CHAPTER 6

# *Loathsome Sympathy*
## *Shelley's* The Cenci *and the Problem of Empathy*

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I begin by placing this essay in relation, first, to my earlier work on Percy Shelley's *The Cenci* and then to my current critical approach, cognitive historicism. After a revisionary look, partly inspired by recent mirror neuron research and its relation to empathy, at eighteenth-century and Romantic-era sympathy theory, I offer some critical remarks on what Shelley called (in *Prometheus Unbound*) "loathsome sympathy" as it functions in *The Cenci*. Finally, I question the current, almost cult-like, vogue for empathy in light of its problematic aspects and significant limitations.

My interest in *The Cenci* goes back over three decades, and I devoted a chapter of my first book to Shelley's verse tragedy.[1] I thought then, as now, that Shelley's conception of sympathy plays a key role both in *The Cenci* and in *Prometheus Unbound*: the latter expresses the redemptive and transformative power of sympathy, while the former delineates a perverse and perverting version of the same human faculty that one might call, after Shelley, "loathsome sympathy" (I.451 [*SPP* 223]). Less clear, however, was how Shelley thought sympathy, especially its loathsome aspect, functioned, because I then understood sympathy largely in mentalistic and idealist terms. No surprise, given that my model for analyzing character interaction in Romantic drama followed Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and that model's idealist bias revealed itself in the very title of my 1988 study, *A Mental Theater*. By the time my second book, a historicist study of education, literacy, and Romantic discourse, appeared, I was happy to leave my early work behind me and this essay marks the first time I have revisited *The Cenci* in print.[2]

The mode of criticism I practice now (and have helped to develop), cognitive historicism, might sound as though it retains the very mentalistic bias that I now feel limited my youthful approach. However, the term "cognitive" in such compounds as cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience no longer excludes apparent antonyms like "emotive," nor does it imply a disembodied, decontextualized view of the human mind and mental



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behaviors. To the contrary, cognitive historicism as practiced by Ellen Spolsky and myself among others, along with overlapping approaches such as Lisa Zunshine's cognitive cultural criticism, programmatically assumes an embodied, emotive, and sociohistorically situated "mind-brain."[3] Let me insist on this last point. Although cognitive historicists, like cognitive literary critics generally, take a keen interest in presumably invariant features of the brain, mind, cognition, and behavior, such "human universals" are always developed, displayed, understood, and represented in relation to specific physical, social, and cultural environments.[4] In addition, although cognitive literary critics accept a basic scientific worldview and respect the power of sophisticated empirical investigation, they also appreciate the provisional nature of even the most widely accepted empirical findings and remain aware of the contentious status of much current work in the mind and brain sciences.

Mirror neuron theory provides a good case in point. Initially discovered in macaque monkeys, mirror neurons, quite surprisingly, become active both when the monkey performs a given action and when it observes another monkey doing the same thing. In this way, mirror neurons trouble the distinction between motor and sensory areas in the brain and, more intriguingly, seem to soften the divide between self and other. As such, mirror neurons have been described as providing the "foundation for empathy" and, more broadly, the first "plausible neurophysiological explanation for complex forms of social cognition and interaction."[5] Some neuroscientists and philosophers of mind have cast doubt on such claims, noting, to begin with, that most human studies involve indirect evidence and extrapolation from what has been learned about monkeys (single brain cell recordings can rarely be made in human subjects for ethical reasons).[6] Such skepticism has not prevented other brain scientists from making still larger claims for mirror neurons, however, as with V. S. Ramachandran's well-known contention that mirror neurons provide the key to a scientific understanding not solely of empathy but of imitation, language, and culture itself.[7]

Congenial as I find Ramachandran's assertion that mirror neurons "liberated our brain from its Darwinian shackles" by enabling cultural evolution to take over from genetic adaptation, I am neither motivated nor qualified to pronounce on whether mirror neurons are indeed the "neurons that shaped civilization" or instead the "most hyped concept in neuroscience," to quote rival essay titles.[8] Yet when I first encountered mirror neuron theory, I could not help being intrigued by a twenty-first-century materialist account of empathy that seemed to provide much of what was

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missing from my understanding of eighteenth-century and Romantic-era accounts of sympathy. (What these accounts centrally mean by *sympathy* overlaps significantly with what we now mean by *empathy*, a term introduced into English only in 1909 [*OED* def. 2a].) More than that, mirror neuron research has developed in ways that speak suggestively to the function of sympathy in Romantic-era texts such as *The Cenci*, as I now understand them. As summarized, for example, in Marco Iacoboni's *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*, the discovery of mirror neurons has enabled an embodied, emotive, and intersubjective approach to empathy that gives special attention to nonverbal communication (especially by means of gestures and facial expressions) and to unconscious and involuntary responses.[9] I believe that sympathy and its "loathsome" double exhibit virtually the same features in *The Cenci*, and perhaps in many other Romantic-era works as well.

