

# Poetry's "shimmering robes": Carl Jung and Romantic Mythology of Intuitive Creativity

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*Abstract:* Despite the many essays that provide instructive tracing of Carl Jung's archetypes in Romantic literature (and elsewhere), critics have declined to examine the important implications and consequences of parallels between Jung's theory of artistic awareness and Romantic aesthetic ideology. This ideology finds expression in the language of Blake, Percy Shelley, Emerson, Coleridge, Wordsworth and others regarding artistic creativity, specifically its origins and aims, but especially the creative process itself. In this essay, I examine the way Jung samples Romantic ideas and imagery in his characterization of art and in his conception of the religious experience of the artist in the act of creation. In doing so, I suggest that attachment to popular (not always accurate) Jungian ideas about art has reinforced the continued acceptance of compelling Romantic myths about unconscious creativity. I argue that, in his essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" and other essays, as part of an effort to liberate modern conceptions of art from reliance on mechanistic views of the human mind, Jung impeaches the merits of the Freudian model tied to medical forensics and installs in its place a Romantic theory of art rooted in the idea of intuitive creativity.

*Key words:* Jung, Romanticism, visionary, numinous, artistic inspiration, analytical psychology, Freud, materialism, intuition, Spielberg, Lucas, Wordsworth Blake, Shelley, Plato, Kant,

## Introduction

Though Carl Jung insisted that he was no literary critic, his ideas have had enormous influence on the way many people think about works of literature. Students of Jung have long sought to link his psychological theories to literary texts, and in that effort several have identified affinities between Jung's ideas and the imagery of Romantic poetry.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have noted connections between Jung and both Blake and Shelley (Gallant), Goethe, (Bishop and Moores), Whitman (Herrmann), Rousseau (Johnston), Emily Brontë (Hume), Blake's *Milton* (Fike, *One Mind*, 184-215), and others.

Christine Gallant characterizes Jung as “neo-romantic” and asserts that many of the ideas that structure his thought “are now considered most characteristically Romantic” (3).<sup>2</sup> In his monograph on Jung and Romanticism, D. J. Moores observes that Romantic authors in Europe and America explored the dark side of their natures in ways that anticipate Jung’s thinking on the unconscious and the repression/projection dynamic. These studies stress that, like his Romantic forebears, Jung believed that human beings in industrialized cultures feel themselves out of touch with essential spiritual realities. For Jung, works of art frequently express regret about what has been lost but also assert a haunting awareness that the spirit lives on. And artistic assertions of this spirit often occur in images of the shadow (a figure representing the submerged instincts of the human imagination). Romantic shadow tropes appear as complex figures, dangerous and frightening sources of productive energy. Such imagery aligns with Jung’s Romantic understanding of the artistic impulse as an alien presence operating beyond the conscious will of the artist, as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s account of the composition of “Kubla Khan.” Ambivalent evocations of the shadow, imbued with salutary (but still potentially destructive) energy appear in such figures as the “fearful symmetry” of Blake’s “The Tyger” (line 4), Coleridge’s “demon lover,” Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, the Byronic hero, and even Milton’s Satan as Blake saw him. In Jung’s conception, recognizing and gaining access to the vitality of these spiritual realities, while dangerous, can bring necessary healing to damaged parts of the adult ego.

However, despite this instructive tracing of Jungian archetypal imagery in Romantic literature (and elsewhere), critics have declined to examine broader implications of parallels between Jung’s theory of artistic awareness and Romantic aesthetic ideology.<sup>3</sup> This ideology finds expression in the language of Blake, Shelley, Emerson, Coleridge, Wordsworth and others regarding artistic creation, specifically its origins and aims but especially the creative process itself. In what follows, I examine the way Jung samples Romantic thought and imagery for his conception of what he calls in “Psychology and Literature” the “creative urge,” which “finds its clearest expression” through the “irrational” (87). In doing so, I suggest that attachment to popularized (and not always accurate) versions of Jungian ideas about art has reinforced the continued acceptance of compelling Romantic myths about unconscious creativity. In his essay “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” as part of an effort to liberate modern conceptions of art from reliance on mechanistic views of the human mind, Jung impeaches the merits of the Freudian model tied to medical forensics and installs in its place a Romantic theory of art rooted in the idea of intuitive creativity.<sup>4</sup> I argue here that this liberating ambition aligns Jung with an impulse Romantic artists (and others) have also felt, a powerful need to counter materialist convictions by asserting a belief in some (usually non-orthodox) version of the spiritual world as the source and impetus for the procedures of art. The Jungian focus on overcoming scientific bias has encouraged a theory of art at odds with the ideas of craft and labor. This sentiment persists today in popular conceptions of artistic creativity, in film

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<sup>2</sup> See also Dawson on Jung and Blake.

<sup>3</sup> For Jung and American literature, see, for example, Fike on Jung and Hemingway (“Ernest”) and Martinez on Jung and Charles Brockden Brown.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Jung’s theories of religion and literary meaning, see Leigh, who includes analysis of published critiques of Jung’s theories.

and television, and especially in rock-and-roll mythology.<sup>5</sup> Such ideas may take their authority from passages in “Relation” without reference to other statements where Jung refines and clarifies his position to reflect a stronger sense of the value of craft. For those committed to the view of art as wholly unconscious, if art can heal the wound created by an excessive emphasis on reason, it must not appear to rely on rational processes to do so. I contend that this conviction at times has led Romantic proponents to embrace shaky philosophical positions (especially regarding Kant’s thought) and has encouraged some poets to make exaggerated claims about their own irrational/unconscious writing process. These claims, amplified by common oversimplifications of Jung’s views, have had the effect of obscuring and under-valuing the technical proficiency of artistic work in general, even that of the Romantics themselves.

