INTRODUCTION

Lyrical forms and empirical realities: reading Romanticism’s “language of the sense”

This is a book about the literary uses of sensation in the period of British Romanticism. Its subject is a language that emerges in this period for describing forms of sense experience unique to the poet and to the encounter with poetry. Working from a contemporary understanding of aesthetics as a science of aisthesis or sensuous experience, Romantic poets give shape to a literary practice defined in a close relationship to the contemporary sciences of physiology and the science of mind, and develop an aestheticized vocabulary for articulating the social and political ends to which such scientific knowledge was considered crucial. Focusing on a few contexts and nineteenth-century legacies of this vocabulary, the following chapters situate in relation to the human-scientific project of the late eighteenth century the experiential idiom that William Wordsworth calls, in a characteristic double-entendre from the “Lines, written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” “the language of the sense” (LB, 109).

To summarize the argument, I contend that the vocabulary of embodied aesthetic experience represented for Romantic poets a powerfully charged site for defining and defending the political work of aesthetic culture. Developing a framework for understanding the uniquely social logic of this inward-turning language, this book seeks to show that a considerable degree of historical self-consciousness inhabits the empirical representations of Romantic poetry. Moreover, my study finds in Romantic poems an often strikingly self-conscious ambivalence about the precise political ends that could be served through the medium of aesthetic experience. Examining the creation of a self-consciously scientized literary practice in which sensation was conceived as a language, and poetic form and language as sensuous media, this book makes a case most broadly for the relevance of Romanticism’s investment in embodied aesthetic response to our own habits of cultural and historical criticism today. Against what has sometimes amounted to a critical tendency to place into opposition the categories of historical analysis and aesthetic response, my study reads...
a politics of aesthetic experience that is articulated from within the categories of the aesthetic itself.

That contemporary critical discussion of aesthetics should return so insistently to the literature of British Romanticism is scarcely surprising in light of this period’s standing as the first in which the category of the aesthetic emerges as a distinct object and mode of knowledge. The notion of the aesthetic as an independent realm of experience is, to rehearse what is by now a familiar story, an invention of the eighteenth century, where it takes its conceptual foundation primarily from the fields of moral philosophy and empiricist psychology. From its first coinage by Alexander Baumgarten, aesthetics was defined as a philosophical enterprise that takes as its focus the sensuous encounter with works of art; as a “science of sensation, of feeling” (the phrase is Hegel’s, from the first of his Lectures on the Fine Arts [1835]), it existed for years from its inception as a discipline in which artworks were considered principally with regard to the feelings that they depict and evoke. This psychological approach to aesthetic response gained prominence towards the end of the eighteenth century, persisted well into the nineteenth, and remains to some degree with us still; it survives, most obviously, in efforts to define the somatic, emotional, and cognitive effects of the work of art. Though the term “aesthetic” and its cognates does not enter widely into the English language until the late nineteenth century (and even then, as Marc Redfield has pointed out, generally appears as a term of abuse), British writers of the late eighteenth century routinely designated poetic language as a privileged medium for representing, embodying, and – though in terms often qualified – communicating experiences of powerful sensation or feeling. Indeed, Wordsworth’s oft-cited declaration that “Poetry is passion; it is the history or science of feelings” suggests an investment in the topic of aesthetic experience that goes beyond the immediacy of “feeling” to reflect on the conditions of its production. At once anticipating Hegel’s characterization of traditional aesthetic thought and suggesting a role for poetry that surpasses the merely psychological function that Hegel critically ascribes to the field of philosophical aesthetics, Wordsworth defines poetry as a self-reflective endeavor which, as “passion,” presents a source of deeply-felt human experience, and, as a “history or science of feelings,” provides a sophisticated commentary on such experiences, thereby installing poetry as a mode of both social and aesthetic inquiry in its own right (Wordsworth, Note to “The Thorn,” LB, 289).

