

Romanticism and Religious Crisis: Schleiermacher, Poetry, Peregrinatio vitae

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Romanticism marks a turning point in the history of modern religiosity, dealing on the one hand with Enlightenment's religion critique and with the position of the modern subject which pushes itself forward (at the expense of God) as the central point that guarantees knowledge of the world. On the other hand, the Romantics try to give religion a renewed context and meaning. The main questions I consider are: *what renewed context for religion is created by the Romantic Movement*; what is the *meaning of religion* for the Romantics and what *meaning can religion offer* them? After reading passages in Schleiermacher in order to find out what the romantic crisis of meaning concerning religion is about, I will illustrate how those romantic ideas find their literary expression in romantic poetry. This poetry turns out to be more than a simple application of the romantic theoretical search for meaning. Furthermore, via romantic poetry can be noticed that the Romantics experience the same kind of struggles concerning 'religion' and 'the crisis of its meaning' as we do today.

1 Introduction

In order to understand today's crisis of the meaning of religion we should go more than two hundred years back into history [1]. It is in Romanticism that the crisis of the meaning of religion is dealt with in a way that is decisive to understand today's crisis and the way in which we face it. The Romantics notice that something crucial is missing in the mechanical, utilitarian and individualistic enlightened world they live in, from which any spark of the divine is removed. What was the origin of the enlightened world view?

This goes back to the early seventeenth century, when René Descartes, as a solution to the hyperbolic doubt undermining the ground of all that exists, including God, puts forward the human mind as the new basis guaranteeing knowledge. Before Descartes, human knowledge was based in the givenness of reality, i.e. in the One who gives/creates reality. Knowledge was based in man's connection to the world, since both were created by God. In the line of Descartes' doubting (doubting about God as well), man started to understand one's own *thinking (cogito)* as the basis of *knowledge*. That knowledge itself was free, undetermined; what that knowledge was about, was determined by rational laws. The known reality became, as said, mechanical and utilitarian.

Kant identified the implications of this Cartesian world view and elaborates on it. He shows convincingly that it is impossible to prove God's existence scientifically and to speak of Him on purely rational grounds. According to Kant, it is no longer God who gives meaning to the world and to man, but man himself. It is up to him to give meaning to life and, if so desired, to God.

← Friedrich Schleiermacher



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The Romantics reproach the Enlightenment for the incapacity to speak conceptually about the meaning of man and world, about their foundation and their destiny. The Romantics, though, remain also modern Cartesian subjects. They keep relating to the world on the basis of their own and free 'subjectivity', preoccupied as they are with their inner Self. But on the basis of this own, free, authentic subjectivity they give expression to the experience that not they themselves, but something else, something divine, gives meaning to man and world.

One of the figures of reference for romantic thinking about religion, is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). He is one of the first theologians to extensively diagnose the crucial weaknesses of the Enlightenment attitude regarding religion.

2 Schleiermacher

Although one might not expect from a German pastor, preacher and theologian standing in the Protestant Reformed tradition who wrote a complex and abstract *magnum opus*, *The Christian Faith* (1821–1822), to be engaged with spirituality, it is nonetheless Schleiermacher who is deeply spiritual in a modern sense. For him religion is not about an ascent from the worldly to the transcendent, but is a spiritual move embodied in the here and now. And all who are sensitive for it can discover the divine in and through the finite. He explains, among others, the idea in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* [2].

Schleiermacher's *Speeches*, as the abovementioned work is usually referred to in short, is one of the first attempts to give religion a specific independent place in the modern

world. In the enlightened environment at the end of the 18th century neither state nor church, but *reason* has the final say. Schleiermacher is on the one hand enthusiastic about modern, enlightened thought, but on the other hand he is very sensitive to critical voices that warn against a possible monopoly of reason and its negative effects. His criticism is part of the larger critical Romantic Movement that emerges in the days he writes his *Speeches*. The Romantics *embrace* and at the same time *criticize* the liberation and emancipation of human reason in Enlightenment philosophy and compensate these rationalistic trends with artistic attention to feeling, imagination, experience and authentic expression.

The *Speeches* treat topics like modernity and religion, the tension between different world views and the important

He is rather optimistic: both in regard to the enlightened man and to the future of religion. Further, he links his focus on religious feelings to the phenomenon of 'art'. Therefore, he is a good point of departure to look at romantic poetry as a place where is dealt with the meaning of religion.

