



# Romanticism and the Body

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## Abstract

Romantic scholarship in the last decade of the twentieth century effectively transformed the object of study, bringing not only new attention to women writers and issues of slavery, empire, and colonialism into the field but making slave narratives, antislavery writing, and writing by women in many genres integral to a newly expanded and configured Romantic canon. At the same time, certain leading descriptions of the older canon, dominated by poetry and a handful of male writers, remained current, especially the notion that Romantic poetry sought transcendence and an ideal realm at the price of denying the body and material nature. This essay looks at a variety of new work on Romanticism and the body that challenges and revises that description, eliciting a pronounced materialist tendency found in a number of Romantic-era discourses, authors, and texts. The new emphasis on the body and on the embodiment of mind brings together several subfields within Romantic scholarship, including literature and medicine, literature and scientific psychology, ecocriticism, environmental and diet studies, recent developments in colonial discourse studies and feminist criticism, and cognitive and neuroscientific approaches to reading Romanticism.

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Two of the most exciting developments in British Romantic scholarship during the 1990s not only contributed to new critical and theoretical perspectives on the field, but have changed the very way that the field is constituted: what “counts” as a Romantic text, what gets anthologized, what gets taught. The recovery and reevaluation of Romantic-era texts written by women, growing out of the feminist critique of canonical, male-authored texts in the 1980s, effectively transformed and rejuvenated the field: dozens of authors barely mentioned for over a century came back into focus – not to mention into print – in ways that challenged reigning descriptions of Romanticism and threw “Romanticism” itself as a descriptive term into crisis. Even authors who had long remained available, most notably Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, became newly central to the field: for the first time, a young Romanticist might be expected to know and teach *Emma* as well as *The Prelude*. Alongside of (and overlapping with) the new scholarship on women writers, came an unprecedented attention to the relation of Romantic-era culture to matters of empire and colonialism, nation and ethnicity, slavery, and “race.” This newly globalized

approach to understanding Romanticism also helped transform the canon and the curriculum, bringing Black British writers like Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, and Robert Wedderburn into the Romantic canon and the university classroom, while refocusing attention on neglected genres ranging from the antislavery verse of the 1780s and 1790s to Robert Southey's "international" epics, Lord Byron's Eastern tales, and the nationalist Irish fictions of Sydney Owenson and Maria Edgeworth.

Yet, for all their transformative effects, these major extensions of the field into neglected areas left certain leading critical tenets in place, at least in relation to the (rapidly imploding) canon of male-authored, poetic texts. In particular, canonical Romanticism continued to be seen as a transcendentalizing, idealist literary movement, implicitly hostile not only to the feminine and to the racially or ethnic "other," but to physical nature and to the material body itself. An idealist disregard for material conditions, including the material instantiation of the mind in a material body, made a central part of Jerome McGann's influential critique of the "Romantic ideology": "the poetic response to the age's severe political and social dislocations was to reach for solutions in the realm of ideas. The maneuver follows upon a congruent Romantic procedure, which is to define human problems in ideal and spiritual terms."<sup>1</sup> Arguing that McGann's description of Romantic ideology failed to account for the diversity of available ideological positions, and especially for a distinctive female or feminine Romanticism, Anne Mellor, in her own influential study *Romanticism and Gender*, accepted the notion of an idealizing, dematerializing ethos informing the major works of canonical poets like William Wordsworth: "to achieve coherence and endurance, this self or subjectivity must transcend the body and become pure mind, become a consciousness that exists only in language . . . it is crucial to see that the soul or self he constructs is bodiless."<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1990s, most work on what can now only anachronistically be called the "Romantic canon" took the idealizing, spiritualizing, disembodied tendency of prototypical Romantic writing for granted. In her important 1994 study of Romantic drama, for example, Julie Carlson could confidently list "senses" and "body" as prominent among the "dirty words of romanticism," the terms to which a canonical Romantic poet would least want to pay tribute.<sup>3</sup>

