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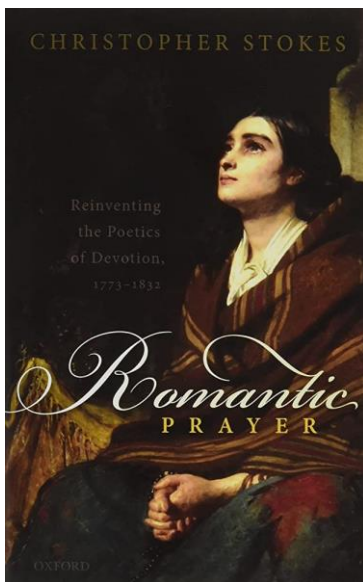
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Romantic Prayer: Reinventing the Poetics of Devotion, 1773–1832

by Christopher Stokes¹

CHRISTOPHER STOKES HAS WRITTEN a timely and important book about the shaping of poetry and prayer in Romantic literature. *Romantic Prayer: Reinventing the Poetics of Devotion, 1773–1832* discovers Romanticism as an experimental ground for reinventing English poetics of devotion. As such, Romantic poetry becomes a mode in which prayer is ‘language in flux’ (38). Romanticism ‘reinvented, beyond theism and atheism, an entire poetics of devotion’ (221). The book frames prayer as ‘a language *to* and indeed *for* God, rather than language *about* God’ (5), a language that stakes the self that utters it, and aims to show how Romantic prayer becomes an essential element within the wider secular dilemma of negotiating the legacy of Christianity.

Notably, the book is titled *Romantic Prayer*, not ‘Romanticism and Prayer’ or ‘Romantic Poetics and Prayer’. For one, the title signals toward its major premise outlined in the Introduction, that poetry and prayer ‘are deeply affined



languages’ and ‘have always shaped each other. . . It is an intimacy between languages so persistent that even Samuel Beckett contended that all poetry, in the last analysis, *is* prayer’ (10–11). Prayer becomes the cultural locus for exploring a critical moment in the histories of English piety and secular modernity.

To that end, each chapter grants new insight through careful attention to Romantic poetry and intellectual prose. Stokes’s work is a remarkably researched study. Discoveries emerge from close readings contextualized by a rich and thorough engagement with important primary materials, including popular sermons, treatises, and devotion manuals important across these five decades. *Romantic Prayer* considers the evocation of prayer, the ‘poetics of devotion’, in the work of seven poets:

William Cowper, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron.

For William Cowper, the subject of chapter two, prayer is the self in search of itself. Through rich analysis of select hymns such as ‘Self-Acquaintance’ and ‘Mourning and Longing’, this chapter examines how the lyrical ‘I’ is largely representative of the Evangelical self divided between ‘two

¹ Christopher Stokes, *Romantic Prayer: Reinventing the Poetics of Devotion, 1773–1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

levels of subjectivity' in which 'one [self] which must seek out the other' (51). In *The Task*, for example, the anxieties of Evangelical subjectivity are given relief by the reflexive recess of the landscape, a hollowed-out place in which the 'I' may safely explore radical interiority.

Stokes's work on Anna Laetitia Barbauld in chapter three demonstrates how prayer bridges the disconnection between thought and feeling in Rational Dissent. Barbauld's poetry became the ground for reconciling competing conceptions of prayer within Rational Dissent and for expanding 'the range and depth of feeling within Rational Dissenting devotion' (71). Barbauld transforms prayer as an expression of a shared devotion rooted deeply in the social world. While the lyrical 'I' in Cowper's poetry evinces a divide in the self, the voice of Barbauld's hymns is presented as a plural 'we', in which the isolated speaker (and reader) is brought into community and identification with a sympathizing Christ.

