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— Anthony Domesticco  
Assistant Professor of Literature  
Purchase College, SUNY



# The Wounded Angel

Fiction and the Religious Imagination

*Paul Lakeland*



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1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9

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# Contents

*Introduction* vii

## **Part One: The Act of Faith and the Act of Reading**

*Chapter One: What Is the Act of Faith?* 3

*Chapter Two: Faith in the Modern World* 19

*Chapter Three: Faith and Fiction* 40

## **Part Two: Religion and Literature**

*Chapter Four: The Crisis of Faith and the Promise of Grace* 71

*Chapter Five: Secular Mysticism* 99

*Chapter Six: What's Catholicism Got to Do with It?* 129

## **Part Three: The Wounded Angel**

*Chapter Seven: The Sacred and the Secular* 155

*Chapter Eight: The Communion of Saints* 176

*Chapter Nine: Saving Stories* 200

*Index of Names* 224



## Introduction

“All art of the highest order is religious in essence.”

(Simone Weil)

“Every truly great work of art orients you to what isn’t there,  
what can’t be seen or described or named.”

(Martin Scorsese)

“I’m certain that the only meanings that are worth anything in a  
work of art are those that the artist himself knows nothing about.”

(Virginia Woolf)

In the last ten years or so of the thirty-five years I have been teaching theology I have increasingly turned to works of fiction in order to focus the attention of undergraduates, who much as they often resist reading are certainly more comfortable with a novel than a theological treatise. At times I have wondered if all I am doing here is what Mark Edmundson does with literature, when he says that “humanism is the belief that it is possible for some of us, and maybe more than some, to use secular writing as the preeminent means for shaping our lives.”<sup>1</sup> But then he did also say that “the most consequential questions for an individual life . . . are related to questions of faith.”<sup>2</sup> So I have turned the question around, to ask if in fact there is much difference at all between the struggle to shape

<sup>1</sup> Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

one's life and the struggle to believe. For a person with a fully formed faith, there is no question but that it shapes the believer's life, maybe that it *is* the shape of that life, though not in a way that all growth is over and everything is closed. Faith can grow richer, and it can die. Not everyone has been gifted with this kind of faith, however, and in our day lots of people are persuaded that they would not want it, even if they are not really aware of what the "it" is. Both of these kinds of people have been present in my classes and they are in all of our lives. So in what ways might fiction be an appropriate conduit of information and inspiration in the task of being more and more fully human? How, indeed, can fiction aid faith, and—equally important—how can the elements of transcendence that lie behind the greatest fiction influence the secular reader?

During the same ten or so years I have also written four books on different aspects of the Second Vatican Council and its relationship to the role of laypeople in the church. This present book takes a very different direction, but there are two important theological takeaways from the work of the council that to a high degree inform and to some extent motivate the work of these pages. In the first place, Vatican II affirmed the ubiquity of divine grace. God is at work everywhere in the world, and while the church has a particular role to play it has no monopoly on grace. Second, following this understanding of divine grace and taking it in a slightly more radical direction, section 44 of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, was at pains to point out that while the church has much to offer the secular world, it also has much to learn from it. So while there will be no further reference to the council and no more quotations from its documents, the conviction that church and world dialogue on a level playing field in the light of grace suffuses everything that follows here.

There are two supporting roles for literature to play in people's lives: one directed more toward those for whom the



act of faith already shapes their lives, and one for those for whom it is not or not yet real.<sup>3</sup> The work of the creative artist is always somehow bumping up against transcendence, hinting at the unsayable even in the process of saying something quite definite or important that is not itself the transcendent. For the person of faith, then, fiction offers a wider perspective on the scope of grace by telling a story that integrates grace *and* sin in a way that defeats simplistic oppositions between the two. No person of faith doubts that we are all both graced and sinful, but grace and sin are so often held apart, while fiction may insist that they are present not only in the same person but perhaps even in the same act. The complex attractiveness of great fiction to the person of faith (or is it seen by some as a threat?) is that it makes it impossible to separate out sin and grace. For the person who does not possess faith in the narrow sense, fiction of course presents the same mix of sin and grace, but now in a way that makes it possible for this person to begin to see that in accepting the very fusion of sin and grace in individuals and communities there is a statement being made about loving acceptance that does not make sense in our ordinary categories and which therefore offers the invitation to look beyond simply what-is. To the person of faith, fiction supports love of the world as it is and contradicts the simplistic separation of the sacred and the profane. To the

<sup>3</sup> I have struggled with the terminology here. On the one hand, I do want to distinguish between people who would claim some kind of religious faith and those who professedly do not, but as a Catholic theologian I work with the conviction that God's saving grace is at work in all people of whatever religious, spiritual, or plainly secular starting point. I also do not want to suggest that "secular" people are entirely without something that even they might recognize as a kind of faith. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra said, "Be faithful to the earth!" Moreover, the term "people of faith," which I use a great deal in what follows, lets atheists be atheists but is not always adequate to the variations among people of faith. So at times I will introduce the word "Christian" and occasionally "Catholic" to make my point more precisely. In the context, all of this will hopefully be clear.

searcher or the agnostic, fiction teases with intimations of a beyond that may be either unnerving or intriguing but cannot be ignored.