However hegemonic such a view became for Romantic scholarship toward the end of the twentieth century, it would have seemed bizarre to many critics writing nearer to the century's beginning. Whether hostile towards what they described as a Romantic "movement," like Irving Babbitt, or eager to explore Romantic texts precisely for their more lurid and amoral features, like Mario Praz, an earlier generation of scholars had seen Romanticism as irrational, emotive, overly concerned with the body, the senses, and with bodily desires, and (if anything) effeminate rather than "masculine." Taking not Kant or Hegel but Rousseau as the representative Romantic philosopher, Babbitt attacked Romantic writers for following

Rousseau in valuing feeling, sympathy, and sensibility over reason and judgment: “The ancient sophist at least made man the measure of all things. By subordinating judgment to sensibility Rousseau may be said to have made woman the measure of all things.”<sup>4</sup> For Praz, the Romantic obsessions with “feeling,” with extreme emotional states, and with the body could verge on sadism, growing out of a fascination with the “uncontrolled, the macabre, the terrible, the strange.”<sup>5</sup> In the spectacle of the Medusa, Praz saw not the emblem of everything the Romantics rejected, but the object of their “dark loves.”<sup>6</sup>

Romantic scholarship has now, at the beginning of a new century, returned to this earlier emphasis on feeling and sensibility, along with a renewed attention to the insistent presence of the body within Romantic-era texts of many kinds. Although few would want to deny the salience of idealizing or transcendentalizing impulses within canonical Romanticism – it would be hard to understand Wordsworth’s “Immortality” ode, or Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” or Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* any other way – these are increasingly seen as tendencies co-existing with different, often opposed tendencies within the same time period, the same author, or even the same text. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” poem may prize those times when “we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul,” but it roots such transcendent moments not in a denial of “this corporeal frame” but in a history of embodied experiences with a particularized landscape and the “sensations” and “feelings” it inspires. “The spiritual condition it celebrates,” McGann writes, “comes through a regimen grounded in the senses.”<sup>7</sup> Significantly revising his earlier position, McGann now views much Romantic-era writing as continuous with a larger and more capacious “Sensibility” tradition, reaching back into the mid-eighteenth century and extending forward well into the nineteenth. Julie Ellison has similarly described romanticism as “one episode” within the “surrounding culture of sensibility – a culture that begins earlier and extends later than any chronology of romanticism.”<sup>8</sup> Redescribing Romanticism in terms of sensibility sets in motion a number of transformative consequences of its own, not only weakening the lines between the Romantic era and the literary “periods” that precede and follow it, but (as in Ellison’s work) eroding the distinctions between the British and American literary traditions and (as in McGann’s *Poetics of Sensibility*) between the distinctively “male” and “female” romanticisms posited by Mellor and other critics in the late twentieth century.

Resituating British Romanticism within a larger culture of sensibility also calls a different sort of bounding line into question: the philosophical line between mind (or spirit) and body. In an essay published nearly thirty years ago, “Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility,” G. S. Rousseau argued that sensibility culture grew out of the “brain-nerve revolution” associated with pioneering neurologists like Thomas Willis in the late seventeenth century, which placed unprecedented

importance on sensation for mental life and gave a scientific foundation to the sensationalist philosophies of John Locke and David Hartley. This intellectual climate in turn fostered a series of “cults of sensibility,” culminating in the “intricate process of internalisation” associated with Romantic literature.<sup>9</sup> Romanticism, for Rousseau, grew out of a revolutionary philosophical and scientific approach to mind, emphasizing its interrelatedness with the body through the nervous system and giving nearly unprecedented importance to the brain (and not a disembodied spirit) as the seat of thought. Long neglected by Romanticists, Rousseau’s work has proved prescient for critics who, like McGann in *The Poetics of Sensibility*, have now begun to view Romanticism in terms of the “stakes involved in overturning the traditional understanding of the relations of mind and body.”<sup>10</sup> The idealizing tendencies of certain Romantic-era authors and texts exist in a dynamic state of tension with opposing tendencies that locate the mind in the body and the thinking principle in the brain, anti-dualistic in tenor and materialist in implication.

