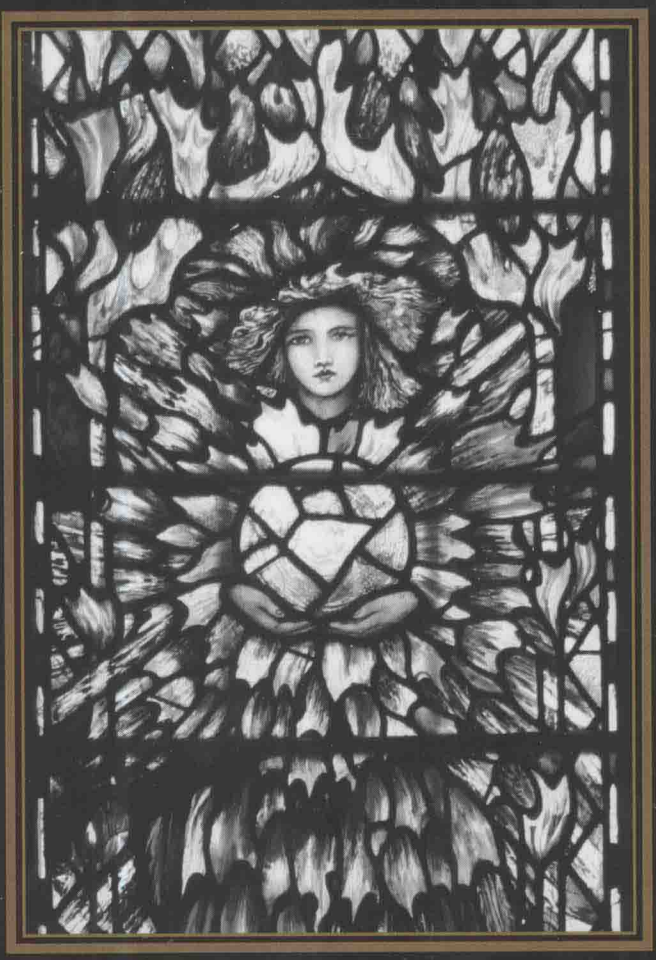
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

ASHGATE

Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens



EDITED BY
GAVIN HOPPS AND JANE STABLER

Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens

Edited by

GAVIN HOPPS
University of St Andrews, UK

and

JANE STABLER
University of St Andrews, UK

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401–4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Romanticism and religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens. – (The nineteenth century series)
1. Romanticism – Religious aspects – Christianity 2. English poetry – 18th century – History and criticism 3. English poetry – 19th century – History and criticism 4. Religion in literature
I. Hopps, Gavin II. Stabler, Jane
821.7'093823

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Romanticism and religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens / edited by Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler.
p. cm. – (The nineteenth century series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–7546–5570–9 (alk. paper)
1. Religion and literature – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
2. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism. 3. Romanticism – Great Britain. 4. English literature – 18th century – History and criticism.
5. Religion and literature – Great Britain – History – 18th century. 6. Religious tolerance in literature.
I. Hopps, Gavin. II. Stabler, Jane. III. Series: Nineteenth century (Aldershot, England)
PR468.R44R66 2006
820.9'145–dc22 2005033639

ISBN–10: 0–7546–5570–9
ISBN–13: 978–0–7546–5570–1

Typeset by Pat FitzGerald

Printed and bound by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

List of Contributors

Arthur Bradley is a Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University. He has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century religion, philosophy and literature and is the author of *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (Routledge, 2004). He is currently working on a book about the relationship between religion and technology in modern European philosophy from Marx to Derrida.

Edward Burns works on Shakespearean drama and libertarian poetry. He is the editor of the Arden Shakespeare *King Henry VI* and a collection of essays, *Reading Rochester* (1995). He has also authored *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage* (1990) and the Writers and Their Work volume on *Richard III* (2001).

Peter Cochran is the editor of the Newstead Abbey Byron Society Review. He has lectured on Byron in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Newstead, Glasgow, Liverpool, Versailles, Salzburg, Yerevan and New York, and published numerous articles on the poet. He is author of the Byron entry in the *New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, and of the entries on J.C. Hobhouse and E.J. Trelawny for the new *Dictionary of National Biography*. He has just published his edition of Michael Rees's translation of Teresa Guiccioli's *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*.

