

Part 1  
Aesthetics and Media

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# Imagination

*Richard C. Sha*

## **On the Romantic Imaginations We Want and Imaginations We Don't<sup>1</sup>**

Perhaps no single entity was more important to Romantic writers than the imagination. Blake wanted “this world of imagination” to be “the world of eternity,” to the God dwelling within every human breast (555). Percy Bysshe Shelley wanted the imagination to be “the great instrument of moral good” and it could function as such by operating as an organ of sympathy (517). In her “Ode to Imagination Under the denomination of Fancy,” Scottish novelist and poet Elizabeth Hamilton addressed the imagination as “Offspring of celestial light, / Spirit of the subtlest kind, / Fancy! Source of genius bright – / Illuminator of the mind!” In one go, she desires the imagination to embody fecundity, Enlightenment, spirit, genius, and mind. That this linkage is accomplished by the figure of apostrophe, the fictive figure of address, perhaps hints at the inability of the imagination to be all these things, even as her insistence on “denomination,” based on the Latin meaning “calling by a name,” generates more naming by adding fancy to imagination.<sup>2</sup> The very powers of naming and addressing are thereby undermined. In her final stanza, Hamilton renders this initially ungendered “offspring” a “daughter,” and femininity enables her to close the gap between “thee,” “thy,” and “thou” (the imagination) – which appear fifteen times – and her “my” in the final line (used once). Hamilton thus demands thinking about how the imagination can heal the gap between wanting and being, and invites us to consider what we are to do with this gap.

The gap between wanting and being is well worth thinking about, especially with regard to the critical history of the imagination. This essay deliberately begins a few miles above Romantic accounts of the imagination because it charts the competing

ways in which Romantic critics have invoked the imagination to perform critical work. Why have critics wanted one version of the imagination over another? The fact that these positions so often mirror and/or reverse previous positions signals that our very definitions and theories of the Romantic imagination have something, perhaps everything, to do with critical desire. Indeed, this history shows that the Romantic imagination oscillates from being pure of ideology to the very embodiment of it, and now to being more wary of ideology than critics of the evasive or ideological imagination have recognized. At bottom, then, I will argue, this debate – this need to read ideology where others have read imagination – is conditioned by our increasing skepticism about the role of literature in the world, and the uses or uselessness of literary methods of reading to that world. The symptom of this skepticism is that contemporary critics have renamed the imagination “history,” the “social,” and “ideology.” And yet, as we shall see, what counts as “history” and “ideology” is a particularly literarily centered history or ideology whose core is figuration or language or reading. The irony here is that Romantic writers had no need to name the imagination as history or ideology because it was for them inextricable from history or ideology. Their notions of history, however, took different forms of material embodiment. The clear-cut distinctions between text and context, literature and history, verbal figures and action, are ours, not theirs, and they are ours because of our faith that to make literature historical or ideological is to do meaningful intellectual work. I will then propose some future directions of study that attempt to return to what the Romantics wanted to do with the imagination, what they found wanting in it, and why.

### **Romantic Histories of the Imagination**

Originally published in 1953, M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* is still read and cited today. Few critical books have an off-the-shelf life of almost sixty years. Abrams distinguished Romanticism from the Enlightenment because it offered a revolutionary expressive theory of art instead of a mimetic one: against Locke’s metaphor of the mind as a mirror, the Romantics conceptualized the mind in terms of a lamp that is “bathed in an emotional light he himself [*sic*] projected” (52). This theory enabled Abrams to show that whereas previous writers had made the world central to the work of art, Romantic writers made themselves central to the work of art.

In terms of his concept of the imagination, Abrams emphasized a gap between mechanical fancy and the organic imagination (ch. 7). He defines “organicism” as “the philosophy whose major categories are derived metaphorically from the attributes of living and growing things” (168). Underlying both is an associationalist psychology that moves from understanding the mind in terms of a mechanical combination of ideas to a more “organic” synthesis and fusing; in the same way that a plant unfolds “spontaneously from within” and assimilates “to its own nature the materials needed for its nourishment and growth” (167), the imagination works

organically. Where the imagination before organicism was doomed to combine and recombine previous “unit images of sense,” the Romantic imagination could assimilate and digest such images (172). Abrams concludes this chapter with speculation that this idea of the imagination “incorporates our need to make the universe emotionally as well as intellectually manageable” (183). This of course raises the issue of what he has done to make his version of the imagination as valuable, including setting up clear binary oppositions between mechanism and organicism, mirrors and lamps – oppositions that will not hold up to rigorous scrutiny.

Like *The Mirror and the Lamp*, James Engells’s *The Creative Imagination* is a major milestone in the critical scholarship on the imagination. Situating the Romantic imagination within multiple Enlightenment contexts ranging from Humean empiricism to Kantian transcendentalism, Engells highlights the key developments in aesthetics, psychology, philosophy, and art that contributed to the growing influence of the imagination. Where Hume believed that it was possible to know the things of this world – hence his empiricist leanings – Kant argued, by contrast, that since things could only be apprehended through our modes of apprehension of them, we could only know about how we know, and the things themselves could never become objects of knowledge. As the name for the relationship between sensory information and mind, the imagination thus became central to knowing.