The topics, questions and answers, hopes and struggles described by Schleiermacher, intertwine as it were with the rise of romantic poetry. The cross-pollination goes further than poetry just illustrating Schleiermacher's text; to a certain point that poetry is a realization and extension of Schleiermacher's insights. We will take a look at some poems in the light of Schleiermacher's ideas of religion, so that they can shed light on the crisis of religion that emerges since Romanticism.

role of feeling and experience: all issues and questions that parallels our contemporary interests [3]. That is why an early romantic theologian can place our current religious crisis in historical perspective and provide us with tools to deal with it. Therefore, we take a closer look at the *Speeches* by discussing the following questions: what, as established by Schleiermacher, is the place of religion after the Enlightenment turn? How does he redefine religion? And what is, according to him, the meaning of religion in a cultural and social context that is determined by the Enlightenment? But first I will sketch how I expose in this article the spiritual approach in Schleiermacher's and the romantic poets' dealing with religion.

2.1 Schleiermacher and Spirituality

When I say that Schleiermacher is spiritual in a modern sense, I like to refer to Sandra Schneiders' definition of spirituality as "*the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives*." (Schneiders 1998, 39–40). According to Kees Waaijman, this definition consists of three fundamentals: "(1) spirituality is a 'project' in which a person seeks to 'integrate' his or her 'life'; (2) the process by which this happens is 'self-transcendence,' directed toward 'the ultimate value,' as one 'perceives' it; (3) the project is intrinsically shaped by the 'experience' of 'being consciously involved in the project.'" (Waaijman 2002, 308). The first characteristic I will elaborate in the final part 'Commonality: Peregrinatio vitae'. The second characteristic testifies of important enlightened heritage:

the interest in the individual related to both experience and moral or truth value. I will observe the self-transcendence in Schleiermacher and in the poems. The individual experience, however, is in all those cases connected to or focused on the universe (or at least on humankind). The third characteristic sets experience to the foreground. I attempt to demonstrate that in romantic theology as well as in its esthetic equivalent 'experience' is a crucial element to speak of the spiritual path. I also count to experience, the pillars of Schleiermacher's definition of religion: 'feeling and intuition'. The poems themselves, as a reconstruction of an original experience, witness a conscious involvement in the project, and so does Schleiermacher's theological account.

2.2 The Place of Religion After the Enlightenment Turn

Back to answering the questions regarding the *Speeches*. It is important to notice that Schleiermacher takes the view that his age is no more unfavorable for religion than any other age [4]. People however became numb for religion because of their business with daily life and their engagement in transcendental philosophy. This philosophy, which is popular among the ones Schleiermacher addresses himself to, makes the human subject the center of everything, and that subject leads everything back to itself, and so presuming the human subject to be the foundation and key to the whole, as Schleiermacher explains mainly in the *Second Speech*. He sees in this view the tendency to get lost in an infinity of reasons and deductions.

As in every age, also in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, the deity sends now and then "mediators" ("Mittlers"), Schleiermacher writes (2015, 6) [5]. *Mediators* are persons who are gifted with a mystical and creative sensitivity wherewith they can express to others what happened to them "after every flight of their spirit to the infinite" (2015, 7). *Mediators* – poets or seers, as Schleiermacher identifies them – "bring deity closer to those who normally grasp only the finite and trivial" (2015, 7). Their higher priesthood "is the source of all visions and prophecies, of all holy works of art and inspired speeches..." (2015, 7). A mediator tries to "awaken the slumbering seed of a better humanity, to ignite love to the Most High, to transform the common life into something higher..." (2015, 7).

Schleiermacher claims that art and religion are as close to each other as "two friendly souls whose inner affinity ... is nevertheless still unknown to them" (2015, 69). More than anything else, the sight of great and sublime art works will cause the most unexpected religious conversions.

He further emphasizes the need to *disconnect* the church from the state. Morality and political references now dominate the church. Therefore, Schleiermacher pleads for a *true church*, consisting of a community of people sharing their inner feeling with relation to the divine beyond reason. In a vision of the true believers he calls them "an academy of priests", "a choir of friends" and "a band of brothers"; everyone with a personal connection to the divine as well as to the community of believers (2015, 94).

