
The Coleridge Circle: Virtue Ethics, Sympathy, and Outrage

Laurence S. Lockridge

New York University

"I hold virtue in general, or the virtues severally, to be only in the Disposition, each *a feeling*, not a principle."

—Lord Byron, letter to Robert Charles Dallas
Jan. 21, 1808.¹

Virtue Ethics as the Third Way

British Romantic writers advance an ethics that absorbs, resists, and transforms other ethical schools of the time, from Hobbesian egoism to an ethics of moral sense and the sentiments to Kantian formalism to hedonistic utilitarianism. These amateurs profoundly advance the work of philosophy. They seek a rich plurality of values against a backdrop of what they regard as a diminishment of values, seen in the flawed ethical systems of the day, in the early promise of the French Revolution betrayed, and in what they regard as the bleak ethical implications of the emergent Industrial Revolution, where persons are increasingly conceived of as things. As embattled radical humanists aware of their own deficits and contradictions, the Romantics give strong voice to a *will to value*—a value pluralism not limited to pleasure or happiness, as the hedonistic utilitarians argue, and with a concept of conscience that does

*Romantics
advanced a
pluralistic
will to value.*

LAURENCE S. LOCKRIDGE is Professor of English at New York University.

¹ Lord Byron, *Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand, 11 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973-81), I, 148.

*Intrinsic
quality of acts
and probable
consequences
keys to moral
life.*

not fracture the self, as Kantian formalism seems to do.²

The Romantics doubt the sufficiency of either a deontological ethics such as Kantian formalism or a teleological ethics such as British utilitarianism. They tend to confirm the common view that both the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of our acts *and* a consideration of their probable consequences are keys to the moral life. The Romantics' approach to the two schools is complex and not always dismissive, whether in prose writings or, by implication, literary works. Coleridge greatly admires aspects of Kantian ethics—especially its emphasis on the “good will” and the precious distinction between persons and things. At the same time he finds Kant a dubious psychologist—for example, making a rigorous distinction between duty and inclination. Respect (*Achtung*) for the moral law—for the categorical imperative—must have a feeling component, not rational recognition alone.³

As for utilitarianism, Coleridge, Hazlitt, the later Shelley, and others resist the hedonistic utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and William Godwin. But one form that emerges many decades after the Romantic era—by some, termed “ideal utilitarianism” and associated mostly with Hastings Rashdall

² For an extended discussion of these generalizations, see Laurence S. Lockridge, *The Ethics of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989, rpt. 2005), ch. II, “British Romanticism, Coleridge, and European Moral Traditions,” 39-154 and *passim*. Despite many attempts over the years, a unified field theory concerning the meaning of “Romanticism”—its basic concepts whether philosophic, aesthetic, or political, who exactly the Romantics *were*, and how the era is to be dated—has never prevailed. *The Ethics of Romanticism* takes note of the many divergencies and disagreements among the canonical figures considered. It charts a “third way” for Romantic ethics with regard to utilitarianism and formalism; but this is a pronounced *tendency*, evidenced in literary, philosophic, and biographical texts, more than a set of fixed and fully enunciated principles. The present essay, necessarily limited as to the writers considered for reason of space, should be read as a heuristic of potential use with respect to the wealth of other writers and texts of the era. In recent years many scholar-critics—for example, Marshall Brown, James Chandler, Mary Favret, Frances Ferguson, David Haney, Noel Jackson, Simon Jarvis, Adela Pinch, Adam Potkay, Thomas Pfau, Rei Terada, and Nancy Yousef—have insightfully written of critical ethics within the field of Romanticism. To my knowledge none has yet focused on the connection between Romanticism and modern virtue ethics.

³ On the relationship of Coleridgean and Kantian ethics, see Laurence S. Lockridge, *Coleridge the Moralist* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 102-47 and *passim*.

and G. E. Moore—is consistent with much Romantic thought: the good should be sought as an end but good is plural, not reducible to pleasure or happiness. Coleridge pointedly anticipates Moore’s famed argument for the indefinability of “good”—one cannot substitute any other word for good, such as “pleasure” or “happiness,” without begging the question of whether good is summed up by that word.⁴ As Coleridge asks rhetorically, “The sum total of Moral philosophy is found in this one question—Is ‘Good’ a superfluous word?—or lazy synonyme for the pleasurable . . . ?”⁵ Instead, for Coleridge the “good” consists of a plurality of values of which pleasure is only one. Asia’s inventory of the gifts of Prometheus in Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) does not even include the pleasure and happiness that a younger Shelley, still under the [?] sway of Godwin, had thought the end of all human action. Instead, Prometheus is himself a “value pluralist” who gives humankind speech, science, music, art, health, cities, wisdom, and love, with a single imperative, “Let man be free.”⁶ (Value pluralism is a philosophically precise perspective, in no way analogous to the “critical pluralism” often taken to be a cop-out in modern literary theory.) And like John Stuart Mill after him, Shelley makes qualitative distinctions among the pleasures in *A Defence of Poetry* (1819) (*SPP*, 528-29). Since the Romantics are teleologists more than they are deontologists, a transformed utilitarianism has its appeal.

*The “good” as
a plurality of
values.*

The oppositional character of European moral schools as they developed historically is inscribed internally in the Romantics’ augmented conception of human personality and moral value. Romantic moral psychology recapitulates structurally the historical dialogue of European ethics that preceded it. Put succinctly, the diachrony of philosophical debate

⁴ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1903; rpt. 1959), 1-27; cf. Hastings Rashdall’s formulation in *Theory of Good and Evil* (1907), 2 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1924).

⁵ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols. Bollingen Series L. General editor: Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon, 1957, 1961; Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973, 1990, 2002), N, III, 3938. All subsequent citations from Coleridge’s *Notebooks* are from this edition, with co-editors indicated.

⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound, Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2nd. edition, 2002), II, iv, 32-109. All Shelley quotes, unless otherwise specified, are from this edition.

from Hobbes to the early nineteenth century becomes for the Romantics the synchrony of the self's mental theater. Hobbes is not simply repudiated; psychological egoism—the view that what we do is necessarily motivated by self-interest—remains an element of the human psyche. In a less absolutist way, egoism persists in the Romantics as its dark side, but it also girds up the self's vitality. Godwin's rationalism persists in the many Romantic writers he influenced, but reason is rehabilitated as a mental faculty and makes its accommodation with sensibility. Blake's bearded and crusty Urizen is rejuvenated and reunited with the other Zoas, including Luvah or human feeling, in *Night the Ninth of Vala/The Four Zoas*.

In finding aspects of both deontological and teleological ethics alluring but wanting, and in foregrounding instead the intrinsic qualities of the self or moral agent, the Romantics participated in what has come by many to be considered the third major school of normative ethical thought—termed “virtue ethics.” Hardly a new concept, virtue ethics has roots in Plato and especially Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Though Benthamite utilitarianism and Kantian formalism were dominant in the later eighteenth century, virtue ethics was implicit in the late seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries in the moral sense and sympathy theories of the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith. Virtue ethics in modern times is discussed, with varying degrees of commitment and dissociation, by Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Iris Murdoch, Christine Swanton, and Bernard Williams, among many others.⁷ But Martha Nuss-

⁷ The modern critical literature, pro and con, on virtue ethics is vast, and I cannot sort through the many subtleties and divergencies here. The following are a few useful titles: Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006); Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy*, 33: 1-19, 1958 (a foundational essay); Annette Baier, “The Need for More than Justice,” *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, ed. Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielsen (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 1987); Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998); Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds. *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997); Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), another foundational text, and *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), and *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2nd

baum challenges the very idea that virtue ethics is a distinct third category, since both deontologists and teleologists argue the importance of the virtues, Kant himself writing an entire treatise on the subject, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, Part II of *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), that has only recently been given fuller attention.⁸

My intent here is not to resolve the complex and fairly heated issue as to whether virtue ethics is a viable category in itself, let alone describe in shorthand the intricacies of the field as a whole, but only to suggest that, right or wrong, the discourse of Romantic ethics strikingly anticipates modern formulations broadly considered. Intellectual anticipations are in themselves of little import unless, as is the case here, issues that arise in later formulations have a retroactive explanatory force—as will be my principal contention with respect to the Romantics' representations of human action. My discussion has as its ironic backdrop Irving Babbitt's early insistence that "there is no such thing as romantic morality,"⁹ to which I shall return later.

Virtue ethicists tend to agree on one simple proposition, and on little else: that the chief concern of moral judgment is not so much acts and consequences, or universalizable rules of duty, whether teleological or deontological, as it is the particular virtues or vices that make up the character of the moral

edition, 1985); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1971); Daniel C. Russell, "That 'Ought' Does Not Imply 'Right': Why It Matters for Virtue Ethics," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 46: 299-315; Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999); Michael Slote, *The Impossibility of Perfection: Aristotle, Feminism, and the Complexities of Ethics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011); Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003); Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985). For views that counter the usual reading that in virtue ethics moral action and duty play a secondary role, see *Working Virtues: Virtue, Ethics, and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca Walker and Philip Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007) and *Virtue in Action: New Essays in Applied Virtue Ethics*, ed. Michael Austin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). I argue that in their own commitments to virtue ethics and representations of human action, the British Romantics give strong evidence for the usual reading.

