“A flaming world embrace”: Lucretian Materialism and the Question of Human Sympathy in Mathilde Blind’s *The Ascent of Man*

Melanie Asselmans (017 11546)
Promotor: Dr. Brecht de Groote
Co-promotor: Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Bekers

Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in Gender en Diversiteit
Academiejaar 2018-2019 (28 mei 2019)
Academisch artikel
Woordenaantal: 9.777
Deze masterproef is een examendocument dat niet werd gecorrigeerd voor eventueel vastgestelde fouten. In publicaties mag naar dit werk worden gerefereerd, mits schriftelijke toelating van de promotor(en) die met naam op de titelpagina is vermeld.
Abstract

It is known that the oeuvre of Victorian aesthete Mathilde Blind (1841-1896) was influenced by evolutionary theory. Her epic poem *The Ascent of Man* (1889) most attests to this. However, critics have yet to examine in depth Blind's cultural critique on Darwin's view of gender relations through her evocation of a universal emotion, in part shaped by her esteem for a Shelleyan brand of Romantic radicalism. This article examines Blind's exploration of sympathetic citizenship in relation to the debate on materialism that pervaded much of Victorian thought and the conflict between the bodily and the spiritual it laid bare. It does so through the analysis of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and the notion of *clinamen*, and focuses on her poem *The Ascent of Man*. By exploring the notion of human sympathy, Blind offers the means for an alternative to the prevailing conventions of the time.

Het oeuvre van de Victoriaanse dichter Mathilde Blind (1841-1896) toont de invloed van evolutietheorie aan, waarvan haar episch gedicht *The Ascent of Man* (1889) het grootste voorbeeld is. Critici hebben evenwel nog niet in beeld gebracht hoe Blind Darwins kijk op gender relaties bekritiseert door middel van haar evocatie van een universele emotie; een notie die overigens deels gevormd is door haar achting voor de Romantische radicaliteit van P.B. Shelley. Dit artikel onderzoekt Blind's exploratie van menselijke sympathie in diens relatie tot het debat omtrent materialisme dat centraal stond in het Victoriaanse tijdperk en waarbij het conflict tussen het lichamelijke en het geestelijke werd blijkgelegd. Het artikel analyseert hierbij Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* en de notie van *clinamen* en focust zich op Blinds gedicht *The Ascent of Man*. Door middel van haar exploratie van menselijke sympathie, biedt Blind een alternatief aan voor de heersende conventies die deze periode karakteriseren.

Keywords: Mathilde Blind, Darwin, Lucretius, materialism, *clinamen*, P.B. Shelley, aestheticism, Walter Pater, Gerard Manley Hopkins, gender relations
Let us dare to solve the problems of life in our own way and day; let us try and see for ourselves, not take it for granted that all our thinking has been done for us by our ancestors (Mathilde Blind, Madame Roland).

In many ways, Mathilde Blind (1841-1896), as James Diedrick expresses in his critical biography on the author, was “a postmodernist avant la lettre” (xiii). Diedrick especially intends to call out Blind’s sensitivity to the complexity and fluidity of identity, itself predicated on her investment in the “Woman Question”. For Blind, it was especially the notions of female agency and female autonomy (e.g. sexual autonomy and female citizenship) that featured prominently in her argument against gender conventions. With the development of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory and the growing pivotal role of science in late nineteenth-century Britain, the consideration of women’s natural inferiority governed much of public life. In this paper, I argue that Blind reintroduces a cultural component to the equation through the contemplation of sympathetic citizenship, which calls into question this post-Darwinian materialist view of gendered relations. This contemplation, much like Blind’s other works, entails a recognition of (female) agency and human will.

The pivotal importance of female agency to Blind’s intervention in late-Victorian culture is rehearsed as early as her adolescence. An unpublished fifty-five-page manuscript by the author that narrates “the story of a precocious, rebellious girl coming of age at a school for girls in London” (Diedrick 10) discloses elements of Blind’s own teenage years. In correspondence with New Woman writer Mona Caird, Blind muses on the possibility of writing an autobiographical New Woman novel in which the theme of women’s independence and agency would be central to the plot. The fragment recounts the experiences of Alma – who represents Blind during her adolescent years – and gives the reader a glimpse into the events that have shaped her later outlook. Alma’s infatuation for a girl named Amy, which represents Blind’s own sexual nonconformism, the character’s captivation with Percy Bysshe Shelley, her dismissal from school as a consequence of declaring her atheism, her travels to Zurich where she encounters people who fought in the 1848 revolutions, and her connection to nature on a spiritual level: all these elements are stations in Blind’s own journey in life and characterise the author’s identity as a freethinker, feminist, and female aesthete. In his short memoir on
Blind, Richard Garnett – Blind’s lifelong friend and literary advisor – captures the author’s independent disposition. In relation to her views on religion, he writes:

Mathilde quickly found inquiry synonymous with martyrdom, and . . . it is difficult to see how it could have been otherwise. The inquiries, which, though no doubt they might with advantage have been deferred to a later period of her career, were merely representatives of a phase through which every thinking young person had passed, was passing, or would pass, produced results comparable in a small way with Shelley’s expulsion from the University of Oxford. Her researches and her conclusions having come to light, the question was plainly put to her, would she give up her heretical opinions? *Upon conviction, yes; upon compulsion, no* (Symons 8, emphasis mine).

Blind’s late twenties attest to the outspoken character present both in the autobiographical fragment and Garnett’s account of the author. She came to occupy a prominent position in the aesthetic movement and had forged close-knit relationships with some of the leading male (literary) figures of the period. In Algernon Swinburne, William Michael Rossetti and Garnett, she found equals in her admiration for Shelley. One element that contributed immensely to her career was the literary journal *Dark Blue* (1871-1873). In his biography on the author, James Diedrick writes:

Blind’s brief association with the journal was formative. It established her reputation as a pioneering female aesthete firmly allied with the politically radical wing of the aesthetic movement. It showcased a unique cosmopolitan sensibility that characterized her writing for the next quarter century. And . . . it led to her subsequent importance to and leadership role among the New Woman writers who emerged in the 1880s and 1890s (Diedrick 98-99).

*Dark Blue* would also offer Blind a stage on which to publish works under her own name, casting off the pseudonym Claude Lake, the alias of a beginning woman writer trying to
establish a literary identity within an overtly male literary history. Taking into account this difficulty for women and the general consensus that “their knowledge [was] not often like the learning of men, to be reproduced in some literary composition . . . but [that] it [was] to come out in conduct” (More 2:1), Blind’s decision to cast off her male pseudonym at this time in her career says much about her own literary exertions; especially in its association with women writers’ contributions as something that is seen through the lens of their sex rather than their ability to publish an excellent piece of writing. Something that, Hannah More asserts, is the one human consideration which would perhaps more effectually tend to damp in an aspiring woman the ardours of literary vanity . . . than any which she will derive from motives of humility, or propriety, or religion; which is, that in the judgement passed on her performances, she will have to encounter the mortifying circumstance of having her sex always taken into account, and her highest exertions will probably be received with the qualified approbation, that it is really extraordinary for a woman (More 2:13).