If Engells admirably charts the manifold ways in which the imagination was defined and used by male English and German writers, psychologists, philosophers, and artists, he stresses synthesis over difference. Like Abrams, Engells’s creative imagination harmonizes difference under the rubric of growth (ix), when in fact the clashes he so ably documents threaten the imagination’s coherence. For instance, although Engells insists that the Germans provide the foundation for the rise of the imagination in Britain, insofar as they systematically think about it, Gavin Budge has recently argued that German idealism was an outgrowth and reaction to British Common Sense Philosophy, embodied in the school of Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart (12). “The Common Sense school’s emphasis on the semiotic nature of perception situates human reason within a theological and providentialist framework” (30), a framework that not only belies neat distinctions between British empiricism and Romanticism, but also undermines the general alignment of British Romanticism and German idealism. The foundations of anything, thus, change according to what is counted in the historical sample. In order to measure growth, growth must be charted against some baseline, and the narrative of growth is contingent upon what counts as the baseline. This growth narrative further obscures interpretative choice: the selection of beginning and endpoint undermines the claims to organic growth.

Responding to what he saw as a tendency of Romantic critics such as Abrams and Engells to recapitulate a Romantic ideology of seeing poetry as non-ideological, Jerome McGann made in his 1983 *The Romantic Ideology* one of the signal interventions in Romantic criticism. “Today the scholarship and interpretation of Romantic works is dominated by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations” (137), he announced. Symptomatic of this uncritical

absorption was the tendency to frame the imagination as having “transcend[ed] the age’s doctrinal conflicts and ideological shifts” (68). In stressing the organic imagination, and in refusing to think about the ideology of organicism – how could the imagination be doctrinal if it were like a plant? – both Abrams and Engells were guilty of such “uncritical absorption.” McGann elaborates, “When Romantic poems deal with Nature and the Imagination, then, they are invoking a specific network of doctrinal material” (69). What he meant by doctrine and ideology was a kind of false consciousness, a “particular socio-historical vantage [that] hence embodies certain ideological presuppositions” (28).

With a few clicks of a keyboard, the very thing that escaped ideology became the very thing that embodied it. The imagination thus became the doctrine that enabled an illusory escape from doctrine. This maneuver had two consequences: one, the value of a critical position became measurable to the extent to which it was at critical distance from Romanticism’s idealisms; two, Romanticism itself became the object of critical suspicion, despite the fact that McGann repeatedly recognized how the Romantics understood the precariousness of the ideal (72), and the critic’s work became valuable to the extent that it manifested such suspicion.

It is the absolutist framing of this position that leads me to ask if the imagination’s relation to ideology can be captured by so blunt an instrument as suspicion. More recently, defenders of the imagination such as John Whale and Deborah White have argued that the imagination was used far more self-consciously than has been credited. If, for McGann, literature as ideology locates the capacity for critical distance in historical distance, then lost in such a position is the possibility of critical sympathy with the Romantics’ belief in the imagination and its capacity to change the world. For McGann, it seems, critical sympathy is not possible. More importantly, Romantic writers had their own suspicions about the imagination. Alexander Schlutz has shown the ways in which Kant worried about how the imagination’s connection to the “realm of receptivity” might disable it from producing an “actual cognition worthy of the name” (85). Yet McGann’s book has had such impact that the twelve-step recovery program for Romanticists has yet to be fully written.

If Abrams and Engells stress growth – the imagination constantly grew in relation to Enlightenment developments – Denise Gigante has recently argued that critics such as McGann have oversimplified organicism by forgetting that “the very concept of organic development, indicated by the German word *Bildung*, merges the diverse fields of biology and aesthetics” (46). Against a narrow version of poetic form as ideology, Gigante argues that “the concept of vital power upon which they [the Romantics] relied made possible a world in which material structures were plastic and subject to ongoing change” (48). And against the synthesizing organicism of Abrams and Engells, Gigante insists that one logical outgrowth of organicism was monstrosity. Here, she aligns monstrosity with Kant’s definition of it: “an object is monstrous . . . if by its magnitude it nullifies the purpose that constitutes its concept” (47). Read in a Kantian light, organicism has the power to frustrate itself and thus cannot be reduced to ideology. Perhaps McGann would respond by insisting that this is yet another form of uncritical absorption into Romantic ideas.

