

Richard C. Sha, *Imagination and Science in Romanticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 327. \$59.95. ISBN 9781421425795.

If the ‘two cultures’ view of art and science belonged to the grain of mid-twentieth-century intellectual history, its legacy continues to distort our view of the past, concealing the fluid cultural dynamics that preceded disciplinary formation and specialisation in the late nineteenth century. This relatively uncontroversial point animates Richard C. Sha’s *Imagination and Science in Romanticism*, a densely argued study of Blake, Coleridge, and the Shelleys, alongside an impressive array of philosophical, scientific and medical writing from the period. Sha’s approach is staked on locating the Romantic imagination outside, or before, acts of poetic, literary and artistic creativity, offering it as a more general mode of presentation and possibility taken up and theorised by writers of different kinds, from Kant and Georges Cuvier to Wordsworth, Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday. Sha pursues bold conceptual enlargement by means of some enjoyably robust and provocative argument, revitalising a term that he senses has lately lost its lustre and reassessing the imagination’s shaping role in the history of science.

In broad outline, the argument feels hard to resist. Coleridge keenly defended the value of logic; Faraday supposed scientific objects of knowledge to have ‘relationality’, with reference both to a subject and to other objects. In Book XIII of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes the imagination as the power ‘That is the visible quality and shape / And image of right reason’. That version of the imagination – one modelled on ‘right reason’, and not one prone to wild or transgressive fantasy, or to errors and erring – matters centrally to Sha’s exploration of the territory, especially when giving us a general mapping. Aligning – or reuniting – imaginative capacities with the province of reason and regulation is a recurring theme. The imagination on this view helped to scaffold scepticism and empiricism, became an ally of hypothesising, and was brought into the fold of epistemology. Equally, and working bi-directionally, Sha regards the Romantic imagination to be ‘infused by science’ (25). These claims have consequence for his (highly) conscious self-positioning.

Working against established critical orthodoxies, Sha sees the sustained entanglement of matter and imagination in his chosen examples of Romantic writing as the basis for a different conclusion, namely, that close textual analysis elicits neither the anti-scientific attitude familiar from cliché nor the drive towards purest immaterial exile or escape, but instead models of dynamic matter and interaction in which individual agency is caught up and remade. In a Kantian sense, ‘phenomenality’ trumps ontology. What is out there could usually be modestly bracketed, while feeling had ‘some power to verify’ (19) knowledge claims. Chapter 1 takes up the issue of physical force (electricity, magnetism) in relation to *Prometheus Unbound*, and having worked its way through Davy’s chemistry and Faraday’s conception of experimentation (as a debt to imagination) then moves to analyse love and emotion generally in the poem as similar dynamic processes effecting change, without risk of mechanistic determinism. If interpretation here can be nimble, it can also occasionally produce puzzlement: ‘[for Shelley] so long as one wills what one is being willed by [...] one thus holds onto free will while willingly being reined in by love’ (91).

Chapter 2 (on Blake’s *The Four Zoas* and the nerves) and Chapter 3 (on Coleridge’s *Biographia* and Romantic physiology) develop highly detailed treatments of canonical texts in dialogue with the history of science, the latter with a sustained focus on the imaginative faculty itself. Embedding the *Biographia*’s celebrated definitions of the primary and secondary imagination in the earlier ideas of Kant and Thomas Reid, amongst others, Sha is able again to claim that the goal of imaginative experience for Coleridge is not ontology but ‘insight’ (181) or a ‘postulate that invites action’ (184).

An excellent final chapter on *Frankenstein*, rather more tightly organised, takes the book in a new direction by offering a remarkably acute reading of the metaphor of ‘conception’, linking obstetrics and organic development and embryology to the novel via several highly suggestive contexts, including Erasmus Darwin’s ‘continuum of the imagination from looser to stricter analogies’ (227-28), in order to bring into focus Victor Frankenstein’s over-imaginative weakness as a scientist and the creature’s ‘birth into consciousness’ (224). Again, albeit in strikingly different ways, an imagination bound by physiological laws emerges as a preferential model. Sha brings to all this sustained rational force of his own. All the same, an impression of a slightly uneven study is underlined by the book’s reluctance to gather its various threads into a formal conclusion or epilogue, when in fact reconnecting with the turn to phenomenality established in the substantial introduction would have been welcome. But throughout its broad, dense and sometimes difficult chapters, *Imagination and Science in Romanticism* shifts the terms in which imaginative theory, in literature and science alike, can be understood long before the fragmenting myth of the two cultures.

Peter Garratt
Durham University