

“Art’s Neurosis”: Medicine, Mass Culture and the Romantic Artist in William Hazlitt

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Abstract

Although criticism has traditionally focussed on the Romantic celebration of artistic genius, there is also an emphasis on artistic abjection in Romantic writing. This essay argues that the Romantic theme of abjection is linked to the claims of early nineteenth-century Brunonian medicine that conditions of nervous over- and understimulation are the cause of diseases such as consumption and hypochondria, a case which is made with particular reference to the writings of William Hazlitt. Brunonian medical theory also informs Romantic period analyses of a newly emergent mass culture, enabling Romantic depictions of artistic abjection to be understood as a denial of the Romantic artist's involvement in a mediatization of experience which potentially distances the audience from the intuition of reality to which Romanticism ultimately appeals. This ambivalence about the position of the Romantic artist is reflected in the Romantic period debate surrounding the aesthetic category of the picturesque, which is shown to draw on Brunonian ideas about nervous stimulation in a way which makes it exemplary of conflicted Romantic attitudes towards the effects of mediatization.

1

Traditionally, Romantic criticism has been so dominated by a rhetoric of Wordsworthian “health”^[1] that the equally characteristic Romantic celebration of disease has been regarded as marginal or eccentric. Romanticism, however, has an enduring preoccupation with perversity and obsession, which has been surveyed by Mario Praz, and is alluded to in my title’s quotation from the British poet R. S. Thomas’s “The Musician.” In what has been dubbed “black Romanticism,” art itself is understood as essentially unhealthy, an attitude expressed in Charles Baudelaire’s characterization of the poetic vocation as one in which you must “cultivate your hysteria” (668), and Arthur Symons’s description of *fin-de-siècle* Romanticism as “a new and beautiful and interesting disease” (136). This tradition has been largely ignored in Anglophone criticism, with those English writers who best represent it, such as William Hazlitt, being assigned secondary status in the Romantic canon. But as Friedrich Schiller’s remark that “our feeling for Nature is like the feeling of an invalid for health” (155) should remind us, the nineteenth-century fascination with William Wordsworth’s healthiness is merely one aspect of a cultural preoccupation with sickness that has now been charted in a number of critical studies.^[2]

2

We usually tend to think of Romanticism as inaugurating a cult of the artist, celebrating individual creativity and artistic “power,” as Thomas De Quincey put it (269-72). The focus of this paper will be on the flipside of such daemonic conceptions of the artist, as manifested in recurrent Romantic-period portraits of the artist as an abject individual. Naturally enough, such negative characterizations often appear in hostile reviews; one thinks of Z.’s demolitions of John Keats and the Cockney School (Reiman 49-60) or of early reviews of Wordsworth which describe him as a morbid dreamer who needs to get out more (Reiman 312-14). But Romantics themselves often suggest that there is a kind of sickness or abjection inherent in art and other intellectual pursuits. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s warnings against financial dependence on writing are a case in point (*Biographia* 1:223-29), as is Wordsworth’s account of his breakdown in *The Prelude* (42-195) and related poems such as “The Tables Turned.” In this context, the self-contempt evident in a number of Hazlitt’s essays (“Conversation” 25) as well as in his notorious *Liber Amoris*, can be seen as representative of Romantic poetics in general, rather than just a reflection of Hazlitt’s prickly personality as Stanley Jones argues (9).

3

This Romantic ambivalence towards the figure of the artist stems from a pervasive somatization of the experience of art in early nineteenth-century thought, exemplified for the purposes of the present essay by Hazlitt's writings and the Picturesque Controversy of the 1790s. The characteristic Romantic privileging of poetry as the paradigm for all other artistic forms can be seen as a product of this early nineteenth-century tendency to describe artistic experience as a bodily phenomenon, in that the characterization of art in terms of neurological stimulation inevitably problematizes art's referential dimension. Rather than accept a purely sensuous conception of art, along the lines of Walter Pater's well-known claim that "all art aspires towards the condition of music," the Romantics attempt to anchor the referentiality of art in the referentiality of language itself by distinguishing between merely sensuous and referentially grounded or "poetic" forms of art, a project which motivates the characteristically unstable Romantic differentiation of fancy and imagination.

4

As Hazlitt comments in the course of an argument for the superiority of theatre over opera, "the thought or impression of the moment is one thing, and it may be more or less delightful; but beyond this, it may relate to the fate or events of a whole life, and it is this moral and intellectual perspective that words convey in its full signification and extent" ("Sir Walter Scott, Racine, and Shakespear" 312). For Hazlitt, language is referential because it is the chief vehicle for consistency of association through time. Following David Hume's philosophical scepticism, Hazlitt regards such associative consistency as constituting the objects of perception belonging to what is conventionally assumed to be the external world. Hazlitt's view that the referentiality of sense impressions is the product of habitual association is shown by his essay "On Depth and Superficiality," which distinguishes between "true" and "false" forms of "moral feeling," arguing against the view that "as feelings only exist by being *felt*, wherever and in so far as they exist, they must be true, and that there can be no falsehood or deception in the question" (327). For Hazlitt, feelings can possess the referential dimension implied by the distinction between their truth or falsity in virtue of their relationship to "some central point of view," exemplified by "our native place and our own fireside," which gives us "confidence ... [in] their truth and reality" (329).

5

Hazlitt's claim that language embodies habitual associations lending authentic reality to sense-impressions which would otherwise be no more than a fleeting phantasmagoria reflects assumptions underlying Wordsworth's poetics. As I have argued elsewhere ("Erasmus Darwin"), the element of Humean scepticism in this Romantic stance towards experience is mediated through the medical theory of Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*, which reformulates the key empiricist appeal to "ideas" in specifically neurological terms. As we shall see, this neurological dimension to Romantic thought is reflected in the appeal throughout Hazlitt's writings to concepts of "irritability" and "sensibility" associated with medical debate about the nervous system.

