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ROMANTICISM'S GRAY MATTER

by NANCY EASTERLIN

THE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN science and the humanities is an old story, one whose basic themes were inspired by a new understanding of the utility of science that emerged from the Enlightenment. If faith in the efficacy of human reason to renew human society was no longer quite so robust after Robespierre's Reign of Terror, science itself did not suffer but instead assumed the central place in intellectual inquiry. Half a century later, the opposition between humanistic inquiry and science not only carried over into the conception of literary studies in its embryonic phase as an academic discipline; the rise of science provided, ironically, a primary impetus for the institutionalization of English studies, since the study of language and literature was envisioned as an arena of spiritual values and social polish. But according to Gerald Graff, the picture is even more complicated than this: the oppositions *between* literature and science are largely matched by those *within* English/literary studies from the very beginning. If English was envisioned as a repository of value and cultivation on the one hand, it was driven, under the influence of science, to professionalize and develop a research industry on the other—which itself fostered a divide between criticism and academic research, areas that have only recently come together.¹

British Romanticism and the Science of Mind, by Alan Richardson; xx & 243 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, \$55.00.

Since conflicted attitudes toward science were thus at the heart of literary studies from the very beginning, it is hardly surprising that debates about the relevance of science to literary theory and criticism are vital today. These debates are the healthy result of the twentieth century's attempts to apply scientific research and models to literature, for early efforts at scientific criticism help locate both the potential benefits and possible drawbacks of interdisciplinary approaches. Yet some humanistic research paradigms have remained largely immune to the influence of science, maintaining the two-cultures tradition by virtue of the body of knowledge they adopt—and therefore by what they implicitly exclude—to frame our understanding of written works. Chief among these are literary history and the history of ideas, which have drawn principally on the fellow humanities of philosophy and history, and only superficially or sporadically on the history and philosophy of science. (Interestingly, despite differences in theory, method, and values, recent projects like the new historicism are in this respect generally continuous with traditional literary historical practice.) In *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind*, Alan Richardson expands the parameters of the history-of-ideas approach within literary criticism, rendering it more fully congenial to developments within scientific thought. With great diplomacy, Richardson points to the limited conception of *context* that has informed historical accounts of British literary romanticism, and proceeds to demonstrate what a knowledge of romantic-era brain science can bring to our understanding of the ideas and works of a selection of romantic-era writers. The result is a book that, in providing a detailed account of the major theories of brain-mind and in constructing the plausible grounds of influence on several major literary figures, largely succeeds in the difficult task of appealing to an interdisciplinary audience.

As Richardson notes in his preface and first chapter, the overlap between literary and scientific representations of mind has been generally neglected in romantic scholarship. Work on the romantic mind has, for the most part, drawn selectively on Hartleyan associationism, psychoanalysis, and the German idealist tradition within epistemology, even though the historical period of British literary romanticism (roughly 1789–1832) corresponds with an unprecedented development of theories of the brain and nervous system, many of which were vigorously discussed—in no small part for their ideologically inflammatory implications—in the major literary periodicals of the day. To

remedy the neglect of contemporaneous science, Richardson supplies a discussion of the major brain scientists in his first chapter, following this with four chapters on major figures and works of literary romanticism (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Austen's *Persuasion*, and Keats); a final chapter on some broader romantic themes and issues; and a brief epilogue that tactfully considers the characterization of romanticism by present-day cognitive theorists. Since everyone who likes ideas, it seems to me, should take an interest in the organ of knowledge and its history, Richardson's account of the brain-mind will appeal to an array of readers across academic disciplines, supplying a fuller picture of the history of brain science while simultaneously correcting received generalizations about romanticism. But if the rewards of this book to the nonspecialist are considerable, to the student of romanticism they are indispensable, articulating the basis of poetical theories and methods that enriches our comprehension of them at the very least, and in some cases makes them seem, as Richardson remarks in his discussion of Wordsworth's poetical theory, something less than "anachronistic, exceptional, or particularly odd" (p. 77).