2.3 Redefinition of Religion

Schleiermacher shifts the definition of religion to the domain of spirituality. For him it is no longer cognitive knowledge and morality, nor prescribed rituals and practices that determine religion, but it is something more personal, more connected to emotion and to experience. In his *Speeches* Schleiermacher explains that religion is often confused with metaphysics and morals. Both domains deal – like religion does – with the universe and the relation of the human being to it. What then is so specific for religion? Its *essence* is not thinking – as is the basis of metaphysics – nor acting – as is morality's domain – but: "intuition and feeling" ("Anschauung und Gefühl") (2015, 22).

What is the *object* of religion? Schleiermacher states that religion concerns something, which is beyond nature and humanity, although it can reveal itself in both. He is not able to describe religion exactly, but eventually puts that: "religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite" ("Religion ist Sinn und Geschmack fürs Unendliche") (2015, 23).

Both metaphysics and morals "see in the whole universe only humanity as the center of all relatedness, as the condition of all being and the cause of all becoming" (2015, 23). Religion, according to Schleiermacher, focuses instead on a man's relation to the universe, the openness to it: religion "wishes to intuit the universe" and "longs to be grasped by and filled by the universe's immediate influences" (2015, 22).

So, Schleiermacher does not want to put God back as the central point of reference of our relation to the universe. For Schleiermacher divinity is "nothing other than a particular type of religious intuition" (2015, 51). Whether you make room for a god in your view of the universe depends, Schleiermacher states, on your own imagination.

The other crucial concept of Schleiermacher's formula of religion's essence, next to "intuition of the universe" ("Anschauen des Universums"; 2015, 24) is "feeling" ("Gefühl"). Every intu-

2.4 The Meaning of Religion in Modernity

ition is connected with *feeling*. Schleiermacher regrets that he can speak about intuitions and feelings only as two separate entities. He attempts to describe a religious experience, when intuition and feeling fuse, in a famous passage, later called the 'love scene' (Stratis 2019, 32).

That first mysterious moment that occurs in every sensory perception, before intuition and feeling have separated, where sense and its objects have, as it were, flowed into one another and become one, before both turn back to their original position – I know how indescribable it is and how quickly it passes away ... A manifestation, an event develops quickly and magically into an image of the universe. Even as the beloved and ever-sought-for form fashions itself, my soul flees toward it; I embrace it, not as a shadow, but as the holy essence itself. I lie on the bosom of the infinite world. At this moment I am its soul ... With the slightest trembling the holy embrace is dispersed, and now for the first time the intuition stands before me as a separate form; I survey it, and it mirrors itself in my open soul like the image of the vanishing beloved in the awakened eye of a youth; now for the first time the feeling works its way up from inside and diffuses itself like the blush of shame and desire on his cheek. This moment is the highest flowering of religion. If I could create it in you, I would be a god ... (Schleiermacher 2015, 31–32).

Schleiermacher mentions how important and determinate the first of such a religious experience is. To remember it and to recognize its importance, will contribute to a better understanding of the start and development of one's religious personality: "each religious personality is also a completed whole, and your understanding of it rests on your seeking to fathom its first revelations." (2015, 107).

Also important for the understanding of the essence of religion are Schleiermacher's remarks on immortality. In order to become one with the universe we have to go beyond ourselves. That state can be reached in death, but already be experienced during lifetime, with a special attitude: "To be one with the infinite in the midst of the finite and to be eternal in a moment, that is the immortality of religion." (2015, 54).

Schleiermacher defends the thesis that religion "springs necessarily and by itself from the interior of every better soul, it has its own province in the mind in which it reigns sovereign" (2015, 17). This connects to the task of the *mediator* to "awaken the slumbering seed". But religions do not exist only for the religious person. Schleiermacher wants to give religion its own domain, a place in a secularizing society. He frees religion from: morality, the urge to know and systematize everything, utility, state intervention and religious institutions. This freedom is in accordance with the bases of secularization, with a modern humanity that freed itself from God as the central point of reference.

In this emancipated form, religion can try to fulfill meaning in a modern world and relate independently to other fields that try to make themselves more and more free from religion, especially to metaphysics and morals, as Schleiermacher shows.

He also pleads for another approach of reality: not to see everything from one point of view – your own – and from the outside, but from its specific middle point, and to approach it from all possible relations to that middle point. If one sees an object in its own essence and in its own perfection, it can be seen as part of the totality. And the universe is only something worth, because of this totality. Once again this is a critique to the problematic situation in which man put himself as reference point of the universe; not free but bound to his own point of view. Schleiermacher's view on religion leads to an attitude of respecting every point of view and keeping everything together.