6

Poetry is paradigmatic of art in general, in Hazlitt's view, because it most forcefully exemplifies the way in which language creates associative centres around which experience can be organized, a process which makes possible the kind of distanced critical reflection which gives rise to referential categories such as "truth" or "falsehood." Hazlitt does not directly answer the question of how this privileging of poetry affects the status of painting, the other main art with which he is concerned, preferring to leave his readers to work it out for themselves ("Sir Walter Scott" 314). His allusions to George Berkeley's theory of vision in an immediately preceding essay in *The Plain Speaker* ("Madame Pasta" 310) leave little doubt, however, that Hazlitt conceives painting as working in a similar way to language, as an associative organization of visual

impressions which are in themselves fleeting. Berkeley famously argued that the visual perception of distance was only explicable if vision was regarded as a process of active mental interpretation of signs akin to language, which bore no intrinsic relationship of resemblance to the world which the mind constructed on their basis. As we shall see, Hazlitt describes the process of painting in similar terms, as one of elaborating a representation which will serve as a kind of index to the lived experience which the painting cannot directly portray. Painting, in the same way as poetry, embodies an associative complex the consistency of which endues it with a referential dimension susceptible of truth or falsity, and it is this which elevates it above the condition of mere sensuous immediacy.

7

Painting, like poetry, however, always threatens to fall back into the condition of sensuous immediacy which the Romantics find characteristic of mass culture. In the case of poetry, this pure sensuousness is that of the Coleridgean definition of fancy, whose boundary with imagination, as critics such as Christensen and Ferguson have argued, is never quite secure. The early Victorian Wordsworthian F. W. Robertson provides an example of how the instability of the fancy/imagination distinction is related to the medical thought of the period. Speaking, significantly, to the mass audience of Brighton's Mechanics Institute, Robertson cautions against the potentially morally degrading effect of poetry on its practitioners:

It is almost proverbial that the poetic temperament, except in a few cases of felicitously organised constitution, and rare equilibrium of powers, is one of singular irritability of brain and nerve...

And by this, too, we can understand, and compassionate, I do not say excuse, the force of that temptation of stimulants to which so many gifted natures have fallen a sacrifice. Poetry is the language of excited feeling: properly of pure excitement. But stimulants, like wine, opium, and worse, can produce, or rather simulate, that state of rapturous and ecstatic feeling in which the seer should live; in which emotions succeed each other swiftly, and imagination works with preternatural power. Hence their seductive power...

The degradation of genius, like the sensualising of passion, takes place when men hope to reproduce, through stimulus of the lower nature, those glorious sensations which it once experienced when vivified from above. Imagination ennobles appetites which in themselves are low, and spiritualises acts which are else only animal. But the pleasures which begin in the senses only sensualise.

Burns and Coleridge are the awful beacons to all who feel intensely, and are tempted to rekindle the vestal flames of genius, when they burn low, with earthly fire.

24-25

8

Robertson links poetry with nervous irritability, in a way which we shall see is characteristic not only of Hazlitt, but of early nineteenth-century critical responses to Romantic poetry generally. This neurological understanding of poetry, however, gives rise to Robertson's need to establish a distinction between the kind of poetry which represents a response to spiritual intuitions from that which is purely sensuous, being a mechanical result of neurological stimulus, a distinction which parallels the Coleridgean one between imagination and fancy. Similarly, as we shall see, for Hazlitt the truth of painting constantly threatens to slip into the merely sensuous condition of the picturesque. Hazlitt's repeated references to the concept of nervous irritability unite his accounts of poetry and painting, by implying that both are subject to a similar degenerative dynamic. Hazlitt typically contrasts the self-motivating condition of nervous irritability with the dependence on the stimulus of sense-impression characteristic of sensibility, but this distinction is constantly threatening to break down when attention is drawn to the sensuous dimension of nervous irritability itself, as it is in such essays as "On the Pleasure of Hating," where nervous irritability is characterized as a morbid

kind of self-indulgence. For Hazlitt, as for other critics, the picturesque represents this kind of addiction to nervous irritation for its own sake, which is also a danger to which the writer is subject.

9

The Romantic medical conception of art which we have found in Robertson and Hazlitt, as a quasi-physical transmission of bodily syndromes is responsible for Romantic claims about the power of the artist, which in this respect becomes akin to the power attributed in the Romantic period to the mesmerist and to the Napoleonic "commanding genius" (Coleridge, *Biographia* 1.32). Paradoxically, the very abjection of the Romantic artist is a condition of his power, in a way that significantly parallels nineteenth-century claims for women's "influence."

10

What unites Romantic theories of art with nineteenth-century accounts of gender is an underlying emphasis on the nervous system. At one extreme, this allies Romanticism with the emerging early nineteenth-century diagnostic category of monomania, the "idée fixe" of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. As we shall see, in the medicalized discourse of nineteenth-century social theory the obsessional neurosis of monomania is not necessarily confined to the individual, but is seen as potentially contagious in a way that is capable of leading to irrational mass outbreaks such as Methodism. Monomania thus becomes thought of as characteristic of the originators of social movements, the hypermasculine "great men" of Carlylean historiography.^[3] At the same time, of course, long established claims for the special "nervous irritability" of the poet (Coleridge, *Biographia* 1:30) allied the Romantic author with the sensibility regarded, by the early nineteenth century, as especially characteristic of women,^[4] a hint of effeminacy mercilessly exploited by Keats's early reviewers.

11

In linking Romanticism with the nervous system, I want to emphasize both the Romantics' neurological conception of art and, following Clifford Siskin, Romanticism's relationship to notions of systematicity. In the writings of Edmund Burke and, previously, the Common Sense school of Thomas Reid and James Beattie, the harmful mental effects of the "systems" of the French reformers and David Hume had been attributed to their tendency to induce the obsessional habit of mind which James Prichard later labelled monomania.^[5] And yet, Romantic period educational theories typically identified the difference between male and female mental capabilities as consisting in men's greater capacity for "system," in the shape of abstract thought.^[6] The notion of "system" in the Romantic period thus shares the ambiguity I have already suggested is characteristic of Romantic conceptions of art: it is at once empowering, as is implied by the Napoleonic credo "il ne faut pas être un homme, mais un système," and disabling, in that it renders the mind liable to the abjection of insanity.

