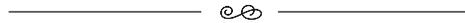


Why We Need . . .

WHY WE NEED COVENTRY PATMORE

STRATFORD CALDECOTT

“With his eye turned firmly outward and upward
—to the world and to God—Patmore’s writing
reveals a keen perception of the infinite disclosed in
every single finite creature.”



The soul is the express image of God, and the body of the soul; thence, it, also, is an image of God, and “the human form divine” is no figure of speech. In the Incarnation, the body, furthermore, is God, so that St. Augustine dares to say, “the flesh of Christ is the head of man.”
—*The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*

The era of European civilization marked by the French Revolution was one torn between the dialectic movements of Rationalism and Romanticism. If Rationalism glorified the idea of universal order perceived and attained through the use of reason, Romanticism rejected intellectual order in the name of self-expression; it is associated in philosophy above all with the “turn to the subject” and away from any kind of objectivism. The question of “the” truth was swept away, leaving rather a concern with what was true *for me* and *for you* (hence, historicism, evolutionism, rela-

tivism, and irony)—a glorification of the “active, dynamic and imaginative self,” and the attempt to “express” the world rather than “describe” it. Thus, nature herself becomes a form of self-expression (Hegel).

What the Romantic movement caught a glimpse of was that this “self-expression” of nature ultimately means that nature’s innermost form is symbolic. The finite expresses or at least *gestures toward* the infinite; everything that exists is overfull with meaning—meaning too rich or elusive to be adequately captured in prose or even poetry. But the Romantic movement was prone to excess, and in its denouncement of reason undermined the foundation of nature herself, leaving nothing but sentiments behind. Romanticism in its secular and literary form thus tends toward a nostalgia for religious belief, and substitutes for the journey to God a quest for the infinite Self—perhaps (as has become more manifest in the twentieth century) in the depths of the unconscious, which was itself an invention or discovery of the Romantics.

The little-known English Victorian mystical poet and essayist Coventry Patmore (1823–1896) represents, we could say, the best of the Romantic movement, precisely because he transcends these tendencies to collapse under the weight of that infinite Self. With his eye turned firmly outward and upward—to the world and to God—Patmore’s writing reveals a keen perception of the infinite disclosed in every single finite creature. It is this firm grounding in the real that allows Patmore to surpass his Romantic precursors and contemporaries, with his insights on the relationship between the world and God, the body and soul, and woman and man. Patmore was one of those eminent Victorians who inherited and transformed the legacy of the Romantic movement, but cannot himself be called, simply, a “Romantic.” He was, as we shall soon see, more balanced, penetrating, and interesting than that.

1. BEYOND ROMANTICISM

Patmore’s intellectual genealogy starts with the British Rationalism of the Royal Society and the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers—a cult of “universal reason”—and the Industrial Revolu-

tion based on that Rationalism, opposed by poets such as William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth in the name of the “creative imagination.” Another important strand in English Romanticism was a tendency to glorify the art and architecture of the Middle Ages, which led to a revival of Gothic architecture, encouraged by the Christian Socialist John Ruskin. Out of this Romantic stream of influence grew, in the second half of the century, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (also fostered by Ruskin), with its rebellion against Victorian morality, and the Arts and Crafts movement led by William Morris. The Pre-Raphaelites (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Edward Millais, and later, Morris) sought to challenge the modernism (i.e., Raphaelitism) of art in their day by a return to medieval sources, to nature, tradition, and allegory—G. K. Chesterton later described Ruskin as wanting every part of the medieval cathedral except the altar. They found some of their inspiration in the Arthurian romances and the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Finally there was the Aesthetic movement of G. F. Watts, James Whistler, and Walter Pater—a cult of “art for art’s sake,” often coupled with sexual license, perhaps best represented by the dissolute Oscar Wilde, who ended his life as a repentant Catholic. To Pater, the purpose of life was to burn always with a “hard, gemlike flame,” that is, to live in continual aesthetic ecstasy. The painters in the group were interested in shapes and colors, in art as decoration rather than the imitation or understanding of nature.