Richard Cronin is a Professor of English Literature at the University of Glasgow. His most recent book is *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824–1840* (Palgrave, 2002).

Gavin Hopps is Academic Fellow in the School of Divinity, University of St Andrews. His forthcoming publications include: *Romantic Invocations* and *Morrissey: The Pageant of His Bleeding Heart*.

Tony Howe teaches English at St Anne's College, Oxford. He has research interests across eighteenth-century and Romantic literature and is currently writing a book about Byron and poetry.

Christine Kenyon Jones is a Research Fellow in the Department of English at King's College London. She has written extensively on Byron, and is currently editing a collection of papers about his portraiture. Her book, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic-period Writing*, was published by Ashgate in 2001.

Michael O'Neill is a Professor of English at Durham University. He is the editor of *The Poems of W.B. Yeats: A Sourcebook* (Routledge, 2004) and (with Mark Sandy) of a four-volume work, *Romanticism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2005). He is currently writing a book for Oxford University Press on Romanticism and its legacies.

Vincent Newey is a Professor of English at the University of Leicester. His publications include: *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (1982); (as co-editor) *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (1988); *Centring the Self: Subjectivity, Society and Reading from Thomas Gray to Thomas Hardy* (1995); and *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology, Novels of the Self* (2004). He is reviews editor of *The Byron Journal* and joint editor of *The Cowper and Newton Bulletin*, and a Past President of the British Association for Romantic Studies.

Alan Rawes is Lecturer in Romanticism in the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures at the University of Manchester. His publications include *Byron's Poetic Experimentation* (2000), *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (co-editor, 2003) and *Romantic Biography* (co-editor, 2003). He also edits the *Byron Journal* and the *British Association for Romantic Studies Bulletin and Review*.

Corinna Russell is Fellow and Director of Studies in English at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. She is completing a book entitled *Romance and the Ethics of Response, 1765–1837*, and has begun a further research project on aspects of repetition in nineteenth-century literature and thought. She has published on Dickens, Wordsworth and Byron, and on the Romantic Period Novel.

Jonathon Shears lectures at the University of Liverpool and is currently writing a book on Byron's narrative art. He is co-editor of the forthcoming collection of essays entitled *Reading, Writing and the Influence of Harold Bloom*.

Jane Stabler is Reader in Romanticism at the School of English, University of St Andrews. Her book *Byron, Poetics and History* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2002. She is currently working on a study of the legacy of the Byron-Shelley circle in Italy.

Timothy Webb is the Winterstoke Professor of English at the University of Bristol. His books include: *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (1977), *English Romantic Hellenism, 1700–1824* (1982) and the Everyman *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poems and Prose* (1995). He is currently working on a new scholarly edition of Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography* and a book on *Romantic Ireland*.

The Nineteenth Century General Editors' Preface

The aim of the series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent years, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. It centres primarily upon major authors and subjects within Romantic and Victorian literature. It also includes studies of other British writers and issues, where these are matters of current debate: for example, biography and autobiography, journalism, periodical literature, travel writing, book production, gender, non-canonical writing. We are dedicated principally to publishing original monographs and symposia; our policy is to embrace a broad scope in chronology, approach and range of concern, and both to recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'. We welcome new ideas and theories, while valuing traditional scholarship. It is hoped that the world which predates yet so forcibly predicts and engages our own will emerge in parts, in the wider sweep, and in the lively streams of disputation and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

Vincent Newey
Joanne Shattock
University of Leicester, UK

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank all the contributors for their commitment to and patience with a very long editorial process. We are grateful to Vincent Newey, who offered tireless encouragement at all stages, and Ann Donahue, at Ashgate, who was also a very kindly and constructive editor. Special thanks are due to Geoffrey Bond, Maureen Crisp, the International Byron Society, the Newstead Abbey Byron Society, the School of English, University of St Andrews, and the Department of English, Canterbury Christ Church University for their generous help with the costs of preparing camera-ready copy. Pat FitzGerald completed this transformative process with professional expertise and good humour. Gavin Hopps would like to thank CRASSH, University of Cambridge, for a visiting fellowship which enabled him to complete part of the editorial work. Celia Hoare, the Senior Desk Editor at Ashgate, was immensely helpful in the later stages of the copy-editing process. We wish to thank the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury for permission to use the cover image of the Archangel Uriel (taken from the Christopher Whall window of 1906, in the SW transept of Canterbury Cathedral) and the photographer Mrs M. Tucker for capturing its glory. Our greatest debts of thanks are to Liane Borghardt and Nicholas Roe.

