

Medicine and the “Manufacturing System”
Embodiment and Imagination in Southey’s Romantic Conservatism

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Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey has traditionally been vulnerable to the charge of political apostasy, and yet recent studies of his political writings emphasize the consistency of his social thought. David M. Craig’s 2007 monograph, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy*, claims “strong continuities” between Southey’s “‘radical’ sympathies of the 1790s” and his “conservatism of the 1820s” (215), which he suggests are mediated by a providentialist religious position akin to Unitarianism (125, 212). David Eastwood’s useful survey in his 1989 article, “Robert Southey and the Intellectual Origins of Romantic Conservatism,” emphasizes the kinship of Southey’s repeated expressions of foreboding at the high social costs of industrialism with the mid-nineteenth-century Tory radicalism of Thomas Carlyle and the Young England movement (315, 331), and identifies his “preoccupation with the well-being of the poor” as a “legacy of Southey’s early Jacobinism” (325).

Whilst not taking issue with these accounts, in this essay I would like to draw attention to a strand in Southeyan social thought which seems to have been overlooked by modern commentators: Southey’s deployment of a specifically medical vocabulary of “stimulants,” “excitement” and “irritability” in his analysis of social problems. Eastwood notes that Southey shared Coleridge’s “organic” view of society (328), but the full implications of this commonplace of nineteenth-century intellectual history have not been adequately explored. Neil Vickers’ 2004 monograph, *Coleridge and the Doctors*, documents Coleridge’s personal and intellectual preoccupation with medical thought without, however, undertaking the critical

reassessment of Coleridgean organicism which attention to its early nineteenth-century medical context arguably makes necessary, an issue broached in my 2007 essay, “Indigestion and Imagination in Coleridge’s Critical Thought.” The present essay extends this approach to Southey’s social and political writing, suggesting that the kind of Brunonian medicine represented by Thomas Beddoes underlies one of the key features of Romantic organicism—its assertion of a relationship of continuity between body and mind in which one cannot simply be mapped onto the other, as materialist determinism would demand. Mike Jay’s recent biography has described Beddoes’s friendship with and treatment of both Southey and Coleridge in their Bristol days.

The significance of this medical context for an understanding of Southey’s Romantic conservatism can be illustrated by the lengthy footnote included in the version of Southey’s well-known essay on the manufacturing system which appears in the 1832 collection, *Essays, Moral and Political*. Significantly expanded from the three line footnote which appears in the equivalent place in the version published in 1812 in the *Quarterly Review* (355 fn), this four-page note summarizes arguments from Dr Jarrold’s *Dissertations on Man* to support the claim that the working classes reproduce more quickly than the classes above them, the key reason for which Southey identifies as the greater mental demands life makes on the upper classes, since “the more the mind is exerted, the more the body suffers” (152 fn). In the context of the anti-Malthusian argument presented in the essay, this invocation of a dualistic relationship in which the development of the mind uses up the constitutional resources required to nourish “animal passion” (152 fn) constitutes a providentialist modification of Malthus’s famous claim that “vice and misery” are the only effective controls on population growth; coupled with Southey’s advocacy of a national education system at the end of the essay, it suggests that better education would naturally lead to a decline in population growth because it would constitute a diversion of the bodily vitality which sexual activity requires.

Southey's criticism of Malthus, then, invokes a medical model in which the body's vital energy is subject to a limited economy in which high expenditure on one bodily function leads to inactivity, or even atrophy, in other functions. This economic model of the body is typical of Brunonian medicine, named after the eighteenth-century doctor John Brown ("Bruno" in Latin), who claimed to have effected a Newtonian revolution in medical diagnosis (Brown 1: 4) through his discovery that all disease resulted from over-stimulation or under-stimulation of the body (1:110-16), so that health consisted in a regulated expenditure of a vaguely defined vital "force" or "fluid" (2: 138-39). Southey's claim that intellect is necessarily at odds with sexuality depends on a neurological conception of mental life, as activity in the physical organ of the brain, which can be paralleled in the Brunonian physician Alexander Crichton's influential 1798 *Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement*, where hallucinations are explained as the product of an overstimulated condition of the brain, brought on by excessive thinking and causing malfunction of other bodily organs, such as the stomach, by its diversion of the blood supply (2: 29-39). It is important to emphasize, however, that Southey is not implying a purely materialist account of the mind: he quotes Jarrold to establish the influence of the mind over the body, not vice versa. As Neil Vickers has noted, this willingness to concede relative autonomy to the mind is characteristic of the "medical mentalism" of Southey's friend Thomas Beddoes, as opposed to the monist medical theory of Erasmus Darwin (39-43), something my 2007 essay "Erasmus Darwin and the Poetics of William Wordsworth" argues is crucial to understanding Wordsworth's use of Brunonian ideas .