Like McGann, Alan Liu counts himself among historicist critics of Romanticism who see “not so much historical reference in the text as the historical groundedness or determinateness of the lack of reference itself” (579n). In other words, and in a typical deconstructive move, the absence of historical reference speaks to the presence of history. To help with the idea of a lack as presence, imagine a smoker who is trying to quit, for whom absence conditions awareness. For Alan Liu, “there is no imagination” (39) because the imagination names the denial of history that is, in effect, the only possible engagement with it. Let me untangle this paradox. As Liu explains, one can never experience history as history because “the stuff of history is manifestly not ‘here,’ available for such ordinary means of verification as sight or touch,” and consequently “the reason poetic denial is ipso facto a realization of history . . . is that history is the very category of denial” (39). Because engagement with history is only possible through its denial, Liu returns to the famous Simplon Pass episode of Book 6 of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850), and where Geoffrey Hartman named the self as filling the gap between nature and nature’s source in order to reformulate the self so that it is about the connections between “history, nature, self” (4), Liu adds, “The theory of denial is Imagination” (5). Because the sourcehood of the self is elsewhere and because the “self” needs an “ad hoc definition of history at its contact point with experience: a sense not yet formulated into idea” (5), this denial must be doubly imagined and such imagining is the very condition of a selfhood partly constituted by history. He then goes on to show how Wordsworth’s crossing of the Alps is mapped onto Napoleon’s crossing, and these crossings – through the figure of chiasmus, the Greek word for crossing – figure the crossing of literature and history. Wordsworth adds his paean to the imagination to the earlier draft because imagination serves as a “canny double for an uncanny ‘Napoleon’” (24). “Imagination at once mimics and effaces Napoleon . . . to purge tyranny by *containing* tyranny within itself as the empire of the Imagination” (24).

One must pause and admire the deftness and formalist elegance of this reading.<sup>3</sup> Rarely has chiasmus had such force. Notice how crossing enables Liu to capture the doubleness of every act: denial is engagement, mimicry is effacement, purging is containment, postcolonialism is empire of the imagination, literature is history. If New Historicists such as Liu turn to chiasmus to get away from totalizing histories, they often return to such histories when they employ chiasmus as a form of synecdoche for history as Liu does (Thomas 12). Liu’s theory of the imagination, moreover, in part attempts to grapple with “a blurred confusion between notions of passive and of active engagement in cultural process” (579n). He submits, “in terms of my operative concept in this book: ‘denial’ connotes a more active form of passive representation than ‘displacement’” (580n). His deconstruction of the terms “denial” and “engagement” grants history an undeniable shaping force even when that force is itself a form of denial. And yet it is the imagination’s undeniable relation to history, undeniable because denial counts as an engagement with history, that I wish to interrogate. If Liu makes history a part of self-making and a part of literature, he also thereby runs the danger of flattening distinctions between active and passive engagement, and thus makes literature’s engagement with history

potentially valueless because it is inevitable. If Wordsworth has since Hartman rarely been read with such power, perhaps the signal failure of Liu's theory is that it cannot adjudicate between radical and conservative engagements with history.

Instead of seeing the imagination as an evasion or denial of the real, Forest Pyle in *The Ideology of Imagination* insists not only that the imagination is a figure, but also that as a figure it represents the very workings of ideology. Because the imagination is charged with "making a linkage, an articulation" (2), it marks "a disjunction" within subject and society and spirit and matter "that cannot be healed" (3). As such, Pyle's subtle revision marks a critical advance: by making the imagination inseparable from ideology, its figuration and representation become sites for probing how ideology works. Such a position enables him to return to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous difference between the primary and secondary imagination at the end of Chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) – the former creates while the latter reconciles – and consider what Coleridge calls upon the imagination to do. "The imagination institutes the process by which divisions inherent in subjectivity – divisions reproduced in the formal doubleness inherent in autobiographical discourse – are 'reconciled' or 'harmonized' as the subject is, buy virtue of its 'training' in the systems of education, 'sutured' or written into th[e] national narrative" (57). Here, the difference between the primary and secondary imagination allegorizes the difference within subjectivity which in turn allegorizes the difference between subject and nation. This difference is valuable insofar as it "leaves an image of the 'nontotalizability' of the social" (175).

This interpretation not only helps to undemonize ideology because ideology is now about "the inscriptions of the social in all forms of representation" (3), but also renders reading as being about the critical exploration of their "co-implication" (4). As Pyle himself notes, the notion of ideology as "false consciousness" is a particularly limited one for two reasons: it assumes that there is such a thing as true consciousness, and it oversimplifies how ideology works. While McGann thinks that ideology can be combatted by situating texts within their sociohistorical moments, Pyle argues that this does not begin to address the fact that "the ideological gap is active in the real itself" (14). Pyle himself thus is attentive to how the real itself is implicated in the process of ideology.

