Jake Grefenstette[1]

reads

The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion

(Cambridge UP, 2021)

edited by Jeffrey W. Barbeau[2]

IN A 1959 REVIEW OF JAMES BAKER'S *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* (1957), Edward Bostetter laments the 'wayward progress of [Coleridge's] posthumous reputation', which is

> accompanied by generalizations so extravagant that even his warmest friends have difficulty explaining them [. . .] younger critics throw his name around with such abandon [. . .] increasingly the name is being associated with principles that the man never entertained.[3]

M.H. Abrams, in a competing review, draws on the same passages to propose precisely the opposite reading. For Abrams, Baker's study of the Coleridgean imagination is instead

> an important corrective to current views of Coleridge as a quasi-Platonist or pseudo-Kantian, whose tenebrous and arid theorizing constituted a non-functional and uninfluential appendage to his brilliant critical impression.[4]

According to Abrams' vision, Baker successfully recovers a system of thought which 'despite its surface fragmentariness and eclecticism [. . .] is coherent and integral.'

Bostetter and Abrams interpret Coleridge's theological afterlife at cross-purposes. Their disagreement—a disagreement between the over- and -undervaluation of the study of Romanticism—epitomizes a broader divide in 20th century scholarship. One school of thought, skeptical in nature, has broadly understood the study of Romanticism and religion to be old hat. Most of the recent 'progress' in Romantic scholarship accordingly amounts only to a kind of eisegesis or ventriloquism of dead sources (and thus Geoffrey Hartman, writing on the bicentenary of Coleridge's birth: 'No great change came into the world because of Coleridge, yet extraordinary claims have been made on his behalf').[5] The opposing view maintains that Romanticism and its relationship to religion is significantly more complex than we have appreciated—and that this complexity both demands and merits our renewed

---

[1] Jake Grefenstette is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University. He is completing his dissertation with Douglas Hedley on S.T. Coleridge's theological and literary legacy in the 20th century.

[2] This review was commissioned by the Editor, not by the Reviews' Editor.

[3] Edward Bostetter, 'The Sad Ghost of Coleridge', review of *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination*, by James V. Baker, *Prairie Schooner* 33, no. 2 (1959): 187–90, 187-8.

[4] M.H. Abrams, 'The Sacred River', book review of *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination*, by James Volant Baker, *Modern Philology* 56.2 (1958): 139-41. 139.

[5] Geoffrey Hartman, 'Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel', review of *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*, by Norman Fruman, *New York Times Book Review*, 12 March 1972.

attention. Hence Owen Barfield's conviction that Romantic theology is buried in what Henry Rago calls the 'density of the medium': that Coleridge's 'incoherence of expression arose from the coherence of what he wanted to express'.[6] On this bullish paradigm, we have only just begun to unearth the significance of the relationship between Romanticism and religion; have only begun to understand the part the Romantics had to play in inventing both their age and ours.

For all the progress made by the Barfieldian camp over the past half century, it is remarkable that it is only in 2021 that we at last encounter a book which announces itself as 'the first scholarly survey of the connections between literature, religion, and intellectual life during the British Romantic period (1780s-1832).' Jeffrey Barbeau's *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion*, a long and sorely needed milestone for the field, marks a great victory for proponents of continued and serious study of Romanticism and religion.

Barbeau and his well-chosen team of authors have logged two notable accomplishments. The first is to compile a consistently high-quality catalogue providing fresh readings of familiar figures alongside new voices and perspectives otherwise sidelined in the field. The second triumph is a functional upending of the popular conviction that the study of Romanticism and religion constitutes a closed (or closing) door. Barbeau's *Companion*, as good an undergraduate primer as it is a professional staple, will leave both novice and senior student of Romanticism with the conviction that our study of their era remains a project nascent and necessary.

Barbeau's 'Introduction' succinctly sets the stage in positive and negative terms. Positively, the volume promises a zoom-in trajectory from 'Historical Developments' through 'Literary Forms' to 'Disciplinary Connections', three parts which treat with increasing specificity notions of interdisciplinarity in British Romanticism. In negative terms, the volume promises to disabuse and correct for infamous misconceptions and deficiencies in the field. Barbeau's sights are especially set on naïve readers of the relationship between Romanticism and formal religious practices: those who perpetuate the 'self-fulfilling' conclusion that 'there is no formal religion among the Romantics because Romantics rejected formal religion' (9).

