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reads
Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry
(Cambridge University Press, 2008)
by Noel Jackson

NOEL JACKSON'S modest opening claim that '[t]his is a book about the literary uses of sensation' cannot mask what is in fact an ambitious, interdisciplinary work, which attempts to situate its aesthetic subject in relation to both contemporary historical and scientific developments. *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* mines, therefore, the same rich seam of literary-scientific inquiry that has produced such recent publications as Alan Richardson's *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2006), and Denise Gigante's *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (2009). "Sensation", Jackson insists, is fundamentally embodied and affective, at once comprising the visceral and the sentimental. In a series of impressively far-reaching readings, the established romantic canon of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley and Keats is brought into contact with a wide range of experimental scientists, natural philosophers, and other miscellaneous thinkers at a time when the lines separating science and letters were far less evidently drawn. Readers of this journal will be gratified to note discussions of John Thelwall and, more briefly, Humphry Davy, both of whose extensive significance for Coleridge's intellectual development remains to be fully explored.

It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to see this volume solely as an attempt to demonstrate how the well-known poetic vocabulary of sensation enjoys a counterpart in the natural sciences. Rather, the scientific colouring that Jackson brings to the term is designed partly as a rebuttal of the charge, long since formulated by various strands of new historicism, that romantic aesthetics demonstrate a consistent exclusion of socio-historical reality, in the name of such "poetic" conceptions of sublimity, "inwardness", subjectivity and so forth. Reference to contemporary science enables Jackson to demonstrate firstly, how so much of that inquiry into the conditions of self-consciousness was bound up with wider social efforts; secondly, how apparently inwardly-focused terms as "sensation" in fact suggest an affective corporeality that transcends the individual; and thirdly, how the general context of experimentation enabled the romantic poets to achieve an acute sense of historical self-consciousness, sufficient as to have anticipated many of new historicism's concerns.

This third claim summarises Jackson's most ambitious intention. Any work that takes *aisthēsis* as a principal term is bound, as the author is all too aware, to confront the sustained interrogation of the aesthetic carried out first by deconstruction (most notably, de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology*), and more latterly new historicism. Both these tendencies, albeit for strikingly different reasons, stress the incommensurability of aesthetic object and the socio-historical reality it might seek to reference. Jackson is frequently quite bold in his dissent from such a position, asserting that, '[w]hile remaining vigilant, therefore, in the face

of a Romantic tendency to conflate aesthetics and politics, this study equally resists a tendency to reject claims for the critical potential of the aesthetic as 'hopeless naiveté' (18). Rather, Jackson's conception of *aisthēsis*-as-sensation permits him a space where self and society, perception and ideation can come into some form of mediation, if not a final resolution.

Proving such a coincidence between the sensuous and the cognitive calls for different approaches in different cases. Regarding Wordsworth, who functions as a crux around which many of the further readings are structured, the issue is an alleged aversion to sensation. Such a claim has been supported through reference to a number of statements in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, and by a series of critics both favourable and hostile to Wordsworth, but Jackson demonstrates clearly its limitations. The profound ambiguity of such terms as 'sense', he contends, enables an engaged yet critical relationship to sensuous experience:

By paying tribute to... moments of vivid sensation both for their intrinsic value as well as for the elevated moods that they will later enable, Wordsworth artfully evades the question of whether these experiences are valuable in themselves or only to the extent that they serve to enable reflection. (206)

The artfulness of such a movement might well, however, ask us to question whether it really does constitute an evasion.

In 'Critical Conditions', the chapter that will most interest many of the readers of this journal, the sensuous aspects of Coleridge's work are similarly stressed, once more against a putatively dominant abstraction. Coleridge's oft-repeated concept of 'the Despotism of the Eye' is given a fascinating and complicating twist with reference to a notebook entry concerning Sara. The entry is revealing both because of, and despite, its unforgivingness:

Sara's... coldness perhaps and paralysis in all *tangible* ideas and sensations—all that forms *Self*—hence...she creates her own self in a field of Vision and Hearing, at a distance by her own ears and eyes—and hence becomes the willing slave of others. —Nothing affects her with more pain or pleasure as it is but only as people will *say it is*. (123)

In a delicate if somewhat abridged reading of "Frost in Midnight", Jackson links Coleridge's frequent optical experiments to the conversation poem sequence with which they were contemporaneous. "Conversation", on this reading, is less a matter of tone or register than it is a means of prospective sociability, of address to an absent other. Coleridge more than almost any writer has suffered the accusation of wilful political occlusion, but here he is made to stand in for the wider claims of the work as a whole. 'Far from effecting an aestheticized flight from politics', Jackson summarises, 'Coleridge's literary experiments seek rather to reconceive the aesthetic as a basis for

imagining profoundly altered conditions for judgment and for communities based on the same.'