Contents

Introduction: Grace Under Pressure

I doubt if doubt itself be doubting.
(Byron, *Don Juan*, IX, 17)

I

For several decades now, the dominant presuppositions of literary criticism have been secular. This does not mean that something extrinsic that shackled our practice has been lifted so that it has become neutral or is without presuppositions, but that it presupposes a view of the world opposed to the religious. That this is the case and what it means has yet to be fully grasped. There have, of course, been a number of exceptions to this trend, and more as well as less explicit and witting espousals of the logic of the secular.[1] Nevertheless, literary criticism of the last few decades has been undoubtedly dominated by a range of theoretical movements which are clandestinely united in the silent refusal of the possibility of faith that precedes their diverse practices. This inaugural refusal – which means that interpretation in a sense begins before it has begun – has been especially prevalent in Romantic studies. Indeed, as Arthur Bradley suggests in the present volume, religion has become the repressed Other of Romantic studies (p. 204). An obvious example as well as a self-conscious advocate of such 'repressive' secular criticism is Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) – from which this introductory essay takes its title.

McGann's radical Marxist project is predicated upon an unargued assumption that the claims of 'vatic' Romanticism are invalid. Romantic intimations of 'the one life within us and abroad' or of 'something evermore about to be' are, he asserts, an illusion and metonymies of a 'false consciousness'. Moreover, he argues that any reading of Romantic writing which does *not* assume that this is the case is likewise invalid. In his 1996 book, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style*, McGann seems more open to different sorts of faith including: 'those who live by imagination' (p. 181), 'the presence of a suprahuman spirit' (p. 125), 'a new kind of artist (one who "watches and receives")' (p. 67) and the possibility that '*Literary* history should seek the truth of imagination' (p. 179).[2] However, at no point in *The Romantic Ideology* is there any acknowledgement that its presuppositions are not self-evidently true. McGann's thesis is thus crucially dependent upon an argument he refuses to have.

Why should we worry about this sort of refusal? Is it not sanely to abandon that which has become unthinkable? After all, it is more than a century ago now that God was declared 'dead'. And has not postmodernity's radical textualism, collapsing

of boundaries, distrust of metanarratives, and corollary revelation of the sway of indeterminacy even more decisively put paid to the claims of religion? By way of introduction, and to explain why it is necessary at this point in time to re-examine the relationship between Romanticism and religion, this prefatory essay addresses these general but vital questions.

If, as the majority of theorists of that condition concur, one of the defining features of postmodernity is its incredulity towards metanarratives, we should not be surprised to witness simultaneously the dissolution and the return of the religious. Though insofar as this premise is true, it saws off the branch on which it is sitting, in putting forward a metanarrative of its own – about the illegitimacy of metanarratives – and so contradictorily sanctions what it appears to prohibit. This is not merely a matter of logic. This paradoxical state of affairs is obviously borne out by the enormous growth of fundamentalism which continues to take place untouched by and alongside of such Lyotardian relativism. The reason for the simultaneous dissolution and return of the religious is perhaps similarly paradoxical and concerns the radical extension or 'consummation' of scepticism. Bernard Beatty encapsulated the matter as follows: 'scepticism, though hostile to faith, must also undermine the absoluteness of doubt [...]'.[3] And it is scepticism's paradoxical engendering of its opposite in being most itself that we seem to be witnessing in postmodernity. As John Donne observes in another connection, 'the furthest west is east'.[4] Something similar may be said of the 'death of God'.

Even if we leave aside the ambiguities of Nietzsche's own position, it has for a long time been apparent – thanks to the work, for example, of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and, more recently, Derrida – that whoever is supposed to have murdered God, firstly, seems to have got the wrong man and, secondly, appears to have done religion a favour. For what has in fact 'died', it appears, is rather an idolatrous concept of God (since a God capable of death ceases to be 'that than which none greater can be thought'). Or, we might say, following Pascal's famous distinction, what it is that has died is the God of the philosophers and not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.[5] The proclamation of the 'death of God', then, according to most postmodern readings, heralds the end not so much of the religious but of 'onto-theology'.[6] In what sense might this be said to have done religion a favour?

