

'O for a Life of Sensations' or 'the Internal and External Parts': Keats and Medical Materialism

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Abstract

By analysing key poems and particularly his use of the mythological figure of Psyche in the ode 'To Psyche' (1819), the least known of his odes, this essay considers John Keats (1795–1821), perhaps *the* poet-physician of the Romantic period, in the light of the vitalist versus materialist debates in medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It begins by exploring ways in which responses to Michel Foucault's notion of the confident clinical gaze and its accompanying surgical touch (as developed in the teaching hospitals in Revolutionary France and also by medical practitioners like William Lawrence and Charles Bell in England around the turn of the nineteenth century) might be traced in Dannie Abse's twentieth-century poem 'In the Theatre' (1972) and William Wordsworth's poetry and thought, before coming to a close focus on Keats. It outlines anxieties about the state, nature and disputed existence of the soul triggered within this wider medical debate, particularly in discussions of the nervous system, of the nature of sensation, and of what has become known as the mind–body problem; and it reads the poems as part of this debate. Referring to his medical notebooks and well-known statements in his letters, it re-examines the idea of Keats as a poet of sensation. It uses recent scholarship which seeks to revise our understanding of Keats specifically, and Romanticism in general, by drawing upon contemporaneous medical and scientific debates and highlighting the centrality of his medical training to possible understandings of Keats.

In the spirit of truth-finding and empirical experimentation which marked much of the medical enquiry at the turn of the nineteenth century, the twentieth-century poet-physician Dannie Abse (1923–2014) records a 'true incident' which took place in a hospital in Cardiff in 1938. Abse's older brother was a 'dresser', the junior doctor assisting the surgeon (often by clearing up after operations), and he reported this story to Abse as a child. In 'In the Theatre' (1972), the surgeon Lambert Rogers is attempting to operate on a brain tumour under local anaesthetic:

[M]ore brain mashed because of the probe's braille path;
Lambert Rogers desperate, fingering still

...

Then, suddenly, the cracked record in the brain,
a ventriloquist voice that cried, 'You sod,
leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone,'—
the patient's dummy lips moving to that refrain,
the patient's eyes too wide.¹

The unease captured here does much to challenge the idea of the confident physician identified by the French philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Foucault (1926–84) as marking the birth of the 'modern' world in the clinical practice in the teaching hospitals of post-Revolutionary France at the turn of the nineteenth century. Foucault argues that 'Modern medicine has fixed its own date of birth as beginning in the last years of the eighteenth century ... it identifies the origin of its positivity with a return ... to the modest level of the perceived ... A new alliance was forged between words and things, enabling one *to see* and *to say*'.² He further characterises this in terms of a 'positivity' in which the 'observing gaze' of the clinician 'refrains from intervening'; his '[o]bservation leav[ing] things as they are' (pp. xii, 107). There is an echo in Abse's 'fingering' brain surgeon of Foucault's observation of the 'metaphor[s] of "touch" by which doctors will ceaselessly define their glance' (p. 122); however, Lambert Rogers's destructive 'desperate fingering' and pointed lack of sight or insight in his 'probe's braille path', juxtaposed with the patient's own 'eyes too wide', is clearly of a different order.

For Foucault's clinician, there is, at least in theory, no such anxiety. His confidence goes beyond observing and, apparently, unproblematically rendering that observation in language – he suggests that the 'the great myth of a pure gaze would be a pure language' (p. 114) – to possessing a gaze which makes the body and any diseases knowable, graspable and ultimately treatable. For Abse, the surgeon's well-intentioned but blundering actions are in a sense unspeakable: the poem ends not with the assertions of the clinician but with the troubling immaterial voice of the patient and with silence. Abse's surgeon is transgressive, destructive and sacrilegious in his attack upon the soul as much as the brain.

A similar anxiety was also strongly held by those opposed to certain kinds of scientific and medical advance at the turn of the nineteenth century, which they too saw as the encroachment of materialism upon the possibilities of the transcendent. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) visited Paris in the 1790s and was familiar with advances in science in general and medicine in particular. His description of a physician in 'A Poet's Epitaph' (1800) might be compared to the description of the surgeon in 'In the Theatre'. Wordsworth dismisses a version of Foucault's clinician, in language similar to that used by Abse:

he is 'one all eyes ... a fingering slave / One that would peep and botanize / Upon his mother's grave' in his search for the Cartesian 'pin-point' location of the 'soul'.³

For both Abse and Wordsworth the physician is engaged in an act of transgression; his 'probing' and 'peeping', embodied in the action of his 'fingers', assault the spiritual fabric of what it is to be human. Directly, and shockingly in Lambert Rogers's case, dismissively in Wordsworth's, the attack is upon the 'soul'. Such an attack – as critics with an interest in the significance of medicine to literature in general and Romanticism in particular have pointed out⁴ – is a fundamental element of the medical practice noted by Foucault in the French clinic or teaching hospital, and part of a controversy in English teaching hospitals from the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵

Alan Richardson rightly warns against too simplistic an account of this vitalist versus materialist debate. He notes the material 'biological account' of the brain-mind and nervous system, championed by a range of scientists and medical practitioners in the second half of the eighteenth century, including the anatomist John Hunter (1728–93), reputedly an early sponsor of the practice of body-snatching for the purposes of medical research; Robert Whytt (1714–66), a pioneer of studies of the nervous system; Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), the polymath, and ardent supporter of the French Revolution; and Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), the grandfather of Charles Darwin, and himself a poet-physician. This view, of course, is challenged by Wordsworth in his choice of the word 'botanize' to account for his near grave-robbing physician, who, in 'The Epitaph to a Poet', 'would peep and botanize / Upon his mother's grave' (19–20). Richardson argues that the pro- or anti-soul camps did not form 'coherent movement[s]' (pp. 5ff.). However, even accepting this, there clearly was considerable debate over the question as to whether the dualism underpinning post-Cartesian thought was – as, for example, Joseph Priestley suggests in his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777) – 'a vulgar hypothesis'. Arguing against such a 'hypothesis', Priestley suggests that '[the] powers of sensation and perception, and thought, as belonging to man have never been found but in conjunction with a certain organized system of matter; and therefore that these powers necessarily exist in and depend upon such a system'.⁶

Abse's poem sees the soul as a 'cracked record in the brain', giving it a physical reality, and as 'a ventriloquist voice', suggesting that it is a kind of pseudo-presence or, perhaps, even a trick. Here, Priestley could be read as suggesting that higher human functions are, as it were, a matter of matter alone; but phrases like 'in conjunction with' and 'depend upon' do not necessarily preclude the possibility that the principle of life could be, as John Hunter argues in 'On the Vitalist Principle' (1786), 'something superadded' to an 'organized system of matter'.⁷ Such possibilities were rejected by radical materialists at the turn of the nineteenth century: most (in)famously by the pro-revolutionary political radical John Thelwall (1764–1834) in his 'Essay towards a Definition of Animal Vitality' (1793), a direct challenge to Hunter; and by William Lawrence (1783–1867), the professor

of anatomy and physiology at the Royal College of Surgeons. Echoing Priestley, Lawrence claims, in his *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* (1819), that 'Life ... is merely ... the state of the animal structure. It includes the notions which are obvious to common observation. It denotes what is apparent to our senses; and cannot be applied to the offspring of metaphysical subtlety, or immaterial abstractions without obscuring what is clear and intelligible.'⁸

Unlike Lambert Rogers, Lawrence was, as Marilyn Butler and others have noted, 'a household name';⁹ his radical, anti-religious, stridently materialist views at the beginning of the nineteenth century were publicly criticised as mounting what Alan Richardson characterises as real 'challenges' not only to the scientific but also to the 'social order' (p. 2). Such views could be characterised as pre-Darwinian but adaptionist, in that Lawrence held that all living entities, including human beings, could only be products of physically determined processes.¹⁰ He was attacked most notably by John Abernathy (1764–1831), professor of medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons, and his former teacher, who in his own lectures found evidence both for what we would call intelligent design and for an 'immaterial' soul. Lawrence later recanted his views, withdrawing his early publications; Priestley and Thelwall were attacked for theirs. Priestley's house and laboratory in Birmingham, then a centre for radical scientific experimentation, were burned down by an anti-revolutionary mob that rioted for three days in July 1791. The cry of Rogers's patient – 'leave my soul alone' – was something of a social if not a medical consensus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

More acceptable, perhaps, at the time were medical theorists and practitioners who were committed to the view of the body and brain as, in Priestley's phrase, 'organised matter', but who nonetheless made space for the soul. For example, seeking to understand how different body parts respond to pain when sometimes not directly under threat, Robert Whytt argued in the 1760s that 'the mind is only affected thro' the intervention of the optic and auditory nerves'; and that it could no longer be considered to control or direct experience alone, but was part of a larger system in which 'nerves are endued with feeling, and ... there is a general sympathy ... through the whole system; so there is a particular and very remarkable consent between various parts of the body'.¹¹ Whytt's 'something superadded', the 'sentient principal', was to be found throughout the body. Anticipating Abernathy, and the intrusive 'probing' of Abse's brain surgeon, he concludes, using the same appeal to reason and empirical method as radical materialists, that