If with Wordsworth and Coleridge the sensuous character of experience is to be reinstated, a poet like Keats requires precisely the opposite kind of medicine. This supposedly most deeply "sensuous" of poets—a term that Coleridge pointedly rehabilitated from Milton, and which Arnold then famously employed in relation to Keats—is therefore also a poet of disembodiment. As Jackson convincingly demonstrates, many of Keats' apparently most vivid sense impressions are staged against, or induced by, a residual tendency toward abstraction. 'There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality' (166), to take one of the most revealing citations from Keats' letters, suggests a mutual implication of the sensuous and the figural strikingly prophetic of a poet such as Emily Dickinson. In Jackson's boldest rhetorical move, the scandal of Keats' sensuousness is made to anticipate a pernicious divide within theoretical and sociological approaches to literature as a whole, which either privilege an apolitical voluptuousness naïvely called "pure" form, or denies (in writers such as Pierre Bourdieu and John Guillory) that aesthetic experience might have any role to play in canon formation, beyond an ideological one.

Jackson's fine chapter on Keats showcases most of what is most impressive in his study as a whole. *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* is punctuated by a series of concise summaries of varied intellectual movements, from recent sociological analysis, to the developing field of physiology in the 1770s, and the various philosophies of mind that accompanied it. Jackson is particularly strong when focusing on nascent scientific terminology such as "suggestion", which implies that indeterminate region between the active and passive faculties. We learn that "constantaneousness", a neologism that it is surprising to find Coleridge didn't in fact coin, is 'a quality that combined attributes of consensual and instantaneous behaviour to describe the harmonious union of the mind and body, and the condition for moral behaviour' (146). His exposition of Kames' notion of the "ideal presence", where 'former impressions remain so strong as to be appear present to the mind' (85), suggests a very useful counterpart to the absent addressees of Coleridge's conversation poem sequence.

Jackson is also surely right to claim that the "subjectivity" new historicism finds so suspicious is already historicised through and through, either through Adorno's sense of the negative dialectic that binds a subject to its social reality, or in the consciously self-experimental nature of both poetical and scientific writings on sense perception at the time. While he flirts with the former explanation (allusions to the *Aesthetic Theory* crop up through the text), it is generally speaking the latter optic that wins out. Jackson's breadth of theoretical reference is, however, refreshingly catholic: Coleridge's conception of "common sense" is profitably linked to Gramsci, of all people, and several tantalising links to Marx's theory of the (at once sensuous and non- or supra-sensuous) commodity item are made.

Nonetheless, a number of doubts remain around the specific thrust of Jackson's thesis. In a study that proposes at once to touch upon sensation, sensuousness, sensibility and root sense, perhaps a certain amount of conceptual generalisation or rhetorical forcing is to be expected. Indeed, there are moments when the discussion comes to resemble an amalgam of etymologically-related terms. In the conclusion to the first chapter, 'Powers of Suggestion', for instance, something like sensation is meant to connect a series of figures as potentially disparate as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson, Pater, Irving Babbitt and even Adorno once again. Here the brushstrokes are far too broad to pick out much of the underlying detail.

It is (if such a comment, coming in a journal such as this, does not itself sound like rhetorical forcing) a shame that Jackson did not pay more attention to Coleridge's own related enquiries. For perhaps no writer so thoroughly interrogated the notion of sensation as Coleridge, for whom the term frequently held negative implications. Not only was he at pains in the *Biographia* to desynonymise the "sensuous" and the "sensual", Coleridge also regarded an overemphasis on sensation as the primary error that paradoxically connected the speculative idealism of Berkeley and the empiricism of Locke. Are 'feeling and sensation really equivalent terms?' he asks in a notebook entry, before concluding, 'I think not' (CN 5432). A truly thorough consideration of *aisthēsis* would consider the translatability of the very term "aesthetic" both as sensation or perception. As it stands, Jackson's somewhat perfunctory account of the origin of the term in Baumgarten (who largely envisages the aesthetic in terms of a "science of perception", while an even earlier thinker such as the Abbé Dubos considers it as "sensation") leaves obscure the relation between the two meanings. Just how is it that the felt inwardness is in turn able to make itself felt in the world?

