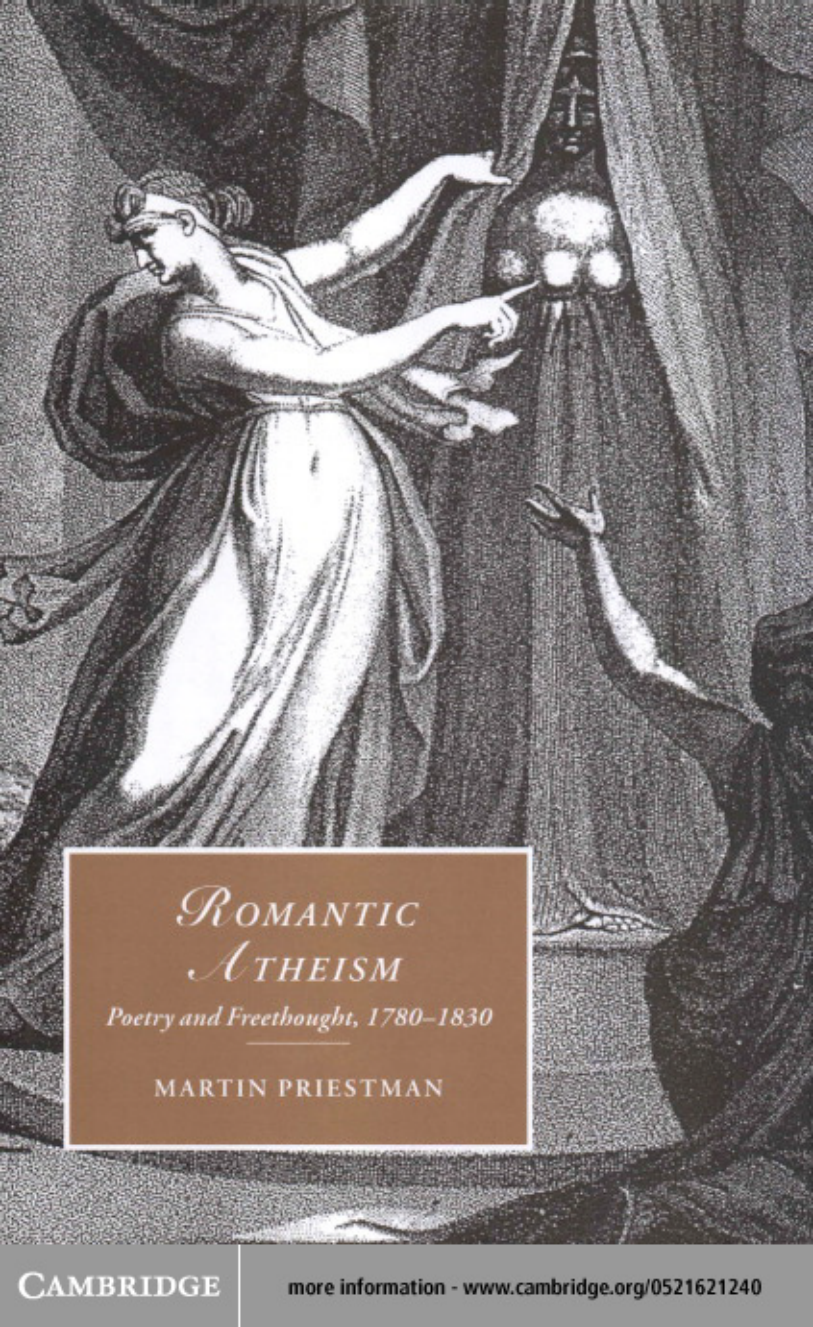




*ROMANTIC
ATHEISM*

Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830

MARTIN PRIESTMAN

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Romantic Atheism explores the links between English Romantic poetry and the first burst of outspoken atheism in Britain, from the 1780s onwards. Martin Priestman examines the work of Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats in their most intellectually radical periods, establishing the depth of their engagement with such discourses, and in some cases their active participation. Equal attention is given to less canonical writers: such poet-intellectuals as Erasmus Darwin, Sir William Jones, Richard Payne Knight and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and controversialists including Holbach, Volney, Paine, Priestley, Godwin, Richard Carlile and Eliza Sharples (these last two in particular representing the close links between punishably outspoken atheism and radical working-class politics). Above all, the book conveys the excitement of Romantic atheism, whose dramatic appeals to new developments in politics, science and comparative mythology lend it a protean energy belied by the common and more recent conception of 'loss of faith'.

Martin Priestman is Reader in English at Roehampton Institute London. He has also been a visiting Professor at Michigan State University. His publications include *Cowper's 'Task': Structure and Influence* (1983), *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (1990) and *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (1998).

ROMANTIC ATHEISM

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The goddess Nature, frontispiece to Erasmus Darwin's *The Temple of Nature* (1803), design by Henry Fuseli: 'Shrin'd in the midst majestic NATURE stands, / Extends o'er earth and sea her hundred hands; / Tower upon tower her beamy forehead crests, / And births unnumber'd milk her hundred breasts' (I, 129–32).

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MARTIN PRIESTMAN



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For Nicki, with love and thanks

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Introduction

The core idea of this book is simple: to explore the links between the development of explicit atheism in the period 1780–1830 and the simultaneous emergence of much important new poetry. There is no single currently available book which aims to bring home to a reasonably wide readership at once the vigour, flexibility, coherence and popular appeal of anti-religious arguments from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth, and the engagement in or response to them of a significant range of the poets of the time. The emergence of declared atheism into common discourse has been traced by such historians of ideas as J. M. Robertson, Iain McCalman and David Berman, the last of whose *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (1988) dates ‘the birth of avowed atheism’ from 1782.¹ Such histories of thought, however, have had no particular brief to look at poetry as a special kind of discourse and have hence overlooked it except when it transparently overlaps with philosophy or polemic.

In literary studies, conversely, even some of these moments of transparent overlap have tended to be overlooked: either the issue has been avoided in various ways, or treated as obvious, or only related to one or two writers at a time. As a topic, the full-bodied presence of atheism in Romantic literature has been seen either as barely conceivable or as somehow crudely beside the point, in a context where ‘Romantic poetry’ itself still constitutes a kind of religion. To give a very rough thumbnail sketch of an old but widely prevalent picture, the eighteenth century was an ‘age of prose and reason’, from which we were saved in the nick of time by the ‘renaissance of wonder’ which constituted Romanticism. It was, of course, a single *ism*, so that whatever its more loquacious theorists (especially Wordsworth or Coleridge) had to say about it was true all round. This generally had to do with rediscovering the truths of

religion through Nature or the Imagination, or else a particular fusion of the two, to understand which was to be admitted to the inner mysteries of 'Romanticism'. Whether this reborn sense of enchantment simply supplemented older forms of religion or replaced them with new ones was not always clear, but it was often presented as an issue which would not even have occurred to the poets themselves, rapt as they were in contemplating the wonders of nature and the imaginative forays of their own minds.

Though their more explicitly unorthodox views on religion have long been available, a nineteenth-century tradition of actively suppressing these has remained powerful in shaping generalized images of these writers. Some of these suppressions were by the writers themselves, as in Wordsworth's withholding of many significant early works from publication, as well as his endless self-revisions, both of individual texts and his overall opus. Some suppressions were by early publishers and editors, as with the family pressures which prevented Mary Shelley from publishing her husband's works in any completeness until 1839. The tradition of editorial suppression also continued in subtler forms: thus her placing of the atheistic *Queen Mab* as the first of Shelley's mature works in 1839 was not followed in Thomas Hutchinson's 1907 standard Oxford edition, where it is to be found discreetly repositioned with his 'Juvenilia' at the back.² In this century, the greater problem in assessing such unorthodox views has been the kind of indifference sanctioned by entry to the canon: thus Wordsworth's and Coleridge's 'pantheism' has become a mildly idiosyncratic variant of Christianity, and Blake's furious blasphemies just a quaintly religious-minded way of putting things. There is also perhaps the circular feeling that since this is what famous writers say, this must be what people thought then, especially when these are the main or only 'people' we read from their period. For readers looking for a more accurate positioning of these writers' ideas in their context, there are many critical studies of the type which whisks one off into the higher reaches of philosophical disquisition, assuming a complete knowledge of the history of thought as a *sine qua non* for understanding the given poet. What makes many excellent studies of Romantic literature 'suppressive' on the religious front is the lack of a sense of shock, that these people said these things at this time. It is partly to restore that sense of shock that this book foregrounds the issue of 'atheism' as central to the age; though to restore the sense of

context, it positions it in relation to as many as possible of the softer variants of unorthodoxy which are also essential to fill out the picture.

Whether total or partial, the various kinds of editorial and critical suppression discussed above played well to a readership attuned to seek and find in 'Romanticism' a wide-eyed innocence on religious matters. This might also be said about politics: indeed it is sometimes hard to know whether religious or political unorthodoxy explains any particular piece of textual suppression since they were often hopelessly entwined in twin-barrelled assaults on 'tyranny' and 'superstition'. Much comparatively recent criticism has worked hard to restore the period's politics to our picture of its literature, and I shall often lean gratefully on such studies in what follows. But, except in a few cases, the religious debates which so intimately accompanied this politics have either been sidelined as unpolitical, or somewhat too readily assumed to be simply dictated by political concerns, or else considered in the work of only one or two writers at a time.

Three books from successive decades which *have* focussed attention on such religious issues across a range of writers, without disregarding the political context, are M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* (1981) and Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation* (1997). In its title alone (borrowed from Thomas Carlyle), *Natural Supernaturalism* implies a great deal of what I believe needs to be said on the subject: that many 'Romantic' writers use religious, 'supernatural' terminology to describe objects, experiences and ideas which they know to be purely 'natural', thus turning the language of religion against itself by directing the feelings of reverence and attachment it has traditionally demanded towards the 'world' it has traditionally downgraded. At a stroke, Abrams makes impossible the simplistic move of estimating a particular poet's degree of 'religion' from a quick count of their biblical quotations: depending on the context, such quotations may easily be polemically placed to make us reapply learned religious responses to other matters entirely.

The great first example which launches his argument is Wordsworth's 'Prospectus to *The Recluse*', whose description of a mental flight past 'Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir / Of shouting

angels' really conveys that 'the heights and depths of the mind of man are to replace heaven and hell'.³ In support of his position, Abrams adduces a great many learned sources from Plotinus and Böhme to Schelling and Kant, tending to demonstrate that a single Neoplatonic philosophy provides 'a "key" to the understanding of Romanticism' (p. 169). Though on some level the materialist 'nature' of contemporary science is accepted as a basis for the shift from orthodoxy, all the interest is on what one chapter calls 'The Redemptive Imagination'; and a series of other religious-sounding chapter titles focusses our attention more on the perfect fit made by the new Romantic construct with the terms of the old one it 'replaces'. For Abrams, ultimately, Romanticism becomes the religion it has ousted.

Where Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* is decisively important is in the wedges she drives between different writers of the period, as indicated in her title whose 'and' opposes three groupings to each other rather than conflating them in a single 'ism'. In the most dramatic of the consequent rearrangements, Coleridge is torn away from his usual soul mate Wordsworth and even from being defined primarily as a poet, to be juxtaposed with other rootless 'men of letters' including the group of German intellectuals, such as Friedrich Schlegel, who first constructed out of their disillusion with politics and uncertainty as to their audience the whole idea of 'Romanticism' as something involving 'an emotional, mystical, irrational religiosity'.⁴ In his similar role as a Christian apologist, Coleridge persuaded a later generation that such views were central to his period's literature, but sharply differentiated himself from the Enlightenment ideal of 'Art for the People' through which another chapter links his old comrade-in-arms Wordsworth with William Blake. This latter pairing adds to its initial surprisingness by being further related to the neoclassicism of revolutionary and 'infidel' France, thus dealing a further blow to the conventional opposition between Enlightenment soullessness and the visionary Romanticism of which Blake and Wordsworth/Coleridge are usually seen as representing different but complementary strands.

While Butler juggles with many more themes than the religious one, religion is a decisive reference point in her picture of the period as one of active struggle between opposed points of view. In particular, she foregrounds the existence of atheism as a possible position, and the special importance of theories of mythology in

articulating an 'infidelity' which need not be shorn of exciting imaginative content. If some proponents of these ideas, such as Richard Payne Knight and Erasmus Darwin, play starring roles in the present book, it is because of the interest initially roused by coming across them in hers; indeed, more often than I have room to acknowledge in detail, this book has found itself chasing hares started by one or other of her crisp asides.

Though Butler's book gives a new focus for the idea of atheism as a live issue across the whole range of 'Romantic' writing, it does so somewhat in passing as far as the poetry is concerned. Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature 1789-1824* does focus almost entirely on the religious issues raised by the major canonical poets of the period, though its title might suggest a fundamentally different starting point from the present study of 'Romantic atheism'. This impression is partly confirmed, in that Ryan does attempt to demonstrate that five of the 'big six' poets, Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelley, were religious reformers at heart, with Coleridge taken as read and Shelley, the most notoriously atheistic, saved till a triumphant last. In proving his case, moreover, Ryan is not always free from the tendency which I earlier suggested Abrams makes untenable, to brandish biblical allusions as evidence of actual or incipient religious commitment.

However, there is more in his book that I agree than disagree with, given that the word *Reformation* can be approached from either side, as he acknowledges in a quotation from Edmund Burke to the effect that 'A man is certainly the most perfect Protestant who protests against the whole Christian religion'.⁵ In this sense, I believe all these poets were at times 'Protestants', though not consistently so (and perhaps, in Coleridge's case, with the attack directed at two mutually exclusive 'halves' of Christianity in turn). Ryan gives much useful evidence of their far-reaching critiques of established religion, and sets these in much the same political contexts as I shall. On Keats in particular, where the problem is to establish any clear line on the religious topics which Keats often deliberately avoids discussing in such terms, I have little if any disagreement with Ryan. Where he demonstrates a poet's move back towards orthodoxy, this is often in the context of later works, such as Wordsworth's *The Excursion* and Blake's *Jerusalem*, which I happily cede to him, since my book does not attempt to follow either poet past his more 'infidel' phase. Our difference is more a matter of emphasis: where he

presents a narrative of each poet's life in turn, with infidelism as the first act and a healthier religious attitude as the last, I take it that whatever their later settlements of their affairs, it is significant enough that most of these poets *had* an infidel phase, in which most of their best work happened to be written.

To turn now to what this book does attempt to do, I shall use the rest of this introduction to look at some crucial words, by whose meanings and occasional ambiguities it is partly shaped. The double-sidedness of the words *Reformation* and *Protestant* can also be found lurking in the word *religion* itself: while writing the above, I have been aware how often I have used the word *religious* when I meant *irreligious* or *atheistic*. There is a large category problem in discussing atheism, which is that it is assumed to 'belong' to the broader field of religion: in libraries, books on the subject will appear on the Religion shelves, if anywhere. This is not just because a negative inevitably invokes its positive; it is because atheism depends on religion to mean anything at all: if the latter simply went away, so would the former. Hence the ease with which the vociferously atheist Shelley can be described as a religious poet; hence, too, the paradox that the most thorough atheist of all might never mention the fact, since for him or her both halves of the dualism have already vanished. From within the shadow of such paradoxes, however, it is still possible to assert that many people from the 1780s to the 1820s attacked religion because they really did want to attack religion, and believed there was something better.

One word often used to indicate that something better is *humanism*. It is a word I do not use in this book because it carries too many overlapping meanings, from classical scholarship to general benevolent humaneness, which either tend to construct their own argument or else need persistent policing. But a belief in the power of, and necessity for, humans to construct their own meanings out of the known facts of nature rather than the unknowable postulates of religion is common to many of the writers I shall be discussing and, at some level, crucial to their work.

I can best start to indicate the range of issues and debates this book will cover by expanding on the key terms of its title. The first of these terms, *Romantic*, denotes only a literary period, not the kind of extractable essence I have criticized above. The often-used 'Romantic period' is ungainly when used adjectivally, and the half-resigned inverted commas I have placed round the term up to now

can be tiring to sustain. However, both in the title and in my subsequent uses of the term, I use it to mean only the period later thus labelled, not any shared intention by its writers to write in a certain way.

The next word of the title, *atheism*, technically denotes the belief that there is no God. My first chapter demonstrates that this became an expressible belief in Britain during the early Romantic period, but I shall not be arguing that all the poets I discuss are atheists, even when they challenge orthodox religion, as virtually all of them do. I shall, however, argue that they were acutely aware of positive, unapologetic atheism as a phenomenon of the time, and that most had unorthodox moments or periods which they knew could easily be accused of atheism, and that some did indeed participate in aspects of atheist discourse. Until I have explored the nuances of their very different positions further in the relevant chapters, however, it is best to stress that the title indicates ‘atheism’ as a topic, an issue, a concern in the period called *Romantic*, rather than indicating ‘Romantic atheism’ as a belief system to which I somehow need to prove all ‘Romantics’ subscribed.

My next word, *poetry*, is clear enough, but it may raise the question, *why* poetry, or why *just* poetry? I focus on it because, unlike such multivocal forms as prose fiction and drama, poetry has an acknowledged responsibility to be affirmative from a single subject position, rather than as filtered through novels or plays where the author’s responsibility for any given utterance may be in doubt – admittedly, often usefully so where controversial ideas are concerned. Of course the same might theoretically be said of poetry, but it is nonetheless easier to tell when poets are taking risks or refusing to do so, given the rush of directly engaging enthusiasm on which so much poetry of the period depends. Tracking the atheist possibility through poetry also gives a useful opportunity to restore to a wider discursive context such mystified ‘poetic’ terms as *Nature* and *Imagination*, the first of which has a special resonance in atheist book titles from the Roman poet Lucretius to the French *philosophe* Baron d’Holbach as denoting the materialist alternative to God, and the second of which can be interpreted as the right to invent God or an acceptable substitute even if, in line with Voltaire’s dictum, he does not exist.

Given that the ‘atheism’ of the main title denotes a dramatic topic towards which the period’s writers orientate themselves in different

ways, my subtitle uses the deliberately broader *freethought*, a term in use from the earlier eighteenth century and allowing for a more shifting range of positions, sharing a general refusal to submit the reason to religious authority but ranging from committed atheism to the 'natural religion' of *deism*, and even to such 'heretical' types of Christianity as the *Unitarianism* and *antinomianism* espoused at times by Coleridge and Blake respectively. In using this looser term, I am not equating all freethinkers with 'atheists', but drawing attention to the interplay between that newly possible label and a more articulated range of terms which might also include *infidel*, *sceptic*, *philosopher*, *materialist*, *enemy of superstition and priestcraft*, *Dissenter* and *theist*. While words near the top of the scale do virtually connote 'atheist', those further down could be used to connote strength or absence of religious commitment, depending on the speaker, though in hostile hands almost all are shadowed by the possibility that they may conceal or lead towards atheism.

Having now related 'freethought' to a range of further terms, I shall briefly define them here, referring readers also to the glossary at the end of this book. *Deism* is the belief that the universe must have had a broadly benevolent creator about whom, however, we can know little more. Since we deduce his existence from the evidence of nature, a virtual synonym for 'deism' is 'natural religion'. As thus defined since the late seventeenth century, the word could be variously used as perfectly compatible with Christianity or (as with Thomas Paine) as violently opposed to it. *Unitarianism* was the branch of 'Dissenting' (i.e. non-Anglican) Christianity nearest to deism, maintaining that Christ was purely human although sent by God to convince us of his message through miracles, including the resurrection. In rejecting the Trinity, Unitarians were theoretically outside the law, the only Christian group whose doctrines were thus actually proscribed except the Roman Catholics. As the leading group of *Rational Dissenters* in our period, however, Unitarians were immensely influential in provoking the debates through which atheism articulated itself, and in leading radical middle-class opposition to the government.

A less 'rational' strain in non-Anglican Dissent was *antinomianism* (i.e. 'against the moral law'), a blanket term for a set of beliefs involving the supersession of the authority of both the Old and New Testaments by the immediate inspiration of some or all believers. Ranging from Quakerism to the Swedenborgianism with which

Blake was involved, such beliefs had roots in the upswelling of independent religious groups in the seventeenth century, and were often seen as forms of 'Enthusiasm' appealing particularly to the radical working classes. There were, however, overlaps with the more middle-class 'Rational Dissent', particularly in the *millenarianism* which greeted the French Revolution as a fulfilment of prophecies of the overthrow of Babylon. In the chapter on Blake, I shall also touch on the following: *Behmenism*, the engagement with the writings of the sixteenth-century German mystic Jakob Böhme; *alchemy*, presumed to be based on Egyptian theories of matter as impregnated with various spiritual forces; *Neoplatonism*, the idea derived from Plotinus and other followers of Plato that matter is simply a trap for the spiritual; and *Gnosticism*, the heretically Christian version of such ideas which sees the creator of matter as lower than the ultimate God, and often as distinctly evil.

Of my further list of possible synonyms for 'freethinker', *infidel* is one of the most significant. Meaning simply 'non-believer (in what the speaker believes in)', it virtually connotes 'atheist' while being a slightly easier label to accept for oneself: hence William Godwin embraces the term while worrying about the 'cold' connotations of 'atheist'. Unfortunately, the abstract noun *infidelity* has now come predominantly to mean sexual cheating: otherwise, as the period's commonest term for atheism, it should perhaps have featured in my title. To continue with my list: *scepticism* is close to what we might now call agnosticism, but with a harder edge to it. A sceptic will only believe what can be proved: in particular, the philosopher David Hume used this approach to discredit the deist belief in a creator while refusing to back any alternative hypothesis, except ironically. The word *philosopher*, meaning 'lover of wisdom', could be neutral, as when applied to scientists ('natural philosophers'), but could also connote *philosophe*, the group of French thinkers including Voltaire, Denis Diderot and Baron d'Holbach generally credited with an undermining of religious authority throughout the eighteenth century which eventually precipitated the French Revolution. Several of these, such as d'Holbach, were committed *materialists*, who believed with the Greek philosopher Epicurus and Roman poet Lucretius that the universe consisted purely of matter, animated by its own energies and needing no external divine input.

