

BRITISH ROMANTICISM AND THE SCIENCE OF THE MIND

ALAN RICHARDSON

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Monotype Baskerville 11/12.5 *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Richardson, Alan, 1955-
British Romanticism and the science of the mind / Alan Richardson.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Romanticism ; 47)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 78191 4 (hardback)

1. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism. 2. Literature and science – Great Britain – History – 19th century. 3. Brain – Research – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
4. Neurosciences – Great Britain – History – 19th century. 5. Romanticism – Great Britain.
6. Mind and body in literature. 7. Psychology in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PR468.s34 R53 2001
820.9'356 – dc21 00-050356

ISBN 0 521 78191 4 hardback

In this provocative and original study, Alan Richardson examines an entire range of intellectual, cultural, and ideological points of contact between British Romantic literary writing and the pioneering brain science of the time. Richardson breaks new ground in two fields, revealing a significant and undervalued facet of British Romanticism while demonstrating the "Romantic" character of early neuroscience. Crucial notions like the active mind, organicism, the unconscious, the fragmented subject, instinct and intuition, arising simultaneously within the literature and psychology of the era, take on unsuspected valences that transform conventional accounts of Romantic cultural history. Neglected issues like the corporeality of mind, the role of non-linguistic communication, and the peculiarly Romantic understanding of cultural universals are reopened in discussions that bring new light to bear on long-standing critical puzzles, from Coleridge's suppression of "Kubla Khan," to Wordsworth's perplexing theory of poetic language, to Austen's interest in head injury.

ALAN RICHARDSON is Professor of English at Boston College. He has published extensively on the literature and culture of the British Romantic period. His books include *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (1988) and *Literature, Education and Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), which won the American Conference on Romanticism Book Prize for 1994.

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ROMANTICISM 47

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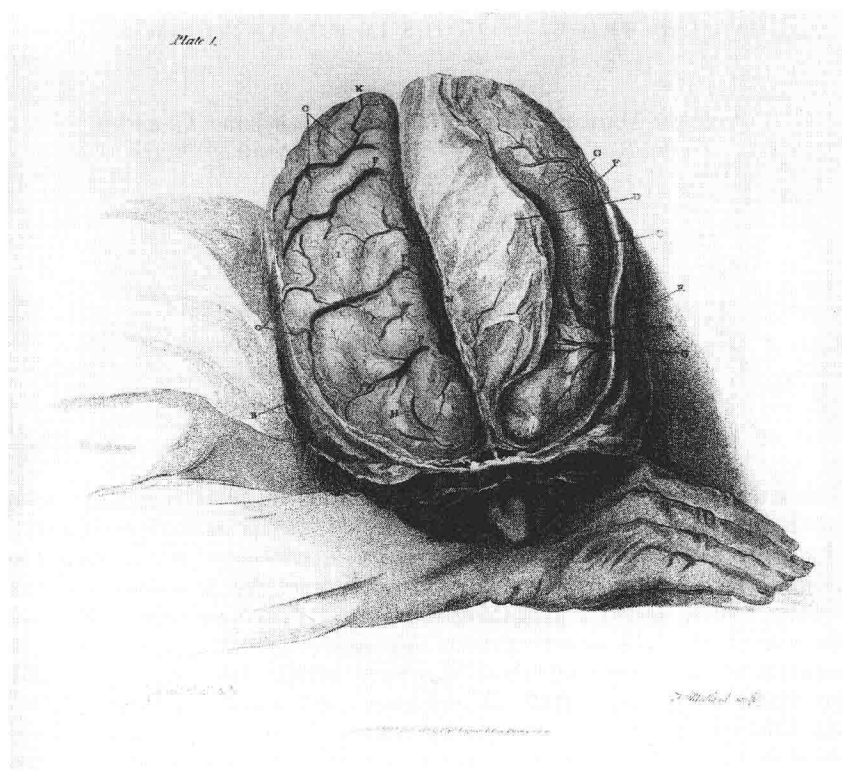
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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad, and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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Charles Bell, *Anatomy of the Brain, Explained in a Series of Engravings* (London, 1802), plate 1.

For Deborah

It is not an easy task to reconcile two subjects so far apart in the minds of most readers as Anatomy and the Fine Arts; but if prejudices early imbibed, be thrown off, it will be found that there is no science, taken in a comprehensive sense, more fruitful of instruction, or leading to more interesting subjects of inquiry, than the knowledge of the Animal body.