If we understand fiction in this way, then we should be able to articulate a theology of literature, in particular a theology of fiction. This will most certainly not mean that we will be singling out professedly theological novels or those written by people of faith, still less novels that have either an open or hidden agenda to make a point about religion. The kinds of works that will claim our attention, as we will see at length in what follows, are those that independently of their authors' purposes or their subject matter bring the reader into an interpretive space where he or she is creatively engaged with transcendence, by whatever name. Religious reflection on the ways in which fiction brings the reader to an encounter with transcendence is itself a theology of literature. The fictions that we entertain may be stories of heroism or of evil, of greed or of self-denial, of love or of hatred, but it is what they inspire in the reader, not what they contain in themselves, that makes them fodder for religious reflection.

*The Wounded Angel*, which provides the title and the cover illustration of the book, is a fairly well-known and somewhat mysterious picture painted by the Finnish artist Hugo Simberg in 1903. Originally Simberg left the picture untitled, and although he eventually gave it its present name, he always studiously resisted offering any explanation of its components. Indeed, he insisted that it was to be interpreted as each viewer thought best, which allows for anyone to classify it as "just a picture of two boys in some kind of public park carrying an angel on a stretcher," or alternatively to dismiss it as "needlessly obscure." No doubt, there have been some viewers who have come to one or the other conclusion, but over the century since it was painted the consensus has been that there is more to it than just what you see, though what that "more" is will not be easy to pin down. Nor, given Simberg's instructions,

will we be tempted to go looking for “the painter’s intentions.” If he had any, he is not telling. For this reason at least, *The Wounded Angel* offers us a fine opportunity to test how attentiveness to the text, for the painting is a text, allows each of us to interpret it to our own satisfaction and so to recognize the existence of the “more” or the mystery to which Martin Scorsese alludes in the quotation at the head of this introduction.

Hugo Simberg’s painting hints at many of the issues we shall be considering. In the first place it points to my sense that faith and everyday life in today’s world suffer alike from the impoverishment of the imagination. *Why* our imaginations are diminished is not the subject of this book, but *that* they are seems to me unassailable. The angel can certainly be understood as an icon of religious faith, and the wound as the product of our failure to imagine. The angel falls to earth because we fail to buoy it up on our faith, and the accusatory glance of the boy who takes up the rear is evidence enough that we are the ones under judgment. One of the reasons that religion in the West is under strain is that it is so much busier trying to retain the past than it is to embrace the present and look to the future. One of the consequences of the way we live now is that there is little time and seemingly equally little taste for attention to the works of the imagination, or for that matter for the challenging discipline of spiritual practices. Movies and television are preferred to literary fiction, and fiction to poetry. In an age of sound bites and short attention spans, both prayer and literary appreciation are luxuries that the majority of people seem to feel they can live without. But we do so at our peril, because somehow they threaten our sense of self. This is the wounded angel of our imaginations that, I believe, fiction can go a long way to healing.

There are several steps in the elaboration of this theology of fiction. First of all, we need to develop a more nuanced understanding of what is happening in the act of faith than

we might usually employ. Part 1 of the book has three chapters, the first two exploring the idea of the act of faith from the medieval argument between Aquinas and Ockham through neo-scholastic and neo-Thomist efforts to reexpress it, to the theories of the imagination in Romantic literature, to more recent twentieth-century formulations of what is involved in the act of faith. These chapters are the most technically theological in the book, and those who are either uninterested in or allergic to the history of theology will probably skip over them or skim them. The important thing to grasp is that the history of the understanding of religious faith is one in which the relationship of the intellect and the imagination has been much debated and that in the end the priority is given to the imagination, without rejecting an intellectual component. When we come to see that the imagination plays a central role, the way is cleared to compare the process to that which takes place in the act of reading, and this is the subject of chapter 3. There is structural isomorphism between the two acts and substantive similarity in the way in which each reaches out to a beyond or an ultimate that is not ever fully accessible. While some of this chapter probably contains more literary theory than some readers will want, it is a critical chapter for establishing the basic thesis of the book, that the act of faith and the act of reading fiction have much in common structurally and have much to contribute to one another substantively.