So, religion is unifying, but always with a sense of the uniqueness of the individual experience. Although in his vision of the society of religious people Schleiermacher goes as far as stating, "[t]hey are no longer merely people, but also humanity; going out beyond themselves, triumphing over themselves, they are on the way to true immortality and eternity." (2015, 94). Here we see the transcendental unifying meaning of Schleiermacher's religion.

3 Romantic Poetry

By making experience – *intuiting* and *feeling* – of the universe the core of religion, Schleiermacher designs a new kind of religion. His romantic artistic friends welcome this, for they are highly concerned with giving expression to their inner *experiences*. Romantic poets namely want to distinguish themselves from their Enlightenment predecessors including their intellectual poetry with its rigid and artificial conventions. No longer reason, but imagination, feelings and expression of the inner Self – of emotions and experiences – become romantic sources of poetic inspiration. In the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* – a manifesto of the English Romantic Movement – Wordsworth states: “*all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings*” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1991, 246). The Romantics strive to be as authentic as possible in the expression of their feelings and experiences. Therewith romantic poetry is original and close to the Self. As Hugh Honour describes: “*every Romantic work of art is unique – the expression of the artist’s own personal living experience.*” (Honour 1979, 20).

Ideally, in the romantic poet’s lives *art* and *life* are indeed mixed: “*The Romantics ultimately lived their lives through their art or ‘philosophy’; their art is the art of life,*” states Paul Heelas while analyzing the parallels between Romanticism and modern *Spiritualities of Life* (Heelas 2008, 43). Of Lord Byron is said that “[h]e could not detach his work from his experience. His poetry was but his life transmuted into another shape” (Heelas 2008, 43) [6]. Also in early German Romanticism one can observe a strong entanglement of art and life, so Schlegel’s famous *Athenaeum Fragment 116* recommends, while explaining the task of progressive universal poetry, to “*mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and social, and life and society poetical...*” (Schlegel 1991, 31).

Life and art melts together in an unconventional world view in which the sacred or divine is present and can surely be beheld or experienced in Nature: “*The Romantics practiced their spirituality through their art of life-philosophy, often informing their utopian ‘Genius’ – that is, their experience of the creativities of the life-within – by ‘reflecting’ on nature.*” (Heelas 2008, 43).

Nevertheless, however inspired and competent the experienced poet is, a poem will never be an exact expression of an original experience or feeling – as Shelley’s metaphor of “*the mind in creation is as a fading coal*” illustrates, with which he wants to say that “*when composition begins, inspiration is al-*

ready on the decline” (Shelley 1972, 53, 54). Also, Wordsworth adds – later on in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* – something crucial to his motto: “*I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility*” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1991, 266).

To show how religious experience, esthetic experience and the expression of those experiences in poetry interact in Romanticism, I will discuss Novalis’ *Hymns to the Night* and how in this poetic work religious experience (based on lived experience, described in his diary) takes shape. In order to show that the mix between esthetics and religion appears not only among the German Romantics, but that it belongs to a more overall romantic spirit, I will take a look at English Romanticism, Wordsworth and Shelley.

By studying the poems more closely with Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* in mind, the poems proof to be simultaneously an illustration and realization of it, and they also appear to be a key to a better understanding of the crisis of the meaning of religion.

3.1 Novalis’ Hymns to the Night

The collection of six poems (published in 1800) partly reflects the project Novalis (1772–1801, born as Friedrich von Hardenberg) undertakes in his real life. In the first three poems of his *Hymns to the Night* (*Hymnen an die Nacht*) Novalis transcends the physical world in order to enjoy a new spiritual freedom on a personal level that culminates in the third *Hymn* where Novalis describes a revelation in which he experiences to be one with the universe, and links this experience to a kind of death experience. In the last three *Hymns* of the cycle Novalis links his epiphany to a universal Christian revelation, colored by a personal and poeticized Christian mythology. The last *Hymn* elevates the whole cycle because of the reference to the universal level that Novalis reaches there [7]. While in *Hymn III* and *V* respectively the beloved one and Christ are *mediators*, in *Hymn VI* Novalis takes this function upon himself and closes the cycle in high emotion. Mediation is not a purely religious phenomenon – Schleiermacher speaks of *mediators* also as poets and seers – it is an artistic and esthetic task, as well, as Novalis proofs.