Few texts spell out the terms of the “brain-nerve revolution” so cogently as Joseph Priestley’s *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, a document that should now be considered essential background reading for students of Romanticism. Published by Joseph Johnson in 1777, Priestley’s *Disquisitions* attacks Cartesian dualism as a “vulgar hypothesis” and argues, on the basis of a post-Newtonian, dynamic conception of matter, that mental life can be accounted for in terms of a specially “organized system of matter.”<sup>11</sup> The “whole of man is of some *uniform composition*,” Priestley insists; the “property of perception, as well as the other powers that are termed *mental*, is [sic] the result (whether necessary or not) of such an organical structure, as that of the brain.”<sup>12</sup> Paving the way for the revolutionary brain science of Erasmus Darwin, F. J. Gall, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, and other medical-model psychologists of the Romantic era, Priestley identifies the “nervous system,” and more particularly the “brain,” as the seat of mental activity.<sup>13</sup> The brain-based, corporeal account of mind sketched by Priestley would be developed in diverse and overlapping ways not only by alleged materialists like Darwin and Gall, but also by more orthodox (and mainstream) medical figures like Charles Bell and Astley Cooper (Keats’s mentor at Guy’s Hospital), who were careful to hedge their antidualistic accounts with qualifiers like, “in this life.” Priestley, for his part, found the conventional Christian notion of the afterlife highly problematic and probably heathen in origin, while Sir William Lawrence, popularizing the new corporeal psychology in his notorious lectures of 1815–16, lost his teaching position thanks to his unapologetically materialist approach to mind.

As a list including such diverse figures as Priestley, Darwin, Lawrence, Gall, and Keats might suggest, Romantic-era speculation on the body circulated freely among a number of discursive fields, including philosophy, medical science, political controversy, and literary culture. The vexed “two

cultures" divide between humanistic and scientific inquiry proves anachronistic in relation to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the career of Darwin, both an internationally respected scientist and a celebrated British poet, attests. Or, in a different manner, that of Keats, who did not so much leave his early medical training behind as incorporate it into his poetry and his sense of vocation. Current Romantic scholarship on the body builds on important earlier studies of Keats and medicine, beginning with Stuart Sperry's groundbreaking study of Keats and contemporary chemistry in *Keats the Poet*, demonstrating that seemingly idealist conceptions like "ethereal" and "sublime" had material analogues in the science Keats studied in medical school.<sup>14</sup> Sperry's insights were significantly extended by Donald Goellnicht, who recast Keats's career as that of a "poet-physician," and by Hermione de Almeida, whose study of *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* greatly enriched the picture of the intellectual culture centered on Guy's Hospital, where Keats trained.<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Roe's 1997 book on Keats and the culture of dissent brought Keats's training at Guy's (and earlier at Enfield Academy) squarely into the orbit of the Dissenting culture typified by Priestley, liberal to radical in politics and materialist in philosophical tendency. Where earlier scholarship on Keats and medicine had broken down the line between scientific and poetic innovation, Roe showed that any line separating medical science from the leading political controversies of the time must prove equally misleading.<sup>16</sup>

A growing body of criticism now suggests that exposure to contemporary medical science, especially those strands within medicine that worked at dissolving the boundaries between mental life and the life of the body, had significant effects on a number of literary figures beyond Keats. Building on Roe's work, for example, James Allard has shown that John Thelwall's immersion in London medical culture and his concurrent work on materialist theories of life and consciousness represented not a departure from but a new facet of his political activities: speculation on the politics of the body could not be distinguished from a concern with the body politic.<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Butler's 1993 edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* opened the door to new work on the relations of both Shelleys to medical science, most notably via their connection to Lawrence, the most outspoken biological materialist of the time (before he publicly recanted in order to save his career).<sup>18</sup> Sharon Rushton has argued that Percy Shelley's medical education, though far less extensive than that of Keats, still affected his intellectual development in momentous ways, helping to inject a skeptical element into his thought and his poetry that constantly militates against his idealist leanings.<sup>19</sup> Neil Vickers has shown that Coleridge's friendship with Thomas Beddoes brought him into sustained contact with the radical medical science of the 1790s, and with mechanistic theories of life and consciousness that Coleridge struggled with in order to develop his mature idealist positions.<sup>20</sup>