One of the answers to this dilemma should, it would surely seem, be poetry. Yet while both "science" and "sensation"—what Jackson stresses as the 'conjunctive "and"' of his title—are attended to at length, the remaining term, ... *Romantic Poetry*, remains oblique. It is easy to see the rationale for Jackson's concentration upon the scientific and sensational aspects of aesthetic experience: in so doing, he relocates inwardness from a dangerously anti-democratic romantic sense of genius, to a socialised and potentially universal form of self-experimentation. But this only begs the question of what role the poet then plays. Is Wordsworth simply one of so many thinkers of the period who happened to employ terms such as "suggestion", "sensation" and the rest, just as an experimental scientist or moral philosopher might?

If the answer to this question really were yes, we would, if nothing else, have gained a historical insight into the proliferation of certain terms across disciplinary boundaries. But Jackson himself seems to envisage a more profound role for the poetic. Frequent if vague reference is made to 'forms of sense experience unique to the poet and to the encounter with poetry' (1), or 'the poet's activity of making us feel' (146), without any real indication of what

such uniqueness, or such activity might be. It is important to stress again how very welcome is the shift from a conception of inwardness as romantic genius, to a more historicised approach. But surely, if it is the particular relevance of poetry that is to be considered, a closer attention to the workings of verse is required. The issue comes into particular focus in a late section of Jackson's chapter on Coleridge, 'Norm and Form: The Case of Meter', which arranges a series of physiological metaphors for the functioning of verse form without any consideration of how they might imply differing poetic practice. Surely the status of sensation changes, depending on whether the physiological metaphor used to describe verse is (to take only three common examples) a pulse, the circulation of blood, or a brisk stride?

As a consequence of this inattention to the workings of verse, the kinds of dualities between thought and feeling, sensation and ideation, which Jackson's exposition were supposed to overcome, instead remain rooted firmly in place. In a discussion of "Lamia", which in reality sounds less like an exposition of Keats than it does a kind of Nietzscheanism that Nietzsche himself quickly disowned, Jackson contends that 'Lamian sensation and Apollonian thought come into violent conflict' (194). But surely the whole point of the preceding discussion is to demonstrate the ways in which experimental science, or the particular verse writing of a poet such as Keats, would challenge such hard-and-fast distinctions? The reservation is in this case made more acute by the fact that when Jackson does proceed to talk directly about poetry, his analysis (as seen in "Frost in Midnight") is frequently revealing.

Such reservations, it must be said, can be articulated only within the broader conviction that the work on the mutual implication of thought and feeling that Jackson suggests does urgently need to be undertaken. *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* does much to point the direction for future research that considers the affective and embodied basis of cognition, while also suggesting a richly historicised and interdisciplinary proving-ground for such ideas. In the particular case of Coleridge, Jackson's book can be classed alongside the recent work of Rei Terada,¹ as providing a welcome attention to the sensuous aspects of a poet still labouring under the trenchant but misguided verdict of William Hazlitt:

All his notions are floating and unfixed, like what is feigned of the first form of things flying about in search of bodies to attach themselves to; but his ideas seek to avoid all contact with solid substances. Innumerable evanescent thoughts dance before him, and dazzle his sight, like insects in the evening sun.

Abstraction, as Jackson's work proves and Hazlitt's judgment concedes despite itself, will always be in search of a body to attach itself to.²

¹ Rai Terada, 'Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction in Coleridge's Notebooks', *SiR*, vol. 43, 2004, pp.257-281.

² CN V 6454: 'Life can only be compensated by *Life*. It is the deep expression of this that renders the complaining Psalms so affecting to me. If there is a spiritual Life, there must be a spiritual *Analogue* of feeling, a *Sensation* of *Being*. "Restore unto me the *Joy* of the Salvations and uphold me a free Spirit."