Romanticism and Transcendence

Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination

J. Robert Barth, S.J.

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OTHER BOOKS BY J. ROBERT BARTH, S.J.

Coleridge and Christian Doctrine (1969; 2d ed. 1987)
Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond, ed. (1972)
The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition (1977; 2d ed. 2001)
Coleridge and the Power of Love (1989)
Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adam's Dream, ed. with John L. Mahoney (1990)
The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion, ed. (2002)

For Sister Maryan Russo, C.I.J.

Acknowledgments

The symbiotic relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge may serve as a salutary reminder of the ways in which members of the scholarly community depend on one another. After more than a decade in full-time administration—during which I tried, usually in vain, to keep abreast of new developments in Romantic studies—I returned three years ago to full-time teaching and research. I have deeply appreciated the kindness and patience of colleagues who have helped me to reshape my thinking in the light of recent developments, especially in Wordsworth and Coleridge studies. As a result, my debts in the making of this book are more than ordinarily numerous and my gratitude more than usually heartfelt.

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At the University of Missouri Press, Director Beverly Jarrett, Clair

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As for the dedication of this book, it is in heartfelt gratitude for almost a quarter-century of loving friendship, through times of sadness and seasons of joy—a friendship that is truly a gift of God. "Mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice"!

J. R. B.
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts
July 10, 2002

"Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason, blest by faith: what we have loved,
Others will love, and we will teach them how;
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of quality and fabric more divine."

The Prelude (1850), Book 14: 446–456

Romanticism and Transcendence

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Prologue

Imagination and Religious Experience

To what serves mortal beauty / —dangerous; does set dancing blood—the O-seal-that-so / feature, flung prouder form
Than Purcell tune lets tread to? / See: it does this: keeps warm
Men's wits to the things that are.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

The view of imagination taken here is admittedly that of a confessed and unabashed follower of Coleridge. This book follows in the wake of a new edition of *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition,* which argues that imagination is of its very nature a religious act. In this Coleridgean view, imagination is founded upon an act of faith—faith in the ability of the human mind to attain something approximating truth, and ultimately faith in a divine empowering source. As Coleridge says in his *Biographia Literaria,* imagination is "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."[1] It is the faculty that allows the human person, whether instinctively or consciously, to shape the world into meaning, much as in the beginning God shaped chaos into cosmos.

But this book is also written with an awareness that if Coleridge was the great theorist of the imagination, Wordsworth was, among their

1. *Biographia Literaria,* ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 1:304, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* ed. Kathleen Coburn. Hereafter, a parenthetical *CC* following a title will indicate that the volume is part of *The Collected Works.*

contemporaries, its supreme practitioner. Thus if we look to Coleridge for the theoretical grounding of the view of religious imagination proposed in this book, it is in Wordsworth above all that we see this imagination at work. One must be always aware, to use Thomas McFarland's phrase,[2] of the symbiotic relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge: Wordsworth working within the paradigm—perhaps even the "field of force"—of Coleridge's thought; Coleridge drawing on Wordsworth's poetry as the working material for his theory. It is a classic example of what medieval philosophers called "mutual causality."

We neglect this profound relationship at our peril. Even as fine a critic as Nancy Easterlin, in her groundbreaking book, *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion,"* takes no account of this crucial symbiosis; Coleridge plays no role in her otherwise highly nuanced and very helpful study. She quotes approvingly Gerald Graff's premise of "an *autonomous* creative imagination" as the foundation of Romantic epistemology, and goes on to characterize Wordsworth's poetry—and Romantic poetry generally—as "religious, then, in this particularly modern sense: it dramatically asserts authentic religious experience while simultaneously raising doubts about the genesis, ontological status, and social value of the experience."[3] Had Easterlin taken into account the profound relationship between Wordsworth's and Coleridge's views of the imagination, she would at least have questioned Graff's view, and her own, of an "*autonomous* creative imagination" at the heart of the Romantic experience. For Coleridge—and for Wordsworth, as I shall contend—the imagination of its very nature is both divinely empowered and can put one in touch with the divine, for of its very nature it participates in the "infinite I AM."

Let me hasten to add that Easterlin's important book serves us well in drawing attention to and powerfully analyzing the relationship between the private experience and the social forms and practices of the Romantic expression of religion. As she argues cogently, "more important perhaps than the transcendent moment itself is its perceived goal or function, its meaning *beyond* the brief moment of experience." She consciously moves beyond the limitations of "poststructuralist practices" to study seriously the structures of meaning inherent in the poetic text.[4]

2. See "The Symbiosis of Coleridge and Wordsworth."

3. *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion,"* 36–37 (emphasis added).

4. Ibid., 10, 9.

This recent attention to the religious dimensions of Romantic texts, and a willingness to take them seriously on their own terms, is a welcome addition to the critical discussion of Romanticism. Robert M. Ryan's magisterial book *The Romantic Reformation* is a case in point. Since Ryan's primary focus is the political dimension of Romantic religion, he emphasizes (in Easterlin's terms) the social aspects of the experience of Romantic writers; however, he necessarily gives considerable attention to the personal experience that grounds their social practice. Ryan says of the writers of the Romantic period: "I call what they attempted a reformation because, after periods of youthful iconoclasm, they all finally became more interested in purifying or redefining England's national religion than in attempting to eradicate it. Critics have always acknowledged and usually honored the Romantics' tendencies toward skepticism, but I will argue here that what made them important figures in our intellectual history was not their skepticism but their belief."[5]