While it makes sense to associate recognition of materialism’s spiritual vacuity with early Romantic ideology, mistrust of mechanized culture as a menace to the human spirit continued through the Victorian period. For the Victorian poet Tennyson in *In Memoriam* (1850), the materialist bias threatened to reduce human beings to “magnetic mockeries” or “cunning casts in clay” (Canto 120, lines 3, 5). For those swayed by Romantic ideology, this perception of being cut off from one’s origins creates a desire for convalescence, a need to return to psychic wholeness, to “make one music as before,” in Tennyson’s words, through a reconnection to something beyond mere materiality, beyond the nightmarish “secular abyss” (Prologue, line 28; Canto 76, line 6).<sup>6</sup> Noting this desire to reconnect with spiritual reality in the nineteenth century, Moores identifies Romanticism as a “religious phenomenon” and observes Jung’s perception that Romantic poets and many later artists work to produce a “replication, at least, of the spiritual experience to which religion attends” (20). In “The Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” Jung explicitly links art with religion, suggesting that these phenomena elude scientific explanation, that it violates their essence to decode them in purely rational terms (66).

I suggest here that in writings of several Romantic authors, in the works of some later poets like Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Dylan Thomas, and in the pop mythology of rock music (see Pattison 88–89), expressions of this aesthetic spirituality take on features that have much in common with language Jung used to characterize what he calls the “collective unconscious,” a “sphere of unconscious mythology, whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind” (“Relation” 80). In describing the workings of the artistic imagination, Jung borrows from Romantic imagery and mythology to suggest that works of art do not result primarily from conscious craft. Rather, art proceeds from the emergence of images and ideas that find their way into language through the artist’s unwilled imaginative access to shapeless primordial contents arising from the collective unconscious. Artists convert these perceptions into images that readers can perceive (such as artistic renderings of the shadow or the mandala), allowing them to experience a more complete awareness of human life, especially its ties to a realm beyond the material one. In other words, Jung’s reading of Romantic concerns about materialism and his understanding of the Romantic attraction to notions of unconscious artistic creation lead him to identify affinities between their aims and his; acting on this perception, he borrows

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<sup>5</sup> See Pattison 3–29 for an argument attributing the ethos of rock music to the extension of “Romantic pantheism.”

<sup>6</sup> All Tennyson references are to *In Memoriam*.

from Romantic imagery, characterizing the origins, aims, and processes of art as a counterpoint to what he sees as the scientific bias in industrial society and especially in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In the view of Jung and some Romantic thinkers, the artist begins with the intuition of a world infused with nonmaterial being and then creates images of that world (not the archetypes themselves) to advance cognizance of this being, thereby providing spiritual relief to troubled human souls. For Jung and these Romantic figures, relying on spiritual intuition minimizes artistic agency; this emphasis on intuitive art contributes to the continuing stereotype (called Romantic), the belief that true artistic creativity, in its reliance on unconscious energy, achieves excellence without the contributions of labor and craft. Complicating this position, I will also note that in essays like “Psychology and Literature” and “Ulysses: A Monologue,” Jung avows more respect for the contributions of craft than some passages in “Relation” suggest.

Detractors (including some twentieth-century literary critics) have demoted literary expressions of Romantic spiritual awareness to the status of poor art, superstition, or insanity. June Singer notes that many readers have consigned Blake’s output to the status of pure madness (237), and Alexander Gilchrist’s famous early Blake biography devotes an entire chapter to the question of Blake’s sanity (362–75). Gilchrist describes a Romantic perception about Blake’s mental life that applies to the attitudes of many Romantic authors and extends to Jung as well: “Blake was, in spirit, a denizen of other and earlier ages of the world than the present mechanical one to which chance had so rudely transplanted him” (369–370). In “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Blake himself puts it this way: “If the doors of perception could be cleansed, then everything would appear to man as it is, infinite” (1483; Plate 14). For artists, the imagination cleanses the doors of perception, and when readers examine truly imaginative creations, they begin to purify their own perceptions. For Romantic votaries—including Jung—this cleansing relies on a belief that the imaginative grasp of eternal realities, far from madness, fosters and invigorates a healthful awareness of spiritual certainties unavailable to inductive dissection.<sup>7</sup>

Disquieted by a spiritual awareness at odds with the cultural norm, Romantic artists then seek to communicate their vision to the world. Spiritual realities or “forms” (to use the Platonically charged word Percy Shelley and Ralph Waldo Emerson rely on to characterize these realities) lie immanent in the material plane. Modern human beings possess only a weakened ability to perceive them partly because they have grown accustomed to the common assumption of an exclusively material world. Many who suffer from this faltering vision live with a disheartening awareness that something has been lost. Such deteriorated perception accounts for the “[m]arks of weakness, marks of woe” Blake’s speaker in “London” perceives in English city dwellers (4). Wordsworth also regrets the decay of human spiritual sight: “Little we see in Nature that is ours.” As a consequence, we have “given our hearts away” and laid “waste our powers” (“World,” lines 2–4). A feeling of loss accounts for Wordsworth’s sense that “there has passed away a glory from the earth” and his conviction that the “visionary gleam” has vanished (“Ode” 18, 58). It’s no accident that the word “visionary” figures deeply in Jung’s conception of artistic creativity (see “Psychology and Literature” 89–90). And the distressing consciousness of this diminished visionary capacity creates the need for the practice of

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<sup>7</sup> For a Jungian consideration of madness and Romanticism, see Woodman’s *Sanity, Madness, Transformation: The Psyche in Romanticism*.

artists who not only recognize a powerful spiritual world inaccessible to most of us but also find themselves compelled to reproduce and communicate illuminating reflections of it.

In Romantic theory, artists and poets, agents of the imagination in a world led astray by materialist misconceptions, perform a healing priest-like function. Gifted with an alert second sight drastically dimmed for most of us, they perceive what we cannot. Like a hierophant, the Romantic artist transmutes human experience so that the non-gifted may receive images of these nearly imperceptible contents, the forms of universal truth, representations of what Jung called the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Attachment to this content through artistic images produces psychic expansion, a fuller experience of life itself. Ross Woodman suggests that the Enlightenment's "contemptuous dismissal of the gods" created the wound that the Romantics felt the need to heal; further, Woodman suggests that Coleridge saw in art the power to aid human "convalescence" from this wound ("Shaman" 62). Woodman then asserts that Jung as a "contemporary Romantic" wanted to be a spiritual physician and saw that the poet/Shaman could also be a healer ("Shaman" 72). The need for healing has encouraged some Romantic apologists confidently to insist on the power of gifted souls to perceive eternal truths through unalloyed intuition and to embody such truths in works of art without the interference of conscious judgment.