If the human frame is considered as a mere CORPOREAL system which derives all its power from matter ... it may be concluded that the IMMENSE UNIVERSE is destitute of any higher principal: but if, as we have endeavoured to shew ... our ... bodies ... are to be referred to the active power of an IMMATERIAL principal; how much more necessary must it be to acknowledge ... an INCORPOREAL NATURE everywhere and always present. (pp. 391–2)

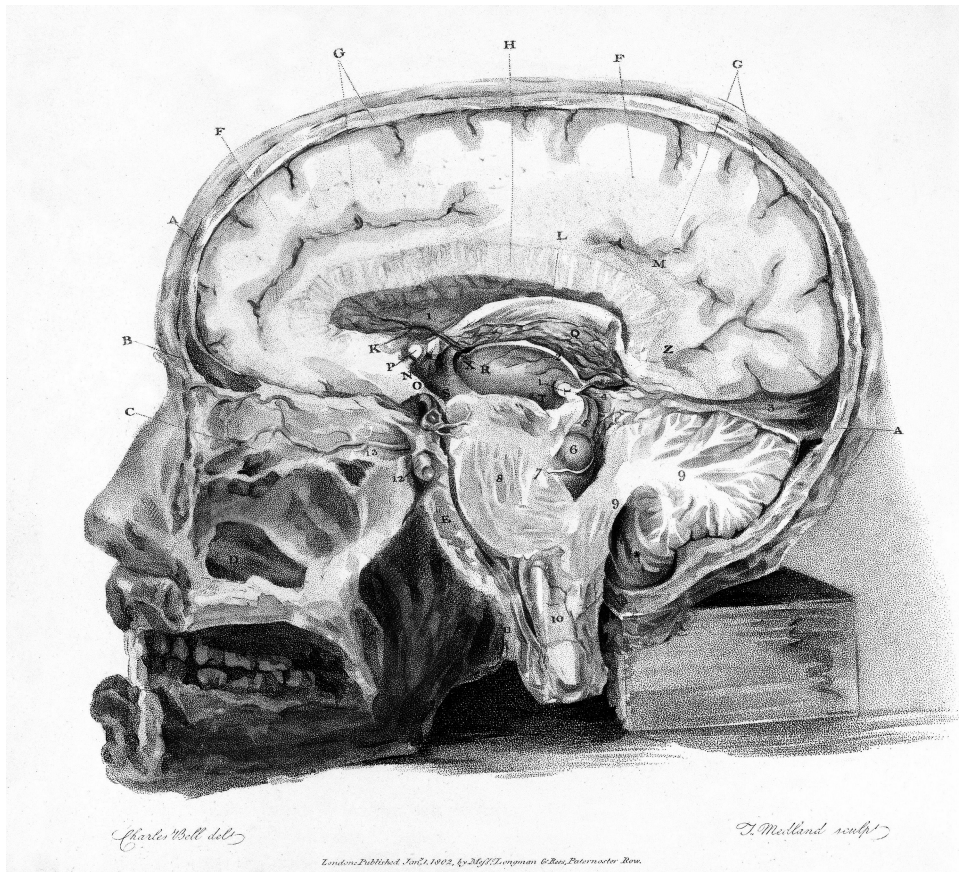


Figure 15.1 Engraving of the brain, from *The Anatomy of the Brain, Explained in a Series of Engravings*, by Charles Bell (1802).

Similarly, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Charles Bell – noted for the palsy named after him and for discovering the difference between sensory nerves and motor nerves in the spinal cord – could demonstrate, in his privately published but influential *Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain* (1811), the emerging awareness of the complexity of human physiology and the brain in particular (Figure 15.1). He argues that ‘[all] ideas originate in the brain’;¹² but, as a devoutly religious Anglican, he equally maintains a clear sense of dualism, distancing himself from the perceived radicalism of Lawrence’s materialism. Bell remarks: ‘They would have it that I am in search of the seat of the soul ... I mean only to investigate the structure of the brain as we examine ... the eye and the ear’ (p. 3). He also echoes Whytt’s sense of what we, again, might call intelligent design, but his language suggests an ambivalence about the claims of any transcendent or totalising systems. He writes: ‘The mind was placed in a body not merely suited to its residence but in circumstances to be moved by the materials around it; and the capacities of the mind, and the powers of the organs, which are a medium

betwixt the mind and the external world, have an original constitution framed in relation to the qualities of things' (p. 8).

Here, there is the same kind of 'positivity' found by Foucault in French Revolutionary clinical practice. Yet, the passive voice is at best ambiguous: the 'mind' being 'placed' and the 'constitution' being 'framed' suggests the assumed agency typical of pre-Darwinian adaptionist arguments, like those of William Paley (1743–1805), who famously argued in his *Natural Theology* (1802) that a designer was necessary to explain the complexity and variety in the world, just as a watch-maker was required to explain the existence of a watch, and the variety in the number of possible watches. However, unlike Whytt's proto-pantheistic 'higher principal', no actual agent seems to be assumed by Bell.