The three chapters of part 2 explore in more detail some specific relationships between fiction and faith. In chapter 4 we begin from the reflections of Nathan Scott Jr. on literature and transcendence and then raise some questions about the contemporary impoverishment of the imagination, both religious and secular, before turning to an analysis of Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* to give more concreteness to what has thus far been somewhat abstract. Chapter 5 takes up the question of just how a novel that sets out to avoid "deep questions" can nevertheless succeed in raising them. Here we go from examining James Wood's theories on the demise of the

sacred in modern fiction to a close look at Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as, in some sense, a refutation of the idea that transcendence can be sidelined entirely, even in a simple stream of consciousness. Finally in this section, chapter 6 revolves around the challenging question of what it means to talk about Catholic novels or a Catholic sensibility in literature, wondering in particular if the changing shape of religious belonging makes the category less than helpful today.

In the third and final part of the book we address directly a theology of literature. We begin in chapter 7 by turning to a more extended consideration of Hugo Simberg's painting, *The Wounded Angel*, which can help us to think more clearly about the question of the interconnections of the religious and the secular as well as the tensions that exist between them. This tense relationship is examined in two novels, Jim Harrison's *The Big Seven* and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Chapter 8 looks at how modern literature complicates our notions of holiness. We trace this first through a brief comparison of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* and Shusaku Endo's riff on similar issues in *Silence*. We then stretch our understanding of where we might find holiness by exploring *Bailey's Café* by Gloria Naylor and the detective fiction of the Canadian author Louise Penny, whose mysterious world of Three Pines provides a textbook example of a community of sin and grace. Finally, in chapter 9 we turn to the question of how the substance of a fiction relates to the substance of faith. In the previous chapters our attention has principally been on the formal relationship between faith and fiction, but now we conclude by asking about how the plot of fiction relates to the plot of our own lives. For a Christian, the plot of the individual's life is somehow informed by the "plot" contained in the whole history of salvation or maybe more commonly in the plot of the life of Jesus, the paschal mystery of death and new life. We argue that fiction and life alike exhibit tensions between different understandings of happiness. There is the hedonistic search for the satisfaction of desires, and there is eudaemonism,

the conviction that true happiness has more to do with being more and more fully who I am. And we bring the chapter and the book to a conclusion by illustrating this claim in three contemporary novels that represent in turn a more religious sensibility, a spiritual but not explicitly religious orientation, and a plainly secular character. If the argument works it will enlighten nonbelievers about the substance of lives of faith beyond dogma and narrowly religious rhetoric. And it will alert people of faith to their own tendencies toward imagining the scope of divine grace to be something much more constricted than in fact it is. Faith and fiction alike deal with a greater mystery than either fully appreciates, and each has much more in common with the other than it suspects.



As always there are many institutions and individuals to thank for their assistance in various forms. First place must go to Fairfield University for the granting of a sabbatical leave and for the Robert Wall Award, both of which together enabled me to take a whole year off from teaching in order to work on this book. Second, I have to thank Michelle Ross and Mary Crimmins, who have kept the Center for Catholic Studies running as smoothly as ever, despite my much more erratic presence. Fr. Michael Fahey, SJ, scholar-in-residence at Fairfield University, read the whole manuscript carefully and made many invaluable suggestions, accompanied by equally important enthusiastic encouragement. Dr. John Slotemaker gave me invaluable help with some of the niceties of medieval thought, though the errors that remain are my own. James Crampsey, my Scottish Jesuit friend of half a century, deserves the credit for listening to my early meanderings about the proposed book and suggesting the painting of the wounded angel as something that might be helpful to me. Evidently, Jim, it was! My longtime friend and wonderful colleague, Dr. John

Thiel, has also read much of the text and, as always, has been unstinting in his careful attention to the argument, even when he might suspect that I would not have been pleased to hear all of what he had to say. We have shared work between ourselves for thirty-five years now, and I venture to say that neither of us has been the worse for it; I have certainly benefited enormously. This time around I am especially grateful for his urgings about the content of the final chapter. Portions of the manuscript have also been the subject of collegial discussions, with my colleagues in the Religious Studies Department at Fairfield, with the New Haven Theological Discussion Group, and with the members of the New York Area Workgroup for Constructive Theology. I am indebted to these groups for equal measure of thoughtful reading and consummate patience. My students in two courses I have taught off and on over the past decade, "Saints and Sinners" and "Belief and Unbelief," have helped me think through much of this material, even when they didn't know that was what they were doing. Hans Christoffersen at Liturgical Press has been his usual patient and affirming self. Amy Ambrosio, the mother of a former student, gave me a huge amount of help thinking about the old TV series *Northern Exposure*, and the fact that in the end I wrote little about it and will have disappointed her does not mean that I did not appreciate her insights. Beth Palmer, my wife and best friend, has left me to it for the most part but suffered through long efforts at clarification of thought on our frequent afternoon walks. And finally, since this may conceivably be the last book I will complete as a full-time teacher at Fairfield University, I want to record my appreciation for the community of teachers and scholars with whom I have had the privilege to work, laugh, and occasionally cry over these many years. They have been the most generous of colleagues, and I couldn't have done what I have done without them. Though, of course, the errors and weaknesses are entirely of my own creation.