Of the last few words on the list, *priestcraft* and *superstition* were often yoked together as things the speaker expects every reasonable

person to be opposed to, and usually ostensibly denote Roman Catholicism. 'Superstition' is clearly any form of irrational belief; 'priestcraft' implies a whole theory of religion being used as a pretext to seize ideological and real power. The beauty of these two extremely prevalent words was that it was impossible to tell exactly where the attack stopped: at Catholicism alone, or at any form of imposed 'state religion', including the Church of England, or even at Christianity itself? The last word, *theist*, is usefully open-ended: theoretically meaning simply 'believer in God', it could in practice range from the most orthodox upholder of revelation to the most minimal deist. One final word I should explain my use of before concluding is *orthodox*, not in the above list but virtually unavoidable as the opposite term to most of those discussed in this book. Meaning simply 'adhering to the established doctrines', it is an inherently spongy term, dependent on how broadly or narrowly one reads those established doctrines. Clearly belief in God and the Thirty-Nine Articles were both 'orthodox' at the time, but the former does not necessarily imply the latter: it depends on the context of the debate.

A great many of these words feature in the following chapter, 'The atheism debate', which demonstrates, I hope, the crucial importance of 'atheism' itself – both the word and the thing it denotes – in the period from 1780 to 1800. As an occasional daringly-adopted badge, or more often as a veiled or open accusation, it vies for importance in the collective mind with the French Revolution itself, with whose fortunes it was to become indissolubly linked. In the chapters that follow, my focus on particular canonical poets is only ever half the point: just as important is an attempt to crowd the canvas with other writers or with the viewpoints which give them context. If in some ways this book's preoccupation with religious debates may seem to narrow unduly the focus of what it discusses, in other ways I hope it widens it beyond the still-prevalent critical obsession with too small a range of 'great writers'. These issues touched everybody; religious and/or infidel discourses provided the channels much else ran in, from theories of political change to theories of mythological poetry to theories of gender to theories of science. These four areas are taken up in a more polemical context again in chapter 6, which considers where the atheism debate had got to between 1800 and 1830, if *debate* continues to be the word for a situation dominated by legal repression and various forms of retaliation. The final chapter

has in a sense the easiest life, with an examination of the overwhelmingly infidel Shelley generation, leaving the conclusion to pose if not explain the conundrum of the rapid disappearance of such infidel literary groupings thereafter.

CHAPTER I

The atheism debate, 1780–1800

Be it therefore for the future remembered, that in London in the kingdom of England, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-one, a man has publicly declared himself an atheist.

This declaration was made by someone calling himself William Hammon, introducing a pamphlet called *Answer to Dr Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* (1782).¹ An unpacking of some of its context will help to set out the terms on which an 'atheism debate' was initiated in Britain in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. First, its authorship: the otherwise unidentified 'Hammon' claims to be merely the editor of the main body of the pamphlet, whose anonymous author was subsequently identified as Matthew Turner, a 'physician at Liverpool: among his friends a professed Atheist'.² The situation of a respectable figure known personally as an atheist but unable to put their name to such views in print is one we shall encounter again repeatedly. The murkiness surrounding 'Hammon' – whether a pseudonym for Turner or the real (or indeed false) name of someone else publishing his views as a partial cover for their own – is also of a piece with the often crooked routes through which atheist ideas gradually came to be aired at this time.

Next, its addressee: as the title suggests, the pamphlet inserts itself into an on-going debate initiated by Dr Joseph Priestley, in the first part of a series of published 'letters' to a supposedly atheistic correspondent who may or not be a specific individual, but who offers him a pretext for attacking the views of two writers to be discussed shortly: David Hume and Baron d'Holbach.³ One of the stars of this chapter and indeed this book, Priestley was a protean figure who at this time played an equally leading role in three apparently disparate spheres of activity: the physical sciences (he discovered oxygen); radical, anti-establishment politics; and religious

‘Rational Dissent’. As a Unitarian minister, he briefly helped to turn that form of anti-trinitarian Christianity into one of the most powerful intellectual forces in the country, whose intimate, sparring partner relationship with out-and-out atheism will form one of this book’s major leitmotifs. While for most of the present chapter Priestley will figure as the hectically versatile defender of Christianity against attack from many directions, it is important to remember that, as he himself pointed out in his reply to Hammon (*Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, 1782), a declared Unitarian like himself was legally a heretic and as such arguably ‘in more danger than a declared *unbeliever*’.⁴

Priestley is referring to the series of laws and legal precedents based on William and Mary’s Toleration Act of 1689, supposedly the cornerstone of English religious freedom but specifically debarring non-believers in the Trinity as well as Roman Catholics from the protection of the law. The Blasphemy Act of 1698 outlawed further specific doctrines, though the enforcement of Trinitarianism was removed for those (such as the Jews) who had never been Christians: hence perhaps Priestley’s remark. Legislation was supplemented by specific judges’ decisions, and William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–9) had recently confirmed that ‘Christianity is part of the laws of England’ and proscribed ‘blasphemy against the Almighty, by denying his being or providence; or by contumelious reproach of our Saviour Christ’. Though the eighteenth century is often described as an irreligious ‘age of reason’, the publication of freethinking views without a decent veneer of orthodoxy was still very dangerous, and produced a long list of ‘martyrs’ legally punished or socially persecuted for it, from the deist and proto-Unitarian John Toland to Peter Annet, imprisoned and pilloried in 1763 at the age of seventy for denying the divine inspiration of the Pentateuch.⁵

It is against this legal background that Hammon/Turner and Priestley play an intricate but revealing game of buck-passing. In his prefatory address, Hammon declares he was neither a philosopher nor an unbeliever till he read Priestley’s *Letters* and asked for an anonymous ‘friend’’s (i.e. Turner’s) comments on them: if the letters alone would not ‘quite have made me an Atheist!’, the fusion between them and the friend’s response *has* achieved that effect (*Answer to Priestley*, p. ix). Hammon goes on to query Priestley’s claim to be ready to extend the arguments of his *Letters* if the first part is

well-received. How will Priestley *know* how it has been received by unbelievers themselves? Will their views be legally publishable, and will he respond to them? In a postscript, Hammon states that he first sent the *Answer* personally to Priestley, requesting a reply as well as his protection for a work which he himself has solicited, since 'your opponent has to dread, beside ecclesiastical censure, the scourges, chains and pillories of the courts of law' (p. 60). His concluding remark, 'To this letter Dr Priestley sent no answer', in fact received a very prompt answer in Priestley's *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr Wm Hammon* (1782). This begins with a circumstantial description of Priestley's several attempts to reach Hammon at his stated address, at which no one of that name seemed to live; a public response (which quotes generously from Hammon/Turner's hitherto obscure *Answer*) is thus the only option. Such complex interfacing between the private and public functions of 'letters' are endemic in the early stages of the atheism debate.

In content, the *Answer* usefully encapsulates a number of the main positions of late eighteenth-century atheism. As Priestley's offered label 'Philosophical Unbeliever' implies, these positions include a general orientation towards the physical sciences ('natural philosophy') but also a more specific one to the French *philosophe* tradition. Claiming that 'Modern philosophers are nearly all atheists', Hammon cites particularly Hume, Helvétius, Diderot and d'Alembert (p. xxiv). The last two were chiefly responsible for the great *Encyclopédie* (1751–72), which was generally held to have smuggled atheist tendencies into popular discourse under the cloak of general knowledge – something also achieved in a more satirically focussed way by Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764). Of the other two, Hume was a notorious sceptic and Helvétius was the author of *De l'esprit* (1758), a materialist account of the mind which bypassed the idea of the soul, though in naming him Hammon probably means Baron d'Holbach, another member of the *philosophe* circle whose *Système de la nature* (1770) was published pseudonymously and known in Britain as being either by Helvétius or 'Mirabaud'.

In the main body of the pamphlet, Turner quotes *Système* repeatedly, echoing its arguments that matter might have existed forever and has no need of God to direct it since it is endowed with its own 'energy of nature', whereby it constantly forms new combinations. Drawing on the discussions of prehistoric remains by such scientists as Buffon and Cuvier, he argues that the present range of living

species, supposedly created once and for all by God, depends on the present environment: ‘bones of animals have been dug up which appertain to no species now existing, and which must have perished from an alteration in the system of things taking place too considerable for it [*sic*] to endure’ (p. 41). With another change, the ‘energy of nature’ might produce them again – as envisaged in the ‘Epicurean system’. This system, postulating a universe made entirely of ‘atoms and void’, and most widely accessible to classically educated readers through the Roman poet Lucretius, was acknowledged even by the seventeenth-century Christian apologist Cudworth as giving ‘a weight to atheism not to be overturned’. Unlike the Christian, the atheist has a sense of ‘his relative importance’ in the great chain of Nature, and ‘If the world has so good a mother, a father may well be spared’, especially one so apparently ‘haughty, jealous and vindictive’ as the Christian God (p. 47). And if this God exists, why does he not make himself known, why ‘require a Jesus, a Mahomet or a Priestley to reveal it’? Or as the author of *Système de la nature* asks, ‘How does he permit a mortal like me to dare attack his rights, his titles, or his very existence?’ (p. 49). As a good scientist, Priestley really agrees with Turner and d’Holbach that everything in nature is determined and that ‘Necessity is therefore the first God’; but at a certain point he exchanges emotion for empiricism and simply worships what he wants to believe in, making God in his own image like all religious devotees: ‘They are all idolators and anthropomorphites to a man; there is none but an atheist that is not the one or the other’ (p. 21).

All these ideas – of Epicurean atoms, unexplained bones, necessity, the energy of nature, misguided self-projection, the redundancy of revelation, and the preference for a natural mother over a cruel father – will recur constantly throughout this book, sometimes in some unexpected mouths. A great many of them were first brought systematically together in what Priestley called ‘the Bible of Atheism’, d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature*.

A thoroughgoing materialist, d’Holbach appeals both to Epicurean atomism and to Newton’s theory of *vis inertiae* (the force needed to resist other forces even in resting bodies) to argue that motion and energy are aspects of matter itself, and therefore have no need of injection into an otherwise ‘dead’ universe by an external deity.⁶ Man is himself merely an arrangement of matter, who may either have existed forever, like the earth, or have developed to

adapt to a changing environment if, for instance, the earth itself began as a comet, or has undergone cataclysmic changes in which earlier species have been destroyed – as man may in turn have to give way to new species if the environment changes again. That life can develop spontaneously is demonstrated by the growth of microscopic animals in sealed jars of flour paste, and ‘the production of a man, independent of the ordinary means, would not be more marvellous than that of an insect with flour and water’ (*System of Nature*, I, 6 and 2, pp. 52–4, 15–16). Given the materiality of all nature, psychological and moral forces can be described in similar terms to physical ones: ‘those modes of action which natural philosophers designate by the terms *attraction, repulsion, sympathy, antipathy, affinities, relations*; that moralists describe under the names of *love, hatred, friendship, aversion*’; ‘Natural philosophers call [the tendency to self-conservation] SELF-GRAVITATION. Newton calls it INERT FORCE. Moralists denominate it, in man, SELF-LOVE’ (I, 4, pp. 29–32).

Another influential part of d’Holbach’s argument relates to the early development of religion. Man embodied powerful natural forces as separate beings, beginning with fire: ‘Thus he . . . fancied he saw, the igneous matter pervade every thing, . . . he gave it his own form, called it Jupiter, and ended by worshipping this image of his own creation’ (I, 6, p. 50). Similarly, Saturn represented time, Juno wind, and Minerva wisdom; Osiris, Mithras, Adonis and Apollo all represented the sun, while Isis, Astarte, Venus and Cybele all represented nature ‘rendered sorrowful by his periodical absence’. The founders of this mythology, however, understood that it was only ‘the daughter of natural philosophy embellished by poetry; only destined to describe nature and its parts’. The Orphic Hymn to Pan demonstrates that ‘It was the great whole they deified; it was its various parts which they made their inferior gods.’ Such knowledge was, however, confined to the élite ‘mystery’ cults: ‘Indeed, the first institutors of nations, and their immediate successors in authority, only spoke to the people, by fables, allegories, enigmas, of which they reserved the right of giving an explanation: this, in fact, constituted the mysteries of the various worship paid to the pagan divinities’ (II, 2, pp. 269–72). d’Holbach argues that the habit of allegorizing natural processes is also evident in some biblical myths, and that Moses’ account of the birth of Eve from Adam’s rib reflects a belief he had picked up in Egypt that humans were

originally hermaphrodite, like aphids. He explains how ‘Moses, who was educated among these Egyptians’ wrote in Genesis that “‘in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them’”: ‘It is not therefore presuming too much, to suppose, as the Egyptians were a nation very fond of expressing their opinions by hieroglyphics, that that part which describes Eve as taken out of Adam’s rib, was an hieroglyphic emblem’ (II, 2, p. 268).⁷

Despite the odd disrespectful aside, however, d’Holbach shows little interest in attacking biblical Judaeo-Christianity in detail, presenting Mosaic monotheism as an attempt to reform older systems and ‘the first doctors of Christianity [as] Platonists, who combined the reformed Judaism, with the philosophy taught in Academia’. For him, it is sufficient to lump them with other types of ‘theism’, whose adherents, ‘undeceived upon a great number of the grosser errors, . . . hold the notion of unknown agents . . . full of infinite perfections; whom they distinguish from nature, but whom they clothe after their own fashion; to whom they ascribe their own limited views’, and hence can have ‘no fixed point, no standard, no common measure more than other systems’ (II, 7, pp. 389–90). For d’Holbach, ‘theism’ includes what is usually called ‘deism’, differing from ‘superstition’ in that in theism ‘the tints are certainly blended with more mellowness, the colouring of a more pleasing hue, the whole more harmonious, but the distances equally indistinct’. At best, such enlightened theism is only a short stop on the route to atheism which, ironically, is travelled faster under more oppressive regimes: ‘Theism is a system at which the human mind cannot make a long sojourn . . . Many incredulous beings, many theists, are to be met with in those countries where freedom of opinion reigns; . . . atheists, as they are termed, will be found in those countries where superstition, backed by the sovereign authority, most enforces the ponderosity of its yoke’ (II, 13, pp. 482, 479). While the same argument was used to reverse effect by many British apologists for Protestant toleration as against papist tyranny, Turner’s *An Answer to Dr Priestley* picks up precisely on d’Holbach’s coolly dialectical argument that religious suppression has put the French *philosophes* ahead of the game.

Of the slew of French texts with a bearing on the atheism debate in Britain, the *Système* and one other (Volney’s *Ruines*) are all I shall have room to include here. Both had a considerable ‘underground’ reputation as high-watermarks of infidelism, but both were also

inscribed into what may be called the 'official' debate through the tireless publications of Priestley. And interestingly, his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* speaks of the *Système* with some respect as at least more 'frank and open' than Priestley's main object of attack, David Hume (Letter XI, *Works*, IV, p. 389).

Hume, famously, refused to be pinned down as a deist, let alone an atheist: once, on introduction to a group of leading *philosophes* in France, he claimed not to believe in the existence of atheists, even when told by d'Holbach himself that there were fifteen in the room.⁸ Though Britain's most formidable sceptical philosopher, his refusal to push that scepticism into avowed disbelief made him a difficult, often frustrating target for defenders of religion, while many of his arguments nonetheless went straight into the kitty of atheist polemic. His essay 'Of Miracles' (1741) carefully scraped away at the grounds for our accepting reports of miracles we have not witnessed, or of our preferring biblical reports over equally circumstantial pagan ones. The controversial eleventh chapter of *An Enquiry into Human Understanding* (1748) puts the case for thoroughgoing materialism into the mouth of an Epicurean philosopher, and rejects the standard arguments for outlawing that position on grounds of morality. *A Natural History of Religion* (1757) presents both polytheism and monotheism from a largely psychological or anthropological perspective, as natural cyclical correctives to each other's considerable drawbacks. Written about the same time, but intentionally published long posthumously, in 1779, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* launches a devastatingly sceptical assault on deist arguments that any deity, let alone a benign one, can be deduced from the evidence available to us from the natural universe. All these texts, however, cover Hume's retreat with variations of the argument that scepticism cuts all ways, and therefore ultimately impels us towards accepting revelation as the only possible guide to the truth.

In *Letters*, Priestley acknowledges the skill with which Hume allows good arguments to the opponents of the *Dialogues'* sceptical spokesman Philo, who then retracts his views at the end, but 'when, at the last, evidently to save appearances, he relinquishes the argument, on which he had expatiated with so much triumph, it is without alleging any sufficient reason; so that his arguments are left, as no doubt the writer intended, to have their full effect on the mind of the reader . . . [T]hough the debate seemingly closes on the side of the theist, the victory is clearly on the side of the atheist'.⁹

Priestley's apparent preference for d'Holbach's forthright atheism is of a piece with his refusal to carry on playing the polite game of hide-and-seek claimed as the proper forum for such debates by Hume and his friend Edward Gibbon. It was in his express wish to open up the rules of debate to include all 'sincere' views as theoretically legitimate that Priestley prompted Hammon/Turner's *Answer*.

Priestley's alacrity in prolonging such debates, or stirring them up unilaterally, is evident in his challenges to Gibbon, his brief correspondence with whom (also in 1782) is an interesting reverse echo of his skirmish with Hammon. Having attacked Gibbon in *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), he sent him a copy with the clear intention of extracting a public reply or at least permission to publish Gibbon's private one, which Gibbon declined in a tone making very clear the impertinence of such an ill-bred and *ad hominem* approach.

The main objects of Priestley's attack were the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) which, after paying due deference to divine causes, account for the early spread of Christianity in terms of an unappealing psychology of fanaticism and intolerance. Gibbon contrasts these qualities with the tolerance of the long-established polytheism and suggests that they eventually undermined the stability of the empire; furthermore, the failure of non-Christians to confirm the miraculous events of the New Testament is noted in tones of somewhat exaggerated mock astonishment.¹⁰ From their publication in 1776 as the climax to the first volume of *Decline and Fall*, the two chapters were the focus of controversy. Their most respectable opponent – certainly the most respected by Gibbon himself – was Richard Watson, Cambridge Professor of Divinity and later to become Bishop of Llandaff, whose *An Apology for Christianity, in a Series of Letters, addressed to Edward Gibbon, Esq.* was a model of courteous and scholarly rebuke. While praising Gibbon for his 'great work' and probably pious intentions, Watson suggests that other minds might be led to believe that Christianity spread by human means alone, and goes on to argue that the cohesion, morality and courage of the first Christians was in itself a mark of divine guidance, as was their message, which attracted converts solely thanks to its self-evident truth.¹¹ Watson goes on to cite examples of the intolerance of Roman polytheism, and of reasons why such a miracle as the

universal darkness at the moment of crucifixion might have been overlooked by Italians used to the clouds of Etna and Vesuvius. In a final letter, addressed over Gibbon's shoulder to strayers into deism or even atheism, he insists that the only basis for morality is the Christian system of rewards and penalties after death, whose truth is firmly underpinned by miracles, and dismisses the ideas that some biblical prophecies may have been falsified later, that new geological evidence dates the earth well before the supposed creation, and that science and philosophy are fundamentally opposed to religious belief.

In *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1779), Gibbon praises the 'liberal and philosophic' Watson for his declared wish not to prolong the debate and his refusal 'to descend to employ the disingenuous arts of vulgar controversy'.¹² Since Watson accepts that *some* secondary causes probably assisted the spread of Christianity, their disagreement is only one of degree. Gibbon only takes issue with one of Watson's arguments: that the Roman authorities' hostility to the Christians' refusal to give even token recognition to the pagan gods showed their imperviousness to rational arguments for religious toleration. Gibbon argues that since neither Roman polytheists nor sceptical philosophers would refuse such recognition to any gods, as a matter 'not of *opinion*, but of *custom*', they simply could not understand the Christians' stubbornness.¹³

The Christian impoliteness to which Gibbon hopes Watson will understand his implied objections is, arguably, of a piece with what he clearly finds offensive in Priestley's various approaches to him. 'Considerations addressed to Unbelievers, and especially to Mr Gibbon' opens the general conclusion to Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782). While repeating many of Watson's arguments about the miraculous persuasiveness of the early Christians, Priestley does so in a far more hectoring tone, accusing Gibbon of sharing Voltaire's anti-Semitism and of writing 'sarcasms . . . founded on ignorance' with a 'sneer of triumph'. While modestly disclaiming the role of 'champion of Christianity, against all the world', Priestley owns he will 'have no objection to discuss this subject with Mr Gibbon, as an historian and philosopher', and repeatedly speaks as if this challenge had already been accepted, 'admonishing' him as to what points he should reply to and, worst of all, enlisting him as a potential ally in his own Unitarianism by

stressing the various trinitarian and other superstitions from which both of them are equally free.¹⁴

In reply to Priestley's gift of a copy of his book, Gibbon wrote back declining the offered challenge and querying 'to whom the invidious name of *Unbeliever* more justly belongs: to the historian who, without interposing his own sentiments, has delivered a simple narrative of authentic facts, or to the disputant, who . . . condemns the religion of every Christian nation as a fable'. Further, 'since you assume the right to determine the objects of my past and future studies', Gibbon passes on the 'almost unanimous . . . wish of the philosophic world' that Priestley return to his scientific studies and abandon religious controversy, taking warning from the Swiss Unitarian Servetus, burned by the Calvinists for heresy but now only remembered for his work on the circulation of the blood.¹⁵ In reply, Priestley insists that for all his protests Gibbon's real aim 'has been to discredit Christianity in fact, while, in words you represent yourself as a friend to it; a conduct which I scruple not to call highly unworthy and mean, an insult on the common sense of the Christian world'. As a means of hiding from the law (from which Priestley himself is in greater danger) such double-talk is valueless, and by now too hackneyed to seem 'ingenious and witty'.¹⁶ Since Gibbon had claimed to write the *Vindication* to defend his 'honour', surely Priestley has now insulted him enough to make him enter the lists again? As for Servetus, Priestley respects his martyrdom more than he would the greatest scientific discovery; and his own scientific researches are proceeding apace, in no way interrupted by his theological involvements. To Gibbon's curt reply that the letter's 'style and temper' make him decline all further correspondence, Priestley riposted with a request to publish the correspondence so far, and met Gibbon's brusque refusal by stating that he would in any case circulate it among friends, and that Gibbon would be wise to say nothing more since any further protest would only increase the volume of the correspondence to be thus circulated. Gibbon seems to have followed this advice, and Priestley subsequently published the correspondence in *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, going on to attack Gibbon again in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part II* (1787).