Of course, one may take issue with Pyle's simultaneous reduction of the imagination to a figure and elevation of figuration to the groundwork of ideology. Seeing it as a figure, of course, puts the imagination in the camp of non-totalizability because it is just a figure. Romantic psychologists, by contrast, worried about the totalizing force of an unregulated imagination. My reference to psychology further suggests that whatever the imagination was to the Romantics, it was much more than a figure. One might also question the extent to which one gap stands for all other gaps. The fact that words defer as opposed to refer to things does not prevent deferrals from referring to each other. Here reference – the idea that words refer to things – creeps back in through the back door. For Pyle, the Romantic imagination allegorizes the salience of a Marxist deconstructive method, and if some have charged deconstruction with being unhistorical, Pyle shows the extent to which figuration is



central to understanding the social, since the social demands representation in language. While the social may rely upon figuration insofar as the social requires representation in language, figuration is not tantamount to the social. It is the rendering of verbal figures as metonyms for the social that somehow erase their metonymic status that troubles me and leads me to suspect that this elegant and incisive interpretation speaks more about critical desire than it does about Romanticism. When figuration stands for the social, the standards for the social have been so relaxed that one wonders who is appeased by the label of the social?

In *Romantic Returns*, Deborah White positions herself against modes of critique of the imagination because this vantage falsely implies that, in exposing the ideology of the imagination, the Romantic imagination has itself been surpassed (2). Instead, White argues that the very aesthetics of the imagination demands “the rethinking and rewriting of its supposed errors” (4). If, unlike Pyle, she is skeptical of the claims of critique, she joins him in her insistence that “these texts pose and expose [the perils of finding oneself in thrall to new impostures] through the very workings of their own (ex)positions, and this uneasy reflexivity, far from closing itself off from the material conditions that make it possible, opens up the space of those conditions, recalling the axiom of their and its joint possibility” (5). Situating the arguments and practices of the Romantic imagination between “the mystifications of superstition and the (de)mystifications of Enlightenment historicism” (11), White insists that the Romantic imagination never does away with the possibility that it itself is merely another superstition even as it participates in the Enlightenment project of demystification. She adds, “Imagination is not, therefore, the ideological resolution of the contradictions of historical being. It is the setting into motion of those contradictions” (17).

Insofar as she recognizes the need for critics to have surpassed what they critique and yet undermines such hubris, White offers a welcome warning to Romantic critics that the imagination has been far from exhausted. White shrewdly examines Shelley’s “problem of reference” (103) in “Mont Blanc” (1817), and shows how the poet’s linguistic self-consciousness is tensed against his decisive political engagements. Despite the poem’s initial suggestion of a reciprocity between mind and mountain, “the whole burden of the poem is that referential status or the status of the referent remains to be decided,” with the end result of making Shelley’s “there” only refer to the need to refer beyond itself without actually referring to such a beyond because it cannot (111). Here and elsewhere, White effectively demonstrates that the neat oppositions between discourse/text and context/action, writ large in the opposition between literature and history, does not hold up because many Romantic texts “(re)install quotation marks around the very terms of the opposition between discourse and action” (17).

White is absolutely right that Romantic texts on the imagination do have kinds of self-reflexivity that have been undervalued. I worry, nonetheless, about her model of reading, which puts anything like ideology, or history, or self within literature, under erasure. To wit, she insists that Hazlitt’s “Essay on the Principles of Human Action” (1805) “effectively produces an ideology that its critical analysis puts into

question” (100). Although she recognizes the potential of the text to be ideological, analysis “puts into question” this ideology. In similar maneuvers, she replaces history and selfhood with futurity. In linking ideology, history, and self with resolution, then, White suggests that aesthetics is about irresolution/futurity and therefore evidence of the one precludes the other. I do not see why either ideology or aesthetics should side with one over the other. After all, organicism, despite its dynamism, has been taken as an ideology. Perhaps ideology gains effectiveness under the sign of irresolution; certainly texts do insofar as they thereby become never-ending reflexive events (Levinson 9).

White once again marshals irresolution against ideology when she insists that the “disinterested imagination . . . bespeaks neither its determination by history . . . nor its transcendence of history. . . . It much rather bespeaks the becoming *of* history” (89). Virtually by definition, Romantic poems cannot be vehicles of ideology because they are histories of becoming. That this method ultimately defangs ideology within literature returns us for all intents and purposes to the notion of the imagination as ultimately free of ideology because whatever ideology is there is erased by a futurity that has yet to determine how poems are ultimately read. I am also reminded here of Liu’s sense of the self’s “ad hoc” need to “defin[e] history at its contact point with experience” (5). Yes, poems speak to futurity. But they also speak to readers situated in historical time who may not have the luxury of turning to figurative returns to counter ideology.

### **Where to Go from Here**

Whether transcending, displacing, or denying history and ideology or victim of them, the Romantic imagination must be considered in some relation to history or ideology even if that relation is based on denial. Indeed, the imagination has become the critical name for this interplay between mind and world, self and society (Schlutz). How else might one explain the imagination’s stark reversal of fortunes – from its being considered the locus of the transcendence of the real to the very embodiment of the real – and from being understood as an evasion of materiality to the embodiment of the very conditions of materiality? This about-face, along with a persistent insistence that either the imagination is ideology or it is not, suggest that critics are dealing with the Romantic imagination not so much as an historical entity, but as a mode of apprehending the imagination. Why then have we needed to protest too much the imagination’s relation to history/ideology in these ways?