### **Kant and Romantic Popular Epistemology**

Romantic theory and Jung's ideas share an epistemological optimism, a conviction that imaginative human beings have access to spiritual truths and that artists can embody authentic and reliable representations of these truths in language and images, thereby communicating this temporarily lost content to ordinary souls bereft by its apparent extinction. As noted above, Moores suggests that one could call such convictions religious or faith based. But to rescue their position from the dangerous ground of pure subjectivity, both Jung and some Romantic adherents insist that the spiritual world they perceive possesses objective reality, that artworks originate in a perception of truth and provide knowledge of truth.<sup>8</sup> This epistemological confidence arrives for both Jung and the Romantics by way of a problematic rendering of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In summing up Kant's position, philosopher Lewis W. Beck distinguishes the crucial notions of "noumena" and "phenomena." Kant sees the noumena as a realm of permanent truth containing objects or events beyond the reach of human observation, a reality Beck likens to Plato's "Forms" (657). Plato believes that the mind, unaided by sense experience, could perceive these forms. But for Kant, noumenal reality remains stubbornly unavailable to human observation. The only reality human beings have access to belongs to the realm Kant calls phenomena, the sphere of flawed human perception consisting of observations that rely on the (admittedly imperfect) categories of mental apprehension. This phenomenal level of perception qualifies as reliable knowledge for Kant, though all such verification remains contingent because it depends, as the skeptical Scottish philosopher David Hume insisted, on demonstrably faulty human senses (see Broackes 378). Thus, phenomenal "knowledge" consists of verifiable yet still contingent content (Beck 658). But of the noumenal, the province of permanent truth like that of Plato's forms, Kant insists we can

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<sup>8</sup> See Bate 160–92 for a characterization of Romantic compromises with radical subjectivity.

have “no knowledge at all” (Beck 658). Or as Walter Jackson Bate puts it, Kant had “proved that reality is forever unknowable to the intellect” (163).

As Coleridge and other Romantic thinkers assimilated these ideas, they seized on Kant’s notion that the active mind can provide a reliable perception of phenomena through the action of mental categories; this process sounded to them like creative imagination, an escape from Hume’s rigorous skepticism and from the trap of John Locke’s empirical “white paper,” which appeared to reduce the human mind to a state of passivity and subjective isolation (Woolhouse). In a philosophical leap, employing what M. H. Abrams calls “popular epistemology,” Coleridge and his compeers concluded that the human imagination provides access not only to contingent reality (Kant’s phenomena) but also to reality in full (the noumena), eternal truth (Abrams 57). The Romantic interpretation of the possibility of attaining this truth through aesthetic intuition essentially forms a faith position which Romantic adherents sought to validate by extending Kant’s metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, critics have contended that Jung’s confidence in the human intuitive grasp of unchanging psychic reality (images from the collective unconscious) may rely on a similarly shadowy reading of Kant’s philosophical corpus. For instance, Robin McCoy Brooks argues that in characterizing the collective unconscious, Jung, writing as a psychologist (not as a philosopher), employed “misappropriated or misconstrued assimilations of Kant’s philosophical corpus” (492). For Jung and for the Romantics, art produces neither a purely aesthetic experience that can be fully understood through philological analysis (i.e., formalist explication) nor an emotional/psychological one related to its author’s personal experience and private unconscious. Instead, authentic art brings about a sanative spiritual/religious transformation in which the reader receives life-altering “knowledge” from a source beyond the reach of rational verifiability. The artist, having perceived the spiritual content, transforms it into images that provide at least a partial or fading representation so as to make its “knowledge” available for ordinary readers. In no uncertain terms, then, for both Jung and the Romantics, art produces knowledge. The intuitive basis of this process leads some Romantic enthusiasts to make extreme claims for the involuntary practices of unconscious artistic creation.

Romantic statements of poetry’s permanent truth occur in many places, including Wordsworth’s famous Preface: “Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge... as immortal as the heart of man” (658). The process of attaining this truth, however questionable its epistemological status, involves, as Mircea Eliade suggests, the artistic reclamation of images that represent human wholeness, such as the mandala (52) and an understanding of art that extends to the idea of escaping from time, attaching to images reaching beyond physical realities to a world of universality and permanence (89). Such a conception accords with ideas like Blake’s “infinite” or what Shelley calls the “eternal, the infinite, and the one.” For the poet’s conceptions, Shelley insists, “time and place and number are not” (341). Jung concurs. In his view, the artist seeks to represent primordial specimens, images inspired by the collective unconscious, that contain within them the psychic history

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<sup>9</sup> See MacMurray’s argument that Kant’s theories never authorize the Romantic view of faith-based intuitive knowledge because such discoveries remain “unverifiable.” See also Wheeler for analysis of Coleridge’s and Shelley’s responses to Kant. For Wheeler, Romantic thought adapts and extends rather than misreads Kant (52).

of humanity. From representation of these archetypal images derives the power of art to delight and instruct. As Jung put it, sounding like a Romantic theorist, “Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices”; such a speaker “enthalls and overpowers” and thereby moves us from the sameness of the everyday into “the realm of the ever-enduring” (82). Understanding the aims of the artist—to reconnect with the infinite—for Jung leads to a fuller awareness of the object of that reconnection. Romantic artists remain understandably unspecific about naming this unorthodox divine source. They embody it in images without really defining it. Jung gives the name collective unconscious to the spiritual dimension the Romantics leave undefined, and he specifies the nature of this psychic region by contrast with Freud’s scientific understanding of the personal unconscious. Jung does not call this mental “hinterland” supernatural, though he does characterize such “primordial experience” as akin to the “superhuman” (“Psychology and Literature” 90). I suggest that the Romantic poets translate their prescient sense of what Jung calls the collective unconscious into religious terms, their primary category for making sense of that which transcends nature. Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* uses the phrase “Natural Supernaturalism” to characterize this Romantic sense of divine immanence (93–202).<sup>10</sup>