As we have seen, d'Holbach's *Système* touches lightly on the idea that some of the fundamental images and events of biblical narrative

derive from Egyptian or other mythologies which are really attempts to describe natural processes metaphorically. Similar ideas were discussed in less committedly 'atheistic' but in some ways more shocking terms by Richard Payne Knight's *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1785), privately published for the learned Society of Dilettanti, along with a shorter essay by Sir William Hamilton. To be discussed more fully in the next chapter, Knight's essay threatened to ruin his career as an MP and was hastily withdrawn from even the limited circulation it had enjoyed. Seen as a disgraceful mixture of obscenity and impiety, it was a jaunty but largely serious attempt to trace the phallic worship still to be found in parts of Italy (the subject of Hamilton's contribution) back through many religions from Greek paganism to Hinduism, and then forward again into certain aspects of Christianity itself. In its mythographic approach to the links between Christianity and other religions, *The Worship of Priapus* is not new, but for Britain at least it made very clear the possible dangers of this rising field of research. The more acceptably orthodox face of such comparative mythography had been seen in Jacob Bryant's *Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1775), and in the oriental researches of Sir William Jones, a major source for Knight but also for many subsequent 'proofs' of the primacy of Christianity over other religions.

I shall be turning shortly to the massive impact of the French Revolution on the atheism debate once we enter the 1790s, but for now I would like to anticipate that moment slightly by following the mythographic issues just noted through into that decade, first by considering a key text of 'revolutionary atheism': Constantin de Volney's *Les Ruines, ou, revolutions des empires* (1791; English translation 1792). The book opens with the narrator musing on the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra in Lebanon, and then being whisked up out of his body into space by a spirit or 'Genius' who shows him the ruins of many other seats of empire, and explains that with them passed many belief systems which once seemed as universally valid as Christianity does now. In the dream vision which takes up the rest of the book, the Genius conjures up a tribunal in which all the world's religions have to justify themselves before the legislators of 'a free people' recently liberated from superstition – clearly France.¹⁷ In chapter 22, after the contradictions and failings of all have been exposed in turn, the revolutionary legislators outline the true history of all religions: most, apparently, sprang from early Egyptian

A View of the

ASTROLOGICAL HEAVEN of the ANCIENTS

to explain the Mysteries of the
Persian, Jewish & Christian
RELIGIONS.



Plate 1. Astrological chart from Volney's *Ruins* (1791), showing figures from various religions including Christianity as personifications of astronomical configurations. Describing one depiction of the twelve signs of the zodiac, Volney says 'that of the Virgin represents a young woman with an infant by her side: the whole scene, indeed, of the birth of Jesus is to be found in the adjacent part of the heavens. The stable is the constellation of the charioteer and the goat, formerly Capricorn; a constellation called praesepe Jovis Heniochi, stable of Iou, and the word Iou is found in the name Iouseph (Joseph)' (London: Thomas Tegg, 1826, pp. 323–4, 196).

attempts to predict the seasons, weather and fluctuations of the Nile according to astronomical configurations which later became personified as gods, whose natures changed as their cults spread round the world. Numerous ingenious comparisons of divine names and attributes (along lines prefigured by d'Holbach, Bryant and Jones, as well as Knight) include with deliberate lack of special treatment figures from the Christian narrative usually accepted as historical, even by the most sceptical. Thus Joseph and Mary become variants of the constellations Capricorn and Virgo, and the name of Jesus Christ is seen as derived from or related to 'Yes-us' (a variant of Bacchus) and Krishna.¹⁸ At the end of the tribunal, the legislators rule that all religions have been vehicles for the personal aggrandisement of priests and rulers, and that henceforth only the Laws of Nature should be followed.

In Part I of his long anti-radical poem *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794), T. J. Mathias attacks both Knight and Volney. A note on Knight's *Priapus* states that 'all the ordure and filth, all the antique pictures, and all the representations of the generative organs, in their most odious and degrading protrusion, have been raked together and *copulated* . . . with a new species of blasphemy'. As for Volney, 'by a jargon of language, and antiquity, and mythology, and philosophy, he labours to confound and blend *them all* in uncertain tradition and *astronomical* allusions'. In making Jesus a version of the sun-god, Volney 'requires of his reader *only* the surrender of his common sense . . . [yet] demands the admission of *all his* allegories and mystical meanings (. . . in the true French stile)'.¹⁹

A fuller response to Volney was made (inevitably) by Priestley, first briefly in Letter IV of *Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion* (1793), then in *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (1794), then at greater length in a third edition expanded to include 'Animadversions on the Writings of several Modern Unbelievers, and especially The Ruins of M. Volney' (1797), whom a revised preface invites to reply. When he did so, in a tone expressing a Gibbonian wariness about joining a public debate on Priestley's terms, Priestley gleefully rejoined with *Letters to M. Volney, occasioned by a Work of his entitled Ruins, and by his Letter to the Author* (also 1797). After expressions of respect and regret over Volney's personalizing of their debate, Priestley argues that 'the splendour of your imagination, and the fascinating charms of your diction' are particularly dangerous in their attractiveness to young readers, too ill-informed

to resist the false arguments of one ‘of your celebrity and shining talents’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 117). Citing much evidence for Christ’s historical existence, he goes on to challenge Volney for evidence on eleven specific points, including his assertion that the God of Moses was Egyptian, his linking of Christ with Bacchus and Krishna, and his claim that the world is at least 17,000 years old, ‘which entirely overturns the *Mosaic* account of the origin of the human race’. This account, confirmed by no less an authority than Newton, can hardly be overturned by passing references to one Dupuis, whom Priestley has never heard of. Ending with a reminder of his own honorary French citizenship, Priestley concludes by wishing Volney ‘*health and fraternity*’ (pp. 126–8).

By 1799, Priestley had remedied his ignorance of Charles Dupuis’s *Origine de tous les cultes, ou religion universelle* (1795), which he challenged in *Remarks on M. Dupuis’s Origin of all Religions* (1799) in terms similar to his attacks on Volney. Despite the latter’s acknowledgements to the former, Priestley suggests that the views of Dupuis’s more ponderous but later-published work are too ‘strange’ to derive from anyone but Volney himself. Along with further challenges for astronomical and mythographic evidence for these views, Priestley also attacks the residual apparent deism of Dupuis’s assertion that ‘There is nothing but *the universe itself* that can correspond to the immense idea which the name of *God* presents to us’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 322). Volney too is prone to such pantheist pronouncements, and in identifying as atheistic any view which identifies the creation with the creator, Priestley assists in the slow stopping-up of deist escape holes which is a main feature of this period.

The brief *Remarks on Dupuis* were published as a pendant to Priestley’s more ambitious *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations* (1799). Drawing largely on Sir William Jones’s Asian studies (particularly *Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Menu* and *Dissertations and Miscellaneous Pieces relating to the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia*), Priestley demonstrates impressive if newly acquired mastery of the rapidly expanding field of Orientalist knowledge which, if not carefully patrolled, might lead to all kinds of marginalization of Christianity by comparison to other cultures and belief systems. This danger is here represented by yet another Frenchman, Langles, who sees ‘the religion of the Hindoos’ as a source for ‘those of the Egyptians and Jews who have done nothing but ape

the latter, of the Chinese, of the Greeks, of the Romans, and even of the Christians'. The five Hindu Vedas are the prototype of 'the five books of Moses, who . . . only copied Egyptian works, originally from India'. Furthermore, Langles accepts a non-Mosaic chronology whereby 'many thousand years before' the Egyptians or Jews 'formed themselves into societies, or ever thought of forming a religion, the civilized Indians adored the Supreme Being, eternal, almighty and all-wise, divided into three persons' (*Works*, XVII, pp. 139-42, 324).

On the chronological question, Priestley again invokes the authority of Newton as well as detailing Jones's determined efforts to reduce the enormous time span of Hindu mythical history to proper Mosaic proportions. While normally cited as a reliable bulwark against Langles's impious suggestions, Jones is also not completely to be trusted: sound on the absurdities of Hinduism, and its clear status as a corruption of the Persian branch of the proto-Christian ur-religion destroyed at Babel, he waxes dangerously sentimental over the Hindus' 'spirit of sublime devotion, of benevolence to mankind, and of amiable tenderness to all sentient creatures'. To counter such religiously levelling tendencies, Priestley compares a long list of absurd superstitions with the rational worship enjoined by Moses and Christ, which for Priestley of course does not include the division of God 'into three persons' cited by Langles and others (including Jones at times) as proof of the fundamental identity of the two systems. For Priestley, the evils of Hinduism range from irrational vegetarianism and teetotalism to widow suicide and the obscenities of phallic lingam worship (pp. 141, 149, 172). While emphasizing Hinduism's distance from Judaeo-Christianity, however, Priestley does pay credence to such confirmatory aspects as its possession of a deluge myth (on which Jones too laid much stress), and on any links with Western paganism which can be used to illustrate what a powerful world system of superstition the Jews and Christians were up against.

In tracing the mythographic dimension of the atheism debate up to 1799, I have had temporarily to bypass the most important phase of the whole debate: the intensely politicized furore surrounding the French Revolution. As early as 1790, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was using the charge of deep-laid atheist conspiracy to blacken both the revolution itself and the Enlightenment atmosphere leading up to it:

The literary cabal [i.e. the Encyclopaedists] had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal which hitherto had been discovered only in the propagators of some system of piety. They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence, by an easy progress, with the spirit of persecution according to their means.²⁰

Come the revolution,

We cannot be ignorant of the spirit of atheistical fanaticism, that is inspired by a multitude of writings, dispersed with incredible assiduity and expense, and by sermons delivered in all the streets and places of public resort in Paris. These writings and sermons have filled the populace with a black and savage atrocity of mind, which supersedes in them the common feelings of nature, as well as all sentiments of morality and religion.²¹

These quotations can perhaps stand for now for what was to become an increasingly standard British association of ideas, especially in the deliberately anti-radical works of Hannah More, T. J. Mathias and the *Anti-Jacobin* group.

Within this context, Priestley's radical politics were more to the fore than his campaign for revealed religion. Elected an honorary French citizen by the National Assembly, his pro-French sympathies occasioned the famous 'Church and King' Birmingham riot of 1791, in which, possibly at government instigation, a crowd destroyed his meeting-house, library and laboratory – an event which led directly to his later emigration to Pennsylvania in 1794. The official deposition of Christianity in such ceremonies as the installation of the worship of Reason in Notre-Dame Cathedral in 1793 divided his loyalties, but his conviction that the new France was engaged in a slow struggle from Catholic oppression to Protestant enlightenment soon received a boost from Robespierre's execution of the more extreme atheizers such as Hébert, and his installation of the deistic cult of the Supreme Being instead. It was in this context that Priestley published *A Continuation of the Letters addressed to the Philosophers and Politicians of France* (1794), in which he informs his 'Fellow Citizens' of his satisfaction at Robespierre's and the Assembly's reintroduction of '*morals and religion*': this bodes better than in Priestley's visit to France in 1774, when 'every person of eminence to whom I had access, and . . . every man of letters almost without exception, was a professed Atheist, and an unbeliever in a future state on any principle whatever'.²² Now the existence of God, a

future state and the immortality of the soul are all accepted, and he trusts Christianity itself will follow in time. Priestley then proceeds to mount the kind of assault on natural religion which in the hands of Hume or Shelley might be taken as a plea for atheism: nature gives us no assurances of God's goodness, the existence of a human soul as distinct from those of animals, an after-life or, hence, any reason for good moral conduct (*Works*, XXI, pp. 113–17). Robespierre's idol Rousseau, who denied the evidence of miracles (in the 'Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar', in *Emile*, Book v), offered no way out of these problems, nor can the Assembly simply *decree* the doctrine of a future state on Robespierre's grounds of its 'use' (pp. 119–24). Pagans such as Cicero and the English seventeenth-century deists alike attempted to deduce the immortality of the soul from first principles, but then abandoned the idea. In fact, however, the French have only given up on Christianity because of its Catholic 'corruptions': if they examine the Bible itself they will find plenteous evidence of verified miracles, which all confirm the truth of an after-life and the rest of the teaching of Christ, who was himself a champion for the 'liberty and equality of man' (pp. 125–6).

In the same year as Priestley's letters to the French politicians, another work appeared which credited 'the determination of mind which gave birth' to it to the French Revolution, and acknowledged 'the *Système de la Nature*, the works of Rousseau, and those of Helvétius' as its most immediate influences.²³ William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) does not spend much time on religion, but its relegation of specific religious ideas to the heading of 'Opinion Considered as a Subject of Political Institution' (what a Marxist might call 'ideology') is deliberately icy. Continuing from a chapter on 'The Political Superintendence of Opinion', the chapter 'Of Religious Establishments' (VI, 2) argues that 'the system of religious conformity is a system of blind submission' whose priests are 'fettered in the outset by having a code of propositions put into their hands, in a conformity to which all their enquiries must terminate', so that the people are 'bid to look for instruction and morality to a denomination of men, formal, embarrassed and hypocritical, in whom the main spring of intellect is unbent and incapable of action' (*Writings*, III, pp. 324–6).

Hard-hitting though this is, Godwin's own roots as an ex-Dis-senting preacher appear in his willingness to stop at this point: 'if I think it right to have a spiritual instructor to guide me in my

researches and at stated intervals to remind me of my duty, I ought to be at liberty to . . . supply myself in this respect'; 'If [public worship] be from God, it is profanation to imagine that it stands in need of the alliance of the state' (*Writings*, III, p. 327). Perhaps only the cool detachment of those 'ifs' signals Godwin's personal atheism, though this could easily be read into some of *Political Justice's* most contentious claims about the non-utility of such emotional reflexes as gratitude, obedience to parents and commitment to marriage partners when these are socially imposed rather than individually and rationally motivated.²⁴

Godwin's fullest explanations of his 'conversion from Christianity' were unpublished in his lifetime and will be considered in a later chapter. As far as the debate of the 1790s is concerned, his atheism was widely known to critics and friends (and those who were both, such as Coleridge), but conveyed in his published work chiefly by the sort of studied silence about religion – except under the heading of political coercion of opinion – whose significance will be reconsidered when we come to Wordsworth. His 'circle' of friends and debating partners constitutes, however, such a significant section of the intelligentsia of the time that an important phase of the debate can be explored by considering some of their interactions, whether or not conveyed in explicit published polemic on religious matters.

The 1794 trial for treason of Godwin's atheist friends Thomas Holcroft and John Thelwall, among others, was one of the key political events of the 1790s, setting the government's seal on its determination to root out 'Jacobin' republicanism, but also establishing – with their eventual jury acquittal – that there was widespread sympathy for their views. Some of the credit for their acquittal belongs to Godwin's pamphlet 'Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794', whose chilling ending 'and the Lord have mercy on your souls!' brings out the barbarism of the sentence of execution that awaits them if convicted.²⁵ While the charge did not involve atheism, the fact that the leading defendants *were* known atheists helped to forge further the link in conservative minds between infidelity and political republicanism, which increasingly became the mental association both radicals and infidels had to contend with even when it was not justified.

It often was justified among the circle surrounding Joseph Johnson, who was responsible for publishing an extraordinary

number of the left-leaning books of the 1780s and 1790s, and whose house was the centre for an immense cross-fertilization of ideas among his authors. These included Mary Wollstonecraft, who first met her future husband Godwin here. Famously, it was his *Memoirs* (1798) of her after her death that ruined her reputation for more than a generation by revealing too much about her love life; a situation not helped by his proud affirmation that as she was dying, 'during her whole illness, not one word of a religious cast fell from her lips'.²⁶

She was not, however, an atheist: the religious views expressed in her works are broadly those of the 'rational' end of Rational Dissent, as promulgated at the Newington Green Academy where she had met Richard Price, the main British butt of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In her rapid riposte to Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), she proclaims 'I reverence the rights of men. – Sacred rights!', but adds 'The fear of God makes me reverence myself'.²⁷ In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her portrait of the ideal woman who has used her abilities to the full concludes 'The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death, and rising from the grave, may say – Behold, thou gavest me a talent – and here are five talents' (*Political Writings*, p. 119). By the time of *A View of the French Revolution* (1794), however, the idea of religion has become much more a matter of disputed symbolisms:

We must get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin: the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora's box, and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate, on which priests have erected their tremendous structures of imposition, to persuade us, that we are naturally inclined to evil. (*Political Writings*, p. 294)

On the other hand, religious terms can be used positively when describing the realization of human potential: 'Respect thyself – whether it be termed fear of God – religion; love of justice – morality; or, self-love – the desire of happiness.' More apocalyptically, 'Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face' and hence 'The image of God implanted in our nature is now more rapidly expanding' (p. 296). In all these various references there is a constant equation of God with reason and the fulfilment of potential; in the last, the idea of an imminent realization of 'the image of God implanted in our nature' comes close to the antinomian and millenarian 'enthusiasm' to which we shall return in relation to Blake.

Mary Hays, the friend and admirer of both Wollstonecraft and Godwin, was a Unitarian whose first major publication in 1791 argued for the efficacy of prayer against the more hardline rationalism of the leading Unitarian radical Gilbert Wakefield. By the time of her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), however, she presented in the character of Mr Francis an approving portrait of Godwin's opposition to all accepted forms of religion as a clog to progress:

That immutability, which constitutes the perfection of what we (from poverty of language) term the *divine mind*, would inevitably be the bane of creatures liable to error; it is of the constancy, rather than the fickleness, of human beings, that we have reason to complain . . . Bigotry, whether religious, political, moral, or commercial, is the canker-worm at the root of the tree of knowledge and virtue . . . These are the truths, which will slowly, but ultimately, prevail; in the splendour of which, the whole fabric of superstition will gradually fade and melt away.²⁸

These ideas, along with numerous references to Helvétius and such daring speculations as whether the soul is 'a composition of the elements, the result of organized matter, or a subtle and ethereal fire' (p. 25), aid the heroine Emma as she battles through a wasteland of sexual disappointment based on Hays's own long-standing passion for William Frend, the radical scholar whose expulsion from Cambridge in 1793 for attacking the Trinity converted Coleridge to Unitarianism.

Along with the avowed feminists Wollstonecraft and Hays, many other woman writers were prominent 1790s radicals, and I shall consider some of the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and others later in this book. All identified 'superstition' as one of the chief barriers to the advance of human equality, but it was not until the 1820s that it became possible for women to put themselves on record as atheists: partly because such views would have been hard to publish until the emergence of a fiercely radical press unintimidated by legal or social pressures, and perhaps partly because in the 1790s Rational Dissenting circles had proved immensely enabling to women's explorations of radical and emancipatory ideas.²⁹

When Wollstonecraft and Godwin met in 1791, the latter was lured to the dinner at Joseph Johnson's by the chance of meeting by far the most celebrated and notorious radical of the time, Thomas Paine.³⁰ The two parts of Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–2) outsold any other political work ever up to that time, partly thanks to the direct,

demotic style in which they handled ideas previously the province of more élite discourses. Charged with 'wicked and seditious writings', Paine fled to France in 1792 where, after being briefly feted, he was imprisoned and very nearly beheaded as an enemy alien.³¹ Just before his arrest he had completed *The Age of Reason*, Part I (1794), which he avowedly wrote to stem the tide of French atheism: 'lest, in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true'.³² Repeatedly stressing that Christ was a 'virtuous reformer and revolutionist' and a deistic belief in a benevolent creator and a probable after-life, the book nonetheless managed to give quite unprecedented offence in Britain. Redefining 'infidelity' as being untrue to oneself in false protestations of belief, Paine bluntly declares from the start that 'All national institutions of Churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit' (*Complete Writings*, I, pp. 469, 464). Repeating Hume's demand for evidence of miracles beyond hearsay, he moves on to deconstruct the Christian 'fable' in the light of other mythologies and the conventions of legendary narrative: 'the Christian Church sprung out of the tail of the old mythology . . . by making the reputed founder to be celestially begotten. The trinity of gods that then followed was no other than a reduction of the former plurality'; 'The Christian mythologists, after having confined Satan in a pit, were obliged to let him out again, to bring on the sequel of the fable'. Even by these standards, he argues, the fable is incompetent, giving no clear reason why Christ and not Satan should be sacrificed, or in what sense the 'proxyism of the crucifixion' saves us from death, especially since 'if their accounts of longevity be true, men die faster since the crucifixion than before' (pp. 467, 470, 480, 479).

Furthermore, the Bible has no special status as a text: 'When the Church mythologists established their system, they collected all the writings they could find and managed them as they pleased . . . they decided by *vote* which of the books out of the collection they had made should be the WORD OF GOD, and which should not.' There is no evidence that that educated Egyptian Moses wrote or believed in the crude creation myth, and as for the rest of the Old Testament, 'the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which

more than half the Bible is filled . . . is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalise mankind'. The so-called prophets were no more than 'Jewish poets and itinerant preachers, who mixed poetry, anecdote, and devotion together', to musical accompaniment. As for the New Testament, it is founded on unproveable and often contradictory anecdotes written after the event by men who were not there; and 'As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me a species of Atheism – a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God. It is a compound made up chiefly of Manism and but little Deism' (pp. 472–5, 486–7).

Elsewhere in Part I, Paine presents parts of Job and the Psalms positively, as supporting his own deistic belief in God as a first cause deducible from the wonders of creation, and also speaks respectfully of his own Quaker upbringing. It was, however, his tone of unrelenting mockery of Christianity as a wholly alien system, 'out there' in the vicious and nonsensical world of power politics rather than 'in here', already installed in our lives and affections, that provoked such powerful reactions, from the book's immediate suppression and repeated prosecutions of its publishers, to a flood of published ripostes. Not surprisingly, these included Priestley's *Continuation of Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion; and of the Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr Paine's Age of Reason* (1794). Speaking as an admirer of Paine's political achievements, Priestley praises *The Age of Reason* for 'vigour of mind and strength of expression', but regrets that this time Paine lacks 'knowledge of his subject'.³³ Repeating some of the Humean arguments of *Philosophers and Politicians* against natural religion, Priestley agrees with Paine in condemning 'mental lying' about one's real beliefs, but argues that *philosophes* from Voltaire and Rousseau to Hume and Gibbon made their careers out of such lies, and that only Christianity supplies sufficient moral conviction for true martyrdom for one's beliefs (a point coming oddly from the self-exiled if undoubtedly harrassed Priestley to the forcibly exiled and recently imprisoned Paine) (pp. 132–3). He goes on to argue that the biblical miracles are as well attested as most other facts, that Paine is self-contradictory to admire Christ's character while overlooking his teachings, and that if all churches were established 'for power and profit' the persecuted early Christians were singularly unsuccessful. At least Paine, unlike Volney, accepts Christ's historical existence, but is wrong to suggest he was little known during his life, or known

only as a political agitator: if anything, it was his pacific approach to the Roman oppressors that made the Jewish leaders fear his great influence (pp. 140–2). Priestley then argues that Christianity did not usher in a decline of scientific learning: this had been at a standstill for some time, and after the barbarian invasions it was Christians who kept it alive. Despite the many corruptions which crept in after Constantine's adoption of the Church (one of Priestley's own favourite themes in other contexts), its early teaching was opposed to priests enriching themselves and its selection of the biblical canon was founded on good textual evidence (pp. 152, 156).