Southey's response to Malthus offers a liberal recuperation of the Malthusian emphasis on "moral restraint" as an act of will by characterising sexual abstinence as the bodily correlative of an increased level of education. This Southeyan cultural politics could be seen as an early version of the strategy of naturalisation which Barthes argues in *Mythologies* is characteristic of bourgeois ideology (143). Medical thought in the Romantic period particularly lends itself to the Southeyan naturalisation of the ideological because it does not recognise a clear boundary

between mental and physical illness. The influential medical theory presented in Erasmus Darwin's 1794 treatise *Zoonomia*, for example, explains all bodily processes in terms of sympathetic associations of nervous fibres (1: 30), consistent with his thoroughly materialist view that these nervous fibrillations actually constitute the mental conceptions philosophers call "ideas" (1: 14-18).

As is made clear in *Sir Thomas More: or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, much of Southey's hostility to the "manufacturing system" originated in his Malthusian analysis that factories encouraged working-class population growth which tended to reduce the rate of wages, and so could not ultimately be sustained (1:177), not an unreasonable concern given the regular crises of overproduction which beset British industry in the first half of the nineteenth century. A similar preoccupation with the connection between manufacturing and population growth can be seen to underlie the emphasis by 1830s observers such as Peter Gaskell, on the premature sexualization of the industrial workforce through overheated working conditions and lack of parental supervision (62-69). Southey's social analysis, however, is not a purely rationalist or materialist one, and it is this which accounts for the difficulty of locating his position in terms of our present-day political categories. Like later Tory radicals such as Carlyle and the Tractarians, Southey locates much human motivation in the realm of the irrational, something which the 1812 essay on the manufacturing system reflects in its emphasis on the role played by local associations in maintaining pre-industrial social relationships (337-338) and its satire on Adam Smith's rationalistic definition of economic man (337).

Southey's use of the term "manufacturing system" in the essay connotes the kind of perverse fascination which nineteenth-century writers such as Charles Mackay claimed was characteristic of economic bubbles (49). Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had attributed the excessively abstract schemes of French revolutionary reformers to exactly this kind of imaginative infatuation with "system," (230) an argument which Burke seems to have derived

from critiques of Hume's scepticism by Common Sense philosophers such as Thomas Reid and James Beattie (Reid 235, 472; Beattie 395-99). For Southey, as we shall see, the very impoverishment of sensory experience intrinsic to the systematized environment of the factory is responsible for the fascination with political systems shown by working-class radicals. Southey's essay uses the vocabulary of Brunonian medicine to suggest that radicalism is fundamentally a perverse phenomenon, in that its political abstractions exacerbate factory conditions of sensory deprivation.

Southey invokes a diagnosis in which working-class radicalism at once counteracts and, at a deeper level, is symptomatic of the unhealthy nature of factory work in a way which draws on Brunonian accounts of the nature of disease as a manifestation of the homeostatic process regulating the expenditure of vital energy. Southey's naturalistic conception of radicalism as simply one aspect of the factory's total mental and physical environment ensures that his social critique, despite its consistent emphasis on the exploitative nature of factories, remains distanced from a working-class political perspective. Southey's paternalistic social naturalism anticipates the influential mid nineteenth-century criticisms of factories by Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in which factory work is similarly characterized as productive of a disturbed mental state, of which, it is implied, working-class political demands and attitudes must be understood as symptoms. In Dickens's *Hard Times*, for example, the repeated characterization of factory steam-engines as "melancholy-mad elephants" (65, 107) suggests the obsessively repetitive groove in which the thoughts of the factory workers run. Likewise, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "The Cry of the Children," through its repetition of the word "turning" (ll. 77-88), portrays factory children as unable to conceptualize or perceive anything beyond the physically and emotionally barren environment of the factory.