⁸ Martha Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?", *The Journal of Ethics*, III, 3 (1999), 163-201.

⁹ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919; rpt. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1991), 217.

For virtue ethicists, morality less about acts and consequences or rules than about proper dispositions.

agent. Such ethicists frequently note that we face the existential crunch of decision-making from time to time only, but how we lead our daily lives and what kind of human beings we become are questions always with us. Our virtues are deep-seated predispositions that manifest themselves everyday over a lifetime, in need early on of being “educated,” led out from latency into full bloom.¹⁰ One simple reduction within virtue ethics is that *being* more than *doing* is where moral truth resides.

An oft-registered complaint with virtue ethics is that, unlike deontology and teleology, it does not mandate one or another action; *it does not tell us what to do*. Instead, it assumes that if the character of the human agent is virtuous, acts and consequences will more or less take care of themselves—with, yes, a little bit of luck. In modern formulations, virtue ethics has emphasized the value of virtue itself (*arete*, or personal excellence in a constellation of virtues, however designated), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and self-flourishing (*eudaimonia*, the happiness that ideally attends the virtuous life).

There is no inevitability or built-in sufficiency about these three. Virtue ethicists disagree on what is fundamental and, with respect to the first category, whether any comprehensive or hierarchical listing of the virtues can ever be made. Plato lists four, Aristotle twelve, Aquinas four cardinal virtues and three theological, while a recent eight-hundred page guide to the virtues lists six major virtues, each of which has many subvirtues, as it were. Following Nel Noddings, feminist virtue ethicists argue that “compassion” or “caring” should be foremost and is most inclusive.¹¹

¹⁰ Coleridge is most insistent on this point. For his writings on education and “educing” the powers of self, see *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), *CL*, V, 228, 517-18, *CL*, VI, 551, 628-33 (all subsequent references to Coleridge’s letters are taken from this edition), and *Essays on the Principles of Method, The Friend* (1818), 2 vols., ed. Barbara E. Rooke (I 448-524), Part 4, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1969; cf. *Treatise on Method*, in *Shorter Works and Fragments*, 2 vols., ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995) (I, 629-85), Part 11 of *The Collected Works*. See my *Coleridge the Moralizer*, 171-83.

¹¹ Stan van Hooft, *Understanding Virtue Ethics* (Cheshim, Bucks, 2006), 128-35; Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1984).

Though they ruminated on all three in their fashion, the Romantics in their concept of virtue or *arete* centered implicitly on “self-realization,” an ill-fated term that Coleridge himself apparently coined, as well as “self-actualization,” in a notebook entry around 1815, an abstruse response to Fichte’s *The Science of Ethics* (1798). Kathleen Coburn explains that Coleridge is not translating Fichte but is “trying to cut through the meandering of Fichte’s argument to extract its main lines in terms that have meaning to him.” Coleridge writes, “However, we yet do distinguish our Self from the Object, tho’ not in the primary Intuition—*Visio visa*—now this is impossible without an act of abstraction—we abstract from our own product—the Spirit snatches it(self) loose from its own self-immersion, and self-actualizing distinguishes itself from its Self-realization—But this is absolutely impossible otherwise than by a free act” (*N*, III, 4186 and n). Whatever else one might say about this passage, it appears the “free act” is totally within consciousness and requires a certain withdrawal of self from the object world. The *OED* gives first uses of “self-realization” to William Wallace in 1894 and F. H. Bradley in 1876; Wallace is cited for first use of “self-actualising” in 1874.

Self-realization, sometimes termed “perfectionism,” is not itself a virtue but a descriptor of the process of educating the virtues, otherwise latent. It is a term rarely heard in modern discussion of virtue ethics, though earlier studies of the “third way” sometimes used it as the umbrella term. “Self-realization” has fallen into academic disrepute through association with theorists now on the margin—Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Erich Fromm—and with facile Western appropriation of Eastern religions.

*Self-realization
a means of
educing the
virtues.*

Though it did not emerge as a galvanizing term at the time, self-realization is implicit as concept in many Romantic literary works, critical treatises, and biographical documents, all too well known for emphasis on the self. (As an ethical theory it has many thorny problems that I have discussed elsewhere.)¹² Coleridge fretted much about his son Hartley, who displayed

¹² For a discussion of philosophical difficulties inherent in the concept of self-realizationism, see *The Ethics of Romanticism* (124-28) and Lockridge, “The Perils of ‘Self-Realization,’” *Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination Today*, ed. Christine Gallant (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 257-73.

“the absence of a Self, it is the want or torpor of Will, that is the mortal sickness of Hartley’s Being, and has been, for good & evil, his character—his moral *Idiocy*—from his earliest Childhood.” Hartley has become the “relationless, unconjugated, and intransitive Verb Impersonal with neither Subject nor Object, neither governed [n]or governing.” Coleridge wishes Hartley “could but promise himself to be a *Self* and to construct a circle by the circumvolving line—” (*CL*, V, 228; *CL*, VI, 551), a metaphor that simultaneously suggests centering and a ranging outward.

To his credit, Coleridge says equally unflattering things about himself—as an “involuntary Imposter” he is a large “herbaceous Plant” with “pith within the Trunk, not heart of Wood” (*CL*, II, 959). To counter this hollow inertia, he sees in our “desire of distinction, the inseparable adjunct of our individuality and *personal* nature, and flowing from the *same* source as language,—the instinct and necessity *in each man* of declaring his particular existence and thus of *singling* or singularizing himself” (*N*, IV, 5115 emphases added).¹³

Other Romantic writers subscribe to the process of self-realization—meritorious perhaps but hardly something that can be morally commanded. Blake speaks of the “Staminal Virtues of Humanity,” by which I think he means the powers associated with each of the four Zoas, conceived as psychological faculties: imagination (Urthona-Los), feeling (Luvah-Orc), reason (Urizen-Satan), and will, or possibly the sensate body (Tharmas). Slumbering on the Rock of Ages, Albion is awakened and becomes fully “realized” only when these faculties warring within his psyche reunite in Edenic majesty.¹⁴ Keats speaks of the seasoned “identity” of the “vale of Soul-making,” a metaphor for a secular theodicy in which the formation of identity is the result of suffering and a sad compensation for it.¹⁵ Near the beginning of *The Prelude* Wordsworth speaks of shaking off “that burthen of my own unnatural self” (I, 23),

¹³ For Volume IV (1819-1826) of Coleridge’s *Notebooks*, Kathleen Coburn’s co-editor was Merton Christensen, and for Volume V (1827-1834) Anthony J. Harding.

¹⁴ *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 600. All Blake citations are taken from this edition.

¹⁵ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), II, 101-02.

implying, as self-realizationist perspectives tend to do, that a natural or authentic self is somehow already there, in need of being educes from the germ—a homunculus lurking within. Wordsworth senses a true *writer* struggling to emerge.¹⁶ With Byron a common reading is that we do not find a homunculus within but a master-performer, whose authenticity is paradoxically found in his self-conscious act of changing costumes while we watch. There is no central core because master performer is who and what he is, most fully seen in the narrator of *Don Juan*. But Byron too has his fund of core virtues, if not principles—energy, courage, honesty, friendship, pluck—even as he doubts that human beings, caught in patterns of non-dialectical exclusion, ever consistently incorporate them.

Because my main concern here is with *arete*, I will say just a word about practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*) as they relate to the British Romantics. Though practical wisdom is sometimes considered the master virtue, I think it more precise to say that it is the capacity of exercising the virtues efficiently within particular contexts and with a view to probable consequences. The opium-addicts Coleridge and De Quincey admit they lack this capacity altogether. Though Coleridge acknowledges the force of Kant's distinction between morality and prudence, he knows better than to under-rate prudence: "For if the Law be barren of all consequences, what is it but words? To obey the Law for its own sake is really a mere sophism in any other sense—: you might as well put *abra cadabra* in its place."¹⁷ A comment made late in life suggests a wisdom hard-won as Coleridge acknowledges the gap between theory and practice: "Ethics are not Morals—any more than the Science of Geometry is the Art of Carpentry or Architecture. We make maps by strait lines, and celestial observations, determining distances as the Crow would fly; but we must travel by *Roads*" (*N*, V, 49, f. 36v). It is fair to say that the canonical British Romantic writers are in their personal conduct not much possessed of *phronesis*. Biography aside, Arnold will intone that among early nineteenth-century British

¹⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1805), ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933; rev. 1960), 123. Further citations are taken from this edition.