I want to focus on the *third Hymn*, which has strong connections to Novalis’ biography. The poet cannot resign himself

3.2 Wordsworth's The Prelude

to the death of his fiancée, Sophie van Kühn. Therefore, he decides to follow her in her death. Novalis' project overlaps partly Schleiermacher's plea to approach reality differently: not to see every object from your own point of view – the view of the empirical 'I' – and from the outside; but from the middle point of every thing itself, and to approach every thing from all possible relations to its middle point. This means a stepping out of one's own view, into an overview of all parts of the totality.

In Novalis' diary, on May 13, 1797, there is an announcement of his *third Hymn* where he reports a kind of mystical experience when visiting the grave of his deceased fiancée. The strongly paralleling words of the *Hymn* are as follows [8]:

*Thou, Night-inspiration, Heavenly Slumber,
didst come upon me –
the region gently upheaved itself;
over it hovered my unbound, newborn spirit.
The mound became a cloud of dust –
and through the cloud
I saw the glorified face of my beloved.
In her eyes eternity reposed – (...)
Into the distance swept by, like a tempest,
thousands of years. (...)
It was the first, the only dream –
and just since then I have held fast an eternal,
unchangeable faith in the heavens of the Night,
and its Light, the Beloved.*

Novalis explores the boundaries of the 'I' and transcends them. He reaches a way to surpass human life and describes that it is possible for him to intuit eternity and to witness and experience immortality: he saw that "*in her eyes eternity reposed*" and felt that "*into the distance swept by ... thousands of years.*" Which comes close to Schleiermacher's notion of the immortality of religion: "*To be one with the infinite in the midst of the finite and to be eternal in a moment*" (2015, 54). In this way the universe beyond humanity is discovered: in a personal revelation, described in a poem. Novalis' beloved one is his mediator in this *Hymn* and he is the mediator for the reader, by sharing his experience in poetry.

Novalis states it is this first and only dream that made such an impression that ever after he held fast an eternal, unchangeable faith in the factors that underlay this experience. Schleiermacher also states that the first religious experience of a person determines his religious life afterwards.

Completely apart from the early romantic situation and environment of Germany, William Wordsworth (1770–1850) shows parallels to the religious experience that Schleiermacher describes. The English poet's sublime experience of nature is like intuiting and feeling the universe. As Schleiermacher states: religion concerns something, which is beyond nature, but it can reveal itself in it. And Wordsworth imagines his oeuvre and his life-project in metaphors of journeys through nature.

The Prelude, first completed in 1805, tells Wordsworth's autobiography [9]. In this poem the journey-metaphor plays an important role: "*many of the crucial episodes are literal journeys on foot, which modulate into spiritual landscapes traversed by a metaphorical wayfarer*" (Abrams 2012, 207). In the first book of the poem Wordsworth depicts his first and already decisive experience, as a schoolboy, of overwhelming nature. In the last book he describes the way in which he experiences sublime overwhelming nature as a kind of religious revelation. This last book – the *Conclusion* – shows the climax of Wordsworth's imaginative life and connects to the opening of the poem.

In the first book Wordsworth walks and sails on a plain level, while in the last book he travels up Mount Snowdon and returns to the same surroundings as where he left as a child, but on a *higher level*. In this last book Wordsworth describes a more or less spiritual experience: a mix of intuiting and feeling the universe.

Wordsworth pictures the ascent of Mount Snowdon and his vision there, while being immersed in the overwhelming nature around him, on a mountainside under the moon, conscious of the dynamic world below and the immutable world above and surrounded by mist. Then, out of the mist there:

*Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams,
Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
The universal spectacle throughout
Was shaped for admiration and delight.*

He immediately reflects on his vision:

*(...) it appeared to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity.*

The poet's consciousness looks up to the heavens and down to the seas and sees something beyond it: a "*universal spectacle*" that refers to the "*gathering waters of judgment*" (Bloom 1971, 163) and therefore has associations with the apocalypse, and at the same time symbolizes the universal as different parts coming together in a greater whole. This reminds us of Schleiermacher insight that the totality thanks its worth to the parts of which it consists.