One has something of an experience of *déjà vu* in reading Richardson's account of the brain science of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whereby ideas that seem so exciting and vital in current cognitive science are echoed in the words of theorists living two hundred years ago. Richardson outlines in some detail the theories of the most prominent brain scientists of the time: F. J. Gall, Pierre-Jean-George Cabanis, Erasmus Darwin, Charles Bell, Sir William Lawrence, J. G. Spurzheim, and George Combe. (Here and elsewhere in the book, he takes account of their most central predecessors, including David Hartley, Denis Diderot, Julien Offray de La Mettrie, and J. G. von Herder.) In spite of some significant theoretical differences, these scientists, writing just in the period in which people were beginning to assert the unity of brain-mind, shared a broad set of assumptions that they sought to establish via observation and argument: the mind is *in* the brain, and it is an active processor; body-mind functions are best understood biologically rather than mechanically; the brain is complex and constantly active; and human functionality is best understood in protoevolutionary adaptative and developmental terms. All were antidualists and believed in universal and innate human tendencies toward sociality largely evident in a shared language of gesture, expression, rhythm, rhyme, and the like. Their theoretical positions

were influenced by Spurzheim and Gall's innovations in brain dissection (in the 1780s and '90s), and by Galvani's experiments in animal electricity (in the 1790s).

As might be expected, the implications of these ideas were no less controversial two hundred years ago than they are today, and many commentators sought to discredit the creeping materialism of romantic-era brain scientists. Gall, who especially emphasized the brain's complexity, joined Spurzheim in the rather more scientifically dubious enterprise of fathering craniology and organology, the precursors to phrenology. Gall and Spurzheim's facultative conceptions of mind were widely attacked in the popular reviews of the time, and became connected with "French" radicalism—repeating a pattern of associating scientific theories with political and ideological convictions that developed in the early chaotic years of the French revolution and that had then damaged Erasmus Darwin's reputation. Sir William Lawrence, already suspect because of his link to the radical Godwin circle, went so far as to assert, in 1819, that man should properly be studied via zoology. When Richardson points out that Bell's *Idea of a New Anatomy* (1811) did not provoke such attacks, in large part because Bell was a devout Anglican free of radical associations, one is reminded of the large part that pragmatic considerations play in the acceptance or rejection of ideas in a given historical period. Thus, although Bell held a complex sense of the human nervous system and a holistic view of the mind-brain-body operating within the natural environment, one that superseded Erasmus Darwin's in rejecting the idea of a generalized sensorium and in promoting instead an understanding of the connection between sensory pathways and brain, the antidualist implications of his thought were not so readily perceived.

Richardson's knowledge of romantic-era theories along with his judicious assessments of their likely influence on the era's literary authors deepens or adjusts our perspective on the literature, especially in the cases of Wordsworth and Keats. Wordsworth has always given trouble to those who have sought to offer systematic philosophical or psychological explanations of his thought, not least because neither his poetry nor his discursive writings are logically systematic. Indeed, a variety of factors—including his dislike for explaining his work, his later conservative politics, and our day's constructivist assumption that human nature is itself a naïve construct—have hardly encouraged a picture of the poet as forward-thinking in any respect. David Hartley's associationist psychology has been the main touchstone for psychologi-

cal explanations of the poetry, according to which the repeated association of sensations with one another results in internal representations, so that the later experience of a single one of these sensations will evoke the whole constellation: “Any sensations A, B, C, &c. by being associated with one another a sufficient number of times, get such a power over the corresponding ideas a, b, c, &c. that any one of the sensations A, when impressed alone, shall be able to excite in the mind b, c, &c. the ideas of the rest.”² While Hartley’s theory, centrally important in the history of physiological psychology and certainly an influence on romantic-era thought, has undoubtedly helped explain something about Wordsworth’s structural and semantic decisions in many poems (from a short lyric like “The Two April Mornings” to *The Prelude*, the long poem on the growth of the poet’s mind), it was limited by the biological theories of its time as well as the principles from Hobbes and Locke to which it was indebted. As Richardson puts it in his characterization of some of Coleridge’s more astute criticisms of Hartleyan associationism,

