, the body indeed was understood to be a landscape that needed to be charted and surveyed. While explorers and cartographers travelled the world to observe, examine, and measure the lands belonging to the Empire, doctors

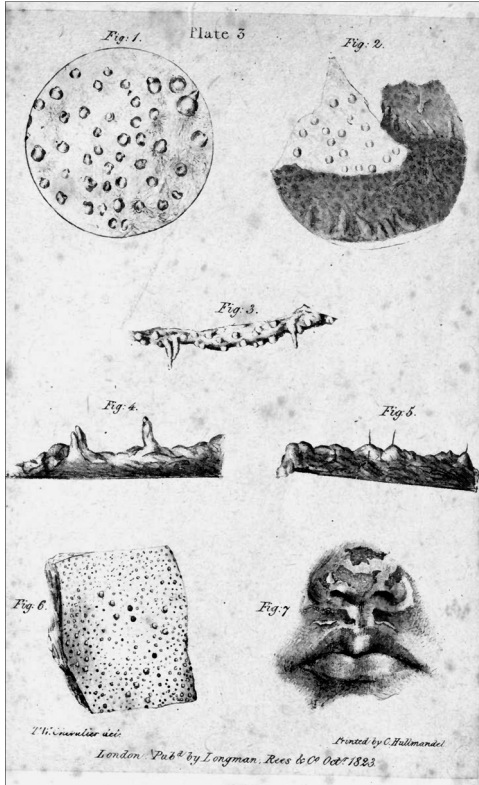


Fig. 1: Thomas Chevalier. *Plate 3* (in Chevalier, facing 266), showing "the existence, form, and locality of the *inter epidermal glands*" (266).

probed and literally uncovered the regions beneath the skin. Not everyone, though, could be a proper investigator of this dark and mysterious territory. Only the "prepared and vigilant eye" of the trained expert was able to "watch [the body's parts] well and carefully, that we may be ready to detect their earlier, as well as their more advanced deviations from a healthy condition" (43). In this connection, Chevalier's prioritisation of the skin is no surprise. It is the outer and visible shell of the body: the structure which effectively shields the inside from damaging external influences while simultaneously being highly sensitive to stimuli. The graphic illustrations he provides in his book at times look like proto-geological cross-sections, as when, in Plate III, figure 4, he "exhibits the internal surface of the moist interior epidermis, in profile, [...] magnified 60 times" (266-67; cf. Fig. 1). This, in turn, serves as a reminder that although Chevalier considers various kinds of skin as they appear across different sections of the body (the hand, the nose etc.), hence proceeding

'horizontally', he also takes a vertical approach, investigating into the different layers of the skin and their interconnections. According to the logic proposed earlier, the skin, after all, serves as the entrance point to the interior realm of the body and its secrets.

A second example offering a vantage point from which to consider the topic of Romantic bodyscapes is taken from the realm of literature. William Blake, in many of his poems, likewise connects the body with notions of a landscape. In *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, he writes that "Rivers Mountains Cities Villages, / All are Human & when you enter into their Bosoms you walk / In Heavens & Earths" (71:15-17, E225²). This passage, however, is not an assertion about the state of existence of contemporary humankind, but alludes to the utopian and unfallen state of the 'Eternal Man', a state in which the bodily microcosm inheres the macrocosm, where everything opens up dynamically towards everything else, and where body and mind are not mutually exclusive but dialectically imply each other: "in your own Bosom you bear your Heaven / and Earth, & all you behold, though it appears Without it is Within / In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow" (71:17-19). Unfortunately, Blake's fallen Albion, the representative of modern man, seriously fails to fully partake of the fullness of Eternity. With increasing success, the poet suggests, philosophical mindsets like Rationalism and Empiricism, as well as the whole venture connected to the rise of the natural sciences, have managed to establish their modes and models of explaining the world as primary and exclusive claims to truth, which in turn has effected a highly reductive view of humankind. Significantly, and this is certainly one of Blake's most astounding insights, the notions that characterise the Enlightenment episteme (and fallen history as a whole), have thus had the power to not only reshape ideas and mentalities; they also – materially – constricted and reshaped the human body. Indeed, the "terrors" represented by "Bacon & Newton [...] hang / Like iron scourges over Albion" and "Infold around [his] limbs" (15:11-13, E159). Man's originally wide-reaching, trans-corporal senses have been limited to answer to a highly narrow and degradingly materialistic sense economy, henceforth allowing only partial glimpses of Eternity. As Blake famously writes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (pl. 14, E39); and he adds in *Jerusalem*: "If Perceptive Organs vary: Objects of Perception seem to vary: / If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seem to close also" (30 [34]:55-56, E177). In other words, if we look at the things in the world only in one way, these things, including other humans and their bodies, will become what we see in them.