To think God outside of the protocols of onto-theology is to allow God to 'be' unconstrained by the category of being. It is to throw open the idolatrously circumscribed horizons of finitude and to respect the irreducible otherness of the divine, by not limiting it in advance according to our own measure.[7] The collapse of onto-theology therefore clears for apprehension an undelimited space and allows God to be 'God' – as it were 'without' being.[8] This does not, it should be immediately added, exclude the divine from or rob it of anything. On the contrary, it infinitely widens its demesne. The far-reaching implications of this change have yet to be fully registered in disciplines such as literary criticism, which have relied for some time on out-dated notions of theological orthodoxy. The fall of onto-theology, then, like the death of God, may be something of a 'fortunate shipwreck' for the religious in that it heralds a beginning *as well as* an end.

This brings us to a subject which, in keeping with the 'both/and' logic we have observed in relation to postmodern scepticism and the 'death of God', has been seen by theology as a threat as well as an ally and obviously needs to be mentioned here: deconstruction.

That deconstruction has been appropriated for a variety of antithetical causes is in a sense a performative illustration of what it preaches in practice. And yet totalising appropriation – of *any* sort – is, of course, what deconstruction sets itself against. This needs to be reiterated because there is a lingering tendency, not least in literary studies, to see deconstruction as in collusion with atheism. There are obvious reasons why this might be so. In discrediting the 'metaphysics of presence', in claiming that there is nothing of which we can speak 'outside the text' or prior to interpretation, and in calling into question the availability of a transcendental signified according to which meaning can be determinately grounded, deconstruction undoubtedly offers a critique of traditional theological ways of thinking and speaking. And yet, as Kevin Hart has rigorously shown, in spite of numerous influential attempts to press-gang it exhaustively into the service of secularism, deconstruction has nothing against faith or the reality of God.[9] On the contrary, it exhorts faith to be, as it were, on its best behaviour, in wanting 'God' to be allowed to be God, beyond the idolatry of onto-theology.[10] Deconstruction is instead concerned with and offers a salutary critique of the use to which 'God' is put,[11] and as such, like Moses' breaking of the idols, may in fact be said to have done religion a service. Indeed, one could go further. Whilst it must be repeated – though this time to keep our account of it from sliding too far in the opposite direction – that deconstruction is neither theistic *nor* atheistic, since it offers a critique of both theism and also of any discourse which denies there is a God,[12] it is at least structurally analogous to religion – or to use Derrida's own paradoxical formulation, it is a 'religion without religion'[13] – in that it is open to and endeavours to *keep* open the possibility of 'the coming of the most unforeseeable, unimaginable [...] *de tout autre*'.[14] Perhaps to our surprise, Derrida is even happy to speak of deconstruction's '*messianic*' structure.[15] Hence for Derrida, as for postmodern theologians such as Jean-Luc Marion, the end – or rather closure – of metaphysics is also a beginning and an opportunity. 'The death of God', Derrida writes, 'will ensure our salvation because the death of God alone can reawaken the Divine'.[16] Indeed, the agreement between Derrida and Marion is such that it has been plausibly claimed that what divides them 'is "denominational" after all, having to do with differing ideas of a Messiah who has already pitched his tent among us in the flesh and a Messiah who is structurally *to come*'.[17]

If, as Marion and Derrida among others agree, theology is in a sense brought to a close but also made possible by the death of God, the end of metaphysics and deconstruction, what might the features of such a paradoxical religion be? We may trace its lineaments with the help of that quintessentially postmodern figure – the angel.

II

If angels had not been rumoured to exist, postmodernity would have had to invent them. Though perhaps, in true postmodern fashion, this is what it has retroactively done. It is not simply the remarkable, resurgent popularity of angelic beings in contemporary art and culture that makes them so postmodern;[18] it is also their nature, status and reason for being ('without' being).