Picking up on this debate about intelligent design, and the wider possibility that 'literature might be considered in [the Romantic] period as a form of scientific practice', Noel Jackson finds in the language used by Whytt, Bell and other medical theorists and practitioners at the turn of the nineteenth century an echo of the Wordsworthian claim that the mind and the external world are in some way necessarily 'fitted' to one another.¹³ Wordsworth writes in the 'Prospectus' to his unfinished and unpublished work *The Recluse*, of which only one part, *The Excursion* (1814), was published during his lifetime:

My voice proclaims
How exquisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted:—and how exquisitely, too,
Theme this but little heard of among Men,
The external World is fitted to the Mind. (lines 62–8)¹⁴

While this clearly was Bell's view, it is interesting to note that he was one of the first theorists to follow through on the logic of his supposition that all 'ideas originate in the brain' (p. 34) and to explore the well-reported phenomenon of phantom limbs and other pseudo-impressions in terms of brain and nerve based physiology; enquiries which might suggest a more complex, and ultimately more troubling, relation 'betwixt the mind and the external world' than can easily be accommodated by adaptionist accounts of perception. Bell notes that following a 'blow to the head', 'the ears will ring and the eye flashes light while there is neither sound nor light present' (p. 11) and more provocatively, and with a sense of transgression not dissimilar to Abse's possibly phantom soul, that 'exquisite sensations' can still be felt from the head of a penis completely destroyed by cancer!

Wordsworth's own sense of the adaptionist view that the world and the senses were 'fitted' to and for each other, was often under similar stress. He could equally record a profound anxiety about the reliability of sensory perception, the

relationship, in Bell's phrase, between 'betwixt the mind and the external world'. He captures the subtleties and contradictions at play most graphically. Against this backdrop of philosophical, if not directly medical, ideas, he grew up with a sense of doubt as to the nature of things. He writes in the 'Fenwick note' to the 'Immortality' ode (1804) that, as a child 'I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence ... Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall myself from the abyss of idealism to the reality' (*Poetical Works*, vol. IV, lines 463–4).

Here, it is the fear that external things may have no external existence and cannot be guaranteed simply by sight of them, that concerns the child Wordsworth, and the man, as it would many of the Romantics. The solution of the child is essentially childlike, a kind of clutching for an epistemological teddy bear: to grab hold of something is again to experience it. Touch becomes the guarantee of truth just as it does, rather less urgently, for Foucault's clinician in his understanding of gaze as touch. Yet, as Bell's research into the phenomenon of the phantom limb and other pseudo-sensations begins to suggest, to touch or feel something, to grab 'a wall or a tree', ultimately proves little. And, something of this uncertainty may be apparent in Wordsworth's phrasing: 'to grasp at' suggests wishful thinking as much as it does certainty.

Bell's *New Anatomy* was used by Astley Cooper (1768–1841), professor at Guys teaching hospital, as a source for his anatomy lectures to students in 1815–16. As is well known, one of his pupils, and indeed one he singled out by arranging a dresser's post for him, not unlike the role taken by Abse's brother, was, perhaps, the poet-physician of the Romantic period: John Keats (1795–1821). Keats entered Guys, then part of the Borough Hospitals, on 2 October 1815 after a five-year apothecary's apprenticeship; and his first published poem, the sonnet 'O Solitude', appeared in the liberal journal the *Examiner* the following May. Although his career plans vied with poetry for his attention – by April 1816, when he should have been concentrating on his forthcoming exams, he had taken to writing poetry during lectures and imitating the fashions set by the already famous poet Lord Byron (1788–1824) – in July 1816 Keats passed his examination and qualified to practise as an apothecary. Since the passing of the Apothecaries Act in 1815, which greatly increased the demands on a would-be practitioner, this was no mean feat. Keats was expected to attend lectures and hospital 'walks', and to show detailed knowledge of current medical theory and practice, including anatomy. After a long summer vacation, he returned to London to continue his studies in order to further qualify as a surgeon, which, naturally, involved attending surgery. The reality of this experience was captured by a contemporary, who wrote:

The pupils packed in like herrings in a barrel, but not so quiet. There was a continual calling of heads, heads to those about the table whose heads interfered with sightseers.