My own contribution to the field emerging at the intersection between literary culture and medical science picks up where Rousseau's prescient

work on sensibility, Romanticism, and early neuroscience left off. In *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, I trace a number of connections, biographical, philosophical, linguistic, and ideological, between Romantic-era literary culture and scientific experimentation and speculation on the brain and nerves.<sup>21</sup> Following in Priestley's footsteps, but without making any explicitly materialist claims, Erasmus Darwin had theorized a neural model of mind in *Zoonomia*, a distinctly biological (and proto-evolutionary) model in contrast to the earlier mechanistic psychology of Hartley. Darwin's influential work helped establish a climate for the guarded but clearly fascinated reception of Gall's "organology," his brain-based theory of mind, character, and behavior. Although Gall's work was widely seen as compromised by the phrenological elements of his biological psychology, Gall gained a great deal of respect, especially among the British medical community, for the revelatory brain dissection techniques he developed along with his disciple J. G. Spurzheim. Spurzheim's many publications and theatrical neuroanatomy demonstrations helped disseminate Gall's neurobiological theories among a surprisingly broad public, and Gall would later become widely credited for establishing, once and for all, the material location of mind in the brain. Gall's "organology" proved attractive to radical political thinkers like Richard Carlile, who (rightly, though in spite of Gall and Spurzheim's careful hedging on this point) saw in it a compelling descendant of the materialist theories of mind earlier promulgated by Priestley and Darwin. The British critical establishment readily condemned Gall for his implicit materialism as it had condemned Darwin before him, and the radical associations of early brain science were hardly diminished by the work of Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, a French Revolutionary doctor who developed his own brain-based theory of mind and behavior. These theories found a ready avenue to Romantic literary figures through such medical acquaintances as Beddoes, James Tobin, and Cooper (whose lectures attended by Keats included praise for Gall's brain anatomy), through the widespread publicity generated by Spurzheim, and through Lawrence's notoriously materialistic lectures on anatomy, physiology, and "human zoology."

One did not, however, need to subscribe to materialism in order to advance an embodied or, to use Coleridge's term, "corporeal" theory of mind. The prominent early neurologist Charles Bell, who discovered the basic distinction between motor and sensory nerves and mapped out many of the chief facial nerves, could at once champion "vitalism" (the belief in a supersensory principle animating all life) and yet develop a thoroughly embodied theory of mental development, behavior, and communication. Bell, in fact, worked out a theory of universal emotional expressions, uniting mind and body in the experience and outward expression of feeling, that seized the attention of Romantic artists (the painter B. R. Haydon, friend to both Wordsworth and Keats, had helped pay for the lectures out of which Bell's facial expression theory grew). Bell's work would also

prove intriguing to Charles Darwin, who developed Bell's theories with an eye to their implication for evolutionary biology: the mutual adaptation of mind, body, and environment, which spoke to Bell of divine creation, spoke to Darwin instead of blind evolutionary processes.

Given the environmentalist and proto-evolutionary character of what I've termed "Romantic brain science," it may not be surprising that scholars working in "Green" or "eco" criticism have become interested in Romantic theories and representations of the body that overlap with recent scholarship on Romanticism and the history of medical science. In *The Song of the Earth*, for example, Jonathan Bate reasserts the connection posed by early twentieth-century criticism between British Romanticism and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, arguing that "Rousseau and the Romantics" followed parallel "tracks" back to a vision of humanity in intimate connection to (rather than idealist detachment from) physical nature.<sup>22</sup> Since the body (especially, I would add, the central nervous system) represents the most overt site of connectedness between the human mind and the natural environment in which it develops historically and in which it must function ecologically, "Green" Romantics have paid increasing attention to how the body functions in discourses that underscore its permeability to the physical world around it. Timothy Morton has helped create an entire subfield around Romantic-era concerns with diet, whether early vegetarian doctrines that view the mind as partly constituted through the materials ingested through the body, or the abolitionist obsession with sugar as at once the metaphorical and concrete expression of the interrelatedness of the British consumer with the colonial slave, physically connected through the blood and sweat that pass from the field slave, through the sugar cultivation process, and into the body of the British tea-drinker.<sup>23</sup> Alan Bewell, in his important book *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, brings together the fields of history of medicine, environmental studies, and colonial discourse studies, showing in compelling detail how British culture registered the anxieties of empire-building through an obsession with the diseases that might travel "home" from the colonies, theaters of colonial wars, and other contact zones.<sup>24</sup> Debbie Lee, in her elaborately researched study of *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*, provides a related case study in a chapter on Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and the representation of yellow fever – an ideologically freighted example of how the evils of the slave trade and colonial violence might be seen to infect the body of the colonizer and threaten to return home to the metropolis itself.<sup>25</sup>