Mirror neuron theory, then, can provide a springboard for a novel appreciation of the workings of sympathy in Romantic-era texts. But only a springboard: the question remains, how did *Shelley* understand and represent sympathy in his early nineteenth-century moment? It simply won't do to claim that Shelley "anticipated" anything like a mirror neuron approach to sympathy, since we have no way of theorizing what such anticipation would mean. Authorial "intuition" might work for Shelley himself, who did grant poets a certain kind of prophetic insight, but it does not work for us, as we have no credible model for how literary prophecy might function. One could always claim that research on mirror neurons has given us insight into a universal propensity and that Shelley, as a great writer, could have observed this propensity in action and then described it. Although considerably less mystical, this claim still raises questions, beginning with the problem that the mirror neuron account of empathy remains more a series of persuasive hypotheses than a body of established facts. Even if we could confidently assert that mirror neuron research had revealed stable and universal features of human nature, we would still need to ask how Shelley, in his own sociohistorical environment, found these features observable, representable, and important enough to be worth representing. In other words, the account of empathy arising out of research on mirror neurons provides a suggestive analogy to Shelley's understanding and representation of sympathy, and nothing more.

Suggestive analogies, however, have their uses. In this case, the analogy between mirror neuron approaches to empathy and eighteenth-century sympathy theory proves salient enough to have struck neuroscientific researchers themselves. Iacoboni, for example, quotes these words from

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Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) as the epigraph to a chapter on mirror neurons and empathy: "When we see a stroke aimed, and just ready to fall on the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer."[10] Here, Iacoboni comments, Smith "nicely" describes the phenomenon of an unconscious, involuntary, visceral empathic reaction "well over two hundred years" before anyone had dreamed of mirror neurons.[11] And the mention of Smith reminds us that the key mirror metaphor itself goes back to the eighteenth century – both Smith and David Hume deploy it in relation to sympathy – and figures prominently in Shelley's *The Cenci* as well.

The question now becomes whether, looking back through the lens provided by recent mirror neuron theory, one can discover elements of a comparably embodied, intersubjective, irrational, and physically immediate account of sympathy that Shelley, for reasons of his own, might have extrapolated from the variants of sympathy theory then current. Shelley's interest in medical and scientific models of mind and mental behavior has by now been well established, as has his early enthusiasm for materialist and "corporealist" approaches to mind.[12] In addition, as I have pointed out elsewhere, Shelley uses "brain" to stand for mind – then still an avant-garde tendency in poetry – more often than any of his fellow high Romantic poets.[13] A number of salient instances occur in *The Cenci*, including Count Cenci's outcry "my brain is swimming round" in the banquet scene of the first act, when Beatrice alone has dared to challenge him, and Beatrice's parallel lament, "My brain is hurt," in the aftermath of her rape by her father (I.iii.164 [*SPP* 155]; III.i.1 [164]). How, for Shelley, does an act of such calculated and horrific violence damage, and perhaps alter, the victim's brain? To what extent did available accounts of sympathy help Shelley to imagine and give poetic expression to such a process?

The question becomes the more pressing given that leading eighteenth-century models of sympathy, not to mention Shelley's own remarks in the *A Defence of Poetry*, can sound quite unabashedly mentalistic if not altogether idealist. For Shelley in the *Defence*, sympathy can be defined as a "going out of our own nature and an identification with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own"; because such sympathy depends on imaginative identification, the imagination is the "great instrument of moral good."[14] Shelley here seems to be elaborating on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who writes in *Émile* (1762) that "it is only imagination which makes us feel the ills of others."[15] Smith's understanding of sympathy involves a famously complex mental process, including a

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moment of judgment that in turn depends on recourse to an "impartial spectator" or idealized self within the self.[16] And Hume's influential definition of the "principle of sympathy" at least sounds quite abstract and mentalistic: "the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination."[17] These pronouncements seem to render sympathy an altogether mentalistic process, leaving the body notably out of account.

And yet Hume's theory, at least, has been described as relying fundamentally on embodied forms of communication and display: "language, tone of voice, body language, and facial expression."[18] This characterization points us in an important direction, one worth following especially because Hume's discussion of sympathy in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740) proved so influential for the theories to come. Most literary scholars have brought their interest in fictional and dramatic representation to their reading of Hume and have often emphasized, for that reason, the ways in which sympathy for Hume can act at a distance, as to be sure it can.[19] Yet the prototypical instances of sympathetic identification in Hume involve irrational thought processes, embodied communication, and physical proximity. This last feature is easy to miss as Hume describes it with the abstract term "contiguity," and contiguity can of course take many forms. But, primarily though not exclusively, contiguity in this context implies a close if not intimate physical connection. Thus compassion "depends, in a great measure, on the contiguity, and even the sight of the object," which shows, Hume adds, that "'tis derived from the imagination," that is, from the faculty of visual imaging.[20] Sympathy requires the "relation of contiguity," which usually entails our ability to perceive "external signs in the countenance and conversation" of the other.[21] Citing his own experience, Hume notes that a "cheerful countenance infuses a sensible complacency and serenity into my mind; as an angry or sorrowful one throws a sudden damp upon me."[22] This paradigmatic example requires only nonverbal communication and registers as feeling; it attests to our intuitive, irrational understanding of human universals, since "nature has preserved a great resemblance among all human creatures," both in the "fabric of the mind" and in "that of the body."[23]

This basic "propensity" to "sympathize with others" and "receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments" does not depend on moral development or education and is already "conspicuous in children."[24] Indeed, "*sympathy*, or the communication of passions, takes place among animals, no less than among men."[25] Hume goes so far as to hint at what sounds like an explanation at the neural level: "As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so