Chapter four, "Hence the necessity of Prayer": Coleridge and the Reasoning of Devotion 1794-1832', shows how radically central prayer remained for Coleridge throughout his years as a Unitarian lay minister and, later, as an Anglican. His final conception of prayer emerges from the split between Reason and Understanding. This chapter foregrounds the place of prayer as a way to follow his religious development. Approaching Coleridge in this way periodizes his verse around his thoughts about prayer, faith, and Reason. Indeed, Stokes suggests that 'his theology was constructed to ultimately justify, as he puts it in both the first and second articles of an 1830 confession of faith, "a God who heareth prayer"' (99). This suggestion is given considerable support through analysis of key passages of Coleridge's poetry and theological prose. For example, we can see Coleridge testing the bounds of Unitarian theology through the Gothic representation of prayer in poems such as 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' (1798) and 'Christabel'. Other poems, such as 'The Pains of Sleep' (1803), show how prayer became more than psychological exercise or a special mode of rationalist contemplation. For Coleridge, prayer is centered on human weakness, the doctrine of regeneration, and need for grace through justification by faith, as one letter to John Prior Estlin makes clear (*CL* II 821). In later years (1825-32), Coleridge found help in reformulating prayer through the writings of Immanuel Kant. Kant's distinction between Reason and Understanding allows Coleridge to posit prayer as something beyond rational explicability; yet Coleridge goes beyond Kant. Prayer becomes 'an act which resists the falling away of human action from the divine will, by being an act itself constituted purely by acknowledging the divine will' (122). By comparing Coleridge and Kant, this chapter reveals how 'Coleridgean prayer is not just conceptually derived *from* [Kant's distinction], but is an existential response *to* it' (126).

Chapter five focuses upon the poetry of Wordsworth, for whom prayer or *prayerfulness* is a habitual devotional disposition that undergirds much of his poetry. Although direct address to God is conspicuously absent from Wordsworth's poetry (aside from a few exceptions), his poetry evinces the

strong potential for prayer through an implicit prayerfulness. This disposition is a perpetual orientation to God. The chapter considers the mode of prayerfulness in *The Prelude* and helps dispel M. H. Abrams's idea that the 1850 *Prelude* awkwardly grafted pious sentiments into a secular text. Instead, Stokes shows how 'these 1850 changes ultimately rise up from a tone already present in the 1805' version (150).

Prayer, for Keats in chapter six, arises in a post-Christian moment. Foregrounded against the post-Christian perspective of Leigh Hunt and the broader European tradition of the radical Enlightenment, prayer emerges as an answer to the materialist question: how should the post-Christian life be lived? Prayer must stand as something more than a critique of Christianity. In Keats, prayer becomes affectivity and rite—an aesthetic of 'embodied devotion (posture, performance, rite) . . . inherent in the formal act of prayer' (170).

For Shelley and Byron, the shared subjects of the final chapter, prayer emerges in the poetry of a world after prayer. Shelley sees prayer as a political act, a formal expression of submission to a tyrannical system. The ground for formal prayer must be freed from its institutional grounds. Shelley's poetry reimagines prayerful acts and prayer-like language as grounded, instead, in love. The matter is more complex for Byron. Although his protagonists define their freedom by their refusal to pray, 'the psychological attitudes of these protagonists appear to mimic especially intense experiences of prayer to the point that they are often indistinguishable from the holy men they oppose' (199). Prayer emerges, Stokes claims, as a language within a world divested of transcendence.

The title *Romantic Prayer* signals the affinities shared between the book and other recent approaches to modernity that contend with Abrams's tendency to emphasize Romanticism as a 'displaced and reconstituted theology'.² While the book locates itself within some recent strains of this discourse (engaging with Daniel E. White, Lori Branch, and William Ulmer, among others), it lacks much explicit engagement with the idea of 'Romantic Religion' as a religiosity in its own right.³ Nevertheless, the chapters take up Abrams's idea of poetry as theology and give it serious treatment in a way that Abrams did not. The book thereby reveals prayer as the crucial dimension of the secular dilemma, and Romantic poetry becomes the testing ground for how modernity negotiated its Christian inheritance. In this way, *Romantic Prayer* will prove indispensable to anyone studying religion and poetry in the Romantic era.

² M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 29.

³ For recent treatment of the concept of 'Romantic religion', see, among others, Nancy Easterlin's *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion"* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996); Jeffrey W. Barbeau's 'Romantic Religion, Life Writing, and Conversion Narratives', in *The Wordsworth Circle* 47.1 (2016): 32–39; Alexander J. B. Hampton's *Romanticism and the Re-Invention of Modern Religion: The Reconciliation of German Idealism and Platonic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Devin Buckley's *Romanticism as Religion: Beyond the Secularization Narrative in Readings of British Romantic Poetry* (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2021).