One further confession is perhaps called for, concerning my own methodology in this work. Although I am aware, as one must be, of the shifting tides of Romantic criticism in recent decades—poststructuralism, deconstructionism, the New Historicism—my approach to the work of these poets remains rather conventional, accepting the principle that meaning can inhere in poetry, and that words do sometimes stand still enough for us to take in at least some measure of their meaning. I also take the view that poetry can aspire to the transcendent—and even at times attains it. This is meant to imply no disrespect to colleagues who exercise different approaches and work from different premises. Jerome J. McGann is no doubt correct when he says of Romantic scholarship that it is "everywhere informed by ideological commitments of various kinds." This is as true of deconstructionist or New Historicist criticism as it is of more traditional scholarship and criticism. And McGann is also surely right when he hastens to add that "such commitments do not in themselves vitiate a scholarship or criticism," for, he goes on, "all science and knowledge is pursued from a particular socio-historical vantage and hence embodies certain ideological presuppositions."[6] What is important is that one makes clear one's point of view, so that readers can judge of its limits as well as its

5. *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824,* 7.

6. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation,* 28.

virtues. In this book, which admits to being a personal statement as well as a critical study, I trust this Prologue—and the book as a whole—will make apparent my own suppositions and point of view.

Before we turn to Wordsworth's poetry—and then Coleridge's—to see the religious imagination at work, the rest of the Prologue will attempt to lay a groundwork for this study by bringing Coleridge's theory of imagination into juxtaposition with one of the classics of Western spirituality, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola.[7] This book, the work not only of a devout Coleridgean and fond admirer of Wordsworth but of a professed and unabashed disciple of Ignatius Loyola, will argue that Coleridge and Loyola have strikingly similar views of the nature of imagination.[8]

Imagination is not merely an artistic faculty, the power that enables the poet to create a poem or the painter a painting. It is also, indeed first of all, the faculty that permits the human person to give meaning to the world and to his or her life. Ignatius Loyola was not in the least an artist—as anyone knows who has read his wise but rough-hewn *Spiritual Exercises*—but very much a spiritual counselor and pragmatic religious leader. As these two sides of my life, the spiritual and the literary, have been mutually illuminating for me, perhaps they may help to shed light for others as well. Bringing together these two great spirits, Coleridge and Loyola, in this Prologue is by no means to sug-

7. My use of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* as a heuristic model for my consideration of Coleridge may be thought of as similar to Harold Bloom's use of Martin Buber's *I-Thou, I-It* dialectic in his classic work *Shelley's Mythmaking;* see esp. 1–10.

8. In this context it may be appropriate to note that Coleridge was, for much of his life, no lover of Roman Catholicism, though his objections were often more political than religious. To be sure, he rejected the doctrine of Purgatory, for example, and what he saw as a number of "superstitious" ritual practices in Roman Catholicism. However, in many of his anti-Catholic writings in the *Courier* his objections were more truly political. David Erdman notes "what C considers the political dangers of Roman Catholicism: tyrannous absolutism, arbitrary ritualism, claims of infallibility" (*Essays on His Times* [CC], ed. David V. Erdman, 2:264, n. 4). It is interesting, though, that near the end of his life, Coleridge—always wary of sectarianism—seems to have softened his views. In 1833, a year before his death, he wrote in one of his notebooks: "Were I young, had I the bodily strength & animal spirits of early manhood with my present powers & convictions, I should not so far despair of a union between the *Protestant* and the now *papal* but still *Catholic* Church, as to prevent me from making it an object" (Notebook 54, f. [17]; quotations from the unpublished notebooks are used with the kind permission of the late A. H. B. Coleridge).

gest lines of influence, but the affinities between them are considerable and, I believe, instructive.

The Jesuit tradition has always prized logic and rigorous analytical thought. The Ratio Studiorum—the sixteenth-century set of principles and practices officially set forth for the Jesuit schools of the time—is, after all, a "ratio," founded on solid intellectual principles. It is sometimes forgotten, however, that Jesuit education has also prized beauty and the movements of the heart. So, from the very beginning of the Society of Jesus, there have been Jesuit artists of every kind: architects, painters, musicians, poets, and playwrights. And four hundred and fifty years later, Jesuits are still active in the arts, from poet Daniel Berrigan and painter William Hart McNichols, to playwrights and directors Ernest Ferlita and Bill Cain, to dancer and choreographer Robert Ver Eecke—and the arts are part of the curriculum in virtually every Jesuit school.

In short, the arts have been—and continue to be—a significant part of the Jesuit tradition. But *why* this commitment to the arts? Perhaps I can begin to explain with the help of an unlikely ally, George Bernard Shaw. At one point in Shaw's *Saint Joan,* Joan's interrogator Robert de Baudricourt asks her: "How do you mean? voices?" Joan replies: "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God." "They come from your imagination," says Baudricourt. "Of course," Joan replies. "That is how the messages of God come to us."[9]

For all his considerable organizational and administrative skills, Saint Ignatius Loyola was perhaps above all a man of imagination. As his *Spiritual Exercises* amply demonstrates, Ignatius combined the mystic's vision of eternity with the pragmatist's sharp eye for the particularities of things.[10] He brought together in a single view the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human, the universal and the deeply particular realities of our world. Ignatius was driven to seek out "the greater glory of God." And since, as the Psalmist says, the heavens and the earth "show forth the glory of God," it is there that we find God, in the beauties of creation. It is the special gift of the artist to be able to show us that creation—and that glory—in a new way. In Percy Shelley's words, the poet (and by this he means any artist) "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar

9. George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan,* 16.

10. The text of the *Spiritual Exercises* used here is found in *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works,* trans. George E. Ganss, S.J. (Classics of Western Spirituality Series).