Such claims for the status of the aesthetic as a self-reflective, experiential domain in which the work of philosophy is at once perfected and
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overcome have featured prominently in critical assessments of European Romanticism, which have shown this assertion to have been central to the self-definition of Romantic authors. These same claims have been of course a source of profound unease as well for many of Romanticism’s modern readers. That “knowing refusal of any critical position outside a self-confirming belief-system” that Paul Hamilton has recently labeled “the ideology of immanent critique” has in reference to the autonomous aesthetics of the Romantics themselves proved troublesome to a diverse body of scholars – from Georg Lukács to Pierre Bourdieu in Continental scholarship, and from the new humanism of early twentieth-century Anglo-American criticism to the new historicism of century’s end – who have read Romantic literary aesthetics as ahistorical, and hence most deeply ideological, in proportion to its patently “aesthetic” preoccupations. The commitment of Romantic writers to preserving the autonomy of artistic reflection has been thus frequently described as constituting an aesthetics wholly and solely immanent to itself – a self-regarding formalism whose consequence, as Lukács described it, was “a seemingly deliberate withdrawal from life” – and accordingly incapable or unwilling to conceive a practicable alternative to its own inefficacious divinity.

It is towards an effort to re-frame such charges, and to consider anew the possibility of a critique immanent to aisthesis or feeling, that the interdisciplinarity of the present study – the conjunctive “and” of Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry – is chiefly dedicated. For while sustained by its commitment to the generalizability of aesthetic response, Romanticism’s language of poetic experience does not solely derive its pretensions to social efficacy from the supposedly representative character of the poet’s sensibility. On the contrary, this language acquires an explicitly social dimension from its close relationship to contemporary sciences with whose theorists and practitioners Romantic poets shared an acute interest in the organs and activities of human sense perception. As historians of medicine have long asserted, this is a period that saw considerable advances in the understanding of the brain and nervous system, and these scientific developments were significantly refashioning the study of the mind, formerly the province of philosophy, along anatomical and physiological lines. Attending to Romanticism’s engagement in, and mutual emergence with, these fields of medical investigation, literary historians have in the last decade begun to trace new sources for some characteristically Romantic models of mind, positing a vitally physiological basis for this period’s conceptions of consciousness, cognition, and subjectivity. In reconstructing the embodied basis of Romantic thought,
these accounts have sharpened our sense of literature and science as closely related enterprises in this period; Jennifer Ford offers a particularly strong version of this claim when she asserts that, in debates concerning the nature of the imagination, “there was no clear distinction between theorists and practitioners of medicine and those of poetry.”

If the kinship of medical science and literary aesthetics suggests a clear epistemological context for the preoccupation of Romantic poets with human sense perception and the operations of the brain, the proximity of these fields was just as importantly a factor in poets’ efforts to imagine a wider sphere of influence for their art. From the sciences of sensation, I argue, Romantic poets derive a basis for self-conscious reflection on the social and political claims of imaginative work. Such assertions for the social efficacy of aesthetic response grew most clearly out of an empiricist intellectual context in which sense experience was regarded as the most significant basis of the individual’s mental and moral life. In *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society* (1803), for instance, the physician, medical theorist, and poet Erasmus Darwin placed sensation at the fount of the human sciences, at once its first object of research and its ultimate foundation. Darwin’s invocation to the enlightened muse of his poem thus begins in accents owing, however distantly, to Locke:

> Immortal Guide! O, now with accents kind
> Give to my ear the progress of the Mind.
> How loves, and tastes, and sympathies commence
> From evanescent notices of sense?
> How from the yielding touch and rolling eyes
> The piles immense of human science rise?

Beyond marking his allegiance to the principles of philosophical empiricism, Darwin makes a strong case for regarding physiology, the science of the sentient individual, as a field dedicated to establishing the basis not solely of healthy physical organization, but of harmonious social and political life as well. This is an understanding clearly reflected in Darwin’s claim to locate in sensation the origins of our “loves, and tastes, and sympathies.” Like Wordsworth’s more famous (if more equivocal) claim to find in “nature and the language of the sense” the anchor of his moral and intellectual being, such assertions were invoked throughout the 1790s by English Jacobins and conservatives alike in the context of articulating a political system, and theory of consciousness, adequate to a revolutionary age.