### Preserving the Essence of Art

In sympathy with the Romantic effort to counteract the reductive scientific bias, Jung devises an approach to literary works that takes particular exception to the pathologizing disposition of the Freudian medical model, which identifies productions of the creative imagination as evidence of mental illness. In thus parting company from his one-time mentor, Jung employs images and ideas derived from Romantic ideology. Early in “Relation,” Jung rejects the idea that science can be used to interpret artworks: “Art by its very nature is not science, and science by its very nature is not art” (66). As he discusses the origins of artistic creation, Jung clearly identifies that which does not function as a significant source of art’s power—the human personal unconscious, an artist’s private psychic antecedents, Freud’s domain. He makes a similar distinction in “Psychology and Literature,” where he discredits the idea that scientific sounding of the artist’s psychological history can explain “the work itself” (86). For Jung, “religion and art” have an “innermost essence” that eludes scientific analysis (“Relation” 66). Freud’s inductive focus on the artist’s private psychic history causes him to seek the sources of art in the wrong place. By Jung’s analogy, we can learn about a plant by studying its environment, but we cannot explain “everything essential” about it by reference to that habitat: “In the same way, the meaning and individual quality of a work of art inhere in it and not in its extrinsic determinants” (“Relation” 72). This organic imagery follows from Jung’s Romantic view of the work of art as not an inert object but a psychic organism, almost “a living being” (72).<sup>11</sup> In Jung’s view, Freud’s method, relying on “a medical technique for investigating morbid psychic phenomena,” devolves into a search for “repressed contents” with “negative traits” containing “sexual, obscene, or even criminal” characteristics (69), a process “detrimental both to the work of art and to its repute” (“Psychology and

<sup>10</sup> Abrams uses this phrase for the title of his book which analyzes the secularized Romantic sense of a natural world replete with spiritual being.

<sup>11</sup> For Coleridge’s organic theory, see Abrams, *Mirror* 218–25.

Literature” 86). Jung’s approach seeks to correct this error: “In order to do justice to a work of art, analytical psychology must rid itself entirely of medical prejudice; for a work of art is not a disease” (“Relation” 71).

After revealing the shortcomings of Freud’s mechanistic method, Jung unveils his own convictions about the spiritual nature of art itself: Freud’s approach, he writes, “*strips* the work of art of its *shimmering robes*” (“Relation” 69, emphasis added). This evocative phrasing figures the luminous garments of glorified holy personages and even invokes the vestments “stripped” from Jesus by soldiers in the gospel (*KJV*, Matt. 27.28). Such holy raiment either emits miraculous light on its own or disperses the rays of glorified bodies. In employing this spiritual insignia and its attendant light imagery, which at least since Plato’s cave allegory (*The Republic*, Book VII), has served to avow permanent truth, Jung expresses his Romantic conviction that art makes contact with spiritual essences beyond the scope of scientific explanation. In “Psychology and Literature” he makes the crucial distinction between the “visionary” and the “psychological” (89–91) in artistic creations. Elsewhere, he employs the word “numinosum” to characterize the way artists experience the visionary world, the realm beyond the material one (“Psychology and Religion” 7). Jung’s resistance to Freudian scientism sought to protect the idea of art, the numinous visionary world, from mechanistic psychological representations. Romantic poets likewise felt the need to preserve the essence of art, to safeguard the sanctity of the human spirit from reductively materialist explanations. The imperative to shelter the glowing human soul from degrading scientific reduction led to Wordsworth’s mourning the loss of “celestial light” (“Ode,” line 4), to Blake’s horror at the “infinite Abyss” of bleak rationality (“Marriage” 1485; Plate 16), and to Shelley’s conviction that the “owl-winged faculty of calculation” provides a woefully inadequate understanding of art (353). Freud’s theories aimed to further the scientific endeavor, offering material explanations for artistic expression and for what he famously called religious “illusion.” Jung’s Romantic response urges “shimmering robes,” salvific immaterial origins (the collective unconscious) to account for such visionary categories of experience.

Jung insists, then, that poetic inspiration arrives unbidden from an unconscious domain whose existence Freud discounts. Using imaginative gifts beyond those of ordinary people, the artist intuits the presence of primordial content, makes psychic contact with it, and then seeks to represent it in images. Such a sequence evokes the Romantic visionary program of recognizing the infinite in the material world—as in Blake’s “Heaven in a Wild Flower” (“Auguries,” line 2) or as in later Romantic expressions of a similar idea, Dylan Thomas’s “round / Zion of the water bead” (lines 7–8) and “the synagogue of the ear of corn” (line 9)—images that embody the immanence of spiritual life. For Jung, medical science cannot fully understand or explain this largely unconscious process. Artists’ intuitive vision allows them to behold what others fail to see and to produce images whose significance they themselves do not completely understand.

### **The Artistic Gift**

In his conviction regarding the special status of the artist’s power, Jung also draws on the ideas of Romantic exponents. In their view, the experience of artistic inspiration occurs for only a select few, “those with the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination” in Shelley’s words (354), or as Wordsworth puts it, those with more “lively sensibility” and “a more comprehensive soul” than ordinary humans possess (Preface 655).



And artistic expression accomplishes for Shelley something akin to what Jung describes as artistic access to the collective unconscious. For Shelley, “Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man” (354). Art’s “secret alchemy” turns the “poisonous waters” of material existence to “potable gold” (354). His alchemical imagery of poetic redemption converts the poet into a divine messenger. Emerson uses the term “form,” associated with Platonic thought. In his view, poets name the truth, and in that function, resign themselves “to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms” (732). Shelley relies on the same word, asserting that poetry “lays bare that naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms” (354). It “transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving withing the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes” (354). Such Romantic rhetoric does not qualify as orthodox Platonic thought, but in employing the word “form” both Emerson (who said “Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato”) and Shelley (who had translated some of Plato’s dialogues) draw on the sense of permanent truth that Plato promoted.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps feeling an affinity for Romantic adaptations of Plato’s thought, Jung also uses “form” in a similar context, suggesting a sense of the collective unconscious as a spiritual domain of eternal truth, “the deepest springs of life,” to which the artist provides access by preserving “the forms in which the age is most lacking” (82).