For those who link the imagination with ideology, Romanticism thereby has power and (social) influence in the world. True, this influence is deeply suspect, but bad influence is better than no influence. For those who defend the imagination from its historicist critics, many of whom do so on the grounds of a theory of figuration or a theory of reading, the “history” they offer seems particularly provincial: a literary critic’s version of history that centers on tropes. It is especially telling that both the major historical treatments of the Romantic imagination – and indeed its defenders

and detractors alike – and even those critics such as Paul Fry who argue that Romantic lyrics have nothing to do with history – feel the gravity of deconstruction. Walter Benn Michaels has argued that the deconstructive “formalism of the signifier makes every instance of reading and writing into the emergence of linguistic difference and thus transforms people who believe different things into people who speak different languages” (61). For Michaels, this maneuver makes “disagreement impossible” because it produces “conflicts without disagreements” (62). If Michaels worries that this drains the signifier of anything meaningful because it is now ironically located in identity – that is, because the signifier constitutes the identity of the text, “what it means to you may well be different from what it means to me” (61–62) – I worry that if it makes Romantic poetry historical, it simultaneously drains “materiality” and “history” of historical meaning.

All of this suggests that our current insistence upon the imagination’s relation to the outward world perhaps screens our attention from our own inward worlds: the relevance and centrality of the imagination to history are inversely proportional to literary criticism’s value to history. In this light, materiality itself serves as a screen, hiding our preoccupations with reading and figuration under an objective materiality located in language. Indeed, Brook Thomas locates the origin of the New Historicist fascination with displays of power in the political theatricality of the Reagan era (Thomas 19). Such a screen is further complicated by the fact that Romantic-period psychologists and scientists framed the imagination as a turning inward to the self, a susceptibility to being influenced by the external world (Kirmayer 586). And yet such susceptibility is not a denial of the external world, but rather a pathologizing of a certain kind of relationship to that world, one that locates indiscrimination within social class and gender. The cure is to learn, despite one’s identity and habits, to better attend to other things.

I urge a return to the reasons why the Romantics thought the imagination needed defending, and to their awareness that the inward bears a necessary relationship to the outward. Because the standard map of the human mental apparatus was divided into the three faculties of memory, reason, and imagination (Goldstein 30), the existence of the imagination was assumed and taken for granted. Shelley thus understood the imagination as one of “two classes of mental action” (510). Whereas contemporary critics are obsessed about the larger salience of figuration or reading to society, Romantic writers instead had to defend the imagination from charges of madness, disease, and delusion. If a pathological or delusive imagination was undesirable, it is instructive to look at how they sought to combat such possibilities.<sup>4</sup> In returning to a history of what they did not want, I seek to restore to our view the reasons why they believed in the imagination, and the reasons why they thought the imagination could change the world. Put simply, the imagination had powers of healing that had been scientifically demonstrated.

Such an approach would look at the historical reasons behind the Romantic distrust of the imagination and use those reasons to question our own. Jan Goldstein has written a history of the French imagination, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850*, one that might serve as a model. Goldstein shows

the extent to which the imagination was elided with the lower classes and with women, and these contexts show no necessary incompatibility between literature and history. Because the imagination was “the most vulnerable component of the person” (22), much thought went into how to discipline it effectively. Goldstein’s study importantly frames psychology as both a turn inward and outward. The imagination becomes a problem only when it has not been sufficiently disciplined, and her focus on discipline shows the ways in which the psychological reshapes one’s relation to the outside world.

Elizabeth Hamilton, with whose poem I began this essay, shows the extent to which the imagination was, as Goldstein suggests, a call to discipline and proper education. The internal only goes wrong when it has been exposed to the wrong externals. My point here is to underscore the incessant traffic between the two. For the Scottish novelist and essayist, the imagination was “not a simple faculty, but a complex power, in which all the faculties of mind occasionally operate” (*Popular Essays* 1: 157). The stakes of disciplining it then were large indeed. Hamilton emphasizes this discipline by focusing on the problem of attention: “the operation of these faculties upon the power of imagination, bears an exact proportion to the degree in which the objects of these faculties have been objects of attention; or, in other words, to the degree in which these several faculties have been previously cultivated” (1: 158). The key to proper development of the imagination was in choosing the right objects of attention. Cultivation of it, therefore, trumps any innate capacity. Given notions about women’s inferior innate abilities, her turn to attention shrewdly moves the discussion away from the innate and toward education. Hamilton elaborates: “the imagination may be equally active as in the minds of a superior order; but, when the attention has never been directed towards subjects of an intellectual nature, we may easily conceive how little its utmost activity can produce” (1: 159–160). If the health of the imagination is based on disciplined attention, then the imagination is about the workings of history or culture.