In between Romanticism and the Rationalist movement it opposed, the Catholic Literary Revival separated itself from both as they turned increasingly against Christianity and traditional morality. Thus the Catholic Revival could be described as a Christian *literature of protest*, not just against the mechanization of life, scientific positivism, and the bourgeois mentality of Victorian England, but also against liberalism and relativism in religion. While it had many of its roots in Romanticism, it was, as Chesterton noted in *The Victorian Age in Literature*, “a rational movement; almost a rationalist movement.” It was a “protest of the rationality of religion as against the increasing irrationality of mere Victorian comfort and compromise.” Thus it transcended the dichotomy of the age. In 1845, when John Henry Newman converted to Roman Catholicism at Littlemore, he had already seen that the real choice was not between reason and emotion,

as most Victorians still thought, but between the mechanical and the supernatural order—or between a conception of life based on industry and technology on the one hand, and a conception of life based upon religion on the other. And it was already apparent to Newman that the Catholic Church was the only institution that could be trusted to defend human reason, human feeling, and the supernatural—all three at the same time and in harmony.

Romantic artists and poets tended to elevate feeling above intellect, poetry above philosophy, and nature above man or God, and in so doing lost their balance and eventually their hold on reality. The Christian Romantics of the Literary Revival, by contrast, were intellectuals in search of the truth. They wanted the *whole* of reality, which could not be grasped simply through feeling, any more than it could be grasped by rational thought on its own. You might put it this way: in traditional scholastic philosophy, Being is characterized by unity, truth, goodness, and beauty. The Romantics tended to subsume truth and goodness within beauty, believing that beauty alone could take them to their goal. Christian Romantics knew that beauty on its own could easily lead astray. Beauty, truth, and goodness “coinhere”—they belong to and exist in each other, and if you separate them they will wither and die.

These writers sought after and desired truth—that is, the *Logos*. They were not merely indulging themselves and exploring their own feelings. Through poetry, through images, through music, through beauty, and through story they sought to reveal the presence of an invisible (but objective) spiritual world underlying the visible. The current popularity of fantasy writing is partly their legacy—especially that of Lewis and Tolkien. The Christian Romantics awoke in our culture a hunger for the meaning and truth that are to be found in history, in drama, in heroism—living images which reveal glimpses of a higher reality, a spiritual reality that walks among us in the light of day. They awoke a renewed appreciation of the importance of *symbols* as a vehicle of metaphysical and doctrinal truth. And for this reason, in the following century they became entwined and associated with the *nouvelle théologie* and the *ressourcement* that took Catholic thinkers back to the patristic era, to the “sacramental imagination” of the early Fathers, and toward a renewed appreciation of the spiritual and allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

2. LIFE

As the Word of God is God's image, so the word of man his image,
and "a man is known by his speech."
—*The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*

Coventry Patmore grew out of this fecund renewal of thinking and writing in Britain. He was extremely well-known in his time, but fell into undeserved obscurity during the twentieth century—due at least in part to his conversion to Catholicism. Privately educated, he at first wanted to become an artist, then a scientist, but instead became one of the most celebrated poets of his day.

Patmore published his first small volume of *Poems* in 1844 under the influence of Alfred Lord Tennyson. After receiving a particularly cruel review he tried to destroy the edition, but it was too late; his career was already launched. Through the book he soon made the acquaintance of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, and began to move in their circles. In order to earn money while trying to write, he became an assistant librarian in the British Museum.

The writer was happily married three times in close succession, and his best poetry is associated with and inspired by the themes of marriage, the body, and nuptiality; in fact, he could be called—somewhat anachronistically, but no less rightly—the Poet of the Theology of the Body. His most famous poem, *The Angel in the House*, chronicles his first marriage, from the moment he lays eyes on Emily, the maid who will be his wife, through their courtship and life together with six children, ending with a reflection on her death. It was written between 1854 and 1862 and, though never completed, is often said to have been the most popular poetical work of the Victorian period.¹

1. "The structure of *The Angel in the House* is ingenious, and far more elaborate than the casual reader suspects. The poem proper is fronted by a Prologue, and is divided into two books, each book containing twelve cantos, each canto being subdivided into a prelude, a segment of narrative, and certain epigrams or epilogues which are independent of the story. It must be remembered that we possess but a portion of the work, which in the early fifties was, as D.G. Rossetti reports, intended to be bigger than the *Divina Commedia*. Had Patmore carried out this scheme, the recurrence of motifs throughout would have