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all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature."[26] Although sympathetic reactions centrally involve the body and (perhaps) its nervous system, and paradigmatically feature close physical proximity and nonverbal displays such as gesture and expression, Hume does allow for sympathetic communication by means of language alone, or we could not be moved by letters, by novel reading, or by verbal reports. Yet physical "contiguity" seems for Hume to inspire the most direct, automatic, and unconscious instances of sympathy: "no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree."[27]

Smith also describes the workings of sympathy in ways that suggest neural transmission and an embodied understanding of human psychology. "Persons of delicate fibres," for example, prove especially liable to spontaneous sympathetic reactions, and the sympathetic imagination allows for physiological as well as psychological identification: "By the imagination [...] we enter as it were into his body."[28] Smith, however, usually insists on a fairly elaborate process involving mental simulation (by means of the imagination, a more robust faculty for Smith than for Hume), judgment, and ultimately an appeal to an idealized "impartial spectator," a "judge within" the mind that enables us to evaluate our own behavior as well as to empathize with other people.[29] In theory, then, sympathy for Smith is highly mediated and inevitably delayed. Even seeing "our brother [...] upon the rack," we cannot refer to our immediate sense experience but rather to the "imagination only," which, by "representing to us what would be our own" sensations in such case, can "at last" begin to affect us with compassion for his "agonies," such that we can "even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them."[30] We could hardly be further here from the immediacy attested to by Hume.

Yet people with delicate nerves are not alone in at least seeming to react instantly, emotionally, and irrationally to the emotional displays of others. "The passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them," and hence of any rational or impartial judgment.[31] So with both grief and joy, which "strongly" (and nonverbally) "expressed in the look and gestures of any one," may "at once affect the spectator with some degree" of the same emotion.[32] Those watching the contortions of a rope dancer will unconsciously "writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation."[33] Here one can readily see the appeal of Smith to mirror

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neuron researchers as a philosophical forerunner providing them with an eighteenth-century pedigree. And in terms of the argument I am making here, Shelley could readily have extrapolated from Smith's rhetoric, as opposed to his fully developed model, support for a view of sympathy as embodied, involuntary, relying primarily on nonverbal sensory cues, and "instantaneous" in its effects.

We should not lose sight, however, of the features of Smith's theory that distance it from mirror neuron theory in the present. In fact, in its interest in representation, judgment, and a comparatively robust exercise of imagination or (in today's terms) simulation, Smith's theory can point up some of the limitations of mirror neuron accounts of empathy. Smith, for example, can account for empathic reactions in the *absence* of any emotional display, or even of the appropriate emotion, on the part of the object of one's compassion. We may feel acute embarrassment on behalf of a foolish person's rudeness, though "he himself appears to have no sense" of his social impropriety; we blush for him "because we cannot help feeling" our own sense of humiliation in such a case.[34] (The relevance of this example to a whole range of theatrical situations, from bedroom farce to tragic irony, should be obvious.) We empathize with the "dreadful […] wretchedness" of insanity, though the sufferer "perhaps laughs and sings."[35] We can even feel sympathy, Smith claims, for the dead, "shut out from life and conversation," a "prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth," though the dead themselves remained unmoved in the "profound security of their repose."[36] These examples point up the capacity of imaginative identification to function independently of the direct bodily or verbal cues insisted upon by mirror neuron theory. As I will argue, Shelley in *The Cenci* both highlights the immediate and unconscious effects of sympathy and retains a place for the more elaborate workings of the sympathetic imagination in his conception of "self-anatomy."

Edmund Burke's relatively brief remarks on sympathy in the *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) also make "imagination" key to sympathetic identification, yet Burke's notion of imagination most resembles Hume's in the directness of its operations and its close relationship to the senses and to what would now be called "feeling." Reasoning as he generally does on what Immanuel Kant termed "physiological" principles, Burke holds that "by the force of natural sympathy" physical displays of such passions as love, fear, anger, grief, and joy affect "every mind" in the same manner, acting upon "certain, natural and uniform principles."[37] Itself a "passion" rather than a chain of mental procedures, sympathy arises independently of the "reasoning faculty," showing the automatic and involuntary character it

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frequently assumes in Hume (and in mirror neuron accounts of empathy). We are moved as others "are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost anything" that others do or "suffer." Sympathy involves "a sort of substitution, by which we are put in the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected," a spontaneous reaction that depends not on reason and judgment but on the "mechanical structure of our bodies," presumably including the nervous system.[38] Burke, that is, advocates not only a "physiological sublime" but a physiological approach to sympathy as well.[39]

Burke's discussion of imitation follows closely upon that of imagination, and the transition makes clear that these two human propensities are as tightly linked for Burke as they are for mirror neuron theorists today. Imitation "arises from much the same cause as sympathy," Burke writes, because just as "sympathy makes us take a concern in whatever men feel," so imitation "prompts us to copy whatever they do [...] without any intervention from the reasoning faculty, but solely from our natural constitution."[40] Like sympathy, imitation begins at a physiological, nonverbal level and sympathy can in fact be facilitated through bodily imitation. Burke gives a striking example of this phenomenon late in the *Enquiry*, citing the "curious story" of the "great physiognomist Campanella." According to Burke's source, Campanella could empathically "penetrate into the inclinations" of other people by composing "his face, his gesture, and his whole body, as nearly as he could into the exact similitude of the person he intended to examine." Investigating the resulting changes in his own mental and emotional state, Campanella could then "enter into the dispositions and thoughts of people" as accurately as if he had been "changed into" them.[41] This passage of the *Enquiry* proved memorable enough to take on a literary afterlife: James Hogg, for example, gives his devil figure Gil-Martin the same method and uncanny degree of success in the *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and Edgar Allan Poe attributes the same ability to his detective Dupin in "The Purloined Letter."[42]