Though the publication of *Zoonomia, or, the Laws of Organic Life* in 1794–6 had made him one of the most eminent medical theorists of his
generation, Darwin was hardly alone in defending the profound social
importance of the medical sciences. In a notebook entry of 1799–1800,
the chemist and poet Humphry Davy similarly declared that “Physiology
is the most important of the Sciences,” lamenting at the same time that
“we are as yet ignorant of it and we have not yet discovered even the
modes in which the investigation must be pursued.”10 This is a point still
more energetically argued by Davy’s partner and employer at the Pneu-
matic Institution of Bristol, the physician Thomas Beddoes, who in 1799
introduced an anthology of medical scholarship by his associates in
Bristol with a declaration of “the stake which society has in medicine”:

The science of human nature is altogether incapable of division into independent
branches. Books may profess to treat separate of the rules of conduct, of the
mental faculties and the personal condition. But the moralist and the meta-
physician will each to a certain point encroach upon the province of the phy-
siologist … Physiology therefore – or more strictly biology – by which I mean
the doctrine of the living system in all its states, appears to be the foundation
of ethics and pneumatology. 11

As professionals primarily concerned, in Beddoes’s phrase, with deter-
mining “the laws that regulate feeling,” and having for their end “the well-
being of individuals,” physiologists were seen to occupy a position more
immediately congenial to political theory and practice than did their peers
in moral philosophy and “pneumatology,” or the field that we would today
call psychology, the study of the nature and functions of the mind.12
Beddoes therefore attributes to these professionals a role as unacknowl-
edged legislators that Percy Shelley more famously attributes to poets some
two decades later. If, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge summarized Beddoes’s
oft-repeated claim, “a Physician is peculiarly well-qualified for political
research,” this privileged position was seen mainly to owe to the physician’s
ability to coordinate the laws of the sentient body with those of the pre- or
post-revolutionary nation.13 Though comparatively in its infancy, as Davy
perceived, the science of physiology was well suited to engage individuals –
“these new doctors of the rights of men,” as Edmund Burke contemptu-
tuously called them14 – who wished to apply the principles of medicine to
the theory and practice of political reform. Capitalizing on the growing
prestige of physiological research, a number of contemporary social and
political philosophies, from William Godwin’s scheme for “the pro-
longation of human life” to Jeremy Bentham’s felicific calculus of pleasures
and pains, derived their conceptual or methodological foundations from
the medical sciences.15
What I have described as a Romantic poetry of sensation thus emerges in the context of a similarly comprehensive effort to locate literary aesthetics – “the science of sensation, of feeling” – at the heart of human-scientific knowledge, and as a key contribution to its ethico-political project. Like the science of physiology in relation to which it was defined, aesthetics emerges in this period as an inquiry concerned with the conditions of sensuous cognition; it emerges, no less significantly, as a discourse preoccupied with the conditions for transforming the sensorium itself – its aim, as Wordsworth variously insisted, to widen the sphere of sensibility, produce “new compositions of feeling,” create the taste by which the writer is to be enjoyed. The poets of this period understood the aesthetic as a topic of scientific inquiry as well as an important subject of moral and political investigation; these purposes were not separate but rather closely linked in discussion of the imagination and its effects. Romantic poets thereby develop an understanding of sensation as a crucial resource of cultural representation and a vital conduit for imagining models of political consciousness, communicative ethics, and social change. When John Keats famously insists, in The Fall of Hyperion, that “a poet is a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men,” he reminds us how fully the knowledge of the medical practitioner furnished a language for expressing the enormous social ambitions of the poet’s art (JK, 1.189–90). Our effort to trace a politics of the aesthetic in this period must therefore address a tendency of Romantic poets to define the categories of art experience, and to articulate the social purposes of aesthetic form, in relation to the emergent human sciences with which the science of literary aesthetics was both contemporary and conceptually allied.

To read Romanticism’s commitment to the embodied character of aesthetic response in relation to the social ambitions of the human sciences is, I maintain, to understand the practice of inwardness as avowedly social in its orientation, though self-consciously ambivalent in its exercise. Coleridge, who better than most understood this ambivalence, once memorably described Wordsworth as “a brooder over his painful hypochondriacal sensations,” and recognized a tendency to what he named “Self-involution in Wordsworth” as both a symptomatic element of the poet’s character and as a probable source of his poetry’s enduring interest and power (CL, 2:1010, 1013). In a letter of the same period to William Sharp, Coleridge offered the following remark on the prospect of Wordsworth’s eventually abandoned epic project:

