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- (1996) 'Uncanny innards', review of Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: dissection and the human body in Renaissance culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), *Metascience* 9, 179-182.

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## UNCANNY INNARDS

Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: dissection and the human body in Renaissance culture* (London: Routledge, 1995). Pp. xii + 327. UK 35.00 HB.

In a "parenthesis of fascinated horror" before "the complete discovery and subjection of the body to science", Renaissance anatomists and poets shared peculiar emotions of dread and desire towards the bodies they dissected and described. Jonathan Sawday's ambitious project is to evoke the common taboos, resistances, and fears which the human body provoked in its various early modern investigators, while telling "stories of terrible cruelty, which are tinged by a form of dark eroticism". He is justifiably proud of the historical range of his study, across medicine, cartography, literature, the law, myth, art, theology, social history, and philosophy. But he seeks more than a synthesis of these disparate domains, hoping also both to sketch a new grand narrative about conceptual, practical, and phenomenological changes regarding the body, and further "if not to dispel, then at least to explain" our own multiple, ambiguous feelings about our innards. Thus he marvellously maintains simultaneous attention to culture and psychology, combining high theory with historical precision in rare and risky fashion.

Sawday rightly works hard, in populist style, at seducing the broad readership to whom this history should matter, and his wish is supported by beautiful production, with 32 striking illustrations; obligatory relevance is added with science fiction and virtual technology. The abstract journalese which can claim that "a world of affinity was collapsing" while "older certainties, however, still existed" is balanced elsewhere by controlled and informative simile. We think afresh about Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* when it's compared to trophy photos of tigers slain in British India, wild "nature" civilized by conquering hunters as the criminal corpse is opened in triumphant medical display.

Sawday's writing is most rich and wry in dealing with the art and literature of his central period, roughly 1540-1680, showing English poets from Spenser to Cowley and Milton to be inevitably engaged in conceptual conflicts about the body. Donne is a constant presence, Sawday applying scholarly accuracy about just which two orifices are "aversely laid" in *Loves Progresse* to illustrate the homosocial mediation permitted by the "blazon" genre, in which male poets divided up female bodies in violent displays of erotic mastery. His analysis of "infamy", the coalescence of loathing and fascination around anatomical ritual, extends neatly to anatomy's links with execution and penal practice, to the fantastical illustrations of self-dissecting bodies which peel back their own skin to aid penetration of the innards, and to the geographic attitude by which body-terrain lay open to be explored and exploited, named and possessed by heroic adventurers.

Relying on juxtaposition and affinity, Sawday constructs a persuasive synchronic picture of the mixture of sexuality and mortality in Renaissance anatomy. His claims about conceptual or causal priority are wisely few: it's difficult to explain just how fantasy dissections by poets "helped to fashion" actual dissections (212). Weakness in the organization of material appears when the implicit diachronic narrative is investigated: despite sane warnings about dating the epistemological ruptures in which, "at some point during the 17th century", the medical "world of interlocking metaphors ... began to crumble", displaced by a new "technological regime" of the body (230), Sawday's periodization is less novel, more nostalgic than his straight criticism. There is surprisingly little detail on theories or practices of the body on either historical side of his Renaissance focus. Ritual invocations of Bakhtin and Caroline Bynum fail to flesh out references to the mysterious chaos of rapacious pre-modern bodies, and Sawday's secondary sources on medieval medicine are outdated, too easily convicted of patrilineal triumphalism. Pre-Vesalian medical theory (as

opposed to medical illustration) is neglected, with Platonic dualism seen as the dominant influence on conceptions of the body. More attention to Aristotelian and Galenic physiology might show that it was impossible to think of the body in isolation "as a discrete entity" not just (as Sawday suggests) because it contained the soul, but because it was embedded in changing physical and cultural environments, a temporary pocket of stability traversed by multiple forces which threaten the fragile equilibrium of its proper fluid balances.