Hamilton further undermines the very neat division between the self and the world that frames our critical discussions of Romanticism. This division, however, was nearly impossible to police in the Romantic period because of growing awareness of how the imagination was shaped by the environment. Anti-masturbation tracts urged the disciplining of the imagination and many psychologists offered moral management as the cure of the madness of the imagination. Dr. Bienville localized lasciviousness in the imagination, and thus it was the root cause of nymphomania. He reasoned thusly: lewd images that are stored in the brain eventually change the very fibers of the brain: “the fibres of the brain are so fatigued by contests with the imagination that they begin to change their tone” (78). Once again outside changes inside, and the recourse is to change what one attends to on the outside. The physician William Buchan repeatedly warned, in his immensely popular *Domestic Medicine*, that patients must be soothed because “everything which disturbs the imagination, increases disease” (133).

Although Romantic critics tend to see the material as a curse to the spiritual and ideal life of the spirit or mind, there was no necessary opposition of the material

and spiritual. Even when the imagination is associated with disease, this is not in itself materially determining, because diseases can be cured, if only one knows how. To wit, despite the fact that the entry under “Imagination” for *Rees’s Cyclopaedia* (1819) begins with “Imagination, as it has been often defined, is a power or faculty of the soul, whereby it conceives and forms the ideas of things,” it elaborates that “the depth and cleanness of the tracks of the imagination depend on the force of the animal spirits, and the constitution of the fibres of the brain.”<sup>5</sup> The author continues, “Now the agitation of these fibres (sensory and brain) cannot be communicated to the brain, but the soul will be affected, and perceive something.” If materiality then could stretch to accommodate both the soul and the fibers of the brain, then spirit and matter were not necessarily antagonists. This flexibility suggests that the tendency to link the material with determinism is perhaps our legacy, not theirs. Like Blake, Joseph Priestley thought the separation of matter and spirit was contrary to Christianity, and if matter had powers of attraction and repulsion, then it was not clear why matter could not think (Knight 10). Far from determining, the vitalist view – “that everything corporeal was evolving: Nerves, spirits, fibres, brain, mind, consciousness, thought, imagination” (Rousseau 179) – further underscored how Romantic corporeal materiality could be about conditions of possibility.

Current criticism has shackled materialism to determinism. However, such mind-forged manacles have been obscured by the relocation of “materiality” from the world to language. Usually taken to signify the physical quality of something, materiality has in recent criticism shifted so that instead of referring to the physical world – “the substance and substantiality of the world” (Oerlemans 34) – it refers to the ways in which language works. Such a collapse between materiality and language only becomes possible with a postmodern understanding of the world, one that takes for granted the role of language in making it possible to think about the world. Here is Pyle tracing Paul de Man’s usage of the “the prosaic materiality of the signifier” (20): “the redemptive gestures or recuperative structures inevitably fail to account for the ‘prosaic’ materiality of language, which is both productive of and incommensurate with those structures and gestures” (21). And here is White: “in de Man’s work, the materiality of the letter is the unmediated remainder that disrupts the dialectical and interpretative allegories of literary criticism – including those of historicism” (21). My point here is that in order for de Man to conceptualize the materiality of language, the very term materiality has changed meanings so that language acquires a kind of material bite, a kind of constitutive force on reality.<sup>6</sup> As long, then, as language is the embodiment of materiality, materiality can retain flexibility. But this is to deny the other kind of materiality, the materiality of thingness and bodies, which might provide some resistance to the constitutive powers of linguistic materiality. Hence this version of materiality screens the other from view.

Although some Romantic critics have resisted this localizing of materiality to language, outside of language, the material is still a manacle.<sup>7</sup> Among others, Onno Oerlemans and Noah Heringman have attended to the materiality of physical nature. While Oerlemans studies the ways in which Romantic poets use the

materiality of nature as a springboard for consciousness while refusing to reduce consciousness to nature (52–53), Heringman reads the irreducible materiality of rocks in Romantic poetry as a counter to the social that nonetheless seem to derive a sublime power from materiality itself (67). My call for attention to a physiological imagination, moreover, comes with the reminder that for Romantic writers even scientific materiality had social consequences, and that such scientific materiality did not preclude the soul and its accompanying theological discourse.<sup>8</sup> Even more crucially: if Romantic materiality even in its scientific forms did not deny the spiritual; if it were active, dynamic, changing, and energetic, then, language could not do anything that materiality could not. Hence the need to locate materiality in language is ours, not theirs.

