Daniel McVeigh
reads
Living Forms of the Imagination
(T & T Clark, 2008)
by Douglas Hedley

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS, by Stephen Lynn of the University of South Carolina, is a popular textbook in American college courses on literary criticism. In an attractive style accessible to undergraduates, Lynn employs a strong knowledge of contemporary theory combined with a teacher's experience to survey the major critical approaches: in his telling the New Criticism, Reader Response theory, Deconstruction, Psychological (largely Freudian) criticism, Marxism or New Historicism, and Feminist / Queer Theory. Lynn has considered including religiously orientated criticism, but its rarity in American graduate schools has kept him from doing so up to now, his 6th edition.

A Coleridgean should find all of Lynn's schools—even the congenial "New" Criticism picked apart as a convenient straw man by the others—as failing in fundamental ways on an imaginative level. Despite the text's clarity, what is one to make of a view of literature so instrumental as to encourage speculation about the "Lucy" poems' encoding William Wordsworth's incestuous desires for Dorothy? "After Freud," in Lynn's unoriginal phrase, who can say *what* truth is? No student reading of a text—for instance, one that descries feminist integrity in Faulkner's psychotic Emily Grierson—can be seen as "wrong." Is an English major reading Samuel Johnson, perhaps the "greatest" eighteenth-century British writer, supposed to *learn* from *Rasselas* or "The Vanity of Human Wishes," because in a long, rich lifetime Johnson himself learned lessons that might profit a twenty-year old in Columbia, SC? Of course not: what she needs to do is to locate a trivial poem like "To Miss—— On Her Playing the Harpsichord" in order to demonstrate how a clever young feminist today can make Johnson's phallocentrism serve her purposes.

Decades ago C. S. Lewis warned of the morass into which professional literary criticism was leading us. Does literature of the last few thousand years lead us into unexplored worlds, broaden our horizons, and expand our vision of what the world can be—and perhaps actually *is*? Or is literature a dead thing for us to manipulate in the interest of political ideologies? This widespread attack on the Imagination makes particularly welcome Douglas Hedley's erudite "attempt to expound a Platonic intimation expressed in the Romantic 'visionary gleam'" (p. 277). His *Living Forms of the Imagination* eloquently defends meaning, not only literary interpretations but meanings so intricately involved in human life as virtually to constitute it.

Hedley, a lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion at Cambridge University, has also published *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity* (2008) and *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion* (2000). In *Living Forms of the Imagination* Plato's

philosophy, especially in his *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, is prominent, and Coleridge, a Romantic Platonist, is another constant presence. German philosophy and literature, including that of Kant, Schelling, Goethe, and Heidegger, offer substance to much of the book's argument, and we also find analysis of Kierkegaard, Meister Eckhart, Spinoza, and Freud, along with many contemporary thinkers.

Given its etymology, symbol, Hedley declares, is "the throwing together of the finite and infinite" (p. 142). Coleridge wrote about "the living *educts* of the Imagination, of that reconciling and mediating power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*" (*Lay Sermons*, quoted by Hedley, p. 30). Symbols make us not just "civilized," but human. A tiger, Coleridge observed, is a tiger whether alone or in a family of tigers, but a human without society and language and cultural inheritance is a contradiction in terms.

Throughout, Hedley's polemic against reductionism insists that life, the human experience, is *what it is*, and not the surface images which remain when scientific materialism, historicism, Darwinian sociobiology, behaviorism, Ayn Rand distortions of capitalism, Marxism, and all the rest, ignore the real psyche in order to fasten on whatever to some earnest coven of academics seems to "explain" it. Outside of academic scientism, is it not clear that "there is a creativity in human life which marks us off from that of other mammals in kind and not merely in degree" (p. 55)? In the fight between ideology and the soul, Christianity is hardly the only contender against death. But since in the Incarnation God is, in Dante's phrase, "painted with our likeness" (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 131), it may be the most significant one. Without triumphalism, Hedley resists submerging it into a sentimental multiculturalism. How does depleting Christianity compliment Buddhism or Hinduism? The central point of Coleridge's most famous definition of Imagination may be that what is distinctively human is only so because rooted in God's "I Am." In 1825 he was being logical enough in claiming that *if* "Christianity is the final Cause of the World… the Idea of the Redemption of the World must needs form the best central reservoir for all our knowledges, physical or personal" (CL V 481). Hedley's defense of the *living* imagination has as its constant target the catastrophe of seeking to dissolve mystery through science, first philosophical and then historical, as evidenced in the last century's brood of totalitarianisms. Imagination draws us upward as through a cathedral's stained glass. Speaking of mystery in *The Nature and Mission of Theology* (1995), Pope Benedict XVI contends that "Knowledge never transfers this reality into a constitutive element of my own thought, but rather the converse is true: It is I who make myself over to it, while it always remains above me." Hedley too insists on the impossibility of *conceiving* reality: "the imagination, as the immediate source of our images, is a dim mirror and index of the boundless plenitude of the infinite