Fantastic as the Campanella anecdote sounds, recent neuroscientific experiments inspired by mirror neuron theory have zeroed in on the basic mechanism behind Burke's claim. Looking specifically (in a functional magnetic resonance imaging [fMRI] study) for links between the supposed human mirror neuron system and the limbic areas, well associated with basic emotions, Iacoboni and his group found that emotion areas duly became activated when test subjects observed faces displaying "fear, sadness, anger, happiness, surprise, and disgust," as did the insula (which connects the limbic area to sites associated with mirror neurons). More

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to the point, such activation increased when the experimental subjects "were also imitating what they saw."[43] Imitating other people's gestures and facial expressions may indeed augment our ability to empathically reproduce and thus intimately comprehend the emotions they are feeling.

Rousseau's account of sympathy stands out for the comparatively late emergence of the sympathetic faculty, at least in the admittedly artificial case of Émile. Brought up in relative social isolation, Émile remains predominantly concerned with his own needs and emotions until around the age of puberty. At that point, however, his sympathetic feelings break out with the kind of immediacy and automaticity seen in Hume and at times in Smith. "He will begin to have gut reactions at the sounds of complaints and cries, the sight of blood flowing will make him avert his eyes; the convulsions of a dying animal will cause him an ineffable distress before he knows whence come these new movements within him."[44] The emergence of sympathy depends on the prior development of a capacity for imaginative identification, resulting in an emphasis on imagination comparable to that of Smith. No one begins to enter into the pains and pleasures of others "until his imagination is animated and begins to transport him out of himself."[45] Yet sympathetic identification seems rapidly to become second nature, operating with the force and speed of instinct. Émile "suffers when he sees suffering"; "it is a natural sentiment."[46] As the phrase "when he sees" suggests, although it depends on a process of imaginative "transport," sympathy remains first and foremost tied to immediate sensory experience, as "all men are affected sooner and more generally by wounds, cries, groans, the apparatus of painful operations," in short, "all that brings objects of suffering to the senses."[47] Although such reactions may be found variously modified in particular individuals due to their differing histories, "they are universal, and no one is completely exempt from them."[48]

We can no longer doubt that prominent eighteenth-century theorists of sympathy, even those who developed highly mediated accounts that stressed representation, imaginative simulation, and internal reflection, also made room for an approach that, in its sensory immediacy and cognitive automaticity, not to mention its "natural" and "universal" status, approximates the neuroscientific understanding of empathy emerging out of mirror neuron research today. In other words, my brief survey of influential writers on sympathy both confirms and extends Ildiko Csengei's identification of the "co-existence of disparate yet interconnected notions of sympathy" in the long eighteenth century, "some mechanistic" – that is, "automatic and immediate" – and others "based on imaginary processes of identification."[49] If indeed (as many neuroscientific studies have by now

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suggested) the mirror neuron approach to empathy turns out to have some degree of empirical validity, the less surprising that earlier theorists of sympathy found themselves at times articulating a comparably automatic, embodied process, even in the face of their own more complex models.

All questions of truth value aside, however, we can safely postulate the availability to Shelley and other Romantic-era writers of an embodied and emotive understanding of sympathy, transmitted rapidly and unconsciously by means of facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tonalities, bypassing judgment and volition, and conveyed, as Csengei discusses, by such metaphors as "contagion" and "magnetism."[50] Understood in this manner, sympathetic reactions resemble more the mechanical process of mirroring than the highly mediated, staged connotations of the theater that informs David Marshall's influential reading of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.[51] Again, I am not arguing that one understanding is preferable to the other but rather that both models of sympathy could be found in various eighteenth-century discourses, at times inhabiting (however uneasily) the works of the same author or even within the same text. Shelley's "official" understanding of sympathy, as set forth in *A Defence of Poetry*, clearly assumes the "imaginary processes of identification" characteristic of sympathy theory at its most mentalistic. In *The Cenci,* however, where Shelley set out to depict the workings of a corrupting, "loathsome" version of sympathy, he found an embodied, unconscious, and (I would add) neural model of sympathetic communication ready to hand.

