



## In a Mirror Dimly by Chris Alderman

At Gutenberg we sometimes refer to Romanticism as the Enlightenment’s “evil twin”—somewhat facetiously, of course, but a certain amount of opprobrium does attach to the term in the annals of intellectual history. Romanticism has been characterized as the refuge of irrationalists, obscurantists, even solipsists who would downplay or even deny the reality of the phenomenal world. The English poet Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) epitomizes the Romantic temperament when he reacts to controversial scientific ideas like Robert Chambers’s “transmutation of the species” (a precursor to Darwinian evolution) and their tendency to view human beings as unexceptional: “Let Science prove we are, and then / What matters Science unto men, / At least to me?” (“In Memoriam,” Canto 120.) If science, history, and representational art are windows through which we see the world outside, then surely Romantic art and philosophy are mirrors in which, like Narcissus, the gazer is lost in an imaginary dream.

But what, after all, is the difference between a window and a mirror apart from the fact that the former shows what is behind it and the latter what is before? Indeed, one could argue that the window—corresponding here to scientific observation with its supposed objectivity—presents the greater obstacle to true knowledge because of its very transparency. Its presence, and thus its effects on the observer and the observed, is easily forgotten. The mirror, on the other hand, which obviously presents nothing more than an image of reality, never lets one lose sight of the fact

that one’s perspective is limited. Even for the Apostle Paul, the mirror is a more appropriate metaphor for the medium of earthly knowledge: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Romanticism, then, might be understood as a reaction to the epistemological pretensions of Enlightenment thinking. But that is not all. By framing their artistic and philosophical productions as so many mirrors—most are loosely if not strictly autobiographical—the Romantics restored to our picture of reality what the Enlightenment and its heirs tended to erase: the human being, instinct with the breath divine.

This human being is not, in Tennyson’s words, “wholly brain”; not merely a pair of hands to pull a lever or crank a machine; not—notwithstanding the reductions of the Darwinist—nothing but that part of the body for which the modesty of a former age sewed an apron of fig leaves. In contrast with all such *analyses*, all such breakings-down of the human being, the Romantics saw the goal of philosophy to be a *synthesis*, a putting-back-together-again. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who of all the Romantics offers the fullest exposition of their thought, writes thus of the imagination, a faculty more important to them than any other:

*It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify.* (Biographia Literaria)

The idealized, unified, synthesized image of the human being that we glimpse in the mirror of Romantic poetry and prose is beauti-



ful and maybe even flattering, combining as it does many of the features that we would sooner associate with God: “For Mercy has a human heart, / Pity a human face, / And Love, the human form divine, / And Peace, the human dress.”<sup>1</sup> The effect of the picture as a whole, however, is a melancholy one, for in a corner of the frame, small but conspicuous, crouches a hideous creature: Death. If the prey for whom it lies fiendishly in wait, the human being, were merely an animal or a machine—as some of the Romantics’ contemporaries averred—the picture would lose its sadness along with its beauty.

American Romantic Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) makes the connection between sadness and beauty explicit in his comments on a kind of self-elegy written by another Romantic, William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878):

*The intense melancholy which seems to well up, perforce, to the surface of all the poet’s cheerful sayings about his grave, we find thrilling us to the soul . . . Let me remind you that (how or why we know not) this certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of beauty.* (“The Poetic Principle”)

Here Poe professes not to know the reason why great beauty should grieve us, but I believe the foregoing discussion provides an answer. The more beautiful we find something—that is, the more we recognize in it the imprint of the divine—the sadder we are tempted to

<sup>1</sup> “The Divine Image,” William Blake (1757-1827).



## March 9 • 7:00 PM Student Art Show & Open Mic Night

Gutenberg's annual art show highlights the performing and visual art of Gutenberg's students. This year's show coincides with our Preview Days for prospective students, and the performance part of the Student Art Show will be open-mic to allow those students to participate. Performance/open-mic begins at 7:00 PM. Limited seating is first-come, first-served. A gallery reception follows. A donation of \$5.00 for admission is requested but not required. All donations help support the arts at Gutenberg College.

## March 9-10 Gutenberg Preview Days (See page 4.)

## March 10 • 9 AM-3 PM Francis Schaeffer Workshop (Bend, OR)

The Gutenberg College Schaeffer Workshop aims to engage students and families in open discussion of Schaeffer's historical narrative of the Western world, his philosophy and sociology of art, and broad concepts of culture as presented in *How Shall We Then Live?* Our goal is to cultivate deep, independent thinking about history, culture, values, and reality for those interested in biblical truth. For more details and to register, go to:  
[www.workshops.gutenberg.edu](http://www.workshops.gutenberg.edu)

## May 18 • 7:00 PM Friends of Gutenberg Night (Save the date!)

Join us for an evening of fellowship, entertainment, and edibles on Friday, May 18th at 7:00 PM. Reconnect with old friends, meet new ones, and learn about what God is doing at Gutenberg College. All are welcome—bring your family!