12

Although defining gender differences in terms of the nervous system may appear to be an essentializing strategy, Romantic emphasis on the plasticity of the nervous system offers the possibility that gender difference may be overcome. Dugald Stewart, for example, regarded his analysis of the differing cognitive styles of men and women as revealing the neurological effects of contrasting modes of education rather than anything biologically innate, as is shown by his comparison of women's typically more superficial mode of thought with that characteristic of the leisured gentleman who has not been trained in any particular employment (4). At the same time, however, fears were often expressed in the nineteenth century that a woman engaging in systematic study might provoke a total collapse of her nervous system, because of the inherently greater sensibility of her nerves.^[7]

13

Romantic attitudes to art are ambivalent for much the same reason. Erasmus Darwin had reconceptualized the association of ideas as a process whereby the nervous system itself was physically modified (Budge, "Erasmus Darwin" 283), an emphasis akin to present-day interest in neurological plasticity. In this post-Darwinian context, which I would argue is profoundly influential on early nineteenth-century British medical thought, the associationist accounts of writing and painting put forward by Wordsworth and Hazlitt can be seen to imply that the practice of art actively "systematizes" the nerves of both artist and audience through its creation and transmission of habitual associative complexes. It is this neurological conditioning which I would argue Wordsworth had in mind when he claimed that it was the role of poetry to "call forth and communicate *power*" (*Prose* 82). An example of this Romantic conception of the empowering disciplinary effect of artistic activity can be found in Sir Walter Scott's *Redgauntlet*, where the wayward and extravagant character Darsie Latimer is portrayed as becoming increasingly focussed and resolute as a result of writing the lengthy account of how he became imprisoned by Redgauntlet which takes up most of the early part of the novel. Scott shows the act of writing itself as having a salutary effect on Darsie, rendering him capable of the concentrated thought necessary to put together an escape plan (219).

14

Artistic practice forms a manly character out of youthful sensibility, but at the same time threatens to exhaust the nervous system through overstimulation, leading to the potentially fatal conditions of brain fever and consumption; Hazlitt, for example, notes the short lives of most painters ("Old Age" 82). Clark Lawlor, in his recent study *Consumption and Literature*, has drawn attention to the importance of the cultural stereotype of the young consumptive poet in the early nineteenth century, where consumption is often portrayed as a consequence of the intense mental activity demanded by writing (113-45). In this context, writing can be seen as a rite of passage between youth and adulthood at which the consumptive has failed. The emphasis in contemporary reviews of Keats on his inability as an author to transcend his own youthfulness seems to reflect this understanding of consumption as a failure to develop the neurological resilience and self-control on which successful artistic activity depends, since, even without personal knowledge of his tendencies towards consumption, Keats would have obviously corresponded to the consumptive type which Lawlor describes (135).

15

In his essay "On the Causes of Methodism," Hazlitt sums up the view that art encourages a monomaniacal fixity of idea that is intrinsically unhealthy:

The same reason makes a man a religious enthusiast that makes a man an enthusiast in any other way, an uncomfortable mind in an uncomfortable body. Poets, authors, and artists in general, have been ridiculed for a pining, puritanical, poverty-struck appearance, which has been attributed to their real poverty. But it would perhaps be nearer the truth to say, that their being poets, artists, etc. has been owing to their original poverty of spirit and weakness of constitution. As a general rule, those who are dissatisfied with themselves, will seek to go out of themselves into an ideal world. Persons in strong health and spirits, who take plenty of air and exercise, who are "in favour with their stars," and have a thorough relish of the good things of this life, seldom devote themselves in despair to religion or the Muses. Sedentary, nervous, hypochondriacal people, on the contrary, are forced, for want of an appetite for the real and substantial, to look out for a more airy food and speculative comforts. "Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works."

58

Hazlitt is offering here a purely neurological account of art. In keeping with the contemporary medical idea that a continual supply of nervous stimulus is necessary to maintain bodily vitality,^[8] Hazlitt suggests that the ability to subject yourself with impunity to the intense monomaniacal fixation on a limited set of ideas

demanding by artistic practice, as by Methodist enthusiasm, depends upon a set of constitutionally insensitive nerves. Lacking a satisfying degree of nervous stimulation from sensory perception, the nervously impoverished author or artist can endure the nervous irritation induced by composition better than those endowed with nerves more responsive to sensory stimuli, who would tend more quickly to succumb to a condition of neural morbidity which early nineteenth-century medical thought regarded as likely to deprive the lungs of vitality and bring on consumption.^[9] Hazlitt may have had in mind here Wordsworth's deficient sense of smell (Richardson xiii), which according to this medical model might be the source of the conspicuous and unusual degree of health Wordsworth enjoyed as an author (Coleridge, *Biographia* 2:129-30).

16

In other essays, Hazlitt identifies physical beauty as a product of nervous responsiveness, and this helps to explain the gendered nature of early nineteenth-century conceptions of authorship, despite the emphasis on the plasticity of the nervous system on which I commented above. Hazlitt defines beauty as consisting in a bodily sense of satisfaction with one's environment ("Manner" 57). In the light of Romantic period medical claims that vitality results from an appropriate degree of nervous stimulation, however, it is clear that the physical placidity on which Hazlitt insists as essential to beauty is above all a neurological condition in which the sensitivity of the nerves furnishes a degree of stimulation which leaves the body nothing to seek beyond its own immediate sensuous surroundings. Such a condition is the neurological opposite of that which drives the author in Hazlitt's account, and, given the period's emphasis on female nervous sensitivity, is much more likely to be characteristic of women.