Southey's characteristically bourgeois combination of sympathy for factory-workers with a refusal to endorse working-class political demands expresses a certain ambiguity in the notion of

“system” in his thought. For Southey, paradoxically, the potentially unhealthy fascination which system exerts over the imagination is a precondition for civilization itself. A comment in the *History of Brazil*, illustrates Southey’s pragmatic acceptance of the role of “system” in human societies:

When man has been degraded to the savage state, it is only by priestcraft that he has ever been reclaimed. When America was discovered, the civilization of its different nations was precisely in proportion to the degree of power and respectability which their priests possessed; and this authority of the priesthood was not the consequence of an improved state of society, but the cause of it. As long as the Priest continues a mere juggler, the people continue Savages; his triumph is but the ascendancy of vulgar cunning over bodily strength, and though he is feared he is not respected. But when a more commanding spirit arises, who, connecting old fables and dimly remembered truths with the devices of his own imagination, lays the foundation of a mythological system, from that moment the improvement of his tribe begins. (1: 251)

Southey’s argument that civilization arises from the authority exerted by a “mythological system” on the populace recalls Shelley’s identification of the origins of society with “poetry” in *The Defence of Poetry*, and presumably Southey, like Shelley, would have attributed this civilizing effect to poetic metaphor’s ability to marshall the “bewildered armies of ... [men’s] thoughts” (688) and so impart structure to the delirium of uncontrolled association. Southey, it should be noted, characterizes the elaboration of “mythological system” as an imaginative re-embodiment of “dimly remembered truths,” suggesting that he has in mind a common eighteenth-century conception of mythology as corruption or symbolic representation of revealed truth. This renders Southey’s conception of the relationship between poetic metaphor and society more conservative than Shelley’s model of the poet’s seemingly *ex nihilo* creation of social order, making it resemble the poetics of Tractarians such as John Keble, for whom poetic

metaphor ultimately depended on the revealed authority of biblical typology (169-70). Southey's sense that mythology might be the expression of a social system instituted by a "commanding spirit," however, harbours a potential for radicalism comparable to Carlyle's claim, in *Heroes and Hero-worship*, that a social belief system must ultimately derive from the worldview of a "hero" such as Odin (258-59), or, as Carlyle suggests in his *History of the French Revolution*, Napoleon (606-7).

Southey's claim that social systems originate in the thinking of "commanding spirits" recalls Coleridge's discussion in the *Biographia Literaria* of the Napoleonic "commanding genius" who "in times of tumult" is "destined to come forth as the shaping spirit of Ruin, to destroy the wisdom of ages in order to substitute the fancies of a day, and to change kings and kingdoms, as the wind shifts and shapes the clouds" (1: 33). Significantly, in view of Southey's references in the essay to the dangerous "irritability" of factory workers, Coleridge's account of the "commanding genius" is introduced in the context of a discussion of the "irritability" popularly attributed to men of genius, a view he argues against in the case of the absolute genius such as Shakespeare on the grounds that such men are content with viewing the world through the medium of their own imagination. Men of commanding genius, however, lack this vividness of imagination and so "must impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness and individuality" (1.32).

For Coleridge, men of commanding genius are goaded into practical achievements by the "irritability," or drive for sensory and social fulfilment, brought about by their failure of imagination. A similar view seems to underlie Carlyle's characterization in *Past and Present* of the English as a "dumb people" in whom "the element of Shakespearean melody does lie imprisoned in their nature; reduced to unfold itself in mere Cotton-mills, Constitutional Governments, and such like" (163). Carlyle suggests that the very lack of artistic expression

among the English is responsible for the achievements of industrialization, in which “*their* Epic poem is written on the Earth’s surface” (163). Carlyle’s description of the “captains of industry” as commanding geniuses who are the natural leaders of society (278-283) echoes the paean to Arkwright as the creator of the “Factory System” offered in *The Philosophy of Manufactures*, Andrew Ure’s 1835 counterblast to Southey’s writings on industrialism. For Ure, Arkwright’s major achievement lay not in his mechanical inventions but in the way he had made his workforce “renounce their desultory habits of work, and ... identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton” (15). But whilst Ure regards such subordination of the self to an impersonal system as unproblematic, and indeed morally beneficial (415-17), for Southey this is precisely what makes the factory system productive of the social evil of working-class radicalism.