I have often known even the floors so crowded that the surgeon could not operate till it had been partially cleared ... I was quickly upset, had to leave the theatre, and not infrequently fainted.¹⁵

Beyond the colourful nature of medical students' experience, which would include cooking breakfast in the corner of the operating theatre, this account gives some idea of their proximity to bodies and their role as 'sightseers' – the seeing of sights recalling both Foucault's sense of the clinician's 'gaze' and Wordsworth's 'all eyes' physician. Indeed, a version of the clinical method that concerns Foucault, with its insistence on observing the diseased and healthy body, was being practised in the English teaching hospitals, like Guys, from the 1770s. For Keats, this proximity was heightened in his role as a dresser for the infamous surgeon, William 'Mad Billy' Lucas.

Criticism in the last twenty years or so, by Hermione de Almeida, Nicholas Roe and others,¹⁶ has done much to establish the importance of the medical context to Keats's work in terms of its imagery, themes and historical context. Although he never completely relinquished thoughts of a medical career and saw poetry itself as potentially a kind of medicine, it is interesting to note that Keats is reported to have abandoned surgery in circumstances not dissimilar to Abse's poem. His friend Charles Brown reported: "My last operation" he told me "was the opening of a man's temporal artery. I did it with the utmost nicety but, considering what passed through my mind at the time, my dexterity seemed a miracle and I never took up the lancet again."¹⁷ De Almeida suggests, rightly, that this should be viewed not as the fragile Keats of literary myth, manifesting an understandable 'distaste for seeing gore and blood', but as 'reflect[ing] an anxiety for life' (p. 326n.).¹⁸ This anxiety might best be understood in relation to the vitalist-materialist debate sketched here.

The latest materialist understanding of sensation at the time, derived directly from Bell and indirectly from Whytt and Priestley, is recorded thus in Keats's notes on Cooper's lectures: 'Sensation – it is an impression made on the Extremities of the Nerves conveyed to the Brain. This is proved by the effects of dividing a Nerve ... Volition is the contrary of Sensation it proceeds from the internal to external parts.'¹⁹ This observation provides an interesting context for the poet who was torn between a 'life of Sensation ... [and] thought', as he notes famously in his letters;²⁰ and for the critical tradition of a one-sided reading of this carefully poised wish, which tends to see him as an escapist writer: for example, Matthew Arnold's dangerously sensuous Keats, F. R. Leavis's anxiety over Keats's perceived vulgarity, John Jones's unworked eroticism, and Marjorie Levinson's sense of Keats's shameful sensualism.²¹ In this regard, it is worth noting that Levinson's reading, relying as it does on a sense of educational deficit, echoes the view of medical students in general held by the contemporary churchman Thomas Rennell

(1754–1840), who saw William Lawrence and radical materialist medicine as corrupters of the innocent young. Rennell writes in 1817:

By far the larger part of those who look upon Mr. Lawrence for instruction ... have no education at all. At the age of fourteen ... they rapidly contract the range of their intellect ... Forgetting then the existence of a first cause ... the more accurately they observe the more surely they puzzle and perplex their understandings; till at last their embarrassments conclude in a state of general scepticism ...²²

Like the voice in Abse's poem, Rennell is concerned with preserving both a 'first cause' and the soul from 'probing' materialist attack. He attacks the 'general scepticism' which in a medical as well as a broader sense might question the Wordsworthian 'fit' between thought, imagination, perception and experience; or between, in Keats's phrase, 'internal and external parts'.

In his recent study of the relationship between science, sensation and Romantic poetry, Noel Jackson argues that Keats, like Wordsworth, is able 'to sustain a balance' between 'ideation and perception' (p. 169). I want to suggest, here, that there is in Keats's absorption of much of the scientific debate about sensory perception, rather than any 'balance', a sense of unease not dissimilar to that noted by Abse in his own accounts of how 'internal and external parts' might relate. In the context of the materialist debate, it is no coincidence that this unease can be seen in Keats's treatment of the figure Psyche, or the soul, from Greek mythology.

The well-known story of Psyche falling in love with Eros (Love) is invoked in the early poem 'I Stood Tip-Toe upon a little hill' (1816) in an ambiguous way which suggests an interest beyond the merely erotic. The following might be said to be typical of the sensual Keats:

So felt he, who first told, how Psyche went
On the smooth wind to the realm of wonderment;
What Psyche felt, and Love, when their full lips
First touch'd; what amorous, and fondling nips
They gave each other's cheeks (lines 41–5)²³

The physical existence of Psyche and the personified Love/Eros is stressed here – 'their full lips', their 'amorous fondling nips' – as is, recalling Foucault's dominant medical trope, their ability to touch. Their presence to the voyeuristic poet and reader is secured through erotic acts of near violence: bites are perhaps the most urgent form of touching. Yet, this presence is undercut by the fact that the poem admits that it is a retelling of a story which has already been 'told'. This kind of distancing occurs more harshly in Keats's later engagement with the worlds of myth and legend, in, for example, *The Eve of St Agnes* (1820), which is famously seen by critics as either an indulgence in the sensual or an exposure of the very

impossibility of such an indulgence,²⁴ and in the pursuit of the goddess in the long poem *Endymion* (1818).