Regretting Paine's 'scurrility' about the doctrines of atonement and the Trinity, Priestley assures him that these are Catholic corruptions which should not be confused with true Christianity. Paine is right to attack 'mystery' when it means keeping the people in ignorance, but the Bible only uses it to denote something which will be explained, or is ultimately incomprehensible (pp. 156–8). His statement that 'the fable of Jupiter and the giants was told hundreds of years before that of Satan' is false since the books of the Pentateuch are 'at least a thousand years older than any others', though in fact Paine's version of the Satan story owes more to Milton than the Bible, where most references (including Christ's temptation in the desert) are clearly allegorical.³⁴ Paine's denigration of prophets as mere entertainers is belied by the fulfilment of numerous prophecies, and others – such as those in the Book of Revelation – are only now being fulfilled by the corruption of the Church into a 'persecuting power', soon to be overthrown with all the temporal powers in a great calamity, after which Christ will return to earth for the Millennium. In conclusion, Paine should consider the Bible's sublimities as well as its distressing but accurate record of earlier times, and recognize that his instinctive belief in an after-life can only be justified in Christian terms (pp. 166, 168).

Also in 1795, Paine published *The Age of Reason*, Part II, with a preface describing his haste to complete Part I without even a Bible to hand before being arrested, his lucky escape from execution through sickness, and his reinstatement by the Assembly on Robespierre's fall. Now that he can write at leisure and with access to books, he will prove in fuller textual detail the assertions for which his many (unnamed) critics have assailed him while unable to disprove them. In indicating that Part I was written without a Bible, Paine illustrates perhaps unconsciously the close familiarity with it

inherited from his Dissenting background; and in fact Part II is a far less brilliant performance, despite or even because of the point-by-point textual references he is now able to provide. Since many of its arguments duplicate those of Part I, their impact on the controversy is best traced in the context of the most influential refutation of them, Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible, in a Series of Letters addressed to Thomas Paine, Author of a Book Entitled 'The Age of Reason, Part the Second, Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology'* (1796).

Much of the *Apology* consists of detailed refutations of Paine's arguments against the factual accuracy, the assumed authorship and the morality of the Bible. In a passage which particularly appalled Blake, Watson responds to Paine's assault on the morality of Joshua's massacre of the innocent 'crying or smiling infants' of the Canaanites by insisting that the latter were themselves 'sacrificers of their own crying or smiling infants; devourers of human flesh; addicted to unnatural lust; immersed in the filthiness of all manner of vice', and hence deserved extermination to deter such practices in future (*Two Apologies*, p. 171).

As interesting as the content, however, is the contrast in tone to the politeness of Watson's earlier address to Gibbon. The very title differs from that for the *Apology for Christianity* in granting Paine no such honorific as 'Esq.', and in the arm's-length designation of 'a Book Entitled "The Age of Reason"'. Where Watson 'knows' Gibbon and his book as any gentleman would, his lack of prior acquaintance with Paine is blazoned throughout *An Apology for the Bible* from this title to later somewhat improbable claims to know nothing of Paine's class background, his political views, or even of *The Age of Reason*, Part I. The point is rubbed in from the start:

Sir,

I have lately met with a book of yours, entitled – "The Age of Reason, part the second, being an investigation of true and fabulous theology;" – and I think it not inconsistent with my station, and the duty I owe to society, to trouble you and the world with some observations on so extraordinary a performance. (*Two Apologies*, p. 163)

A brusque nod to Paine's sincerity, energy and acuteness is followed with the wish that – given Paine's confession in his preface that only fear for his life rushed him into publishing Part I so soon – 'I hope there is no want of charity in saying, that it would have been fortunate for the Christian world, had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention' (p. 164). This remark – which

prompted Blake's furious annotation 'Presumptuous Murderer' – elaborately enacts Watson's claim to be only acting and speaking for the general good, while nobly swallowing strong deeper feelings of personal revulsion.³⁵

Whatever motives of personal conscience he may claim, Paine's book has 'unsettled the faith of thousands'. The French Revolution, far from being a healthy reaction to Catholic stifling of debate, was simply a mark of the benighted French not 'believing even that religion' (p. 165). As Locke has proved, conscience can only relate to private actions, not to more general principles of right and wrong: the danger of extending it to the public sphere is illustrated not only by 'an inquisitor who burns Jews and heretics', but also by 'a Robespierre, who massacres innocent and harmless women' or 'a robber, who thinks that all things ought to be in common' (p. 167). To counter Paine, Watson will retaliate by writing 'the following letters in a popular manner; hoping that thereby they may stand a chance of being perused by that class of readers, for whom your work seems to be particularly calculated' (p. 169).

While clear as to his intended readership, Watson claims sublime ignorance of Paine's own class or even his politics: 'Some accounts of you have been published in England; but conceiving them to have proceeded from a design to injure your character, I never read them. I know nothing of your parentage, your education, or condition in life . . . I know not whether you have as great a dislike of kings as of priests' (p. 202). With superb *faux-naïvety*, he argues that 'if' Paine has been elevated by birth 'above the necessity of . . . sustaining life by the labour of hand and head', he should still not begrudge tithes to priests who do work for a living. Watson's carefully managed 'ignorance' of Paine's artisan background is here used extraordinarily to ally him with such radical-chic Whig aristocrats as the Duke of Bedford excoriated in Burke's 'Letter to a Noble Lord' (1796). At other points, however, he shows more familiarity with his antagonist's career, arguing that kings and priests 'never, I believe, did you any harm; but you have done them all the harm you could' (p. 195).

Paine's American and French involvements are further lovingly dwelt on in a fantasy supposedly designed to refute his sneers at the disparities in Gospel accounts of the crucifixion: 'had you been guillotined by Robespierre, with this title, written in French, English, and German, and affixed to the guillotine – Thomas Paine, of America, author of the Rights of Man', and had this wording been

reported slightly differently in four different accounts, no one would have queried their essential truth (pp. 308–9). While presented as if purely illustrative, this invocation of a scene which very nearly occurred cleverly satirizes the final fate of Paineite radicalism in France, sacrificed like Christ by the very power on whose behalf it claims to speak.

Increasingly, towards the end, Watson rounds on Paine's abusive language: not only his suggestion that Mary Magdalene was 'on the stroll' when she claimed to meet the resurrected Christ, but more generally:

your abuse of holy men and holy things will be remembered, when your arguments against them are refuted or forgotten. Moses you term an arrogant coxcomb, a chief assassin; Aaron, Joshua, Samuel, David, monsters and impostors; the Jewish kings a parcel of rascals; Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets, liars; and Paul a fool, for having written one of the sublimest compositions, and on the most important subject that ever occupied the mind of man – the lesson in our burial service. (p. 357)

'Men of low condition', that is Paine's natural audience, will not thank him for undermining this service's sublime promise that after death the 'misery peculiar to' their station 'will not be in vain'. As for Watson himself,

Sincerely as I am attached to the liberties of mankind, I cannot but profess myself an utter enemy to that spurious philosophy, that democratic insanity, which would equalize all property, and level all distinctions in civil society. Personal distinctions, arising from superior probity, learning, eloquence, skill, courage, and from every other excellency of talents, are the very blood and bones of the body politic. (p. 378)

In attacking the people's simple beliefs, Paine threatens to spread the weed of infidelity, whose 'root is principally fixed amongst the great and opulent',

through all the classes of the community. There is a class of men, for whom I have the greatest respect, and whom I am anxious to preserve from the contamination of your irreligion – the merchants, manufacturers, and tradesmen of the kingdom. I consider the influence of the example of this class as essential to the welfare of the community. I know that they are in general given to reading, and desirous of information on all subjects. (pp. 392–3)

If Watson hoped to stem the rising tide of infidelity by this attack, he may have helped to increase it: *Watson Refuted* (1796), by the otherwise unknown Samuel Francis, MD, is arguably only the

second published British declaration of atheism after Hammon and Turner's *Answer to Dr Priestley*. Defending Paine's critique of revealed religion on many points of detail, Francis also happily accepts Watson's attacks on the illogicality of Paine's acceptance of natural religion: 'The deistical notions of your adversary do not agree with his reasonable tenets . . . my principles extend so much further than his, that I suspect I come under the class which you [i.e. Watson] are pleased to call madmen.'³⁶ David Berman's claim not to have found 'any passage in which Bishop Watson calls atheists madmen' overlooks Watson's dramatic assertion that if Paine deems the Creation 'a story, I am not dealing with a deistical philosopher, but with an atheistic madman'. Pinpointing what Berman has usefully described as 'the repression of atheism' through the denial of its very possibility, Francis declares 'The world has too long been imposed upon by ridiculous attempts to vilify atheists and show their non-existence. That name has been a cant word, like Jacobin in France, and the Whig and Tory in England.'³⁷

In 1797, *An Investigation of the Essence of the Deity*, by the cautiously pseudonymous 'Scepticus Britannicus', took the antideist arguments of Francis a stage further. Like d'Holbach, 'Scepticus' disputes all attempts to separate a creator from the material universe itself, which he maintains has existed forever, whatever transformations individual forms of matter may have undergone. As for atheism, 'An atheist is a man, who destroyeth chimeras prejudicial to the human species.'³⁸

With their unabashed foregrounding of the word *atheist* and their direct assaults on the vestiges of a deistic common ground between believers and non-believers, Francis and 'Scepticus' set the tone for a different, less well-behaved phase of the atheism debate than that of Hammon and Turner's *Answer to Dr Priestley* fifteen or so years before. The non-élite 'underground' of opinion from which they seem to emerge is the subject of William Hamilton Reid's *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies*, whose account of the popular diffusion of atheist ideas enables us to draw a convenient if provisional line under this chapter's account of atheism up to 1800. Published in 1800 by the 'bookseller to her Majesty', Hatchard's of Piccadilly – alongside Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, approving accounts of the forcible pacification of Ireland 'during the French Invasion' of 1798, and numerous sermons on such subjects as 'Dearthness occasioned by Scarcity, not Monopoly' – it speaks with the voice of

reaction triumphant. At the same time, as Iain McCalman has demonstrated, it indicates real inside knowledge of the scene it describes, and is by no means unintelligent in its explanations both for the rise and temporary fall of the various agitational groupings it describes collectively as 'infidel societies'.³⁹

One of Reid's most dramatic and interesting moves is to suggest that, far from representing opposite ends of an ideological spectrum, 'infidelity' and extreme religious 'enthusiasm' often became intertwined as a result of the French Revolution:

It being a general tradition among Protestants, that the seat of the Roman Catholic religion was to be annihilated, it unfortunately occurred, that, as the French were successful, after the period of the revolution, in despoiling that church, notwithstanding their general espousal of infidelity, their admirers still supposed them to be the *instruments* of fulfilling their favourite prediction . . . From hence, under the idea of the instrumentality of the French revolution, in the fulfilment of prophecies, religion itself became accessory to deism and atheism! (*Infidel Societies*, p. 2)

Conversely, 'It was natural for infidels, who had a revolution in view, to connive at those enthusiasts who believed in vulgar predictions relative to the destruction of Popery; it was natural also for the former to embrace such converts.' Though such alliances often proved temporary thanks to the infidels' 'general habit of ridiculing every thing before held sacred', their existence gives ample grounds for suspecting dissenting groups as different as the Unitarians, Methodists and Swedenborgians of providing support if not cover for the spread of atheism among the lower classes.

During a circumstantial discussion of this spread through political associations such as the London Corresponding Society and other groups whose shifting addresses in both the East and West Ends are closely tracked, Paine's *Age of Reason* is given pride of place as the 'New Holy Bible' of the infidels (p. 5). It was, however, accompanied or preceded by such other works as 'the heavy artillery of Voltaire, Godwin, &c.', Meslier's *Le Bon Sens*, the works of Peter Annet (until stopped by prosecution) (pp. 7-8), and above all, 'Mirabaud's [i.e. d'Holbach's] System of Nature, and Volney's Ruins of Empires: the latter, in point of style, is looked upon as the Hervey of the Deists; the former, as the Newton of the Atheists: and, as the System of Nature was translated by a person confined in Newgate as a patriot, and published in weekly numbers, its sale was pushed' (p. 6). The suggested contrast in this passage between deists and atheists is more

retorical than real, since Reid normally couples the two terms, and later explains: 'Nor let the reader be surprised, that I have classed Atheists and Deists indiscriminately: for the common practice of Infidels, to cover themselves with the name of *Deists*, is a mere pretext, calculated to escape the more odious appellation of *Atheists*' (p. 79).

While the rise of infidelism is explained in terms of political manipulation and the lower classes' temporary sense of empowerment in attacking things they were brought up to respect, Reid devotes just as much time to explaining its apparent decline in the later 1790s, which he ascribes to its inability to inspire or motivate in its own terms when not attacking Christianity. Thus he describes at length an attempt to open a 'Temple of Reason' in a salesroom in Whitecross Street in 1796; this had some organizational resemblances to a Dissenting meeting-house but

as the acts of prayer and praise were expressly excluded, the defects of solemnity or impression upon the attendants may easily be conjectured . . . and, while the doctrines of the new philosophy, as far as they related to morality, were much too general to suit any particular purpose, the feelings of the impartial hearer, who justly expected the *new* religion would supersede the *old*, were invariably those of surprize and disappointment. (*Infidel Societies*, p. 25)

While 'the most rational members' wished to confine lecturers to discussing morality without reference to Christianity, the majority overruled them, 'well persuaded, that, deprived of the most copious themes of argument, or rather declamation, they would entirely lose the command over the passions of their auditors, and, of course, become more insipid and uninteresting than any of the professions they were determined to condemn' (p. 25). Nonetheless, 'laxity of attendance' soon caused the Temple to be closed, though Reid tries to have his cake and eat it by arguing that it proved a dangerous breeding-ground for the spread of similar attempts throughout the country. While systematic government suppression is clearly one reason for the failure of such 'temples', Reid points triumphantly to the failure of a similar venture in France: 'in the summer of 1799, the Theophilanthropic Temple, at Paris, would share the fate of its humble imitator in Nichols's sale-room in Whitecross-Street, notwithstanding the support of Thomas Paine and other eminent characters', since even there 'the many-twinkling meteor of Infi-

delity, after blazing its hour, has paled' before the greater truths of Christianity (p. 27).

In expanding these points, Reid argues that the infidel texts included 'no work upon the relative duties, no work inculcating moral or religious obligations to virtue', with the exception of Volney's *Law of Nature*, a copy of which however was not to be found in 'a hundred houses furnished with Paine's *Age of Reason*' (p. 31). (Reid's qualified approval for a work normally published as an end-piece to *Ruins* is strange, and one of many hints that he has himself been more deeply engaged in the lines of thought he is attacking than he openly admits.)

In his account of 'infidel' tendencies in various dissenting groups, Reid offers interesting support for the idea that the Swedenborgianism and Unitarianism with which Blake and Coleridge – the two most 'pious' figures of the great Romantic canon – were involved at formative stages in their poetic careers could easily be seen by contemporaries as themselves atheistic. Thus,

the opinions of Baron Swedenborg, approaching nearer than others to modern Infidelity, may be supposed to have administered in proportion to the objections of Deists and Atheists. What must these think of a sect, who, under the appellation of Christians, explain away the doctrine of the atonement, the resurrection, and the day of judgement? Let them be told, that, from the canon of the New Testament, this new sect have excluded all the Epistles, which they class as *private letters*! That with them the day of judgment is more a *figure* than a *fact*: that it commenced about 1758, in the printing and publication of the judgment of Emmanuel Swedenborg, to condemn, collectively, all the doctrines of the *Old*, or Trinitarian, church. (*Infidel Societies*, pp. 89–90)

This sums up very succinctly many of the 'antinomian' ideas I shall be discussing in relation to Blake. Reid goes on to link the Swedenborgian belief in the 'divine humanity' of Christ to the Muggletonian sect to which E. P. Thompson has tried to relate many of Blake's unorthodox ideas: 'that the whole godhead is circumscribed in the person of Jesus Christ, still retaining the human form in heaven; the *belief of which*, and not *repentance*, both Muggletonians and Swedenborgians enforce upon their followers, as the *first* and most essential condition of gospel acceptance' (p. 90).

If such views were dangerously 'enthusiastic', the Unitarianism or Socinianism with which Coleridge and many other key writers of the period were involved represents an opposite danger:

But, after all, where Infidelity has failed of complete success, many upon whom it has operated have been, at least, brought under Socinianism, the *Frozen Zone* of Religion, even if it can deserve the name; for, before Dr Priestley had attained to his past celebrity as a *divine*, this opinion undoubtedly had its effects in deadening the human heart. But, when his improvements upon it were dignified with the name of *philosophy*, the warm tide of intellectual life immediately ceased to flow. The character of a *materialist* was fixed, and all the benignant forces of genuine Christianity, which might have been expected in this quarter, were hermetically sealed.

It was this great chemist who reduced all the ideas of the grand enemy of the human race to a mere '*personification of human passions*'; from whence, and similar refinements in what was called the '*corruptions of Christianity*', a discussion of questions, in the debating societies, on a Sunday evening, previous to 1781, subversive of all the fundamentals of our religion, operated as a sufficient justification of the Sunday Reformation-Bill, passed in that year, which, by prohibiting the taking of money at the doors, put a temporary stop to the increase of Infidelity in the lower orders. (p. 90)

Despite its tortured syntax, the last sentence above indicates the ways in which the Priestleyan Unitarians paved the way for the infidel societies – and for much gagging legislation against them – by holding open debates on controversial religious issues, funded by a small entry-charge, on the Sunday evenings supposed to be reserved for religious services. The language Reid uses against the 'materialist' Priestley in particular is interesting for its metaphorical resonances: the imagery of 'hermetically sealing' vital forces in the interests of a 'reducing' process which may be excellent chemistry but freezes the spirit is very like that used by the ex-Unitarian Coleridge of his recent beliefs at just this time, and will be useful to bear in mind when considering that great tour of 'Frozen Zones', 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'.

Other activities which prepared the ground for organized infidelity included the 1775/6 'Deistical lectures' of the Revd David Williams, whose common 'appellation of the *Priest of Nature*' – borne out in such claims as that 'In moral as well as natural scenes, my delight has ever been in climbing rocks and tempting dangers' – throws an interestingly deistical light forward on to that other Priest of Nature, Wordsworth.⁴⁰ Various foreign groups cited by Reid also suggest links between the deist/dissenting fringe and some ideas of Wordsworth and other poets such as Shelley. An 'imitation' of one of the Psalms by a group of French 'Illuminati' posits a dangerously anarchistic version of the simple life as ideal, with the proviso that

the father constitutes the absolute patriarchal authority within a family unbound by any other laws:

Then the father of the family, king of his household, had no other sceptre but his pastoral staff.

Without sword or balance, he administered justice at the foot of an Oak, or before the door of his Cottage . . .

Blood never stained his [i.e. man's] lips, neither was he preserved by the destruction of useful and peaceable animals.

Then was the marriage-union, formed in the face of Heaven, without a witness, and without a priest. (*Infidel Societies*, pp. 101–2)

This attempt 'to render the present state of society, odious, by a fictitious display of the indolent pleasures of the patriarchal life' may strike a modern reader as relatively uncontroversial except for the male chauvinism implicit in the patriarchal ideal; but it helps to underline the degree of nonconformity invoked, not only by Shelley's espousal of vegetarianism and free love, but by the whole *Lyrical Ballads* ethos of outdoor living, care for animals and concern at the morale-sapping of such rural patriarchs as Michael, the Female Vagrant's father, and the weeping owner of 'The Last of the Flock'.

With Reid, we encounter a whole melange of the ideas and cultural practices which I have tried to keep separate for most of this chapter. In particular, distinctions between republicanism, reform agitation, Unitarian Dissent, millenarian enthusiasm, deism and atheism seem to break down, in ways which doubtless partly reveal the prejudices Reid is appealing to, but also reflect a kind of reality, as groups leaning towards one or the other combine and interconnect in what Iain McCalman terms the 'radical underworld'.⁴¹ Defined in opposition to and to some extent created by the oppressive government legislation of the 1790s, this infidel underworld was a long way from the polite debates on the nature of the deity of which Priestley was for so long the ringleader. Nonetheless, as Reid's account of Priestley's Sunday debating societies indicates, it was the Unitarians' commitment to the whole notion of open-ended debate, in a non-trinitarian context that was in any case technically illegal, that offered this underground infidelism many of its most useful forms of procedure.

*Masters of the universe: Lucretius, Sir William Jones,
Richard Payne Knight and Erasmus Darwin*

Mother of Aeneas and his race, delight of men and gods, life-giving Venus, it is your doing that under the wheeling constellations of the sky all nature teems with life, both the sea that buoys up our ships and the earth that yields our food . . . So throughout seas and uplands, rushing torrents, verdurous meadows and the leafy shelters of the birds, into the breasts of one and all you instil alluring love, so that with passionate longing they reproduce their several breeds. Since you alone are the guiding power of the universe and without you nothing emerges into the shining sunlit world to grow in joy and loveliness, yours is the partnership I seek in trying to compose these lines *On the Nature of the Universe*.¹

So, in part, begins the Roman poet Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, written in the first century BC in six books aiming to instil the principles of Epicurean materialist philosophy. Though it opens with this much-quoted invocation to Venus, the first book wastes no time in insisting that Epicurus has shown us that the gods have no interest in man or the universe, that there is no after-life, and that all of space is made up simply of 'atoms and void'. The apparent disjuncture between the rhapsodic opening and the rest illustrates one of the perennial difficulties of 'atheist poetry': how can a form dedicated to presenting a sublimely elevated view of nature and man's place within it do so without borrowing from the religious imagery which in most cultures invests that position of elevation? Lucretius' solution is twofold: first to hit the reader with a full-blooded rhapsody to a goddess which in fact deconstructs her into a universal force of nature; then to relegate 'the gods' when abstracted

from such natural forces to a purely imaginary role, devoid of direct agency within a subject matter which covers nothing less than 'the nature of the universe'.

