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## IMAGINATION AND SCIENCE IN ROMANTICISM



By **Richard C. Sha**  
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Reviewed by **James Robert Allard** on 2023-03-31.

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We have long understood that certain key terms like "nature" and "revolution," to cite only two examples, are at home in a variety of seemingly disparate texts and contexts in the Romantic Century, even as they often prove frustratingly difficult to define or circumscribe in any meaningful way. To a certain extent, we may have always understood "imagination" to be another of those terms, but, with a nod to Noah Herringman and other key specialists in Romanticism and Science, Richard Sha claims that the "popular account of Romanticism still maintains that hostility to science is a unifying attitude of the period" and argues "that both Romantic artists and scientists seized upon the imagination to connect more fully with the experience of objects" (1).

His demanding but rewarding book ranges expansively across the work of a considerable and diverse list of scientists from the period, including "Davy, Faraday, Boscovich, Priestley, Kant, Mary Somerville, Goethe, Haller, Humboldt, Orsted, Swedenbourg, Blumenbach, Buffon, Saumarez, Erasmus Darwin, Smellie, and Von Baer" (27). Sha links these figures to four major works that grapple with the concept of imagination: Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Blake's *The Four Zoas*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In linking these works to the thinking of a wide range of scientists, Sha aims to correct the "traditional view of the imagination as articulated by the likes of Frye, Bloom, and Engell," which "assumes that imagination reaches its developmental peak in Romantic literature, and. . . wrongly predicates this teleology on the assumption of a split between the two cultures of science and literature before any such split solidified" (6-7).

Contesting those who would confine the work of the imagination to literature (or the arts more broadly), Sha argues that the split between literature and science "was more rhetorical (performative) than actual (constative), notwithstanding Wordsworth's polemical antithesis between poetry and 'matter of fact, or science'" (16). As "images and ideas of imagination became nearly impossible to dispense with," offering as they did "new ways of seeing previously unknown forms of what the Romantics considered matter" and helping to "explain how our senses could encounter them" (2), Sha insists that "the imagination mattered and was not merely delusion or a literary phenomenon, and that science helped explain why it mattered" (23). This book is his sustained effort to show us that the imagination still matters, in our own time as well as in the Romantic period.

Following a substantial, wide-ranging introduction, the four main chapters of the book highlight canonical literary texts and authors in order to "explore the ways in which Romantic writers and scientists argue for the value of imagination in scientific practice, and the ways in which those arguments should challenge assumptions about what the imagination can and cannot do" (27). Chapter 1 (at 64 pages, the book's longest) shows how the period's chemists and physicists (to use our labels) "helped Romantic writers to understand matter not in terms of Newtonian corpuscles or atoms [. . .] but rather in terms of dynamic forces" (31). The key figure in this process was surely Humphry Davy, whose status as a major shaping influence on the period as a whole continues to grow. Reading *Prometheus Unbound* through the lens of Davy's work, Sha argues that it represents "the dynamism of matter" and thus reveals "ways of thinking about both the forces of matter and their consequences for human action, mental states, and the imagination" (31).

Turning to *The Four Zoas*, chapter 2 argues that Blake not only "believed in a visionary imagination" but also "localized this imagination in the brain and nerves" (28). "Why," Sha asks, "did Blake simultaneously reduce the imagination to the nerves--thereby seemingly risking a physicalism devoid of spirit and an automaticity that denies intentionality and consciousness--and associate his poet figure, Los, with loss?" (96). Read in these terms, *The Four Zoas* shows how the "neurology of the period facilitated a flexible materialism that included both spirit and a dynamic materiality in the form of life" (96) and pleads "for an imagination not merely subject to the understanding, [. . .] insofar as Blake shows the ways in which even delusions can enhance understanding" (143).