Southey’s ambivalence about the imaginative fascination of the systems created by commanding geniuses is reflected in the passage quoted above from the *History of Brazil* by his use of the word “priestcraft.” Southey intensely disliked Roman Catholicism, and “priestcraft” was a word particularly associated with protestant polemics against “Romanism.” His use of the word carries the implication that the mythological systems created by pagan “priests” are means at once of civilization and of moral corruption.

A similar ambivalence can be found in Southey’s writings about Methodism, where the systematic character impressed upon Methodist practices by its founder, John Wesley, is identified as responsible at once for Methodism’s success and for the harmful physical and mental effects on its devotees, as displayed in the convulsions of the Methodist conversion experience. Southey understands the hysterical fervour of Methodist belief in Brunonian medical terms, as a symptom of the nervous irritability induced by the systematic nature of Methodist practice. As Tim Fulford has pointed out in his 2004 article “Radical Medicine and Romantic Politics,” for Southey Wesley’s religious doctrine of conversion belonged very much to the same

context as his interest in electrical healing (17), a parallel which Southey makes explicit in the *Life of Wesley* when he compares the psychological crisis of Methodist conversion, and its accompanying physical manifestations, with the therapeutic crisis induced in Mesmerist medical treatment (132). Southey's analyses of the psychology of Methodism and the psychology of radicalism are closely akin, in that both are characterized in medical terms as addictively self-reinforcing syndromes resulting from an irritable nervous condition induced by overstimulation.

Southey's comparison, in the *Life of Wesley*, of Wesley's talents as an organiser to those of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits (216), makes clear his view of Methodism as a totalizing religious system akin to Roman Catholicism in its exploitation of human sensory organization for its support. As is illustrated by Hogarth's well-known print "Enthusiasm Delineated" (depicting a Methodist preacher in full flow whose wig has slipped, revealing a Jesuit tonsure) the view that Methodism, with its emotive appeal to the working classes, was in some way continuous with Roman Catholicism was common in the eighteenth century. David Hume's essay "On Superstition and Fanaticism" is an expression of this assumption that Catholicism (strongly connoted for eighteenth-century readers by the word "superstition") and other forms of religious extremism are kindred psychological phenomena. Hume finds Catholic "superstition" considerably more of a threat to the Church Establishment than Protestant "fanaticism," because of the "forms, ceremonies, and traditions" it involves (148-49). Hume's argument draws on his psychological observation in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that sensory imagery, such as painting, tends artificially to perpetuate a vividness of belief which naturally dissipates when it does not have this kind of sensory support, an observation which he links to the role that ceremonies play in Roman Catholicism (99-100).

For Hume, it is the systematic nature of Catholicism's appeal to imagery which renders self-perpetuating the morbid religious hysteria cultivated by the Counter-Reformation. Southey's writings about Methodism invoke a similar explanation for the unhealthily persistent character of

Methodist religious excitement, identifying Methodist religious system as the instrument of its perpetuation. Southey, however, generalizes Hume's analysis, locating the neuropsychological mechanism responsible for the unnatural and mentally debilitating prolongation of Methodist enthusiasm in Methodist print culture and organizational structures, rather than specifically in religious imagery. It is this combination of sociological analysis and Brunonian medical diagnosis that makes Southey's account of Methodism bear important similarities to the analysis of working-class radicalism in his essay on the factory system.

Southey's 1803 article on Methodism in the *Annual Review* displays a preoccupation with the effects of mass print culture which anticipates his emphasis, in the essay on the factory system, on the role played by radical pamphleteering. Southey notes, perhaps slightly enviously, that the print-runs of official Methodist publications are so high that the author's percentage of the profits is expressed as "a hundred copies out of every thousand" (209). Southey also highlights the control of the Methodist Conference over distribution, with only licensed publications being allowed to be sold through Methodist channels, and the practice of advertising books from the pulpit (208-9). Southey's account implicitly links the notorious bodily spasms and convulsions which accompanied Methodist conversion experiences with systematic exposure to the Methodist media empire represented by the combination of print, pulpit and mass meeting.