Emily died in 1862 after a long illness, and the devastated Patmore abandoned further work on *The Angel in the House*. But this was to mark an important change in his life, and one that would distance him from his admiring public. He had already in his wife's later years begun to be attracted by the writings of the mystics and particularly Roman Catholic writers. (In later works he often quotes both St. Augustine and St. Thomas.) He refers to having been drawn on at least one occasion into a "mystical rapture." In 1864, while on a visit to Rome, where he received regular instruction from a Jesuit priest, Father Cardella, Patmore fell in love with a devout Catholic, whom he at first thought to be the poor companion of a wealthy woman. When he discovered that she was in fact *herself* the wealthy woman, he ran away in panic at the thought of becoming a kept man, but was brought back by friends, and he and Marianne were married in July 1864 after his own reception into the Catholic Church back in England by Marianne's friend (for whom Patmore later developed a strong antipathy, regarding him as a religious tyrant), Cardinal Henry Edward Manning.

The English Reformation cast a long shadow, and despite Catholic Emancipation in the early nineteenth century and the influence of distinguished English converts such as Manning himself and Blessed John Henry Newman, to become a papist in nineteenth-century England was still something of a disgrace, so that Patmore's reputation was adversely affected by his reception into the Catholic Church. John Ruskin, who had at first admired Patmore, thought that by becoming "sectarian" (as Ruskin saw it), "all his fine thinking" had been rendered "ineffectual to us English."

In 1877, inspired by a pilgrimage to Lourdes that dissolved his lingering resistance to Marian devotion,² Patmore

been still more marked than it is, and the concinnity of the poem as a work of art still more apparent. The 'preludes' would then have been seen to form a poem in themselves, a philosophical setting, of which faith transfigured in love was the theme and the inspiration" (Edmund Gosse, *Coventry Patmore* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905], 69–70).

2. Henceforth, Gosse writes, "Patmore will dedicate his golden gift of poetic speech, no longer to any earthly use, however innocent or salutary, but to the direct glory of the divine Mother" (*ibid.*, 125).

published what everyone now regards as his best work—though at first it was largely ignored—*The Unknown Eros* (encouraged by his saintly daughter, Mary Christina, who became a nun), and in the following year *Amelia*, his own favorite poem, with an interesting and influential essay on *English Metrical Law* as a kind of preface to it. As he himself pointed out years later, the basic principles of this essay became widely accepted among critics within a decade or two. His insight into the *musical* nature of all speech, especially poetry, and his refusal to draw any clear lines between poetry and prose, lie close to the heart of his argument. He finds support in Hegel's writing on music and meter, to the effect that the rules of formal versification do not impede, but rather facilitate, the "free outpouring of poetic thought." He then goes on to analyze the relationship of life to law in the various degrees and kinds of meter in poetry, "from the half-prosaic dramatic verse to the extremest elaboration of high lyric meters." Although he defends the rules of versification, he also argues that the best poetry does not follow the rules tamely and as if mechanically, but must convey feeling by constant little tensions with the underlying structure, little departures from the standard pattern.³

In 1880 his second wife died and he married only a year later, at the age of 58, the woman who had been the governess of his children. Patmore was by then a friend or acquaintance of many of the literary figures in Victorian England, including Tennyson, Carlisle, and Browning. He became particular friends with Alice Meynell (with whom he fell in love), Francis Thompson (who would become a close friend and disciple after he was rescued from the streets by the Meynells), Robert Bridges, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom he met in 1883 and who was the one who first drew Bridges to his attention. Bridges in turn wanted to enlist Patmore's support for his and Hopkins's experiments in accentual verse, which he claimed amounted to a "new prosody." Patmore, however, did not fully understand or appreciate Hopkins's poems (perhaps he was too old at this point), commenting that they were like "veins of pure gold imbedded in masses of impracticable quartz."⁴

3. I have written a detailed summary of this essay at <http://beauty-in-education.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/english-metrical-law.html>.