# Part One ■



## *The Act of Faith and the Act of Reading*



## What Is the Act of Faith?

### *Aquinas, Ockham, and A. J. Ayer: What Counts as Evidence?*

Let us begin with a little imaginative exercise. We are going to eavesdrop on a conversation taking place in a quiet and little-frequented corner of heaven, where there is a room that contains every creature comfort that a medieval mind could imagine. Of course it does, because this is heaven, though it is heaven as it could be imagined in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. No iPads, no memory foam. Beautifully carved but distinctly un-upholstered chairs sit around a solid oak table. Because this is heaven the daytime temperature is a steady 22 degrees Celsius (God, like most of the human race, eschews Fahrenheit). Which is just as well, since window glass wasn't invented for several more centuries, and the stretched animal skins that served to cover windows by the end of the fourteenth century kept out most of the light as well as the draft. There are two men sitting together in this room, one of them sufficiently well-upholstered himself that the absence of cushioning on the chairs is a matter of no moment. This is Thomas Aquinas (1225–1276), and his conversation partner is the much skinnier Englishman, William of Ockham (1280–1348). They could meet only in heaven because Ockham was born four years after Aquinas died. They speak in Latin, the language of the learned, but we will imagine them using Ockham's own

tongue in its modern form since the English he spoke, when he spoke it, would be barely comprehensible to us today. Let us listen in for a few minutes.

**Aquinas:** *I wanted to get us together, William, because from our vantage point in eternity we can see only too well what kind of a mess subsequent history has made of our philosophical and theological writings. I am quite horrified when I look at my own treatment at the hands of those whom I thought were my followers and who clearly thought they were saying what I had said—though perhaps they were actually saying what they wished I had said. Or even saying what they thought themselves and using my authority, such as it is, to authorize their strange conclusions.*

**Ockham:** *A good idea, Thomas. I cannot tell you how upset I am by the way in which my work was taken over by nominalists and eventually resulted in that terrible fiasco produced in the mid-twentieth century by Alfred Ayer, an Oxford scholar, God help us, and an arrant atheist. How the old place has gone to the dogs!*

**Aquinas:** *Take this question of the knowledge of God and how it is involved in the act of faith. I have never argued that human reason can know much about God, only that it can be predisposed to receive divine revelation by arriving, through observation and logic, at a sense that God exists and that God must have certain perfections to be God. Faith does not lie in the intellect, but there must be something in the intellect if the will is going to be able to lead the intellect to accept God.*

**Ockham:** *Well, of course, but if I may say so, your subsequent interpreters can be excused to a degree for making this mistake because you do indeed insist that the intellect receives the data of faith as genuine evidence about God. I have never been able to see revelation as evidence, because evidence comes from intellectual activity, and there is no human intellectual activity in revelation. This is God's self-revelation, and all we can know truly about God comes from revelation, not from human reason.*

**Aquinas:** *Yes, but that's not quite the problem. The question of whether our knowledge of God comes from revelation is not at issue. My thoughts about natural knowledge of God are fragile and, frankly, not extensive. No, the true question is whether the divine revelation has the status of evidence. I think it does, and I know you disagree. Which may indeed be why your thinking ended up in logical positivism. How far is it from your view that there are only three ways in which we can attain knowledge of anything—that it must be “self-evident or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture”—to Ayer's position that only statements whose truth can be verified have any meaning, and so empirically unverifiable statements, which include ethical, metaphysical, and religious claims, are simply meaningless? Your inclusion of Scripture, which Ayer would obviously reject, seems to leave you open to being charged simultaneously with positivism and fideism. The first is a mistake and the second is a heresy.*

**Ockham:** *You know well enough that this is not my position. All I wish to claim is that the knowledge of God derived from divine revelation (a) is the only knowledge of God we can have and (b) does not qualify as knowledge in the normal human sense of the term because we have no evidence, other than the authority of revelation itself. So perhaps we are not so far apart as history has judged us to be.*