Wordsworth attains to an understanding of the relation between his own state of consciousness, being there at Mount Snowdon, and the 'mighty mind'. His experience of conceiving what is around him, but also what is beyond, means that he feels the force to transcend himself and mediating nature. He speaks of 'God' but does not definitely put the label 'God' to that something beyond nature. The above-cited lines go on:

*That is exalted by an under-presence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being.*

Wordsworth experiences the oneness with the universe, reflects on that experience, is careful with regard to labeling it, and further on in his *Conclusion* he gives that experience a place in his idea of poets as *mediators*:

*This is the very spirit in which they deal
With all the objects of the universe:
They from their native selves can send abroad
Like transformation, for themselves create
A like existence, and, when'er it is
Created for them, catch it by an instinct.*

3.3 Shelley's Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was infamous in his days for writing an atheist pamphlet. He nevertheless links a certain divine inspiration to poetry. The poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (written in 1816) represents a link between the poet's early atheism and his later more complex reflections on the divine. Again, we deal with an autobiographical based poem.

The *Hymn* consists of seven stanzas and the first shows some keywords of Shelley's view on poetry. He describes an "*unseen Power*" and its shadow, "*visiting ... with as inconstant wing as summer winds*". Metaphors like "*shadow*", "*visiting*", "*inconstan-*

cy", "*wind(s)*" point to a coming and going whenever the Power wants to, towards being intangible, invisible. The words have a divine connotation.

In the next stanza one can read how Shelley longs to hold on the "*Spirit of Beauty*", which is another name for the shadow of the Power and refers to the title *Intellectual Beauty*, which means spiritual beauty or beauty beyond the senses (Bloom 1971, 290).

Shelley searches for answers to existential questions in the third stanza. He realizes that religiosity cannot help him, instead it makes everything more obscure by raising doubts. Shelley prefers the *Spirit of Beauty* above religion, because it gives grace and truth. It is a kind of worldly substitute to the confusing religions: it is "*nourishment*" to "*human thought*". While seemingly worldly or secular, it is nevertheless out of human control.

In the fifth stanza Shelley describes how in his youth he tried, by spiritualistic activities, to find contact with the supernatural, which he was not able to reach:

*While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
I was not heard; I saw them not;
When musing deeply on the lot
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
All vital things that wake to bring
News of birds and blossoming,
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;
I shriek'd, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!*

Shelley was searching, but he could not find what he was looking for. Conversely, he himself is found, while he was in deep thought about life's fate. The poet has no control over the shadow of the Power, it visits him most unexpected and suddenly.

After this climax, the last two stanzas are quieter. Shelley tells that he promised the Power to dedicate his own powers to it. Here we read that the poet conceives it as his task to mediate this visitation, to use Schleiermacher's and Shelley's term. Shelley's essay on romantic poetry, *Defence of Poetry*, empathizes the importance of this task: "*poetry redeems*

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from decay the visitations of the divinity in man" (Shelley 1972, 55). This is in line with the ability Schleiermacher ascribes to poets to "bring deity closer to those who normally grasp only the finite and trivial" (Schleiermacher 2015, 7).

To give a just expression to the experience of the *Power* is nevertheless a difficult task with which Shelley struggles. Like the moment of fusion between intuition and feeling cannot be captured in words, as Schleiermacher states, it is also impossible to fully record the experience of the very moment of visitation: "evanescent visitations of thought and feeling ... elevating and delightful beyond all expression" (Shelley 1972, 54).

In the last stanza Shelley asks the *Power* to supply him with calmness for the rest of his life. He wishes that everyone who is filled with this *Power* would respect oneself and "love all humankind". It is a hopeful open ending, paralleling Schleiermacher, who tries to be open and hopeful and not to be determinate or moralistic. With such an open ending Shelley puts the imagination of the readers to work: he gives no ready-made pictures, but wants to awaken a feeling for spiritual beauty in the readers, as a true poet – in his romantic perspective – should do.

Notwithstanding Shelley's doubts concerning religious matters, he experiences this sudden, overwhelming moment of inspiration as a visitation that comes from somewhere else – from outside his own questioning, from outside the traditions wherein he could find no answers. Although only a very brief moment, it determines his idea of being a poet. From that moment onward he is going to dedicate his own expressive poetical *power* to the *Power* that revealed itself to him. In the act of writing this poem Shelley answers indeed to the call of inspiration and tries to fulfill his task as a romantic poet. In the end he even refers to universality through his wish that the binding principle of the *Power* effectuates to "love all humankind". Shelley thus meets Schleiermacher's idea of a poet, prophet or mediator, and hopes to fulfill this task to the level of the transcendental unifying meaning Schleiermacher attributes to religion.