¹⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 6 vols., ed. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley, III, 317. Part 12 of *The Collected Works*.

writers only the works of Wordsworth answer to the highest calling of literature, which is to tell us “how to live.”¹⁸ The least judicious of these writers in his conduct of life, Byron himself would concur, writing in 1821 a treatise on how “the highest of all poetry is ethical poetry . . . whose object is to make men better and wiser.”¹⁹ We need, says the narrator of *Don Juan*, “some Columbus of the moral seas” to “show mankind their Souls’ antipodes,” implying that he is himself that Columbus.²⁰ If they have any entitlement to speak of *phronesis*, it is because they have failed in different ways to embody it and know so.

Eupraxia the identity of “perfect Well-being” and “well-doing.”

Concerning *eudaemonia*: Hazlitt’s final words may have been, “Well, I’ve had a happy life”—a delightful puzzle given the life he led. By contrast, in his level of constant dread and guilt, Coleridge could lay claim to being the least happy of the visionary company. As usual he leads the others on the level of theoretical articulation. Physical pleasure, *hedone*, he considers the lowest on a qualitative scale of pleasure and happiness. It is gauged quantitatively in the main. And it is only a matter of taste whether one prefers turtle soup over port. Similarly, Keats’s “pleasure thermometer” speech in *Endymion* (1817; I, 770-842) leaves *hedone* far behind as the young Endymion charts a hierarchy of values—from nature, myth, religion, statesmanship, music, and poetry to the “chief intensity,” a merging of friendship and love. But Coleridge declines to give *eudaimonia itself* a high mark as he conceives the word—it is too indebted to “good-hap” or “favorable providence.” This kind of happiness results from the “aggregate of fortunate chances,” the circumstances (literally “whatever stands round us”) of life. If one is sorely unlucky, one cannot possess *eudaimonia* whatever one’s virtues, the Stoics notwithstanding. What the virtue ethicists regard as *eudaimonia* Coleridge instead calls *eupraxia*—the intense pleasure that attends moral virtue. “Bliss, not Happiness, is the true Summum Bonum,” he writes, citing Socrates as his authority, and *eupraxia* expresses the identity of “perfect

¹⁸ Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” *Essays in Criticism*, First Series, III (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 7; “Wordsworth,” *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, IV (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 105-6.

¹⁹ *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, 6 vols., ed. Rowland E. Prothero (London: John Murray, 1898-1901), V, 554-60.

²⁰ Lord Byron, *Don Juan, The Complete Poetical Works*, 7 vols., ed. Jerome McGann (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980-1993), V, Canto XIV, 101.

Well-being” and “well-doing.”²¹ I think virtue ethicists could accept this revision of vocabulary. They do not dismiss “well-doing” but simply assert that it is the virtuous person who is most likely to succeed in it.

These preliminaries in place, I propose three stages in the onset of moral consciousness in major Romantic writers and suggest the pertinence of these stages to modern ethical debate. (Why discussion of ethics so frequently deals with categories of three is a conundrum.) First are the Romantic concepts of sympathy and empathy as virtues produced by the imagination; second, the outrage felt upon confrontation with blatant injustice; and third, the problem of action in response to what is to be done in an unjust world.

Ethics as the Romantics’ First Philosophy

The most pointed claim for the priority of ethics is found in a Coleridge notebook entry of 1810 and elaborated more than a decade later in his *Opus Maximum*. “Without a *Thou* there could be no opposite and of course no distinct or conscious sense of the term *I* From what reasons do I believe in a *continuous* & ever continuable *Consciousness*? From *Conscience*! Not for myself but for my conscience—i.e. my affections & duties toward others, I should have no *Self*—for *Self* is definition. But all boundary implies *Neighbourhood*—& is knowable only by *Neighborhood*, or *Relations*” (*N*, II, 3231). Conscience he calls the “equation of *Thou* with *I* by means of a free act by which we negative [negate] the sameness [the *I* and the *Thou* are not identical] in order to establish the equality” [the *I* and the *Thou* are equally real and worthy]. Always the linguist, he notes that there are deep ethical implications in our ordinary pronominal usage: “*I*,” “*you*,” “*she*,” “*he*,” “*they*,” and “*it*” take on meaning only within a differential linguistic system that implies the dependency of any single pronoun on all the others. An “*I*” obtains meaning only through its relatedness to all the other pronouns. Our recognition of the reality and worth of other persons is fundamentally linguistic (*OM*, 72-79).

Conscience the “equation of Thou and I by means of a free act.”

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *N*, III, 3558; *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi, Vol. 15, *The Collected Works*, 26-29.

Ethics is first philosophy for Coleridge, prior to epistemology and ontology, but also to theology: he insists that religion must have “a *moral* origin; so far at least, that the evidence of its doctrines could not, like the truths of abstract science, be wholly independent of the will The belief of a God and a future state . . . does not indeed always beget a good heart; but a good heart so naturally begets the belief, that the very few exceptions must be regarded as strange anomalies from strange and unfortunate circumstances.” Ethics ideally has “religion for the ornaments & completion of its roof & upper stories.”²² It is built up on its own foundation grounded in the responsible will, which he calls the primary “postulate of humanity.” We immediately intuit but can deny this postulate only by dropping out of the entire grammar of humanity (*OM*, 6-11).

Coleridge
conceives of
self always
in relation to
others.

The current revival of interest in critical ethics has largely revolved around Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics is first philosophy and for whom the onset of moral consciousness is recognition of the face of the other, its “alterity” (a term Coleridge himself uses frequently in theological contexts), and the responsibility for the other that falls upon us, whether we wish it or not.²³ The Romantic emphasis on the self might seem to contradict Levinasian thought, but like other Romantic writers Coleridge conceives of self always in relation to others—he continues the search one finds among post-Hobbesian moral philosophers for evidence of benevolence beyond self-love. Self-realization casts a broader net than ethical or psychological egoism, often considered its insidious flaw. What more proto-Levinasian passage could there be than this from “Frost at Midnight”? “And so I brooded all the following morn,/ Awed by the stern preceptor’s face, mine eye/ Fixed with mock

²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), I, 202-3. Part 7 of *The Collected Works*.

²³ See, for example, *Critical Ethics*, ed. Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism*, ed. Donald R. Wehrs and David Haney (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2009). David Haney has noted resemblances between Coleridge and Levinas in “Aesthetics and Ethics in Gadamer, Levinas, and Romanticism: Problems of Phronesis and Techne,” *PMLA*, vol. 114, 1 (Jan. 1999), 32-45, and has discussed them at length in *The Challenge of Coleridge: Ethics and Interpretation in Romanticism and Modern Philosophy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 2001).

study on my swimming book:/ Save if the door half-opened,
and I snatched/ A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,/
For still I hop'd to see the *stranger's* face,/ Townsman, or aunt,
or sister more belov'd,/ My play-mate when we both were
clothed alike!"²⁴ Or, as Blake writes, "Man liveth not by Self
alone but in his brothers face."²⁵ For Blake the "selfhood" is an
inhibition and blight; "self" for Percy Shelley is pathological
unless opened to others. Fredric Jameson tells us that ethics is
intrinsically individualizing and should be circumscribed by a
true (Marxist) politics, but the Romantics' ethical emphasis on
the other, on alterity, provides strong counter-evidence.²⁶

*Self-realization
casts a broader
net than
ethical or
psychological
egoism.*

The role of the affections or emotions as virtues is central here. Nussbaum urges the cognitive dimension of the emotions in life and literature, often underestimated by philosophers, psychologists, and literary critics alike. The affective responses are in part *cognitive responses* to the world as perceived.²⁷ And these perceptions can be wrong. Coleridge puts it bluntly: "The Feelings, that oppose a right act, must be wrong Feelings!"²⁸ If we have the world wrong, our feelings are without anchor or authenticity. The affective component of the self, hardly blind, registers things that are real. In an extensive treatise, *On the Passions* (ca. 1828), a refutation of Descartes on the passions and mostly unpublished until 1995, Coleridge argues that the passions have a somatic ground but are neither entirely passive nor non-cognitive. Rather, in the "Kennel of my Psychosomatic Ology" (yes, Coleridge coined "psychosomatic"), a passion may have its "pre-disposing cause in the Body" in response to external stimuli, but the passion is "not *immediately* produced by the incidents themselves, but by the person's Thoughts and Reflections concern-

²⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight" (36-43), *Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 3 vols., ed. J. C. C. Mays (2001). Part 16 of *The Collected Works*.

²⁵ William Blake, *Vala/The Four Zoas* (133:25).

²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 116. For a critique of Jameson's argument, see *The Ethics of Romanticism*, 29-34.

²⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), *passim*.

²⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 96. Part 9 of *The Collected Works*.

ing them.” He speaks of the “*craving* of grief”—a total loss felt viscerally but also “a Hunger of the Soul” that pervades consciousness.²⁹

In his fragmentary “Essay on Morals” of 1798, Wordsworth writes that formal systems of ethics such as Godwin’s or William Paley’s are impotent. “Now, I know no book or system of moral philosophy written with sufficient power to melt into our affections, to incorporate itself with the blood & vital juices of our minds, & then to have any influence worth our notice in forming those [good] habits of which I am speaking.”³⁰ The author of “Tintern Abbey” does not for this reason underestimate the cognitive dimension of the feelings, which are situated in scene and episode, and gathered up by memory, meditation, and reflection. Through the “impressive discipline of fear” and other feelings, certain scenes and episodes of early life become “habitually dear, and all/ Their hues and forms were by invisible links/ Allied to the affections” (*P*, 631, 638-40). Our feelings are “bound” to the hues and forms that have occasioned them in our consciousness of an object world. Enduring attachments structure our life in a relational network of other selves of whom we become increasingly aware as we age. When these felt attachments persist without an object, they may bring on the pathological “heart-wasting” of a Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage* (1797), grieving for her lost husband, her craving never gratified.

Other canonical Romantic writers—Blake, Percy Shelley, Hazlitt, Keats—anxiously insist on our power to surmount Hobbesian psychological egoism, through the emotions and especially the imagination. Their hunches are possibly being confirmed today by neurobiologists who have acquainted us with mirror neurons and the pathological and tragic blockage of empathy in autism. A valuing or, as Irving Babbitt complains, over-valuing of the affective life is a familiar aspect of Romantic thought. Blake writes in *Jerusalem* that “Jesus tells us, every kindness to another is a little Death/ In the Divine Image nor can Man exist but by brotherhood” (96:27-28)—a striking

²⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Passions*, in *Shorter Works and Fragments*, II, 1423, 1451.

³⁰ William Wordsworth, “Essay on Morals,” *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, 104.

paradox that suggests a sacrificial element in sympathy, and Luvah, Zoar of the emotions, is accordingly the most vulnerable of the four Zoas.

The most powerful is Los, the imagination, from which feelings of sympathy and empathy emanate. In his early *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), on which he labored a decade and which he himself regarded as a “dry, tough metaphysical *choke-pear*,” Hazlitt neatly cleaves human mind into three faculties, of which memory pertains to the past, sense to the present, and imagination to the future. Human identity must consist of the first two alone because, in a word, our future self does not yet exist. A corollary is that as we ponder future action, our imaginary future self is no more our own than are other selves. Thus, “the imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward . . . into my future being, and interest in it. I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others. Self-love, used in this sense, is in its fundamental principle the same with disinterested benevolence.”³¹ His example: if we shun running into a fire, we are not acting out of a motive of self-interest because the future dead self does not yet exist! It would certainly be in our interest not to be incinerated, but beyond self-interest something Hazlitt terms the “reasoning imagination” gets the credit.

“I could not love myself, if I were not capable of loving others.”

In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) Percy Shelley gives the most familiar formulation of the role of imagination in ethics: “The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination” (*SPP*, 517). Imagination so rendered is the genetic ground of both poetry and the moral life, which I argue co-exist therefore in a *homologous* relationship, con-

³¹ William Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805) (Gainesville, Fl.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969), 3.

sistently rendered throughout the *Defence*. The production of poetry strengthens the originating imagination, which is also the source of moral feeling and acts—just as exercise, he says, strengthens a limb. Poetry, thought of as the expression of the imagination in all the arts and high culture and not just verse, need not have any expressed ethical content, since any good poem can strengthen imagination in both poet and reader. In his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Shelley speaks of didactic poetry as his “abhorrence.” Homology explains the powerful *indirect* influence of poetry on the ethical life.

In denying any firm distinction of aesthetics from epistemology on the one hand and from ethics on the other, Shelley is implicitly undoing Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1792) as commonly read. The imagination is for Shelley a higher form of understanding that kills error, not a disinterested play of hypotheticals. And contrary to Kant’s view that aesthetic experience as a symbol of morality is only *analogically* linked to the good, Shelley links imagination *genetically* and *homologically* with the highest moral experience, love, as well as to poetry.³² Homology, the circumstance where entities have a common source, entails a more intimate linkage than analogy. The poet is for him a moral force that helps legislate the very conduct of human history. In his own way, Schiller makes a similar revision of Kant in his play-drive (*Spieltrieb*) and the central role of the aesthetic in political progress on a planet dominated by reigns of terror.³³

There are anticipations of what is eventually called “empathy” throughout the earlier schools of moral sense and of sympathy, especially in Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, 1761). But these formulations seem cautious next to the Romantics’ impassioned pronouncements concerning human capability, the intensity of the affections, and for Shelley the revolutionary potential of the imagination. Smith writes within a tradition that values “tranquility,” next to which the urgency of the Romantics is quite out of keeping. Coleridge

³² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000). See section 59, “On beauty as a symbol of morality,” 225-28.

³³ Friedrich von Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), trans. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 85n, 101, 147, 149.

objects to Shaftesbury's idea of virtue as merely "notional," without the "manly energy" etymologically implied by the word itself (AR, 19, 195). The "moral sense" of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson is a term rarely used by them, as this shop-worn faculty gives way to "imagination," which in addition to its aesthetic function accrues broad ethical and cognitive powers.

The imagination is the mental power by means of which the virtues of both sympathy and empathy are educed, a conclusion hardly surprising with respect to the British Romantics but one with implication for the current interest in virtue ethics, the debate over justice, and the problem of redress of injustice through moral action.

A clearing distinction: The word "empathy," from the German *Einfühlung*, was not introduced into English until 1904 (OED: Vernon Lee's *Diary* and Anstruther-Thompson's *Beauty & Ugliness*, 1912). As a cognitive identification with another, empathy does not assure sympathy, or a feeling of distress at another's pain. In speaking of the "motive mongering of motiveless malignity," Coleridge has empathy with Iago, as one would of necessity if playing the role well, but empathy here would not, one hopes, entail sympathy; likewise, all the world's villains whom one might wish to understand from within but denying any sympathy whatsoever. More frequently than not, however, empathy in practice is accompanied by sympathy in the Romantics as elsewhere, and sympathy is in varying degrees accompanied by empathy. Is it not a little surprising that Coleridge, who coined "dyspathy," did not also coin "empathy" and go on to desynonymize it from "sympathy"?

Outrage at Injustice

That we are capable of sympathy and empathy through the workings of the imagination is a hopeful note in Romantic moral consciousness. Fortunately for imaginative literature if unfortunate for the world, we are more complicated and sinister than these capabilities suggest. Though Adam Smith's "impartial" or "judicious observer" may be the ideal moral judge, Coleridge speaks of how a "Film" might "rise and thicken on the moral Eye" even of a Wordsworth (CL, II, 1013),

possessed of a larger imagination than any contemporary. Hazlitt is a more compelling writer in his later personal essays than in his implacably dull treatise on the principles of human action. Passion is “the chief ingredient of moral truth,” he writes, and human passions tend to be nasty. “I believe in the theoretical benevolence, and the practical malignity of man.”³⁴ The passion that most engrosses Hazlitt is envy, the opposite of benevolence—and later in life he calls envy the “most universal passion,” the pain we feel at the good fortune of another. As for imagination, an older Hazlitt links it with illusion, obsession, and right-wing politics instead of moral and political knowledge. In his autobiographical *Liber Amoris: or, The New Pygmalion* (1823) he portrays the psychic unhinging a diseased imagination has dealt him, beset by sexual jealousy of a young woman working in a boarding house. At one point he tries to confirm his suspicion that she is whorish by hiring a proxy to seduce her. This is an act of empathetic identification, yes, but one hardly benevolent.³⁵ Empathy may run amok if not corrected mid-course by hard-nosed reason.

The will a source of satanic pride as well as of love.

For all his liberal ethics and talk of reconciliation of psychological faculties in the “whole soul,” Coleridge believes the ground of human personality, the Will, is the source of satanic pride as well as of love. In theological writings in the *Opus Maximum* and elsewhere he speaks of Will as akin to the unconscious, a motive-spring inaccessible to consciousness, and distinguished from the conscious will or motives involved in day-to-day decision-making. His Ancient Mariner inhospitably kills a pious bird for no good reason, and his Geraldine *looks evil* into Christabel, vulnerable because of her very hospitality; so read, she is a powerful illustration of Nussbaum’s fragility of goodness. More accessible to everyday consciousness than the abysmal Will, the emotions or feelings if deprived of true perception can waylay us. The Romantics are not sentimentalists, and Coleridge ridicules what he terms the “sentimental pro-Virtues” of Laurence Sterne and his “numerous Imitators,” who mistake self-pleasuring tender feelings for authentic en-

³⁴ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols., ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1967), XX, 343.

³⁵ The most reliable text is *Liber Amoris; Or, The New Pygmalion*, ed. Gerald Lahey (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1980).

gagement with the suffering of others (AR, 60-61).