This imaginary exchange brings us right into the heart of the question about faith. In order to be able to believe, do we have to have some idea of God's existence before belief is possible, or is this kind of “natural knowledge of God” simply impossible? Can the human reason unaided by revelation arrive at any knowledge at all of God? The affirmative response to this question is usually classified as “natural theology,” that is, theology that stands outside the knowledge that revelation provides to the person of faith. Its classic exposition is in Aquinas's work, and the best example can be found in his

relatively well-known arguments for the existence of God. In each, human reason unaided by revelation can conclude to the existence of God through either a mental thought process or through reflection on experience. To take the best-known of all, the argument from design or what came to be known in a later era as the “clockmaker argument,” we can deduce from the complexity of the universe the necessity of its having a first principle from which this complexity is derived, and “this we call God.”<sup>1</sup>

If Aquinas and many others before and since have believed that a modest amount of information about God—existence and attributes—can be ascertained through the use of reason unaided by revelation, the opposite point of view has since at least the time of Ockham been staunchly maintained. Ockham insists that knowledge of God can only be derived from revelation. It is clear to Ockham that we cannot know God directly in the way in which we know a table, for example, because we cannot have direct experience of God through the use of our unaided intellect. God is not an object of experience in that way. We can only know God because God has revealed the self of God to us. For both Aquinas and Ockham, as we may have discovered by the little eavesdropping we have done, faith is a gift of God that is not dependent on or somehow achieved through the collaboration of human reason. But Aquinas does insist that knowledge of God is truly “knowledge” (*scientia*), while it cannot be for Ockham, since he thinks that knowledge exists only where there is evidence, and the truths of Christianity are not matters for which there is any evidence other than the word of God.<sup>2</sup> For Aquinas, the word of God in Scrip-

<sup>1</sup> Aquinas’s views on the possibility of this kind of knowledge should not be overstated. See *Contra Gentiles* I/4 for his clearly minimalist optimism about the extent of reason’s capacity to know God.

<sup>2</sup> On this, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *William of Ockham*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987). Especially important here is chapter 22, “Faith and Reason,” 961–1010.

ture and the authority of the Church produce knowledge, while Ockham insists that we would have to have evident knowledge about God, and this kind of knowledge is not available to us. For Ockham, there are only three ways in which we can attain knowledge of anything. It must be “self-evident or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

The first two of Ockham’s three ways of knowing sound remarkably similar to the criteria A. J. Ayer laid down in *Language, Truth and Logic*, though the third places him in a different world altogether and enables us at this point to paint a picture of what is at stake in the debates over faith in more recent times. There are, on the one hand, the late nineteenth-century disputes between neo-scholastics and neo-Thomists over the degree to which the act of faith is an intellectual act and, if it is to some degree, whether this does not mean that there can be a kind of “natural faith” distinct from true, supernatural faith. And then there are the approaches of both Catholic and Protestant thinkers that stress the spiritual or sometimes even the affective inspiration of faith.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, faith begins and perhaps ends in a personal experience of God in Jesus Christ. While Catholic thinkers will be more likely to go on to see this personal experience leading to the acceptance of the authority of the Church in pronouncing dogmatically, Protestant voices are more likely to hear the authority of Scripture

<sup>3</sup> Sent. I, dist. 30, q. 1. I am grateful for clarifications suggested to me on this point by my colleague John Slotemaker, though any remaining errors are, of course, my own. What is at stake here is the definition of *scientia*. Ockham believes we can know things, but in the case of knowledge of God, only through revelation. Thomas imagines he is faithful to Aristotle’s idea of knowledge, but only by expanding what “knowledge” can mean beyond the Aristotelian categories.

<sup>4</sup> Whose classical exposition is the view of Friedrich Schleiermacher that faith begins in “a feeling of absolute dependence.” See *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 12–18.

generating the assent of faith, or in later and more liberal forms, to rely on feeling as its basis. Like the differences between such as Aquinas and Ockham, however, agreement is much greater and more fundamental than disagreement. All agree that there is both an intellectual and a spiritual (for want of a better word) component to the experience of faith. The dispute is over how to balance the two.

Though Aquinas and Ockham differ only to a degree, the issues they raise open up questions of deep significance for thinking about faith today. In particular, they constrain us to think about the *source* of faith. If we imagine with Aquinas that there is a component, however limited, of unaided intellectual activity in arriving at some knowledge of God, then there is some basis for the belief that dialogue with the secular world about religious realities is quite possible. Whoever is possessed of intellect is at least in principle open to persuasion that there is a God and that this God possesses certain attributes. Indeed, lying behind the entirety of Aquinas's writings is the conviction that Christian philosophy and theology are perfecting the work of the great pagan philosophers. If we side with Ockham and are persuaded that all knowledge of God and hence any faith is supernatural, deriving from a supernatural gift of grace, then we may value the pagan philosophers but we will see a great divide between what today we would call secular and religious thought.<sup>5</sup> Both thinkers, of course, were in complete agreement that the fullness of Christian faith lies in a free and unmerited gift of God and is not the fruit of human intellect. But in their different ways each competes for the attention of today's Christian. Ockham's belief that faith begins and ends in God's self-revelation to us appeals to our individualism, but

<sup>5</sup> On the relation of both Aquinas and Ockham to the legacy of the pagan philosophers, see Alfred J. Freddoso, "Ockham on Faith and Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 326–49.