As the work of Morton, Bewell, and Lee demonstrates, the body in the new Romantic scholarship belongs equally to nature and to culture, a material locus, permeable to the environmental surround (and changed by the foods it ingests and the pathogens that invade it), and a discursive construction, framed within a welter of contending theories and ideologies and represented in ways that reveal its political uses and its social embeddedness. Recent scholarship may most differ, however, from earlier criticism

and theory in its refusal ever to see the human body as *purely* a discursive construct. Independently of how diseases are represented, for example, the body can grow sick and die from them – although, as Bewell and Lee point out, contact with a specific pathogen may have everything to do with changing patterns of economic, colonial, and military activity. Romantic-era theorists of the body saw it as remarkably malleable and subject to cultural fashions – changing patterns of diet and of hygiene, transformations in living conditions, work, and exercise – yet the Romantic era also saw a remarkable expansion of interest in biological universals (such as Bell’s facial expression theory) and in continuities among humans and other animals. *Frankenstein* draws no small part of its visceral charge, I would argue, from eroding the distinctions not only between human and “artificial” intelligence, but between human and animal organisms (the creature is constructed, after all, partly from materials gathered in the slaughter house). Lawrence’s lectures on “human zoology,” like Darwin’s evolutionary theory of the human mind arising on the same principles, and through the same biochemical processes, as the fungus or oyster proved especially noxious to orthodox palates, threatening to undermine any firm line between the human and the bestial.<sup>26</sup> Those aspects of the human body (and of its brain and its characteristic behaviors) that seemed least susceptible to enculturation, and most consistent across ages and places, tended to be those most readily identified through comparative anatomy, an extremely important scientific endeavor at the time. What was most robustly human, that is, might turn out to be what was least removed from other animal forms. Language itself was rethought at this time in terms of its continuities with various forms of animal communication as well as its distinction from them; to the Enlightenment emphasis on artificial signs and semantics generally Romantic theorists added a profound interest in the extrasemantic, emotive, rhythmic, and universal aspects of linguistic exchange, a development that helps account for some of the more puzzling aspects of Wordsworth’s writings on the language of poetry.<sup>27</sup>

A guiding interest in the universal aspects of emotive expression and response also informs the dramatic theory and practice of Joanna Baillie. As Dorothy McMillan has established, Baillie was by no means confined within a feminine sphere isolated from the scientific conflicts of the day – rather, she belonged to one of the most important medical families in Great Britain, as niece to John Hunter, around whose intellectual legacy the materialist-vitalist controversy raged.<sup>28</sup> Baillie’s brother, Matthew, was moreover an early exponent of species-wide correlations among the experience of emotions (or “passions”), their instantiation in the body and nervous system, and their (universal) expression. Frederick Burwick argues in a recent essay that Matthew Baillie’s work in abnormal psychology left its mark on his sister’s *Plays on the Passions*.<sup>29</sup> In an essay included in the same volume, I’ve argued that his interest in what might be termed normative psychology – including the behavioral neurology of emotion – was



evidently shared by Joanna Baillie, who extends this early biomedical line of thought in significant ways in her thinking about – and stage representation of – emotional expression.<sup>30</sup>