Hartley’s system suffered . . . from the “passive” and mechanical approach to perception and other mental acts that limited associationist accounts generally; Hartley’s formulations implied a “senseless and passive memory,” a cognitive process characterized by “mere lawlessness.” (p. 11)

Although scholars before Richardson have noted connections between romantic poets and contemporaneous brain scientists, these have not been extensively articulated before, and as a result Hartley has remained the most prominent source for explanations of Wordsworth’s psychologizing. The problem is that the Wordsworthian conception of mind is anything but mechanical and passive, his language anything but formulaic. Richardson argues convincingly that Wordsworth’s conception of the mind as an active, perceiving organ was influenced by Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia*, a text that Wordsworth either read or knew well from extensive conversations with Coleridge. Published in 1794, *Zoonomia*, in contrast to Hartley’s 1749 *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, posits the centrally active nature of mind, and diverges as well from the Lockean inheritance in asserting the internal nature of sensation as well as the actuality of innate desires and unconscious processes. Noting the surprising parallels between Herder’s and Wordsworth’s descriptions of the human infant and pointing as well to Wordsworth’s use of words like “brain” and “organic” in the 1790s, which find their likely source in Darwin’s protoevolutionist

conception of the mind-brain, Richardson claims that the poet was, for “at least a few years, in the midst of one of the most daring intellectual ventures of his era—the reinvention, along naturalistic, physiological, and ecological lines, of the study of human nature” (p. 67). Thus building on the research of H. W. Piper, Richard Matlack, and others, Richardson does romantics scholarship a valuable service in providing crucial new evidence for the originality of Wordsworth’s thought.

Wordsworth’s theories of language form an additional topic in this chapter, and here Richardson likewise shows how the poet’s thinking on the subject is incompletely understood when viewed as primarily a revision of Enlightenment primitivism. Early Enlightenment speculation on language tended to claim that there was no natural basis for mature language and reflection, that nature is fundamentally left behind with the human individual’s introduction into culture and language, and that the rational mind of civilized man is distinct from the savage mind of primitive peoples. In contrast,

The overall effect of late Enlightenment speculation on linguistic origins was to weaken the distinction between natural and artificial languages while maintaining that between natural and artificial signs. In place of an older consensus stressing the human uniqueness and divine origins of language . . . Wordsworth’s generation inherited a thoroughly naturalistic approach, alive to continuities as well as human and “animal,” learned and instinctive communication systems, prizing the emotive as well as the rational aspects of language, and increasingly grounding linguistic behavior in human physiology rather than a disembodied mind or “REASON.” (p. 76)

Thus, earlier theorists like Horne Tooke, who assume that natural language is displaced by symbolic language (on this view, the interjections and babblings of early childhood are simply replaced by mature language), provide no very clear guide to Wordsworth’s theoretical claim to write in a real language of men connected to sensation and emotion, to his discussion of meter and pleasure, and to his poetical use of extrasemantic qualities like repetition and interjections. As Richardson sensitively notes, these interjections are a fundamental feature of *Lyrical Ballads*, contributing to the “overall feel” of the collection (p. 81). Coleridge’s later criticisms in *Biographia Literaria*, too often accepted as the guide to the weaknesses in Wordsworth’s theories—one man the intellectual, the other the creative artist, as a central cliché of romantic scholarship would have it—reflect that poet’s own

insistence that the best part of language derives from reason and reflection, a view that minimizes the role of the body and thus accords with thinkers of the early Enlightenment more closely than Wordsworth's own views. This discussion of Wordsworth's theory of language could be strengthened by some recourse to the context perhaps most centrally important to the poet himself, that of the literary conventions of his day. If claims for the value of a real language seem vague, theoretically unsophisticated, and sentimentally primitivistic, they are a good deal less so when weighed against the tired imperatives of outworn Augustan conventions, such as chronically inverted syntax. Grammatically speaking, it may be just fine to claim, as Thomas Gray does in a sonnet Wordsworth criticizes, that "In vain to me the smiling mornings shine," but this is an artificial rather than a commonplace use of English, one whose preciousness belies the melancholy it is meant to convey. In the context of such bad verse, it is not difficult to imagine why Wordsworth would overstate his case for the virtues of rustic life and the expressive language of humble people.