Because Romantic writers recognized that the imagination was steps away from disease, the issue becomes one of controlling one's behavior or environment so that pathology might become physiology – disease can return to the condition of health. Perhaps no one put it more succinctly than Coleridge: "pathology is the crucible of physiology" (*Omniana* 182). However, the very framing of the imagination in terms of disease/cure meant that the imagination had undeniable material effects on the body. To the extent that the imagination had material bite, there was no need to trumpet its historical impact. Hence, after a general overview of the imagination, and an entry on its pleasures, *Rees's Cyclopaedia* devotes most of its space on the imagination to "Imagination, Influence of, on the corporeal Frame." I want to think about imagination and this kind of materiality, not a linguistic materiality but instead a physiological and psychological one.

I do so because writers then did not connect materiality primarily with language in the ways we now do. Here again is the author of the *Rees's Cyclopaedia* entry: "The phenomena actually occasioned by the operation of the imagination on the corporeal functions, are so numerous, and yet at times appear so extraordinary, that they merit particular investigation." William Wollaston's 1809 Croonian Lecture, published in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*, underscores a flexible materialism, despite his warning that, with nervous diseases, "the mind becomes incapable of any deliberate consideration, and is impressed with horrors that have no foundation, but in a distempered imagination" (13). "With a steadier tone of mind," however, Wollaston argues, the mind "returns its full power of cool reflection; and if the imagination becomes more alive than usual, its activity is now employed in conceiving scenes that are amusing" (13). Wollaston insists the distempered imagination can be cured.

Read in such a light, we can return to Blake who not only equates imagination with "spiritual sensation" (703), but then also proceeds to ground this imagination in Lord Bacon's comment that "sense sends over to Imagination before Reason has judged & Reason sends over to imagination before the Decree can be acted" (703). Notwithstanding Blake's alleged hostility to science, he invokes Baconian science in his understanding of the imagination as literally mediating between reason and sense and reason and action. The imagination is thus necessary to thought and to history, and as such must be cured if diseased. Bacon has described the imagination as having

ontological priority over reason, and thus the poet's famous dictum in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – “what is now proved was once, only imagin'd” (plate 8; p. 36) – ironically would six years later acquire Baconian proof for its faith in imagination.<sup>9</sup> Blake's repeated understanding of the imagination as a divine body (see *Jerusalem*, plate 24; p. 169), moreover, once again signals a more flexible corporeality and materiality than the vegetative ones he denounces.

The imagination, the writer of the article on the imagination in *Rees's Cyclopaedia* submits, had almost miraculous powers of healing. The author demonstrates the key role imagination had to play in two scientific controversies, the Mesmerism controversy in France and the British debate about the efficacy of metallic tractors. In the former, Antoine Mesmer claimed to have the ability to manipulate the magnetic powers of the body and thereby cure it of disease. King Louis XVI created a commission to discover whether or not Mesmer's cure was legitimate. Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Lavoisier determined that the imagination was behind any cure: when blindfolded, previously susceptible subjects did not know when and where they were magnetized, and therefore did not react. “Our experiments allowed us to discover only the power of the imagination” (Bailly 51). This context enables us to return to the books of Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1850) that speak to how the imagination was impaired and then restored, and examine his references to wizards and their wands. Wordsworth writes,

And as, by simple waving of a wand,  
The wizard instantaneously dissolves  
Palace or grove, even so could I unsoul  
As readily by syllogistic words  
Those mysteries of being which have made,  
And shall continue evermore to make,  
Of the whole human race one brotherhood. (12: 320)

Clad in opulent robes like a Wizard, Mesmer would enter the room and magnetize his patients into health by inducing a “crisis.” Imagining himself as a wizard, Wordsworth hopes to restore his imagination, damaged by the crisis of the “brotherhood” of the French Revolution. If, for Mesmer, the power was not so much in his magnetic wand as in the imaginations of his patients, for Wordsworth, the power lies not in “syllogistic words” but in his imagination's ability to heal itself by converting history into the more renovating “spots of time.”<sup>10</sup> The poet's failure to name Mesmer here, then, is a refusal to engage in syllogism. Just as Mesmer cannot explain the “mysteries of being,” neither can Wordsworth, and yet this refusal is part of the healing process, part of how the French Revolution's slogan of brotherhood does not unsoul the kind of universal brotherhood the poet desires.

In the latter, physician John Haygarth painted wooden tractors to look like Perkins's metallic tractors, and he used these to “cure” his patients. Perkins had touted the magnetic healing powers of his metals, and patented his “tractors” in 1798. The Quakers built a “Perkinean Institution” specifically for the curing of the diseases of the