Blind’s central position among some of her literary contemporaries is reflective of her ability to sidestep these conventions. Moreover, the focus on female sexual agency in her works and her critique of evolutionary theory that would preoccupy much of her later writing, including Tarantella (1885) and The Ascent of Man (1889), showcase her active resistance to Victorian pigeonholing. The overtly radical nature that shines through in Blind’s persona as much it does in her oeuvre displays the author’s adherence to the belief that women’s subordinate societal position is a consequence of socialisation rather than an outcome of their natural inferiority. Yet, to this day, Blind is barely touched upon in critical works on nineteenth-century literary history and feminist literary criticism.

---

1 Gilbert and Gubar have touched upon this extensively in their critical work The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). For further discussion on the position of women in nineteenth-century British literary discourse, see Joan Shattuck’s Women and Literature in Britain: 1800-1900 (2001).

2 Hannah More (1745-1833) was a religious poet, playwright and social reformist. She enjoyed a successful literary career and was a member of the Bluestockings community. Among other things, More actively opposed slavery and contributed to women’s right for education by setting up several schools. However, it must be acknowledged that she still argued from a point of view of sexual difference and did not agree with, for example, her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft. For a general overview of the author’s life, see Susan Skedd (2004).
Seeking to repair Mathilde Blind’s under-acknowledged position as a freethinker, feminist, and female aesthete in late Victorian society and her affiliation with some of the leading literary figures of that period, this paper examines more thoroughly how her oeuvre engaged with the “Woman Question” that occupied much of intellectual life in Victorian Britain. It is especially her engagement with Darwinian sexual selection and her feminist critique of said theory in her writing that I will be concerned with. As I have mentioned, one component of Blind’s critique of Darwinian sexual selection and its ingrained gender bias lies in her consideration of socialisation as playing a substantial role in women’s subordinate socio-political position. In a reaction to an increasingly materialist post-Darwinian Britain, Blind’s oeuvre reintroduces society into the equation. Darwin’s The Descent of Man not only intensified the on-going debate regarding women’s inferiority as a consequence of biological determinism; it also served as confirmation to many that man was in fact “more powerful in body and mind than woman” (Darwin 597). Even More’s deliberation of women writer’s “mortifying circumstance” (2:13) was to be briefly commented upon by Darwin when he addresses “the difference in the mental powers of the two sexes” (563):

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can women – whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination . . . If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music . . . with half a dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison (Darwin 564).

Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (1928) would come to present a notable reaction to this issue some fifty-five years later. Still, Blind’s own endeavours to debunk this Victorian disposition cannot be overlooked. What merits a closer look is the author’s own assertion that existing gender relations are not merely a result of what – generally – transpires in the natural world; in particular, I will suggest, because of the author’s contemplation of a universal human connection. Both her epic poem The Ascent of Man and her novel Tarantella seek to convey the complexity of gendered human relationships, and particularly reflect on a universal emotion that might serve as a focus for an alternative to the prevailing conventions of the time. That is to say, not only does
Blind offer a cultural critique of the dominant doctrine of society by pitting the prejudices that quietly constrain Darwin’s scientific method against the category of gender; her critique finally resolves itself to an exploration of the means through which societal models might be improved upon: Blind’s remedy, I argue, centres in an exploration of empathetic citizenship. Moreover, I argue, Blind’s elaboration of this emotion can be examined with regard to the philosophy of materialism often associated with the Roman poet Lucretius, and is partly governed by Blind’s esteem for a Shelleyan brand of radical Romanticism. In this paper, I want to trace Blind’s contemplation of a universal human connection in its relation to debates on philosophical materialism that pervade much of Victorian thought as the latter seeks to assess the claims of developing science, and I aim to trace Blind’s engagement with scientism through the lens of her interest in the Romantic literature of P.B. Shelley. In the remainder of this paper, I will home in on the notion of clinamen and the role of Venus in Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura and analyse these elements in relation to Blind’s reflection on a sympathetic human connection. The Ascent of Man – her most explicit critique on Darwinian theory – forms an interesting starting point for this investigation. As a brief concluding gesture, I will finally move to consider how this is articulated in Tarantella in relation to the “Woman Question”. How is this emotion contextualised in the author’s novel and how is it linked with her deliberation of female agency and choice?

Although Blind’s poetry has increasingly attracted critical attention in recent years for its allusions to Darwinian sexual selection and female agency, critics have yet to establish its relationship with Blind’s endeavour to bring people together in sympathy. Jason R. Rudy (2006), most notably, alludes to the author “sing[ing] out moments of passionate communication” (443). However, his article focuses on the formalist representation of structures of emotional communion in metrical structure and rhythm rather than the foundation of Blind’s attachment to this ideal. Moreover, its focus is on the author’s poetry, and it only briefly acknowledges Tarantella. Katy Birch’s article (2013), which centres on Blind’s re-imagination of the human courtship plot, does attend to this novel. Yet her analysis centres on highlighting the role of female agency in
relation to natural imagery (Birch 84-87). Helen Groth’s critical essay in Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian, comes closest to my take on Blind. Her detailed analysis of Blind’s The Ascent of Man incorporates a notion of universal sympathy that encourages “a belief in humanity’s potential to transcend the brutalizing forces of economic competition and individualistic struggle” (340). However, she is more concerned with the general role that poetry plays in this matter. In short, in much of the critical writing on Blind, the import of materialist thought and the conflicts it lays bare between bodily and spiritual assessments of man and woman are yet to be acknowledged. It is interesting to examine what this universal emotion and its connection with the history of Lucretian materialism might indicate about her feminist ethics and position as female aesthete.

In an 1891 article on Giuseppe Mazzini for the Fortnightly Review, Blind directly refers to her misgivings regarding the materialist tendencies of Victorian society:

> the preponderance of evil and sorrow, the poor pittance of happiness doled out to the individual, the limitations which hedge us in on all sides, had tormented me from an early age, and would often fill me with a passionate rebellion against existence. The materialist school of thought, which recognised force and matter as the only factors in the world, . . . , left a void which it required Mazzini’s essentially spiritual doctrine to bridge over. His quenchless faith in the progress of the race, in the duty of the individual to modify and transform the social medium, and in the intrinsic oneness of all human life, gave it a deeper reality . . . (Blind, Personal Recollections, 703).