In an important essay on Shelley and "animal magnetism," Nigel Leask argues that, throughout the later poetry, Shelley remains torn between a Platonizing idealism and a "materialistic naturalism positing the self-sufficiency of sensibility," an embodied sensibility transmitted through the nervous system – even across individuals.[52] Yet in writing *The Cenci*, by his own account, Shelley temporarily abandoned his Neoplatonic "metaphysics" altogether and turned instead to the remorseless delineation of a "sad reality" (*SPP* 140). Seeking to represent "all the feelings of those who once acted it," their "various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other," Shelley drew extensively upon sympathy theory at its most mechanistic and magnetic (141). In fact, he portrays his principal characters as compulsively driven to engage in sympathetic or (in current terms) "theory of mind" activities. As Beatrice's former suitor (and would-be betrayer) Orsino puts it: "'tis a trick of this same family / To analyse their own and other minds" (II.ii.108–109 [162]). Orsino goes on to label such activity, at once introspective and other-directed, "self-anatomy," as though in reading one another's minds the Cencis simultaneously attempt

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to anatomize, to dissect, one another's brains and nervous systems. What this feels like has already been described by Orsino himself, following an interview with Beatrice early in the play.

> I fear
> Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze,
> Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve
> And lay me bare, and make me blush to see
> My hidden thoughts. (I.ii.83–87 [150–151])

Beatrice's father also seeks, in his mental anatomizing, to penetrate to the material level of "every nerve of you," to trace out and deform the very "foldings of the brain" (II.i.155 [159]; IV.i.179 [179]).[53]

Cenci, in other words, seeks ultimately to torture Beatrice from the inside out, and in the process he makes use of the very psychic mechanisms that underlie empathy (or, in Shelley's terms, sympathy). Mirror neuron researchers have pointed out the lack of any firm and reliable connection between empathic understanding and ethical or "prosocial" behavior: "if we see that someone is in pain, we are not automatically induced to feel compassion for him."[54] Some cognitive psychologists go further, suggesting that empathy may even be recruited in the service of positively inducing pain. "Empathy can have a dark side," according to Grit Hein and Tania Singer, such as "when it is used to find the weakest spot of a person to make him or her suffer."[55] The psychologist Paul Bloom, in his recent book *Against Empathy*, concurs, calling the empathic understanding of others an "amoral tool," used by successful "con men, seducers, and torturers."[56] This represents a decidedly minority view, as most cognitive accounts of torture and other antisocial behaviors speak instead of an empathy deficit. Yet whether or not the notion of "dark empathy" proves psychologically plausible, it certainly plays a notable role in the spectatorial culture of our own time: Hannibal Lecter and Tony Soprano, for example, both show an uncanny ability to understand their victims from the inside precisely in order to manipulate, torment, or destroy them with greater success.[57] Bloom gives a fictional example of his own, referring readers to the monstrous yet empathic torturer O'Brien in George Orwell's *1984*.[58] We can see Shelley's Count Cenci, if not as the single great progenitor of such figures, at least as an early and notable ancestor. (Whether the sadistic empath can be found *only* in fictional works, and not in real life, remains an open question.)

In keeping with Hume's emphasis on the role of visual experience and "contiguity" in arousing sympathy, Shelley offers a number of quite

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detailed descriptions of his characters' facial expressions. As I have argued elsewhere, facial descriptions of this sort in many Romantic-era texts should be understood less in terms of physiognomy than of physiology.[59] That is, Shelley represents faces in motion, often adding in accompanying changes in gesture or complexion or vocal tonality. Consider two examples from Act I: first, Beatrice's description of her father's expression. "I fear that wicked laughter round his eye / Which wrinkles up the skin even to the hair" (I.iii.37–38 [*SPP* 152]) – indeed, this particular example reads almost like a passage from the pioneering neurologist Charles Bell's *Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression*.[60] It also represents a moment of intersubjective communication – Count Cenci fully intends Beatrice to react anxiously – as does this attempt, again by Beatrice, to read the expression of her dubious ally Orsino.

> Even now you look on me
> As you were not my friend, and as if you
> Discovered that I thought so, with false smiles
> Making my true suspicion seem your wrong. (I.ii.30–33 [149])

We can appreciate not only what Lisa Zunshine would term the multiple levels of "embedment" in this brief speech – Beatrice sees that Orsino affects not to know that he in fact knows that Beatrice suspects that Orsino is deceiving her – but also the rapidity with which Beatrice registers all this, the wordless, physiological communication by means of glances and smiles, and the role that emotion or "passion" plays in such exchanges.[61]

The first scene of Act II, in which Cenci begins to torment Beatrice with intimations of his intent to rape her, moves from one such description to the next, again emphasizing facial expressions while evincing the multimodal and intersubjective character of what Hume calls "*sympathy*, or the communication of passions."[62] Here is one example of how the entire body becomes involved in an expressive act:

> How pale you look; you tremble, and you stand
> Wrapped in some fixed and fearful meditation,
> As if one thought were over strong for you:
> Your eyes have a chill glare. (II.i.29–32 [*SPP* 156]; Lucretia on Beatrice)

And here is one that stresses the intersubjective character of sympathetic communication, the way that one knows one's own mind in part by reading the expressions of others: "And every one looked in his neighbour's face / To see if others were as white as he." Lucretia, narrating this moment, adds that she herself "felt the blood / Rush to [her] heart," elucidating the

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sudden pallor that propagates itself as if by rapid contagion (II.i.38–41 [156]). Contagion becomes an explicit theme in the play, or rather, to use Shelley's terminology, contamination.