## In a Mirror Dimly, continued

become, understanding or remembering or only vaguely sensing that it, too, must pass. Or perhaps, observing beauty that seems perpetually renewed, like winter blooming into spring, we are saddened at the thought of our own continuous decline. "Beauty," as the English Romantic John Keats (1795-1821) famously wrote, "is truth" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn").

Poe puts his finger on this idea in a later essay when he writes: "[T]he death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world" ("The Philosophy of Composition"). Many of his poems and stories, and all of the more beautiful ones, have just this as their theme.

*For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams*

*Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE;  
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE;  
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,  
In her sepulcher there by the sea—  
In her tomb by the side of the sea.*

This is not the affectation of a poet who has simply realized that sorrow sells. Poe wrote "Annabel Lee" after the death of his consumptive wife at the age of twenty-three. We may also confidently trace the origins of "The Raven," "Ligeia," and "Berenice" to her long illness—and to Poe's memory of his young mother's death from the same disease when he was still a child.

Poe is not the only Romantic to sound this note of sadness. Just as some have detected in Thomas Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) the first signs of the Romantic sensibility, the elegy may be the genre in which the Romantics did their more characteristic and beautiful work. In "Adonais," the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) writes:

*I weep for Adonais—he is dead!  
Oh, weep for Adonais! though our tears  
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!*

Again, this is no lachrymose little number performed by a hired mourner at the head of a Roman funeral procession. Shelley wrote it less than six months after Keats's death from

tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, seeing in his friend's fate not only the tragedy of the beautiful Grecian youth beloved of Aphrodite but also a foreshadowing of his own demise. (Shelley was to die six years later, young himself and, like Keats, relatively obscure.) Shelley's grief, like Poe's for his wife Virginia, was real.

Real too is the grief in the sonnet beginning with the words "Surprised by joy" by the English Romantic William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the last of the sad, beautiful poems that I shall adduce for you here. Its first words, of course, were later used by C. S. Lewis as the title for his 1955 autobiography, testifying to the poem's importance for him. In this sonnet, Wordsworth recounts the pain he felt when, turning unconsciously to share a moment of happiness with his three-year-old daughter Catherine, he remembers that she is dead.

*—That thought's return  
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,  
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,  
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;  
That neither present time, nor years unborn  
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.*

C. S. Lewis, remembering the time when he was still seeking a philosophy of life that would do justice to his experience of it, writes: "The only non-Christians who seemed to me really to know anything were the Romantics" (*Surprised by Joy*). Like the Romantics, he rejected the latest instance of Enlightenment thinking, the psychological "realism" of the day according to which even our highest aspirations are sublimations of sexual desire—a simplistic and even sophomoric account of the human condition. For Lewis, such a theory failed to account for what he calls "Joy." Joy is to be distinguished from pleasure and even happiness, he writes; in fact, one might almost call it a kind of grief. Most interesting for our purposes is the genre of the literary work to which Lewis traces his first encounter with Joy: the elegy. "I heard a voice that cried, / Balder the beautiful / Is dead, is dead..."<sup>2</sup> The death of the beloved,

<sup>2</sup> "Drapa" (Death Song or Dirge) by Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér (1782-1846) as translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

the beloved's beauty: this might be a poem by Poe, Shelley, or Wordsworth. Lewis found in Romanticism a view of the human being that better accounted for the reality of Joy, for that strange mixture of elation and dejection we feel when love reveals to us man's beauty with the toll of a passing bell.

But this is not the end. Joy—grief—is not the end, as Lewis came to realize, but a signpost directing us thither. It may be an inseparable part of all the higher manifestations of beauty, as Poe observed, but it can have no share in the highest. As any Christian could have told them, and as Lewis discovered, the highest manifestation of beauty (and the end of sadness) is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Once a Romantic myself, I believed that our Lord had forever sanctified human sorrow with his tears. "Weep with those who weep," Paul tells us in Romans 12:15, and this is just what we see Jesus do in John 11:35, where he weeps with those who mourn the death of his friend Lazarus. But whom, we may ask, is Jesus weeping *for*? Is he, as the Romantics would have done, weeping for Lazarus? Scholars disagree on the answer. The text, however, shows Jesus greeting the news of Lazarus's sickness and death with equanimity because he knows he will raise Lazarus from the dead. It thus suggests that Jesus weeps not for the dead man, who has only "fallen asleep in Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:18), but sympathetically for the living.

Today I search the New Testament in vain for the sadness I found so beautiful in the Romantics. "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" (Matthew 9:14). And he is with us always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). For a long time, our writing has either drily painted the world without us (like the Enlightenment writers) or run with the tears of self-reflection (like the Romantics). What would our writing look like if it were to crystallize into a vision of the world to come? What if we, beholding our visage in the center of the mirror, were to sit ourselves down and see above us the image of the one who stands at our back, the one true man and express image of the Father, rising victorious over the grave, and ourselves raised with him?