What Diedrick has characterised as “spiritual in its metaphors but secular in its orientation” (22) to describe Mazzini’s doctrine could also describe Blind’s perspective on evolutionary theory and her search for a universal emotion. The introduction by the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace that accompanies the second edition of The Ascent of Man hints at the broader conflict between body and soul, between the material and the

---


4 Though materialism is a broad concept that could include, for example, Marxist materialism or historical materialism, this paper focuses on materialism in reference to the philosophy of Epicurus and its relation to ancient atomism.
transcendent inherent in Blind’s understanding of socio-political human relations. This introduction touches upon the social and spiritual nature of Blind’s ideas and notes their importance to the struggle for “social and humanitarian improvement” (Blind xii). Wallace’s contribution to Blind’s poem is noteworthy, as he did not – as Levine acknowledges in Darwin Loves You (2006) – share Darwin’s overarching views on natural selection, even though he was a definite supporter of his ideas. According to Wallace, “it [natural selection] could not be responsible for human intelligence and the virtues of higher civilization” (174). This conflict between the material and spiritual in Blind’s works reflects the broader Victorian debate on science and religion. The Roman writer Lucretius was taken as the earliest proponent of the former, his poetic treatment of the materialist perspective usefully modelling a literary engagement with its central tenets. Often said to have anticipated Darwinism, Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura (hereafter DRN) became a work repeatedly acknowledged in this debate set off by Darwin’s On the Origin of Species (1859). The poem’s contemplation of Epicurean philosophy and its examination of the true nature of the universe as one that “is made up of indivisible (a-tomos) particles of matter moving, colliding, and congregating at random in an infinite void” (Gillespie & Hardy 3) represents a perfect example of materialist rationalism. Its original message, which aspires to incite in its reader peace of mind by eliminating the fear of the gods and of death, serves as an argument of Lucretius’ agnosticism in the nineteenth-century debate and DRN’s anticipation of evolutionary theory. However, though DRN is generally associated with materialism and in that sense goes against Blind’s own critique of post-Darwinian materialist Britain, what is notable in Lucretius’ poem is the notion of movement and the possibility that it

---

5 This attention to the opposition between body and soul is something that Robert Buchanan criticises in the Pre-Raphaelite art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Algernon Swinburne, whom Blind was closely affiliated with. See Gowan Dawson’s “Intrinsic Earthliness: Science, Materialism, and the Fleshy School of Poetry” (2003) and Isobel Armstrong’s Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics (1993, part III).

6 Wallace was a self-proclaimed agnostic and fully embraced spiritualism later in life. Moreover, he was a social critic and supported women’s suffrage and economic independence as a “prerequisite for a form of mate selection that would tend to raise the moral standards of humanity” (Smith). Yet even his contemplation of Blind’s poem seems to be influenced by the conventions of Victorian Britain when addressing the author’s more social and spiritual perspective of evolutionary theory; see Groth (1999). For a general overview on Wallace’s life, see Charles H. Smith’s “Wallace, Alfred Russel”.

7 Paradoxically, Lucretius also came to be considered “an ally of religion” (337), paving the way for Christianity. See Turner (1973).

8 When referring to Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura, I adopt Thomas Nial’s translation used in his work Lucretius: An Ontology of Motion (2018).

9 Both Gale (2007) and Gillespie & Hardie (2007) provide an extensive look into Lucretius and DRN.
subsequently creates. It is this germ of an internal critique and complication that Blind
seizes upon in her *Ascent of Man*.

Throughout *DRN*, Lucretius observes the image of atoms moving, colliding and
interacting as showcasing the perpetual motion of reality and nature. Without this
motion and collision, nature and life would not exist. On account of the first thesis of
Lucretian materialism—“nothing ever comes to be from nothing through divine
intervention” (Nial 73)—the primacy of atomic movement in the creation of matter
becomes apparent. Yet Lucretius’ understanding of this notion goes further. The poet
states that these atoms do not only move; they also *swerve*¹⁰:

In this matter there is this, too, that I want you to understand,
that when the first bodies are moving straight downward through the
void by their own weight, at times completely undetermined
and in undetermined places they swerve a little from their course,
but only so much as you could call a change of motion (Nial 194).

When atoms move, they cannot but swerve. And, moreover, it is precisely this chaotic
swerve or *clinamen*, which is unpredictable and which happens “at an unassignable
space-time before any measurable discrete time or space” (Nial 194), that produces the
collisions between atoms due to the occurrence of a minute deviation in movement.
Thus, the swerve is not a causal effect of these atoms’ movement but rather an inherent
part of their existence. Without it, nothing would ever collide and therefore nothing
would ever exist:

Because unless they were accustomed to swerving, all would fall
downward like drops of rain through the deep void,
nor would a collision occur, nor would a blow be produced
by the first beginnings (Nial 195).

¹⁰ See Thomas Nial’s *Lucretius I: An Ontology of Motion* for a detailed overview of the notion of movement
in Lucretius’ *DRN*, see John Greenblatt’s *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* for a comprehensive
retelling of the history of the poem. See respectively chapter 11 (Nial) and chapter 8 (Greenblatt), and
Dolar (2013) for a closer look into the notion of *clinamen*. 
The unpredictability of the swerve and its concomitant existence outside the boundaries of time and space signify its fundamental will or *voluntas*, according to Lucretius.\(^{11}\) This implies that the movement of matter is not fully constrained by external natural and mechanic laws and that said motion does not merely follow a preconceived trajectory. In *voluntas* reposes a site for a complication of theories of nature that regard it as driven entirely by causality, fate and necessity; as incontrovertibly bound by determinism.\(^{12}\) Or, to push this reading further still: it is precisely the unpredictability, declination and *voluntas* enshrined in *clinamen* that contains possibility and opportunity; even creativity. There is agency present in atomic movement, which means that there is agency in nature and all the elements it comprises. Blind understands that, since everything is made up of matter that moves, and therefore swerves and encompasses *voluntas*, human beings are not an exception. As Dolar asserts:

> Cosmology suddenly and without transition shakes hands with anthropology, . . . a glitch in the natural causality overlaps with a glitch in the ‘psychic causality.’ Just as the atoms depart from their way, so does our will depart from the bonds of necessity, it breaks the decrees of fate . . . *Clinamen* is at the point where cosmos and humanity overlap, the out-of-place and out-of-point they share (Dolar 229).

*Clinamen* thus queers Lucretian materialism or at least the nineteenth-century determination of it, which projects materialism onto the whole scientific enterprise. For Blind, it is through this notion that she finds a way to complicate from the inside the Victorian materialist consideration of gendered relations.