I argue that the ratcheting up of Romantic moral consciousness comes less through slow evolution of benevolent feelings or rational inference than through sudden recognitions of blatant injustice—injustice spawned by the “practical malignity” of humankind. The susceptibility to outrage depends on the prior capability of both sympathy and empathy as virtues emanating from the imagination. The causal sequence is often rapid, a sudden ethical epiphany rather than the insights of a gradual experiential or rational inquiry. Possessing virtue ethics makes for a greater sensitivity to human fallibility and manifest evil.

In *The Prelude* one finds a notable adumbration within a literary context of the current debate over the nature of justice. Wordsworth narrates the crucial moment in France when the aristocratic revolutionary Michel Beaupuy points to a hunger-bitten girl leading a heifer. “’Tis against that/ Which we are fighting” (X, 518-19). The abstract notion of distributive justice becomes suddenly real for the poet. It is not rational benevolence or political theory but direct compassion and indignation—*outrage*—that politicizes the poet, who had grown up in what he regarded as a natural egalitarianism in the Lake District and who at first mistook the French Revolution for an extension of the way nature and history naturally work. An even greater reversal occurs when Great Britain sides with the counterrevolutionary forces against the French Republic early in 1793 and prepares to go to war. “No shock/ Given to my moral nature had I known/ Down to that moment; neither lapse/ Nor turning of sentiment that might be named/ A revolution, save at this one time;/ All else was progress on the self-same path/ On which with a diversity of pace/ I had been traveling; this a stride at once/ Into another region” (X, 233-41). Outrage at betrayal from within corrects any complacency about human nature and natural egalitarianism. This is an ethical *peripeteia* for the poet.

These recognitions plus Wordsworth’s critique of Godwinian rationalism (P, X, 873-905) anticipate the critique made by Robert Solomon and Amartya Sen of the Rawlsian concept of justice as fairness. John Rawls’s well-known *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is grounded in a thought experiment where,

under a veil of mutual ignorance, representatives of interested parties work reasonably toward an equitable binding social contract.³⁶ Solomon complains that Rawls ignores the moral sentiments such as resentment or outrage. "Our sense of justice is not simply a kindly sense of sympathy and compassion, but a cauldron of sometimes competing passions, all of which have as their basis an almost visceral sense of what the world should be like, not by way of some grand philosophical blueprint [such as one finds in John Rawls] but rather by way of specific expectations and demands. Our sense of justice begins not with a principle but with a feeling that 'This is unfair!'"³⁷ And Amartya Sen begins *The Idea of Justice*, a good portion of which is given over to refuting Rawls, with a quote from *Great Expectations*: "In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt, as injustice." Sen insists that "an approach to justice that is particularly involved with the diagnoses of injustice, as this work is, must allow note to be taken of 'inflamed minds' as a prelude to critical scrutiny. Outrage can be used to motivate, rather than to replace, reasoning."³⁸

*Outrage over
injustice rife
in Romantic
narrative.*

Outrage over injustice is rife in Romantic narrative and somewhat under-discussed in the critical literature. Beyond anecdotal accounts, some of which follow here, there is deep implication with respect to how these writers struggle with means of redress. In his *Life of William Blake* (1832), Frederick Tatham tells of an incident in which Blake saw a neighbor's boy "hobbling along with a log to his foot, such an one as is put on a horse or ass to prevent their straying . . . Blake's blood boiled, and his indignation surpassed his forbearance. He sallied forth, and demanded in no very quiescent terms that the boy should be loosed, and that no Englishman should be subjected to those miseries, which he thought were inexcusable even towards a slave."³⁹

³⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971, 1975).

³⁷ Robert Solomon, *A Passion for Justice and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1990), 201.

³⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), 389.

³⁹ *The Letters of William Blake together with a Life by Frederick Tatham* (1832), ed. Archibald G. B. Russell (London: Methuen, 1906), 23-24.

In an autobiographical letter to his friend Thomas Poole, Coleridge narrates the injustice he incurred at the hands of his brother Frank, who deliberately minced up a piece of cheese that he had hoped to toast and eat intact. Coleridge “saw the exploit, and in an agony of passion [I] flew at Frank—he pretended to have been seriously hurt by my blow, flung himself on the ground, and there lay with outstretched limbs—I hung over him moaning & in a great fright—he leaped up, & with a horse-laugh gave me a severe blow in the face—I seized a knife, and was running at him, when my Mother came in & took me by the arm—/I expected a flogging—& struggling from her I ran away to a hill at the bottom of which the Otter flows.” After his rage died away, the young Coleridge obstinately stayed outdoors, “thinking *at the same time* with inward & gloomy satisfaction, how miserable my Mother must be!” When he was eventually found close to death and taken home the next morning, his mother “was outrageous with joy—in rushed a *young Lady*, crying out—‘I hope you’ll whip him, Mrs Coleridge!’—This woman still lives at Ottery—& neither Philosophy or Religion have been able to conquer the antipathy which I *feel* towards her, whenever I see her” (*CL*, I, 353-54).

The pre-Freudian insight of the letters to Poole is that early experience, notably trauma, is formative of personality. Coleridge’s early lectures against the slave trade and other injustices can be linked to a sensitivity to injustice inculcated early on. The capacity for outrage through sympathy and empathy must be ranked high among the virtues. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* itself is often read as an indictment of God’s justice. The Mariner’s “wicked whisper” (246) is presumably a blasphemous expression of moral outrage over an implacable punishment incommensurate with the crime.

The capacity for outrage through sympathy and empathy high among the virtues.

Hazlitt’s resistance to ethical system-building is another anticipation of the modern justice debate. “I have no theory to maintain,” says Hazlitt, having left his early essay on human action far behind (IX, 165). The brutal manifold of human experience overpowers any theoretical effort at explanation or redress. The brutality of the slave trade should not be greeted dispassionately through some theoretical lens. Invective is more in keeping because “there are enormities to which no word can do adequate justice.” Discussion of slavery should

be as graphic as possible “so that what they suffered in reality was brought home to you in imagination Those evils that inflame the imagination and make the heart sick, ought not to leave the head cool” (XII, 46-47). Hazlitt argues for what I term a “passionate common sense” that puts us reliably in touch with the sorry objective world. The British ethicists of the sentiments as well as those of rationality are by contrast fairly complacent when it comes to the world’s indignities. “The definition of a true patriot is a good hater,” writes Hazlitt in *The Round Table* (1817), a sentiment that would baffle the likes of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith.

What Is to be Done?

*Romantics’
commitment
to virtue
ethics brings
problems in
representations
of action.*

How move from ethical predicament and outrage to ethical action as a moral agent? And how merge ethics with politics? Here, the Romantics’ commitment to virtue ethics leads to revealing problematics in their representations of action.

De Quincey would be the first to confess himself a dubious moral guide. Of stoicism and Kant, he writes that he seeks a morality that “will condescend more to the infirm condition of an opium eater An inhuman moralist I can no more endure, in my nervous state, than opium that has not been boiled.”⁴⁰ He ridicules Kant for arguing that, with regard to a universalized maxim of never telling a lie, one is commanded to tell a would-be murderer the whereabouts of his intended victim, if possessed of that knowledge.

De Quincey is a profound inquirer into the ironies of what has come to be termed “moral luck,” debated in modern moral philosophy by Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, and Thomas Nagel, among others. His metaphor in the 1856 *Confessions of the Whispering Gallery* at St. Paul’s Cathedral sets forth the headache of moral decision-making. Just as “a word or a question, uttered at one end of the gallery in the gentlest of whispers, is reverberated at the other end in peals of thunder” (II, 156n), so an act, seemingly inconsequential, may have ruinous consequences that can be neither predicted nor thwarted. He could never have guessed what the consequences

⁴⁰ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-eater* (1856), ed. Grevel Lindop, II, 232, *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 21 volumes. General editor: Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000).

would be when he first took opium to ease a toothache. He likens act and consequence to entering a “vast Hercynian forest, unexplored and unmapped, where each several turn in your advance leaves you open to new anticipations of what is next to be expected, and consequently open to altered valuation of all that has been already traversed” (II, 169). De Quincey faces a world of radical contingency with fear, evasion, and humor.

Similarly, the author of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* laments the unforeseen consequences of *his* opium addiction. I think this is the unspoken personal circumstance behind his refutation of 1810 in *The Friend* of William Paley’s ethics of general consequences, the lengthiest ethical disquisition Coleridge published in his lifetime. One cannot predict long-range consequences, and any ethics such as utilitarianism cannot require that we do so. Life is inherently unpredictable and unfair.⁴¹ He says it more forcibly in a letter of 1814: “Tho’ there was no prospect, no gleam of Light before, an indefinite indescribable Terror as with a scourge of ever restless, ever coiling and uncoiling Serpents, drove me on from behind.—The worst was, that in exact proportion to the importance and urgency of any Duty was it, as of a fatal necessity, sure to be neglected I used to think St James’s Text, ‘He who offendeth in one point of the Law, offendeth in all,’ very harsh; but my own sad experience has taught me its awful, dreadful Truth.—What crime is there scarcely which has not been included in or followed from the one guilt of taking opium?” (CL, III, 490).