A similar stance is taken by the poetic voice of 'Sleep and Poetry', which was completed around the same time as 'I Stood Tip-Toe', in the second half of 1816, when Keats was training to be a surgeon. In a frequently quoted passage, often seen as predictive of his desire to move beyond the mytho-erotic to the world of 'Pains and troubles' of his experience of practising medicine and necessary to form a 'soul' (*Letters*, vol. II, p. 103), Keats writes:

First the realm I'll pass
Of Flora, and old Pan ...
Catch the white-handed nymph in shady places,
To woo sweet kisses from averted faces –
Play with their fingers, touch their shoulders white
Into a pretty shrinking with a bite
As hard as lips can make it; till agreed,
A lovely tale of human life we'll read. (lines 101–10)

Here, again, the poet's ability to connect with the external world may be read parodically in its overemphasised physicality; it might be seen as a sort of exposure of the concerns expressed in the apparent confidence of a clinician's touch, or Bell's sense that 'the mind' could equally confidently know and experience 'the quality of things'. Here, the poet will 'catch' the nymphs, 'play with their fingers'. Touch is, again, a means not so much to prove that the external 'realm' has substance, but to test that assumption to breaking point. Echoing the 'fondling nips' of Eros and Psyche, the poet will even 'bite' the nymphs to prove their existence.

In his account of much of the scientific material sketched here, Alan Richardson highlights this passage. He sees it at one and the same time as 'harmless' and, in language which unwittingly echoes many of the anxieties of the sensualist readings of Keats, as an 'erotic combat which may verge too nearly on the sadistic for some' (p. 140). This reading, it seems to me, misses the sense of uncertainty about the nature of sensory experience. Using a word which might again bring Abse's brain surgeon to mind, Roe identifies the 'disconcert[ing]' nature of Keats's erotic poetry,²⁵ and what might equally be seen as a lack of 'balance' – a lack of balance of which Keats would have been fully aware from his own understanding of the science of the mind at the time.

This sense of uncertainty is made most apparent in Keats's last treatment of the Psyche story in the ode of that name, written in 1819 and the least considered of the sequence of odes on which his reputation as a poet, perhaps, rests. The poem is first recorded in the long journal letter to his brother, George, in which he speculates about how a soul might be 'made' (*Letters*, vol. II, pp. 102–3); and it contains

a description of a 'working brain' (line 60) which has long been linked directly to Keats's medical training.²⁶ By the end of the poem the poet-priest promises:

I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind (lines 50–3)

But, unlike earlier versions of the myth in Keats, he has no direct access to the goddess. He doesn't even catch a voyeuristic glimpse of her; she is in a sense even less than the pseudo-presence of Bell's phantom limb or Abse's 'ventriloquist voice' soul. In a phrase which might suggest the vitalist spark of life, the poet finally vows to keep '[a] bright torch and a casement ope at night / To let the warm Love in!' (lines 66–7).

Anne K. Mellor sees in this conclusion an invitation to restage the embrace that is gazed upon at the opening of the poem, beyond its frame.²⁷ Yet, if we see the poet-priest here as standing in for Cupid – who, as Keats knew from *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary*, his favoured source for mythological material, made 'a place of bliss'²⁸ for Psyche – then there is a sense in which the personification of 'Love' here refers *not* to Cupid himself but to Psyche, or the soul. This, then, is to repeat the scene of so many of Keats's erotic encounters: an erotic location is sustained only in the poet's mind, or more dangerously and appropriately for Keats's awareness of emerging materialist accounts of consciousness, the poet's brain; and, more indirectly, it is an act of wishful volition on the part of a hopeful observer. Yet, of course, as with so many of these encounters, despite the open window, and the open vowelled 'ope', sounding the hope within the poetic or imaginative act, here, as with the phantom limb, beyond the confines of the poet's own imaginative 'sanctuary', Psyche may not be there. Unlike the confident physician, or the vitalist who is sure of a transcendent underpinning to sensory perception, the poet cannot finally guarantee the existence of the soul. But, despite the force of the materialist argument that, as Lawrence put it, 'an immortal and spiritual being' was not to be found 'amid the blood and filth of the dissecting room' (p. 8) or operating theatre, Keats's poet still looks out, not with the sense of shock of Abse's brain surgeon, but in hope.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

My essay springs from an interest in the life of John Keats and is concerned with research that sees his medical training as centrally significant. Many biographies of Keats are available, but I would particularly recommend the one by Andrew Motion listed in Further Reading. In that list, I have also provided some introductory critical reading on the other two poets discussed, Wordsworth and Abse, along with a collection of essays on connections between science and modern poetry edited by John Holmes.