17

Hazlitt's conception of artistic ability as consisting in a capacity for sustained neural irritation which is made possible by a torpid condition of the sensory nerves also underlies the contrast he draws between French and English literature. For Hazlitt, the very dullness and unresponsiveness of the English is responsible for the greatness of English poetry, because it encourages the tendency for dwelling on one idea ("Merry England" 158) and seeing everything else in its light, on which the poetic combination of ideas depends. The more responsive nerves of the French, by contrast, encourage rapid transitions between ideas in way that is favourable to wit, but inimicable to poetry and humour ("Merry England" 157-58). Coleridge's use of Lear's speech to the storm, comparing it to his daughters, to exemplify "Imagination or the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others," corresponds to this Hazlittian account of poetry as a kind of monomania (*Lectures* 81).

18

Hazlitt's characterization of poetic capacity in terms of nervous understimulation and resulting hypochondria is widely echoed in early reviews of Wordsworth,^[10] and underlies the criticisms of Wordsworth in the notes of Leigh Hunt's *The Feast of the Poets* (107). In a recent article, George Grinnell has identified an association between hypochondria and references to writing in Thomas Beddoes's *Hygeia*, in a way which is close to the argument I am presenting here (240). Grinnell draws attention to the way in which Beddoes explains hypochondria as the result of misperception, or nervous insensitivity, to the sensations of health (240-50) and cites Beddoes's remark that most chronic invalids would be cured "if their whole mass of ideas—provided those were included that relate to their means of recovery—could be abolished" (Grinnell 232). Hypochondria thus represents a kind of monomania (although neither Beddoes nor Grinnell uses this term), in that it is brought about by a fixation of ideas for which writing is responsible, and, in the same way as I have suggested in the case of the Romantic artist, results in a condition of abjection (Grinnell 245). Grinnell also notes that consumption represents for Beddoes the opposing pole in this nosology, since the

tendency of sufferers to disregard the seriousness of their symptoms testifies to an inverse kind of misperception of the state of their health for which excessive nervous sensibility is presumably responsible (249).

19

Grinnell explores at length the question of reflexivity created for Beddoes by his recognition that popular medical treatises were at least as likely, through their influence on the imagination, to harm their readers as to help them. Such attention to issues of reflexivity was entirely characteristic of Romantic period medicine in general, when doctors recognized that visiting spa towns such as Bath might benefit the patient as much through the expectations created as through any intrinsic properties of the waters (Wiltshire 208) and that the patient's response to the personality of the doctor might be as important a factor in a cure as any medicines that were prescribed (Oppenheim 138). As I have explored in a recent article (Budge, "Erasmus Darwin") this Romantic period emphasis on the medical importance of the imagination represents far more than a simple acknowledgement of the kind of psychosomatic factors which present-day medical science is prepared to recognize. The imagination is central, not peripheral, to Romantic medicine, because of the far-reaching unification of the domains of mind and body represented by the Brunonian medical theory of Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*, an important influence on Beddoes. Darwin explains all mental activity materialistically, as "motions of the fibrillae of the extremity of the nerves of sense" (qtd. in Barnes 257); conversely, he explains all disease as a result of (materialistically conceived) "associations" (*Zoonomia* 81-85). Darwin reconceives the imagination as a fundamentally somatic consciousness, a view reflected in Hazlitt's argument that "habitual indigestion" might imperceptibly "oppress the very sun in the sky, beat down ... all powers of enjoyment, and imprison all ... faculties in a living tomb ("Depth and Superficiality" 328), and which I have argued underpins Wordsworth's therapeutic conception of the function of poetry ("Erasmus Darwin" 289).

20

The somatic nature of the Romantic imagination helps to explain why Beddoes, although acknowledging the imaginary nature of hypochondria, nevertheless regarded it as a real disease (Grinnell 245). The connection between writing and hypochondria, noted by Grinnell in Beddoes's *Hygeia*, and underlying the Wordsworths' frequently expressed worries about the effect of poetic composition on William's health (Barker 236), is frequently to be found in Romantic period medical writings, going back at least as far as S. A. Tissot's "Essay on Diseases Incidental to Literary and Sedentary Persons," translated into English in the 1770s.

21

Alexander Crichton's 1798 *Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement* makes explicit the Romantic conceptualization of the connection between artistic practice and hypochondria in terms of an intense nervous stimulation inducing an obsessive mental condition of the kind that was later to be called monomania:

In every action of the mental faculties, the action of the arteries of the brain is increased, and a greater quantity of blood than usual is immediately transmitted to it ... [T]he irritability of the blood-vessels of the brain, therefore, are preternaturally stimulated, in the first place, by this increased quantity of blood, and a state of indirect debility of the brain follows ... As all irritable parts also become more disposed to action by repetition, and as action necessarily exhausts a great deal of the vital principle, we see the reason why all exertions of the mental faculties, when too long continued, or too violent, produce fatigue, and debilitate the corporeal part of the animal.

2:29

Crichton's allusion shortly before this passage to Tissot's essay (2:27), and a comment afterwards that those who write "works of imagination" are particularly exposed to the condition he describes (2:37), indicate that

his description of the effects of intense mental activity is intended as a diagnosis of the neurological condition of the writer. Given the close parallel Hazlitt establishes between literary and painterly composition, it is also reasonable to extend Crichton's account to art more generally. The references to "irritability" and to exhaustion of the "vital principle" situate Crichton's neurological description of imaginative activity within the framework of Brunonian medicine, an important influence on Beddoes and the source of the idea that healthy vitality depends upon an adequate degree of nervous stimulation. For John Brown, the eponymous founder of Brunonianism, normal bodily processes were to be understood as a regulated discharge of the vital principle (or "fluid") through the stimulation of bodily tissues (1:71-76). In Brown's radical simplification of medical theory, disease consisted in a condition either of understimulation ("asthenia"), resulting in an unhealthy accumulation of the vital fluid, or of overstimulation ("sthenia"), resulting in its overly rapid exhaustion (2:124-25). In this context, Leigh Hunt's suggestion that Wordsworth is a hypochondriac can be seen to reflect a Brunonian diagnosis of his condition as one of understimulation. Keatsian consumption, on the other hand, as many contemporary reviews imply,^[11] represents the opposite Brunonian condition of overstimulation, in which bodily and mental force is prematurely exhausted.