Such recognitions underlie complexities in the Romantics’ representation of action. They are baffling storytellers, even when they complete their stories. To the consternation of many, Wordsworth himself confirms this with regard to the most famed Romantic narrative poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, writing of the version printed in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* that “the Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects,” including, among others, that the Mariner “does not act, but is continually acted upon” and that “the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other”⁴² Anyone who

⁴¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, I, 313-25; II, 313-20. See Coleridge *the Moralists*, 244-50, for a discussion of Coleridge on Paley’s utilitarianism.

⁴² William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1803*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (The Cornell Wordsworth: Ithaca: Cornell Univ.

has struggled to teach Romantic narrative, drama, and even lyric knows how puzzling these works seem to students with respect to such matters as moral causality, the representation of character and acts, and the claims of justice and injustice. I give a few illustrations of the moral perplexity endemic to literature of this period that implicate virtue ethics in various ways.

Whether conceived of as representing mental instead of literal fight, Blake's prophecies are among the most violent in the English language. "Annotations on Lavater" provides a revealing gloss on his representation of human action: "Accident is the omission of act in self & the hindering of act in another. This is Vice but all Act [from Individual propensity] is Virtue. To hinder another is not an act[,] it is the contrary[,] it is a restraint on action both in ourselves & in the person hinderd[,] for he who hinders another omits his own duty at the time/ Murder is Hindering Another [,] Theft is Hindering Another . . ." (600-01). Bromion's rape of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1792) is the contrary of an act, an outrageous hindering of another. As in *America a Prophecy*, the initiating event is an act of sexual violence.

That all acts from individual propensity are virtuous echoes a degree of wishful thinking in virtue ethics. But the number of right and whole acts in Blakean narrative is small—arguably only two, the descent of Milton into the Ulro and the awakening of Albion. The four Zoas are represented as mental agencies, not moral agents, and what they do is truncated and chaotic until the apocalyptic reunification in *Night the Ninth*, after eight nights of unrelenting nightmare. There is in Blake a contradiction between the "right" and the "good," terms that dominated metaethical debate in the early twentieth century. Transformations come as acts of violence or a "fierce rushing" of the populace, as in the insurrectionism of the Lambeth prophecies, and to the extent that these make up a teleological chain of events leading to regeneration, the acts that induce them are "right." They point to a new state of being—of love, benevolence, peace, mutuality, and "thunders of intellect"—in a word, the "good." But the good is continuously deferred along an arduous and violent path in Blakean narrative until the final moments when "travelers to Eternity" perceive it.

Press, 1992), 791.

Other Romantic writers have their own distinctive problematics when it comes to representations of moral action. In *The Prelude*, even prior to his experience in France, Wordsworth announces that he “began to deem myself/ A moral agent, judging between good/ And evil, not as for the mind’s delight/ But for her safety, one who was to *act*,/ As sometimes, to the best of my weak means,/ I did, by human sympathy impell’d” (VIII 669-74). But the circumstances of this resolve are totally unclear, as are these acts impelled by that chief virtue, sympathy. In what sense does the poet become a “moral agent”? Just as one confronts a contradiction between the right and the good in Blake, so one confronts a split between “being” and “doing” in Wordsworth, quite in keeping with virtue ethics. Following his retreat from the world stage of the French Revolution, we watch him return, chastened, to a circle of intimates in Somerset. He then follows his homing instinct to the Lake District, where, once again, he feels the “sentiment of Being” within the landscape and leaves behind the ethical burden of doing in the world. In “retirement” his only action will be the writer’s action—which, after all, *is* writing.

*Split between
“being” and
“doing” found
in Wordsworth
quite in
keeping with
virtue ethics.*

Keats’s *Hyperion* leaves off just as the action begins, which would consist of Apollo’s supplanting Hyperion, already defeated and doomed. Since the speaker empathizes more with the fallen Hyperion than with Apollo, Keats may back away from representing an action that would entail self-annihilation. When Apollo arrives in expectant triumph, dying into life, the muse ironically deserts the poet. In Keats one finds an implicit movement away from “act” to “activity.” Beyond the stealthy acts of a Porphyro or the doomed heroics of a Hyperion, he implies an alternative to action in the activity of the gleaner in “To Autumn” and the activity of the poet working at his vocation.

In Byron we witness literal action as he leaves off writing *Don Juan*, which he did well, to don an antique helmet and perform as a general in the Greek War of Independence, which he did not so well. In the *Ravenna Journal* he had reflected on how the Carbonari uprising will almost certainly fail because “man has always been, and always will be, an unlucky rascal,” but it is necessary to act *as if* liberty might prevail (*LJ*, VIII, 20).

Himself a casebook of the predispositions of virtue ethics—courage, energy, sympathy, honesty, flexibility, and steadfastness in not eating his tutor—Don Juan is more acted upon than acting, exhibiting great pluck in a world of predators but ultimately letting contingency decide matters for him.

The question of what is to be done, how one is to act, is approached in different ways by these writers and almost always within the mist of Keats's "Chamber of Maiden-thought," where certainties are unavailable. This is consistent with how virtue ethics steps aside from universal moral imperatives. Though not himself a virtue ethicist, Amartya Sen argues that there is no universal formula of right and just action, Kant and Rawls notwithstanding. One approaches particular injustices in different ways at different times and in different cultures. Injustices felt on our pulses are the prelude to debate about relief and redress. We do not require a universal theory of just institutions to undertake this.

To be sure, the Romantics have written a number of political prescriptions. Shelley's *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819) sets forth a reformist agenda for Great Britain, different in kind and degree from the revolutionary sympathies he has for movements abroad. Hazlitt's incomplete treatise, "Project for a New Theory of Civil and Criminal Legislation" (n.d.) lobbies in favor of individual rights to the extent that any duty toward the state virtually disappears. This is an anarchistic libertarianism that conflicts with his low estimate of human behavior in the personal essays. Wordsworth writes eleven "Sonnets on the Punishment of Death" (1839-40), which in their grandiose support of capital punishment contradict the humane perspectives of the *Salisbury Plain* poems (1793-98). Such pronouncements are caught up in contradiction with respect to the larger oeuvre of each writer.

There is no uniformity of opinion among them or internal consistency as to what is to be done. I think their implicit commitment to virtue ethics brings with it the irresolution concerning action and ethical imperatives inherent in the theory itself. Whether this results in reluctance to finish narratives—*Christabel*, the *Hyperion* poems, *Don Juan*—or makes lyric, narrative, and drama all resistant to clear ethical imperatives—*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, *Jerusalem*, *The Cenci*—it is apt illustration

of how a grounding in a set of philosophical ideas has ineluctable consequences on the level of literary representation. This is hardly to suggest that literary schools *should* have a palpable ethical design on their readership, expressible in sets of maxims and imperatives, only that the ethics of Romanticism in its complex representation of action finds its diverse quandaries *accounted for* by its commitment to virtue ethics.

*No consistency
among
Romantics
concerning
what is to be
done.*

Works by Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley especially bring this point home. Unlike the older Coleridge, who writes that practical politics cannot be conducted on an analogy with ethics, Percy Shelley upholds the ideal continuity of ethics and politics: "The most fatal error that ever happened in the world was the separation of political & ethical science. The former ought to be entirely regulated by the latter, as whatever was a right criterion of action for an individual must be so for a society which [is] but an assemblage of individuals, that politics are morals more comprehensively enforced."⁴³ The case is sometimes made for Percy Shelley as a proto-Marxist, but the priority of ethics to politics is a ratio Marx reverses.

Percy Shelley's most intense expression of outrage is at the Peterloo massacre, the occasion of his greatest political poem, *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819, 1832). The moral imperative he proclaims, well before Thoreau and Gandhi, is passive resistance, grounded in his sense that the slaughterers will eventually sicken at their own actions and lay off. "Ye are many, they are few!"

Whether this is wishful thinking is severely tested in *The Cenci*. I say "tested" because an ethical approach to literature relies more on the metaphor of testing than on the more familiar aesthetic one of playing. I have in mind Paul Ricoeur's view that literature offers us an "ethical laboratory" in which human actions and values can be hypothetically tested and adjudicated.⁴⁴

In his fragmentary "Speculations on Morals" (1817, 1821), Percy Shelley—influenced by Hume, Locke, and Godwin—outlines a theory of justice, which has, he says, three com-

⁴³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), I, 223.

⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), I, 59.

ponents (no surprise), though one can be dismissed. There is benevolence, which he calls the principle of utility, the wish to “seek the happiness of others.” Then there is justice itself, which is “a sentiment in the human mind that regulates benevolence in its application as a principle of action,” in effect what we call distributive justice, spreading happiness around equitably. He significantly calls justice a “sentiment,” not a concept as such.⁴⁵ Not unlike Rawls he conducts a thought experiment involving ten men shipwrecked on a desert island who must distribute subsistence: “If six of them conspire to deprive the remaining four of their share, their conduct is termed unjust.” Finally, there is retributive justice, which he equates with revenge and which is always morally wrong. “The distinction between justice and mercy was first imagined in the courts of tyrants.”⁴⁶ On the basis of this view of justice, he finds Beatrice’s patricide in *The Cenci* morally wrong, a “pernicious error.”

At least he says this in his Preface, for the play itself does not provide Beatrice with any alternative. After all, she has previously tried to convert her hardened father, Count Cenci, through her strong innate benevolence. But love has proved not enough. Her replete virtue ethics before the assassination proves powerless. The wishful Shelley of the Preface says no one can be truly dishonored by the act of another, but Beatrice expresses a sense of profound contamination. The violation will likely be repeated, another “hindering,” as Blake says in his remarkable understatement. Beyond revenge, there is the additional motive of self-defense. Is she to behave like the populace in *The Mask of Anarchy* and give passive resistance a chance? Let us trust the play, not the playwright, who appears to misread his own play as it relates to action and moral responsibility. The larger thrust of the play is that in 1599, with the prior collusion of church and state, Beatrice did not have the option of collective resistance. She was forced to act alone as an assassin within her family circle. But Shelley’s play implies that in 1819 there is the possibility of revolution lead-

⁴⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley’s Prose: Or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David L. Clark (Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1954, rev. 1966), 182-93.

⁴⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “On Christianity” (1817), *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. I, ed. E. B. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 254.

ing to distributive justice, envisaged in *Prometheus Unbound*, where the initial outrage of Prometheus toward Jupiter gives way to sympathy and a cosmic epithalamium.

In a sense, when Romantic writers only in a handful of literary works such as *The Mask of Anarchy* and "The Tables Turned" tell us what is to be done, they vindicate one aspect of Irving Babbitt's pungent assertion that "there is no such thing as romantic morality." In *Rousseau and Romanticism* he takes a dim view of *Prometheus Unbound*: "What is found in this play is the exact opposite of imaginative concentration on the human law. The imagination wanders irresponsibly in a region quite outside of normal human experience. We are hindered from enjoying the gorgeous iridescences of Shelley's cloudland by Shelley's own evident conviction that it is not a cloudland, an 'intense inane,' but a true empyrean of the spirit" (359). By contrast, a true "ethical imagination" is "an attempt however imperfect to give an account of actual experience" (201).

Though he nowhere gives a precise definition and does not believe in such precision, Babbitt's "ethical imagination" is a cognitive non-utopian envisaging of higher human possibilities that does not forsake the comings and goings of human life as we already know it. It is also an ordering power within the self that produces a unity, in line with Coleridge's notion that the imagination is "esemplastic"—bringing the many into one. This applies not only to the personal self but to the social whole. It is through the ethical imagination that we join others within the human race. Perhaps surprisingly, it is for Babbitt the ethical imagination—not reason, conscience, or *pudeur*—that produces the "inner check" on the passionate self (200-01). His high estimation of imagination ironically aligns him with the central tenet of Romanticism itself, in keeping with Coleridge's frequent observation that "ends meet." Blake believes that *Los*, or imagination, is the ultimate human power, and Babbitt is Blake's unlikely bedfellow here.⁴⁷

*Babbitt's
"ethical
imagination"
an ordering
power within
the self that
produces
personal and
social unity.*

⁴⁷ From the late 1970s to the present day, there has been a reevaluation of Irving Babbitt. Studies by J. Hoeveler (1977), Thomas R. Nevin (1984), Claes G. Ryn (1986), Stephen C. Brennan/Stephen R. Yarbrough (1987), and Milton Hindus (1994) have challenged the modernist and postmodernist dismissal. An edition of essays, *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, ed. George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), includes nine essays on "the enduring influence of Irving Babbitt."

For *Babbitt*,
good art
induces in
us a sense of
“decorum”
that makes us
better human
beings.

There are marked differences in aesthetic judgment, however, and in how Babbitt and the Romantics conceive the moral life in its relation to art and literature. For Babbitt, ethics is predicated on the imaginative intuition of right action and an agent’s follow-through on terra firma, in which the lower passionate self is held in check. Being should lead to doing, and literature and art that embody this intuition induce a sense of “calm.” Babbitt believes in the pragmatic function of literature and art but not by means of didactic maxims. These do not change lives. Here he agrees with Shelley, for whom didactic literature is his “abhorrence.” Art changes us by indirection, for Babbitt by inducing in us a sense of “decorum” such as what Hamlet describes in his advice to the players: a great performance “in the very torrent, tempest, and (as I may say) whirlwind of passion, [will] acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness” (201). Internalizing this decorum makes us better human beings.

Romantic
writers’
frequent
narration
of ethical
dilemma and
uncertainty
more likely
to induce
perplexity
and unease
than calm and
decorum.

The indirection by means of which Romantic writers would change readers and history is different in kind. They more commonly narrate ethical dilemma and uncertainty, which are more likely to induce perplexity and unease than calm and decorum. As Keats writes, “We see not the ballance of good and evil. We are in a Mist—We are now in that state—We feel the ‘burden of the Mystery.’ To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote ‘Tintern Abbey’ and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark passages” (*L*, I, 281). Their commitment to virtue ethics entails a potentially affirmative appraisal of certain human powers—the moral imagination and the various virtues that are its spawn, such as sympathy and empathy, a sense of justice, and indignation at injustice. Percy Shelley hopes *The Mask of Anarchy* and Blake his *America a Prophecy* will produce the subversive

Essays subsequent to these studies have appeared in *Humanitas*. Emphasis on the crucial role of imagination in Babbitt’s thought is found in Claes G. Ryn’s *Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality* (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Regnery Books, 1986), as well as in his introduction to the 1991 reprint of *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Kenneth B. McIntyre’s essay, “Decision Procedures, Moral Philosophy, and Despair: The Response of Virtue Ethics and the Connoisseur” (*Humanitas* XXVIII, 2015, 31-43), describes how virtue ethics is an alternative to both deontology/formalism and teleology/utilitarianism.

indignation that could change history. Poets are, after all, unacknowledged legislators. But I have tried to show how the transmission of inner virtue to fruitful consequence in the world is never assured for these writers.

The broadest reply to Babbitt's critique of Romantic ethics is that the Romantics themselves predate in their own literature and ethical disquisitions his anatomy of the passional, appetitive, erotic, narcissistic self, even as they anticipate his pragmatic valorizing of imagination as the highest human faculty. Babbitt writes as if the Romantics, following Rousseau, uncritically invert the values and powers that define human personality—the affective, appetitive, egoistic, erotic self valued over the ethically imaginative, decorous, and unified self. As I have suggested throughout, the Romantics themselves are critical of the affective life and see its inherent dangers, even as they may write of the "holiness of the Heart's affections." Coleridge's *Will*—the abysmal source of both aggression and love—and Hazlitt's envy show that for them virtue ethics does not necessarily prevail in the human personality. Babbitt gives us what is ultimately a buoyant over-simplification of Romantic ethics. As philosophical amateurs, these writers, in their creative work as well as in writings on ethics, anatomize the entire human personality; theirs is hardly a sentimental encomium of the passional human heart.

Whether *The Triumph of Life* (1822)—whose subtext is *The Divine Comedy*—would hold out a promise similar to the cosmic epithalamium of *Prometheus Unbound* we will never know for sure, since Shelley did not live to lead us out of the hellish dream vision of the surviving fragment. But he leaves us with a hint. The poem both confirms and answers to aspects of Babbitt's critique of Romantic ethics. In Shelley's last poem, Rousseau, Babbitt's *bête noir*, has recanted beyond the grave, confessing that the heart must be "tempered" to its object, much in line with Babbitt's key concept, the "inner check" that, in the interest of personal well-being and the larger society, disciplines what Shelley terms "the mutiny within." The feelings, bereft of an enlightened imagination (the poem's "Shape all light"), become noxious, just as Rousseau himself is represented, improbably, as a rotten root sticking out of a hillside. So much for the "natural man"! But Rousseau, who be-

comes a Virgilian guide, prophesies the imagination's eventual triumph. Put in mind of *The Divine Comedy*, he remembers "in words of hate and awe the wondrous story/ How all things are transfigured, except Love" (475-76), as Dante makes his way to Paradiso guided by Beatrice. This is a major exemption in a passage tactically overlooked in deconstructive analyses of the poem.⁴⁸ More a knowing than a feeling, love is at the center of Shelleyan ethics, since it takes us out of ourselves to acknowledge the reality and worth of others. In this sense Shelley's last poem upholds his claim that "the great instrument of moral good is the imagination."