Chapter 3 considers how shifting debates on the science of physiology shaped Coleridge's still-influential theory of imagination, a theory articulated most clearly in the *Biographia Literaria*. The turn to physiology here allows us to apprehend that theory more directly, since Coleridge, we are told, "defines the imagination as 'essentially vital,' thereby framing it physiologically" (144). Attending to Coleridge's analyses of bodily processes helps us to grasp the notoriously confounding *Biographia* itself, since "Understanding how physiology and imagination shape each other allows us to explain the unified ambitions of the *Biographia* in ways that criticism has been unable to do" (145).

Turning to *Frankenstein*, chapter 4 aims to show "how the place of imagination within obstetrics and embryology shaped Mary Shelley's thinking about imagination, creation, and science" (185). "[A]lthough critics generally assume biological creation to be something new," Sha notes, "theories of the time reduced it to a form of copying, and women's contributions to generation were minimized" (185), even as "obstetricians and embryologists of the time begin to understand that with so much unknown about generation and embryonic development, the imagination had to provide leads" (188). The chapter ends by asking, "What then does all this mean for both Romantic imagination and science?" (230)--a question that applies as much to the book as a whole as it does to this chapter. "Setting criteria against which to evaluate the imagination's contributions," Sha holds, "becomes the requisite for the possibility of its development and, through it, the development of science" (230). Without reference to imagination, in other words, we cannot understand the science of the Romantic period.

"By neglecting the imagination's role in epistemology of the time," Sha writes, "Romanticists have done nothing less than give up the store" (30).

The enormous range of Sha's work is surely its greatest strength. Whether or not specifically interested in science, anyone curious about almost any aspect of the Romantic period will find much to think about here. As Sha conclusively demonstrates, *any* effort to grasp the concept of "imagination" and the products of its workings must contend with the elusiveness of the word itself, and in the Romantic period, writers and thinkers of all kinds--literary and scientific alike--often seemed much more comfortable with this elusiveness than have any of their subsequent readers. Nevertheless, while Sha's deep learning and commitment to refusing any easy division of "literature" and "science" permeate this book, it is flawed by overstatement. Too often, Sha seems to need the work of others to be wrong in order for his to be right.

Much of the introduction, for instance, pursues the question raised in a section sub-heading, "What's Wrong with Historicist and Ideological Approaches to Imagination?" [13]). This question is at least in part prompted by the too-easy assumption that too many scholars continue to see a hostility to science in the literary writing of the period. To be sure, no approach is ever above critique, but the ease with which these claims are made should give us pause. It is never easy to summarize fresh scholarship fairly, to engage meaningfully with the sheer volume of work on any topic, no matter how sharply focussed, let alone a topic that links the loaded terms of Sha's title. But in this book, too many brilliant, field-defining studies are casually dismissed as "a virtual cottage industry" in "Romantic science" (1), or amalgamated as the work of "a group of historicist critics led by Jerome McGann" (10)--as if the scholarship of the decades since McGann's *Romantic Ideology* (1983) has not productively built from and when necessary worked against the model it offers. Many of Sha's claims, therefore, sound more like a polemic against (an over-simplified) historicism than a profoundly important argument for a re-examination of the imagination and its continuing role in our efforts to understand both the period and its key terms.

But the book is surely important. As it shows, we have yet to fully appreciate the full scope and deeply nuanced impact that "imagination" had on the thinking, writing, and practices of the Romantic period. By taking such pains to trace the term and its legacies across such a wide range of disciplines, guided by the deceptively simple but absolutely vital recognition that "Science and art were more compatible then" (1), Sha has effectively challenged all of us to reconsider--perhaps even consider for the first time in any substantial way--how we have engaged with or perhaps avoided a term so central to the thinking of the period, whatever role it has had in our treatments of it. *Imagination and Science in Romanticism* will prompt lively and productive discussion across the entirety of the fields and specialities that constitute Romantic Studies, if perhaps equally lively and no less productive disagreement from some quarters. Either way, its impact will be stimulating and salutary.

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