I prophesy immortality to his Recluse, as the first and finest philosophical Poem, if only it be (as it undoubtedly will be) a Faithful Transcript of his own most
To read between the lines of Coleridge’s parenthesis: Wordsworth being the person he is, how could his Recluse be anything but a “Transcript” of his sensory life? Coleridge’s declaration that Wordsworth’s greatest literary achievement may consist of little more or less than an autobiographical narrative is in fact a shrewdly prescient characterization of the posthumously-titled Prelude to this project on which the poet was then engaged, and of the principal basis upon which Wordsworth’s contribution to literary history is still described today.\(^\text{17}\) Two centuries since Coleridge’s pronouncement, we have come to know Wordsworth as, above all, a chronicler of the inner life; he is our foremost poet of self-consciousness, the poet who first accommodated the elevated subject matter of the epic to the comparatively more local dimensions of lyric subjectivity. Through its rhetoric of embodied aesthetic experience, however, Wordsworth’s poetry describes and models a form of inwardness firmly grounded in a regime of the bodily senses; this mindset does not represent a condition of hermetic isolation from the world, but a state of consciousness in continual interaction with it. Though we are long used to reading Romanticism as embodying a poetry of self-consciousness, to read this literature as vitally rooted in the senses as well as in sublime reflection is to shift considerably the ground on which our understanding of Romantic self-consciousness generally rests. By reassessing the cultural and political meanings that inwardness could assume in this period, I hope to return with a fresh eye to those habits of “Self-involution” that have often (and not without reason) drawn charges of egotism, even solipsism, or political retrenchment and reaction. In reconsidering a practice of inwardness that has come to be identified with the “interiority” of this period’s literature, however, my aim is not to rethrone this tendency of Romantic poets so much as to establish contexts for understanding it as always-already social.\(^\text{18}\)

At the same time that I have portrayed Romanticism’s “language of the sense” as a key expression of a shared human-scientific project, it has not been my ambition to counter charges of aesthetic autonomy by dissolving Romantic literature in the crucible of social or intellectual context. On the contrary, while historicizing the language of athesis in Romantic poetry this book aims to contextualize without altogether repudiating the specificity of the aesthetic as such. As a contribution to a recent boom in interdisciplinary scholarship in Romantic studies, I hope that this endeavor will be understood as an effort to extend the basis upon which
literature might be construed in this period as a form of scientific practice. One of the most boldly paradoxical, though generally unstated, premises of Romantic poetry is the claim to have found in the human sciences a key to what makes literature distinct from science in the first place. Consequently, my aim is not to resolve the question of aesthetic autonomy so much as to highlight it as a live issue with which the writers of this period consciously contended. Nor, as will be apparent, does the present study presume to offer an exhaustive account of Romanticism’s engagement with the sciences of sensation, offering instead a selective study of some significant thematic convergences between the literary and scientific domains: the concept of mental suggestion in late eighteenth-century epistemology and literary aesthetics; the practice of scientific self-experimentation and the self-described poetic “experiments” of 1798; the notion of the poet as physician or healer of society; the theory of the divided nerve as a model for Keats’s understanding of the divided, at once sensuous and abstract character of poetic form. Darwin’s “human science” was a capacious intellectual field from which poets freely adapted in this period, and to which they just as importantly contributed. My interdisciplinary method is not intended to be systematic, therefore, so much as imitative of the intellectual breadth of those poets whose work I explore.

Though Romanticism’s preoccupation with the somato-sensory dimensions of aesthetic experience might be examined in relation to any number of authors, this book focuses on Wordsworth’s conception of embodied aesthetic response as a paradigmatic, though by no means the first or only, effort to define the cultural, ethical, and political work of “feeling” in early Romantic literary culture. As much as any poet of the early Romantic period, and with certainly the most extensive influence on the British literary aesthetics of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth sought to systematize a model of individual poetic consciousness closely if ambiguously tied to bodily feeling; this is true both in ways that readers have long acknowledged – in a long-standing commitment to reading Wordsworth as a poet of psychological introspection, for instance, or as a writer whose central themes are derived from Hartleyan associationism – and in ways that we have just begun to recognize, as in recent accounts of Wordsworth’s partially materialist orientation towards questions of human thought and feeling. Wordsworth’s “language of the sense” – a language that could seem at times paradoxically to involve the overcoming if not outright abnegation of the physical senses – served as a lightning-rod throughout much of the nineteenth century for debates about the
relationship of the poetic sensibility to its historical environment, the status of the aesthetic as a model for communal consciousness or social organization, and the politics of readerly pleasure. With few exceptions, then, I have confined my analysis to a loosely defined literary tradition in which Wordsworth, through his programmatic writings of the late 1790s and early 1800s, is acknowledged to have had a founding role.\textsuperscript{20} I have attended as centrally in these pages to how, for better or worse, the poet’s work has continued to set the agenda for the professional discipline of Romantic studies today. Recognizing the considerable debt that my own or any analysis of Wordsworth owes to the critical labors of the past, I am reminded that my approach to the poetry cannot be separated from a critical history of Wordsworthian scholarship, and have attempted, as far as possible, to keep both perspectives in view. Consequently, this book will be found to be about Wordsworth in his status as both an historical figure and as one of English literature’s most durable “monuments of culture,” as Kenneth Johnston has referred to the poet’s legacy – a monument that has been variously reared, revered, and reviled over the course of two centuries.\textsuperscript{21} As a study of Wordsworth as well as of the mixed legacies of the “Wordsworthian,” then, this book focuses on a figure both narrowly situated in time, read mainly in relation to the poetry of the “great decade” of 1798–1807, and more generally associated with a modern aesthetic lineage to which the poet is a major contributor.