*Frankenstein's
monster all
too human
when he sets
out on path of
"distributive"
revenge.*

But enter Frankenstein and his monster. The novel is Mary Shelley's chastening of any confidence that, beyond outrage, a passion for distributive justice will necessarily prevail. The monster, who is all too human, has just grievance in being deserted by his maker. But his outrage is not immediate. His early coming into consciousness is at first driven by benevolent feeling toward the De Lacey family, toward whom he undertakes acts of caring and compassion. "Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity."⁴⁹ So the monster *has* that innate bump of benevolence the Romantics carried over from the anti-Hobbesian British moral tradition; he has a good dose of virtue ethics. Its passionate nature—a soul glowing—exceeds how benevolence is spoken of by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Smith. The monster takes an impassioned interest in the cottagers. He is a quick study in sympathy (as well as language), but he founders in empathy, not sensing why he might give Felix the creeps. Whenever we focus on the faults of his creator Frankenstein, we may overlook that it is the kindly domesticated *De Lacey*s who, in their revulsion, send the monster on his path of what I would term "distributive *revenge*," as he spreads his vindictiveness amply and equitably to Frankenstein's circle of intimates before targeting Frankenstein himself.

⁴⁸ See essays by Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and J. Hillis Miller in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury, 1979; rpt. London, New York: Continuum, 2004). That Shelley's fragmentary and manic last poem was set as the test case for deconstruction as a critical methodology was a serious flaw in experimental design.

⁴⁹ Mary Godwin Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), ed. J. Paul Hunter, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 68.

All too human? If so, what is Mary Shelley saying about human nature, the just society, and the likes of Percy Shelley? One dark inference is that although the monster has absorbed vicariously a core curriculum of humanistic lore—in Plutarch, Milton, and Goethe—he is, in his outrage over injustice, not dissuaded from strangling a child, framing a servant girl, dispatching a bride, and silencing a young aspiring Orientalist. If we accept the implication—Percy Shelley, Matthew Arnold, and perhaps Martha Nussbaum notwithstanding—great literature does not necessarily make us better.

Mary Shelley quotes from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* twice in the 1818 edition and amplifies this in the 1831, where Walton says his “passionate enthusiasm for the dangerous mysteries of ocean” is attributable to “that production of the most imaginative of modern poets.”⁵⁰ Though the novel is often read as a check on the Promethean ambition of a Percy Shelley or Lord Byron—ambition gendered as male—it seems probable that Mary Shelley has in mind as well this other member of the visionary company, Coleridge. His belief in the depraved human Will finds its way into her novel, whether ascribed to Frankenstein or his monster, and however empathetic we as readers might be toward the monster, especially if we are homely. Coleridge writes that the exercise of will is “the condition of all moral good while it is latent, and hidden, as it were, in the center; but the essential cause of fiendish guilt, when it makes itself existential and peripheric—*si quando in circumferentiam erumpat*” (*F*, I, 425-26n, the first use of “existential” in its modern sense). And yet the Will is mysteriously also the source of love, of the blessing of sea creatures that gushes “unaware” from the Mariner. In this sense, Frankenstein’s monster, whose soul glows with love but also with aggression, is a Coleridgean figure.

Mary Shelley has not told us what is to be done. To the extent her novel is a cautionary tale, she has told us what *not* to do because, whatever its intent, the novel survives well beyond the elite audience for *Prometheus Unbound*, having prophetically birthed the modern myth of science run amok.

In summary, I find a marked disjunction between what

⁵⁰ *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1831), ed. Johanna Smith (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 33.

*A marked
disjunction
exists between
Romantics'
view of
humans
as moral
agents
possessed of
certain virtues
and how
they see
these virtues
affecting
human action..*

the Romantics value in humans, regarded as moral agents possessed of certain virtues, and how they see these virtues playing out in human action and its consequences. The disjunction can be thought of as a form of Romantic irony, of a productive narrative incoherence that keeps us critics hard at work and that presents in different ways. The most blatant disjunction, just discussed, is between the initial plentiful virtue ethics of Frankenstein's monster, whose soul had glowed with benevolence, love, and humanity, but who becomes a serial killer in his indignation at the unjust way he has been treated. Beatrice Cenci is fully possessed of the virtue of benevolence but, victimized, outraged, and contaminated, she becomes "hardened" like her father, and, to the disapproval of the playwright, a patricide, unwilling before the judge in courageous defiance to announce herself a victim seeking retributive justice.

These are among the more striking of the disjunctions but hardly singular. In Blake we find the "Staminal Virtues" or powers associated with the Four Zoas at odds one with another after an original Edenic unity; humanity's journey toward reunification and the New Jerusalem entails acts both partial and violent, as the "right" makes way for the eventual triumph of the "good." In Coleridge's *Christabel*, we find someone whose virtue ethics—seen in her compassion for Geraldine—leads to heteronomy and the serpent's hiss. (There are other ways of reading *Christabel*'s character and motivation.) Underrating his own aggressions, Coleridge sees himself a well-meaning Albatross, slain time and again for his good intentions, his fund of virtue ethics under-appreciated by others. And how could he have guessed the consequences of his first taking that anodyne, opium, for a dysentery? It was bad moral luck indeed. His rhetorical mode is apology but not for any intrinsic malice—has he not always meant well? Rather, he apologizes for his unwitting misrepresentation of self in the social world, for what he calls the superficial "representative image," and an unjust world that punishes him for it.

In Wordsworth the disjunction of being and doing characteristic of virtue ethics is played out in *The Prelude*, where the plenitude of being, so seductively described in Book the Second, invites the defeated son to return from the world's stage. His earlier resolution that he would become a "moral

agent" who was "to act" out of "human sympathy" has been broken. Moral luck is the conceptual key to the person who worshipped him, De Quincey, who ridicules Kant for his Stoic rigor and rule-bound ethics and who finds in Ann of Oxford Street a fallen woman of total sympathy for the young down-and-outer. But like Byron's Don Juan, De Quincey inhabits a world of contingency, where the quality of an inner life, one's virtue ethics, is no guarantor of success in a "world of strife." And Hazlitt, who early on speaks of the sympathetic imagination as the keystone of human personality, comes to believe that envy is instead the key; a merely theoretical benevolence gives way to the observed practical malignity of humankind; and, to make matters worse, the previously exalted imagination sides with the right-wing trappings of authority. Much influenced by Hazlitt, Keats in the *Hyperion* poems sees a ruthlessness in the historical progression of one order to another, where the virtues of Hyperion count for little in the end, and poets, far from being "disinterested" (a cardinal Keatsian virtue) in their "poetical Character," must take on the sufferings of others as physicians who suffer with those who suffer. Keats was never an aesthete, but the Christ-like burden the poet takes on in *The Fall of Hyperion* is beyond what we could ask of any poet, and Keats seems implicitly to acknowledge this in the elegiac acceptance of "To Autumn," where an agonized personal "I" is nowhere to be found.

These are a handful of canonical writers, and it can readily be asked if they are representative of those we term "Romantic." Agreed, but I think these disjunctions may be one implicit reason they have emerged in the canon as Romantic. They invite a complex hermeneutics. Students of the field could ponder extending to others a recognition of a blatant disjunction of character traits to act and consequences in a *productive* narrative incoherence of critical interest and value, whether in literary or philosophical works or in biographical narrative. Obviously there are many who would not qualify. I think most would exempt Austen, in whose novels justice, for a time out of kilter, is eventually balanced out in a continuity of characterological traits and consequence. She gives us a narrative coherence that is rarely found in the tormented works of the visionary company.

*Much of the
Romantics'
torment comes
from inability
to translate
virtue ethics
into meaning-
ful narratives.*

It is their very torment that holds our attention today. I have argued that this torment comes in good measure from the resistance encountered in translating virtue ethics into meaningful narratives that answer to the question of what is to be done in an unjust world. Collectively, the writers whom we have come to call the Romantics—British and Continental—engaged ethical and political issues with greater ardor and more extensive commentary than any *literary* movement, before or since. This was Matthew Arnold's complaint, thinking of his earlier compatriots—these writers were too invested in the upheavals of their day to attain the sweetness, light, and disinterestedness of a truly great literary epoch such as the Ancient Greeks and the Elizabethans. Maybe so. But their profound investment in the powers of human personality, for good or ill, are ample compensation. We continue to ponder the paths of Albion, the Ancient Mariner and Christabel, the poet of *The Prelude*, the narrator of *Don Juan*, Beatrice and Prometheus, the narrator of *Liber Amoris*, the poet-physician of *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Frankenstein and his monster—all of them irregular rather like Coleridge stumbling from one side of the footpath to the other, resistant to our plucking out their mysteries, often anguished, always astonishing. The Romantics' value pluralism anchored in virtue ethics is not an abstraction for them but a concrete negotiation with a world that is by turns beautiful, baffling, and outrageous—a world in which their ethics cannot tell us with any certainty what is to be done.