Lucretius’ *DRN* and Blind’s *The Ascent of Man* display a significant congruence. Both are epic poems of cosmogonic genesis, and both image the dynamics of the cosmos

---

\(^{11}\) *Voluntas* has often been translated as “free will”, yet not all critics agree on its accuracy. Nial (2018) considers this equation misguided, see chapter 11. See Dolar (2013), see Masson (1883) and see Eliopoulos (2015) for their consideration of *Voluntas* as “free will”.

\(^{12}\) See Johnson (in *Lucretius: poetry, philosophy, science*) on the spontaneity of nature and the political connotations of the term. In his article, he also addresses Lucretius’ depiction of *Voluntas* and its concern within human relationships (book II). He translates it as follows: “But it is quite a different matter when we are thrust forward by a blow delivered from a formidable force and powerful pressure by another person; for in that event it is transparently clear that the whole bulk of our body moves and is swept along involuntarily until the will has reigned back all our limbs . . . even though an external force [uis extera] pushes a crowd of us, often compelling us to move forward against our will . . . there is something in our breasts with the ability and will to oppose and resist it?” (Johnson 126).
through a constant alternation between images of birth and creation, and those of death and destruction. In addition, Lucretius’ depiction of nature – corresponding with that of Blind – is inherently feminine:

Lastly, the rains pass away when Father Aether has poured them down into the \textit{womb of Mother Earth}” (\textit{De Rerum Natura}, Gillespie & Hardy 98, emphasis mine)

And lo, from the \textit{womb of the waters}, upheaved in volcanic convulsion . . . Mountains, the \textit{broad-bosomed mothers} of torrents and rivers perennial (Blind, AoM, 7-8, emphasis mine).

Even the contemplation of movement in both poems showcases a striking resemblance. Movement, as Rudy (2006) most notably examines, is unquestionably present throughout Blind’s epic poem. Rudy asserts that the author’s variation in her use of metrical structures allows the reader to experience the rhythm and flow of motion\textsuperscript{13}:

\begin{quote}
STRUCK out of dim fluctuant forces and shock of electrical vapour,
Repelled and attracted \textit{the atoms flashed mingling in union primeval},
And over the face of the waters far heaving in limitless twilight
\textit{Auroral pulsations thrilled faintly}, and, striking the blank heaving surface,
The \textit{measureless speed of their motion} now leaped into light on the waters (\textit{AoM}, 7, emphasis mine)
\end{quote}

Indeed, both poems showcase many similarities. Yet, there are certain differences, which are centred in Blind’s and Lucretius’ evaluation of gender. What merits closer examination, then, is the feminine nature of both poets’ cosmos in relation to its flows and swerves and the character of Venus in \textit{DRN}.

Though Venus’ presence could be considered quite unconventional in a text dedicated to exposing the passiveness of the gods in human matters, Lucretius starts off his poem with a hymn to the goddess of love and desire. Much has already been said

\textsuperscript{13} One of the metrical forms that Blind adopts in her poem is the epic hexameter, which Lucretius makes use of too. Rudy emphasises the importance of this hexameter in portraying “the epic nature of the evolutionary scene” (446). Moreover, throughout the poem, Blind alternates between different metrical structures, which in itself demonstrates the presence of \textit{clinamen}. 
about Venus’ role in Lucretius’ *DRN*. Some have argued she pays homage to Empedocles’ Aphrodite, while others have reduced her role to a mere rhetorical device that allows the poem to ease its readers into a shocking moral. I am most concerned with the allegorical deliberation of Venus as a driving force of creativity and pleasure, and the generator of the cosmos.\(^{14}\) It is in Venus that Lucretius locates the energy that drives his cosmogony, which energy is rhetorically legible as a structure of circular logic: while Venus is unequivocally material in Lucretius’ view, she is also the mother of matter (Nial 24). Venus thus creates the nature that she herself is inherently part of as a material being:

> It is you who beneath *the falling stars*
> Of heaven makes *the ship-bearing sea* and *the fruitful earth*
> Teem with life, since through you the whole race of living creatures is conceived, born, and gazes on *the light of the sun* (Nial 30, emphasis mine).

The cosmology of Venus reveals the importance of movement and curvature (e.g. *clinamen*) in the broader production of nature. As the myth goes, Venus was born from the foam of the ocean\(^{15}\) after Uranus’ genitals were cut off with a curved knife and thrown into the sea. In other words, she comprises of the “falling stars” (Uranus’ seed) that rain from the sky, as well as the “ship-bearing sea” (Venus’ shell) that come out of the flow of air from said falling stars. The foam out of which she was born, in turn, is a product of the crashing waves that hit the “fruitful earth”. In addition, as Nial also states, all of these elements revel in “the light of the sun”. Thus, the goddess of love is essentially made up of the elements of air, water, earth and fire and the inherent movement that they entail. Nial asserts:

> The movement of the four elements form a single continuous wave of materialisation . . . The process of materialisation, according to Lucretius’ praise of Venus, is therefore like the process of waves upon the beach, bubbling like

---

\(^{14}\) Nial’s consideration of a Venusian ontology is especially suitable in relation to my own analysis of Blind and thus will be the guiding theory of this paragraph. For a full account hereof, see Nial (chapter 1, chapter 2 and chapter 13).

\(^{15}\) This foam in itself already presupposes certain turbulence because it displays a disturbance of an otherwise streamlined ocean, as does the ribbed shell Venus is often portrayed with.
foam in the glistening sunlight . . . Matter emerges from the hidden to the visible and back again in the continuous cycles of creation and destruction (Nial 32).

The initial elemental flows in turn fold over themselves through curvature to produce larger entities. Thus air, for example, forms into wind, which in turn forms into clouds. Venus therefore constitutes the ontology of motion; she is the “single creative source from which and within which all bodies flow” (Nial 234). Consequently, because she constitutes motion, she also constitutes the curvature inherent in motion, namely the swerve or *clinamen*. The desire or *voluptas* that is Venus is at the same time the *voluntas* of matter.\(^{16}\) This Venusian ontology of movement, as Nial defines it, – which includes the consideration of *clinamen* – thus allows for creativity and possibility, in part also because Venus embodies the peaceful and nurturing side of that which she herself creates and is part of. As a creative force, the goddess of desire and pleasure brings order to the chaos of pedetic motion of matter. She calms storms and brings peace through pleasure.