Charles Bell, *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression*

Preface

The secondary literature devoted to William Wordsworth, by now extensive enough to stock a small library, has found no room to discuss a most remarkable feature of the poet's sensory life. Wordsworth's critics and biographers alike have made little or nothing of an intriguing psychophysiological oddity attested to both in Robert Southey's 1822 reminiscences and in Christopher Wordsworth's 1851 *Memoirs*: the poet "had *no sense of smell*."¹ Perhaps the near-total silence regarding Wordsworth's sensory deficit ever since is understandable. For many critics, at least until recently, it might have been seen as having anecdotal value at best, good perhaps for a donnish lecture joke. ("All the mighty world / Of eye and ear,' – but not, sadly, of nose.") In the present critical climate, however, with unprecedented attention to the centrality of sensation, of "organic sensibility," perception, and the body within Romantic writing, Wordsworth's limitation to four of five external senses seems at least worth noting. If, as an influential critic has declared, Wordsworth's poetic project is "grounded in a regimen of the senses,"² does the ground shift when one considers Wordsworth's alienated relation to at least one of those senses?

Put more directly, did his lifelong experience of a congenitally damaged sensorium affect the way Wordsworth himself understood sense experience, the sensory organs that variously channel it, the mind that anticipates, shapes, and interprets it? Wordsworth came of age, after all, at a time when the bodily – and hence mutable – nature of the mind had been boldly asserted by Joseph Priestley, when the medical and physiological account of mind developed in Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* had caught the fancy of avant-garde intellectuals, and when sensory and cognitive deficits gave fuel to arguments for the mind's dependence on, if not identity with, the brain. Wordsworth was exposed to these new ideas in the formative 1790s, a time of close collaboration with Coleridge, himself thoroughly caught up in questions of perception,

epistemology, and mind–body interaction. Radically modular accounts of mind and sensation were just on the horizon, most notoriously the “organology” of Gall, whose brain-based psychology would soon be described for the English public in a pamphlet by Wordsworth’s friend Henry Crabb Robinson. By 1851 Harriet Martineau, a recent convert to the phrenology movement that had given Gall’s ideas wide currency, would cite Wordsworth’s defective sense (and his momentary, perhaps apocryphal, recovery of it) in the context of a modular, anti-dualistic, embodied theory of mind and sensation.³ Martineau came late (though with characteristic zeal) to a Romantic fascination with the brain, the nerves, and the continuity between body and psyche. For the half century conventionally associated with literary Romanticism (1780–1830) had also witnessed the rise and first flourishing of a biological science of mind.

Any number of motifs, ideals, and “discoveries” routinely attributed to literary Romanticism – including the split or fragmented psyche; the revaluation of feeling, instinct, and intuition; the active mind; developmental models of subject formation; the unconscious; even a new, more humane construction of “idiocy” – feature prominently in the era’s emergent biological psychologies as well. In the chapters that follow, I argue that these common focal points reveal an important though neglected area of overlap between Romantic-era literary and scientific representations of the mind as situated in and lived through the body. The new biological psychologies of Darwin, Gall, and other radical brain scientists constitute a crucial segment of the Romantic discursive field; they give new dimensions to terms like “sensibility,” “nervous,” “organic,” “natural,” “universal,” and “brain” that reverberate through the fictional works and poetic theories of their literary contemporaries. Rediscovering the extensive commerce between literary and scientific investigations of mind in the Romantic era does more, however, than open up a vital new area for research in the history of literature and esthetics. It also presents a fertile site for examining cultural and ideological conflict, looking back to a time when an immaterial and indivisible conception of mind seemed an indispensable prop to established religious doctrine and even political stability.

These claims may seem surprising, and the elaborate network of discursive connections and historical contacts that supports them came initially as a surprise to me. I was taught to think of Romantic-era brain science, when at all, as a vaguely comical affair of phrenological bumps and Hartleyan vibratiuncles. The early psychological theories of Darwin

or Gall might provide matter for the sociologist of science, but could hold little interest in themselves or in relation to the larger intellectual culture of the period. It was through the lens of contemporary neuroscience, which has returned (in its own way) to one after another concern of Romantic psychology – from the modular mind to facial expression theory – that I began to see how innovative, exciting, and threatening the theoretical and experimental work of leading Romantic-era brain scientists might once have appeared. (That it did strike contemporaries as momentous can be seen in the comments from reviews, lectures, notebooks, letters, and other sources cited throughout this book.) Although I develop my argument primarily through the interplay of archival research and textual analysis associated with “new” historicist literary criticism, I have deliberately preserved traces of its beginnings in the unexpected parallels I noticed between the brain science of the Romantic era and that of our own period. Given that the past can never be addressed from an entirely neutral or detached position, I have thought it best to be candid about the interests that launched me into this subject. In certain cases, as with the “cognitive unconscious” or the “basic” level of conceptual categorization, where formulations from cognitive neuroscience can enrich or clarify an understanding of notions or terms within Romantic discourse, the parallels are made explicit.