22

Crichton, then, describes imaginative effort as tending to induce the Brunonian condition of overstimulation in the brain by means of the greater supply of blood and vital fluid which mental activity diverts from the rest of the body. For Crichton, this leads to a neural syndrome which displays the self-reinforcing tendencies typical of Brunonian sthenic disease in general (Brown 2:150-58). Under this excessive stimulation, the vitality of the brain's tissues becomes exhausted and a state of morbidity ensues, in which the brain requires increasing amounts of the vital fluid simply in order to keep functioning normally. In Brunonian terminology, the brain's tissues become increasingly "irritable," and this need for further stimulation by the vital fluid results in continued neural activity in that portion of the brain which has already been stimulated by the intense concentration on a limited set of ideas demanded by composition (Crichton 2:36). Artistic creation becomes, in this Brunonian account, the cause of a physical state of addiction to nervous overstimulation whose mental concomitant is the obsession of monomania.

23

Significantly, Hazlitt applies this Brunonian model of overstimulation and addiction not only to the experience of writing and painting, but also to that of reading, and in this context the abjection which I have suggested is inherent in Romantic attitudes to art can be seen as resulting from a Romantic denial of the artist's relationship to mass culture. Amidst the exalted claims of his essay "On Poetry in General," for example, Hazlitt accounts for the imaginative interest excited by novels by invoking the Brunonian notion of "irritability." Although Hazlitt plainly regards the prosaic and diffuse style of writing of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* as representing the opposite of the imaginative language of poetry, he nevertheless remarks on the "inconceivable height" to which the interest of the reader is worked up by the proliferating detail of Richardson's descriptions (14-15). This obsessive scrutiny, the antithesis of imaginative interest, is typical of what Hazlitt regards as the effect of "irritation" upon the mind: in Brunonian fashion, the very exhaustion and weakening of our faculties provokes an ever-growing need for more of the same kind of stimulus. "Irritation" gives rise to a morbid compulsion which keeps the reader absorbed throughout Richardson's thousand-page novel. The archly sentimental terms in which Hazlitt refers to the fascinations of the "divine Clarissa" are echoed in Hazlitt's fictionalized account in *Liber Amoris* of his own obsessive love for Sarah Walker, which may be understood as a practical study of the way an addictive-obsessive condition is provoked by the sexual "irritation" of this coquettish serving-girl's prolonged embraces.^[12]

24

Hazlitt's Brunonian account of novelistic realism is echoed in other Romantic period complaints about the harmful effects of novels on the mind, which clearly express anxieties about mass culture.^[13] Similar Brunonian categories inform Robert Southey's political analysis of the effects of the new print culture:

Discussions and speculations upon first principles of government and abstract rights, with a view to the formation of some New Atlantis or Utopia, have an effect upon men analogous to that which novel-reading produces upon girls: as long as the inebriation lasts, it unfits them to bear their parts in the realities of life, which appear "stale, flat and unprofitable" to their heated and high-fed fancies. They become dissatisfied with the society in which they are placed, and because they cannot remodel its institutions according to their own notions of perfection, instead of endeavouring to lessen the quantum of evil in the world, they increase it by their factious or querulous discontent.

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Southey describes himself in this article as diagnosing a new "moral pestilence" (338), and in the context of the anxieties about novel-reading to which he alludes it is clear that he is characterizing political radicalism as a Brunonian condition of sthenic addiction to nervous overstimulation, brought on in the first instance by reading cheap political pamphlets, but threatening to spill over into irrational forms of mass political action as the less powerful stimulus of reading loses its effect and is replaced by the potent nervous irritant of meetings, regarded by Southey as largely responsible for the success of Methodism (*Life of Wesley* 348). Southey invokes the spectre of a contagious form of monomania, whose vector is printed matter, a Brunonian characterization of mass culture which appears later in the nineteenth century as an explanation for crime waves (Bulwer-Lytton 238-39) and which Pamela Gilbert has noted underlies conceptualizations of the "sensation novel" in the 1860s (188).

25

Writing is not the only medium that attracts this Romantic hostility towards mass culture, with its accompanying Brunonian language of overstimulation, exhaustion and monomania. As I have argued elsewhere, the damning review of Maturin's drama "Bertram," which Coleridge appended to *Biographia Literaria*, refers to Brunonian thinking through its conspicuous deployment of references to indigestion ("Indigestion and Imagination" 172). Brunonian categories can also be seen to inform the picturesque controversy of the 1790s, in a way which suggests that it is possible to regard Romantic uneasiness about the picturesque, as reflected for example in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (138-176) as expressive of the same desire to evade or deny the condition of mediatization inherent in mass culture which we have identified in the recurrent Romantic figurings of artistic abjection.

26

As a category, the picturesque draws attention to the purely sensuous dimension of painting and visual experience generally, and it is this which makes it a focus for Romantic anxiety about mass culture. My claim that, in Romantic thought, legitimate forms of painting are not regarded primarily in terms of sensuous experience will seem less paradoxical if it is borne in mind that according to Berkeley, to whose influence upon Hazlitt I alluded earlier, vision itself consists in the active interpretation of perceptual signs, rather than in the passive absorption of visual sensation in its immediacy. This Berkeleyan model of the mediation of the visual world through signs underlies Hazlitt's discussion of "the difference between painting or copying a portrait" in his essay "On the Portrait of an English Lady" (267). Copying a painting, Hazlitt notes, does not demand anything more than an appreciation of its purely sensuous qualities, since "you have only to attend to what is before you, and finish it a bit at a time" (268). Hazlitt compares copying to the painting of a still-life, where "it is easy to produce a *fac-simile* of a table or a chair ... because these things do not stir from their places," (268) something which allows "any given degree of minute and continued attention on finishing" (268).