Cenci's ultimate design concerns nothing short of transforming Beatrice into a mirror version of himself, and thus at once destroying her and living on through her. I argued much the same long ago, but this time around I can better appreciate the physicality of Cenci's strategy and its relation to an embodied version of sympathy theory.[63] Cenci's description of how his own facial, gestural, tonal, and physiological confusion becomes transferred to Beatrice brings this out quite starkly, and I will here quote only the key lines of that speech, which brings to a culmination the series of such descriptions in Act I, Scene ii:

> Then it was I whose inarticulate words
> Fell from my lips, and who with tottering steps
> Fled from your presence, as you now from mine. (II.i.112–114 [*SPP* 158])

This psychophysiological mirroring is intensified rhetorically, here, in the figure of parallel (heightened further by elision) and structurally, later in the play, by the corollary relation between Orsino and Giacomo, Beatrice's brother, in the play's subplot.

Finding Giacomo an easier mark than his formidable sister, Orsino goes to work on him as well, eliciting Giacomo's sympathetic responses to his skillful deployment of gestures, glances, tones, and facial expressions. Mistrustful of the workings of his own "unwilling brain," Giacomo begs Orsino to back off: "My heart denies itself / To think what you demand" (II.ii.87–88 [*SPP* 162]). But Orsino represents himself as Giacomo's secret mirror – "a friend's bosom / Is as the inmost cave of our own mind" – and claims to read his true intentions: "You look what I suspected" (II.ii.87–92 [162]). Weakening under the assault of Orsino's seemingly mesmeric influence, Giacomo again pleads with him to leave off: "Spare me now!" (II. ii.92 [162]). All too late. As he will bitterly lament after being accused of Cenci's murder:

> O, had I never
> Found in thy smooth and ready countenance
> The mirror of my darkest thoughts; hadst thou
> Never with hints and questions made me look
> Upon the monster of my thought, until
> It grew familiar to desire (V.i.19–24 [188])

Orsino can correctly claim, "You cannot say / I urged you to the deed," but claims this knowing that verbal directness would only have counteracted

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his deployment of manipulative mirroring (V.ii.18–19 [188]). This is the same distorting or "monstrous" mirroring that Prometheus must resist in *Prometheus Unbound* – "Methinks I grow like what I contemplate / And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy" (I.451–452 [223]) – and what some in the present have called "dark" empathy.[64]

Wishing to convey the sheer power and emotional intensity that the sympathetic relation can take, Hume describes moments when his own individual agency gives way, at least partially, to the desires and passion of the other: "no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his own opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree."[65] Cenci's relentless program of verbal, physical, and finally sexual abuse of Beatrice seeks to prolong and greatly intensify such moments of other-identification, and the play attests to his success in doing so in a number of ways. One concerns the rhetoric of contamination. Cenci boasts to Lucretia, Beatrice's stepmother, that his daughter will soon "grope through a bewildering mist / Of horror" (II.i.184–185 [*SPP* 159]); in the aftermath of the rape, Beatrice tells Lucretia that a "clinging, black, contaminating mist" surrounds her, unconsciously deploying Cenci's own imagery to describe the contagious effect of his assault (III.i.17 [164]). Later in the same scene, she speaks of Cenci's blood circulating in her "contaminated veins" (III.i.96 [166]). Another textual manifestation of Cenci's successful infiltration of his daughter's subjectivity has Beatrice unknowingly adopting Cenci's rhetoric. In the play's opening scene, Cenci declares that he has "no remorse and little fear" (I.i.84 [147]); after agreeing to Cenci's murder, Beatrice tells Lucretia to put off "remorse and fear" (III.i.208–209 [168–169]).

If Beatrice comes most to resemble her father through planning and helping to execute his murder, one could argue that Count Cenci, foreseeing this very possibility, in fact plans the murder himself. Though rarely noted, Cenci seems to plant the seeds of his own murder in haranguing Lucretia over her alleged disloyalty. "You were not here conspiring?" he asks Lucretia as Beatrice and her younger brother Bernardo exit the stage (II.i.137 [*SPP* 158]). Were they not discussing:

> How just it were to hire assassins, or
> Put sudden poison in my evening drink?
> Or smother me when overcome by wine? (II.i.141–143 [158])

Not long afterward, Cenci will be strangled to death by hired assassins after Lucretia has put, not poison, but an opiate in his evening goblet of wine (IV.ii.30 [181]; IV.iii.45 [182–183]). If Cenci, who has tired of life,

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plans his own murder as part of his program of turning Beatrice into his mirror image, he seems to claim as much in hinting at an "act" that "shall soon extinguish all / For me" (II.i.188–189 [159]). All indeed.

Beatrice claims that the murder will have a mirror-like, homologous relation to the rape that it avenges – "something which will make / The thing that I have suffered but a shadow / In the dread lightning which avenges it" (III.i.87–89 [*SPP* 166]). One could also mention the ironic use of "atonement" – at once conveying revenge and a collapsing together of identities, at-one-ment – that occurs not once but three times in relation to the murder (III.i.215 [169]; III.i.333 [171]; IV.iv.92 [185]). And Cenci intimates the perverse mirroring – the loathsome sympathy – at the heart of his program when, during his extended curse on Beatrice, he hopes that she will bear a child, "a hideous likeness of herself, that as / From a distorting mirror, she may see / Her image mixed with what she most abhors" (IV.i.146–148 [179]). Her incestuous child, in other words, will both literalize and prolong the program of loathsome sympathy that Cenci's torment and rape of Beatrice have set in motion and that his murder has sealed.