In reading Blind’s *The Ascent of Man*, the reader perceives the presence of a Lucretian Venus to a certain extent, albeit mostly in an indirect manner. Blind does not evoke the goddess of love through a hymn as Lucretius does, but she is still visible in the poet’s description of nature. In the first part of her epic poem entitled “Chaunts of Life”, which describes the evolution from inorganic to organic matter, the reader instantly gets a glimpse of the creative force that is Venus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lo, moving o’er chaotic waters} \\
\text{*Love* dawned upon the seething waste,} \\
\text{Transformed in ever new avatars} \\
\text{It moved without pause or haste:} \\
\text{Like sap that moulds the leaves of May} \\
\text{It wrought within the ductile clay.}
\end{align*}
\]

And vaguely in *the pregnant deep*,

---

\(^{16}\) *Voluptas* means pleasure and desire. Nial asserts: “She [Venus] is both the *process* and the *object of desire*. . . . gods and men are themselves already expressions of a more primary *process* of desire within them. Their will [*voluntas*] is nothing than the immanent desire of Venus expressed in and through them” (Nial 24).
Clasped by the glowing arms of light
From an eternity of sleep
Within unfathomed gulfs of night
A pulse stirred in the plastic time
Responsive to the rhythm of time (AoM 9-10, emphasis mine).

As the poem develops, the reader continues to be confronted with the materiality of Venus’ existence. Moreover, Blind even briefly acknowledges Venus directly:

By sheer persistence, strenuous and slow,
The marble yields and, line by flowing line
And curve by curve, begins to swell and shine
Beneath the ring of each far-sighted blow:
Until the formless block obeys the hand,
And at the mastering mind’s supreme command
Takes form and radiates from each limb and feature
Such beauty as ne’er bloomed in mortal mould,
Whose face, out-smiling centuries, shall hold
Perfection’s mirror up to ‘prentice nature.
Not from out of voluptuous ocean
Venus rose in balanced motion,
Goddess of all bland emotion;
But she leaped a shape of light,
Radiating love’s delight,
From the sculptor’s brain to be
Sphered in immortality (AoM 48-49, emphasis mine).

Yet, it quickly becomes apparent that though Venus does personify nature and love initially, Blind’s Venus eventually ceases to be the personification of these concepts. With this the author acknowledges the devastating reality that chaos still rules the universe as a consequence of human interaction: “the human myriads, preying, bleeding,/ put creation harshly out of tune” (AoM 96). The bloodshed, the poverty, the unequal gender relations in society are expressed through the removal of Lucretius’
clinamen or Venus, signifying an almost mechanical pursuit of post-Darwinian materialism in which human will is eliminated.

However, love is not entirely disembodied in The Ascent of Man. The author depicts Love as a poor, helpless and naked child that requires nursing and sympathy in order to build itself back up.\(^{17}\) This suggests that Blind is not entirely pessimistic about the future of humankind and our consideration of each other. In other words, there is still a possibility for a sympathetic connection between people. The reader first encounters the poor child in the second part of the poem titled “The Pilgrim Soul”:

The wings of the wild flock fast fading above,
As they melt on the sky-line like foam-flakes in motion:
So sadly he wailed: “I am Love! I am Love!

“Behold me cast out as a weed and spurned from the ocean,
Half nude on the bare ground, and covered with scars,
I perish of cold here;” and, choked with emotion,

Gave a sob: at the low sob a shower of stars
Broke shuddering from heaven, pale flaming, and fell
Where the mid-city roared with rumours of war (AoM 66).\(^{18}\)

The sentiment of this encounter is in tune with the general theme of the second part of Blind’s poem. “The Pilgrim Soul” can be read as an allegory of modern society in which the author critiques the prominence of wealth, luxury and pleasure, and the extent to which these values have eliminated emotions of sympathy and love. Nonetheless, not all is lost. Love is not entirely left to his own devices when a woman comes across the naked child and stays by his side. As Wallace acknowledges in his introductory note on the Ascent of Man, “She who finds him takes him home, shelters and nourishes him, he grows and becomes greater than the lost gods of the cruel city to which he returns for its

---

\(^{17}\) In the introduction to the second part of AoM, Blind quotes Plato. The quote itself already alludes to Blind’s contemplation of human sympathy: “Love is for ever poor, and so far from being delicate and beautiful, as mankind imagined, he is squalid and withered... homeless and unsandalled; he sleeps without covering before the doors, and in unsheltered streets” (AoM 58).

\(^{18}\) As this quote shows, Love is still very much part of the material world we live in. He is part of the ocean and his tears set off a shower of stars.
ultimate salvation” (AoM viii).\textsuperscript{19} In the last part of the poem titled “The Leading of Sorrow”, a veiled phantom takes the narrator on a journey that showcases an almost perpetual presence of death and sorrow as part of human life. Eventually the narrator “[sinks] back without sense or motion” (AoM 97) and loses consciousness. She hears Love’s voice as he narrates the process of evolution, which parallels Darwin’s own evolutionary theory. Love ends his narration with the creation of humankind. Here, he addresses her directly and looks at the future with a sense of possibility: “Oh my heir and hope of my to-morrow” (AoM 100) and “Till there break from passion of the Human/ Morning-glory of transfigured life” (AoM 100). Ultimately, his voice fades away and the narrator is left witnessing nature’s beauty. The poem thus ends on a rather hopeful note:

And beside me in the golden morning
I beheld my shrouded phantom-guide;
But no longer sorrow-veiled and mourning –
It became transfigured by my side.

And I knew – as one escaped from prison
Sees old things again with fresh surprise –
It was Love himself, Love re-arisen
With the Eternal shining through his eyes (AoM 101-102).

Throughout the entire poem, Blind alludes to emotions of sympathy and human connection as a way of overcoming the unbalanced chaos of Victorian Britain. The general post-Darwinian materialistic outlook, which for many entailed a validation of deterministic views on the inferior societal position of women, is not something that Blind readily agrees with. The Ascent of Man conveys an ambiguity towards materialism and endeavours to construe a humanist apprehension of evolutionary theory.\textsuperscript{20} To Blind, a purely materialist world is one that does not take into account the impact of socio-political and economic factors on people’s lives but considers women’s inferiority to be

\textsuperscript{19} It might also be interesting to further analyse the gendered nature of this encounter between the poor boy and the woman who nurtures him. However, this exceeds the scope of this article.

\textsuperscript{20} See also Lindsay Wilhelm’s “The Utopian Evolutionary Aestheticism of W.K. Clifford, Walter Pater, and Mathilde Blind” (2016).
inherent in their nature. Thus, the author’s contemplation of the conflict between the material and the spiritual in her epic poem reflects her engagement with the Victorian “Woman Question”. Here, the spiritual component becomes an acknowledgement of the cultural and it carries with it a sense of possibility. The author strives to bring people together in solidarity by evoking a universal emotion that supersedes the rigid gender dichotomies of Victorian Britain. This is visible in her contemplation of a Venusian ontology of motion and Lucretius’ consideration of *clinamen*, and it is voiced throughout her poem:

And electrified
Masses, far and wide,
Thrill to hope and start
Vibrating as with *one common heart* (Blind, AoM, 41, emphasis mine).