Although Baillie may have been the best-positioned woman writer of her generation in terms of family connections to the new biological thinking of the time, she was by no means the only one to take a vital interest in the new science. Implicitly challenging as they did traditional alignments of male: culture: mind (or spirit), on the one hand, and female: nature: the body, on the other, corporeal theories of mind offered an important alternative to the dominant, and blatantly antifeminist, paradigms of an earlier era. Although nerve-based or “nervous” models of the self could, notoriously, serve to aggravate notions of sexual difference, they could also (as Isobel Armstrong notes) challenge the “Cartesian division between matter and mind,” inverting the “traditional hierarchal relation between mind and sense.”<sup>31</sup> Armstrong mentions work in the 1820s on the nervous system by J. C. Prichard and John Cooke, but one could look earlier to such figures as Priestley, Gall (who posited relative rather than absolute differences between the sexes) and Erasmus Darwin. Darwin was important to a number of women poets – Anna Seward, for example, published a memoir of Darwin after his death – and while the appeal of his radical, highly sexualized botany for women intellectuals has been widely noted, the potentially feminist implications of his nerve-based psychology deserve more attention.

In paying far more attention to the body and its claims, Romantic discourse significantly challenged and extended Enlightenment notions of the universally human, of what might be called the “normal.” As Paul Youngquist has shown, however, the new thinking about the body also included an inordinate amount of attention concerning the abnormal and the “monstrous.” Youngquist’s recent book, *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism*, bears comparison with recent work by Roe, Bewell, and myself that draws on medical literature in positing anti-transcendentalist, anti-dualistic tendencies within Romantic writing. Youngquist’s special contribution, however, involves his unique interest in Romantic representations and theories of the monstrous and extra-normative, picking up where Praz left off many decades before. Reading the medical literature with an eye to its ambivalent fascination with the abnormal, Youngquist traces a disciplinary, homogenizing discourse emerging from various scientific and esthetic writings of the period and then proceeds to read Romantic texts as they expose and to a degree attempt to counter this normalizing discourse. His chapter on Blake and racialist tendencies in both contemporary physiology and esthetics exemplifies his approach: by taking certain Enlightenment notions of Reynolds further than Reynolds himself is willing to go, Blake invents an iconography of racial difference that disrupts and exposes the new racist art and pseudo-science of his time.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, De Quincey, in his portrayal of Kant’s last days, slyly asserts

an anti-transcendental philosophy grounded in the claims of the “crazy” body as against Kant’s idealism, undermined by Kant’s own obsession with bodily needs and limitations.<sup>33</sup>

Recent work on the body and Romanticism has also helped reopen the topic of sexuality, suggesting that a turn toward biological materialist models might have radical consequences in this area as well. Seeking to understand why the Romantics linked sexuality with liberation, Richard Sha, for example, turns to medical science and what he calls the “perversification” of sexual pleasure, the scientific recognition of the gaps between sexual pleasure and sexual function, proposing that early biological discourses on the human body included new conceptions of sexuality that might support rather than constrain mobility in sexual behavior and erotic object choice. In “Scientific Forms of Sexual Knowledge in Romanticism,” he finds moments of epistemological panic in Buffon, the Hunters (Baillie’s uncles), and in *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* that complicate Foucault’s notion of bio-power, suggesting that sexual liberation does not simply amount to power extending its grasp.<sup>34</sup> In “Medicalizing the Romantic Libido,” Sha looks at how perversion gets written onto the body in the period, thus undermining current notions that sexuality emerges in Victorianism only when perversity (as a moral issue) becomes perversion (as a psychological condition).<sup>35</sup> Like Youngquist, Sha returns to critical ground once occupied by Praz – here, the connection between Romantic notions of sexuality and the perverse – in an original manner that underscores the radical, counter-cultural aspects of Romantic discourse.

The new Romantic scholarship on the body and on embodied theories of mind has appeared at a time of widespread interest in brain and behavior and in neuroscientific accounts of mind. In academic departments of psychology and psychiatry, biological approaches to understanding mind and behavior have largely if not entirely displaced the psychoanalytical models still very much in vogue in literary studies. Evolutionary biology has become an important reference point for many anthropologists, while some philosophers of mind have been studying “neural network” artificial intelligence programs and brain-based accounts of cognition. Cognitive neuroscience has emerged as a metadiscipline to bring together researchers in medical fields like neurology, psychiatry, and psychopharmacology with colleagues in psychology, linguistics, and computer science. In contrast to some earlier trends in cognitive science, advancing a “mind as computer” agenda and ignoring the messy location of mind in brain, cognitive neuroscientists by definition must take the brain, nervous system, and body into account. To what extent is work on the body in the humanities, and in studies of Romantic literature and culture in particular, responding to this changing intellectual climate?