"The minds of men are mirrors to one another," Hume writes of sympathy.[66] Smith suggests that without sympathy – without the ability to reflect on one's own actions and passions as we imagine others would regard them – one could have no sense of personal identity at all. So, a person growing up "solitary" from birth would have no way to regard his own "character" because "he is provided with no mirror" in which to consider himself: "Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before."[67] If sympathy ultimately forms character, can a perverse kind of sympathy deform it? So Giacomo wonders in Act V, in his final interview with Orsino, "O, had I never / Found in thy smooth and ready countenance / The mirror of my darkest thoughts" (V.i.19–21 [*SPP* 188]). So, by Act V, the spectator or reader is forced to wonder of Beatrice, as Shelley certainly intended. "It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification […] that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists" (142).

Mary Shelley considered Act V "a masterpiece," and one can imagine why she singled it out for special praise.[68] Primarily, the powerful emotional effect of this act relies on the splitting of our sympathetic response that Shelley seems to have aimed for all along, and the resulting "anatomizing" that links our own overcharged sympathetic faculties to those of the characters. Two features of the act seem designed to intensify such

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audience engagement: first, the way in which onstage sympathetic communication fails or malfunctions, particularly in relation to the Pope's reported responses (or rather, lack of responsiveness) when twice asked for a compassionate act of clemency. When even Barnardo, despite his guileless naivety, fails to move the Pope, his metaphor for losing Beatrice says more than he perhaps intends:

> To see
> That perfect mirror of pure innocence
> Wherein I gazed, and grew happy and good,
> Shivered to dust! (V.iv.129–132 [*SPP* 201])

The mirror of empathy, grown increasingly distorted throughout the play, altogether shatters at its end.

A second remarkable feature concerns the metatheatrical aspects of this final act, which not only stages a show trial of sorts (inquisition might be a better term) but regularly announces its own theatrical status. Orsino reports (in soliloquy) that he tried to "act a solemn comedy" (V.i.77 [*SPP* 190]); Beatrice denounces the trial as a "wicked farce" (V.ii.38 [191]). Later she worries that the inevitable public execution will constitute a "spectacle" compelling enough to empty the "theatres" (V.iii.38–39 [196]) – a claim that strikingly echoes Burke's contention that a notable public execution would result in the "emptiness of the theatre," such is the power of "real sympathy."[69]

These instances of metatheater underscore how eager Shelley was to have this play performed: in stark contrast to *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci* certainly cannot be regarded as a closet drama. Rather, Shelley hoped that his dramatic verse would provoke sympathetic reactions in live audiences through its embodied performance by theatrically trained and charismatic actors. The role of Beatrice, in particular, he hoped would be played by Eliza O'Neill, an actress whose performances, according to Mary Shelley, had "deeply moved" him through the "intense pathos, and the sublime vehemence of passion she displayed."[70] Apparently for Shelley, an actress of O'Neill's caliber could provoke sympathetic reactions in the audience in spite of the considerable disadvantages of the London theaters of the day.[71]

Having begun by referring to empirical psychological studies of empathy and its possible relation to brain activity, I want to emphasize, before concluding, that I would not claim anything like psychological realism or even plausibility for Shelley's *The Cenci*. Shelley certainly attempted to endow his characters with something like real psychological mechanisms, drawing on the sympathy theory available to him and which I have

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reexamined in light of the current neuroscience of empathy. I find the correspondences between sympathy theory then and empathy research now of great interest, and at least some of the psychic mechanisms that both forms of inquiry attempt, however imperfectly, to describe may well prove real ones. Whether or not mirror neurons in humans turn out to have the importance recently ascribed to them, too much convincing empirical evidence for what one might term "mirror neuron *effects*" has mounted up to dismiss altogether – *some* kind of neural system, or combination of systems, must be functioning in more or less the ways that the mirror system is thought to function by researchers like Iacoboni and Ramachandran. But while Shelley based his main characters on historical originals, they remain literary constructs, and whatever Shelley himself thought, they do not seem to behave or react very much like real people might. Sadists and torturers like the historical Count Cenci tend to manifest marked deficits in empathy, not perverse or "dark" versions of empathy, in contrast to such fictional counterparts as Orwell's O'Brien, Harris's Hannibal Lecter, or Shelley's Cenci himself.

Still, the critical accounts of Bloom, Breithaupt, and others have brought out, at the very least, crucial limitations to human empathy, at a time when empathy has attained both a cult-like status and a significant market niche within our current twenty-first-century American moment. Writing in 2016, Bloom surveyed the Amazon.com book site and found "over fifteen hundred books" displaying the term "*empathy* in their title or subtitle."[72] He notes in particular books aimed at parents and teachers, self-help books, and guides to boost marketing and sales. This trend has shown no signs of diminishing over the five years since: a quick internet search today yields sites with titles like "8 Genius Examples of Empathic Content Marketing in Action" and a *Forbes* "council post" entitled "Empathy is the Key to Great Marketing." Empathy has itself become commoditized, as the *New York Times Magazine* acidly noted in reviewing a celebrity-studded and "seriously weird" Pharrell Williams "MasterClass" on empathy, one that apparently involves more self-promotion than genuine fellow-feeling: a "compilation of commodified theory of mind."[73]