27

Hazlitt emphasizes that portrait-painting, by contrast, demands an effort of mental synthesis, since “the human face is not one thing ... it has infinite varieties, which the artist is obliged to notice and to reconcile, or he will make strange work” (267). The visual appearance of a face offers nothing but a “medley of successive, teasing, contradictory impressions” (268) which it is impossible merely to imitate, as they are not consistent with each other. In order even to begin to offer a true representation in painting, artists are forced imaginatively to reconstruct sensuous appearances, so that they are “painting from recollection and from a conception of character, with the object before ... [them] to assist the memory and understanding” (268).

28

Hazlitt’s identification of “expression” as “the great difficulty in history or portrait-painting” (269) testifies to the Berkeleyan conception of a visual *language* not reducible to sensuous immediacy which underlies his discussion. As in his analysis of how a distinction between “true” and “false” feelings is possible, to which I referred earlier, the referentiality of painting, which gives it “signification” (269), results from habitual association. The painter’s efforts to imagine the portrait, on the basis on the fleeting sensuous impressions presented by the sitter’s face, result in the formation of a persistent associative complex from which accidental sensuous variation is omitted, and it is this associative complex which allows the portrait to be painted. The portrait consequently functions as an index or sign of the painter’s “conception of character” (268), and its sensuous qualities are in the last analysis only relevant insofar as they transmit the associative complex which is the painter’s understanding of the sitter.

29

Hazlitt’s view of painting, then, is similar to the one John Ruskin sets out at the beginning of *Modern Painters*, where “truth” in painting is conceived according to an expressive linguistic model which is sharply distinguished from the merely sensuous imitation of still-life *trompe l’oeuil* effects (79-82); it is not unlikely, of course, that Ruskin was influenced by Hazlitt’s writings. Hazlitt’s emphasis on painting as essentially an act of recollection, even when the model is present before the painter, makes his account of art closely akin to the Wordsworthian poetic. The early nineteenth-century category of the picturesque, by contrast, privileges immediate sensuous effect, rendering it the opposite of Hazlitt’s conception of the painting as an inherently non-sensuous sign. The category of the picturesque also implies derivation from the work of other painters, something which associates it with the sensuous paradigm of the copy, rather than the act of imaginative synthesis which for Hazlitt is characteristic of legitimate kinds of painting.

30

The picturesque, then, represents an experience in which the sensuous element of visuality predominates in a way which is easily reproducible, and it is for this reason that, like fancy, it is regarded by the Romantics as representative of the effects of mass culture. Romantic medical thought attributed the primacy of the sense of vision to the domination of the nervous system by the massive optic nerve (*Zoonomia* 249), a view which represents the neurological underpinning for Wordsworth’s complaints about the “tyranny of the eye” (*Prelude* 170-84). In this context, it is not surprising to find that the arguments about the proper place of visuality, which underlie Romantic period reservations about the picturesque, appeal to the Brunonian concept of nervous overstimulation, or irritation. Hazlitt, for example, identifies the nervous irritability characteristic of the English as the reason they are unsuccessful in painting, as well as pre-eminent in poetry (“Means” 212-22). Hazlitt characterizes the category of the picturesque itself in terms which are related to the Brunonian notion of nervous irritation, as “whatever stands out from a given line, and as it were projects upon the eye,” and remarks that this is essential in “a subject for painting” (“Picturesque” 318). But he also criticizes John Martin, the British painter of sublime imaginary landscapes, for an unremitting deployment of

the picturesque which “wearies the imagination, instead of exciting it,” a fault which he links with the aesthetic theory of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and particularly its assumption that the painter creates ideal beauty by selecting and combining choice details from nature (“Elgin Marble” 155). The picturesque for Hazlitt represents the inherent qualities of the medium of painting itself, but it is precisely this condition of mediatization that threatens to induce a Brunonian condition of nervous overstimulation in which the imagination succumbs to morbidity.

31

For Hazlitt, Reynolds' emphasis on selection leads to one-dimensional and repetitive art of the kind Martin produces; he contrasts this with the Elgin Marbles, where the ideal is achieved through realizing the harmonious interplay between different parts of the body that takes place in nature. But, as Hazlitt notes, the Greek artists had the splendid naked forms of gladiators and slaves to imitate, which are unavailable to the modern artist (“Elgin Marbles” 145). His essay consequently seems to suggest that the modern Romantic artist is condemned to a “picturesque” obsession with detail and inability to grasp the whole. Furthermore, Hazlitt's “On Poetry in General” emphasizes, as a distinguishing quality of poetry, precisely that vivid heightening of momentary detail which constitutes the picturesque, and asserts the superiority of modern poetry over the classics on the basis of the modern tendency to reach beyond the immediately present world of the senses (“Poetry in General” 17). This inability to be content with sensuous immediacy, however, as we have seen, is the basis for Hazlitt's neurological characterization of authors as prone to hypochondria (“Literary Character” 133). Despite Hazlitt's wish to celebrate the essential healthiness, and play of faculties, evident in the productions of genius, it looks as if in practice he accepts that the modern Romantic artist is condemned to the state of specialized nervous irritation characteristic of the picturesque.

32

A similar anxiety about the potential reductiveness of the kind of mediatization represented by the picturesque can be identified in the picturesque controversy of the 1790s, and, as in Hazlitt, it is couched in terms derived from Brunonian medicine. One of the most sustained assaults launched on the picturesque aesthetics of Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price by a contemporary is William Marshall's lengthily titled *A Review of the Landscape, a Didactic Poem: Also of An Essay on the Picturesque: Together with Practical Remarks on Rural Ornament*, published in 1795. Marshall particularly focusses on the role played by “irritation” in Price's aesthetics. Price had argued that landscape gardening should center around the picturesque, because beauty on its own, as manifested in the smooth lines favored by Capability Brown and his disciples, quickly became insipid (1:104). Price suggested that, in order to ensure that a garden continue to give sensory pleasure, it was necessary to add some roughness and jaggedness to landscape forms, a procedure which would result in a garden possessing a picturesque, rather than a merely beautiful character (1:115). Sensory “irritation” maintained aesthetic curiosity (1:126-27), in a process which Price, typically for eighteenth-century writers on aesthetics, compared to male sexual arousal: the vivacious coquette provokes sexual interest in a way the placid beauty does not (1:73-74).