I cannot, all the same, claim this study as an exercise in what John Sutton has christened “historical cognitive science,” though I share his conviction that research into certain “strange, neglected” traditions in neuropsychology gains immeasurably from the perspective of recent cognitive and neuroscientific theory. (I also find aid and comfort in Sutton’s avowal of the “virtues and pleasures of superficially silly old theories,” “weird old views” that seem considerably less so in the wake of the cognitive revolution).⁴ My methodological sympathies here lie closer to what Nicholas Roe, in his revealing study of Keats, terms “literal archaeology,” an attempt to recover the ideological as well as scientific and cultural valences of key terms and ideals usually limited to a range of literary meanings.⁵ Nevertheless, I hope this book will find readers beyond its primary audience of British Romantic scholars, among historians of psychology and neuroscience, and even among cognitive scientists seeking to learn from the “prehistory” of their field. It may also appeal to those beginning to bring methods and findings from cognitive science to bear on the study of literature, by demonstrating how the interplay between literary and neuroscientific models and representations has a rich past as well as a robust future.

As I have presented sections of the work below to various audiences, I have learned to anticipate several recurring questions, some addressed in the course of the argument, others best dealt with up front. One sort of question concerns my use of a neuroscientific lexicon to clarify and highlight aspects of Romantic-era texts, especially non-scientific texts, that I read in terms of what I call “embodied” or “corporeal” accounts of mind. The anxiety, as I understand it, is that I illicitly borrow an aura of authority from the sciences, especially when I point to parallels (however rough) with recent neuroscience, thus implicitly claiming a special validity for my interpretations. I would emphasize in response, first, that in drawing on models and formulations from recent neuroscience in order to add clarity and point to my discussions of “weird old views,” I make no claim for the validity of these views, old or new. To the contrary, I am quite aware that among the recent scientific conceptions I allude to here and there in the text and notes, at least some are sure to prove invalid, since some of them contradict or cancel out others. I have borrowed eclectically (but not, I hope, promiscuously) from cognitive theory and neuroscience in trying to give new life to old ideas, but the resonance I hear between the Romantic era and the past few decades does not in itself speak to the truth value of either past or current findings and models. The sciences of mind, perpetually reinventing themselves, can circle back to reopen promising paths abandoned for no good reason, or can return to the mistaken, even perverse windings of the past in (temporarily) compelling new ways. I do think that the brain science of the Romantic era has been badly undervalued, both in terms of its cultural weight in its own time and its intellectual interest for the present, but (some very general trends apart) I would not want to claim that it has been “vindicated.”

Those who look here for full-scale interpretations of literary works will in any case be disappointed. My aims are more modest, concerned with contradictions, cruxes, and charged moments in selected texts rather than with comprehensive readings of them. I try to show that by shifting and extending notions of historical context to include the context of brain science, one detects new meanings in certain key terms (“organic,” “unconscious”), discovers new approaches to longstanding problems (Coleridge’s un-Coleridgean preface to “Kubla Khan,” some of the knotty points in Wordsworth’s poetic theory), and finds new philosophical and ideological significance in a familiar topic (blushing and related psychophysiological events in Keats). Even the chapter devoted to Austen’s *Persuasion* looks primarily at selected incidents and stylistic

issues, leaving many aspects of the novel undisturbed. In proposing and selectively illustrating new ways of thinking about British Romantic culture, I have tried to be provocative rather than definitive or synoptic. Other texts, authors, and issues might well have been taken up in light of the embodied approaches to mind being worked out in the scientific and literary discourses of the period. I hope other scholars will find cause to help fill in the picture, and I welcome in advance the gains in nuance and complexity that further critical discussion will add to the new perspectives offered below.

For crucial support in the course of researching and writing this book, I thank, first of all, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a Fellowship in 1997–98. Boston College generously supplemented the fellowship in numerous ways, including a Summer Research Grant in 1997, a Research Expense Grant in 1998, and Undergraduate Research Assistant Grants in 1998 and 1999. Thanks to these programs, I had the pleasure as well as profit of working with three talented research assistants, Beth Bradburn, Stellar Kim, and Sara Hart. Research for this book was also significantly aided by the librarians and staffs at the O'Neill Library at Boston College (especially Brendan Rapple), the Widener Library at Harvard, and the Countway Rare Books collection at the Harvard Medical School (especially Jack Eckert).