My essay is influenced by a particular approach to literary study, New Historicism. It is not any longer particularly 'new', having originated in the 1980s, but the term was coined by Stephen Greenblatt, whose book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) is usually seen as its first incarnation (although, of course, all approaches to literature have complex origins and antecedents). It is an approach which has proved particularly fruitful in studies of the literature of the Renaissance and Romantic periods.

Chapter 9 of Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* (2002) offers a good overview of New Historicism along with chapters on a full range of literary theories, many of which are used elsewhere in this volume. Barry summarises 'What New Historicists do', linking the practice to many of these other theories:

1. They juxtapose literary and non-literary texts, reading the former in the light of the latter.
2. They try thereby to 'defamiliarise' the canonical literary text, detaching it from the accumulated weight of previous literary scholarship and seeing it as if new.
3. They focus attention (within both text and co-text) on issues of State power and how it is maintained, on patriarchal structures and their perpetuation, and on the process of colonisation, with its accompanying 'mindset'.
4. They make use, in doing so, of aspects of a post-structuralist outlook, especially [Jacques] Derrida's notion that every facet of reality is textualized, and [Michel] Foucault's idea of social structures as determined by dominant 'discursive practices'. (p. 179)

It is point 4 which might be said to differentiate the approach from other ways of using historical material to help 'explain' a literary text.

You might want to take these points and ask some questions about my essay. Is it helpful or even legitimate to compare Keats's poems to the range of non-literary texts? Do you find convincing the reading of 'To Psyche' as in some sense a poem about medical theories of sensation and the mind-brain problem? Do you think that Keats is knowingly ironic about much of his material? Do you prefer less 'defamiliarising' readings concerned more with the immediate formal, mythic and aesthetics qualities of the poems? And to what extent do you accept that 'every facet of reality is textualized'? (Here Barry is referring to Derrida's (in)famous claim usually translated as 'There is nothing outside of the text' (*Of Grammatology*, p. 158) but perhaps better understood, although not easy to understand, as 'there is no outside-the-text').

In Keats this debate about what can be read into a poem might be best exemplified by competing readings of his ode 'To Autumn' (1819). You might usefully contrast readings of it by Roe (*Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, pp. 253–67; see my essay, note 16) and Helen Vendler in chapter 7 of *The Odes of John Keats*. Similarly with Wordsworth, you might want to read 'Tintern Abbey' (1798)

and come to your own views before considering the readings offered, for example, by Marjorie Levinson in *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* and the counterblast by Thomas McFarland in *Intensity and Achievement* which accuses Levinson, and by inference New Historicism as a whole, of 'a Herculean headlock to force us toward [an] interpretation' (p. 6). Do you think that these poems are being 'seen anew' or being distorted by juxtaposing them with such historical materials?

Many critics question the methods of New Historicism. Some argue, like Harold Bloom, that in prioritising the text's relation to history, it ignores the 'aesthetic ... autonomy of imaginative literature' (*The Western Canon*, p. 10). Others argue that in limiting itself to historicity – that is, to a concern with the ways in which history is, and can only be, represented in multiple and often competing historical documents and accounts (Derrida's texts), rather than in any sense known for certain – it denies the reality of what Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory*, calls 'the truths of history' (p. 208).

Foucault looms large in my essay in the ways that Barry suggests. The claim underlying my argument is that the 'discursive practice' of the idea of the clinician, as he defines it, fundamentally shaped medical practice at the time and continues to do so (see the introduction to *The Foucault Reader*). It becomes, for Foucault an 'episteme': a form of words which determines the nature of what we can know (see 'Truth and Power' in *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 51–75). You might like to reflect upon how medicine and science more generally are culturally constructed. My essay and this reflection were written during governmental and public health responses to the Covid 19 crisis of early 2020. Although not explicitly part of my essay's interest in the 'gaze', it seems appropriate to end by pointing out that Foucault is particularly interested, as New Historicist readings of Keats often suggest he was, in the idea of (government) control by observation (see 'Panopticism', *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 206–213, and also Roe).

FURTHER READING

- Archard, Cary, *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook* (Bridgend: Seren, 2010)
 Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester University Press, 2009)
 Bloom, Harold, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994)
 Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp.157–64.
 Christopher Norris's *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987) is a useful introduction to Derrida.
 Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction (Anniversary Edition)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008)
 Foucault, Michel, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow (London: Penguin, 1991)
 Gill, Stephen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (Cambridge University Press, 2003)
 Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, new ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2005)

- Holmes, John (ed.), *Science and Modern Poetry: New Directions* (Liverpool University Press, 2012)
- Levinson, Marjorie, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1986)
- McFarland, Thomas, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)
- Motion, Andrew, *Keats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997)
- Vendler, Helen, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983)
- Vesser, H. Aram (ed.), *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989). In addition to the readings of Keats which are New Historicist in nature cited in my essay, this provides discussions of the theory and its application.