1 Angels are everywhere. Of course, to a believer, they have always been everywhere. Yet now they are being studied, depicted and employed (as ornaments, in advertising, as metaphors and so on) with a seriousness and ubiquity that would have been unthinkable to the Enlightenment mind. The catch, of course, is that the contemporary re-enchantment of the real is at the same time a 'liquidation' of religion, for what we are witnessing alongside of a retrieval of traditional concerns is the return of the repressed as kitsch or simulacra. As Graham Ward argues, the liquidation of religion does not mean its end but rather 'its increasing dilution. The resources of faith traditions', he notes, 'are being endlessly redeployed, reiterated and dispersed beyond the communities for whom they have a specific content and significance.'[19] One of the salient features of postmodern religion, then, which is reflected in the diversity of the present volume's chapters, is a pluralism that more and more seems to resemble a Borgesian list, which on the one hand encompasses a burgeoning fundamentalism and a revival of orthodoxy, and on the other hand 'includes' a dilution that modulates imperceptibly into atheism[20] or else resembles the contentless growth of global capitalism,[21] and a citational or simulacral commodification of the religious as fetish, fashion accessory or theme park thrill.
2 Our knowledge of angels has dwindled to a rumour.[22] For Michel Serres, whose *La Légende des Anges* describes a contemporary world 'that is tending towards angelism in its fluxes and its messages', angels are a 'myth'.[23] In Karl Barth's words, 'when the Bible speaks of angels [...] it always introduces us to a sphere where historically verifiable history, i.e., the history which is comprehensible by the known analogies of world history, passes over into non verifiable saga or legend'.[24] Our knowledge of God, as postmodern theology of most persuasions is keen to insist, is no different. For, as Derrida, following Nietzsche, has made clear, 'everything is always already an interpretation' and 'there is no unique transcendent point from which one can judge conflicting interpretations [...]'.[25] In line with this, the Jesuit cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) speaks of 'belief stripped of any secure site' and of the discourse of contemporary faith as a 'language without force [...]'.[26] In the absence of any secure site or transcendental vantage point, belief becomes more of a risk, an act of 'madness' even,[27] which is based upon the 'weakness of a fable [...]'.[28] Religion, therefore, postmodernity teaches, has no privileged access to truth. Though by the same token, neither does any discourse which has sought to discredit it. As we have seen, the declaration of the 'death of God' seems also itself to have dwindled to a rumour. Unlike the

Mafia, religion makes us an offer we *can* refuse; though whichever way we choose – and not choosing, like Pilate, is of course also a choice – it is a wagering upon a story and upon the meaning of absence, and all we have to go on is the story we find most persuasive.

3 Angels are creatures of difference. This is not only because, according to the 'Angelic Doctor', each angel is its own species,[29] nor is it simply because they are an intermediate rank of beings, who are traditionally defined according to their difference on the one hand from God and on the other hand from man. More paradoxically, they might be described as creatures of difference for they in a certain sense differ from themselves. This is because, whilst angels are 'purely incorporeal'[30] and subsist immaterially 'totally apart from bodies',[31] they may, as Scripture shows, assume or 'put on' finite form. In this case, their form is not illusory – since it is a real entry into finitude and real form they put on, and since such form is involved in a communication of truth – and yet neither does it belong to what they 'are'. Additionally, in the work of Luce Irigaray and others, angels are related to sexual difference.[32] Postmodern theology – arguably in so far as it *is* postmodern – is likewise committed to difference: difference, that is, as a 'non-originary' or heterogeneous origin; as a constitutive and therefore irreducible feature of the semiotic flux of all that is; as productive of an aporia which opens a distance between signifier and signified, and confronts us with an undecidability wherever we turn; and, increasingly – if humankind is made in the image of a Trinitarian God, who 'is' in kenotic self-differentiation, and may be said to 'share both "genders" [in all three persons] by way of an order that remains asymmetrical'[33] – as alluding to the sexuate character of human being. And yet, in contrast to nihilistic accounts of postmodernism, theological readings are prepared to see such differences as not necessarily warring and ultimately dissonantal, but as participating in and imperfectly bespeaking an 'infinite interpersonal harmonious order';[34] or, in the case of sexual difference, as forming part of a relationship of reciprocity, complementarity and peace, to use Hans Urs von Balthasar's terms.[35] Postmodern theology therefore entertains the idea of a peaceful reconciliation without effacement or diminution of difference.