In the latter part of this chapter, Richardson illustrates the continuity between Wordsworth's views and those of contemporary cognitive linguists such as Mark Johnson and Eve Sweetser, who argue that our fundamental structures of thought and language derive from bodily experience. Even while providing an impressive explanation for Wordsworth's theories by placing them within a long tradition of thought about human language that runs from the late Enlightenment up to the present, Richardson, citing the criticism of romanticist David Miall, is careful to point to the narrower focus of cognitive linguistics, which does not emphasize passion and emotion or the extrasemantic features of communication: "In granting a primary role to feeling and emotion within an embodied and ecological understanding of mind and culture, Wordsworth is closer to the brain science of his time than to what is sometimes called 'cognitivism'" (p. 91). Clearly, cognitive linguistics pursues a narrower focus, in keeping with the increasing tendency toward specialization that has gone hand-in-hand with the disciplinary development of psychology and linguistics in the past two centuries. True to his prefatory claim not to remark on the validity of either romantic-era theorists or contemporary neuroscience, Richardson simply places Wordsworth in context here; yet it is hard not to feel, at the conclusion of this chapter, that cognitive linguistics runs the risk of cutting itself off from the affective and bodily experience it acknowledges as the very basis of human thought and language.

Like his discussion of Wordsworth, Richardson's chapter on Keats does an exceptional job of employing research in romantic-era brain science to bring together and support some of the best insights of earlier criticism, placing our understanding of the connection between the poet's medical knowledge and his poetics on firmer ground. It has long been assumed that Keats's surviving notes from his training at Guy's Hospital were from the lectures of the famous anatomist Sir Astley Cooper, but since Keats never produced a fair copy of these notes, it has been difficult to confirm this definitively. Richardson has performed a valuable bit of scholarly detection in locating the notes of an American student, Edward Reynolds. In Richardson's assessment, Reynolds's notebook,

The Twelve first Lectures of Mr Astley Coopers Anatomical Course delivered at St. Thomas' Theatre, corresponds so closely to Keats's more fragmentary notes that there is no longer reason to doubt which lecture course Keats's notes reflect. Based on similarities in organization and phrasing, moreover, Cooper seems to have altered his lectures on the nervous system very little. (p. 119)

In spite of the stereotypical image of Keats as a dreamy poet ill-suited to medical training, he was probably an excellent student, "particularly intrigued by Cooper's innovative teaching on the brain and nerves" (p. 118). Cooper's lectures emphasize that the human body is an integrated system, within which sensation is a process, not an organ in the brain, and the anatomist's interest in the manifold effects of head injury illustrate his focus on the interrelatedness of all parts of the system. Quoting from the notes of Keats and Reynolds and from Cooper himself, Richardson produces a concrete feeling for the medical understanding of "the interconnectedness of psychological and physiological functions" that provides the basis for Keats's understanding of passion and of his poetical expression.

It is not Richardson's goal to offer close readings of literary works in this book; nevertheless, in his glosses of selected poetical passages and his attention to the physiological basis of Keats's poetics, Richardson beautifully re-creates the physical immediacy of the verse. Drawing, for instance, on M. H. Abrams's insight that Keats has a remarkable ability to bring the physical qualities of speech together with meaning, Richardson analyzes a variety of sound patterns in brief passages,

