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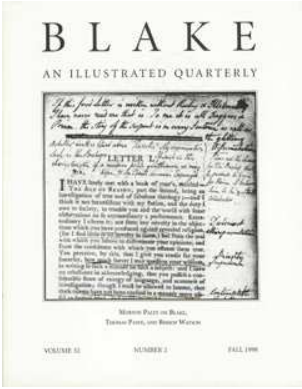

R E V I E W

Robert M. Ryan, The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824

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R E V I E W S

Robert M. Ryan. *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 24. Cambridge: University Press, 1997. Pp. ix + 202. $59.95.

Reviewed by SHEILA A. SPECTOR

In his 1972 review of M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, J. Hillis Miller argued: "Abrams' clinging metaphysical presuppositions obscure a clear vision of what is most problematical in the historical sequence he describes." Giving rise to the critical attitudes that would dominate the academy for the next quarter century, Miller complained that by relying on "the grand tradition of modern humanistic scholarship," Abrams overlooked "[t]his alternative scheme, with its various aspects or motifs, [that have] always been present as a shadow or reversed mirror image within the Western tradition, even in the texts Abrams discusses." Consequently, he concluded, Abrams's "failure to recognize its pervasive presence in texts both traditional and modern is perhaps the chief limitation of *Natural Supernaturalism*."

Apparently responding to Miller's suggestion, during the past 25 years or so, subsequent critics have explored any number of "alternative schemes," subjecting literature of the romantic period to every manner of analysis—excluding the metaphysical, that is. For in the years since 1972, there have been few, if any, book-length studies of romantic "metaphysics," at least not until Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824*. Picking up where *Natural Supernaturalism* left off, Ryan has inverted Abrams's assertion that "in the Romantic consciousness revolutionary optimism gave way to 'revolutionary disillusionment or despair,'" arguing that "[i]nstead of lamenting Romanticism as a political retreat, then, one may more usefully see it as a creative and effective engagement in the contemporary religious crisis, an engagement that was perceived as having far-reaching consequences in the political order" (5). In this study of Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Mary Shelley, and Percy Shelley, Ryan

> examine[s] the literature of the Romantic period as a conscious attempt by a group of writers to influence the religious transformation that was taking place in

> their society. They all saw that they could have an important cultural impact by altering the character of the system of religion that was increasing its hold as the dominant ideology and idealism of their time. I call what they attempted a reformation because, after periods of youthful iconoclasm, they all finally became more interested in purifying or redefining England's national religion than in attempting to eradicate it. (7)

In his approach to his texts—specifically *Jerusalem, The Excursion, Cain, Endymion, Frankenstein,* and *Prometheus Unbound*—Ryan deliberately places himself within the Abrams tradition of humanistic scholarship, thus providing the necessary continuity for a critical strand that has been neglected since the publication of *Natural Supernaturalism.* Unfortunately, he also, like Abrams, has restricted himself to "the grand tradition of modern humanistic scholarship," excluding almost any reference to "the alternative schemes" that we now know, from our own poststructuralist vantage point, to be not only not "shadow or reversed," but, in fact, integral parts of the larger, more grand, because more complex, English tradition of romantic literature.

The Romantic Reformation provides a fairly conventional analysis, containing an introduction and seven chapters, the first delineating the cultural context and each of the remaining six devoted to one of the writers being discussed. In his introduction, Ryan establishes the need for his study of the social and political impact of religion during the romantic period. Although, as he notes, it is traditional to interpret the romantic disengagement as a form of disillusionment, he believes that it more rightly reflected the recognition that as the mediator between political and economic imperatives, religion could provide an effective arena for expression. Consequently, "all the poets committed themselves resolutely to this work of cultural critique and rehabilitation" (4). In fact, Ryan believes that "The career of each of the Romantic poets has a clearer outline when seen as an attempt to define a religious position in dialogue or conflict with the dominant belief system in their society" (9).

As Ryan explains in the first chapter, "A Sect of Dissenters," religious liberty was prominent among the liberal campaigns waged during the Romantic period. Spurred on by the growing numbers of Protestant Dissenters and Evangelicals, English religious debate revolved around the effects of the Act of Toleration, passed in 1688. Originally intended to appease non-Anglicans, the Act permitted Dissenters freedom of worship, though it stopped short of granting them citizenship. By the late eighteenth century, the number and political strength of the non-Anglicans had grown to the point that they were clamoring not simply for toleration but for religious liberty, and ultimately, for dismantling the monopoly exercised by the established church. During this period, political debate was dominated by religious interests, for contrary to common belief, it was not the church which required the state's protection, but the other way around—the government needed the church to restrain the people. Consequently, the religious disputes threatened the very stability of the nation. Within this context, those romantics who wrote about religious matters were effectively taking up the agenda of the Dissenters, attempting to reform Christianity so that it might better fulfill its own ideals.