I am particularly grateful for the opportunities given me to present, discuss, and circulate parts of this work at various stages of its progress. Earlier versions of chapters 2 and 4 were published (respectively) in the journals *Romanticism* and *Poetics Today*. I wish to thank the anonymous readers and especially the editors I worked with, Nicholas Roe and Meir Sternberg, for their suggestions. The American Conference on Romanticism twice gave me venues for presenting aspects of this work at annual meetings held at the University of Georgia and at Indiana University; thanks to the interdisciplinary and comparatist ethos of this group, and the lively and attentive audiences it fosters, I learned a great deal in each case. No less instructive were the more intimate (but no less lively!) exchanges sponsored by the ELH seminar series at Johns Hopkins University and the seminar on Romantic Literature and Culture at the CLCS (now the Humanities Center) at Harvard University. The latter has provided me with an academic second home for many years and I am especially grateful to Sonia Hofkosh for helping to keep the seminar as collegial as it is challenging. I cannot imagine more informed or more stimulating audiences for the chapters on Coleridge and Wordsworth

than those I found in 1998 at the Coleridge Summer Conference at Cannington and the Wordsworth Summer Conference at Grasmere. I am also thankful for opportunities to lecture closer to home at Dartmouth University and the University of New Hampshire. Though I cannot individually acknowledge all of those who helped me with questions, comments, or suggestions, I hope they will find their interventions bearing fruit below.

Those who provided indispensable early encouragement for this project include William Keach, Ti Bodenheimer, Frederick Burwick, Marilyn Butler and Chuck Rzepka. Chuck also proved a generous and demanding reader of various chapters in draft, along with Mary Crane, Richard Matlak, Bruce Graver, Marilyn Gaull, Francis Steen, Beth Lau, Ash Nichols, Brian Richardson, John Mahoney and, not least, David Miall. Josie Dixon provided exceptionally valuable editorial guidance in the early stages of this project and her successor, Linda Bree, brought her own keen attention and high scholarly standards to bear on its completion. I am immensely indebted to Roy Porter and to a second reader (who remains anonymous) for their detailed, scrupulous, and stimulating responses. I am also grateful for the careful attention of Christine Lyall Grant, who brought a much-appreciated combination of rigor, professionalism, and tact to copyediting the final manuscript. Most of all, I wish to thank Deborah Blacker. This book grew indirectly out of many conversations with her, and it continued to grow literally under her hands as she read and commented on every page as I wrote and rewrote it. Dedicating the book to her is a small enough return for making it, and for making so much else, possible.

Abbreviations

- AP* Charles Bell, *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression As Connected with the Fine Arts*, 7th edn. (London: George Bell, 1877).
- BL* Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. J. Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1983).
- Essays* Charles Bell, *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806).
- FB* François Joseph Gall, *On the Functions of the Brain and of Each of Its Parts: With Observations on the Possibility of Determining the Instincts, Propensities, and Talents, or the Moral and Intellectual Dispositions of Men and Animals by the Configuration of the Brain and Head*, tr. Winslow Lewis, 6 vols. (Boston, MA: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon: 1835).
- HW* William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, Dent: 1930–34).
- JKL* John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).
- JKNB* John Keats, *John Keats's Anatomical and Physiological Note Book*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (Oxford University Press, 1934).
- LL* Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–19 on Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Princeton University Press, 1987).
- LPZ* William Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man, Delivered to the Royal College of Surgeons* (London: Benbow, 1822).
- Outlines* Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Outlines of the Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (1800; rpt. New York: Bergman, 1966).
- P* J. G. Spurzheim, *Phrenology, or, The Doctrine of the Mind; and of the Relations Between Its Manifestations and the Body*, 3rd edn. (London: Charles Knight, 1825).

- PS J. G. Spurzheim, *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim; Founded on an Anatomical and Physiological Examination of the Nervous System in General, and of the Brain in Particular; and Indicating the Dispositions and Manifestations of the Mind*, 2nd ed. (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815).
- R Pierre-Jean-George Cabanis, *On the Relations Between the Physical and Moral Aspects of Man*, tr. Margaret Duggan Saidi, ed. George Mora, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).
- STCL Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1956–71).
- SW Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Princeton University Press, 1995).
- TT Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Princeton University Press, 1990).
- WP William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).
- ℷ Darwin, *Zoonomia: or, The Laws of Organic Life*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1794–96).

Quotations from poems by Blake, Darwin, Keats, and Wordsworth, unless otherwise noted, follow these editions: *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman, rev. edn. (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1982). *The Poetical Works of Erasmus Darwin, M.D., F.R.S.*, 3 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1806). *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) excluding the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, which follows *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen, 2nd edn. (Oxford University Press, 1969) and *The Prelude*, which follows *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York, Norton, 1979); 1805 is preferred unless 1799 is being explicitly discussed. Line numbers are given for quotations from longer poems only.