Aquinas's insistence that there is the possibility of continuity between pagan and Christian philosophy resonates with today's preference for understanding faith in more universalistic categories. Ockham gives us God's free gift and Aquinas gives us a way to think about the salvation of the nonbeliever. On the other hand, removing natural knowledge of God from the equation, as Ockham does, takes away any possibility of thinking of Plato or Aristotle as Christians *avant la lettre*, which some at least might think returns to them their intellectual integrity. It also dramatically saps the energy from apologetics, which classically has its focus on persuading the unbeliever to believe.

When we consider more recent Catholic and Protestant attempts to clarify the act of faith we see that they are all concerned with *Christian* faith and, in the case of neo-scholastic and neo-Thomist writings, of a distinctly Catholic version of that faith, as indeed were the medievals. To anticipate for a moment, thinkers as different in their outlook on St. Thomas as Jean Bainvel<sup>6</sup> and Pierre Rousselot<sup>7</sup> would be in entire agreement that the dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church are an important component in a fully actualized faith. This would not suit a Protestant perspective, but the insistence on a component of external authority is just as present in its more evangelical forms, this time in the dependence on biblical revelation. What the two have in common is a deep suspicion of purely private faith, that is, of a more mystical or "spiritual" form of religious experience. Because it eschews external authority, mysticism escapes control, whether that of the Scripture principle or that of ecclesiastical magisterium. While none of these thinkers would have expressed themselves openly about the status of non-Christian faith, if any such thing would have

<sup>6</sup> Jean Bainvel, *Faith and the Act of Faith* (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1926).

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Rousselot, *The Eyes of Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

crossed their minds, we shall in time have to raise the question ourselves of what might be the status of such faith once we put aside the humanly constructed boundaries of ecclesiastical authority or Scripture. Much more close to home, there is also the question of what any of them would have made of the overused but still largely accurate slogan of millennial perspectives on faith, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious."

### *The Romantic Imagination*

As we begin to think about the phenomenon of the human imagination, it might be good to do one more little piece of eavesdropping. Since everyone gets the heaven they imagine, it will be no surprise to encounter Mary Shelley (1797–1851), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), and many other Romantics spending their eternity in an Alpine meadow, even if it has the quintessentially English River Wye flowing gently through it and a beautiful ruined abbey that might seem to the trained eye a little too Northern Gothic for Switzerland. Details, details. Let's listen in:

**Shelley:** *You know, Coleridge, I am not too sure that Wordsworth wouldn't be happier off on his own somewhere. His "sublime" is so English! Pretty, even quaint, and giving rise to solemn thoughts no doubt, but perhaps just a little too provincial. Too many daffodils, not enough opium, I say. My Alpine setting in Frankenstein, you will remember, was a place of good and evil. It paid the rent, but I must say that I am delighted not to be worried that a monster might appear to spoil our lunch.*

**Coleridge:** *My dear Mary, I agree about Wordsworth, and that's the reason that relations between us cooled off considerably as I grew a little older and wiser. He didn't take too kindly to my efforts in Biographia Literaria to put his minor genius in its place by explaining that much of what passed for imagination was, in fact, mere fancy. I seem to recall him murmuring, "damn-*

ing with faint praise" or some such phrase. All I meant to suggest was that his extraordinary talent sometimes drifted away from the creative genius that consists in bringing into the world a new vision of the whole and is not to be confused with the pretty ornamentation of this or that detail.

**Shelley:** *I have always wondered if you would have been equally critical of my work. There is a great deal of mere fancy in my picture of the monster, but a lot of the more serious stuff I think I drew in some way from your influence. Ever since as a little girl I hid behind the parlor sofa to hear you recite your "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" I have been slowly coming to appreciate the foolish bravado of those scientists who imagine they have the power of life over death. So the details of my story may count as fancy—and whose do not?—but the point of it all, the moral of the story, is something I meant to be much larger. "What does it really mean to be human?" I was asking. "And what power should and does the human have the right to exercise over the limits of humanity?" Before my time, you have to admit.*