In a particularly striking passage of the article, which Leigh Hunt later singles out for praise in an *Examiner* essay on Methodism as "truly acute and philosophical" (557 fn), Southey condemns the Methodist practice of confession to small bands of fellow believers. For Southey, the fact that these bands consist of members of the same sex shows that the sins being confessed are predominantly sexual in nature and he argues that such confession represents a peculiarly perverse form of group masturbation. Confession for Southey represents a systematization or media representation of sexuality which ends up by exacerbating it: the very act of verbalizing sexual temptation before others, with the shame that accompanies it, ensures that sexual desires

are reinforced and will again have to be confessed, in a vicious circle which ends up entirely corrupting the mind (212). For Southey, the Methodist practice of group confession is even worse in this respect than Catholic confession to a priest.

Southey's analysis of confession echoes anxieties about the effects of masturbation, whose evils, as Thomas Laqueur has shown, were thought to consist not in physical acts but in the employment of the imagination to reinforce sexual ideas. Since masturbation made sexual ideas independent of any particular bodily situation, the sexuality of the masturbator was in danger of running rampant in a self-reinforcing spiral of addiction which drained the body of vitality. As we shall see, very similar anxieties were expressed about the debilitating effects of novel-reading. Such anxieties were easily assimilated to the model of bodily economy on which Brunonianism was based, although in some cases they predate its formulation as a medical doctrine. The neural overstimulation inherent in masturbation monopolizes vital energy, starving other organs of vitality in very much the same way as any other Brunonian disease of overstimulation.

Southey's *Life of Wesley* elaborates the account of Methodism as a kind of organized perversity whose attraction to its working-class adherents is the strong stimulation of the nervous system which it offers, but which ends up by destroying their mental and physical health by inducing a condition of addictive overstimulation. Southey emphasizes particularly the role played in Methodism by the breaks with routine represented by watch-night services and love-feasts (348). For Southey, this shows that Methodist belief can only be kept up by a perpetual nervous overstimulation which accounts for the hysterical character of the Methodist conversion experience (509).

Despite this naturalistic view of Methodism as a wasting neurological disorder akin to masturbation, Southey in the *Colloquies* characterizes Whitefield and Wesley as "chosen

instruments of Providence” for the revival of the Church of England (1: 383), and calls for a body of “Church-Methodists” who would “take upon themselves some of those duties which, in large towns and thickly-peopled districts, it is impossible for the parochial clergy to perform (1: 384-85). Arguably, this demand for a “Church-Methodism” was met by the Tractarian movement, part of whose agenda was a revival of the parish as a functioning social unit. Southey’s apparent inconsistency in his attitude to “Methodist” forms of enthusiastic religious commitment can be explained by the pragmatic acceptance of the role of “system” in human society which was noted earlier.

Southey’s acknowledgement that “system” can be beneficial, in that it is productive of social order, as well as hazardous, reflects the ambiguity of the notion of system in the Brunonian medical context represented by Darwin and Beddoes, in which any distinction between “system” as an intellectual and an organic entity tends to be blurred by the assumption that particularly vivid ideas can have direct physical effects. From this Brunonian viewpoint, the notion of “system” encapsulates the ambivalence of Southeyan cultural politics. “System” is at once potentially delusory, a morbid obsession or mania in which the imagination goes round in circles, and the very thing which a doctor of the body politic might seek to restore to health through giving a therapeutic direction to the imagination. The imagination is at once the disease and the cure, in a way which reflects Brunonian medical thought, in which “stimulants” such as opium and alcohol are simultaneously recognised as potentially addictive and as necessary remedies (Darwin 2: 659). “System” represents the embodied condition of imagination, in which a feverish over-investment in particular ideas results from a hypochondriac failure of living interchange with the environment. The influence of this conception of the embodied imagination can be traced throughout Southey’s account of the effects of factory life.

Southey’s denunciation of the “manufacturing system,” as represented by his 1812 *Quarterly Review* article, remains one of the most famous examples of Romantic political critique. One of

its more striking aspects is Southey's deployment of medical references to characterise the manufacturing system as a "moral pestilence": starting with a citation of the comparative anatomist John Hunter (338), Southey draws an analogy between the insanitary physical conditions of factory work, and its unhealthy effect on the mind. Deprivation of intellectual stimulation in the repetitive environment of the factory, Southey suggests, prepares factory workers for the mental "contagion" of political radicalism in a similar way to that in which lack of food makes soldiers more liable to succumb to disease in the crowded environment of the camp (342). When the mental constitution has been weakened in this way, the abstract speculations of political theorists produce a kind of "inebriation" to which workers become addicted, so that their existence becomes a state of permanent, and dangerous, "querulous discontent" (353). Luckily, Southey argues, there is a "vaccination" at hand, in the form of "Dr Bell's" Madras system of monitorial education, whose cheapness will enable a national system of education to be rolled out (353).