connecting them to Bell's fascination with the physiological effects of emotion—the lungs, thorax, and mouth are not simply the pathway for the expression of emotion but integral to the emotional state; hence, in “Lamia,” “The throat throbs in literal as well as metaphoric sympathy with the heart . . . –‘Deaf to his *throbbing throat*’s long, long melodious moan . . . the ‘*thro*’ clusters [force] the tongue back and [narrow] the throat for the ‘r’ and then [open] it up again to intone the vowel” (p. 140). This discussion of sounds constitutes but a few brief pages of Richardson's chapter on Keats, yet the preceding assessment of Keats's training, the explication of Cooper's teachings about the action of the circulation and lungs in sexual passion, and the detailed reproduction of Bell's illustration of the nerves running from chest to brain at the beginning of the chapter so well prepare the reader for the comments on sound that, reading silently, one remembers the precise physical sensations Keats evokes—the pressure in the chest, straining in the throat—and thus reexperiences the physicality of the verse while simultaneously understanding how it works. This is no mean feat in literary criticism, which so often, as an explanatory enterprise, succumbs to the risk of divorcing us from our feelings, even those feelings the poet has so consciously sought to evoke. Fifty years ago, Douglas Bush characterized Keats as the poet of the *material sublime* and thus illustrated that the unity of consciousness and the attendant sense of selfless euphoria and peace—of negative capability, in Keats's own phrase—traditionally associated with transcendence is, in Keats's poetry, attained through immersion in actuality, especially in a poem like “To Autumn,” the last of Keats' great odes. Unmistakably, the yearning for transcendence recurs over and over again in Keats's poetry, but just as unmistakably sublimity is only experienced *here*, in the physical world and, as Richardson would have us realize, through the bodily processes that constitute our unity with that nonhuman world as well as our emotional and “spiritual” attachments to it. In a nod to Bush, Richardson renames such Keatsian moments of psychic unity the *neural sublime*, thus contributing further holism to Bush's original analysis, whereby the unity of matter outside the self is no longer implicitly or explicitly distinct from the system of the human organism.

“Keats and the glories of the brain” is undoubtedly, in my view, the highpoint of a book that offers throughout much of great worth, and I'd like to consider for a moment why this is the case. While many intellectuals of the romantic era were acquainted with the work of their

day's brain scientists, or at least with the major controversies surrounding their theories, Keats had a professional knowledge of these theories, which is something else entirely. Indeed, it would seem that a trained apothecary, as was Keats, must of necessity focus his attention on the body and its processes, and thus such a person would be better prepared to accept an integrated view of mind and body based in a materialist perspective. (Foucault would perhaps insist that a person with such training would be unable to see the world otherwise, the training in essence interpellating him in the discourse system.) In short, of all the writers Richardson takes up, Keats was closest to these theories and least likely to reject them because of their troubling implications. Although as an extremely ill young man he might have wished to see life in some other way, both personal experience and professional training placed the dominion of the body at the center of his way of seeing, and all this enables the direct connections Richardson makes between the scientific research and Keats's poetic techniques—connections that, to my mind, are difficult to argue with.

Yet as the chapter on Wordsworth illustrates, much can be gained when the connections are less direct, especially if the critic focuses on a period when the poet was enthusiastically receptive to new ideas. Coleridge, however, is quite a different kettle of fish, and Richardson's chapter on this poet, while certainly containing much of interest, is the least striking portion of the book, in no little part because Coleridge, an enthusiastic intellectual, was no less eager to react to new ideas than to grasp them in the first place. Hence, the question Richardson proposes as the focus of his chapter—why did Coleridge suppress "Kubla Khan" for so long?—and the ultimate answer—because the image of the unpredictable human mind operating independent of the individual's will depicted in the prefatory note and the body of the poem itself was utterly heretical and threatening to the poet who would later limn the human creative imagination as a unifying and godlike entity—confirms our received image of Coleridge. If one thing is consistent about this poet, it is his self-division, and it is therefore expected rather than surprising that he would write a poem in which personal taboos not only become central themes but also provoke feelings of guilt, which themselves are expressed in the poem. Since this psychological pattern, evident in poems other than "Kubla Khan," including "The Eolian Harp" and "Dejection: An Ode," would tend to exaggerate rather than alleviate conflicts within the self while simultaneously canvassing ideas the poet eschewed, the wonder would be that Coleridge published any