**Coleridge:** *Well, of course, that's why your little story has survived so long and has inspired so many others, not all of them laudable I am afraid, and none of them up to the imaginative standard you set. Imagination is a possession of all human beings, even if they do not all take full advantage of it. But the artist is the one who can create a narrative that is its own thing but at the same time resonates with that sense of the whole that the human imagination at its best can feel, if it cannot always grasp it. Indeed, the work of artistic genius is most often the way that those who do not possess the genius can come close to the imaginative grasp of the whole that brings enormous spiritual satisfaction. That is, I would put it even stronger, our encounter with the sublime, the absolute, what others might even call the divine.*

**Shelley:** *Poor old Wordsworth talked about it a lot, wrote about it a lot, but didn't quite get it, I think I hear you saying. It's like that phrase that "professors of creative writing," whatever that*

*is, invented to encourage their students, long after we had graduated to our Alpine meadow. "Show, don't tell," I think it was.*

**Coleridge:** *Quite. Which is why, by the way—and this is between us—I wish people read my poetry more and my critical writings less. All those letters and notebooks published. Too bad! Like poor old Emerson, though he didn't have much in the way of poetry to distract people. And as for Biographia Literaria, how I wish I had never started it. Though I am pleased that my distinction between fancy and imagination has survived, even if I did crib it from some minor German philosopher. I hope he doesn't show up here in our Alpine meadow.*

When we ask about the imagination, under the influence of Romantic poets and writers like Mary Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the very first thing we need to do is to disabuse ourselves of the common or garden conversational use of the word. "Oh, come on, there's no such thing; it's just your imagination," or—at an elite level—Bertrand Russell's injunction to "imagine a golden mountain, now imagine a golden mountain existing—is there any difference?" We can encounter, then, in the most conversational of everyday language and in some of the most arcane twentieth-century philosophizing—a British analytical philosopher attempting a disproof of Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God—plainly erroneous use of the word "imagination." In Coleridgean terminology that we will shortly explore a little further, what my unlettered friend and Bertrand Russell have in common is mistaking for imagination what is, in fact, mere fancy. In working-class northern England a couple of generations ago, and perhaps still now, they got it right. If you were to throw out to someone a far-fetched idea or an entrancing but unlikely possibility, like dangling before them all the good things that might follow from winning the lottery, a dreamy look might come over the face, accompanied by the words,

“Eeeh, fancy that!” In other words, how wonderful it would be if that were the case, but it’s clearly not.

It may seem a bit of a leap from Aquinas and Ockham to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the company of Romantic poets, but if we are going to trace the development of the idea of religious faith into the twentieth century, it is not such a detour as we might imagine. While the Romantics taken as a whole were not exactly textbook Christians, they certainly had a sense of the sublime, the absolute, even at times the divine. They were, in fact, the first post-Enlightenment women and men of letters who confronted transcendence without embarrassment and wrote of religion without contempt. They may have found inspiration in the heavens rather than in Heaven, and certainly not in the Bible, but they were possessed of what more traditionally religious people might consider to be the single most important of human qualities, a sense of transcendence, of something far greater and more mysterious than our puny human selves. The enemy of the Romantic spirit is not religion, not even Christianity, but the far different spirit of Enlightenment rationalism. In this regard, they could unite with Christians in defense against a common enemy, and they provide an excellent starting point for examining the common purposes of literature and religion.

Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*<sup>8</sup> has to be one of the most frustrating books one could encounter. It divides neatly into two halves, which do not hold together well. The first half is a pure tease, a promise to unfold a theory of the imagination that never materializes. The second part, mostly about Wordsworth, becomes so interesting to the writer that he forgets what he set out to do in the first half. Halfway into the book, on the verge of getting to the point, Coleridge invents a letter from a friend to whom Coleridge claims he has sent the manuscript of his great theory of the imagination. In effect, he has the

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: n.p., 1817), 95–96.

friend advise him that the theory is too complicated for most human beings to follow, and he should drop it, at least for now. Barely disguising his relief, Coleridge says that he will instead offer a short version of the argument. This turns out to be two paragraphs, very famous paragraphs in the history of Romantic literary criticism but also a tease, though of a different kind. Having cajoled his reader through a lengthy hundred pages or so with the promise of a theory that doesn't appear, he substitutes a brief and positively gnomic utterance that has had a huge and probably disproportionate effect on subsequent thinkers.<sup>9</sup> Coleridge begins by distinguishing the primary and secondary imaginations from "mere fancy." The primary, he says, "I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." The secondary imagination is "an echo of the former," which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create. . . . It struggles to idealize and to unify." "Fancy, on the contrary," he continues, "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites" and "is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space." This is about all we get, together with the never-fulfilled promise of a "critical essay on the uses of the supernatural in poetry."