In his article "Blessed Bane," Tim Fulford has explored the role played by references to vaccination in Southey's 1825 poem *The Tale of Paraguay*, in a way that sheds light on the implications of Southey's characterisation of working-class education as vaccination. In the context of the disease metaphors that were often associated with slavery in abolitionist rhetoric (para 27), Fulford argues, the notion of vaccination offers for Southey a way of claiming potentially beneficial effects for the paternalist conception of colonial authority which he is engaged in promoting (para 30). A similar point could be made about Southey's paternalist advocacy of a national system of education, which reflects an almost Marxian sense of the internal contradictions of capitalism. On the one hand, the spread of radicalism amongst factory-workers makes education a necessity for the maintenance of the factory system. On the other hand, as we have already seen, Southey thought that a better level of education amongst workers would naturally tend to divert the vital energy that went into procreation, and so presumably lead to an increase in wages owing to reduction in workforce numbers, a liberal version of

Malthusianism which was explicitly set out in an 1814 *Quarterly Review* article “On Improving the Condition of the Poor” (Waterman 170). As Fulford notes, Southey drew a parallel between colonial slavery and the factory system as both, in Southey’s terms, manifestations of “cold-hearted Commerce” (paras 26-27), and in this context political radicalism can be seen as equivalent to the smallpox which, Fulford observes, Southey characterises as “a disease of colonial guilt and native revenge” (para 28). The strategy of naturalisation which, as Fulford argues, “allows Southey to be both revengeful and self-righteous because it lets him seem to be invoking a *natural* retribution rather than directly justifying human acts of vengeance” (para 29) is even more strikingly apparent in Southey’s account of the factory system, where political radicalism is characterised as a quasi-physical disease which has the potential to spread to society as a whole. The Brunonian medical vocabulary which Southey deploys in the article lends itself to this naturalisation of the political, owing to its categorization of everything that can act upon the body as a “stimulant” (Brown 1: 71-76), implying a monist perspective in which mental and physical causes of illness are radically of the same nature.

For Southey, workers in factories succumb to political radicalism because they have a physical need for “excitement” (339-40) owing to the unstimulating nature of their working environment. In this way, Southey’s point is closely akin to Wordsworth’s argument in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that popular literature is corrupted by sensationalism owing to the “accumulation of men in cities” (1: 129), where the monotony of the environment produces a “craving” for “outrageous stimulation” (1: 129-31). For Southey, political radicalism is a stimulant of this kind, equivalent to the opium to which factory workers were known to resort at the end of a long week (Bewell 273-74).

Southey’s use of medical vocabulary in the article is far from being merely metaphorical. His comparison of the effects of political speculation to “that which novel-reading produces upon girls” (353) invokes a common early nineteenth-century anxiety about neurological degeneration

resulting from the excessive nervous stimulation induced by emotionally gripping novels, an anxiety closely akin to current worries about a reduction in attention span caused by heavy internet use. Southey's reference to "girls" feminizes the factory-workers, invoking the Brunonian medical idea that the onset of menstruation rendered neural overstimulation a particular danger for young women as it directed blood and its accompanying vital force away from the brain to the reproductive organs (Shuttleworth 77-83); Southey seems to be suggesting that the repetitive manual work of the factory similarly diverts blood away from workers' brains and makes them predisposed to the neural morbidity induced by the unusual stimulus of the radical pamphlet. As Richard Payne Knight argues in his 1806 *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, the surfeit of stimulation offered by novel-reading leads to a condition in which the mind is incapable of rationally assimilating what is read:

The habit, which young persons get, of reading merely for events, without any attention to language, thought, or sentiment, so completely unnerves all the powers of application, that their minds become incapable of learning, or retaining any thing... By the vicious indulgence of a prurient appetite, the mind, like the body, may be reduced to a state of atrophy; in which, knowledge, like food, may pass through it, without adding either to its strength, its bulk, or its beauty... Besides this atrophy, arising from the habit of reading without attention, there is likewise a sort of sickly sensibility of mind, nourished, if not engendered, by compositions of this kind; which is equally adverse to the acquisition of all useful knowledge and sound morality... Like the theories of the philosophical politician, or the calculations of the abstract mathematician, the benevolence of persons afflicted with this eccentric sort of sensibility, is too refined for the ordinary occurrences of life, which are either too insipid to attract their observation, or too coarse to merit their attention (450-52)