33

Marshall regards Price's stress on “irritation” as symptomatic of his reduction of the sensory pleasures afforded by a garden to the single dimension of sight: painting needs to “irritate” the visual sense, because viewing a painting involves a hyperstimulation which exhausts the visual faculties, so that painting needs to offer perpetually fresh provocation in order to continue to elicit a sense of pleasure in the jaded spectator (Marshall 81). In Marshall's reading of Price, however, the Brunonian trope of “irritation” assumes a peculiar mobility which is symptomatic of the way in which the category of the picturesque represents the threat of mass culture. This can be seen, for example, in Marshall's allusions to the 1790s political context, which hint

that the irritating quality of the picturesque is potentially dangerous (49). For Marshall, the quality of “brilliant imagination” which Price equates with “a true relish for picturesk scenery” must be held responsible for the disastrous condition of France (217-18). Marshall also suggests that the picturesque is the enemy of domestic contentment—which is, conversely, promoted by the soothing surroundings created by Capability Brown (83-84). The picturesque for Marshall is not only a character of landscape, but also a rather suspect sort of human character that can be contrasted with the inherent manliness of Brown-style landscape:

The personage whom we conceive to correspond with ornamented beauty, is a more open and manly character. His language, though flowing and polished, wants neither strength nor sincerity; he expresses himself, on all occasions, with frankness and promptitude; and, in the more important concerns of life, with firmness and candour; equally rejecting sophistry and intricacy of argument. Nevertheless, in the hour of relaxation, he enters freely into the playfulness of figurative language; and though not "eternally" on the rack for "unexpected turns—of flashes of light," nor for ever labouring "to strike out unthought-of agreements and contrasts;" yet checks not, when they rise naturally out of the subject in agitation, the more splendid embellishments of polite conversation: a personage whose naturally good faculties have received, from cultivation, a respectability and becoming dignity; even whose countenance is expressive of benignity and candour; and whose manner is not less strongly marked by an openness of carriage, and a gracefulness of deportment.

How different is the thing, which remains to be characterized! Its language is ever suspicious and suspected: in its graver moments, it is studiously intricate and mysterious; abrupt and embarrassing: its whole aim is deception; frittering away its own arguments, by indulging in a vicious habit of giving variety of expression to the same simple thought, and priding itself on the nefarious faculty of hiding the truth. In general, and in its natural character, it is a mere monkey—chattering aloud its inarticulate nothings, as if in response to the babblings of some favourite stream, in its native woods: at best, a brilliant buffoon, and a pleasant companion in the lighter hours of relaxation...

As recreations or matters of amusement,—or in better English, as pastimes,—wild scenery and mother wit are charming:—so, in their season, are broad farce and pantomime: but who would wish to *live* in a theatre?

Marshall 246-49

The contrast Marshall draws between the unstrained “playfulness” of the character corresponding to Capability Brown’s “ornamented beauty” and the frenetic “variety of expression” belonging to the “brilliant buffoon,” which is the picturesque, obviously derives from later eighteenth-century discussions of the difference between “wit” and “humour”: the picturesque is witty, and therefore corrupt, whilst Brownian “ornamented beauty” has that solidity of character which had been attributed to “humourists” such as Falstaff. As is indicated by his comment, “who would wish to *live* in a theatre,” Marshall’s comparison of the picturesque to wit implies that the basis of his objections lies in picturesque theory’s location of aesthetic standards in the mediatization represented by painting. The underlying Brunonian medical model allows Marshall’s characterization of picturesque “irritation” as at once a vicious habit and as linked to brilliancy of imagination to slide easily between references to the sensuous “irritation” which is the goal of Price’s picturesque aesthetics, and characterizations of Price’s writing itself as wittily “irritating,” captious and querulous.

One reason, I would suggest, Brunonian medical ideas represented an attractive intellectual resource to Romantic writers such as Hazlitt and Marshall, who are engaged in conceptualizing the effects of mediatization and mass culture, is because of their very reductiveness. Brown's explanation of all human disease in terms of the single dimension of over- or understimulation implied that the complex pharmacopeia of existing medicine could be safely ignored, since all these remedies in fact achieved was the single physiological effect of stimulating the organism (Brown 1:71-76), so that the Brunonian physician’s decision

was limited to the question of whether, and to what degree, to apply “stimulants” such as alcohol or opium in a given case (Brown 1:138-42).

35

Just as Brunonian medicine flattened out the multidimensional diagnostics of previous medicine into the single dimension of stimulation, so too mediatization reduces human experience to the single dimension of the medium itself, which, as Marshall McLuhan suggested, becomes the message (15). The picturesque’s anticipation of Herbert Marcuse’s “one-dimensional man” is indicated in Marshall’s association between picturesque “irritation” and exactly those kinds of stimulants that Brunonian physicians were employing on their patients:

Let us listen again to the instruction of wisdom. "Irritation is indeed the source of our most active and lively pleasures, but its nature, like the pleasures which spring from, is eager, hurrying, impetuous; and when the mind is agitated, from whatever cause, those mild and soft emotions which flow from beauty, and of which beauty is the genuine source, are scarcely perceived."... A sufficient caution, surely, to avoid indulging in the pleasures of irritation too freely; like taking a bottle extraordinary, they may give a fillip to ennui, and prepare us for the more rational enjoyments of life; but it would be equally reasonable for a man to spend his days in "eternal" drunkenness, as to subject himself "eternally" to the irritations of pictureskness. (sic)