The claim that the poet can envisage eternal (Platonic) realities concealed from common perception receives additional impassioned ratification from Shelley, for whom poets “imagine and express” an “indestructible order” (341). Artists put readers in contact with “the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion” (341). More emphatically, a “poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (342), and poetry “forever developes new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains” (343). Shelley identifies Plato himself as a poet, acknowledging the similarity between his notion of eternal truth and Plato’s idea of the “forms,” permanent unchanging realities (342). In his own poetic way, Shelley makes the kind of epistemological claim that (as we have seen) derives from a Romantic reading of Kant’s theories. Poets access realms of eternal knowledge and make it available to readers. As Abrams observes, the word truth can mean many things, but the primary Romantic meaning remains consistent: “Poetry is true in that it corresponds to a reality that transcends the world of sense” (313). Moreover, such divine content allows the poet to perceive moral truth untainted by temporal contingency. Poets should ignore the moral promptings of their “time and place” because their “poetical creations . . . participate in neither” (344). Later in the essay, Shelley returns to the beatific epistemology of verse: “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge” (353). Poetry ascends “to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar” (353). These images of celestial luminosity call to mind Jung’s image of “shimmering robes” and its evocations of holy knowledge. The punning phrase “owl-winged faculty of calculation” combines Shelley’s contempt for the confining capacities of cramped rationality with his loathing for the Oxford officials who expelled him for his unorthodox thought. It links the false power and misdirected authority of those who rely on calculation with the predatory, earthbound focus of the owl, a vulture (for Shelley) that uses its wings not to soar like the

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<sup>12</sup> See Emerson’s “Plato; or, the Philosopher” 40. For more on Shelley’s translations and his Romantic Platonism, see Abrams, *Mirror* 126–32.

skylark towards shimmering eternity but to drop on its prey, tenebrous material reality. In this Romanticized view, possessing an intuitive grasp of spiritual truth that by itself empowers them to create, artists need not rely on the discredited capacities of reason and craft.

In sum, then, popular Romantic epistemology provides an optimistic account of human artistic perception. For Jung and his Romantic ancestors, the world bears traces of transcendent truth. But as a result of the scientific bias, humans often fail to recognize these immanent presences. Art performs the salvific function of revealing them. Wounded by the rational dismissal of spiritual possibility, Romantic exponents felt an urgent need for psychic healing. This need led them to insist upon the unconscious powers of the imagination to re-establish a spiritual and revelatory aspect to poetic utterance. Thus, art wears “shimmering robes” for Jung and for his Romantic predecessors, as it performs the holy task of revealing eternal light hidden in human darkness. In Shelley’s sense of poetry’s enlightening power, it “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world” by bathing earthly objects in “Elysian light” (344). And for both Jung and the Romantics, art’s intuitively produced illuminations promote pleasure and spiritual recovery.

### **Processes of Artistic Creation**

For further linkage of Jung to his Romantic forebears, their affirmation of unconscious creative procedures furnishes the clearest evidence of affinity. In Jung’s view, if psychology has anything valuable to say about art, it can advance our understanding of the “process of artistic creation” (“Relation” 65). Having defined the collective unconscious as the source of artistic inspiration, Jung turns to this question of process, and in so doing describes his view of the unconscious mechanisms of creative output, a compelling stance that minimizes the contribution of artistic agency. In thus emphasizing intuition, Jung’s position in “Relation” draws on Romantic scorn for the idea that art results from the conscious labor of the artist. And for Jung, following Romantic ideology, disciplined craft directly informs the shape of the created thing, but in a true work of art, this craft always serves at the behest of an inspirational overlord, the promptings of the collective unconscious. In Jung’s view, while the most self-consciously craft-driven artists work with a conviction that they have control, they labor with incomplete awareness of the true impetus of their work; as he puts it, they identify with their craft, but the belief that they command their creations is illusory. Jung found Joyce’s writings a formidable challenge to his sense of irrational composition, and in his essay on *Ulysses*, he acknowledges the crucial role played by craft in the creation of certain works of art. Jung’s response to *Ulysses* emphasizes the value of what he calls “detachment of consciousness” in Joyce’s work (125–26). But popular exponents of Jung’s ideas fasten on unconscious processes and tend to ignore his more nuanced respect for craft. And an unrefined version of Jung’s views abets a continuation of the obdurate popular claim that artistic production employs purely intuitive processes unaided by craft.

Romantic certitude regarding the non-rational procedures of artistic production derives from the parallel conviction (characterized above) concerning the divine origins of art. In Romantic theory, the human artificer acts more as a medium for expression than as a conscious crafting producer. In service of this principle, both Coleridge (“Eolian”) and Shelley (340) employ the eolian harp as an image of the inspired mind in creation. And Jung takes a similar stance. At first in “Relation,” he appears to support the moderate

position that the artistic process may employ either intuitive or highly conscious procedures. On the one hand, in intuitive art, authors function as conduits for a mysterious force beyond their will, under the control of “an alien impulse within” them (73). Conversely, in highly conscious art, the “material is entirely subordinated to [the maker’s] artistic purpose” (72). But soon Jung slyly modifies this fence-straddling position and insists that the intuitive/conscious distinction does not hold up. Even those seemingly conscious artists, who think of themselves as commanding their intentions, are “nevertheless so carried away by the creative impulse that [they are] no longer aware of an ‘alien’ will” (73). In other words, “the conscious mind is not only influenced by the unconscious but actually guided by it” (74). Thus, “the poet’s conviction that he is creating in absolute freedom would then be an illusion: he fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along” (74). Jung identifies the creative process here as “a thing implanted in the human psyche,” a living being, what he calls an “*autonomous complex*”: in some minds this complex can become a “supraordinate authority which can harness the ego to its purpose” (75). This forcefully expressed position, qualified and refined in essays like “Psychology and Literature” and the essay on *Ulysses*, has understandably exerted more influence over the popular imagination than have Jung’s more modulated views.