poor. The fact that Haygarth's tractors were wood, not metal, meant that it was the hope of a cure, the imagined cure that effected any cure. One report noted that "the wooden tractors were drawn over the skin so as to touch it in the slightest manner. Such is the wonderful force of the imagination!" (*Rees's Cyclopaedia*, s.v. Imagination). The poet Robert Southey pronounced that "the tractors are no new mode of quackery" (*Omniana* 111). Both of these events helped to facilitate the development of controlled experiments, and thus the imagination played an underappreciated role in the development of science. Because the imagination's openness to the world was read in terms of suggestibility – the fact that weak, lower-class, and female minds had allowed themselves to be indiscriminately influenced by the world – the imagination was internalized and pathologized (Kirmayer 586). From the stance of criticism today, what could have been celebrated as an openness to the world, to history, was diminished in terms of disease, class, and gender. And yet this diminishment was also an historical stance: the need to try to anchor diseased imaginations in certain bodies was in part an attempt to defend the imagination. When John Keats framed the poet's role in "The Fall of Hyperion" (wr. 1819) between the "fanatics who have their dreams" (1) and the physician who pours his balm upon the world (190, 201), he is thinking of the imagination's tendency to delusion, its activeness in an unconscious state, and, surprisingly, its powers of healing.

Before leaving the issue of disease, I would like to return to the issue of the physical materiality of the imagination by revisiting another debate, popular in the period, about the ability of the mother's disordered imagination to imprint itself on the fetus (Huet). In the Romantic period, this theory actually lost scientific credibility. But as the debate moved from ontological questions about whether a mother's disordered imagination had this power and how it could be proved, to epistemological questions of how to explain why people believed in the pathologizing power of the maternal imagination, the theory moves out of the orbit of empiricism and into the realm of psychology. Because empiricism and psychology are two sides of the same coin – the external and the internal – and because scientific empiricism must ignore psychology because psychology threatens to make the external subjective – this shift has dramatic consequences for the imagination. The shift to psychology runs the danger of turning the imagination inward, and this shift perhaps partly helps explain why we today are so concerned with its outward relations.

Without a theory of heredity or genetics, the imagination could be called upon to explain birth defects. How did the imagination have material effects? While blaming the maternal imagination for causing the defect became suspect, one could still blame the mother for believing in the powers of her imagination to have such effects, and then the beliefs might have those effects. Although some dismissed the theory of the disordered imagination as the basis for birth defects on the grounds that "there is no communication of nerves whatever between the mother and the child," they did concede that there was real evidence of the powers of the imagination over the "nervous and vascular system" (*Rees's Cyclopaedia*, s.v. Imagination). The imagination's material effects were also imagined in terms of metaphors of galvanism and electricity, metaphors that provided especially flexible kinds of



materiality. William Belcher, MD, in *Intellectual Electricity* for example, not only equated the nervous and electrical fluids, but also named “Oxygen, or Electricity” “the vehicle of the soul” (20). In recognizing the “peculiarity” of electricity, the chemist Humphry Davy sought to remind his readers of an experiment that might “assist the imagination in the conception of this singular and mysterious mode of action” (417). By tethering imagination to experiment, Davy makes it work on behalf of science instead of against it.

The imaginations Romantic critics want are historical and ideological. The ideological imaginations we want must be trumped by present reflexivity, unless we want Romantic aesthetic imaginations to have the capacity to resist forms of ideology. My point has been that all these wants obscure what the Romantics wanted. They wanted a physiological imagination, a spiritual imagination, a psychological imagination, and even a scientific imagination. More surprisingly, none of these imaginations had to cancel out another. In place of what they wanted, we have localized a materiality in language that neglects the physical world of materiality because it shapes it. And yet in quest of such linguistic materiality, we have lost sight of many of the key Romantic-era concerns about the imagination, especially with the deluded or diseased imagination. Of course, diseases could be cured, and with careful discipline, the imagination could shift from being the source of disease and delusion to its cure. Because no one could deny the imagination’s power over the body, a fact scientifically documented during the period, the imagination had real influence in the world, and a kind of material physiological power that we are only just beginning to grapple with.

See IDEOLOGY; PHILOSOPHY; PSYCHOLOGY.

## Notes

- 1 I adopt this framing from Eaves.
- 2 For a trenchant critique of the deconstructive reading of the figure of apostrophe, see Alan Richardson’s *The Neural Sublime*, ch. 4.
- 3 In his *ELH* essay, Alan Liu demonstrates the ways in which the New Historicism was in effect a New Formalism that performed its close readings on context.
- 4 On the relevance of the tradition of poetic madness, see Burwick.
- 5 *Rees’s Cyclopaedia* was well known by the Romantics. Blake did illustrations for it. We know that Percy Bysshe Shelley read it.
- 6 De Man links the “materiality of the letter” with the “errancy of language” (89–90). He defines the materiality of the letter as that which “disrupts the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence” (89).
- 7 Exceptions include Knight, Wilson, and Lussier.
- 8 For some leads to this approach, see Gordon, Kirmayer, and Rousseau.
- 9 Although the letter is dated 1799, and the *Marriage* was written circa 1790, the fact that he would later ground his idea of the imagination in Bacon provides an ironic commentary on this earlier quotation.
- 10 On Wordsworth and mesmerism as providing a language for the sublime, see Rzepka.

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