But the period before Vesalius is not Sawday's stated topic, though it would help in evaluating his views on the uniqueness of Renaissance body culture. He does, however, profess to explain the shift from Renaissance to "modern" bodies, at the other end of his chronological sweep, when everything "was falling into a collapsed and fragmentary rubble of displaced body parts and Cartesian doubt" (128). Sawday's use of scholarship in the history of science is not as sharp and humorous as his literary history, and so he can only caricature the new natural philosophy and medicine. In his account, the triumph of "the colder eye of science", announced in 17th-century mechanism and "confirmed over the following 300 years of scientific culture" (22, 265), stripped wonder and awe from the human body which was now silenced, "divested of its latent capriciousness" (170, 181, 37): the machine, without difference or specificity, now "emerged to stride, once and for all, within the body's interior" (130, 28). The new scientists, proclaiming their "austere communion with nature", inevitably subjected the body to their method while liberating it from theology (249, 98, 105), with mechanism's monstrous legacy unchallenged in the gap from Traherne and Margaret Cavendish to Freud and Joyce (146, 182). These are legends, if gorgeous ones, but Sawday's narrative of the end of "sacred anatomy", the temple of the body in ruins, is powerful death-of-nature historiography.

Yet if Sawday read the physiology of Descartes or Thomas Willis (symptomatically misdescribed as "the high priest of mechanism" (257)) with the sophistication of, say, his intriguing account of the somatic visions of "pre-modernist" English poets "hovering on the brink of the Cartesian moment" (141-6), he would find "the body's essential strangeness" (259) outside poetry, at the heart of 17th-century natural philosophy. His tired sketches of Cartesian dualism neglect the dynamics of fluids which drive mechanistic physiology: the clumpings and commotions of the animal spirits which carry and transform patterns over time are precisely the medium of difference in Cartesian automata, which are not only animated and sentient but also marked by history and experience. In turn, Sawday's sensible reflections on the politics of Restoration science (239-242) are marred because he doesn't realize that the defence of the supernatural, of phenomena inaccessible to reason, was intrinsic to the defence of English mechanism: so he wrongly sees Boyle, Hooke, and Willis as secularizers, sharing in a "new philosophy of human reason" which just banished the uncanny (37, 92, 253).

This picture not only reinforces false dichotomies between religion and natural philosophy (ironically reinscribing the disastrous humanities/sciences dualism which he ascribes to mechanists' myths of autonomous reason), but also suggests a bizarre, sudden transformation of medical philosophy and practice under newly rational technologies of the body. The literature on medical professionalization can be read as implying swift divorce between a holistic "network of traditional remedies" and new theory-driven elite therapies administered by devotees "of the mechanical impulse" (230-1, 249, 253): but surviving evidence suggests that the medical practices of Sydenham, Willis, or Locke were no more revolutionary or "rational", no further from older, weirder assumptions about spirits, humours, fluids, and the "non-naturals", than were the details of their physiological theories. The delicate bodies treated in 18th-century spa society were indeed a mark of the sympathetic superiority of their owner's sentimental souls: but this later form of distancing and appropriation of body by feeling self did not result from renewed loyalty to any theoretical dualism.

The example has wider significance for Sawday's overall narrative. If the body was silenced and the strangeness within disavowed, if boundaries between bodies and their cultural or physical surrounds were more rigorously reinforced and the multiplicity of interrelations between body and world reduced or policed, if nerves and innards were solidified and organs conceptually isolated, it's at least arguable that these shifts occurred much later than the later 17th century. Body historians find that period so fascinating not so much because "our" modern body culture and

concepts began then, as because odd fluids still roamed bodies which remained strangely open at a time when, we'd always been told, reason's rule over a disenchanted physical world was meant to have commenced.

Sawday's layered elucidation of the background to fantasies of erotic self-destruction encourages such disagreement about the early modern body, and his brave theoretical frameworks for understanding the "vivid dreams of punishment and partition" he finds in the texts are elegantly applied: he uses Freud (on masochism and on the uncanny) wonderfully, and should further develop this difficult amalgam of body history and psychoanalysis.

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Updated 4 June 2000.