In this and in other ways, Lucretius offers a model for many of the poets to be discussed in the rest of this book, whose moments of rhapsody often come with religious-sounding accompaniments – of which the rhetorical significance needs careful weighing in relation to other kinds of implication about 'the nature of the universe'. The shift from polytheism to Christianity of course leaves the classical gods available for the ascription of importance to natural forces or emotions in ways which do not impinge on the serious high ground of the accepted religion. But this *modus vivendi* between Christianity and paganism, which underwrites much poetry from the Renaissance on, could be put under great strain when the high ground was suspected to be empty, as it was by many in the 'Romantic' period between about 1780 and 1830. Under these circumstances the 'allegorical' classical deities take on a new weight again, as the forces they represent claim renewed autonomy from the single guiding agency of the Christian God. As we shall see, they are joined by numerous other deities, from the Hindu gods to the psychic projections of Blake, all of which can be at will deconstructed back to their originating elements, or hailed as enthrallingly significant new elevations for the imagination to perch on.

I am not claiming Lucretius as a direct influence on all of this; but he certainly influenced the three poets I shall discuss for most of this chapter, who in turn stand behind 'Romanticism' in ways which deserve greater acknowledgement. Before introducing them, it will be useful for many subsequent references in this book to outline the content and then some of the publication history of *De Rerum Natura*. Book 1 is as described above; Book 2 begins by comparing the philosopher's immunity from common religious anxieties to the pleasure of watching a shipwreck from dry land, and goes on to describe the combinations of atoms, their indestructibility, and the generation of life itself from atomic matter. The third book describes the gods as living beneath a laughing sky wholly unconcerned with our affairs, and explains that since life itself is made out of indestructible if particularly small atoms, it is ridiculous to worry about dying. Book 4 explains how this rigorously atomic universe permits us to have sense perceptions: all objects constantly fling off a kind of 'film' of atoms which impress themselves on our senses and

from there even get into our imaginations. One particular way of being affected by such films or images is sex, whereby we (males) eject seed towards the cause of the disturbance as wounded people eject blood. Love, whereby we repeatedly do this towards the same image, is an unpleasant disorder best cured by a healthy course of promiscuity.

I shall outline Book 5 more fully since it had a massive influence in our period, in its specific sequence of ideas as well as its general assumptions. Since the universe only came together out of chance atomic combinations, it is bound to fall apart at some point: its present imperfections suggest it is still young, which implies a subsequent ageing and death, a process which may have happened before and may again. It was formed from a raging conflict of atoms, which eventually separated into sky, earth, sea and fiery sun and moon. Various further astronomical hypotheses are open-mindedly explored before we turn to the creation of life, wherein numerous 'wombs' appeared from the still-young earth and gave birth to the various species, doubtless including many maladapted freaks which failed to survive. Among the surviving species was man, at first a rough hunter who did not yet kill his own kind in thousands, as he does now. Settlement brought closer family and thence social ties, which gave rise to language and the harnessing of fire. Then kings appeared and were overturned by mob rule, until this cycle was replaced by 'civil rights and duties'. At some point, people began to dream of ideal beings and try to explain natural terrors such as thunder; this gave rise to religion, a solution worse than the problem: 'Poor humanity, to saddle the gods with such responsibilities and throw in a vindictive temper!' (p. 159). Further developments – metalwork, horse-riding, clothing, agriculture, music – were not god-given but 'taught by usage', and the struggle over such technologies has often led to increasing bloodshed.

The sixth and last book again stresses how Epicurus' philosophy can cure us of desire and fear through 'an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature' (p. 168). This is followed by scientific explanations of a range of phenomena from thunder and lightning to the flooding of the Nile and magnetism. A final explanation of the causes of disease leads to a horrific conclusion describing a plague in Athens, from which the reader is offered no comforting exit in the shape of any idea of an after-life. The abrupt ending has been ascribed to textual incompleteness, but is more

probably meant to stand as a kind of final test of the Epicurean convert's full acceptance of the materialist philosophy.²

In Britain, the exhaustion with religious differences which marked the Restoration saw the first big surge of interest in Lucretius' poem. Rochester, Dryden and John Evelyn all translated the opening invocation to Venus and other sections; and Aphra Behn wrote of the first full published translation (1682) by Thomas Creech, that

It pierces, conquers and compels,
Beyond poor feeble Faith's dull oracles.
Faith the despairing soul's content,
Faith the last shift of routed argument.³

Creech's translation was often republished throughout the eighteenth century, when such didactic poems on huge, global subjects as Pope's *Essay on Man*, Thomson's *Seasons* and Akenside's *Pleasures of the Imagination* owed much to the 'Life, the Universe, and Everything' content of *De Rerum Natura*. Nonetheless, in a supposedly 'deist' and/or sceptical age, it is surprising that no new translations or major editions appeared – perhaps with the thought that Creech had done the job once for all, although one critic has argued that the Newtonian belief in a guiding hand behind 'Nature's laws' found the 'blind chance' of Lucretius' atoms fundamentally unacceptable.⁴ In France, however, the links between Lucretius and the new science were explicit: a great aid in focussing atheist arguments was Cardinal de Polignac's *Anti-Lucretius* (1747), which tried to overturn Lucretian materialism in terms of a pre-Newtonian science whose mistakes could easily be demonstrated. The links between Lucretius and the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment were taken for granted in such attacks as H. S. Reimarus's *The Principal Truths of Natural Religion Defended . . . wherein the Objections of Lucretius, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, La Mettrie, and other Ancient and Modern Followers of Epicurus are Considered, and their Doctrines Refuted* (trans. R. Wynne, 1766).

In Britain, a new wave of Lucretian editions and translations appeared between 1796 and 1813. In 1796–7 the radical Unitarian Gilbert Wakefield produced the first new annotated edition of the Latin text since Creech; to be followed by three early nineteenth-century translations in quick succession. In 1805 another Unitarian, John Mason Good, produced the first complete translation since Creech's, accompanying it with voluminous notes citing clear Lucretian borrowings by English writers as far back as Shakespeare (such

as Prospero's speech about the great globe dissolving and 'leaving not a wrack behind'). Though Good reconverted to Anglicanism in 1805, his preface clearly indicates a polemically rationalist intention, claiming that *De Rerum Natura* 'unfolds to us the rudiments of that philosophy which, under the plastic hands of Gassendi and Newton, has, at length, obtained an eternal triumph over every other hypothesis of the Greek schools'; despite 'the cloud that, for many centuries posterior to the Christian aera, hung over the Epicurean system' and made the poem 'generally proscribed and repudiated'.⁵ After an 1808 translation of Book 1 only by another radical Unitarian, William Hamilton Drummond, the next translation of the full poem, in 1813, was by Thomas Busby, whose obituary regretted his 'loose notions on religious subjects'. Subscribers for this translation included Coleridge, the Duke of Wellington and Byron.

Among the borrowers from Lucretius cited in Good's notes are Sir William Jones and Erasmus Darwin, two of the subjects of the rest of this chapter. The third, Richard Payne Knight, explicitly acknowledges Lucretius as the main model for his *The Progress of Civil Society* (1796).

Jones, Knight and Darwin were all highly influential figures in three apparently very different walks of life. Sir William Jones was an East India Company judge whose study of Sanskrit texts and Hindu beliefs made him the leading Orientalist of his day. Richard Payne Knight was an aesthetic theorist whose views on the Picturesque helped to transform British landscaping, and whose collection of antiquities is still a core part of the holdings of the British Museum. Erasmus Darwin, the most celebrated physician of his time, regularly swapped scientific ideas and discoveries with a circle of friends including such 'fathers of the Industrial Revolution' as James Watt, Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood and Joseph Priestley.

All three, then, were prominent, actively engaged figures in both the intellectual and the practical worlds of the 1780s and 1790s. While in each case their poetry was only a part of their perceived achievement, each had clear views on the role of poetry in relation to the communication of progressive ideas, which I shall consider later in this chapter. These ideas are often conveyed in structurally essential prose introductions, arguments or notes accompanying the poems themselves. With each writer, the poetry gives the impression of being so full to bursting with new argument, new research, new

content, that it cannot be trusted to give the right impression without an almost equal counter-weight of erudite explanation. At the same time, each writer has clearly felt the need to endow his specialized knowledge with the kind of celebratory authority poetry in particular bestows.

Some distinctions need to be drawn, however. While Jones's deistic belief in a rationally deducible monotheism still privileges revelatory Christianity, for the other two writers non-Christian 'natural religion' is a starting point available to be sometimes politely assumed and sometimes deconstructed in more sceptical or atheistic terms. Since Knight is less apologetic than Darwin in this, the three poets range themselves usefully within the late eighteenth-century deist spectrum. This chapter will accordingly move between Jones's Christian deism and Knight's thoroughgoing religious scepticism, with Darwin's nominally deistic materialism occupying something like the middle ground between them.

In poetic terms, Darwin is in every way a larger figure than the other two, both for his influence on other writers – which we shall continue to trace throughout this book – and simply in his own right. Accordingly, in what follows, I shall devote proportionately more time to his major poems than to those of Jones or Knight, over whose prose as well as poetry I shall range more generally. In a final section, however, I shall try to relate the three in terms of some of their shared preoccupations, and then consider their diverging reputations in the 'anti-Jacobin' 1790s and beyond.

Sir William Jones's nine 'Hymns' to various Hindu deities arose from his impressive researches into Indian religion and culture, undertaken while he was a judge in British Bengal. While there may have been good political reasons for such researches, the Hymns are crammed with cultural information new to Jones's readers, and expanded on further in the brief but densely packed 'Arguments' which preface each hymn. The overall effect is one of an enthusiastic empathy with Hinduism which fits well with Jones's liberal Whig background – although, as we shall see, this empathy has certain clearly defined limits. A scholarly lawyer with parliamentary ambitions, he had survived a number of political disappointments at home before becoming a judge in British Bengal, overlapping briefly with the governorship of Warren Hastings before the latter's impeachment. Before this he was an enthusiastic supporter of American Independence, and the author of a proto-Painite *Dialogue on the*

Principles of Government (1782), setting out the principles of the British constitution in common language, whose publisher was unsuccessfully prosecuted for its republican tone.

Though regularly mixing in freethinking circles (his friends included Benjamin Franklin and Edward Gibbon), he was not an atheist but a Christian with a strong deist inflection. His more philosophical poems lean towards Platonic and Berkeleyan idealism rather than materialism, and a passage from his 'unfinished Tragedy of Sohrab' specifically denies that the universe is constructed from the 'dance of atoms blind' as described by Lucretius' master Epicurus. Nonetheless, in introducing a poem I shall discuss in more detail later, he describes the goddess Bhavani who brings the world to life through the power of sexual love as 'the Lucretian Venus'. While he threw considerable energy into forcing Indian and other mythologies and histories into conformity with the biblical account of creation, he constantly proclaimed his openness to new evidence, and the strongest impact of his Indian-based writings was to establish the idea of a rich, vivid and largely admirable belief system outside both Christianity and the classical mythology which long habituation had largely drained of its 'alternative' potency. Furthermore, his idea of a brahmin élite secretly preserving a virtually deistic tradition under the cover of a more popular polytheism fits well with some of the more explicitly sceptical views of priesthood current at the time.

His poems apart from (i.e. mainly before) the Hymns demonstrate a restless attempt to inhabit various pre-existing forms and modes including the pastoral, the classical-republican ode, the libertine Anacreontic, the Petrarchan or Persian love poem, the Spenserian allegory and (in outline only) the national epic. Aged sixteen, he wrote 'Arcadia', in which Virgil, Spenser, Pope and Gay all contend successfully for the pastoral pipe of Theocritus; and 'Caissa', an accomplishedly ludic account of the birth of chess. In 1767 (at twenty-one), the more ambitious 'The Seven Fountains' mixes luscious eroticism and Puritan asceticism in an allegorical mode reminiscent of Spenser. In 1770 he showed his debt to Spenser more fully in his outline for a national epic, 'The Design for Britain Discovered, an Heroic Poem, in Twelve Books'. Intended to explore the twelve 'public' virtues Spenser did not get round to in *The Faerie Queene*, the epic will recount the voyage of Britan (a Phoenician prince) in quest of Albina (the spirit of British liberty). The virtues he

will need to be worthy of her hand are tested in turn by a series of evil spirits, and after being magically whisked to Mexico and back, the last enemies he has to defeat are the French, before his final union with the British constitution in the form of Albina.

In the period around the end of the war of American Independence, Jones wrote a series of highly political neoclassical odes. Though 'The Muse Recalled; An Ode' (1781) is largely about the wedding of Jones's erstwhile pupil Lord Spencer of Althorp, it ends with a vision of all the public virtues fleeing to America while the British lyre falls silent (a theme also to be found in Goldsmith, Blake and Cowper during the 1770s and 1780s). The 'Imitation of Alcaeus' endlessly reiterates the question 'What constitutes a state?', and answers it in the republican language of a people who know their rights, and a law before which even crowns must shrink. The 'Imitation of Callistratus' celebrates Harmodius and Aristogiton, whose tyrannicide helped to establish the Athenian republic. It is significant, however, that in the same year, Jones wrote to Gibbon that such radical activity at home 'has no relation to my seat on the bench in India where I should hardly think of instructing the Gentoos with the maxims of the Athenians'.⁶

A major part of the impact of the Hymns lies not in any specific line of argument but in their encrusted quality, the engagement they show with the variegated specifics of their settings and divine characters. One aspect of this interest in variegation is the frequent use of alternative names for most of the major gods – partly, as Jones explains, because the mnemonic enumeration of such names was part of the point of the Hindu hymns he is imitating, but arguably also to enforce the idea that these gods should be seen more as allegorical emanations or aspects of universal forces than as wholly fixed personalities.⁷

Though this habit favours the idea of a synchronic layering of shifting alternatives, a certain diachronic order is imposed on the Hymns by the sequence (not that of composition or first publication) given in Thomas Park's 1808 edition of Jones's works.⁸ In Park's sequence, the Hymns offer a steadily growing insistence on British religious and imperial interests, while also respecting the equal powers of the supreme 'Indian Trinity', Siva, Vishnu and Brehma. 'To Camdeo' deals with the love-god once punished by the supreme god of destruction, Siva, for inflaming his passion for his wife Pracriti, whose different attributes as a war goddess and goddess of

reproduction are celebrated in the next two hymns, to Durga and Bhavani. The next three hymns address various likeable but erratic weather gods: Indra the thunder-god, Surya the sun-god and Lacshmi the goddess of rain and crop fertility, who is joined by her husband, the supreme preserver-god Vishnu. The third of the supreme trinity, the creator-god Brehma, is celebrated in the mystical 'To Narayena', where a Christian-deist monotheism is shown after all to underlie the Hindu system, while the next hymn addresses his wife Sereswaty, the music goddess but also a great river whose meeting with the Ganges features in the concluding hymn to Ganga, celebrating that river's triumphant progress towards its fertile delta in British-owned Bengal.

For now I shall try to tease out the implications of just one of these Hymns: that to Bhavani, the goddess of reproduction described in the poem's Argument as 'the Lucretian Venus'. Brooded over by the dove-like spirit of love, the primeval waters are suddenly lit by a ray of light, whereupon a lotus-flower rises to the surface and opens to reveal Bhavani, who knits part of the light into a veil for herself, and diffuses the rest over a gradually awakening nature. First fish, then birds appear, then islands of land emerge covered with other animals, flowers and trees: all in their different ways driven to reproduce through the power of love. Nature thus becomes 'one vast eternal gyre', giving life and nurture to 'sentient forms, that sink again to clay'.⁹ Finally, youths and maidens are exhorted to bring flowery wreaths to the joint festival of Lacshmi (goddess of abundance) and Bhavani, whose image will then be returned to the water from which she first emerged.

As well as carrying explicit echoes of Lucretius' invocation to Venus, the idea in this Hymn of a vast 'gyre' of 'transient forms, that sink again to clay' echoes the Lucretian emphasis on the coexistence of destruction and creation, which is represented in Hindu myth by Bhavani's husband, Siva. One of the three supreme gods who are really all aspects of the incomprehensible first cause Brehme, Siva counterpoises Brehma the creator and Vishnu the preserver, representing the necessity of destruction in all material processes. In the Hymn to Durga, Bhavani's other embodiment, we see several examples of Siva's essentially creative powers of destruction: driving Durga to throw herself from a cliff and then saving her; burning the love-god Camdeo to ashes then restoring him; and fathering with Durga both the divine warlord Cumara, destined to

repel the demons from Mount Meru, and the wise Ganesa who presides over new openings as well as old closures. Since for Jones 'The *Hindu* goddesses are uniformly represented as the subordinate powers of their respective lords', Durga/Bhavani is also Cali, the Hecate or Proserpine of Hell and Death.¹⁰ Given this, Jones makes a particular point of the fact that her festival coincides with that of Lacshmi, 'the Indian Ceres' or goddess of abundance, while she herself also corresponds with the Egyptian Isis, or goddess of nature. The force of love, then, is extended outwards to become virtually coterminous with all forms of natural process: a single energy.

The Hymns arose from Jones's broader researches into Indian religion and culture. These had as part of their starting point the new East India Company policy of administering Bengal with reference to traditional Muslim and Hindu law. Jones's quest for an ever more intimate 'knowledge' of Indian culture was thus part of a project to confirm British power as ruling the colonized society from the inside, and as it were on its own behalf. But whatever its ultimate motive, this quest for 'understanding' could not have worked without considerable sympathy for, or acceptance of, some aspects of the religions on which the new laws were to be based. Already a Muslim scholar, on his appointment as an Indian judge Jones immersed himself in Hindu scholarship, bringing much greater accuracy to the picture already tentatively set up by some of his predecessors in the Company administration.

For several of these, India had fitted well with the deist discourse in which *philosophes* such as Voltaire and Gibbon had used the virtues of Chinese or Roman 'paganism' as a stick to beat the pretensions of orthodox Christendom. For deists like John Zephaniah Holwell and Alexander Dow, Hinduism seemed to contain at least as many of the truths of 'natural religion' as any other faith, a tradition which later impelled the orthodox Thomas Maurice to call Indian religion 'the *debateable ground* on which the fury of Jacobin hostility had reared her most triumphant banners'.¹¹ While necessarily embroiled in this ongoing discourse, however, Jones's Hymns also betray an anxiety to establish the proper limits of the 'understanding' of polytheism they work emotionally to promote. While the 'allegorical' presentation of the many gods as projections of different aspects of a single creator is approvingly stressed, in Park's final arrangement the Hymns increasingly foreground enlightened Christianity – indeed, enlightened

British Christianity – as still needed by Hindus who ‘err, yet feel; though pagans, they are men’.¹²

Where Jones comes closest to the deconstructive work of his deist precursors on one hand, and to Darwin and Knight on the other, is in presenting all world religions and mythological systems as inter-related, and as equally worthwhile objects of study. In this respect, while upholding the special status of Christian revelation, he at least professes an open mind ready to be swayed by new evidence, and works to undermine the distinctions between Eastern and Western polytheisms likely to be upheld unthinkingly by those to whom Greek and Latin formed such a basic part of the idea of ‘education’. Hence a crucial part of the Arguments prefacing each of the nine Hymns is devoted to demonstrations of the parallels if not actual identities between specific Hindu and Graeco-Roman gods, and between the more esoteric, proto-monotheist sublimities of Brahman philosophy and those of Pythagoras and Plato. In his other writings on comparative religion, Jones generally tried to limit Hindu links with Judaeo-Christianity to matters of pre-Babel ‘history’ such as (pre-eminently) Noah’s flood. In one striking instance, however, he strays into Volneyesque speculations on the similarities of character as well as name between Krishna and Christ, surmising that the Hindus must have grafted reports of the historical Christ on to pre-existing elements to produce the current idea of Krishna.¹³

Despite its implicitly imperialist elements, it is still worthwhile to emphasize the generally ‘hands off’ nature of Jones’s project as a whole, especially by contrast with other nearly contemporary attempts to project non-Christian systems to a Western audience. One of the most celebrated such attempts, only a decade or so later, was Robert Southey’s cycle of epic romances set within Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Aztec systems in a broadly deistic programme aiming to prove that nobility and morality are the same whatever the cultural background. By the time he reached his Hindu epic, *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), it is clear that a rapid mugging-up of Jones and other sources had done little to dispel Southey’s natural impulse to divide Hindu belief and practice into a straightforward war between goodies and baddies, with suttee (widow suicide) and the disciple-crushing wagon of ‘Juggernaut’ well to the fore on the wicked side. Whatever Jones was attempting in the Hymns was very far away from such a project to absorb only what could be instantly used by a moralizing Western sensibility.

Richard Payne Knight is now perhaps best known as a theorist of the Picturesque movement, as demonstrated in his poem *The Landscape*, where certain views about social liberty and even equality are enshrined – somewhat strangely to modern ears – in arguments about the best way to lay out the grounds of large country houses. On a relatively *nouveau riche* fortune – his grandfather was an ironmaster – Knight redesigned his country estate to express a consciously personal view of life, creating in Downton Castle in Herefordshire a Gothic extravaganza second only to Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, and laying out its grounds in the Picturesque style. A Foxite Whig MP, he resembled Jones politically in his support for the American Revolution and deep distrust of monar-chism.

Unlike Jones, however, Knight was a thoroughgoing religious sceptic. Repeatedly accused of atheism, of obscenity and, after the French Revolution, of Jacobinism, he was in many ways a perfect embodiment of the links between libertinism, religious infidelity and political radicalism widespread in his class from the 1780s to the early nineteenth century. Since his verse, in serviceable heroic couplets, is considerably less densely wrought than Jones's Hymns or Darwin's three interlocked masterpieces, the best way of establishing these links will be through a broader survey of some of his more important work in prose as well as poetry.