Part I of the volume, 'Historical Developments,' begins this corrective project with a historical survey comprising three chapters on Christianity (Frances Knight's 'Christianity: Established Churches'; Felicity James's 'Christianity: Protestant Dissent'; Michael Tomko's 'Christianity: Roman Catholicism') as well as Michael Scrivener's 'Judaism', Humayun Ansari's 'Islam', Nishi Pulugurtha's 'Hinduism', and Martin Priestman's 'Atheism'. This part will be valuable for newcomers to the field of Romanticism and religion, particularly those unfamiliar with the often neglected (but supremely important) channels of influence between British Romanticism and Roman Catholicism, Protestant Dissent, and non-Christian religions. At a personal

[6] Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age: Essays on the Creative Imagination*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Barfield Press), 204.

level, I was happy to encounter Tomko's chapter, which glimpses (among many other things) the complex Romanticism—Newman connection first seriously explored in Stephen Prickett's *Romanticism and Religion* (1976). Tomko is an excellent scholar of the Romantic legacy in Catholicism; his *Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief* (2015) provides a fascinating dialogue between Coleridge and Tolkien which readers of either the *Companion* or this *Bulletin* will enjoy. (I must admit, however, writing as a student of Coleridge with a dog named Frodo Waggins at my side, I am as naturally biased towards the Coleridge—Tolkien connection as I possibly could be.)

Part II of the volume, 'Literary Forms', will be of special interest to scholars working in the (recently quite contentious) field of literature and theology. The five chapters, which span 'Poetry' (Jeffrey Einboden), 'The Novel' (Miriam Elizabeth Burstein), 'Drama' (Frederick Burwick), 'Sermons and Lectures' (Jeffrey W. Barbeau), and 'Life Writing' (Amy Culley), offer fresh accounts of Romantic ideas about the (never simple) relationship between literary form and theological content. Given that my own research falls in the jurisdiction of the Romantic legacy in 20th century, I was glad to find myself encountering new and valuable information in every essay. Einboden's 'Poetry' offers a concise glimpse into the vast phenomenon of the confluence of Romantic religion and philology, an intersection concisely presented through mini expositions subtitled 'Hebraic Blake', 'Arabic Moore', and 'Armenian Byron'. Burstein's chapter provides a needed overview of religion and the novel in British Romanticism, a nexus of influence aptly described as 'both absurdly large and paradoxically small' (161). Each chapter in Part II could bear expansion into a book in its own right; but the footnotes point us in helpful directions for further reading. One feels that other literary forms would have been welcomed for exposition, but this is not so much a criticism of the volume as it is a recognition of its inevitable limitations. Indeed, this is only an echo of the wishes of the editor himself, who—one quickly senses—would happily, if the decision were his, double or triple the volume's length.

The third and final part, 'Disciplinary Connections', turns to the question of interdisciplinarity itself. The five chapters—James Vigus's 'Philosophy', Deirdre Coleman 'Politics', Rosalind Powell's 'Science,' Martin V. Clarke's 'Music' and Martin Myrone's 'Painting'—make the consistent case that our understanding of Romantic literature and religion is mutually illuminated by our understanding of the broader intellectual universe of the age. Having just recently revisited Vigus's *Platonic Coleridge* (2009) and Morton Paley's *Coleridge and the Fine Arts* (2008) for my own work, I welcomed broader contextual snapshots in the Vigus and Myrone chapters on philosophy and painting. Clarke and Coleman do an excellent job of framing their subjects in terms of both Christian and non-Christian religious influences, an inclusive decision that provides a sense of continuity with the first two parts of the volume. Finally, Powell's 'Science' chapter serves as a fascinating introduction to how 'natural philosophical discourse of this period is bound up with religious thought', (257) a thesis explored via crosscurrents between figures like Joseph Priestly,

Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Coleridge.

When I began my PhD in 2019—written, as it happens, on a topic in the idiosyncratic world of Romanticism and religion—I was baffled to discover the lack of a dedicated survey in the standard handbook or companion series. When I mentioned such an absence to a colleague, his response was to suggest that we really have no need for such a volume; that there are shelves enough to exhaust the topic. Yet I myself did (and still) echo Barbeau's conviction that the field remains nascent. I was excited to learn of plans for the *Companion*; and after approaching it with all the build-up I had created for myself, I still find myself both satisfied and encouraged by the book.

Several recent texts in the sub-discipline of literature and theology—Eric Ziolkowski's *Religion and Literature: History and Method* (2019), most notably—have begun to sound a death-knell for the field, or at least to mark a move away from Romantic sources and paradigms. Barbeau's *Companion* makes the strong case that the field remains in need of attention and expansion, both in terms of focus and approach. There will always be those who lament the 'wayward progress of [Coleridge's] posthumous reputation', those who discount Romanticism and religion as a defeated, even disingenuous, path of study. I am happy to see gathered in one place a cohort of scholars who understand the study of Romanticism and religion as a deep and unplumbed chasm in the Romantic legacy. I look forward to re-reading; I hope for the sequel.