NOTES

1. Dannie Abse, 'In the Theatre', in *Funland and Other Poems 1967–72*, reprinted in *Collected Poems 1948–1976* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), pp. 160–1.
2. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1973), p. xii; subsequent references are incorporated within the main text.
3. 'A Poet's Epitaph', lines 17–25, in *The Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Derek Roper (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1987), p. 221. The Cartesian view was developed by the French philosopher-scientist René Descartes (1596–1650), who argued that there are two kinds of experience, the mental and the physical, which both exist in a dualistic account of what it is to be a conscious individual. In his *The Passions of the Soul* (1649) he argued that the pineal gland at the base of the brain was the seat of the soul.
4. Roy Porter, 'Medical Science and Human Science in the Enlightenment', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (eds), *Inventing Human Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 53–87; Sharon Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) (subsequent references to Richardson are incorporated in the main text).
5. See, e.g., Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 5ff.
6. Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (London: Johnson, 1777), pp. xxxviii, 26.
7. *The Works of John Hunter*, ed. J. F. Palmer, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1835), vol. I, pp. 221–3.
8. William Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* (London: Callow, 1819), p. 39.
9. See editor Marilyn Butler's introduction and 'Appendix C' to *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. ix–li, 229–51.
10. For a discussion of William Lawrence's ideas see K. D. Wells, 'Sir William Lawrence (1783–1867): A Study of Pre-Darwinian Ideas on Heredity and Variation', *Journal of the History of Biology* 4 (1971), 319–61.
11. *The Works of Robert Whytt* (Edinburgh: Balfour, Auld & Smellie, 1768), pp. 493, 152.
12. Charles Bell, *Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain* (1811; London: Dawson, 1966), p. 34.

13. See Jackson, *Science and Sensation*, p. 8ff.; and, for a similar view, Richardson, *British Romanticism*, p. 15ff.
14. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire, 5 vols (Oxford University Press, 1940–9), vol. V, p. 5; subsequent references to the *Poetical Works* are incorporated within the main text.
15. From William Hale-White, *Keats as Doctor and Patient* (Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 14.
16. De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and Keats*; Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and the Medical Imagination* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017).
17. H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Keats Circle*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), vol. II, p. 56.
18. The idea of Keats as a fragile other-worldly figure, or as someone with little interest in or knowledge of the world, principally concerned with escaping into his imagination, was begun by Percy Shelley's poem *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821) and perpetuated by much criticism and commentary in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A useful summary and exploration of the different critical readings of Keats is provided by Jack Stillinger's 'The "Story" of Keats', in Susan Wolfson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 246–60.
19. *John Keats's Anatomical and Physiological Notebook*, ed. M. B. Forman (Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 55–6. For the latest work on the relationship between these notes and his work see Hrileena Ghosh, *John Keats' Medical Notebook: Text, Context, and Poems* (Liverpool University Press, 2020).
20. H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. I, p. 185; subsequent references are incorporated within the main text.
21. For readings of Keats as a poet of sensation in a non-medical sense see, e.g., Matthew Arnold, 'Keats', in *Essays in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1888); F. R. Leavis, 'Keats', in *Revaluation* (London: Chatto, 1936); John Jones, *John Keats and the Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto, 1969); and Marjorie Levinson, *Keats' Life of Allegory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).
22. *British Critic* (n.s.) 8 (July 1817), 64–5.
23. All quotations from Keats's poems are taken from *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). References are provided by line number as the texts of the poems are widely available.
24. Stuart Sperry's *Keats the Poet* (Princeton University Press, 1994) summarises the sensualist/ironist debate over *The Eve of St Agnes*, pp. 198ff. Levinson's *Keats' Life of Allegory* provides a sustained reading of Keats's eroticism and masturbatory imagination but does so in terms of kinds of social and educational exclusion or lack that locating him against medico-empiricist debates does much to correct.
25. Citing John Bayley's 'The Vulgar and Heroic in "Bad Poetry"', Roe's *Keats and the Culture of Dissent* discusses the 'Sleep and Poetry' passage in relation to its social rather than epistemological significance (p. 16ff).
26. See, e.g., Donald Goellnicht, *The Poet Physician: Keats and Medical Science* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), pp. 135–9.
27. Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 80ff.
28. See *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary* (1788; London: Braken Books, 1984), p. 567.

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