

Madeleine Callaghan, *Eternity in British Romantic Poetry*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022. Pp. 336. £83.60. ISBN 9781900856066.

Opening her book with two key Kantian questions ‘Is there a God? And, is there immortal life?’ (1), Madeleine Callaghan avows that Immanuel Kant’s riddle of eternity is akin to the poetic as well as philosophical concerns of British Romantic poetry. Percy Shelley’s imaginative yearning for the ‘abode where the Eternal are’ (*Adonais*, 495) and Byron’s view of the self as being ‘[h]alf dusty, half deity’ (*Manfred*, I, ii, 40) are some of the examples which, for Callaghan, elucidate the ‘dominant intellectual preoccupation’ of the Romantic period with the ‘relationship between the mortal and the eternal’ (11). Suggesting that eternity is not ‘always a positive source of hope’ (14), Callaghan claims that the sempiternal hovers ‘between being a concrete reality, a seductive fiction, and a terrifying blank’ (14). To explore the multifaceted nuances of eternity in British Romantic poetry, Callaghan also resorts to (Neo)Platonic philosophy and Christian theology to exhibit the shared intimation of the Romantic poets that ‘poetic imaginings might go beyond or hand in hand with philosophical theory’ (12). But, most importantly, she proves that Romantic poets inherited ‘the philosophy, the theology, and the imaginative visions of their predecessors’ and ‘pushed them into new complexity in their demanding poetry’ (11).

In chapter 1, Callaghan starts her assessment of eternity in William Blake’s almost proto-Nietzschean configuration of the artist as a prophet. As Callaghan intimates, Blake ‘rejects the limitations of the finite’ (23) and pushes his artistic boundaries to make the writing of eternity ‘the ultimate test and culmination of the poet’s vision’ (24). Prefiguring the Nietzschean notion of *will to power*, Blake envisions the artist as free from ‘conventional morality’ (36) endemic, for Callaghan, to sense-based perception. And, so, the poet must defy, as it were, his mortal genius to achieve a renewed one located in the eternal realm and ‘reveal eternity’ to his ‘sense-enclosed readers’ (40). Chapter 2 treats, instead, the visionary loss of the eternal in William Wordsworth’s poetry, where eternity is ‘what compels the poet’ and yet ‘what is withheld from view’ (63). Callaghan tactfully posits that the mortal-eternal binary is unstable for Wordsworth; in fact, eternity is ‘a focus for criss-crossing tensions’ (60) between quest and loss. These tensions are exhibited in Callaghan’s magisterial reading of the ‘Immortality Ode’, in which she acutely draws out how the ‘movement from visionary eternity to temporal sight’ becomes ‘a story of shared loss’ (66). Callaghan goes on to present in chapter 3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s surmise of poetry as ‘the primary mode for thinking about and through eternity’ (98). As much as ‘imaginative poetry’ might outshine, for Coleridge, ‘philosophical reason’ (101), Callaghan suggests that these are ultimately commingled, making intelligible ‘a more perfect beauty’ (105) that is beyond the human domain.

In ‘Byron’s protean and shifting approach to eternity’ (138), Callaghan illuminates in chapter 4 that Byron eschews a uniform understanding of the eternal. She claims that Byron often ‘experiment[s] with and experience[s] a number of philosophical possibilities’ (138). The section on Byron is followed in chapter 5 by an extensive critical account of Shelley, whose poetry repeatedly signals the self’s negotiation between the human and the eternal domain. Crucially, Callaghan reminds us of the Wordsworthian echoes instilled in Shelley’s poetry, when she suggests that, like Wordsworth, Shelley’s poetry and prose ‘reveal his attempt to write eternity rather than his confidence in achieving it’ (177). Quest and loss are a given of the poetic experience for Shelley. Therefore he ‘explores new possibilities of imagining the eternal’ (178) by reconfiguring the mortal realm as a locus where the tangible and the intangible are not distinct but coexist. On the contrary, John Keats, as argued in chapter 6, considers eternity ‘a deadly abstraction’ (218) and centres his poetic efforts to make ‘what is human, mortal and sensual into the essence of poetry’ (218). As Callaghan posits, Keats only regarded eternity as the ‘final status’ (219) of poetry, because poetry, for Keats, is itself eternal ‘and his

struggle to create poetry testifies to its eternal condition' (219). The final chapter focuses on Felicia Hemans' reading of eternity as timelessness, perceptively interpreted by Callaghan as the genealogy of women whose lives are tethered by a 'shared experience of everlasting suffering' (251). *Eternity in British Romantic Poetry* offers, therefore, pioneering ideas that will exert a great deal of influence on the future generation of scholars and students of Romanticism. And, most importantly, this monograph proves, once again, that Callaghan is a leading scholar of our generation.

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