An episode from an American film provides a Jung-inspired popular example of this mysterious, intuitive process, a twentieth-century continuation of the resilient Romantic myth of unconscious creativity. As historians have shown, Jung’s ideas guided the comparative mythology of Joseph Campbell, whose *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* influenced filmmaker George Lucas in *Star Wars* (1977). Steven Spielberg, Lucas’s friend and collaborator, felt this influence as well. In a famous episode from Spielberg’s *Close Encounters* (also 1977), Roy Neary (the Richard Dreyfuss character), a man with no artistic training or inclination, has a close encounter with extraterrestrials that leaves him possessed by the need to contrive fastidiously detailed renderings of an object he does not recognize (Devil’s Tower). Although the significance of the object eludes him, he feels irrationally compelled to mold his fabrications with great care. “This means something,” he announces more than once. In a near trance state, he fashions it in his mashed potatoes at dinner, but when he realizes that his behavior distresses his family, he tries to let it go. However, while dismantling the clay cast he has laboriously crafted in his rec-room, he accidentally modifies the shape in a way that brings it closer to his mental image—this moment an exemplum of unconscious creativity overwhelming craft—and the fixation returns, now heightened. He eventually drives his family out of the house by shoving bricks, garden soil, yard implements, chicken wire, assorted trash, and a hose through the kitchen window to give full vent to his creative drive. “You’re scaring us now,” his wife says.

Jung’s theory of unconscious creative drive accurately maps this sequence. Sounding every inch a Romantic propagator, he describes the compulsion of creative artists to construct images they do not fully fathom. Jung bears witness to his passionate engagement with such visionary images by creating his own artistic renderings of them (see *Red Book*). In “Relation” he states that art is a “living mystery,” which “[a]s long as we ourselves are caught up in the process of creation, we neither see nor understand” (78). As he continues, he seems to narrate the Neary pattern: under the influence of the need for artistic creation, “the intensity of conscious interests and activities gradually diminishes.” Neary stops eating and sleeping; he neglects his job and gets fired, which does not faze him. Eventually, Jung states, “the instinctual side of the personality prevails over the

ethical, the infantile over the mature.” Under the control of this inspiration, artists “revert to an infantile” state (79). Thus, in the thrall of creative urgency, Roy ignores the needs of his beloved family. When they flee into the station wagon and squeal off, he tries to stop them, but once they have gone, he returns to his obsessive creation with barely a shrug of regret. Such activity and energy appear “withdrawn from the conscious control of the personality” (79). For Jung this compulsion does not proceed from the personal unconscious of the creator, nor does the image produced originate there. Both the impulse and the product arrive through the guidance of a force beyond mundane earthly realities, the collective unconscious. In the film, Neary’s impetus comes from a superior extra-terrestrial mental power (what one might call a highly spiritualized quasi-divine force); during their initial contact with Roy, the aliens—associated with both music and dazzling superhuman shows of light, electric manifestations of Jung’s “shimmering robes”—plant the image in his brain and mark him as elect with burns on his skin. His name reinforces his membership among the elect, as Roy (suggesting kingship) and Neary (suggesting approximation) both intimate an extraordinary status. This conception of the quasi-divine corresponds with Romantic ideology, which draws on spiritual and mythological imagery but does not insist upon orthodox Christian notions of divinity. Spielberg here figures such impulses in terms of a superior extra-terrestrial force, which has acted as a replacement for more traditional divinity in many Romantic, modern, and post-modern imaginations.<sup>13</sup> And the dialogue confirms that Roy finds this power psychically healing. “I haven’t felt this good in years,” he tells his wife. When she suggests therapy, he demurs: “If I don’t do this, that’s when I’m gonna need a doctor.”

The legend surrounding Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” provides a fostering nineteenth-century model for the idea of unconscious artistic creation embodied in the Neary narrative. This famous fragment contains images of potently dangerous unconscious energies, as critics have noted.<sup>14</sup> And Coleridge’s tale of the poem’s composition corresponds nicely with that imagery. In a version of events that many English majors will summarize—and accept as gospel—Coleridge accounts (in various notes) for the unfinished condition of this poem by attributing its composition to an opium dream (“Kubla Khan” 1680–82). After waking from the dream, he claims, he began copying the words of the poem from memory when a visitor interrupted him. Returning an hour or so later, he found that the poetic vision had vanished, leaving only the gorgeous fragment.

This story remains a staple of Romantic mythology supporting the notion of unconscious composition. Norman Fruman writes that “Kubla Khan” lore “has been used in many studies of the creative process as a signal instance in which a poem has come to us directly from the unconscious” and that critics have seen the poem as proof of the “amazing richness of the poet’s creative unconscious” (334).<sup>15</sup> However, textual evidence contradicts Coleridge’s account. Fruman convincingly demonstrates that Coleridge fabricated this and other tales of his own spontaneous composition by misrepresenting the actual sequence of crafted drafts and revisions. Fruman writes, Coleridge proved himself

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<sup>13</sup> See Shermer, who describes the common correlations between religious faith and belief in superior extraterrestrial beings. For Jung’s parallel interest in “flying saucers,” see Woodman, “Shaman” 76. See also Fike, *One Mind* 81–108 and “Jung’s Letter.”

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Heninger.

<sup>15</sup> For the use of the word “unconscious” in early English and German psychological thought relating to literary creation see Abrams, *Mirror* 213–18.

“perfectly capable of making absolutely false statements in public” in order to support the idea of his spontaneous “poetic powers” (336). Coleridge’s yarns neatly instantiate the Romantic myth of unpremeditated composition, the belief that inspired verse comes not from the “toil and delay” Shelley disdains (53), not from the kind of processes Shelley associates with the calculating wings of the owl, but from an unconscious source. By noting Fruman’s skeptical account, I do not mean to suggest that Coleridge did not believe in poetic inspiration; in fact, his willingness to concoct stories to support the notion attests to the urgency of his conviction. But evidence confirms that he exaggerated in order to bear witness to the Romantic assuredness of the poet as chosen prophet, as one who wears “shimmering robes.” He seeks to affirm that the creative spirit arrives unbidden and flows without effort from its composer’s dreamy (and in this case opium-addled) imagination. And despite Fruman’s damaging disclosures, Coleridge’s embellishments have proved highly influential in devaluing the idea of craft in artistic creation.