After establishing this context, Ryan turns to Blake. Chapter 2, "Blake's Orthodoxy," attempts to resolve "the paradox of Blake the anti-Christian Christian, the religious reformer who has been mistaken for an atheist by so many careful readers" (78), hypothesizing that "Blake took it as his primary poetic mission to combat the corrupt, deformed Christianity that served as the state religion of Britain and to articulate an alternative, more authentic, radically reformed and purified version of the religion of Jesus" (44). By defining Protestant orthodoxy in the broadest possible terms, as belief in "the divine humanity of Jesus Christ and his redemption of the fallen human race," Ryan then asserts that "by the standard of his time Blake seems to have been quite adequately orthodox in regard to the essential core of the faith" (53). Confusion over Blake's attitude towards religion has arisen from a misapprehension of Blake's dialectic. While it is customary to believe that in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* Blake takes the devil's side, Ryan views the voices of the devil and the angels as contrary extremes, with the truth lying somewhere between the two. He argues that Blake used the dialectic in this way in order to defamiliarize an orthodoxy that might otherwise be overlooked.

Relying primarily on Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947), Bloom's *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (1963), and Paley's *Continuing City: William Blake's* Jerusalem (1983), Ryan provides a conventional reading of *Jerusalem* to support his thesis about Blake's orthodoxy, in which he interprets the prophecy as "the story of the fall and redemption of mankind, or Albion," and associates Jerusalem with "fallen mankind's memory or understanding of Jesus, the Divine Humanity" (60, and n45). Vala and Rahab, who seduce Albion away from Jerusalem, symbolize natural religion. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Blake did not view deism as an alternative to the national church; rather, he saw little difference between the two, believing that "fallen mankind's religious sense was radically corrupt, so that religion, which ought to indicate the path to redemption, became a nearly insuperable stumbling block to it" (69). Los labors at his furnace, therefore, "to forge an authentic Christianity of 'Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love'" (71).

As with Blake and *Jerusalem*, the rest of the monograph examines the means by which these particular romantic

writers used specific texts as vehicles for working out their own attitudes towards the state church. Chapter 3, "Nature's Priest," sees *The Excursion* as encapsulating the religious peregrinations of Wordsworth's own life. As a young man, he had studied for religious orders, his 1793 turn to pantheism being motivated by politics as much as by religion. By 1800, though, he returned to a more traditional, if more expansive theology in which the natural religion could coexist with basic Christianity. From this perspective, *The Excursion* emerges as a personal history of Wordsworth's own faith, each of the speakers representing an aspect of his religious life. In addition to the Poet, the Solitary is the "alienated revolutionary," the Wanderer the "natural religionist," and the Pastor the conventional cleric. By leaving the ending unresolved, Wordsworth seems to be advocating a capacious religion that can accommodate such disparate theological stances.

In chapter 4, "The Ironies of Belief," Ryan focuses on Byron's satire as a medium through which to reform the national religion, the main thrust of the irony deriving from the fact that both believers and unbelievers alike assert theirs to be the true and definitive word on religion. Written from a sympathetic perspective, *Cain* provides a balanced dialogue between faith and skepticism, and though Byron remains distant from his hero, he still, according to Ryan, sympathizes with Cain, "trapped as he is in an intellectual milieu where dissatisfaction, curiosity, and even honesty are condemned, if only by the human apologists for the divine order" (141).

For Keats, the reformative impulse was manifested in his choice of Greek mythology over Christian, as Ryan explains in chapter 5, "The Politics of Greek Religion." More than evidence of nostalgia, the Greek models were used as the means of illuminating his objections to mainstream Christianity. As his philosophy developed, however, Keats came to recognize the shortcomings of the Greek culture as well, but rather than turn to Christianity, he renounced mythology entirely, advocating in its place a neutral form of deism.

For Mary Shelley, the question of religion, as seen in chapter 6, "The Christian Monster," was far more complex than it was for any of the other writers included in this monograph. Having been raised to an anti-Christian Godwinian ideology, which she found flawed, she used the monster in *Frankenstein* as the instrument for criticizing both the state church and her father's antithetical views, thereby avoiding the need to endorse either. In contrast to Mary Shelley, who apparently found no faith worth advocating, Percy's idea of God was so exalted that no human conception could reach his ideal. Consequently, as Ryan argues in the last chapter, "The Unknown God," Shelley followed the *via negativa*, identifying error rather than truth. From this perspective, *Prometheus Unbound* emerges as an allegory of two conflicting impulses, to repudiate false conceptions of God, while articulating a truer vision. Thus, Shelley seems to present pure Christianity as a liberating ideology, predicated on the virtues of charity, mercy, and forgiveness.

