

Review: Madeleine Callaghan, *Eternity in British Romantic Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022) 336pp. ISBN 978-180-085-6066, £87.60.

CATHERINE ROSE MAW

IN HER AMBITIOUS monograph, *Eternity in British Romantic Poetry* (2022), Madeleine Callaghan sets out to explore conceptualisations of eternity and its relationship to the mortal world in Romantic poetry, which she establishes as one of the most significant intellectual concerns of the period. Her work considers whether poetry can successfully apprehend the intangible concept of eternity: how might poetry be a means to ‘access, express, and understand eternity, if eternity exists’?¹ In response to this question, Callaghan demonstrates the diverse ideas and forms of eternity in Romantic poetry, in both their positively hopeful, and negatively uncertain, iterations. Like the monographs of Andrew Bennett (1999), Martin Priestman (2000), and Mark Sandy (2013) which examine ideas of eternity in Romantic poetry through broader theological, philosophical, secular, or aesthetic frameworks, Callaghan’s study also takes the ‘big six’ canonical Romantic poets—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats—as her starting point, but also includes the Romantic poet Felicia Hemans (1793-1835).² Where Bennett, Priestman and Sandy consider eternity to be only one ideological factor within a wider set of literary and socio-historical contexts such as theological beliefs and practices, philosophical influences, the practice of literary creation, or literary posterity, Callaghan departs from this practice by addressing eternity directly as the central focus of the monograph, refreshingly seeking to read Romantic poetry through a ‘conceptual rather than contextual’ methodology.³

Until now, Callaghan attests, ‘no studies have focused on the mixture of sources that contribute to the Romantic fascination with eternity’.⁴ Callaghan’s work draws upon

¹ Madeleine Callaghan, *Eternity in British Romantic Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), p. 1.

² Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory and Mourning* (London: Routledge, 2013).

³ Callaghan, p. 11.

⁴ Callaghan, p. 13.

writers such as Milton, Plato, Boethius, and Aquinas, forming an intersecting (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) range of literary, philosophical, and theological frameworks. This interdisciplinary methodology challenges the separation of theoretical lenses, and brings those lenses together to work as a symbiotic whole. This allows Callaghan to consider how each poet diverges in their approach to eternity as a thematic and conceptual concern, arguing that while the ‘thrilling tension between the temporal and the transcendent is the principle that unites their work’, each individual poet ‘imagines their own version of eternity’.⁵ As a result, Callaghan demonstrates that eternity in British Romantic poetry is a multifaceted concept constructed via a range of spiritual, intellectual, and authorial considerations.

The first chapter explores William Blake’s poetic and artistic approaches to the experience of eternity. Callaghan claims that ‘Blake’s chosen position is that of an artist suspended between the historically-situated world and the eternity accessible via prophetic vision’.⁶ For Blake, she argues, an unstable apprehension of eternity is built upon our understanding of the temporal condition of our own world. However, for Callaghan, Blake refuses to consider the sensations of the physical world as the only mode of perception. Instead, Blake ‘rehabilitates the imaginary’, enabling the poet ‘to make his reader see as he sees’ by engaging the reader in both visual and poetic imagery.⁷ As such, Blake’s poetry aims to equip the reader with a new way of seeing eternity whilst living in the material world.⁸

Chapter Two considers William Wordsworth’s tentative approach to notions of eternity. Callaghan highlights Wordsworth’s various philosophical and theological influences, which include Plato, John Locke, Emmanuel Kant, Saint Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, and differentiates between Wordsworth’s perception of the tangible world and what *could* exist beyond empirical observation. Callaghan categorises these as ‘mortal sight of what is here and his visionary perception of what is eternal’—or, in short, his mortal sight and eternal vision in poems such as *The Excursion* (1814) and *The*

⁵ Callaghan, p. 15.

⁶ Callaghan, p. 25.

⁷ Callaghan, p. 25.

⁸ Callaghan, p. 58.

Prelude (1805), among other canonical works.⁹ However, Callaghan argues that, for Wordsworth, the poet cannot fully apprehend, 'only intuit the presence of visionary eternity in his mortal sight'.¹⁰ With a nod to Wordsworth's empiricism, Callaghan suggests that, for Wordsworth, possibilities of eternity can be imagined but are ultimately unknowable within the limitations of mortal life.

In Chapter Three, Callaghan considers Coleridge's theological exploration of a Christian afterlife through the art of writing poetry, arguing that his use of sensory imagery serves to create a somatic, rather than solely conceptual, experience of eternity. For Callaghan, Coleridge as a poet-philosopher 'must range through our fallen language in an attempt to discover words adequate to transcend the finite and access the eternal':¹¹ Callaghan examines Coleridge's poem *Religious Musings* (1796) as one example of how Coleridge uses this kind of imagery to contemplate the imagined sensory experience of biblical apocalypse and Christian eternity. Coleridge vividly illustrates, Callaghan argues, a promised paradise beyond mortal life: an eternal heaven, which paradoxically, as an abstract and unknowable concept, can only be imagined and expressed through rich sensory imagery as an earthly lens through which we might successfully perceive this otherwise-intangible concept.