Before returning to Knight's first major prose work, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1786), it will be useful to place it within the context from which it emerged: the Society of Dilettanti. This society of well-heeled amateurs in Roman togas was founded in 1731 by Sir Francis Dashwood, whose enthusiasm for founding clubs also extended to the Divan Club, whose members wore Eastern costumes and drank toasts to the harem, and the more notorious Hell-Fire Club, whose members dressed as monks and, by some accounts, indulged in orgies with local women at Medmenham Abbey, near Sir Francis's country seat at West Wycombe. The most salacious of these accounts were produced by Dashwood's erstwhile Hell-Fire colleague John Wilkes after a political falling-out, but even if they were exaggerated, the link with Wilkes clearly involves a shared enjoyment of blasphemy: hence the monkish garb at Medmenham, numerous portraits of Dashwood as a friar or pope toasting the image of Venus, and some of the obscene scenarios of Wilkes's poem

An Essay on Woman, such as one where Eve, finding that after the fourth time Adam cannot give her an 'other shag', turns to the Serpent who does so 'ten times o'er'.¹⁴

Dashwood's range of interests as indicated here – in Greek antiquities, in anticlerical mockery and in sexual libertinism – gestures at an interlocking network of concerns which, I would like to suggest, was broadly influential within certain élites in the second half of the eighteenth century. A glance at some of his other involvements might help to indicate that these interests sometimes abutted on other more serious and even at times radical concerns. Though briefly Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord Bute's Tory Ministry, he was a political independent who believed, like Wilkes, that MPs should be contractually mandated by their constituents, and that it was Parliament's duty to resist royally appointed governments of whatever party. Another friend of Dashwood's was Benjamin Franklin, with whom he attended London's first Unitarian chapel in 1774. With Franklin's help he had proposed in 1773 a radical revision of the Anglican prayer-book and liturgy so as to be acceptable to Unitarians and deists. Though not taken up in Britain, his revision had some influence on the American Episcopalian liturgy after Independence.¹⁵

One thread linking these diverse interests is an Enlightenment deism dressed in the garb of the neoclassical revival. The interest in Greek antiquities at times clearly signalled an active imaginative preference for pagan polytheism over Christianity: a preference spelled out at West Wycombe by a west portico exactly modelled by Nicholas Revett on the temple of Dionysos at Teos, and the first piece of purely 'Grecian' architecture in Britain. The choice of Dionysos was clearly not accidental, as witness the statues and paintings of that god included in the design, and as witness the nearby temple of Venus, designed by Dashwood on the model of the female genitals, according to Wilkes. And though the prayer-book revision was clearly sincere, its solemn profession of 'veneration for the doctrines of Jesus Christ' suggests a deist or Unitarian stress on the teachings rather than the divinity of the teacher. According to the Unitarian Joseph Priestley, Dashwood's collaborator Benjamin Franklin was himself an avowed atheist.

Commissioned by the Society of Dilettanti, which Knight joined on the year of Dashwood's death, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1786) is a wide-ranging scholarly study of ancient phallic cults and

the perpetuation of some of their imagery and even beliefs in more recent religions, including Christianity. Extending its enquiries from church steeples and their weathercocks to the 'loving kiss' of early forms of the Eucharist and the shape of the cross itself, the discourse is by no means the simple exercise in sacrilege its many critics took it as.¹⁶ Beginning as a response to a description by Sir William Hamilton of evident phallic cults still surrounding certain saints in Sicily, it postulates a fundamental worship of creative energy, preceding any notions of anthropomorphic or external deity, and using the sun and the sexual organs as its major symbols.

With acknowledgements to the researches of Orientalists such as Jones and Charles Wilkins, it suggests India as an early repository of this ur-religion, with its creator-destroyer-preserver triad the source of later trinities including the Christian one, and its phallic lingam and self-regenerating lotus echoed in the flower-topped columns of Egyptian and thence Greek architecture. While Egyptian sun worship still reflected something of this ur-religion, in the Greek world it was perpetuated chiefly through the Orphic mystery cults, whose fragmentary surviving texts indicate the symbolic functions of such images as bulls, snakes, winged figures, fire, light and darkness, as well as of male and female procreation, which, taken literally by the uninitiated, construct the fantastic narratives of the popular mythology.¹⁷

While suggesting many etymological and symbolic links with the mythological 'system of emanations', as he calls it, Knight sees Jewish monotheism as an attempt to get back to the more primal ur-religion, but vitiated by misreading the recreative force as literal creation (*Priapus*, pp. 112–13). Its puritanical suppression of the festive ethos of older religions was only intensified by the early Christians, but later this gave way to a virtual return to the festive system of emanations under Catholicism, with its Trinity, mythologized saints, and the frequently phallic and/or vaginal imagery of its sacred buildings. While 'among the moderns philosophy has improved, as religion has been corrupted', Judaeo-Christianity as a whole has lost the tolerance of the ancient Greeks towards others' beliefs, and also their charity towards beggars as favourites of Zeus, rather than in order to be 'repaid tenfold' by God as in the Judaeo-Christians' mercenary weighing of virtues and benefits (pp. 108–9, 112).

Despite an occasionally somewhat salacious tone, especially in

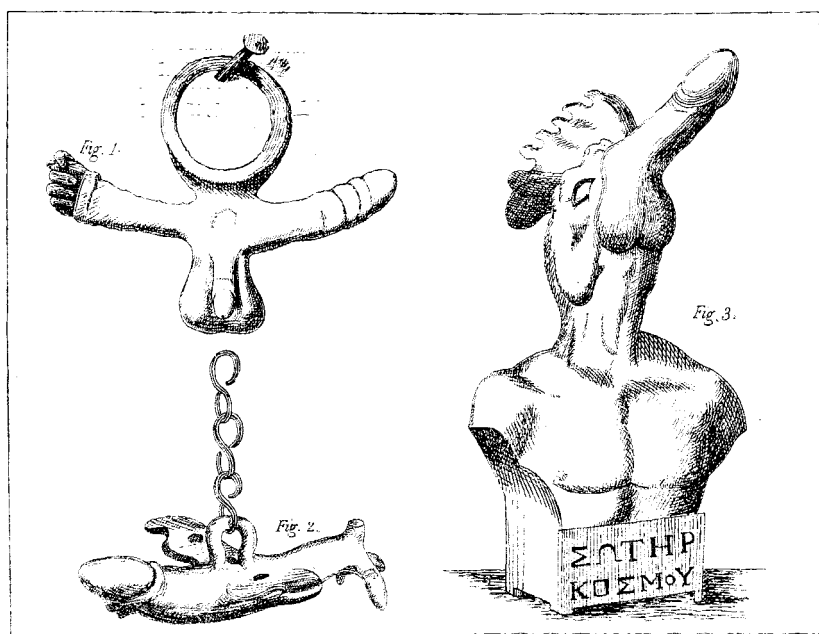


Plate 2. Plate II from Richard Payne Knight's *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*. See note 18 of this chapter for Knight's defence of the figure on the right against T. J. Mathias's attacks on his inclusion of such 'representations of the generative organs, in their most odious and degrading protrusion'.

describing the 'devotions' of the 'pious matrons' and promiscuous 'saints' of the Priapic cults, and given the inclusion of plates reproducing ancient depictions of fellatio, cunnilingus, bestiality and numerous other phallic and vaginal images, *The Worship of Priapus* is a seriously meant attempt to correlate a mass of mythological and religious evidence into a coherent, albeit antichristian, argument.¹⁸ Though cries of obscenity soon led Knight to withdraw it from circulation, there is little evidence that he ever distanced himself far from its views since in 1818 he reproduced and expanded on them in the more decorously presented *An Inquiry into the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology*.

His next major work, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem* (1794), which sets out the theory of Picturesque landscape gardening as against the wealth-displaying 'bald' style of Capability Brown, may seem a far cry from the religious controversies of *Priapus*. But a discussion of the

decline of art and knowledge from classical times lays the blame not on the Huns and Vandals, who were simply uninterested in beautiful artefacts, but on the Christian church from the moment it was empowered by Constantine:

But gloomy Bigotry, with prying eye,
Saw lurking fiends in every figure lie,
And damnèd heresy's prolific root
Grow strong in learning, and from science shoot;
Whence fired with vengeance and fierce zeal, it rose
To quench all lights that dared its own oppose.

(*The Landscape*, II, 428–433)¹⁹

On a more political front, the poem ends with a lengthy comparison of revolutionary France to a stagnant pond at last freed to cascade downhill: while at first much damage will be inevitable, it will end up fertilizing the surrounding ground: 'Yet, from these horrors, future times may see / Just order spring, and genuine liberty' (III, 415–16).

Despite a lengthy footnote deploring the progress of the revolution so far, opponents such as Brown's successor Humphrey Repton pounced on this apparent linkage between Picturesque theory and revolution. Knight's insistence in the second edition that Repton and his like should not 'endeavour to find analogies between picturesque composition and political confusion' (p.104) was, as Alan Liu has pointed out, disingenuous.²⁰

Knight's next major work was *The Progress of Civil Society* (1796), to which I shall return in a moment. The last one I wish to consider here is his prose study of aesthetics, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1806). Here Knight broadly steers clear of political, religious and sexual controversy, but makes numerous pointed side-swipes at that great rallier of conservative opposition to the French Revolution, Edmund Burke. Suavely, Knight argues that from *Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) on, Burke's basing of all our finer feelings in animal instinct 'leads directly to materialism, from which no man was ever more averse'.²¹ In the same anti-instinctualist vein, Knight also attacks women novelists of 'religious sensibility', whose heroines routinely overthrow 'fictitious disciples of Hume, Gibbon and the French academy' with no real grasp of the issues involved (*Principles of Taste*, p. 453). Despite his preference for active culture over passive nature, however, Knight's own chief aesthetic principle is a synthesis of the two: the spectator's natural identification with signs of active 'energy' in the aesthetic

object. Tracking Burke into the bowels of our dangerous enjoyment of tragedy, Knight argues that in every horrific instance our identification is not with the passive fear of the sufferers but with the energy they display against fate – something equally visible in the lacerated trees of the prime Picturesque artist Salvator Rosa which, far from passively soliciting our pity, display both their own power and that of the winds they have resisted (p. 371).

Arguably, this aesthetic of energy is the guiding principle of most of Knight's work. In *The Worship of Priapus* creative energy is, in various forms, the motive force of all effective religions as well as – clearly – of life itself. In *The Landscape* the principle of energy determines what ought to 'strike' the viewer from one moment to another rather than in a single governing view, and provides a climactically dynamic image for social change. In *The Progress of Civil Society* the sublimation or channelling of excess human energy, for constructive or destructive ends, is quite simply the motor of history.

Beginning with complete scepticism as to the beginnings of life – whether caused by 'the wild war of elemental strife' or the command of 'one great all-pervading soul' – the *Progress* goes on to describe pleasure and pain as the source of all emotions, including 'Almighty Love' which, in the case of man, ultimately 'builds the state'. Bonded together in hunting communities, even quests for selfish pleasures are channelled towards the common good in the form of competition: 'Passions that stimulate, and yet control; / Divide the parts, and yet connect the whole'.²² With the invention of language, civil institutions are born and man abandons the dangers of nomadism for settlement, embracing 'the soft and tranquil prejudice' towards a single spot (I, 408).

In an acknowledged close imitation of parts of Lucretius' fifth book, Book II explains how at this stage man invents religion, to assign a first cause to nature, albeit 'with faint belief' (153), but also to explain and if possible avert such hostile forces as storms. Eventually some men dreamed of gods and tried to depict them, and these depictions became objects of worship. While religion is a 'gentle delusion', it is also the 'Soul of ideal joy! without whose aid, / Life were no better than an empty shade' (II, 211, 233–4). This pleasant opium-of-the-people stage did not last, however: 'the pure rays of faith's ambiguous light' were taken over by the 'ambitious fraud and greedy pride' of priests, who became the first kings (260, 263). Threatening the people with divine wrath if disobeyed,

claiming to foresee victories and blaming failures on the sins of others, they introduced deception, tyranny, slavery and systematic war, but also brought a higher level of control to personal behaviour.

The greater leisure brought by the development of farming and metal tools again left a space to be filled – this time with the idealization of love. In primitive times this was all the more fervent because not tramelled by rigid marriage laws: a state to which we should return by allowing divorce by consent. This pastoral age of ‘Love and Fancy’ led to the birth of ‘Sweet Poetry’, and it was as the poetic creations of bards like Homer that anthropomorphic gods were invented: ‘Thus, as the muse-inspired poet sang, / Each abstract cause to form substantial sprang’ (III, 305–6). Without such gods to embody ‘each abstract thought’, contemporary poets like Knight himself are confined to strewing ‘flowers refresh’d in Heliconian dew’ over ‘Dry fact and solid argument’ better suited to prose (481).

The development of technology enabled sea travel, trade, and class distinction: ‘So still, where arts the social system cheer, / Discriminated ranks of social life appear’ (IV, 227–8). With class came money, ‘One moral centre, in whose orb unite / The regulated springs of wrong and right’, but also a potentially corrupting force, the only escape from which is the Horatian ‘middle state’ so often acclaimed by eighteenth-century bigwigs nodding at their bourgeois roots (Knight’s fortune was built on his grandfather’s iron foundries) (IV, 267–9). The supreme ancient examples of this middle state were the Greeks, whose superiority to the class-ridden Medes, Persians and Egyptians was expressed in both their artistic superiority and their religious tolerance: ‘O, ever free let faith and fiction stand!’ (IV, 450). Book IV ends with a rousing plea that religion stay ‘loose and undefined’ as a way of leading ‘wild imagination’ forward rather than being subject to the ‘civic exclusion’ of doubt (456, 476, 500).

Though human life started in Africa, man’s full powers only emerged in harsher climates: witness (once again) the Greeks, driven to develop commerce and thence political freedom by their rocky, infertile terrain. Similarly, the quest of northern races for a place in the sun has led them to conquer most of the globe, from the Scythians and Goths of the ancient world to the British of today. In the past imperial conquest led to decadence at the centre, so that real power devolved on local military leaders, from the satraps of ancient Persia to the medieval barons. The romances favoured by

the latter are a mark of their cultural degradation: 'fables, that a monk's belief defied, / The place of fiction's natural grace supplied' (VI, 183-4). In fact, the feudal defiance of nature could not last, and at the Renaissance the reassertion of central government was accompanied by the rediscovery of natural, that is to say classical, laws of art and reasoning. This enlightenment in turn has eroded the arbitrary use of centralized power, and even where despotism still persists, such past barbarities as the burning of heretics have been gradually disappearing. Until the French Revolution, that is. As if to correct the semi-sympathetic impression given at the end of *The Landscape*, Knight launches into an all-out denunciation of Robespierre and the Terror, under which 'rapes and murders grow the rights of man' (VI, 428). In attempting to give the causes of this return to barbarism, however, he reverts to the earlier poem's naturalizing metaphor of a flood of released water, unstoppable after the initial impetus has been given: 'So, urged by want, or loosen'd from control, / The rabble's growing numbers onward roll' (413-14).

With much help from Lucretius, then, Knight presents in *The Progress of Civil Society* a highly Whig version of history, in which what is in some ways a fall from primal innocence into superstition, warfare and class division has its compensations in the right use of money by those in the middle state, and in the conquest of barbarous nations by those who have emerged from their state of feudal ignorance into one more enlightened. If the loss of a certain poetic inspiration is the price we must pay for this enlightenment, it is worth it to have escaped from the horrors of religion.

At the centre of an influential circle of scientists and industrialists who championed free social and cultural inquiry, Erasmus Darwin was the author of *Zoonomia* (1794-6), a weighty prose treatise on animal and human biology and psychology, and *Phytologia* (1800), another on plant biology and crop growing. He also poured the results of his and his friends' investigations of a dizzying range of issues into his three major poems – *The Loves of the Plants*, *The Economy of Vegetation* and *The Temple of Nature*. Consistently hostile to religious 'superstition' as an ally of political reaction, these poems also articulate – from the deliberately haphazard *Loves* to the relentlessly sequential *Temple* – an increasingly organized assault on the biblical account of creation, firstly by allying it with other 'myths' derived ultimately from Egypt, and secondly by displacing it with a wholly

materialist account of the birth of the universe from a primal explosion, and the evolution of man from a primitive 'filament' through a series of environmental adaptations.

The Loves of the Plants (1789) is an extended botany lesson, taking the reader through Linnaeus' categorization of plants according to their reproductive mechanisms. Starting with sexual systems comparable to human monogamy, Darwin moves on to ever more complex and/or deviant 'loves', thus cunningly insinuating a libertine motif into a work whose other main source of entertainment is the far-fetchedness of the 'analogies' between various plants and the legendary or invented human characters chosen to represent them. Though acclaimed by an enthusiastic readership, including the pious William Cowper, the poem's lightly inconsequential structure does contain one or two potentially subversive moments. One of these emerges significantly from a celebration of the birth of literacy through the first use of papyrus, hailed as 'a present God!' by the Egyptians, with the poem's apparent approval: as the means of transmitting cultural and scientific knowledge between generations, paper has released us from 'perpetual infancy' (II, 137; II, 105n).²³ With an apparent change of subject, a group of time-sensitive flowers collectively known by Linnaeus as 'the watch of Flora' leads us to a description of the mechanics of an actual clock and thence to a personification of time as a massive force for political and cultural progress:

– Here *Time*'s huge fingers grasp his giant-mace,
And dash proud Superstition from her base,
Rend her strong towers and gorgeous fanes, and shed
The crumbling fragments round her guilty head. (II, 183–6)

By a common Enlightenment ambiguity, the 'Superstition' to be attacked for its overweening power and abused wealth might either be read as a safely distant Catholic Church, or as established religion more generally. Whichever is the case, its destruction by Time is inevitable: while 'the fair growths of Science and of Taste' are planted like flowers in individual 'light Moments', at some point all those moments will combine into an unstoppable force (II, 190–1). The passage thus suggests a possible subversive intention for the structure of the poem as a whole, in which a 'light' drip-feed of information about flowers and other matters may gradually undermine old beliefs until the moment arrives to reveal its real goal of

forwarding the victory of Enlightenment science over oppressive and monarchical religion.

Another jab at superstition occurs in the story of St Anthony of Padua preaching to and converting shoals of fish because humans refuse to listen to him. In a parody of contemporary mass conversions like those of Methodism,

The listening shoals the quick contagion feel,
Pant on the floods, inebriate with their zeal,
Ope wide their jaws, and bow their slimy heads,
And dash with frantic fins their foamy beds. (II, 263–6)

At the very end of the poem, the multiple stamens and pistils of the Adonis plant are compared to the inhabitants of Otaheite (Tahiti) who, as a note puts it, ‘form one promiscuous marriage’ (IV, 160n):

Thus where pleas’d VENUS, in the southern main,
Sheds all her smiles on Otaheite’s plain,
Wide o’er the isle her silken net she draws,
And the Loves laugh at all but Nature’s laws. (IV, 487–90)

The ‘all’ that laughter includes is not spelled out, but can certainly be taken to involve the Christian expectation of monogamy: as with Lucretius, the only ‘laws’ which ultimately rule us are those of Nature, as represented by Venus.

Though written later than *The Loves of the Plants*, *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) was published as an introduction to it in the composite *The Botanic Garden*, but the two poems are best considered entirely separately. Despite its title, *The Economy* takes on the whole physical universe and contains far more radical material. In its framing conceit, the ‘Genius of the Place’ summons the Goddess of Botany to instruct a select band of sensitive readers, which she does by addressing the four elements in turn under the guise of fiery Salamanders, earthy Gnomes, watery Nymphs and airy Sylphs, in a borrowing from the ‘Rosicrucian’ machinery of Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*.²⁴ From within this fanciful framework, the poem acclaims the Industrial as well as the American and French Revolutions, postulating a single unstoppable progress from the primary explosion by which ‘Love Divine’ created the universe to the achievements of such political and scientific heroes as Priestley, Benjamin Franklin, Wedgwood, Watt and Boulton. Thus in Canto I, on fire, we move from the explosion of a ‘million suns’ with their orbiting ‘Earths’ to Watt’s steam engine and Franklin’s Prometheus-like theft of fire from

heaven in his lightning experiments. As with the solar energy of Knight's *Priapus*, heat is proclaimed as the principle of life, as shown by the 'soft combustion' of breathing and the reviving powers of spring and dawn: all of which are represented by the myth of Divine Love hatching from the egg of night and lighting 'with torch divine the ever-living flame' (I, 420).

In a similar myth-explaining vein, Canto II compares the formation of the Earth as a separate planet, and the emergence of the first land from the water which first covered it, to the myth of the sea-birth of Venus. The theme of earth also takes us via Wedgwood's pottery – including the 'Portland Vase', which I shall discuss later – to the antislavery campaign he supported, and thence to the Revolution's liberation of the Gulliver-like sleeping giant of France from 'the weak hands of Confessors and Kings' (II, 380). This leads to a denunciation of the similar role of religion in the Spanish conquest of Mexico: 'When avarice, shrouded in religion's robe, / Sail'd to the west, and slaughtered half the globe' (II, 415–16). Cantos III and IV deal with water and air in similar terms, increasingly foregrounding one of Darwin's most persistent claims, that the Greek myths were based on misunderstandings of Egyptian depictions of physical processes whose accuracy is only now being rediscovered: 'From these fables, which were frequently taken from ancient hieroglyphics, there is frequently reason to believe that the Egyptians possessed much chemical knowledge, which for want of alphabetical writing perished with their philosophers' (IV, 178n). Examples of this are the myth of Adonis, which is 'a story explaining some hieroglyphic figures representing the decomposition and resuscitation of animal matter' (II, 586n); and the rape of the flower-gathering Proserpine by the subterranean Pluto, signifying the oxidizing of iron as demonstrated by Priestley (IV, 166n, 178n).

Towards the end there is a strong echo of Lucretius' assertion that the world will eventually disintegrate: from the astronomer Herschel's observation that the galaxies are drifting towards each other, like 'flowers of the sky' or airborne seeds, it is clear that they will some day 'Headlong, extinct, to one dark centre fall, / And Death and Night and Chaos mingle all!' (IV, 375–6). Fortunately, however, the conditions will then exist for a new big bang and hence an endless cycle of 'destruction and resuscitation of all things', of which the 'ancient hieroglyphic emblem' is the phoenix (IV, 377n):

– Till o'er the wreck, emerging from the storm,
 Immortal NATURE lifts her changeful form,
 Mounts from her funeral pyre on wings of flame,
 And soars and shines, another and the same. (IV, 377–80)

The Temple of Nature was published in 1803, a year after Darwin's death, by which time his reputation had been more or less destroyed by attacks which I shall consider at the end of this chapter. Not only were his views branded as dangerously 'Jacobin' and infidel, but his sub-Popean poetic diction and 'jingling' couplets were increasingly criticized by a new generation of 'plain-speaking' poets, some of whom had nonetheless borrowed extensively from him in ways to be considered later. In particular, the highly elaborate setting for the opening of *The Temple* may well have influenced a still younger generation of poets, including Shelley and Keats.

