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The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion

in Honor of John L. Mahoney

(Fordham University Press, 2002)

edited by J. Robert Barth, S.J.

ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL FASCINATIONS of nineteenth-century writers was the relationship between matter and spirit. *The Fountain Light* explores how various Romantics discovered the spiritual within the material and bridged the alleged gap between nature and the supernatural. Barth describes John Mahoney, the honoree of the volume, as a figure of complex ‘wholeness,’ ‘perhaps like the complexity of [a] jazz recording’ (xii). So, too, the essays of this volume present an assortment of evocative expressions of the Romantic fascination with spirituality and the pursuit of the religious domain. The chief figures are Wordsworth and Coleridge—appearing prominently in eleven of the thirteen essays—but along the way many others are drawn into the sphere of discussion, including Cowper, De Quincey, Hazlitt, Hemans, Hopkins, Maturin, and Newman. Barth’s contribution best indicates the heart of the volume, even if the individual essays do not always follow suit. In what may be read as an apt summation of a persistent theme in Barth’s lifelong body of scholarship, Barth claims that the covenant between the artist and the world rests on ‘the innate relationship between immanent and transcendent [...] Even today, when for so many the divine is an irrelevance, the transcendent is present by indirection, in what Steiner calls ‘the density of God’s absence, the edge of presence in that absence’ (111).

The Fountain Light begins with an intriguing essay that asserts a widespread Romantic concern for animals on religious grounds (David Perkins’s ‘Religion and Animal Rights in the Romantic Era’). Though writers such as Coleridge clearly distinguished between humans and beasts in order to emphasize the moral duty of the person, Perkins recovers the theological and popular roots of religious interest in the natural order. Works such as William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802) demonstrated the benevolence of God through a detailed description of happy creatures whose natural faculties reflect God’s inventive care. Perkins indicates that the Romantic belief that ‘cruelty to animals was impious and would be punished’ (17) emerges out of this theological tradition. Romantics interpreted outward human actions—for example, shooting an albatross—as symbols of the interior state of individual souls.

A string of six essays follow on Wordsworth, each drawing out his unique ability to perceive the sacred within and through nature. Robert Kiely, for example, explores Wordsworth as a poetic figure parallel to the great saint of nature, Saint Francis. Kiely finds in Wordsworth’s ‘The Cuckoo at La Verna, May 25, 1837’ ‘a mixed sensation of pleasure [. . .] and sadness’ that links the two in a common concern for the solitary, though the two figures belong to

different spheres. Dennis Taylor's 'Wordsworth's Abbey Ruins' follows with an analysis of 'spots of time' vis-à-vis Catholicism: spots of time are analogies 'of the solitude of contemplation experienced by the monk or hermit' (40). Taylor claims, against M. H. Abrams, that Wordsworth relies on ecclesiastical history as an ongoing stimulus and vital resource for his works of imagination. Similarly, John Anderson ('Icons of Women in Wordsworth and Hemans') maintains that the church functions in Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* as a basis for unity and even a means of the exploration of otherwise 'unmentionable religious experience' (93). Other essays work through related territory: David Leigh extends Richard Brantley's treatment of *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* (1975) by considering the 'pervasive but not stifling' influence of the evangelical William Cowper on English Romanticism, while Charles Rzepka considers how 'spots of time' reflect the decision for 'spiritual over material values and a heavenly as opposed to an earthly path' (79). Barth's contribution ('Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" and Hopkins' "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo": In Pursuit of Transcendence'), already noted, is a particularly strong example of a religious analysis of literature. Through an examination of images of light and joy in Wordsworth and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Barth recovers the longing for life and desire for a deeper, more permanent 'beauty that will not fade and die' in these writers' works.