In broad terms, one could claim only that the resurgence of scientific interest in brain and mind has lent older speculation a new luster, and made biological materialism a far richer, more complex, and comparatively

open-ended alternative (or supplement) to cultural materialism than might have seemed likely in light of earlier, reductive enterprises such as social Darwinism and sociobiology. In particular, one could point to recent examples of Romantic scholarship that make telling use of research in the mind and brain sciences to propose new readings of issues and central to the field. Karl Kroeber, for example, writing as an ecocritic, works backwards from the neuroscientist Gerald Edelman's "neural Darwinism" in arguing that the British Romantic poets were at their most prescient in advocating an early biology of mind.<sup>36</sup> Working with cognitive-neuroscientific theories of and research into memory, Beth Lau has significantly revisited the topic of memory in Wordsworth's autobiographical poetry, suggesting that elements that have been previously seen as quirky or outright fabrications might in fact have been based on what is now known about the mechanisms and limitations of human recall.<sup>37</sup> Drawing on neurobiological theories of early development, Nancy Easterlin has argued cogently that the older, psychoanalytical theories of infant development relied upon in much Romantic scholarship simply are not tenable, in an essay that I believe should be required reading for graduate students in the field.<sup>38</sup> I have begun publishing a series of essays that test out the usefulness of recent cognitive and evolutionary theories for approaching texts and issues in the field, including a reassessment of the rhetorical figure of apostrophe in Romantic poetry in light of what can be learned from cognitive linguistics.<sup>39</sup> Other critics, advertising no special interest in the value of cognitive or evolutionary theories, may nevertheless draw tellingly on "the research of cognitive science," as with Celeste Langan's skilful reliance on insights from information theory and post-Chomskian linguistics in her recent essay on voice, writing, and speech pathology in Coleridge's "Christabel."<sup>40</sup> Scholarship that engages with cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary biology has by now become a notable presence within literary studies generally, and there's every reason to believe that this trend will continue to grow in tandem with more purely historically-oriented work on the interrelations of mind, brain, and body in the Romantic era.

I would conclude by emphasizing, however, that the interest shown by recent Romantic scholarship in the materiality or non-semantic aspects of language, the neural constraints on memory, the embeddedness of mind in brain and body (the "biology of mind"), and related issues does not yield up a new or alternative Romanticism. Rather, it significantly enriches the critical reconstruction of Romanticism built up over several decades of revisionist analysis in crucial and sometimes surprising ways. It opens up a view of Romantic discourse as by turns dualistic *and* antidualistic, with even prototypical Romantic authors like Coleridge and Wordsworth caught up, if only in fits or moments, in the era's revolutionary embodied psychologies. The Romantic impulse towards transcending the body to reach a pure realm of ideas remains a pervasive and seductive one to reckon with; as Bate puts it, the "aspiring spirit of the Rousseauesque or

Wordsworthian contemplative is sometimes forgetful of the biological body.”<sup>41</sup> Yet if Romantic writers were at times tempted to erase the body, at others they reconfigured the body, with its newly elaborated web of nerves and complex of sensory and neural organs, so as to encompass the realm of spirit and ideas itself. The new Romantic scholarship on the body gives us, ultimately, a more elaborate and more dynamic sense of the Romantic mind.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. J. McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> A. K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> J. Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> I. Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Cleveland: World, 1955 [1919]), p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd ed., trans. A. Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970 [1951]), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> J. Ellison, “The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility,” in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. C. S. Wilson and J. Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 228.

<sup>9</sup> G. S. Rousseau, “Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility,” in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century 3: Papers Presented at the Third David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar, Canberra 1973*, ed. R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 154, 157.

<sup>10</sup> McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> J. Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), pp. xiii, 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> S. M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 30–71.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984); H. De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> N. Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> J. R. Allard, “John Thelwall and the Politics of Medicine,” *European Romantic Review* 15(1) (2004), pp. 73–87.

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