The “Kubla Khan” legend also tidily certifies an oversimplified version of the way the collective unconscious controls artistic production, even though we have seen that Jung nuances his position to acknowledge the value of craft. Jung also objected to the therapeutic uses of drugs, but in some popular Romantic accounts, and for many twentieth-century students of psychoactive substances, the anodynes involved here do not impair judgment so much as engage a more powerful agent. Since this agent is the source of art, Coleridge and Shelley seem to suggest, the route one takes to make contact does not matter because true art never proceeds from the rational part of the mind.<sup>16</sup> In Shelley’s view, buoyed by chemical enhancement or not, authentic poetry never responds to “the determination of the will.” For him, “[a] man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry’” (353). Poetry “acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness” (343). In other words, to use Jung’s terminology, poetic inspiration functions as an “*autonomous complex*” (“Relation” 75), a “visionary” process (“Psychology and Literature” 89-91) outside of conscious mental activity. Thus, in Shelley’s way of thinking, “the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness” (353). Because of these features, Shelley claims that we can deduce that “labour and study” never act as the prime movers of great poetic art (353). “Poetry . . . differs from logic, that it is not subject to the controul of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence has (sic) no necessary connexion with consciousness or will” (355). He characterizes poets not as assiduous wordsmiths in the mold of Horace, (who advocated much deliberation and delay) but as intuitively empowered fountains of holy truth, “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration” (355–56).<sup>17</sup>

A similar pattern of transcendent imagery emerges in Emerson’s “The Poet,” where he insists that true art derives from a faculty not associated with cautious preparation. Artistic vision “does not come by study,” he writes, but by divine inspiration. And again, for Emerson, such inspiration invokes Plato, as the poet accesses “forms” and makes them “translucid to others” (732). Emerson sees the poet as having special, almost divine gifts: the poet “is emperor in his own light” even a “sovereign” (725) associated with the

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<sup>16</sup> On the issues of Plato and the use of stimulants, see Rinella. See Pattison on the Romantic drug myth in rock music (120–25) and Buchanan for a cautiously optimistic meditation on the virtues of psychedelic stimulants for spiritual growth. See also Moores’ “Dancing” for analysis of Jung’s position on this issue.

<sup>17</sup> See Horace 124–35.

shimmering luminescence of the Greek light-bearer, Phosphorus (732). In his eyes, revision and toil do not make the poet: the true creator is not only a person “of industry and skill in meter” but also an “eternal man” (726). Like Jung, Emerson parts company with some of his Romantic confederates in rejecting the idea, fostered by “Kubla Khan” mythology, that artificial stimulants can lead to artistic excellence. He scoffs at the notion of using “a trick” to power the imagination, as “the spirit of the world . . . comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine” (733). Narcotics only produce “counterfeit excitement and fury” (732). Despite this Puritan qualification, in “The Poet” Emerson associates poetic utterance with unconscious, intuitive origins and processes. In “Psychology and Literature,” Jung explains his position on the artistic visionary in more detail, and while he agrees with the Romantic idea that artistic insight itself is “wordless and imageless” (96) and concurs that “expression can never match the richness of the vision” (97), he acknowledges, more than Shelley seems to, the role of craft in finding ways to express “even a fraction” of this “tremendous intuition” (96, 97). In the same essay, Jung also points to the function of learning and conscious effort in the creations of Dante, Nietzsche, Goethe, Blake and others, noting that they employ great mythological understanding and skill “in order to express the strange paradoxes” of their vision (97).

### Traditions of Irrational Creativity

Far from a Romantic or Jungian innovation, however, the notion that works of art derive from irrational origins has found expression since the beginnings of critical thought, and a line of that idea extends through the tradition. The same tradition furnishes the alternate Horatian view, insisting on the conscious craft of the artist, but even during the neoclassical period, where the rational (crafted) view of art peaked, important critics have acknowledged the influence of an irrational element. Soaring beyond mere acknowledgment, though, Romantic descriptions of irrational expression surveyed here promulgate a highly influential extreme intuitionist understanding of creativity. Distancing themselves from neoclassical rationalism, these Romantic apologists (most influentially Shelley, Emerson, Coleridge, and sometimes Wordsworth) commonly insist that creativity functions beyond the rational control of its practitioners, a view that endures in modern versions of it like that shown in the Neary sequence. A thumbnail sketch of this question’s historical progression confirms that the Romantic position, while radical, finds authority in the existing tradition. Near the beginnings of Western thought, in *Ion*, Plato associates the artistic process with madness, prophetic frenzy, clearly suggesting that in the processes of creation, artists do not rely on their rational powers (41). For Plato, such irrationality discredits the productions of artistic inspiration, though Romantic apologists downplay Plato’s anti-poetic sentiment. Since Plato, most influential critics have insisted on the value of craft, but they also recognize the possibility of the irrational contributions to the artistic process, for both good and bad results.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the Victorian reaction against Romantic excesses, the idea of craft again finds strong favor in theories of creativity. Matthew Arnold famously writes that Wordsworth overvalued the creative impulse and “should have read more books” (135). Similar anti-Romantic reactions wielded authority through much of the twentieth century. But the myth of Romantic irrational composition

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Aristotle’s *Poetics* (104), Sir Philip Sidney’s “Apology for Poetry” (326, 329, 333), Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” (443–444), and Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1321 ff.).

dies hard. It receives qualified approval in surprising places, such as the Romantic musings of Marianne in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and in Aurora's early poetic theories in *Aurora Leigh* (Books I and II). It arises in some modern poems (such as Dylan Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn") and persists in contemporary rock mythology, as Robert Pattison convincingly demonstrates, and in countless expressions of the popular imagination such as films by Lucas and Spielberg.