of his poetry at all, were he not so demonstrably additionally endowed with the confessional impulse (the unconscious goal of which was, undoubtedly, to share some of the guilt around). In spite of his fervent intellectualism, Coleridge was fundamentally less personally secure and more religiously orthodox than Wordsworth or Keats, and thus fundamentally averse to a protoevolutionary conception of human beings. Richardson might have achieved more in this chapter had he broadened his discussion to include some of the other poetry—for instance, “Dejection” suggests that the attempt to control cognitive processes results in a new kind of internal chaos, whereby abstruse researches constrict and strangle the mind, divorcing the self from the ability to experience feelings that are nonetheless cognitively apparent. Something might be gained by comparing the many times in Coleridge’s poetry that the mind seems to forego the directions of its purported master. In any case, Coleridge’s reservations, both intellectual and personal, about the implications of brain science probably successfully guarded his poetry against the incursions of materialist heresy.

Several matters that arise throughout the book and that might seem, initially, to be leading us down the garden path of scholarly trivia—psychoactive drugs, head injuries, dreams—turn out to have a central place in Richardson’s account, for studies of the effects of drugs and injuries as well as of the cause of dreams pointed uniformly to the bodily basis of mind, and thus were crucial to building the case that the mind is in the brain. From his medical use of laudanum and his participation in Humphry Davies’s nitrous oxide experiments in the 1790s, Coleridge himself was uncomfortably aware of the causal relationship between ingestion and subsequent mental state, and it is this evidence of the material nature of mind that lies behind the hallucinatory “Kubla Khan.” Head injuries, which showed the more permanent effect on mind of physiological damage, were likewise central to the argument that mind resided in the material entity of the body-brain. In his short, useful chapter on Austen’s *Persuasion*, which argues that Austen’s approach to feeling, mental states, and innate disposition are all influenced by romantic-era brain science, making this novel “romantic” in opposition to her other works, Richardson puts Louisa Musgrove’s head injury in the context of the times. The fall that brings about an apparently fundamental change in Louisa’s character has proved difficult for critics to discuss, but Richardson reminds us that head injuries were a politically loaded topic at the time. Certainly, Austen is having a bit of fun with her reader, but in her day that bit of fun

included the serious reminder of arguments for the material nature of mind.

In the final portion of *Romanticism and the Science of Mind*, Richardson expands his discussion to suggest how knowledge of romantic-era brain science might revise our notion of romanticism, both within literary studies and intellectual culture at large. Noting two opposed traditions within literary criticism—one highlighting romanticism's claim for a universal humanity, the other insisting that romanticism turns away from an eighteenth-century emphasis on a uniform human nature—Richardson suggests that

the shift from a mechanistic and dualistic to a biological, embodied view of human nature entails not so much an abandonment as a radical reformulation of human universals. In some cases, their corporeal and emotive approach to human nature enables Romantic writers to reassert shared human features rejected by an earlier generation of thinkers For some Romantic thinkers, embodied universalism set important limits to the new time-bound (evolutionary, historicist) relativism. But these universalist and relativistic tendencies could be found together, sometimes in tension, sometimes in outright contradiction (p. 152)

Richardson here encourages a history of ideas that is both broad and extensive; that takes account of the coexistence of seemingly incompatible ideas; that recognizes how, over time, rather different concepts may be signified by the same words; and that distinguishes politically motivated uses of scientific theories from legitimate uses of them. At a time when literary theory and criticism has been for several decades very free with grand generalizations (about the cultural construction of human nature and the self, for instance), Richardson's circumspect account implies that, if we take more care with our ideas, our pains will be rewarded. So, too, Richardson urges contemporary cognitivists to avoid homogenizing generalizations about romanticism (a concept whose usefulness, it is worth noting, has been questioned for over fifty years), and to attend to the striking continuities between romantic-era thinking about the brain-mind and contemporary theories. Though understated in his criticism of others and modest about the extent to which he seeks to redraw the map of intellectual history, Richardson suggests a significant reorientation in our approach to romanticism. This judicious, well-researched book provides a welcome impetus for further interdisciplinary criticism, and in the process renders the

sometimes-perplexing matter of romanticism a little less amorphous, a little less gray.

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1. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
2. David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, excerpted in *Backgrounds to Romanticism: English Philosophical Prose of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Leonard M. Trawick (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1967), p. 61.