4 According to the rumours, an angel is not a substance but the function of a service.[36] That is to say, an angel does not exist prior to or apart from what it does. Writing of the angelology of Erik Peterson, von Balthasar notes that this 'performative' ontology obtains not only in communications from God to man but also in reverse from man to God: 'For him [Peterson], an angel is, in the last analysis, the very idea and instantiation of pure adoration and love, of the state in which one pours oneself out wholly in praise of God.'[37] In this respect also, then, angels seem to be the forerunners of postmodernity, which tends to call into question the existence of 'essences' such as subject and object outside of their involvement in a given narrative. As we have seen, such an idea is nothing new in theology, since, although the idiom may be unfamiliar, this is a traditional way of conceiving Trinitarian being. Here is how it is described by Rowan Williams:

> The gulf between Father and crucified Son, between Father in heaven and Son in hell, now appears as the immeasurable measure of the way divine love 'leaves' itself, travels infinitely from itself (from self-possession, self-presence). Here there can be no identity prior to differentiation: the only identity in question is precisely the total and eternal self-bestowal that constitutes the other. The generative or originary moment in the divine life, the Father, has no reality except in the act of generating the otherness of the Son and sustaining the unity of divine life across this gulf of immeasurable otherness by the issuing of 'spirit': the life bestowed in its wholeness upon the Son is both returned to the Father and opened up beyond the duality of Father and Son as the Holy Spirit.[38]

If we take seriously the scriptural teaching that we are made 'in the image of' the divine (Genesis, 1:26), we should not be surprised to discover some sort of analogical corollary of this with respect to finite being. And, indeed, this is precisely what we find a number of postmodern theologians averring.[39] Human identity, on such a reading, is not anterior to but is rather a 'production' of expression and social practice. Subjectivity thus ceases to be a fixed and immaterial essence behind the curtains of what it says and does, capable of possessing or discovering itself apart from language and differentiation. Instead – like an angel – the subject 'is' what it does, or – in the image of the Trinitarian Creator – it 'is' its differential relation with the other.

5 Angels mediate or 'are' their mediation. For this reason, as Karen Leeder writes, angels 'offer us a way into a discussion of [...] a philosophy of difference and relation, but also, in a more specifically literary vein, the function of metaphor (in that they manifest the Logos) and translation, in being the messenger between realms – ideas at the heart of the literary and artistic enterprise.'[40] Whilst in recent years we have become accustomed to seeing mediation as some sort of impediment or aporia – coming between in 'going between', like Tristan's 'mediation' between King Marke and Isolde – angels present us with an alternative model of 'benign' mediation, which does not retard or deflect the 'message', and preserves whilst permitting the traversal of distance. As Graham Ward observes, 'the good angel is a messenger who seeks not to glorify himself or herself, seeks not to draw any attention away from the message; *is* the communication without remainder'.[41] Such 'immediate mediation' is, according to Jean-Luc Marion, 'founded in the trinitarian play', as '[t]he Son made man does not offer a reproduction of a god who is himself otherwise visible [...]. He brings into visibility the definitive invisibility of the Father [...].'[42] Here, then, we have a model of mediation in which 'separation coincides with intimacy' and which allows 'the perfect transitivity of the gift that [...] passes without loss, safe and unchanged, from one term to the other'.[43] According to this 'postmodern' theological model, which is cognisant of but diverges from recent pessimistic accounts of mediation, truth is seen as materially embodied – as unable to sidestep though undeterred by the 'detour' of finitude – and hence as in some sense constructed or 'made'.

6 Angels are notorious for their violation of ontological boundaries.[44] The consummate image of which is their ascending and descending of the ladder