Knight's insistent medical vocabulary parallels the mental process of assimilating what is read to the physical process of digesting food, and significantly, in the context of Southey's comparison of factory workers' reading of radical political tracts to novel-reading, he echoes Burke in classing the novel-reader's ineffectual response to real life with the impracticality of political theorists and statisticians. A similar linkage of nervous overstimulation with political radicalism can be found in *The Friend*'s denunciation of the unconnected sentences of the "Anglo-Gallican" style, whose encouragement of "the habit of receiving pleasure without any exertion of thought, by the mere excitement of curiosity and sensibility" is ranked by Coleridge with "the worst effects of novel-reading" in the way it leaves the mind "flat and exhausted" (2: 150-51). Both novel-reading and radical political rant are characterized as the opposite of that active and methodical reflection whose role in forging the neurological and associative connections necessary for knowledge acquisition was emphasized by Romantic educational theorists such as John Abercrombie (82-83) and Dugald Stewart (4: 225-26).

Southey is very consistent in applying the notion of a "moral pestilence" to the manufacturing system in his later work *Sir Thomas More: or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, where the reference to John Hunter featured in the *Quarterly Review* article appears again (1: 50). Thomas More, whose ghost is one of the participants in these dialogues, develops the medical comparison in an elaborate description of manufacturing as "a wen, a fungous excrescence from the body politic: the growth might have been checked if the consequences had been apprehended in time; but now it has acquired such bulk, its nerves have branched so widely, and the vessels of the tumour are inosculated into some of the principal veins and arteries of the natural system, that to remove it by absorption is impossible, and excision would be fatal" (1: 171). Manufacturing is characterised as a cancerous tumour which has become so integrated into the bodily economy that it can't be removed without killing the patient. Earlier on in *Colloquies*, Southey draws attention to the social threat posed by the "plague of diseased opinions"

propagated by the press, as “men acquire a frightful and not less monstrous power when they are in a state of moral insanity, and break loose from their social and religious obligations” (1: 31). In the context of the *Colloquies*, references to “the plague of diseased opinions” are followed by a discussion of epidemiology (1: 47-60), in which Southey draws attention to the likelihood of the spread in Britain of some contagious disease akin to the “yellow fever” (1: 53-54) found in America and Portugal, given the new vectors of communication and overcrowded living conditions created by the industrial age. Southey’s juxtaposition of physical epidemic with the “moral pestilence” (1: 50, 56) of radicalism and class conflict afflicting Britain indicates that for him there is little distinction between bodily and mental health, which are both threatened by industrialism. From the viewpoint of Romantic-period medicine, the linkage Southey establishes between moral and physical “contagion” is not just an analogy. In Charles Kingsley’s 1853 novel *Two Years Ago*, the climax of whose plot is an epidemic of cholera, it is suggested that the ability of one of the protagonists to resist infection whilst ministering to the sick is due to the strength of his religious faith, which preserves him from the panic which causes others to succumb to the disease (305-06, 308-10). In this context, “moral” and “physical” contagion are closely akin, if not actually the same thing. Southey’s letters show that he shared Kingsley’s view of contagion as a process in which “moral influence” (4: 291) played a role.

The medical underpinnings of Southey’s characterization of the attractions of political radicalism for factory workers help to reveal the complexity of his political position. Southey is dismissive of workers’ political radicalism as a mere symptom of the conditions created by the “manufacturing system,” but his naturalistic view of radicalism as originating in a craving for “excitement” then puts the onus on the manufacturers to change conditions for their workers so that radicalism is not the only outlet for this physical need. It is this ambiguity in his position which makes him politically akin to the mid-nineteenth century “Tory radicalism” of thinkers such as Carlyle and the Tractarians in the 1840s. The medical naturalism which all these thinkers share has implications which are conservative on the one hand, in that social relationships are

grounded in nature, or in the psychosomatic needs of the human organism, but also profoundly sceptical, in the sense that current social forms are viewed as merely one expression of an underlying psychosomatic dynamic, and possibly a morbid one at that.

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