Thus, the insistence on intuitive sources of art has substantiated for many an enduring assumption that authentic artists achieve excellence without the aid of conscious artistry. This premise has caused some influential twentieth-century critics to regard Romantic writings as inferior and to extend that derision to Jung. Among psychologists, not even Freud's scientific positivism insists on the notion of a fully conscious artist. But many twentieth-century students of literature adhered to a neoclassical view (vigorously renewed by such modernist luminaries as T. S. Eliot and Yvor Winters) that conscious judgment governs the creative imagination. Few serious critics have ever insisted that artists function on a purely rational level. But the history of critical thought tends to identify conscious craft (study, imitation, practice, and revision) as the most significant contributor to successful creative works; moreover, the outpouring of formalist theorizing in the twentieth century supported a radical expression of this notion, which in turn induced a defamation of Romantic art in some high circles. For example, Eliot used his near Czar-like influence to disparage the unorthodox irrationalism of Romantic poetry, especially the works of Shelley and Blake.<sup>19</sup> Winters's *In Defense of Reason*, though parting company with Eliot in crucial ways, includes strongly worded attacks on Romantic betrayals of the rational faculty that Eliot would probably have seconded (6–7). And Northrup Frye denigrated Jung's approach, as it seemed to him to dis-authorize artistic agency, the sense of a fully conscious aesthetic autonomy that Frye (and critics under the sway of Eliot) were at pains to preserve.<sup>20</sup> Despite this formalist insistence on artistic agency and craft supported by overwhelming textual evidence, the view that authentic art proceeds by way of unconscious inspiration perseveres, and simplified versions of Jungian beliefs often figure in such conviction. But in some ways the Romantics and Jung merely sought to rescue art from becoming a purely rational academic exercise. In his essay on Joyce's *Ulysses*, Jung wrestles with the concern that in Joyce's work the rational consciousness has finally eliminated the imagination and produced something "inferentially nugatory" (110), but he eventually defends *Ulysses* as a true work of art.

## Conclusion

I have contended here that Jung's "Relation" constructs an aesthetic psychology based on his assimilation of Romantic beliefs about the aims and processes of art. Reading Romantic imagery not as a literary critic but as a professional psychologist, Jung adapts Romantic theories regarding creativity and imagination to his understanding of the human mind, even relying to some degree on a Romantic interpretation of Kant's theory of knowledge to support his ideas. His approach employs Romantic ideology to explain the value of art as

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<sup>19</sup> See "The Use of Poetry" where Eliot refers to Shelley's "schoolboy thought" and his verse as an "abuse of poetry" (81–82). See also Eliot's "William Blake," which derides Blake for ignoring the framework of established philosophical ideas (279).

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of Frye's position on Jung, see Moores, *The Dark Enlightenment* 30.

an expression of the full human psyche. This view directly opposes the disabling materialist idea of art fostered by scientific approaches deriving from Enlightenment rationalism, especially those of Freudian psychoanalysis. In his widely read “Relation,” Jung stresses the view of artistic production favored by some Romantics, that art proceeds from unconscious sources rather than judgment and craft. And this extreme version of Jung’s thought has had more hold on the popular imagination than have his more carefully moderated claims in other essays.

I have also suggested that, despite the twentieth-century critical predisposition emphasizing craft and training, a popular understanding of Jung’s view has survived in Romantically inflected notions of creativity that have persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These ideas thrive despite evidence of Jung’s qualified beliefs and our knowledge that Romantic assertions regarding the “spontaneous overflow” of art inflated intuitive aspects of the artistic process. Ample textual evidence proves that the poetic practice of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other Romantic authors (including Keats and both Shelleys), relied on judgment, commitment to craft, and inveterate revision.<sup>21</sup> Even some of Coleridge’s critical statements (not to mention his lifetime habits of laborious study) work to contest his seeming convictions about involuntary composition.<sup>22</sup> Until just now I have left the famous locution “spontaneous overflow” out of my analysis because Wordsworth’s own wording suggests that he had little confidence in the idea. The phrase remains a shibboleth of commitment to the notion of unpremeditated artistic formulation, and Wordsworth employs it twice in the Preface. But in both instances, he follows it with a colon, and in each case the language following the colon severely restricts the “spontaneous” features of composition. When invoking this construction, apologists for the idea of Romantic unconscious composition seldom mention the accompanying qualifiers, such as the long and deep thought (651) and the discriminating “tranquility” (661) required for successful expression. Though some of Jung’s essays show an awareness of the role of craft and careful thought and planning in art, popular representations of Romantic and Jungian ideas reinforce the continuing common belief that intuition alone rather than craft (or even a combination of feeling and craft) produces memorable art. This conventional belief also relies on the language Shelley, Coleridge, Emerson, and Wordsworth himself sometimes use to describe artistic creation.<sup>23</sup> In such moments, Romantic apologists—Jung among them—suggest that truly healing artistic inspiration arises from nonrational origins and engages a part of the mind impervious to reason and judgment. Popular oversimplification of this approach to the issue has tended to obscure or misprize the crafted nature of Romantic writings and has sometimes countenanced misleading and anti-intellectual portrayals of artistic processes in general.

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<sup>21</sup> See for example, Mellor’s analysis of the Shelleys’ collaborative efforts in *Frankenstein*.

<sup>22</sup> See Coleridge, “Shakespeare’s Judgment”.

<sup>23</sup> Recall that in “The Tables Turned,” Wordsworth insists that “We murder to dissect” and urges poets (especially Coleridge) to forgo “the meddling intellect,” to shrug off the baleful influence “of Science and of Art,” and to rely instead on “spontaneous wisdom” (lines. 28, 26, 29, 19).



and others. In 2022 his essay on Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* won the Tony Hilfer Prize for the best essay in Volume 64 of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. He is the Editor of *Studies in the Literary Imagination*.

#### Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Melissa McLeod, Catriona Miller, the keen-eyed Matthew A. Fike, and the anonymous reader at *JJSS* for their valuable support and assistance.

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