Marshall 107-08

Consistently with Brunonian ideas about “stimulants,” alcoholic intoxication is here equated with the irritating effect of picturesqueness. The gentleman who has made his grounds picturesque, as Price has done, is for Marshall like a habitual drunkard, in that he has become addicted to perpetual “irritation,” or sensual stimulation, in a way that unfits him for “more rational enjoyments.” Marshall later reinforces this characterization of the picturesque as a degrading addiction when he describes it as “a vicious habit—a depravity—similar to that of eating devils, drinking drams, and smoking assafoetida; snuffing high-dried Irish blackguard, and using highly scented perfumes” (77). Price and his fellow connoisseurs are “sickly,” in Marshall’s view, because they suffer from the disease of modernity itself, an unhealthy specialization of their faculties which is the antithesis of that mental roundedness on which gentlemanly authority is based.^[14]

36

As Marshall complains, the whole thrust of Price’s argument about the picturesque subordinates gentlemanly taste to the judgement of the painter:

It is very natural, and perfectly right, for a Landscape painter, in viewing natural scenery, to examine with nice regard, all the light and shadow he can detect in the scene before him; in order to imagine how, by enlarging and improving them, such scene could best be represented on canvas. So a portrait painter may frequently examine a woman, with a view to imagine how she could best be done in light and shadow, or what sort of portrait she would make. (And in like manner, we may suppose, an undertaker sometimes conceives within himself what sort of a corpse the woman before him would make, how she would look in her coffin.) But will any one say that a *Gentleman*, a MAN OF GENERAL TASTE, ought to view either of them with a *professional eye*?

Marshall 113

Marshall’s point is that in proposing landscape painting as the guide to planning an estate, Price is professionalizing the authority of the gentleman. Price conceives gentlemanly taste as the product not of a natural bodily responsiveness made possible by freedom from the hardening and coarsening effects of labour, but as the result of education through connoisseurship. For Price, the gentleman is no longer “a man of general taste,” but a *specialist* in matters of taste, in a way which Marshall finds a contradiction in terms.

37

Marshall's remarks about the mental effects of specialization echo Adam Smith's well-known conclusions in *The Wealth of Nations* about the division of labour (781-82). In conjunction with Marshall's emphasis on the addiction to aesthetic "irritation" on which Price's picturesque theory is based, however, a medical, and specifically Brunonian, diagnosis of social modernity can be seen to underlie his arguments. The connoisseur of the picturesque craves "irritation" *because* his mind is "sickly," having had his visual faculty overstimulated by the exclusive attention to the sense of vision that the act of viewing pictures entails.

38

Brunonian medicine thus supplies Marshall with an aetiology of addiction and perversity with which to diagnose the Pricean connoisseur, as opposed to the healthiness of the gentleman who employs the followers of Capability Brown. For Marshall, the picturesque is a "stimulant" in the Brunonian sense, which is desired because overstimulation of one particular set of nerves has depleted their vitality. Precisely similar arguments are constantly reiterated in early nineteenth-century descriptions of the effects of factory labour. The resort of factory workers to alcohol (characterized as a "stimulant" in Brunonian medicine) is explained as a result of the weakened state of nerves induced by endless repetition of the same minutely circumscribed task: nervous depletion naturally prompts recourse to the "stimulant" of intoxication, in a vicious circle leading to the irremediable depravity of the working population (Gaskell 123-26).

39

The Brunonian language in which the writings belonging to the Picturesque Controversy are couched indicates the status of the picturesque as emblematic of a newly pervasive mediatization of experience which threatens to reduce it to a purely sensuous dimension. Its association with tourism and other forms of mass consumption (Birmingham 81-119) suggests that the picturesque represents the threat posed by mass culture to the Berkeleyan conception of experience as consisting in the interpretation of essentially non-sensuous signs, which we have seen underlies Hazlitt's Romantic conception of art. At the same time, however, the Brunonian neurological discourse employed by Hazlitt and other Romantics reveals an unacknowledged kinship between the Romantic artist and an embryonic mass culture. Hazlitt's appeal to the neurological concept of irritability, as a condition which simultaneously implies independence from nervous stimulus and a relapse into bodily sensuousness, expresses the paradoxical relationship between Romanticism and mass culture itself. Romanticism, in this view, not only rejects mass culture, but is also fascinated by it, because mass culture's characterization as a morbid state of the nerves represents the mirror-image of Romantic poetics itself, in terms of the medical discourse which I have argued informs Romantic theories of art.

Biographical notice

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Notes

[1]

See Ian Reid's "Fathering the Man" and *Wordsworth and the Formation of English Studies*.

[2]

See, among others, Miriam Bailin, Janet Oppenheim, Neil Vickers, Dino Franco Felluga, Sharon Ruston, and Clark Lawlor.

[3]

See Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* 429 and *The French Revolution* 590.

[4]

See, for example, Thomas Gisborne's *The Duties of the Female Sex* (1797), 34-35.

[5]

See Burke 105, 107; Thomas Reid 228-29; and Beattie 307, 395.

[6]

See, for example, Dugald Stewart 4:240-41.

[7]

See, for example, Diana Basham's *The Trial of Woman* 26.

[8]

See, for example, Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* 74-80.

[9]

Erasmus Darwin links consumption to a "temperament of decreased irritability...frequently found amongst the softer sex, and amongst narrow-shouldered men," making their health, according to the Brunonian medical model which underlies Darwin's thinking, more dependent on the external stimulus of sensation (*Zoonomia* 355-56). Hazlitt's emphasis on the comparative sensorial insensitivity of authors echoes this Darwinian categorization, in that it implies that authors such as Wordsworth have greater nervous irritability (in the sense that brooding over a narrow range of ideas provides them with sufficient nervous stimulus) and less sensibility (i.e. dependence on rapidly changing sense-impressions for a healthy degree of nervous stimulation) than normal people.

[10]

Reiman 312-14.

[11]

See, for example, John O. Hayden 506-07.

[12]

For "irritation," see the "Publisher's Note," *Liber Amoris* 285.

[13]

See, for example, Richard Payne Knight's 1806 *An Analytical Inquiry Into the Principles of Taste* 43-45.

[14]

For a discussion of the politics of gentlemanly authority, and its relationship to the landscape tradition, see John Barrell, 31-40, 56-65.

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