between heaven and earth in Jacob's dream (Genesis, 28). Without being at all pejorative, one might say that angels 'are' neither here nor there, since, as we have seen, they exist without finitude and yet may also assume finite form. We have also seen how they make sport of the distinction between message and means – categories that were confused a long time before it was noticed by Marshall McLuhan. And finally, they transgress their *own* boundaries – ecstatically overflowing themselves – and blur the difference between interior and exterior. The connection between postmodernity and the angelic confusion of categories has been made by Michel Serres: 'our world, which is fluid, fluent, even fluctuating, is becoming increasingly volatile. [...] *Volatilis* is the Latin word for things that have wings.'[45] The importance of the collapsing or permeability of boundaries within postmodern theology may be briefly illustrated with reference to five cases of such confusion. (i) It has already been noticed that the customary distinction between 'to be' and 'not to be' is troubled by recent theological thought. In some sense returning to pre-modern ways of thinking about the divine (in Plato, Denys, Anselm and others), it has been suggested that the category of 'being' does not exhaustively cover that which holds in reality, and that the obverse category of 'not being' does not necessarily consign a thing to nothingness. It therefore seems that there may be more things in heaven and earth than are thought of even in Hamlet's philosophy. (ii) It is the nature of the Good to diffuse itself (*bonum est diffusivum sui*). Divine being is thus traditionally seen as being in ekstasis. The permeability of the boundary between the interior and exterior that this implies has been explored by recent theological writing, not only in relation to the divine but also with respect to the imitative ekstasis of created being. Several chapters in the present collection relatedly reveal the importance of such ecstatic ontology in Romantic art. (iii) If creation, as Aquinas (after Denys) contends, is as it were the divine reaching 'outside of' itself in love, and if, as Trinitarian theology teaches, God, in whose image mankind is made, 'is' in relational differentiation then this obviously has implications for the otherness of creatures and the relationship between 'subject' and 'object'. To cite von Balthasar once again: 'The otherness of creatures is essentially justified by the otherness that exists within the identity of God himself [...]'.[46] This otherness – which is wholly real – is otherness or difference *in relation*. The distinction between subject and object is therefore, according to a theological reading, upheld but also beneficently sundered by a subterranean continuity or kinship. This sense of difference in relation is lyrically described by Paul Claudel (addressing the divine): 'from the sublimest Angel who beholds Thee down to the pebble on the path, and from the one end of Thy creation to the other, / The continuum never ceases, not any more than from soul to body. [...] / And among / All Thy creatures and all the way to Thee there is a liquid bond'.[47] (iv) In view of this 'liquid bond' between creatures – from 'the sublimest angel' to 'the pebble on the path' – the boundaries between created phenomena may also be called into question. This is not, we might note, to abolish such distinctions – their reality and subsistence is, after all, *affirmed* by Claudel's list – but by seeing their sovereignty annulled by a superordinate continuity, it is to

acknowledge that they are not absolute. (v) In religion generally and in Christianity in particular, there has never been an easy or straightforward distinction between truth and fiction (which etymologically refers to that which is 'fashioned'): Christ revealed the truth by speaking in parables; and the events that are narrated in the Old Testament, many of which, as we know, have pagan 'myths' behind them, are believed by Christianity to be 'shadows' or 'types' of the truth that is more fully disclosed in the New Testament ('more fully' because Christ himself is held to be a 'finite fashioning' of the truth). This traditional 'aesthetic' dimension of revelation has been recovered and radicalised by certain strands of postmodern theology, which seek to remind us – against the 'Protestant' tendency of modernity to forget about the third transcendental – that the Good and the True are also convertible with the Beautiful.

7 Angels are unspeakable. The final words of Denys's discourse on angels, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, anticipate the close of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, in bowing out before that which is beyond speech: 'The omission of matters similar to those with which I have been dealing may be explained by a twofold concern of mine, not to overextend my discourse and to honour in respectful silence the hidden things which are beyond me.'[48] Descriptions of angels therefore invariably resort to figurative language, whose 'stammering' betrays the inadequacy of the finite to represent that which is beyond it (though in doing so, such stammering may point obliquely towards such beyondness). A sense of the divine as the unspeakable has, of course, always hovered close to religious experience. However, in recent years there has been an exponential increase of interest in apophaticism.[49] So much so, that Denys Turner has been prompted to say of the theological community: 'We are all apophatic theologians now [...]'.[50] As the present collection testifies, this concern is not limited to theologians. Such interest is evident in the various discussions in the chapters that follow of: speaking silences and unfathomable spaces, bedazzlement by a 'divinity which exceeds conceptuality', 'legitimate stammering', graceful excess, 'incommunicable communion' and artistic attempts to figure the 'invisable'.[51]

III

What is the relevance to Romantic Studies of the 'theological turn' in postmodern thought? First of all, it reminds us that we are (still) *in medias res*. As James K.A. Smith puts it, 'all the data are not in'.[52] The postmodern end of metaphysics, which simultaneously ushers in a re-turn of theology or a way of thinking God differently, therefore censures as premature any foreclosure of faith as a rational possibility. It should by now be apparent, if it was not already, why the silent refusal of the possibility of faith – with which secular literary criticism begins – may be called into question, and why it is necessary, without first of all deciding about that which is undecidable, to re-examine the presuppositions of critical practice in the light of the theological turn. 'Suspicious' secular criticism – Romantic New Historicism would be a prime