The supreme, undying, sole
Spirit struggling through the whole,
And no more a thing apart
From *the universal heart*
Liberated by the grace
Of man’s genius for a space,
Human lives dissolve, enlace
In *a flaming world embrace* (Blind, AoM, 54, emphasis mine).

Yea, a spark, a flash of some *eternal*
*Sympathy* shone through those haunted eyes (Blind, AoM, 92, emphasis mine).

In addition, Mathilde Blind’s reflection on sympathetic citizenship is also indicative of her position as a female aesthete. The author’s writing reveals similarities, both on a philosophical and formal ground, with some of the leading figures of aestheticism – in particular Walter Pater and Gerard Manley Hopkins – and thus situates her among the male intellectuals of her time. To a more general degree, Blind’s contemplation of subversive possibility brought about through the notion of movement
can be linked to the broader aesthetic movement, which concerned itself – not entirely surprisingly – with the question of what a materialist worldview might signify in terms of its deliberation of beauty. Yet especially Walter Pater, whose conclusion *The Renaissance* (1873) touches upon the disruption of the material world and the possibility that this movement brings with it, bears resemblance to Blind’s understanding. Pater’s “Conclusion” showcases a sidestepping of the strict moralities of Victorian Britain and invites the reader to recognise the importance of continually pursuing knowledge through, as well as take pleasure in, the impressions that naturally flow from the perpetual motion of human life. In his “Conclusion”, the author asserts that

[a] counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world (Pater 236-237).

The multitudes of impressions that are in constant renewal thus serve to, as it were, broaden ones perspectives; Pater continues, “What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, Hegel, or of our own” (Pater 237). In addition to the “Conclusion”, the author’s understanding of this particular notion of possibility inherent in movement can also be observed in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). This novel not only touches upon the concept of sympathy, it also echoes the conflict between the material and spiritual present in Blind’s work. In her analysis of the novel, Hacke (2010) notably argues that the novel and its references to Lucretius’ *DRN* can be examined as a critique on post-Darwinian materialist Britain. Both Pater’s “Conclusion” and his novel draw attention to the materialist stream of impressions and emotions that constantly

---

21 Blind read Pater’s article on William Morris’ poetry, of which the final paragraphs were ultimately reworked into *The Renaissance*’s “Conclusion”. Moreover, as Diedrick asserts in his biography, “for the freethinking Blind, Pater’s essay represented a vindication of her emerging aesthetic vision” (73). For a more detailed discussion, see Diedrick (2003, chapter three).
emerge from our surroundings and both works implore the reader to eliminate the habituality of life. Especially in *Marius the Epicurean*, the conflict between the material and the spiritual is constantly at play; and it is through this conflict that the philosophical contemplation of the notion of sympathy emerges. Ultimately, to Marius, sympathy becomes a way of complicating the purely materialist outlook on nature and society. This can also be continually observed throughout the *Ascent of Man*. Blind’s own consideration of materialism is thus – much like Marius’ view in Pater’s novel and Pater’s own assertions in his “Conclusion” – not one of unmitigated materialism; rather it contains a certain ambiguity. To understand the Victorian morality surrounding gender relations as mere ramifications of a natural hierarchy is to not take into account a pivotal cultural component, which, as I have argued, Blind addresses through the notion of *clinamen*. Pater’s understanding of the possibility inherent in the disruption of movement thus displays philosophical correlations with Blind’s own endeavours and aesthetic vision.

Aside from philosophical parallels with the aestheticism of Walter Pater, Blind’s *The Ascent of Man* displays, in a like manner, prominent formal comparisons with Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poetry. As I have briefly asserted, Blind’s application of varied metrical structures represents the movement of the material world and the evolution of said world. However, what is of particular importance not only to the presence of Lucretian motion but also to the contemplation of sympathy in *The Ascent of Man* is Blind’s use of iambic pentameter, albeit with minor deviations, which at times takes the form of sprung rhythm, a poetic rhythm that Hopkins is most known for. Blind’s treatment of this rhythm closely resembles Hopkins’ sonnet “The Windhover” (1877), which

---

22 The difference in nuance between Pater and Blind, however, is the undeniable atheist stance of the latter. To Blind, the spiritual is not an understanding of the religious but rather of the cultural, as I have mentioned previously. Overall, Pater’s complication of materialism lies in his consideration of beauty, Blind’s complication of materialism in her consideration of sympathetic citizenship.

23 See also Morgan (2010) on Pater’s consideration of the autonomy of art. The author addresses Pater’s ambiguous outlook towards materialism in both his “Conclusion” and *Marius the Epicurean* with relation to his reflection on works of art as independent and self-sufficient. Morgan writes “Pater’s ambivalence about the concept of autonomy does not indicate philosophical confusion, but rather demonstrates his engagement with one of the central questions of aesthetic philosophy ... the discourse of aesthetic philosophy equally addresses how certain kinds of affective responses to the material world ... play a role in the development of individuality” (733).
showcases – among other characteristics – the alliteration and the stress-timed character indicative of this poetic metre:

I CAUGHT this morning morning’s minion, king-
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in
his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! Then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and
 gliding
Rebuffed the big wind . . . (Hopkins 69).

The rhythm produces motion emphasised by the alliteration and the singular use of stress. At times the sprung rhythm slows down the reading; only to have it speed up again when a particular action takes place. Though not fully exemplary of Hopkins’ sprung rhythm as seen in “The Windhover”, Blind’s central use of alliteration, assonance and rhyme in particular aids the invocation of movement, and in that sense showcases striking similarities with Hopkins. In addition to the natural flow produced by the sprung rhythm, Hopkins’ use of alliteration calls to mind the alliterative verse found in Old English poetry, like that of Beowulf. This especially merits closer examination to Blind’s own particular application of sprung rhythm in The Ascent of Man in which she combines this alliterative verse with the iambic pentameter used in the more modern blank verse:

24 See Stephenson (1981, p.98) for an outline of the nine characteristics of Hopkins’ sprung rhythm. See also LeVasseur (1998) for a review on the critical literature on Hopkins and his sprung rhythm.

25 See Wimsatt (1998) for a closer examination of the importance of alliteration to Hopkins’ consideration of sprung rhythm as echoing natural speech.

26 It becomes apparent that this motion demonstrated by the rhythm in turn corresponds with the motion of the bird itself suspended in the sky at one moment, and diving towards its prey the next. As follows, the change in motion of both the rhythm and the bird itself can be identified as evoking a swerve or clinamen. However, Hopkins’ randomness in nature constituted in the swerve is inherently religious and in that aspect differs from Blind’s consideration of clinamen. Moreover, it also very much centralises the aesthetic experience and maps the complex sensory expressions.