In Chapter Four, Callaghan focuses on Byron's work, arguing that his enquiry into the intellectual potential of eternity shapes Byron's most experimental poetry. Through close readings of some of Byron's most famous works, such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18), *Manfred* (1817), *Don Juan* (1819) and *Beppo* (1818), Callaghan underscores Byron's struggle with the nature of humanity to envisage itself as '[h]alf dust, half deity'.¹² Tied to mortality whilst seeking an aspect of the eternal or immortal, 'Byron's protean and shifting approach to eternity sees him experiment with finding a means to *articulate* what eternity *can* signify to a mortal poet' (my emphasis).¹³

⁹ Callaghan, p. 60.

¹⁰ Callaghan, p. 95.

¹¹ Callaghan, p. 101.

¹² Lord Byron, 'Manfred', in *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 274-314.

¹³ Callaghan, p. 138.

In Chapter Five, Callaghan argues for the status of Platonic-Christian philosophy as intrinsic to Shelley's conceptualisation of eternity, with Callaghan noting that Shelley was fascinated by the 'gulf' between mortal and eternal.¹⁴ Through a close reading of Shelley's construction of poetic personae in major works such as *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *The Witch of Atlas* (1820), *Epipsychidion* (1821), *Adonais* (1821), and his later lyrics, Callaghan argues that the 'problem of how to imagine, reach, and express eternity becomes the question that haunts Shelley's poetry'.¹⁵ Shelley's poetry thus passionately manifests his desire and yearning for a world beyond the human.

Chapter Six focuses on 'Defying Eternity in Keats's Poetry'. For Callaghan, the pursuit of eternity is 'antithetical to how Keats configured his poetics'.¹⁶ She suggests that, for Keats, eternity is beyond mortal comprehension, and points to an apprehensive resistance on Keats's part to define eternity itself. Callaghan's subsequent revisiting of 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819) illustrates to us that the '[d]efiance of eternity is the ultimate Keatsian gesture' and that, for Keats, '[b]eing human is all we know, and, finally, all we have'.¹⁷

Finally, Chapter Seven turns to Hemans's 'Eternity of Female Suffering', with Hemans being the only female poet discussed at length beside the canonical 'big six' Romantic poets. Taking *Records of Women* (1828) as its focus, Callaghan suggests that Hemans's female protagonists are 'fated to suffer' a sempiternal pattern of anguish that cannot be outlived.¹⁸ Through exploring poems such as 'Indian Woman's Death Song' and 'Madeline. A Domestic Tale', Callaghan argues that Hemans's women only have two options: to end their own lives to cease suffering, or to endure life with the mutual support of other women. By including this chapter, Callaghan implicitly recognises the expansion of the perceived Romantic canon. Nevertheless, to only include one in-depth study on a woman poet suggests a possible limitation of the work: the absence of other female poets, such as Letitia Landon, Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson is marked. The positioning of the Hemans chapter in the study also makes the inclusion feel like something of a belated afterthought. Callaghan's methodology

¹⁴ Callaghan, p. 178.

¹⁵ Callaghan, p. 199.

¹⁶ Callaghan, p. 217.

¹⁷ Callaghan, p. 250.

¹⁸ Callaghan, p. 251.

of centring chapters around individual poets is, at first glance, logical for exploring differing perspectives and beliefs around eternity. However, an alternative approach might have been taken in integrating the works of women more consistently throughout the monograph, allowing their work to participate more fully in conversation with that of more established male poets. Nonetheless, Callaghan's chapter on Hemans provides a fruitful starting point for future scholarship: further discussions of eternity in the works of women, and those of other non-canonical Romantic writers. Such an approach poses a prime opportunity to diversify the perspectives on the concept of eternity in this monograph, demonstrating the impact of differing lived experiences on individual understandings of eternity.

Callaghan's answer to the question raised in her introduction—how might poetry provide a means of knowing eternity—is that, on its own, '[p]hilosophy can only do so much' but that '[p]oetry might be the nearest possibility of apprehending eternity'.¹⁹ Through her text-first approach, Callaghan demonstrates that the poetic expression of eternity reflects 'a spur to the imagination', and subsequently positions the imaginative and creative impulse as central to the expression, and function, of eternity in poetry.²⁰ She concludes that '[p]oetry, more so than philosophy, allows for the imagination to take hold and remove us from the reason-bound systems of philosophical thinking'.²¹ The fact that eternity remains fundamentally unknowable to these poets means that, for Callaghan, imaginative and diverse conceptualisations of eternity are allowed to proliferate: her work skilfully illustrates poetry's status as a mutable medium that enables these poets to theorise, posit, and explore such vast and intangible concepts.



BIOGRAPHY: Catherine Rose Maw is an MLitt English Literature student at Newcastle University. She graduated with a BA(Hons) in English Literature from Newcastle University in 2019. Her current research explores the poetry of John Keats in relation to his self-fashioned role of the 'poet-physician', and how his medical training inspired Keats's attempts in poetry to capture, embrace, and palliate the emotional effects of

¹⁹ Callaghan, p. 294.

²⁰ Callaghan, p. 292.

²¹ Callaghan, p. 293.

longing for immortality as a condition of human mortality. Her research interests more broadly include nature, feeling, and emotional experience in Romantic poetry.

CONTACT: catherine.maw@newcastle.ac.uk