I AM" (p. 142). Aspiration toward an unreachable ideal is far from an illusion, then: rather than desiring to be more than human, it constitutes *being* human. Gibber as they will, apes don't participate.

Such a logocentric view of language rejects outright Derrida's *mot* that there is nothing outside the text: stories, insists Hedley pungently, "resist reduction" (p. 175). In criticism, such a view restores vitality to literature, making it again what it has always been, both prior to criticism and superior to it. At points Hedley's book echoes George Steiner's eloquent *Real Presences* (1989), which employs the charming image of receiving literary texts not with suspicion but with *cortesia*, a hospitality, as in the Italian Renaissance, open to learning and new experience.

Hedley argues that knowledge in the Platonic sense is not experimental but experiential—a core thesis of Romanticism itself. The book seeks for itself a *via media* between extremes, whether the extremes are philosophers like Hobbes and Berkeley, empirical psychology and Cartesian models of the soul, or theological arguments on the immanence or transcendence of God. Coleridge himself consistently employed this method of argument, fashioning a dichotomy between Bacon and Plato, for instance, and then employing the language of a mediating Imagination to trump them both.

To resist Hedley's basic argument with vigor, one would need to reject Coleridge's thought generally. To both, a faith in God and the human soul is propaideutic to any deep vision of literature. In details, some contentions in the book may invite questions. In terms of content, Wordsworth's meditation on the scenery a few miles from the ruins of Tintern Abbey is not obviously one "on a Christian holy place" (p. 245). In a certain way Coleridge's Imagination is both higher and "lower" than Fancy, if the latter adjective means something like "elemental" or "fundamental," or using Hedley's own word "primordial" (pp. 50, 77). But connotatively the "lower" usage may feel uncomfortable. Is Fate, however much a mysterious force in classical Greek tragedy, really dictatorial (p. 166)? Oedipus's anger and the stubborn integrity of Prometheus and Antigone lie deep in their characters, struggling with Moira, not merely determined by it.

Hedley qualifies Coleridge's link to Edmund Burke and his negative view of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Perhaps: but it is worth pointing to a more conventional view. Coleridge dissects Rousseau's *volonté générale* in *The Friend* as being impossible to determine, by voting, for instance, and therefore arbitrary. This warning against potential tyranny should ring true to anyone tracing Rousseau's influence in Simon Schama's gripping history of the French Revolution, *Citizens* (1990). Whether a modern revolution, such as the recent peaceful one in Egypt or the violent one in Libya, is more like the one in 1776 than those in 1789 and 1919 is a matter of no small concern. So even if he and Coleridge were not ideological twins, Burke, with his warnings about rebellion against tradition and the centralization of power to institutionalize "radical" reform, provides a healthy minatory presence for Westerners today.

Yet demurrals are minor in the context of this fine book. In *Walden* (1845), Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, looking askance at the average human being, claims that he has "*somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever.'" The satire is directed against Puritanism and children's readers. But thousands of years of culture had gone into formulating that declaration of purpose, and Thoreau may have been hasty in rejecting it so summarily. Some years ago my younger son Paul was baptized in St. Mary Magdalene Church in Camarillo, California, in my parents' home parish. The ceremony was moving, despite babies' crying. A year later my father, weakened by pneumonia, died in the night at age 81. Finding him on the couch in the morning, my mother hesitated an hour before calling the emergency number 911. During the funeral Mass James Edward McVeigh's coffin rested only a few yards from the font in which his grandson had been baptized. Now the holy water was being sprinkled, unpredictably, on him. In our end is our beginning. My father was 40 years older than I when he died, and Paul 40 years younger.

Is it because I teach literature that I now connect baptismal fonts with the interlocking circles of Dante's *Paradiso*, his enigmatic Trinity? The circular font, the sacramental echoes of baptism and funeral liturgy, Eucharist and holy water have remained present with me for many years. Like countless human experiences each day, they illustrate Hedley's compelling argument.