The essays in the next major section of the book turn to Coleridge, where the earlier emphasis on Wordsworth's perception of the spirit in nature gives way to extended treatments of the place of the spiritual within the person. Three of these essays indicate the continued relevance of Coleridge's philosophical theology. James Engell's 'Coleridge (and His Mariner) on the Soul' is a wide-ranging consideration of the soul that clarifies Coleridge's lifelong interest in the limits of materialist philosophy: 'The soul is a fact of human spirit, not something the human mind can properly conceive of or analyze' (133). Engell finds contemporary relevance in the symbiotic relationship between Coleridge's attempt to reconcile encyclopedic fields of knowledge and his understanding of the active growth of the soul: 'One reason that Coleridge continues to attract so many readers is that the world and our knowledge of it, as well as our realization of what it means to be human in that world, seem ever to present us with more, rather than less, to reconcile and mediate' (148). The penultimate essay of the book, Philip Rule's 'Coleridge and Newman: The Centrality of Conscience,' compares Coleridge's *Opus Maximum* with Newman's 'Proof for Theism.'¹ Rule maintains that both Coleridge and John Henry Newman had a unique understanding of the relationship between religious experience and self-understanding: 'each was adept at the very difficult philosophical process of self-appropriation, a process whereby one becomes reflectively or explicitly aware of oneself in the act of

¹ Rule's essay presents some of the most important insights in his later 2004 publication by the same name. For further discussion of Rule's valuable study, see my review of *Coleridge and Newman: The Centrality of Conscience*, by Philip C. Rule (Studies in Religion and Literature, 8 [New York: Fordham University Press, 2004]) in *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), 678–80.

knowing' (235). Both believed that conscience is prior to other forms of knowledge; conscience thereby serves as the foundation for the knowledge of God and others. Knowledge also drives Frederick Burwick's excellent comparison of 'Coleridge and De Quincey on Miracles.' Hume famously scrutinized the biblical claim to miracles in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), but few know of Coleridge and De Quincey's engaging responses. For Coleridge, miracles are part of the development of the individual, the means God uses to communicate 'spiritual truth' to the individual subject (206). As with Coleridge, De Quincey believes that the subjective is essential to the power of miracles, but De Quincey links the power of miracles overtly to language. For De Quincey, even if Christ came down from the cross, his miracle would not impact the crowds as powerfully as the oral proclamation of the disciples. Other essays in the latter portion of the text explore Coleridge's construction of myth (Thomas Lloyd's 'The Gothic Coleridge: Mythos and the Real'), Hazlitt's dissatisfaction with Coleridge's turn from early forms of dissenting speech (Jonathan Mulrooney, "Sounding on his Way': Coleridgean Religious Dissent and Hazlitt's Conversational Style"), and, finally, Judith Wilt's thoughtful analysis of the 'blasphemous potency' of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

The Fountain Light raises important questions about the category 'Romanticism and religion.' While I have traced a number of the common threads of discussion among the diverse essays in this volume, the field of study—'Romanticism and religion'—is undoubtedly wide. John Anderson's essay hints at the inherent difficulty of defining 'Romanticism and religion' when he cites a few lines from Dickinson:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church,
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister
And an orchard for a dome. (91)

The varieties of Romanticism are so diverse that encapsulating the religious is inescapably difficult. What (and who?) defines Romantic religion? *The Fountain Light* incites further exploration. 'Romantic religion' for Wordsworth means more than looking to nature as the ecclesial residence of the poet. His fascination with English church history and his likeness to St. Francis of Assisi contradict a simplistic conception of 'nature's poet.' Coleridge, too, not only returned to the church (to Hazlitt's dismay) and examined the interior of the person—the soul and the conscience—but also denounced an overemphasis on nature in his assertion in the *Opus Maximum* that 'To deduce a Deity wholly from nature is in the result to substitute an Apotheosis of Nature for a Deity' (239). Thus, even a focused comparison of William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge challenges univocal portraits of the movement, since that which constitutes 'Romantic religion' varies considerably. As the American historian Sydney Ahlstrom explains, 'definitional specificity is an inverse function of

chronological specificity. If one defines a movement's essence narrowly, that essential trait will often be found in many times and places. If, on the other hand, one places primary emphasis on the period, no single trait or tendency is likely to make itself obvious' ('Ahlstrom's Law').² The result is an unsettling anxiety, but an anxiety that will remain necessary as the disquieting stimulus to further analysis of the diverse religious beliefs and practices of the Romantics. For this contribution, Barth's *The Fountain Light* will continue to spur discussion of not only the various personalities the authors ably discuss, but also the obdurate challenges of engaging the elusive field 'Romanticism and religion.'

² Sydney E. Ahlstrom, 'The Romantic Religious Revolution and the Dilemmas of Religious History', *Church History* 46 (1977), p. 154.