Coleridge's brief remarks on the imagination have occasioned an enormous outpouring of efforts to explain his ideas and account for their influence. The best source for cutting through the forest of arguments and counterarguments, however, may actually be the words of Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote in an unsigned review that "Imagination is, possibly, in man, a lesser degree of the creative power in God." "The sentiment

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough debunking of the originality of Coleridge's theory of the imagination that nevertheless recognizes the influence his words had in channeling German philosophy to an Anglo world that did not read German, see Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 72–102.

of Poesy," he writes, "is the sense of the beautiful, and of the sublime, and of the mystical." It is that which gives rise to aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty and of the power and majesty of the heavens and, inextricably intermingled with this, "the unconquerable desire—to know." Poetry, then, is "the practical result in certain individuals" of the sentiment of Poesy. This practical result is the secondary imagination of which Coleridge speaks. The capacity of imaginative genius in some creative individuals that enables them to fashion a work of art is dependent on but also builds on the capacity of the imagination that is the possession of all human beings. But the gestation period that the secondary imagination requires to work on the primary may be quite extended and is never instantaneous. We shall shortly encounter something very similar in the work of Henry James, when he discloses in his preface to *The American* in the New York Edition of his novels that he had come up with an idea for a novel and "must have dropped it for a time into the deep well of unconscious cerebration."<sup>10</sup> James, being no Romantic, substitutes a suspicious-sounding neuroscientific reference to brain activity, not to the divine or the sublime. Quite unlike his psychologist brother William, who was content with something much more Romantic.<sup>11</sup>

While Romanticism is sometimes dismissed as airy-fairy mental meandering among nature images and soft-sounding quasi-mysticism, it is more accurately understood as a corrective to the materialism of much of Enlightenment thought,

<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, n.d.), 1055. I am indebted for this reference to James Volant Baker, *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 122.

<sup>11</sup> For a trenchant discussion of the misreading of neuroscience, see Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015), especially the essay on "Humanism," 1–16.

without returning to traditional religious concepts.<sup>12</sup> Looking past the harshness of Coleridge's judgment on Wordsworth, the great poet was trying to capture a sense of that which lies beyond the individual or even beneath the natural world. It is easy for us to label it "the transcendent," and so long as we do not smuggle back in the Jewish or Christian God, not at all inaccurate. The domestic beauty of the River Wye on which Wordsworth meditated impressed him with a sense of human insignificance over against the whole. In the mechanism and materialism of Enlightenment thought there is a movement toward the neuroscientific temptation to imagine that when we can identify brain wave patterns in human thought processes, we have explained human thought. The Romantic resistance to this reductionism does not depend on a traditional belief in a deity and has little if any of the ethical dimension of Christian faith, but it is one with theological thinking in its commitment to a sense of a whole that exists independently of human thought processes but which is encountered through the human imagination. As William Blake put it in a clear challenge to all forms of positivism, "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity . . . and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself." Moreover, he wrote, "I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination."

For romantic thinkers like Blake, Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, the human imagination is the supreme faculty we possess, though the artist has a particular responsibility to it. It certainly does not replace or displace reason; on the con-

<sup>12</sup> Eugene McCarragher traces in excellent fashion what he calls the "sacramental dialect" of Romanticism in "We Have Never Been Disenchanted," *The Hedgehog Review* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 86–100.



trary, it enables reason to see clearly.<sup>13</sup> The Romantics in general, but none more clearly than Blake, were able to distinguish between an instrumental reason that reduced everything to mere information and a more dynamic form of reason that conspired with the imagination to see through appearances to some grasp of what lay beyond. This imaginative capacity is a universal human possession, they believed. But as we have seen in the work of Coleridge, the artist is the one who possesses the gift of quickening the human imagination. The creative imagination of the artist produces a work of art that enables and enriches the everyday imagination. Through their work we are all led to some apprehensions of the infinite or the sublime that lies beyond the mere appearances of this present world. When we describe it this way, we can see why the term “sacramental” is particularly accurate to describe the Romantics’ view of reality. It would, however, be a mistake to dichotomize this world and the real world, as big a mistake as a Christian would make who thought of God as a reality only to be encountered beyond this world. The imagination finds the holy, if we may be allowed to use this word, both the holy of Christian faith and the holy of the Romantic imagination, present in this world and met through the powers of the human imagination.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church saw a return to a form of what came to be known as neo-scholasticism in Catholic orthodoxy. This represented a return to understanding faith as a cognitive act as much if not more than one of the will or the imagination, supported by a deeply unhistorical appropriation of the work of St. Thomas. When the reaction to this approach began to set in at the end of the nineteenth century, both in the highly suspect activities of what Pope Pius X would call “Modernism . . . the mother of all heresies,” and in a new reading of Thomas as a product of his

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

historical context, it became time for a new approach to understanding faith as a product of a healthy relationship between intellect and imagination, a nascent theory of the act of faith whose development we shall track in the next chapter.