In all three examples from romantic poetry we see parallels with Schleiermacher's "love scene" where the religious experience is an exciting, instantaneous experience of both *intuiting* and *feeling* the universe. The experiences in all these examples are on the bases of inner *feeling*. All describe a melting together or at least an intense grasp of something beyond. The three poems show that the romantic religious experience finds shelter in the arts, in accordance with Schleiermacher's point of the closeness of religion and art. By giving expression to the experience of something mystical the poet becomes a *mediator*. Religion has its own domain in the human mind, but it seems to coincide with the artistic domain. What can the approach to religion via its esthetic dimension, contribute to the question concerning the crisis of the meaning of religion?

An important clue can be found in the trope of all of these poems. The poets show a consciousness in development by a literary journey in which they, on a certain moment, reach a superior level towards their starting point. This is a typical form of romantic literature and it is derived from an ancient trope: *peregrinatio vitae*, "the pilgrimage of life" [10]. Abrams, in his essay *Spiritual Travelers in the Literature of the West*, notices that this plot form appears in individual histories – often partly fictionalized biographical accounts – as well as in the description of the history of humankind (Abrams 2012, 202). In the original form the journey of life led to admission to an otherworldly city. The Romantics use the spiritual *peregrinatio* nevertheless in a modern way: "the goal of the journey has been transferred from heaven to earth and has been internalized and secularized." (Abrams 2012, 202). In the new, romantic form the journey becomes a process of self-education, self-discovery, and self-fulfillment in this world.

Not only in poetry, but also in romantic theology traces of this *peregrinatio vitae* can be found. As Schleiermacher notes, the first religious experience in a person's life is so impressive that it is decisive for the development of his/her religious personality. He states, as cited before, that "each religious personality is also a completed whole, and your understanding of it rests on your seeking to fathom its first revelations" (Schleiermacher 2015, 107).

The centuries-old form of the *peregrinatio vitae* was not forgotten throughout history. In the Enlightenment it turns up, in a progressive linear way. The Romantics – consistent with their distrust of Enlightenment's ever-ongoing progressive thought and attitude – adopt the circular form of the ancient trope. In the circular form the journey ends where it started:

returning home as it were. Nevertheless, the Romantics fuse the old circular form with a notion of progress: the *romantic vitae form* not a two-dimensional circle, but a spiral.

Enlightenment's *linear vitae* confirms Schleiermacher's observation that modern humans are focused on aims only, just looking straight ahead without attention for developing a feeling for the universe. The discussed poets illustrate how exactly this feeling affects the *peregrinatio vitae* and turns it into the romantic spiral variant; not an enlightened travel from A to B, but a romantic journey, searching and developing without a set point.

Philosophy in the Romantic era also uses this construction. Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) explains that the original and natural view for art is the view on nature: "*nature is a poem lying pent in a mysterious and wonderful script. Yet the riddle could reveal itself, were we to recognize in it the odyssey of the spirit.*" (Schelling 2001, 232). This odyssey stands for a special kind of the romantic *peregrinatio vitae*. For what happens, according to Schelling, with this "*odyssey of the spirit*"? It "*seeks itself, and in seeking flies from itself; for through the world of sense there glimmers ... the land of fantasy, of which we are in search.*" (Schelling 2001, 232). After seeking and fleeing it "*will reach its goal only when it 'returns completely to itself,' as a subject that finally recognizes it is itself the object it seeks,*" as M. H. Abrams remarks (2012, 206).

5 Conclusion

Although it is not the explicit intention of his essay, Abrams points exactly to the core of the religious crisis by referring to this passage of Schelling. The spiritual odyssey is a journey to and in our inner Selves. No divinity guides us or is the goal of that journey. We have to give ourselves guidelines; we ourselves have to give our lives meaning. The goal is the journey itself, ending on a higher level as where we started. Whether there is or there is not a place for God in these *vitae*, depends on the imagination of each individual. As Schleiermacher states: "*for me divinity can be nothing other than a particular type of religious intuition*"; and carefully safeguarding himself: "*You will not consider it blasphemy, I hope, that belief in God depends on the direction of the imagination.*" (2015, 51, 53).