The partiality that defines the interdisciplinarity of the present study thus clearly extends to its selection of authors and texts as well. A book that promises to treat the topic of sensation in Romantic poetry would, for instance, be most readily understood to address the sensuous language of poets such as Keats or Rimbaud, or might otherwise call to mind the most conspicuously sensational elements of this period’s literature, from its scandals and causes célèbres to the haunted castles and desolate landscapes of the gothic. While this book touches intermittently upon both of these literary phenomena, its principal subject concerns neither the gothic nor aestheticism per se, a fact that might well cause the reader to look skeptically upon the degree of sensuousness inherent to what I call in this study, somewhat idiosyncratically as may seem, a Romantic poetry of sensation. I am aware, to begin with, that my selection of Wordsworth as the central practitioner of a poetry of sensation may strike some readers as a willfully perverse gesture. If on the one hand we are used to regarding Wordsworth as the poet of deep and powerful feeling, an equally common characterization of Wordsworth is as a poet of sublime disembodiment, the figure among British Romantics who most cherishes those moments
“when the light of sense / Goes out” (P, 6.534–5). It is certainly true that when Wordsworth describes poetry as directed by “the eyes and senses of man” (Preface, LB, 259), or as reflecting the continued influence of what Coleridge calls the poet’s “habitual Feelings,” he refers to an experience with origins in the body. (That Coleridge is referring to Wordsworth’s “Feelings” in both familiar senses of that term—that is, as both sentiment or emotion and the physical sense of touch—is plainly indicated by his reference immediately following to the other physical senses for which Wordsworth’s poetry will provide, and will be remembered for having provided, a “Faithful Transcript.”) As an experience at least nominally distinguished from external sense perception, however, sensation is for Wordsworth as much as a category of cognition as of physical response; it is a term he generally uses to describe the activity of the mind under the influence of powerful feeling. Signifying a cooperative relationship between physical affection and reflective mental activity, sensation designates above all a provisional reconciliation of body and mind implicit as well in aesthetic experience. Though Wordsworth is a figure whose poetry and politics alike have long been read in lapsarian terms, I do not find that either his fascination with or powerful skepticism towards the imaginative potential of sensuous literary representation changed substantially in the years that saw the attempted composition and partial publication of his epic project.

In a 1798 manuscript addition to “The Ruined Cottage,” Wordsworth looked forward to the time when “the senses and the intellect / Shall each to each supply a mutual aid,” and thence to the eventual cultivation of “[t]he [ ] habit by which sense is made / Subservient still to moral purposes.” Whether Wordsworth’s own poetry effected the “compleat and constant synthesis of Thought and Feeling” that the poet anticipated and that Coleridge predicted for it, however, was a question that occupied Wordsworth’s readers, with wide differences of opinion, throughout his career (CL, 2:1034). By a number of critics, Wordsworth was and has continued to be read as an author far-removed from the immediacy of physical sense-experience, despite his own repeated claims to the contrary. In an 1801 letter to the poet, for instance, Charles Lamb identified the debt that Wordsworth owed to the late eighteenth-century literature of sensibility, locating poems such as “The Old Cumberland Beggar” within the tradition of Laurence Sterne and other “novelists and modern poets, who continually put a sign post up to shew you where you are to feel.” By thus insisting on the morality of sentiment, Lamb implies,