27 Stephenson’s analysis (1981) notably considers the correlations between Hopkins’ “The Windhover” and Beowulf, and the author ultimately asserts “Old English verse is accentual, logaoedic, sense-stressed, alliterative, isochronous verse that features clash of accents and dipodic rhythm. So is Hopkins’ sprung-rhythm verse” (Stephenson 105).
The wings of the wild flock fast fading above,
As they melt on the sky-line like foam-flakes in motion:
So sadly he wailed: “I am Love! I am Love! (AoM 66).

“For life casts us forth, and Man dooms us to die.”
As if stung by a snake the Child shuddered and started,
And clung to me close with a passionate cry (AoM 71).

It is noticeable that Blind does not employ this Hopkinsian verse form throughout the epic poem; but rather uses it throughout the second part of the poem, namely “The Pilgrim’s Soul”. The author’s use of these two poetic rhythms coincides with the introduction of the character of Love, which reveals the extent to which The Ascent of Man contemplates the notion of sympathy and the author’s difficulty with radical materialism. Not only “The Pilgrim’s Soul” subject matter, but also its formal style convey the cultural component imperative to Blind’s consideration of Darwinian evolutionary theory; and in the latter she mirrors Hopkins. As Martin (2008) compellingly argues in her analysis of Hopkins’ use of the metrical mark, “for Hopkins . . . the forms of English meter were not only implicated in measuring English poetry but in measuring England’s character” (Martin 244). When uttered in a particular manner, language, according to Hopkins, can become an attestation of being (Martin 246). By introducing Love in conjunction with Hopkins’ sprung rhythm, Blind does the same. Thus, Blind’s formal style and subject matter in a way disclose the history of poetics – bringing together old and modern verse forms – along with the history of thinking about materialism and Darwinian evolutionary theory in an attempt to reintroduce society to the equation.

By reintroducing the cultural to her work through her philosophical and formal contemplation of sympathy, Mathilde Blind is implementing the political in her aestheticism, paradoxical though it may sound for a movement set on emphasising the values of l’art pour l’art and downplaying the socio-political. The implementation of the political is also where Blind differs in her aestheticism to that of Pater and Hopkins. I
argue that the author’s political aestheticism, and with it also her reflection on a universal emotion, is partly governed by her regard for a Shelleyan brand of radical Romanticism. As I have asserted, Blind’s ideal of sympathetic citizenship – as an embodiment of the cultural/spiritual – forms an answer to a post-Darwinian materialism and the conflict it lays bare between the bodily and the spiritual assessments of man and woman. To Blind, P.B. Shelley, himself ever grappling with the conflict between the bodily and the spiritual, between nature and emotion, constitutes the fruitful union of these two: “Shelley succeeded, perhaps more completely than any poet, in marry[ing] the most sublime or evanescent appearances of the material universe to human emotion” (Blind, Shelley, 21). In both Blind’s and Shelley’s works, emotion not only serves as a prominent element in understanding the complexity of the world but also as a means of reconciling humanity with nature. In relation to the debate on materialism, Shelley’s poem Mont Blanc most directly attests to the difficulty a materialist consideration of nature holds. The poet’s inability to describe the majestic mountain by means of its own materiality quickly becomes apparent:

Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate fantasy,
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things around (Shelley, Complete Poetical Works, Mont Blanc, lines 34 – 40).

Yet it is in Shelley’s first large poetic work “Queen Mab” (1813) that we find clearest reason for Blind’s appeal to his socio-political radicalism as a representation for her own feminist ethics. “Queen Mab”, as Mary Shelley noted, holds Shelley’s own belief “that all

---

28 In her review essay on Rossetti’s The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley for the Westminster Review, Blind writes: “Let us for one moment stay to consider what would become of the Beautiful, if, securely damned up against the influx of moral convictions and the speculations and discoveries of the reasoning faculties, it were subsisting in proud isolation only on and through itself” (Blind, Art. V. Shelley; 86). See also Diedrick (2016) chapter two in which he details Blind’s own esteem for Shelley as a reformer.
29 This revolutionary idealism is, moreover, fully established in Shelley’s epic poem The Revolt of Islam (1816), which Blind acknowledges in her 1970 contribution to Westminster Review. Blind’s own assertion
could reach the highest grade of moral improvement, did not the customs and prejudices of society foster evil passions and excuse evil actions” (Mary Shelley, Notes). The poem itself constitutes that, though hatred and oppression shape the past, the future holds possibility for humankind to come together in moral excellence. Again, the conflict between the bodily and the spiritual is ever present in the poem and its understanding of what is at the foreground of humankind’s consideration of one other. Starting off with a look at the devastating consequences of human intervention in the past and present, the poem ultimately moves on to the fairy queen revealing a hopeful future encompassed by emotions of love and sympathy:

Joy to the Spirit came.
Through the wide rent in Time’s eternal veil,
Hope was seen beaming through the mists of fear;
Earth was no longer hell;
Love, freedom, health had given
Their ripeness to the manhood of its prime,
And all its pulses beat
Symphonious to the planetary spheres;
Then dulcet music swelled
Concordant with the life-strings of the soul . . .
. . . the pure stream of feeling
That sprung from these sweet notes,
And o'er the Spirit's human sympathies
With mild and gentle motion calmly flowed (Shelley, Queen Mab, 57-58).

Aside from the possibility of a future that gives rise to human relations symbolised by love and sympathy, which is comparable to Blind’s evocation hereof, this fragment also invites comparisons to Blind’s treatment of movement. That is to say, a sense of

 entails that the latter’s fundamental idea is “one which has hitherto been overlooked”, namely that “this is the completely changed aspect in which the relation of the sexes is regarded” (Blind, Art V. Shelley, 88). Blind comments upon Shelley's portrayal of women and considers him “the first poet who has embodied . . . the most momentous of all our modern ideas – that of the emancipation of women from this subjection to men.” Thus making him “the poetic forerunner of John Stuart Mill” (Blind, Art V. Shelley, 88). See also Keach (2004) chapter five, in which he addresses Blind’s understanding of female agency in The Revolt of Islam.
movement comparable to that inherent throughout Blind’s poem can be observed. Moreover, Shelley’s portrayal of earth, much like that of Blind in The Ascent of Man, is intrinsically feminine:

All things are recreated, and the flame
Of consentaneous love inspires all life.
The fertile bosom of the earth gives suck
To myriads, who still grow beneath her care,
Rewarding her with their pure perfectness;
The balmy breathings of the wind inhale
Her virtues, and diffuse them all abroad (Shelley, Queen Mab, 59).