4. Cited in Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private*

For his part, Hopkins wrote detailed criticisms of many of Patmore's poems, protesting at "moral blasphemies" in them and a "passion for paradox" that occasionally tortured his sensibility, though he admired Patmore's mastery of the English language. Patmore respected his friend's critical judgment enough to burn on, Christmas Day 1887, a series of his poems that Hopkins did not like, called *Sponsa Dei*. (It should be noted that Hopkins was mortified to hear that he had done so.) What had shocked Hopkins was the intensity of the sexual-mystical symbolism of the poems. He felt that the world was not ready for them.⁵ However, the insights expressed in these suppressed poems were not completely lost. They can be found scattered through Patmore's last two books of essays and aphorisms, *Religio Poetae* in 1893, and *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*, which Herbert Read compared to Pascal's *Pensées*. This last was published in 1896, the year before the poet died.

3. THE SIXTH DAY

Though it scandalized Hopkins, Patmore's most daring poetry is a flowering of the Catholic Literary Revival, and his insights fit perfectly with the *nouvelle théologie* that came later. One aphorism in *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*, "Nature fulfilled by grace is not less natural, but is supernaturally natural,"⁶ captures the para-

Life (London: HarperCollins, 1991), 357.

5. Edmund Gosse, Patmore's friend and biographer, writes: "The *Sponsa Dei*, this vanished masterpiece, was not very long, but polished and modulated to the highest degree of perfection. No existing specimen of Patmore's prose seems to me so delicate, or penetrated by quite so high a charm of style, as this lost book was. I think that, on successive occasions, I had read it all, much of it more than once, and I suppose that half a dozen other intimate friends may have seen it. The subject of it was certainly audacious. It was not more nor less than an interpretation of the love between the soul and God by an analogy of the love between a woman and a man; it was, indeed, a transcendental treatise on Divine desire seen through the veil of human desire. The purity and crystalline passion of the writer carried him safely over the most astounding difficulties, but perhaps, on the whole, he was right in considering that it should not be thrown to the vulgar. Yet the scruple which destroyed it was simply deplorable; the burning of *Sponsa Dei* involved a distinct loss to literature" (*Coventry Patmore*, 143–44).

6. *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1923), 7.

doxical truth at the core of Henri de Lubac's interpretation of St. Thomas. In the first chapter of *Religio Poetae*, Patmore develops a distinction akin to that which Newman drew between *intellectual assent* to truths of faith, and their *apprehension* or *comprehension* as a matter of actual perception, which is the experience of the poets, and especially of the saints. He writes prophetically:

I do not see what is to become of popular Religion, parodied and discredited as Christianity is by the "religions" of atheists, moralists, formalists, philanthropists, scientists, and sentimentalists, unless there can be infused into it some increased longing and capacity for real apprehension.⁷

The reason poets, he adds, are so important, is that "the poet is, *par excellence*, the *perceiver*, nothing having any interest for him, unless he can, as it were, see and touch it with the spiritual senses, with which he is pre-eminently endowed."⁸ The saints may also have these spiritual senses "greatly developed by their holiness and their habitual suppression of the corporeal senses," but they necessarily tend to express themselves with greater circumspection. The poet can speak what others cannot, because he occupies a position "somewhere between that of a saint and that of Balaam's ass." His gift is to be able to detect, "in external nature, those likenesses and echoes by which spiritual realities can alone be rendered credible and more or less apparent, or subject to 'real apprehension' in persons of inferior perceptive powers." So the poet is able to bring these spiritual realities within the grasp of others.

Christianity, he concludes in this first essay, is "yet in its infancy, though it seems, as it has always seemed to contemporaries, to be in its decay."⁹ He even looks forward to something like a "New Dispensation" of Christianity in which the "real apprehension" of the truths of faith will be opened to the millions. Many of these truths concern the relation between man and woman, and here he anticipates in many respects the Theology of the Body of Pope John Paul II—a theology grounded in

7. *Religio Poetae, etc.* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1893), 1–2.

8. *Ibid.*, 2. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are from pp. 2–3.

9. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

the Trinity, and based on the analogies between the love of the soul for God, the love of God for mankind, and the love between man and woman. Patmore's formulations can be startling. He writes, for example: "The account of the creation, in Genesis, is prophecy, not history. We are now in the beginning of the sixth day. Woman is being created out of man."¹⁰ For woman, as Patmore writes, "is the sum and complex of all nature, and is the *visible* glory of God. The divine manhood, indeed, may be *discerned* in man through the cloud of that womanhood of which he is a participator, inasmuch as he also is the body, which, as St. Augustine says, 'is the Bride.'"¹¹ Creation, he says, is a musical concert, "consisting of representative repetitions and variations upon the single theme, God, who is defined by St. Thomas as an *Act*—the Act of love, the 'embrace' of the First and Second Persons, and their unity is the thence proceeding Spirit of Life, '*Creator Spiritus*,' the Life and Joy of all things." To hear it we must fix our attention

upon the *theme*, which is God, and "the love which is between himself," the love of which all other loves are more or less remote echoes and refrains. This "dry doctrine" of the Trinity, or primary Act of Love, is the keynote of all living knowledge and delight. God himself becomes a concrete object and an intelligible joy when contemplated as the eternal felicity of a Lover with the beloved, the Anti-type and very original of the Love which inspires the poet and the thrush.¹²

Patmore even saw why the time had come for the Church to unfold a Theology of the Body: "It is because religion is less venerated now than ever, and love more, that it has become permissible to look a little behind the veils which have hitherto concealed these truths from the many, though they have always shone clearly to God's Elect, to whom 'Thy Maker is thy Husband' is no hyperbole or figure of speech."¹³

10. *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*, 36.

11. *Ibid.*, 111.

12. *Ibid.*, 108–09.

13. *Ibid.*, 112.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find reflected in Patmore's poetry and other writings a great love for the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Thou Speaker of all wisdom in a Word,
 Thy Lord!
 Speaker who thus could'st well afford
 Thence to be silent;—ah, what silence that
 Which had for prologue thy "Magnificat?"—
 O, Silence full of wonders
 More than by Moses in the Mount were heard,
 More than were utter'd by the Seven Thunders;
 Silence that crowns, unnoted, like the voiceless blue,
 The loud world's varying view,
 And in its holy heart the sense of all things ponders!

These verses are from the splendid poem "The Child's Purchase" from *The Unknown Eros*, which contains an entire mariology. A bit later in the same section, we read:

My Lady, yea, the Lady of my Lord,
 Who didst the first descry
 The burning secret of virginity,
 We know with what reward!
 Prism whereby
 Alone we see
 Heav'n's light in its triplicity;
 Rainbow complex
 In bright distinction of all beams of sex,
 Shining for aye
 In the simultaneous sky,
 To One, thy Husband, Father, Son, and Brother,
 Spouse blissful, Daughter, Sister, milk-sweet Mother;
Ora pro me!

Indeed, this is the sixth day, and in the Blessed Virgin woman is created, and from her are born all who now live. The great secret, Patmore says, that the Church has hidden in plain sight of all, as the Sun is hidden by its rays, is "the doctrine of the Incarnation, regarded not as an historical event which occurred two thousand years ago, but as an event which is renewed in the body of every one who is in the way to the fulfillment of

his original destiny.”¹⁴ Our Lady is the “prism” or “rainbow” in whom we can see this dazzling secret that reveals our destiny.

These notes on Coventry Patmore make no claim even to sketch the many aspects of his personality. He was a complex man. But it seems to me that in Patmore’s poetry, essays, and aphorisms, we see a fullness of Catholic wisdom that is not exceeded by any other representative of the Revival, and one that speaks to our age as much as it does to his own, opening vistas within the Word of God that remain incompletely explored even today. If “a man is known by his speech”—and a poet even more so, for he pours himself into his verse and crafts it to perfection—then we know Coventry Patmore as something more than a Victorian gentleman of aristocratic temper, more than a devout Catholic convert who was at the same time something of a despiser of priests, more than a faithful husband three times over. We know him (and need him) as a prophetic voice at the heart of English Catholicism, speaking of human and divine love, a voice that falls into silence—a “silence full of wonders”—only when he has brought it within our reach.¹⁵ □

STRATFORD CALDECOTT is editor of the journals *Second Spring* and *Humanum*, and the author of *The Radiance of Being*.

14. *Ibid.*, 122.

15. I want to pay tribute to the late Dame Felicitas Corrigan, O.S.B., a nun of Stanbrook Abbey in England, whose unusual scholarly interest in Patmore and infectious personal enthusiasm introduced me to this prince of Victorian poets. The present essay is based on my Foreword to a new edition of Patmore’s *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*, available from Angelico Press.