In overall structure as well as in many points of detail, *The Temple of Nature* is overwhelmingly Lucretian. Its original title, *The Origin of Society* and its four canto titles – 'Production of Life', 'Reproduction of Life', 'Progress of the Mind' and 'Of Good and Evil' – indicate its sweep through the nature of the universe from the formation of the earth and its species to the emergence of moral and religious ideas and their effect on our current psychological ills. The belatedly chosen final title is also Lucretian, highlighting the central image of the poem's frame narrative whereby Nature is personified as a goddess, who is intertwined from the start with the idea of Love as the Venus-like force holding the universe together:

IMMORTAL LOVE! who ere the morn of Time,
 On wings outstretch'd, o'er Chaos hung sublime
 Warm'd into life the bursting egg of Night,
 And gave young Nature to admiring Light!
 YOU! whose wide arms, in soft embraces hurl'd
 Round the vast frame, connect the whirling world! (I, 15–20)²⁵

As Lucretius requests Venus' 'partnership' in writing his poem, Darwin asks that Love 'with rosy lips rehearse, / And with your polish'd arrows write my verse!' (I, 27–8). With the ground thus prepared, we plunge into an apparently straightforward rendition of the story of Adam and Eve which, however, ends strangely cheerfully with an Adam who 'Spread his wide arms, and barter'd life for love!', in an echo, we may note, of the 'wide arms' of Immortal Love herself (I, 46). Throughout the poem, the Eden myth of the Fall is constantly scrutinized in the light of the truths of Nature, as

revealed by her 'hierophant' or priestess Urania – the 'heavenly muse' of Milton's *Paradise Lost* who is also the classical muse of astronomy.

Thus, in a very surreal transition, the reader is led from the blighted landscape of Nature as described in Milton's account of the Fall through the 'opening wall' of a rock to where 'high in air, unconscious of a storm, / Thy temple, NATURE, rears its mystic form' (I, 65–6): a direct echo of Lucretius' home of the gods 'never shaken by storms'.²⁶ In the centre of this fantastically described edifice stands 'majestic NATURE' herself, with her hundred hands and unnumbered breasts, though as yet veiled from head to foot (I, 129–36). Entreated by the poet to withdraw 'the mystic veil' and 'give the Goddess to adoring day', Nature's priestess Urania begins the narrative of the main body of the poem by asserting: 'GOD THE FIRST CAUSE! – in this terrene abode / Young Nature lisps, she is the child of GOD' (I, 168–70; 223–4). Though this sounds orthodox enough, Darwin's stress on *young* Nature derives directly from Lucretius: 'this world is newly made . . . That is why even now some arts are being perfected: the process of development is still going on.'²⁷ While no adherent of the claim of such materialists as d'Holbach that the world has existed forever, Darwin firmly banishes God to the role of 'first cause' only: 'there is more dignity in our idea of the supreme author of all things, when we conceive him to be the cause of causes, than the cause simply of the events, which we see'.²⁸ Later in the poem, Darwin criticizes ancient philosophers such as Lucretius, 'who contended that the world was formed from atoms', for 'leading the mind to atheism' by attributing too much to 'blind chance' rather than the universal laws of causality (IV, 150n). Nonetheless, 'the events, which we see' are for Darwin all completely explicable in terms of a single process beginning when, 'from flaming Chaos hurl'd / Rose the bright spheres, which form the circling world' (I, 227–8).

For Lucretius too, the universe begins with 'nothing but a hurricane raging, a newly congregated mass of atoms of every sort', until the earth separates itself out and then expels the sun and moon leaving a gap which is filled by sea. After this,

First, the various breeds of winged birds were hatched out of eggs in the spring season . . . Then it was that the earth brought forth the first mammals. There was a great superfluity of heat and moisture in the soil. So, wherever a suitable spot occurred, there grew up wombs, clinging to

the earth by roots. These, when the time was ripe, were burst open by the maturation of the embryos. (*Nature of the Universe*, p. 149)

For Darwin, an essentially similar process happened more gradually: recent studies of microscopic organisms by scientists such as Buffon and Priestley have proved that such 'spontaneous vitality' depends on the presence of water. Hence, in an extraordinary prevision of his grandson Charles Darwin's evolutionism, 'ORGANIC LIFE beneath the shoreless waves / Was born and nursed in Ocean's pearly caves'. It then gradually developed into more complex organisms, so that eventually 'Imperious man, who . . . / . . . styles himself the image of his God; / Arose from rudiments of form and sense, / An embryo point, or microscopic ens!' (I, 295–300, 309–14).

Though Darwin dismisses Ovid's fanciful description of animals emerging full-grown from the Nile mud, he concedes that it could be based on a speeded up allegory of ancient Egyptian knowledge of the real nature of evolution (I, 417n). There are numerous further comparisons of physical processes with mythology in the rest of the poem, as when Lucretius' apostrophe to Venus is cited as describing the constant replenishment of species by sex (II, 261–2n). For the rest of this discussion, however, I shall focus on Darwin's periodic revisitings of the Adam and Eve myth, so rudely abandoned at the start of the poem. Lines II, 135–58 describe the birth of Eve from Adam's rib in sub-Miltonic tones, but an additional note to II, 140 (X, p. 42) derides even the idea that it is a 'sacred allegory, designed to teach obedience', since talking serpents and the separation of life from knowledge are clearly absurd. Clearly, then, the story is an Egyptian allegory borrowed by Moses, like all the rest of his beliefs, and indicating man's evolution from an originally hermaphroditic state. A little later, as Urania takes a rest from her narrative, Darwin's Muse is served a distinctly unorthodox picnic:

Next, where emerging from its ancient roots
Its widening boughs the Tree of Knowledge shoots;
Pluck'd with nice choice before the Muse they placed
The now no longer interdicted taste. (II, 439–42)

Later still, the myth of the tree seems to be taken more seriously: 'our deluded Parents pluck'd, erelong, / The tempting fruit, and gather'd Right and Wrong' (III, 455–6). We are then told, however, that their sense of guilt really arose from 'blood by Hunger spilt' (459), suggesting a dawning of human horror at the necessity of

hunting animals, or being driven by hunger to fight each other, which signalled both the first awareness of evil and the first stirring of sympathy for others on which higher social forms are based. This idea of sympathy leads later to an unironical comment on the aspect of Christianity most deists accepted: 'the sacred maxims of the author of Christianity, "Do as you would be done by", and "Love your neighbour as yourself", include all our duties of benevolence and morality; and, if sincerely obeyed by all nations, would a thousand-fold multiply the present happiness of mankind' (III, 485n).

The theme of sympathy and its absence also leads, however, to gloomy reflections on 'the curst spells of Superstition' which fix 'fetters on the tortured mind' and throw 'o'er the grave a deeper shadow' in the shape of fear of damnation (IV, 83-8). A footnote to IV, 87 lambasts 'Many theatric preachers among the Methodists [who] successfully inculcate the fear of death and Hell, and live luxuriously on the folly of their hearers', whose reason has been disabled by 'intellectual cowardice'. Casting about for evidence of more active goodness, the poem draws attention to John Howard's prison reforms and Richard Arkwright's harnessing of steam to 'clothe the world'. In the context of the current wartime muzzling of radical and freethinking ideas by new laws such as the Two Acts of 1795, however, the most important invention of all is 'the immortal Press!', identified firmly with the much-threatened 'tree of knowledge' first encountered at the very start of the poem: 'Oh save, oh save, in this eventful hour / The tree of knowledge from the axe of power' (IV, 283-4).

As Urania's song ends, it is taken up by 'Angel-tongues' and invisible harps, and then, in silence, she ascends Nature's altar, bows to her and, drawing aside her 'mystic veil' at last, 'Lifts her ecstatic eyes to TRUTH DIVINE!' (IV, 524). Whether this Truth is something glimpsed on drawing aside Nature in the form of a veil, or whether the veil is our ignorance that the only Truth *is* Nature, is left carefully ambiguous.

I hope I have shown that Jones, Knight and Darwin share the sense that the figures of mythology have to be interpreted relativistically and symbolically. If Lucretius' Venus provides one model for this, another is his more critically presented description of the earth mother Cybele. In great myth-deconstructive detail, Lucretius gives specific reasons for all the attributes attending the earth's personifi-

cation as a goddess: her lion-drawn chariot signifies that 'earth cannot rest on earth'; her battlemented crown that 'she bears the weight of cities'; her Phrygian music that 'crops were first created' in Phrygia; her attendant eunuchs that the ungrateful are 'unworthy to bring forth living children'; her weapons 'to chasten the . . . rabble with dread' or to remind them 'to defend their native earth staunchly'; and so forth. But all this is only a build-up to the final anti-religious rebuke that 'If anyone elects to call the sea Neptune and the crops Ceres and would rather take Bacchus' name in vain than denote grape juice by its proper title, we may allow him to refer to the earth as the Mother of the Gods, provided that he genuinely refrains from polluting his mind with the foul taint of superstition' (*The Nature of the Universe*, pp. 53-4).

In showing their grasp of this essential fact about religious myth, the three writers I have been considering declare their membership of an élite of initiates, whose insights into the purely provisional nature of religious imagery give them a resemblance to those Brahmins, priest-kings and hieroglyphists their work often discusses. Before concluding this chapter, I shall glance briefly at their presentation of such initiate groups, and at some of the ways in which their own work enacts the idea of such initiation.

For Jones, the existence of such an élite in the Brahmin caste has a particular excitement since it was through his learning of their scholarly Sanskrit and his assiduous wearing-down of their resistance to revealing sacred secrets, that he became in his own eyes an honorary member of 'the Brahmans, who consider me as a Pandit'.²⁹ In the Hymns, the role of the Brahmin priesthood in masking their real knowledge with polytheistic imagery is exemplified in the 'Hymn to Surya', Surya being the 'Indian Phoebus', who represents the sun. In the Argument, Jones suggests that since most polytheistic religions are based on sun worship, the supreme 'triple divinity' of Brehma, Vishnu and Siva too may well express the sun's creative heat, preserving light and destructive fire. He argues that this shift of veneration to a physical source from the true primitive religion, which attributed such powers to an 'eternal MIND' and is still discernible in the 'sublime theology' of the Brahmins, probably arose during the struggle to establish 'regal government'. In the poem itself the poet, coming as he does from an island with a gentler sun, reflects that, though 'obstructed' and 'obscured' the 'Sanscrit song's' worship of the sun acknowledges

that its 'all-enlightening ray' reminds us of its 'more glorious' creator.³⁰

In a fuller exploration of the Brahmins' 'sublime theology', the 'Hymn to Narayena', the idea that the imagery of nature constitutes a 'veil' for more metaphysical truths becomes even more central. Here the final veil of the first cause is impenetrable, at least from the vantage point of the physical world which is itself a veil of illusion, or Maya. Even for the active creator god Brehma, his own origin in the mind of the inactive first cause Brehme is veiled: 'BREHMA! No more in vain research persist: / My veil thou canst not move – Go; bid all worlds exist'.³¹ However, the Hymn reaches its climax as the final veil of Maya, or naturalistic illusion, is pulled aside to reveal to the brahmanic poet a single creative force: 'GOD only I perceive; GOD only I adore'.³² In the hymn's Argument, Jones suggests that this 'sublime' view of creation as 'rather an *energy*, than a *work*' has Egyptian, Persian, Orphic and Platonic analogues, and presents it as the common property of the 'wisest' ancients and 'most enlightened among the moderns'.³³

For Darwin and Knight, the Egyptian and Orphic mysteries do indeed fulfil the elite function gestured at by Jones, though for them the fundamental creative force is better described in terms of the laws of material energy than as God. For Knight, the true nature of the universal phallic sun worship was particularly the secret of the Greek Orphic cult, as revealed in surviving fragments of the Orphic Hymns. Knight is, however, more straightforwardly critical than Jones or Darwin of élites who understand but conceal the 'real' meanings behind popular mythology. As we move further from the frankly celebratory ur-religion, priestly castes have deliberately encouraged its misreading for purposes of political power.³⁴ In terms of Knight's own career, this gaff-blowing stance is somewhat ironic since *The Worship of Priapus* could only have been published as a limited edition under the auspices of the exclusive Society of Dilettanti. If the Society could be seen as representing a kind of atheist clerisy, their exclusivity was crucial to this project although, even thus protected, Knight was forced by the general outcry it raised to withdraw his essay from circulation.

While also broadly anticlerical, Darwin sees less to protest about in simple misreadings of myths which enlightened science is now in a position to explain. He too, of course, belonged to an élite – the freethinking Lunar Society – but simply assumes their knowledge

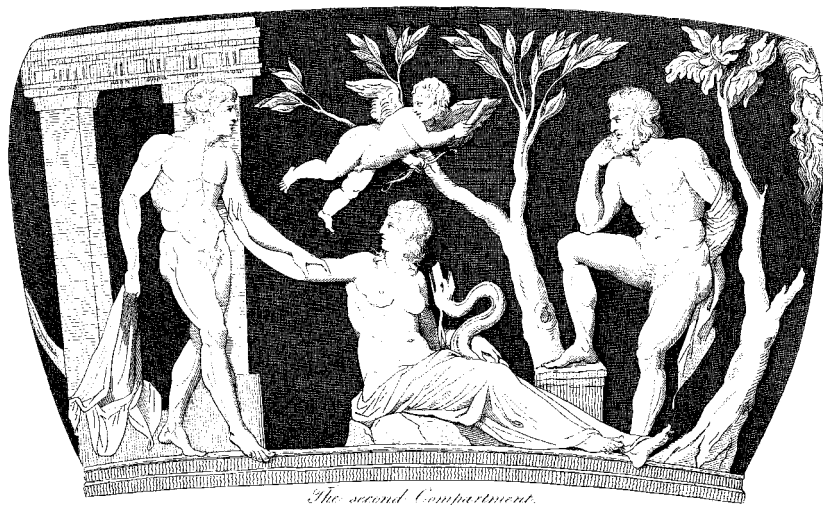


Plate 3. The 'second compartment' of the Portland Vase, from Erasmus Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation* (Additional Note XXII, to II, 321; p. 54). Probably engraved by William Blake, this scene is read by Darwin as depicting the entry of the soul into the underworld, as elucidated in the Eleusinian mysteries. 'There the pale GHOST through Death's wide portal bends / His timid feet, the dusky steep descends; / . . . / IMMORTAL LIFE, her hand extending, courts / The lingering form, his tottering step supports' (II, 327–32).

must be broadcast as widely as possible. As we have seen, he repeatedly stresses how in the ancient world the wisdom of one élite, the Egyptian magi, was inscribed in hieroglyphic images and then partially lost with their subsequent misreading as mythic narratives. An important part of the old wisdom was, however, preserved in the Greek Eleusinian mysteries, derived by tradition from Egypt and celebrating in symbolic form the immortality of life thanks to the indestructibility of organic matter (*Temple*, I, 137n). Excluding the 'profane' masses, the Eleusinian rituals took selected 'initiates' through a form of mock-death to a view of resurrection, which Darwin pins firmly to the idea that the matter of the body cannot be destroyed but only change form. His fullest account of this view appears in his decoding of the designs on the Portland Vase, whose 'first compartment' he sees as mourning the universal fact of mortality.³⁵ In the second compartment, by contrast, the human soul is seen guided into Hades by Cupid or Love, and welcomed by a seated woman caressing a serpent which symbolizes immortal life. In

one of his few hints at a possible Indian origin of the Egyptian/ Eleusinian secrets, he goes on to suggest that a cowed figure with finger at lips at the bottom of the vase may be the hermaphrodite Atis, by whom the mysteries were first 'brought from India' (p. 59); alternatively it is a 'priestess or hierophant', warning initiates to keep silent about 'the secrets of the temple'. The same imagery reappears more ambitiously as the frame narrative of *The Temple of Nature*, whose materialist message is presented in terms of the hierophant Urania's unveiling of Nature before an altar from which 'famed Eleusis stole / Her secret symbols and her mystic scroll' (I, 137-8). Any sense that Darwin wishes to preserve such secrecy is dispelled by a note to I, 137 concluding, 'Might not such a dignified pantomime be contrived, even in this age, as might strike spectators with awe, and at the same time explain many philosophical truths by adapted imagery, and thus both amuse and instruct?'

The desire expressed here to relate the specialized knowledge of the initiate to a wider audience through public artistic expression is the next issue I shall briefly consider. How, in particular, does poetry enable the élite to communicate with the people? For Knight, the idea of energy which links *Priapus* with his aesthetic theory of the Picturesque can also be applied to poetry, which for him predated the whole realm of visual art in the aesthetic 'big bang' whose name was Homer:

From the dark gloom of undiscover'd night
Thy genius pour'd the electric stream of light,
And wheresoe'er it beam'd with quickening ray,
Roused dormant taste, and bade the soul obey;

(*Landscape*, II, 384-7)

As repeatedly in writing of the time, the image of 'electricity' combines natural energy and social progress in a single composite. Also like many other writers of the time (such as Peacock in *The Four Ages of Poetry*, 1820), however, Knight believes that by a sad paradox of the Enlightenment, contemporary poetry has inevitably lost its inspiring function with the decline of superstition, and can now only embellish truths more accurately conveyed in prose: 'Truth now is all the Muses have to boast, / Since Fancy mourns her airy visions lost' (*Landscape*, III, 427-8). Thus, though poetry once created religious imagery as an embodiment of real knowledge ('Each abstract cause to form substantial sprang', *Civil Society*, III, 306), its only function now is to convey such knowledge directly.

For Jones, instructive 'Truth' is one of poetry's main aims, as it is for Knight; but what they both call 'Fancy' has a much more energized function than Knight believes to be now possible. In the Hymn 'To Sereswaty', Jones presents the Hindu goddess of poetry and music as presiding over 'Eloquence', which 'like full GANGA, pours her streams divine, / Alarming states and thrones: / To fix the flying sense / Of words, thy daughters, by the varied line'. Both 'Science' and 'playful Fancy' have assisted in giving 'primeval Truth / Th'unfading bloom of youth'.³⁶ The point about varied lines clearly relates to Jones's ceaseless metrical experimentation in the Hymns, often carefully explicated in terms of their parallelism with the Indian forms being imitated. More broadly, the comparison with the Ganges, and the ideas of a 'flying sense', 'playful Fancy' and youthful bloom, all evoke the idea of a life-force whose energies – as with Knight's 'electric' Homer – are also allied to social progress in the still-republican Jones's goal of 'Alarming states and thrones'.

In the Advertisement to *The Botanic Garden*, Darwin suggests a similar subordination of contemporary poetic fancy to prose truth to that assumed by Knight. The poem aims only 'to inlist Imagination under the banner of Science, and to lead her votaries from the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocination of philosophy' (p. v). In the ensuing 'Apology', however, Darwin suggests a far more active scientific role for such imaginative analogies:

Extravagant theories however in those parts of philosophy, where our knowledge is yet imperfect, are not without their use; as they encourage the execution of laborious experiments, or the investigation of ingenious deductions, to confirm or refute them. And since natural objects are allied to each other by many affinities, every kind of theoretic distribution of them adds to our knowledge by developing some of their analogies. (p. vii)

In a universe so full of connections, *any* attempt to explore these will add ultimately to our knowledge, even those which may seem to be merely metaphorical 'analogies' – a manifesto well borne out in the bustling, often hectic, structures of Darwin's three poems, with their endless repetitions of such copulatives as the 'So' of metaphoric parallelism as well as the 'Hence' of metonymic causal sequence. Within this world-view and aesthetic, there is no ultimate use for mysteries or veils except as temporary, sometimes titillating, adornments: hence from numerous images of wind-ravished flowers and

god-ravished nymphs, their gowns eternally awry, the poems move in a natural progression to the climax of *The Temple of Nature*, in which our guide Urania approaches Nature's altar and removes the final 'mystic veil' from 'TRUTH DIVINE!' (IV, 522-4). The way to this altar is, however, through a restlessly 'extravagant' combination of logical deductions and wildly metaphorical hypotheses.

While their theories may vary, the practice of all three assumes that poetry has a vital function in articulating or even constructing the other realms – political, aesthetic and scientific – in which they were so actively engaged. From here to Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' is only a very short step – with perhaps the main difference being simply that in their respective spheres Jones, Knight and Darwin were already acknowledged legislators too.

Before turning to their critical reception, one more aspect of these writers' élite sense of being absolved from ordinary beliefs is worth touching on. Their common interest in the primary energy represented by the Lucretian Venus raises the question of their attitudes to sexual morality, and more specifically to monogamous marriage. In 1780 the issue had been made particularly topical with the publication of *Thelyphthora*, an advocacy of polygamy as a way to reduce prostitution, by the serious-minded Methodist, Martin Madan. Attacked by Madan's cousin William Cowper in a Spenserian spoof ('Anti-Thelyphthora', 1781) in which the damsels thus threatened are rescued by 'Sir Marmadan', *Thelyphthora* has also been suggested as a source for William Blake's elusive but basically pro free-love *Book of Thel*.³⁷ Another source for 'Thel', with its celebration of love as a natural process uniting plants, animals, the elements and ideally humans, is very arguably the Erasmus Darwin of *The Loves of the Plants*. There, we progress steadily from the monogamous Indian Cane, with its single male and single female organ, to the approving comparison of the promiscuous Adonis to the mass mating ceremonies of Tahiti, while 'the Loves laugh at all, but Nature's laws' (IV, 406). If the poem does have any relation to the polygamy debate, Darwin seems to be suggesting that many different sexual arrangements may be equally natural – a point borne out in his own life by his open acknowledgement of his two daughters born out of wedlock, to whom he addressed his influential *Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797).

Of the three writers, Knight adopts the most straightforwardly libertine tone towards marriage. While the sordid pleasures of the

brothel or harem are false and to be avoided, the true pleasures of love are only imperfectly expressed in marriage:

For fix'd by laws, and limited by rules,
Affection stagnates and love's fervour cools;
Shrinks like the gather'd flower, which, when possess'd,
Droops in the hand, or withers on the breast.

(*Progress of Civil Society*, III, 150–3)

In earlier societies, where marriages were dissoluble at the wish of either party, 'vows, because they bent, were seldom broke' (172). Knight's plea for looser divorce laws is deliciously parodied by the *Anti-Jacobin* (1797–8, to be discussed more fully below), in the complaint that while changes of partner are permitted in whist,

Yet must *one* man, with one *unceasing* wife,
Play the long rubber of connubial life.³⁸

It may seem more surprising that Jones – himself impeccably monogamous – seems at times to express a similar tone of detachment to the other two about monogamy as an ideal. In his comic Indian verse-tale 'The Enchanted Fruit; or, The Hindu Wife' (1784), he anticipates Darwin by using Linnaeus' account of plant reproduction to point out the variety of sexual combinations available to plants and hence, by implication, to humans. In the tale, the adored wife of five superheroes is forced after much build-up to confess to the minor peccadillo of allowing a Brahmin to kiss her cheek: altered from a somewhat more graphic original, the poem plays lightly round the idea of normal marital jealousies and passions coexisting with an accepted polyandry:

Thus Botanists, with eyes acute
To see prolifick dust minute,
Taught by their learned northern *Brahmen*
To class by *pistil* and by *stamen*,
Produce from nature's rich dominion
Flow'rs *Polyandrian Monogynian*.³⁹

A note identifies the 'northern Brahmen' as Linnaeus, and the last phrase means 'many males to one female'. At the end, in apparent acknowledgement of the British polygamy debate, and perhaps specifically of Cowper's 'Anti-Thelyphthora', Jones has a grimly personified Britannia transfix with her lance the dragon Scandal, and free all British ladies from any association with the foregoing tale. In the seriously intentioned Hymns, Jones arguably still keeps a

libertine note of sexual variegation to the fore: if Pracriti/Durga/Bhavani is broadly speaking married to Siva/Iswara/Mahadeva, their relationship can be seen in practice as expressing an almost infinite number of possibilities. The multiplicities of character and function so essential to Indian mythology are constantly stressed in the Hymns, and give them much of their bejewelled, multifaceted quality: a quality which would sit ill with the fixed subject identities of Western sexual morality.

