

an authoritative account of this particular variant of alternative modernities.

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**Sharon Ruston,** *Shelley and vitality*,  
Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan in association  
with Arts and Humanities Research Board, 2005,  
pp. xiii, 229, £45.00 (hardback 1-4039-1824-4).

The relatively healthy invasion of medical history by English literature scholars continues unabated. Sharon Ruston's placing of Shelley's writings square in the Abernethy/Lawrence debate is an eye-opening contribution to this movement. Keats's association with medicine (unfortunately the victim of some scholarly ill treatment) is well known. It was a revelation to me that Shelley had decided to become a surgeon and that between 1811–14 he moved within the St Bartholomew's medical community. That Shelley had an interest in science has long been recognized. Before 1811, Shelley had been at Oxford (from where he was expelled). In his rooms at the University he had an array of devices including an electrical machine, an air pump and a microscope. Shelley's life-long reading in medical matters has usually been put down to his concerns about his own health. Ruston's achievement is to show how deeply Shelley was interested in vitality questions for poetical and political reasons besides the more mundane one of obtaining a surgical education. Shelley turned to medicine after leaving Oxford. In London, he moved in with his cousin, John Grove, a surgeon, and reported "[I am] firm in my resolve to study surgery" (p. 77). Over a period of about a year Shelley attended John Abernethy's anatomy class where William Lawrence was demonstrator. As is familiar to historians of science, in 1817 an acrimonious debate broke out between Abernethy and Lawrence, ostensibly about the nature of life. It was quite apparent to all, however, that the real issues were deep political and religious questions. Lawrence was soon perceived by the conservative

establishment to be a subversive, Francophile atheist. Not surprisingly, the radical young Shelley warmed to Lawrence's views. The aspiring poet and the surgeon got to know each other partly through William Godwin, whom Shelley met in 1812. Not surprisingly too Shelley immersed himself deeply in Humphry Davy's chemical writings. Although it is not the point of her volume, Ruston's text makes clear how Davy was one of the creators of something, chemistry, whose purpose in his own hands was quite alien to its modern descendent. Chemistry was not a demarcated discipline for Davy (or, perhaps, not for the younger Davy) but one means to investigate life, mind, matter and God (why else did he inhale nitrous oxide?). It is idle but interesting to speculate whether like Lawrence, Coleridge and Davy, Shelley would have become a conservative had he lived to old age.

Ruston's first three chapters use the Abernethy/Lawrence debate as a nucleus on which to build a detailed account of Shelley's shifting views and his musings on life and Life. The secondary literature in the history of science on the debate is very sophisticated and Ruston, thankfully, has used it to full effect showing how controversies about vitality in this period were part of the common context and not confined within disciplinary boundaries. Her following chapters are detailed exegeses of Shelley's poems, notably *Prometheus unbound*. Quite rightly she notes that Shelley's use of words such as "powers" and "excite" are "evocative" of the vitality debate (p. 105). That Shelley's poems are permeated at some level by the vitality issue seems indisputable and that specific references can be identified is also beyond question. But the literary purist will find Ruston destroying her case by embarrassing over-reading. To say that when Shelley writes of "all sustaining air" or the "sweet air that sustained me" he is "responding to the work of scientists" is bathos indeed. Can Shelley's reference to "life-blood" have been written "as though in agreement with Hunter's theory of the blood as the vital principle" (p. 118)? What's Hunter to him (or he to Hunter)? This smacks too much of a mirror image of that genre in which doctors

found medical insights in works of literary genius (I never did discover what Hamlet's madness *really* was).

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**George S Rousseau,** *Nervous acts: essays on literature, culture, and sensibility*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. xii, 395, £17.99 (paperback 1-4039-3454-1).

By any standard this is an unusual collection of essays. Reproducing, in part, eight articles first published between 1969 and 1993, it stands as testimony not only to the importance of discourses on the nerves in medicine and literature, but also to the acknowledged importance of George S Rousseau as an historian of the nervous system. The essays' combined effect is to demonstrate how, from the beginnings of neurology in the 1660s, theories of the nerves fed into and nurtured wider discourses on social and emotional experience. This book was produced primarily to provide greater availability to students of several of Rousseau's articles that have deservedly become core reading in the humanities. These include 'Science and the discovery of the imagination' (1969), 'Pineapples, pregnancy, pica and *Peregrine Pickle*' (1972), and 'Nerves, spirits and fibres: towards defining the origins of sensibility' (1975). Each of these articles is preceded by a discussion of its place in Rousseau's own intellectual evolution, and in terms of its contemporary originality and reception. Of his widely-read 'Nerves, spirits and fibres', for instance, Rousseau observes that "The essay was frequently cited during the first five years after its publication. However, it came into its own in the 1990s", and has been cited "over one hundred" times since the year 2000 (p. 159).

As this statistic demonstrates, Rousseau is conscious of the influence of his writings on interdisciplinary studies since the 1970s. Thus the author's introduction leads the reader

through the course of his own biographical and intellectual development. We learn how Rousseau was first inspired in graduate school by a passage about neurology in John Evelyn's *History of religion*, and had subsequently "stumbled" and "fumbled" through a variety of disparate texts in his struggle to define a new theoretical territory that could encompass both science and the humanities. The interdisciplinary student was, at that stage, something of a misfit: "although mesmerized by the sciences, especially anatomy and astronomy, I was of the party of the humanists . . . I had briefly dipped into medicine, especially philosophical writing about the body, healing and suffering, and even contemplated defecting to medical school and becoming a brain surgeon" (p. 6). Yet it was not mere intellectual voraciousness that led Rousseau towards his goal: he had spent his youth training as a concert pianist, serious application to which "made me aware at that young age that instrumental virtuosity depended on the muscles, ligaments, tendons, arms, shoulders, neck—the whole anatomical maze of the upper torso", and subsequently the importance of the "perfect balance of the whole human nervous system" (p. 7).

Fuelled by such graphic awareness of the need to understand the history of the nerves, and yet blighted by circumstance—"set the dials to approximately 1965 or 1970 in the Anglo-Saxon world, and the picture was unclear: a blank slate waiting to be framed" (p. 8)—Rousseau's search for connections between discourses of the body, memory and the imagination stretches from the early modern period, when people had little to say about the nerves (though their medieval counterparts did), through to the nervous ubiquity of eighteenth-century culture. This shift reflected, amongst other things, the rise of a new morality which equated nerves and communal sensitivity, a morality which (as other historians have subsequently noted) was skewed by assumptions of class and gender.

Where this book succeeds is in its depiction of the growth of a nervous culture, one linguistically charged and populated by "nerve doctors", in which neurophysiology came to account for