Nonetheless, for Blake, the limitations of the body, particularly the 'imprisonment' of the organs of perception, are not wholly negative. In *The Book of Urizen*, it may seem surprising at first that it is Los, a character prominently standing for the imaginative and creative principle in Blake's mythopoeia, who gives such a limiting human form to Urizen, the embodiment of the rational(istic) principle: by "forging chains new & new" (10:17, E75), Los, the Promethean smith, creates linear clock-time and with it binds Urizen's "eternal mind" (10:19). He encloses his "fountain of thought" (10:34) within a skull, a "roof shaggy wild" (10:33), and afterwards forces him into the

2 The figure after "E" refers to the page number in Erdman's edition of Blake's works.

constricting order of a limiting frame by further providing a spine, ribs, bones, a heart, a brain and a nervous system, eyes, ears, nostrils, a belly, a throat, a tongue, arms and feet. Yet, all of this is a necessary task in order to prevent an already falling Urizen from falling further – into total and irrevocable chaos and shapelessness. Indeed, Los divisively creates parts in place of the former whole and thereby catastrophically triggers ever more divisions and separations, yet his 'analytical' actions are unavoidable to enable Urizen's – and, in *Jerusalem*: Albion's – journey back to a perfect state of synthesis.

As his name unmistakably indicates, Albion does not only represent man as such, he also and more specifically stands for Great Britain. Hence, all the changes that affect him and his body also affect the island, and the other way round. Enlightened mechanistic thinking – "cruel Works / of many Wheels [...], wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic / Moving by compulsion each other" (*Jerusalem* 15:17-19, E159) – has wreaked havoc on the land: "the Four Sons of Los / Stand round him cutting the Fibres from Albions [*sic*] hills" (15:22-23). Nonetheless, all hope is not lost, for instance when personified London – who is a city teeming with individual bodies and, at the same time, a particular being with an afflicted body itself – avers to Albion that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the giant:

[...] Return, Albion, return! I give myself for thee:
My Streets are my, Ideas of Imagination.

[...]
My Houses are Thoughts: my Inhabitants; Affections,
The children of my thoughts, walking within my blood-vessels,
Shut from my nervous form which sleeps upon the verge of Beulah
In dreams of darkness, while my vegetating blood in veiny pipes,
Rolls through the Furnaces of Los, and the Mills of Satan. (34 [38]:30-31, 33-37, E180)

With Blake, land- and cityscapes are bodyscapes, and vice versa. He blurs boundary lines between entities normally considered to be separate in order to insist on a potential wholeness of things, a synthesis, which, however, would not completely erase differences, those individual qualities he commonly refers to as "minute particulars".

Blake's yearning for an integrative relationship between bodies and the world is expressive of the fact that such holistic conceptions of being-in-the-world, in the course of the early modern age, had gradually ceased to be the foundational tenets of Western humanity's self-understanding. By the end of the eighteenth century and despite protests to the contrary, Western humanity had factually freed themselves from a metaphysical order within which they had not been granted the position of self-determined agents. However, as Jan Philipp Reemstma suggests, up until today, this victory has yielded ambiguous results, one of them being the imputation of an untenably idealised status to the body:

Ultimately, the relief afforded by modernity's absence of a binding whole is a burden. For it leaves us without a social locus to take for granted and without an inner locus from which to define our place in society. Modernity's basic assumption that our body is inviolable – which persists as a norm-giving convention however frequently it is vio-