If sheer overselling has begun to inspire widespread skepticism regarding empathy as social panacea, this may help to underscore its limitations, particularly in regard to some of the most vexing and potentially cataclysmic problems facing human beings at this time: climate change, habitat destruction, species extinction, and environmental degradation generally, not to mention global pandemics. Bloom cites climate change as a particularly glaring problem for which "empathy favors doing nothing."[74]

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Empathy works at the level of individuals rather than populations and inevitably favors the local (on Hume's contiguity principle) over the global. The philosopher Jesse Prinz, in his own brief "Against Empathy," defines it as an "essentially dyadic emotion" arising "between two individuals," powerless to address large-scale problems: "Environmental destruction and widespread diseases cannot be combated by addressing the plight of a few individuals."[75] Faced with issues like global warming and the COVID-19 pandemic, our best hope may lie, Prinz declares, in the "extirpation of empathy."[76]

New developments in both the life sciences and the humanities may be converging toward a new consensus, not simply on the shortcomings of empathy but on the limitations of thinking in terms of individuals at all. In *Entangled Life*, for example, the biologist Merlin Sheldrake gestures toward both the massive and intricate web of interconnections in what we call "nature" and the (overlapping) web of interconnected species informing the "human" as well. "We are ecosystems, composed of – and decomposed by – an ecology of microbes […] ecosystems that span boundaries and transgress categories": not least the category of the "individual."[77] The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, similarly defines the planet as a "dynamic ensemble of relationships" among and across species, advocating a radically "new form of cosmopolitanism" that is "larger than the human" and capable of extending "ideas of politics and justice to the nonhuman, including both the living and the nonliving."[78] Mind-bending as they are, such proposals both adhere to the empirical findings and sophisticated models emerging out of fields like biology, neuroscience, and ecology and address the novel requirements of ethics and politics in a time of planetary crisis and the looming threat of extinction.

This does not mean preferring a utilitarian ethics of cool calculation over the human warmth associated with empathy. As Bloom notes, empathy can and should be distinguished from compassion, a feeling for rather than with suffering beings, one that can be broadly extended as in Buddhist teachings on "great compassion": "Less empathy," Bloom summarizes, "more kindness."[79] The Bodhisattva ideal of great compassion in Mahayana Buddhism, which Bloom cites, depends on practices that erode one's conviction in a separate, individual self; *karuna* (compassion), *anatman* ("no-self"), and *pratityasamutpada* (the mutual co-arising and interweaving of self and other) all name different facets of the Bodhisattva way.[80] We may seem to have strayed quite far here from Shelley. Yet the same poet who memorably embodied, in *The Cenci*, the figure of the perverse empath also

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offered, in *Prometheus Unbound*, an alternative highly resonant with the ideal of "great" or universal compassion pointed to by Bloom and central to the Mahayana schools of Buddhism (about which Shelley could have known virtually nothing).[81] Repeatedly assailed by the Furies' attempts to entrap him in a mirror relation of "loathsome sympathy," Prometheus prevails through taking up the universalizing compassion he simply, and powerfully, announces in retracting his curse on Jupiter: "I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (I.305 [*SPP* 218]). As the drama unfolds – or, rather, as dramatic tension gives way to lyric, choric, and hymnic modes – the borders between Prometheus and humankind increasingly blur and humankind as a whole emerges "Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed" (III.iv.194 [269]).[82] In a word, unbound. The design of *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* taken together implies that the dyadic relation between individuals undergirding tragedy – as well as what we now call empathy – must at last give way to an unconstrained, selfless compassion if we are to join with other beings, living and nonliving, in repairing a damaged and afflicted world.

## Notes

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3 See Ellen Spolsky, "Cognitive Literary Historicism: A Response to Adler and Gross," *Poetics Today* 24.2 (2003), 161–183; Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 1–16; and Lisa Zunshine, "Introduction," in Zunshine, ed. *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 1–33.
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5 Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 5.
6 See especially Gregory Hickok, *The Myth of Mirror Neurons: The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition* (New York: Norton, 2014).
7 V. S. Ramachandran, "The Neurons That Shaped Civilization," in *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (London: Norton, 2011), 117–135.
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11 Iacoboni, *Mirroring People*, 107. For a more extended examination of connections between Smith's sympathy and mirror neuron research in the present, see L. Lynne Kiesling, "Mirror Neuron Research and Adam Smith's Concept of Sympathy: Three Points of Correspondence," *Review of Austrian Economics* 25.4 (December 2012), 299–313.
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19 See, for example, Adela Pinch's influential reading of Hume in *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 17–50.
20 Hume, *Treatise*, 239–240.
21 Hume, *Treatise*, 206–207.
22 Hume, *Treatise*, 206.
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24 Hume, *Treatise*, 2.
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28 Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 10, 9.
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32 Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 11.
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56 Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 37.
57 Fritz Breithaupt cites the fictional character Hannibal Lecter (best known from the 1991 Jonathan Demme film *The Silence of the Lambs*) as a prime example of "empathetic sadism" in *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, trans. Andrew B. B. Hamilton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 173–174. The Hannibal Lecter character was created by the novelist Thomas Harris, initially in *The Red Dragon* (New York: Putnam, 1981).
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65 Hume, *Treatise*, 378.
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