Ultimately, the last canto (IX) displays the coming together of body and soul, of the material and the spiritual; an action that equally entails the coming together of woman and man:

‘Then, that sweet bondage which is freedom’s self,
And rivets with sensation’s softest tie
The kindred sympathies of human souls,
Needed no fetters of tyrannic law.
Those delicate and timid impulses
In Nature’s primal modesty arose,
And with undoubting confidence disclosed

---

30 Considering the distinct references made to Lucretius in Shelley’s notes to “Queen Mab”, it is perhaps not surprising to find the notion of movement present in his poem; See also Warner Taylor (1906) on the sources for Shelley’s “Queen Mab”. Blind also comments on Shelley’s “days of rampant materialism” (Blind, Art V. Shelley, 93) in her Westminster Review piece when addressing his poem.

31 Overall, it does need to be acknowledged that there is certain paradoxality in Shelley’s understanding of free will in “Queen Mab” to that of Blind’s own understanding of this notion as I have commented upon it in my analysis of Lucretius’ clinamen (see p. 9). That is to say, Shelley’s attachment to a Godwinian doctrine of Necessity inherent in his poem seemingly goes against the understanding of possibility in atomic movement and what it means for queering the more general nineteenth-century view of Lucretian materialism in relation to deterministic views on gendered human relationships. Yet “Queen Mab” does try to depart from this doctrine in a way. As Heydt-Stevenson and Hessel (2016) put it, “Queen Mab emphasizes that Necessity, an autonomous construct of ‘unvarying harmony’, is impartial: ‘thou hast not human sense’ and ‘thou art not human mind’ (6.218, 219). Necessity is the soul of the universe, and operates beyond the scope of earthly binaries” (358).
The growing longings of its dawning love,

...  

*Woman and man, in confidence and love,*  

*Equal and free and pure together trod*  
The mountain-paths of virtue, which no more  
Were stained with blood from many a pilgrim's feet (Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 64, emphasis mine).  

*The Body and the Soul united then.*  
A gentle start convulsed lanthe’s frame;  
Her veiny eyelids quietly unclosed;  
Moveless awhile the dark blue orbs remained.  
She looked around in wonder, and beheld  
Henry, who kneeled in silence by her couch,  
Watching her sleep with *looks of speechless love,*  
And the bright beaming stars  
That through the casement shone (Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 67, emphasis mine).  

Ultimately, Shelley's contemplation of the conflict between the bodily and the spiritual reflects the centrality of those notions in a Post-Darwinian materialist Britain and Blind's own exploration of sympathetic citizenship as a means through which societal models might be improved upon. Shelley's radical idealism in reaction to societal injustice forms a basis for understanding the political aspect of Blind's aestheticism and feminist ethics. The latter's deliberation of a universal emotion forms a response to a purely Darwinian materialism that has reduced women's socio-political position to a consequence of their natural inferiority. Instead, Blind brings together both Darwin's materialist outlook and Shelley's radicalism in her endeavour to advocate sympathetic citizenship as it relates to the broader Victorian "Woman Question".
As a concluding gesture, I want to briefly examine how this notion of sympathy and Blind’s endeavour for a universal human connection is contextualised in Tarantella (1885), specifically as it pertains to Blind’s queering of the nineteenth-century determination of Lucretian materialism. In the novel, music is at the centre of the author’s attempt to transcend the conflict between the material and the spiritual. That is to say, music explicitly creates the possibility to bring people together, because it is said to give “divine expression to the love which emancipates and exalts, to the love in which the body itself becomes transfused with the soul” (Tarantella Vol. II, 208). Whenever Emmanuel takes up his violin, the musician is able to align a community in solidarity and transcend the individual materiality:

Nothing exalts the heart more than seeing a mass of people thus swayed by one common emotion. We then consciously realize the solidarity of those human units, each of which, bent on its individual desires, aims, and passions, seem often so indifferent, alas! Even so antagonistic, to its fellows . . . Let them feel the thrill of that occult demoniac force we call genius . . . that instant they are liberated from the dull, cold obstruction of self, are made partakers of intellectual beauty, are made inheritors of spiritual force; merged, confounded, absorbed in one universal element of delight (Tarantella Vol. I, 80, emphasis mine).

Blind even goes as far as considering music – and art in general – to be an allegory of love, which guides mankind “through labyrinthine error to ideal attainment” (Tarantella Vol. I, 81). Moreover, in the motion of music it is possible to perceive Lucretius’ notion of clinamen. The constant change in tempo as it goes from an adante to an allegro, for example, displays the unpredictability and declination implicit in the music’s movement and in that sense gives way to possibility.

Yet, in the novel, as in much of her work, Blind is aware of the difficulty in carrying out this ideal of sympathetic citizenship. This is especially showcased through the character of Antonella Mansi. As Birch (2013) asserts, the character embodies Blind’s critique of stereotypical femininity through her association with spider imagery. Blind’s use of spider imagery “as an image of female dominance and power demonstrate[s] that there is not a ‘single law’ governing female animals’ sexual behaviour” (Birch 87) and thus rejects Darwin’s commentary on feminine coyness.
However, Antonella’s sexual agency does not fit into the general Victorian consideration of feminine propriety and therefore encounters the opposition of a society whose reality is governed by materialist tendencies. This is, as Rudy (2006) comments upon, expressed in her uncontrolled spasmodic movement, which “comes less from [her] own capitulation of rhythmic individualism . . . than it does from defective societal structures, the failure of human communities to provide a ‘sympathetic world embrace’” (Rudy 452). Still, as the last few lines of Tarantella indicate, Blind maintains – much like in The Ascent of Man – a hopeful disposition in her endeavour for a universal human connection:

Music which at last altogether ceased to be the medium of personal desire and became the purest expression of the blended yearning of infinite human hearts, flame-like aspiring towards that sublimation of love and beauty and delight which has haunted our vision since the dawn of man, and which the universal heart expresses in the words – “I shall rise again!” (Tarantella Vol. II, 248).

The decision to use the medium of art as that which ultimately brings forth this universal connection once again displays Mathilde Blind’s central position as an aesthete. To Blind, art entails the means to convey her feminist response vis-à-vis a post-Darwinian materialism that has omitted a necessary cultural component in understanding the gendered nature of human relationships. Ultimately, Blind’s ability to address the complex cultural questions of her time – in particular as they relate to the “Woman Question” – unquestionably demonstrates her prominent place among the leading figures of not only nineteenth-century British literary history but also of feminist literary history. By exploring the notion of human sympathy, Blind offers the means for an alternative to the prevailing conventions of the time.
Bibliography


Rudy, Jason R. “Rapturous Forms: Mathilde Blind’s Darwinian Poetics.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2006, pp. 443–59, DOI: 10.1017/S1060150306051266