Ryan's conclusion to this survey is somewhat restrained. Noting that the Evangelicals had a far greater impact on the English than did the works of these six writers, he concludes that their influence was more indirect: "There seems to be a special religious vitality in the work of the Romantic writers that continues to serve a kind of scriptural function, teaching and inspiring individual readers generation after generation" (233). In contrast, the thesis stated at the beginning of the book seems a bit optimistic:

> My primary thesis in this book is that all the poets committed themselves resolutely to this work of cultural critique and rehabilitation. . . . Religion was the crucial mediator between the cultural and the political-economic spheres in England, and the Romantics directed their creative energies toward intervention in that arena. . . . If the British Constitution in church and State was resistant to change on its political side, the religious dimension of the power structure still seemed susceptible of correction. Instead of lamenting Romanticism as a political retreat, then, one may more usefully see it as a creative and effective engagement in the contemporary religious crisis, an engagement that was perceived as having far-reaching consequences in the political order. (4-5)

The disparity between Ryan's introduction and conclusion reflects the central weakness of this study. The problem, as Miller had foreseen in 1972, is that concentrating on a single focus blinkers one from recognizing the broader ramifications surrounding the romantic attitude towards religion and the state church. There is no doubt that these six writers expended a great deal of creative energy exploring the proper role of a national religion; less clear is the larger significance of their effort. Ryan's miscalculation derives from his decision to center his study in what is essentially a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, primarily male vacuum whose effect is not only to cut his writers off from the global forces that influenced the Anglican Church of their day, but to isolate himself from the broader critical and cultural perspectives that might enable him more effectively to contextualize this study of what he believes to be the "Romantic Reformation."

The most obvious limitation of Ryan's approach is canonical. With the exception of Mary Shelley, Ryan seems to assume the authority of the conventional, six male poet canon of British romanticism, omitting any of the other poets or genres of the period. (Ryan justifies his exclusion of Coleridge on the grounds that he "came to understand himself primarily as a theologian and only secondarily as a poet or a writer of fictions" [10].) Despite his assertion that Mary Shelley was chosen both because of her personal relationships with contemporary writers and "her own

original critical perspective on the values represented by that spirit" (179), it seems hard not to wonder if she was included primarily as a token, especially since she is not a poet but a novelist.

More serious is the limited and ambiguous religious context. Regardless of whether, as Ryan claims, it was "Protestants who fomented most of the domestic agitation during the crucial decade of the 1790s in which British Romanticism first emerged as a cultural force" (19), in fact, all of the works he deals with were written after 1810, and therefore, were affected by more issues than those involved with the Dissenters and Evangelicals. During the nineteenth century, the English were being forced with greater degrees of insistence to confront the inconsistencies of their state church. In addition to the Scots, who had maintained their own national church even after uniting with England in 1707, there were the Irish Catholics, who had become part of the United Kingdom in 1800, and the Jews, who had been legal residents, if not citizens, since the seventeenth century. As the Empire continued to grow, so, too, did the variety of non-Anglican, non-Protestant, even non-Christian peoples to be dealt with.

Actually, the reformation of the national Church coincides more closely with the so-called "long century" of British romanticism. The period seems to have been initiated by the failed Jew Bill of 1753, which was passed on 22 May, only to be repealed on 20 December. Despite the bill's modest intent of permitting just the naturalization of the Jews, public outcry (accompanied by the chant, "No Jews, no Wooden Shoes") was prohibitive. Religious reform was therefore delayed until 1858, when on 23 July, Baron Lionel de Rothschild was permitted to take his seat in the House without having been required to swear an oath "on the true faith of a Christian." In between, Parliament wrestled with the legal complications associated with non-Anglican residents demanding their educational and economic rights, and the religious ramifications of granting equal rights to "heretics."

Ryan is correct to situate the national religion in its larger political and economic contexts. However, by restricting his inquiry to Protestant activities, he sometimes overlooks the religious contradictions inherent in the romantic literature he considers. Certainly, it is possible to define Christian orthodoxy broadly enough to include Blake, but in so doing, Ryan only parodies Blake himself who defines Christianity broadly enough to encompass the Jews, as he says in *Jerusalem*: "If Humility is Christianity; you O Jews are the true Christians; . . . Take up the Cross O Israel & follow Jesus." The same kind of ecumenism seems to dominate Ryan's interpretation of Wordsworth: "Since he himself had found a refuge in the Church he concluded that others could likewise harbor there, even Catholics and Dissenters if they lay aside their specific doctrinal rigidities" (116). Missing, however, is the recognition that both Blake and Wordsworth are advocating at best only a specious tolerance, both defining, and thereby restricting, the beliefs of others. In another context, Ryan rationalizes Percy Shelley's bigotry against Hindus and Turks as "an alloy of pragmatism" (206). These writers all lived in intellectual milieus whose boundaries far exceeded the narrow range of the state church, and apologizing for their prejudices does them a disservice. Ryan would have done better to consider how these apparently narrow views of religion related to the ever-expanding world in which the romantics lived.

Publishing in the mid-1990s, Ryan had access to the best of two worlds. Situating himself within the Abrams tradition of humanistic scholarship, he foregrounded an important topic which has been marginalized for decades. But by neglecting the many cultural studies that were unavailable to his predecessor, he repeated over again the "same dull round" that itself strongly contributed to the critical reformation we have been experiencing since the publication of *Natural Supernaturalism. The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824* would have been far more useful had Robert M. Ryan taken greater advantage of "the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds."

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Reviewed by David Worrall

Bentley's labors, both here and in *Blake Books*, *Blake Records* and *Blake Records Supplement*, have been hugely important to the expansion of Blake studies. It's surely not too fanciful to trace back to Bentley's foundations the original impulses behind the new "Superbibliography" of Essick