Perhaps such writing might look like the *Hyperion* of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) at the height of its passion:

*Auch wir, auch wir sind nicht geschieden,  
Diotima, und die Tränen um dich verstehen  
es nicht!  
[We too, we too are not parted, Diotima, and  
the tears for you understand it not!]*

Perhaps it would resemble the "Dream-Fugue" of Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) in the splendor of its final throes:

*A thousand times, amongst the phantoms  
of sleep, has God shown thee to me, standing  
before the golden dawn, and ready to enter  
its gates—with the dreadful Word going  
before thee—with the armies of the grave  
behind thee; shown thee to me, sinking,  
rising, fluttering, fainting, but then suddenly  
reconciled, adoring; a thousand times has he  
followed thee in the worlds of sleep—through  
storms; through desert seas; through the  
darkness of quicksands; through fugues and  
the persecution of fugues; through dreams,  
and the dreadful resurrections that are in  
dreams—only that at the last, with one  
motion of his victorious arm, he might record  
and emblazon the endless resurrections of his  
love!*

Or perhaps we would see in it something of "Crossing the Bar," that lofty valediction from the poet with whom this essay began, Alfred Tennyson:

*Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;  
For tho' from out our borne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.*

Whatever the case may be, we may appreciate the work of the Romantics for what it is—a fairer, sadder, higher view of the human being than the Enlightenment thinkers gave us. But let us move beyond their view of "the higher manifestations of beauty," entangled as it is in death and grief, and instead thank God for that highest beauty that holds no sting.

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## Wednesdays • 7:30 PM Community Classes

Gutenberg offers free community classes on a variety of topics during the academic year to enrich students, residents, and learners in the community. For information and class offerings, go to [www.gutenberg.edu/home](http://www.gutenberg.edu/home). To subscribe to video recordings, go to [www.patreon.com/gutenbergcollege](http://www.patreon.com/gutenbergcollege).

### August 2-4 2018 Summer Institute: Are We All Reading the Same Bible? (Save the date!)

The old saying is unfortunately true: you can use the Bible to prove anything. People have always disagreed strongly about what the Bible means. Those disagreements arise because people have different ways of reading the Bible. We each bring our preconceived ideas to the Bible. We each have our own way of deciding what the words of a text mean. We each come from traditions that have explained the Bible to us in various ways. Sometimes it feels as if we are each reading different Bibles. In such circumstances, can the Bible communicate to us? Summer Institute 2018 intends to explore this important issue: with such a diversity of perspectives, can the Bible really speak, and if so, how?

We do not intend to give a systematic, comprehensive set of lectures on this topic. Summer Institute is always an exploration; we seek to provide an experience with some of the flavor of a Gutenberg College education. To explore this question of whether and how the Bible can communicate, we will read and discuss significant texts from Western history. We will read and discuss passages from the Bible. And speakers will present their own reflections on some of the issues raised by those readings. We hope to provide varied and stimulating sessions relevant to the topic of how we read the Bible.



## Thank You!

Gutenberg wants to thank Stefan and Carina Crabtree, who have served the students as Residence Program house managers this last year. They and their sweet daughters have been a wonderful blessing to our community.

The staff and faculty appreciate the valuable contribution they all made to Gutenberg, and we wish them well in their future endeavors. Please be praying for Gutenberg as we begin our search for new house managers.

## News & Views Quarterly

News & Views is going quarterly! It will feature the same great faculty articles but will add new content exploring all things Gutenberg. We are also excited to bring you an updated design coming this fall. Look for your next issue this summer, and don't forget that you can sign up for an electronic version. Just select "Subscribe" at [www.gutenberg.edu/home](http://www.gutenberg.edu/home).

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## Gutenberg Preview Days • March 9-10

Gutenberg Preview Days on Friday March 9th and Saturday March 10th is an event filled with information for students and parents about student life, academics, admissions, and financial aid. Gutenberg Preview Days is designed not only to give you a campus tour but also to immerse you in the Gutenberg experience for a full day and a half. Join us for Gutenberg Preview Days to discover if Gutenberg is the college for you.

This event is for individuals who are currently high school or transfer students

who are considering applying to Gutenberg College for a bachelor's degree in liberal arts. There is a \$15 registration fee, which includes lunch and dinner on Friday and breakfast on Saturday.

Discover first-hand the faculty, financial aid process, and housing options Gutenberg has to offer. Parents are invited to attend a separate meeting for their questions, hosted by Gutenberg parents and Gutenberg's Admissions Director, Dr. Eliot Grasso.



**Details and to register: [www.gutenberg.edu/home](http://www.gutenberg.edu/home)**