Both roads, with or without God – depending on our own imagination – "*to transform the common life into something higher*" (Schleiermacher 2015, 7) lead to our inner Self. We

can conclude therefore that Romanticism makes us realize that it is not religion as such which is in a crisis, but that we have to speak of the crisis of the ones who ask for the meaning of religion. The crisis lies in the fact that man can and must make choices concerning this matter, with the help of his imagination, the interpretations of his experiences and his own struggle with different world views. This choice making-process forms the journey to man's inner Self – a Self, which will be on a lifelong journey, because he deals with existential questions throughout his life, in an ongoing (upward) spiral.

Since Romanticism the pre-modern world view, guided by a divine reference point, as well as that of the Enlightenment, where the human subject is regarded as central and leading, prove to be not satisfactory anymore. However, the lack of a clear central reference point courses a crisis of the modern subject. In taking part of that crisis, instead of escaping it, Schleiermacher manages to create space between those two earlier views (pre-modern and Enlightenment) by emphasizing the openness to the universe: the relatedness of the human being to the universe by intuiting and feeling it. In that space one can develop a romantic *peregrinatio vitae*. In that space the crisis of the meaning of religion flows as well. But notice that this crisis is important in order to form a free identity, free from any constraining pre-given identity. That counts for the identity of the emancipated religion itself, as in the space created by Schleiermacher religion is free from other powers and old definitions, so that it can freely develop. It counts as well for the identity of the free modern subject. One can give shape to the crisis of the meaning of religion, and to the meaning of existential questions in an individual way. We would better accept and appreciate this crisis, in order to recognize the freedom of the modern subject.

The positive conclusion of this ongoing crisis is that we can grow in freedom into fuller, more complete personalities. The three poets discussed, all express personal struggles and explorations, while experiencing something in their openness to the universe. In that way they give insight into their inner being that gets elevated respectively to the highest imagination, to universal nature and to a love for humankind. Eventually, their *peregrinatio vitae* leads to another, higher point within their selves. By writing, they explore and mirror their deepest selves that reveal works of art, which can bring about interesting insights to our modern crisis. We are not alone in that crisis, but together with our romantic ancestors.

Notes

- [1] For an elaborated overview of that crisis see Peterson 2018, in particular Part I: *Background Issues and Theoretical Approaches* (31–125).
- [2] The *Speeches* are revised in 1806, 1821, and 1831. I use the first, anonymously published, edition of the *Speeches* of 1799, because this first edition shows a youthful frankness and, although still in a more excessive style, it is more to the point than Schleiermacher's later revisions of the texts. The revisions concern namely not only style and a more careful choice of words but also take greater account of church dogmas.
- [3] The current value of the *Speeches* is underlined by e.g. Westerink (2007) in the introduction to a Dutch edition. In the concluding chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, Terrence N. Tice writes: “*In short, Schleiermacher was not only prescient, he was accomplished in numerous ways that are still relevant today. In those respects, his achievements can readily be evaluated as far broader and potentially more long-lasting than those of all but few philosophers and theologians before or since.*” (Tice 2005, 309). Peterson, as a final example, mentions Schleiermacher as a forerunner of William James in terms of constituting the classic definition of the modern idea of *religion* that is “*influential today at the interface of religious studies and theological studies, in the discourse about the rise of individual spirituality, and in academic discussions about the persistence of ‘religion’ in secularization.*” (Peterson 2018, 35).
- [4] He states this twice very explicitly at the beginning of the *First Speech* and in his *Third Speech*.
- [5] In the same year as Schleiermacher, Novalis also uses the idea of ‘Mittler’ and Schlegel in his turn derives it from Novalis (Safranski 2007, 135; O’Brien 1995, 166).
- [6] Heelas citing Charles Whibley.
- [7] Schleiermacher and Novalis both link a universal level to Christianity. Although Schleiermacher keeps on emphasizing the diversity of religious experiences and of religions, in the last *Speech* he ends up with Christianity as a religion that recognizes its own transitory character and he praises this insight. He thinks that Christianity will last forever in ever changing forms, because of its mediating function.
- [8] The English translation made by Higgins 1988.
- [9] Wordsworth constantly revised it and it is finally published posthumously in 1850. As Bloom (1971, 140) remarks, the final text “*both suffers and gains*” by the almost fifty years of revisions: craftsmanship increased during the years, but Wordsworth became also an orthodox censor of his own long poem.
- [10] In the history of spirituality, a *vita* is a literary genre that accounts of the life of a holy person, a “*spiritual biography*” (Waaijman 2002, 602–603). There are various sub-genres, and the *peregrinatio vitae* is one of them.

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