As we have seen, Joseph Priestley expressed suspicions of Jones's apparent indulgence towards Indian lingam worship and general sexual laxity. It was not Jones, however, who attracted the most hostility in the counter-revolutionary 1790s for mingling eroticism with radical republicanism and the claim to new kinds of encyclopedic knowledge. *The Anti-Jacobin's* parodies of *The Progress of Civil Society* and *The Loves of the Plants* are in fact very funny.⁴⁰ 'The Progress of Man' (1798) begins with an expansion of Knight's sceptical inquiries as to the origin of the universe, asking 'Whether the joys of earth, the hopes of heaven, / By Man to God, or God to Man, were given?', and concluding 'On all these points, and points obscure as these, / Think they who will, – and think whate'er they please!' (lines 13–14, 18–19). The 'contents' list for what is supposed to be the first of forty cantos includes a section on contented vegetables: 'Lettuce – Leeks – Cucumbers. – MAN only discontented'. From here we move to 'Priestcraft – Kingcraft – Tyranny of Laws and Institutions', 'Concubinage recommended', and 'FREEDOM the only Morality, &c. &c. &c.' (pp. 58–9).

The even more hilarious 'Loves of the Triangles' (1798) begins with a parody of the Horatian banishment of 'the profane' which opens Darwin's *Economy*:

Stay your rude steps, or e'er your feet invade
The Muses' haunts, ye Sons of War and Trade!
Nor you, ye Legion Fiends of Church and Law
Pollute these pages with unhallowed paw! (1–4)

For the rest of the poem, the eroticized science of *Loves of the Plants* is satirized through the lens of a Burkeian suspicion of dessicated theorists:

To *you* no POSTULATES prefer their claim,
No ardent AXIOMS *your* dull souls inflame;
For *you* no TANGENTS touch, no ANGLES meet,
No CIRCLES join in osculation sweet! (7–10)

T. J. Mathias's *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794–7) enjoys no such lightness of touch in its violent trouncings of virtually every writer mentioned so far in this book, with the exception of Jones. Thus Mathias sternly demands if he will be forced to write like Darwin and

In sweet *tetrandryan*, *monogynian* strains,
Pant for a *pystill* in botanick pains;
...
Raise lust in pinks; and with unhallowed fire
Bid the soft virgin violet expire? (I, 81–2, 85–6)⁴¹

Later, Darwin and Knight are raked together in a list of things Mathias could do if he had no moral standards:

give with Darwin, to the hectick kind,
Receipts in verse to shift the north-east wind;
With Price and Knight grounds by *neglect* improve,
And banish use, for naked Nature's love,
Lakes, forests, rivers, in one landscape drawn,
My park, a county, and a heath, my lawn;
With Knight, man's civil progress could rehearse,
And *put* Hume, Smith, or Tacitus *in verse*. (II, 47–54)

In a note, Mathias links Darwin's ideas on the possibility of redirecting the winds to the fact that in France his kind of attempt at overweening knowledge led to the French Revolution, the 'true cream of their modern Encyclopedia'. Knight is attacked for 'beginning all his books *with doubt*, like a true philosopher', and never 'giving even a *doubtful* solution of *doubtful doubts*, as Mr Hume kindly used to do'. Warming to his theme, Mathias goes on: 'I wish from my soul, that all the democracy and infidelity in the kingdom were buried under the great guardian oak of England, and the spirit of Mr Knight confined in the stem of it' (pp. 116, 118, notes m and o).

Having earlier described Knight's *Priapus* as 'all the ordure and filth, all the antique pictures, and all the representations of the generative organs, in their most odious and degrading protrusion . . . *copulated* . . . with a new species of blasphemy' (p. 27), Mathias later moves from attacks on the banality of Knight's poetry to a call for his prosecution, along with that of M. G. Lewis, author of *The Monk*:

To rouse attention is the poet's art,
Knight calls to sleep, and acts a civil part,
Save to his view when foul Priapus rose,
He wak'd to lust, in stimulating prose
...

Why sleep the ministers of truth and law?
Has the state no controul, no decent awe,
While each with each in madd'ning orgies vie
Pandars to lust and licens'd blasphemy? (IV, 374–7, 380–3)

It is a different story when Mathias places Jones at the apex of those by whom the future of literature is to be saved:

His mind collected; at opinion's shock
JONES stood unmov'd, and from the Christian rock
Celestial brightness beaming on his breast,
He saw THE STAR, and worshipp'd in the East. (IV, 683–6)

In also clamorously praising Jacob Bryant – another comparative mythographer who deployed enormous learning (and what Jones himself thought much fallacious etymology) to support the Bible – Mathias demonstrates an awareness that the new science of Orientalism is not going to go away, and needs firm encouragement to constitute a new body of magi, worshipping Christ from the East. As we saw in chapter 1, even Priestley (himself attacked by Mathias for his 'king-killing' politics) found Jones's Christianity suspect. But in the great sheep-and-goats division of the late 1790s, the reputations of different exemplars of the Whig deist tradition sharply part company along lines of perceived orthodoxy: Jones's to continue unblemished, Knight's to remain influential only in the confined field of aesthetic taste, and Darwin's to descend rapidly to near-oblivion except as an example of what Romanticism was opposed to, and a footnote to his grandson's vindication of his ideas. At the same time, the encyclopaedic polymath was replaced by the specialist, in science, in anthropology, in aesthetics and above all in poetry: an arrangement which arguably kept in place what Burke might have called the 'decent drapery' of ignorance outside one's specialism, and left the final arbitration as to what lay behind this 'mystic veil' in the safer hands of church and state.

CHAPTER 3

And did those feet? Blake in the 1790s

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

The openings of William Blake's two best-known poems seem to affirm his strong religious belief in an all-powerful creator-God and a universally redeeming Christ respectively. And yet grammatically these openings are questions, which remain unanswered throughout the remainders of their respective poems. 'The Tyger' simply piles up further questions, bringing out the apparent impossibility of creating the terrifyingly alive tiger as if it were some piece of machinery, and the lyric best known as 'Jerusalem' only answers its opening questions by resolving to realize their vision in a future when we will indeed have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.¹

Repeatedly with Blake's poetry, passages which sound and feel direct and simple instantly develop complexities of this or other kinds when we ask ourselves either what they literally mean or what he means by saying them. In current language, his poetry is immensely 'dialogic': engaged in often impassioned debate with positions we can only glimpse via the stance Blake adopts towards them. In particular, the open-ended question can sometimes be used rhetorically, to elicit the 'God's' and 'yes' normally assumed as the

right replies to the above two passages; but it can also be used Socratically, to pile up a series of doubts until the reader or interlocutor is compelled to abandon the complacent beliefs Blake's questions clearly attribute to them. (Examples of such question sequences can be found at the end of *The Book of Thel* and repeatedly in the mouths of such radical spokespersons as the Duke of Orleans and Oothoon in *The French Revolution* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*²).

Despite the image of 'lonely visionary' still sometimes affixed to him, it is through this feeling of on-going impassioned dialogue with barely glimpsed off-stage interlocutors that Blake's style has such an immediate impact – situating us instantly within the poem even if we do not know 'where' the poem itself is. The sense of a haze of surrounding dialogues is also, arguably, what has made 'Blake criticism' so different from that of many other writers. For readers who have read more than the simpler (but are they?) *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, discussion hardly seems possible without a contextualization which might range from the other appearances of such weirdly named characters as Oothoon or Urizen to the supposed shape of Stonehenge to the political significance of 'chartering' streets. As such commentary has developed, 'Blake criticism' has become far more than the criticism of Blake, stumbling not only on textual and mythological sources hitherto barely suspected of having any relevance to literature, but also on many political and social events and debates tacitly brushed off into other disciplines until their fundamental importance to Blake's work – and hence to the 'Romantic Literature' of which he was belatedly becoming a major star – was pinpointed through such groundbreaking studies as David Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954).

Successive studies, from Erdman's in the 1950s to E. P. Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (1993) and Jon Mee's *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism* (1992), have slowly shifted perceptions of Blake from that of the innocent visionary who did little but talk to the angels to that of the artisan radical who brought street-credibility to the free-thinking Joseph Johnson circle, and was clearly well-read in such revolutionary infidels as Paine and Volney. Somewhere between these, Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition* (1969) set up in the 1960s a Neoplatonist, alchemical and Gnostic Blake attuned to the Jungian workings of the mind and equally remote from conventional

Christianity and the materialism of contemporary freethought; and recently Robert M. Ryan has returned us to 'Blake's Orthodoxy' in *The Romantic Reformation* (1997). The easiest thing to say is that all these views are right for some of the time, and indeed why Blake's work is so gripping is that he constantly seems to be making points on religion, politics and psychology simultaneously. I shall be arguing, however, that in his most radical period, from about 1790 to 1795, he did challenge orthodox Christianity so consistently and blasphemously as to leave very little of it standing. This is not to deny that from about 1795 he managed to rework some of his boldest ideas and images back into a complex harmony with his reviving Christianity, and it is certainly not to imply that as a good left-winger he should have been a paid-up atheist: Edward Larrissy usefully warns us against assuming 'that Blake was some kind of incipient historical materialist who scorned the occult', without asking 'about the specific nature of Blake's literary production'.³

Accordingly, I shall begin this chapter by exploring the context of 'antinomianism' which links many seventeenth-century radical religious groupings to the Swedenborgianism with which we know Blake was for a while involved. Next, I shall more briefly consider some of the other possible influences on his work, ranging from Neoplatonism and Gnosticism to the myth deconstruction of infidels like Richard Payne Knight. Then, in the second half of the chapter, I shall look at a range of his longer poems from 1790 to 1795, with particular attention to the opposed figures of Urizen and Orc, and to issues of gender. In most of what follows I am deliberately not going beyond 1795 because Blake reworked many of his key ideas and images continually, and his particularly sharp focus on certain religious and political issues in the first half of the 1790s would, I believe, be blurred by making use of the illusion of hindsight afforded by his later epics *Vala*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, which treat the same issues more fully, but after some of his ideas have shifted back in a more orthodoxly Christian direction.

The two best recent studies of Blake's place within the traditions of 'antinomian' religious enthusiasm are E. P. Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast* and Jon Mee's *Dangerous Enthusiasm*. Both approvingly cite A. L. Morton's earlier *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (1958) for establishing the links between Blake and seventeenth-century antinomianism, while pointing more clearly than he does to the continuations of that tradition in Blake's own

time. In a very clear and succinct account of the antinomian tradition, Morton traces it back to the twelfth-century Italian mystic Joachim of Flora:

He taught that the history of the world fell into three ages, those of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost. The first was the age of fear and servitude, and ended with the death of Christ, the second was the age of faith and filial obedience, and the third, which was to be expected shortly, was the age of love and spiritual liberty for the children of God. The scripture of the first age was the Old Testament, of the second the New Testament. In the coming age of the Spirit the full truth of the Everlasting Gospel will be revealed, not in a new sacred book but in a new revelation of the spiritual sense of the Bible with which God will illuminate the hearts of men.⁴

In suggesting that the Bible is not the final revelation, unless reinterpreted in completely new ways, antinomianism radically displaces its authority while at the same time focussing minute attention on to it as a source of allegory and metaphor. At the same time, the 'three ages' structure implies a progressive demolition of 'the Moral Law': the idea that our main religious duties are obedience and avoidance of sins, for which we will be eternally punished. Thus the Old Testament code of the Ten Commandments is wholly to be rejected, at least when read literally, and, while it is often unclear whether we have yet emerged from the second age of the New Testament, its code of meek Christian submission can also be subjected to fierce criticism at times. Insofar as the third age is deemed to have come, anyone who feels so moved can declare the 'spiritual sense of the Bible' in ways which may entirely overthrow the literal sense in favour of new, metaphorical or poetic interpretations, and which virtually *are* in their own right such wished-for events as the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgement. In times of crisis, when many people may feel so moved, these events may be seen as taking place on a political as well as a purely mental or spiritual level.

As Thompson rightly argues, the Protestant emphasis on faith against works proved tremendously enabling to political radicalism, since it allowed people of whatever class direct access to the forces at the roots of their shared belief.⁵ Rather than having to conform to social behaviours possibly constructed by their social superiors as 'good works', they could discover faith in their own powers by seeing these as an expression of God's. This language of confidence in the

closeness of 'Poetic Genius' to prophetic revelation is very much present in the 'firm perswasion' of Blake's assertive, often apparently blasphemous style. 'Faith against works' can often, however, seem a potentially oppressive doctrine to those whose faith is less than certain. What distinguishes the antinomian tradition most strongly from other beliefs such as Calvinism is its lack of interest in sin: God is 'in' everyone and forgives all their actions rather than sitting in judgement over them or predestining them to heaven or hell. Indeed, he may be specifically behind actions which bring the third age nearer by overthrowing the moral precepts of the other two. It might be asked whether, in that case, anything at all is evil; to which the answer for some members of this tradition is that 'Nature' is, and works on people by 'binding', 'hindering' or deadening their innate energies, rather than through positive, affirmative 'acts', which are all spiritual. It is above all in this sense of unspiritualized Nature as evil, and in the belief that existing sources of wisdom need to be endlessly reinterpreted, metaphorically rather than literally, that the antinomian tradition connects with those of Gnosticism, alchemy and Neoplatonism, which I shall be considering later.

All these ideas are present in Swedenborg; Thompson, however, searches hard for evidence of a more native English lineage for Blake's ideas, in the shape of the seventeenth-century Muggletonian sect which did indeed survive into his day. Some of their more distinctive beliefs include a complex sexual symbolism whereby Cain and his offspring descend from Eve's seduction by the serpent, while the descendants of Abel and his brother Seth are 'the offspring of the divine principle in which God created Adam' (*Witness Against the Beast*, p. 73). These 'Two Seeds' are still at work in the human race, but whether in the shape of a predestinated 'elect' and 'damned', or so mixed by cross-breeding that everyone must work out their destiny for themselves, is less clear. Because for the Muggletonians the devil completely dispersed himself into Eve, only to reappear as her human offspring, and God similarly abandoned his separate existence when he became Christ, having actually fully died in the three days between crucifixion and resurrection, the conventional separation of body and soul is meaningless: hence perhaps Blake's assertion in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'Man has no body distinct from his soul' (line 23). It has to be admitted, however, that Thompson never succeeds in proving the links with Muggletonianism he has worked so hard to find; and we have to rest content

with the broader idea of a shared 'culture' rather than evidence of direct connection.

Antinomianism offers an indispensable context for one of the most striking pieces of apparent evidence for a pro-deist if not atheist Blake: his margin annotations to Watson's *Apology for the Bible* – which was addressed, it will be remembered, to Paine's devastatingly disrespectful critiques of the Old Testament in *The Age of Reason*, Part II. Blake's opening comment, 'To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life. The Beast & the Whore rule without control', may alert us to a complex intention to defend both the Bible and Paine's attack on it at the same time: on the one hand, '[I] believe the Bible & profess myself a Christian'; on the other, Paine is right to say that 'the Bible is all a State Trick, thro' which tho' the People at all times could see, they never had the power to throw off'.⁶ Watson's 'perversions of the Bible' are a defence of 'Antichrist', whereas 'Paine is either a Devil or an Inspired man. Men who give themselves to their Energetic Genius in the manner that Paine does are no Examiners' (pp. 383, 386). Like Christ, Paine abolishes 'the Jewish Imposture' by showing that 'a defence of the Wickedness of the Israelites in murdering so many thousands under pretence of a command from God is altogether Abominable and Blasphemous' (p. 387) and that 'The Bible or Peculiar Word of God, Exclusive of Conscience or the Word of God Universal, is that Abomination, which, like the Jewish ceremonies, is for ever removed & henceforth every man may converse with God & be a King & Priest in his own house' (pp. 387, 389).

Many of these remarks may well remind us of the strain of anti-Semitism in Enlightenment critiques of the Old Testament: the image of the Jews as a particularly cruel and primitive people had a long history in 'polite' deism and scepticism such as Voltaire's and Gibbon's.⁷ Paine takes this over and adds many sneers of his own, which Blake happily echoes in remarks like the above. However, Blake usually immediately links these with similar critiques of the Christians: thus the Holy Ghost 'in Paine strives with Christendom as in Christ he strove with the Jews'; and 'That the Jews assumed a right Exclusively to the benefits of God will be a lasting witness against them & the same it will be against Christians' (pp. 387, 389). In much of this, Blake sounds only a whisker away from deism, the difference lying largely in the detection of active energy and inspiration in people like Paine, in whom 'God Universal' constantly

reinscribes his 'Word' rather than simply existing passively to be 'examined'. It is possible that if Paine had adopted a less cavalier, more considered tone, Blake would have read him less positively, however impressive his political credentials. This tone may itself derive from Paine's partly Quaker upbringing, the most mainstream eighteenth-century repository of seventeenth-century antinomianism and with a long tradition of not respecting established authority in matters either of religion or etiquette. The Quaker insistence on egalitarian simplicity of statement arguably lies behind such prefatory claims to *The Age of Reason* as 'I believe in one God, and no more', 'I believe in the equality of man' and 'My mind is my own church' (pp. 1-2).

For Blake, Paine's overthrowing of the literal reading of the Bible allows its reinterpretation as poetry: 'If Moses did not write the history of his acts, it takes away the authority altogether; it ceases to be history & becomes a Poem of probable impossibilities, fabricated for pleasure, as moderns say, but I say by Inspiration' (p. 390). This rejection of the literal truth of the Bible for metaphorical and imaginative truth is something Blake shared with the only sect outside the Church of England with whom he had clearly recorded connections: the Swedenborgians. He owned and annotated at least three books by the Swedish visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and refers to others, and in 1789 he and his wife attended the first General Conference of the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church in London. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) sharply criticizes Swedenborg, but in ways showing a full familiarity with his ideas; *Milton* (1804-8) refers to 'O Swedenborg! strongest of men, the Samson shorn by the Churches' (pl. 22, 50); and the *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809) states that 'The works of this Visionary are well worthy the attention of Painters and Poets; they are foundations for grand things'.⁸ These facts point to a clearer engagement with Swedenborg, through a great period of Blake's life, than with any other near-contemporary religious thinker or dissenting sect.

I have already looked at William Hamilton Reid's account of Swedenborgianism as an atheist fellow-traveller in his survey of 'infidel societies', but it will be useful to spell out more fully what some of Swedenborg's views actually were. They were in themselves highly heretical (certainly enough so to have been banned in his native Sweden),⁹ particularly in their insistence that the Bible is only true in a spiritual, metaphorical sense rather than in a literal,

physical or historical one. This has clear links with the antinomian tradition, but can also be aligned with the revolt against scriptural literalism, in the face of scientific evidence, undertaken by such freethinkers as Darwin, Paine and Volney. Himself a scientific polymath with a Europe-wide reputation, Swedenborg's 1744 conversion from 'all worldly science' to 'spiritual things' occurred after pondering, in Bellin's words, 'the logic of the mechanisms involved' in Moses' miracles ("Opposition is True Friendship", p. 43). The literal impossibility of such biblical events went along with the key finding of his recent – for the time ground-breaking – researches into the construction of the brain: that there was no physical space in it for the soul (p. 42). The alternative construction of a purely spiritual realm in which soul was all and every word of the Bible was metaphorically but not literally true was a direct response to, rather than an ignoring of, the incompatibility of these things with the 'nature' explored by Enlightenment science.

Perhaps, paradoxically, because it is so obvious, there has been a tendency by some of Blake's best critics to sideline Swedenborg's influence on his work.¹⁰ Thus, in trying to limit this influence with a dismissive 'at most', Thompson accurately lists a series of debts which are surely very major indeed: 'At most he was confirmed in the mental style of thinking in "correspondences" (but this, under other names, is the very nature of poetry); he was encouraged to speak of objectifying his insights as visions or as conversations with spirits; and he was confirmed in a mode which enabled him to read the Bible as myth or parable' (*Witness Against the Beast*, p. 134). The key point in the repeated 'confirmed' and the 'encouraged' is that Blake somehow had all these things at his fingertips anyway. Thompson's rider that 'correspondences' belong to the very nature of poetry is quite right, but surely Blake's boldness in taking off into a dimension of symbolism coherent only within a massive personally constructed system of significances – which has made him such a paradigmatic figure for twentieth-century poetics – has a more specific origin than the general prominence of metaphor in poetry.

To explore the issue of 'correspondences' further: Swedenborg's *Heaven and its Wonders, and Hell* (1758) begins with a thoroughgoing deconstruction of the literal reading of Christ's prophecy of the Apocalypse in Matthew 24: 29–31, 'for the Word is written by pure correspondences, in order that every particular expression may contain an internal sense'.¹¹ Hence the statements that the sun and

moon will be darkened, to be followed by the Son of Man emerging in glory from the clouds of heaven, should really be understood thus: 'By the sun, which shall be darkened, is signified the Lord as to love; by the moon, the Lord as to faith; . . . by the coming of the Lord in the clouds of heaven with power and glory, His presence in the Word and revelation; by clouds, the sense of the letter of the Word; by glory, the internal sense of the Word' (p. 2). We are soon informed in precise detail why the sun and moon 'correspond' with the Lord as seen through the eyes of love and faith respectively, and so forth. Despite the famous remark that 'I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's',¹² many of Blake's own symbols are based on precisely these correspondences, as with the 'clouds' rolling 'heavy upon the Alps round Rousseau and Voltaire', whose literal-minded interrogation of received dogmas heralds the approach of Orc, himself an embodiment of the 'heat but not light' which in Swedenborgian terms signifies love without wisdom.¹³ The insistence on 'minute particulars' as opposed to would-be 'natural' shading in Blake's art criticism and elsewhere can also be related to Swedenborg's idea above that 'every particular expression' of the Bible has meaning, as well as his assertions elsewhere that even in the spiritual world the will and understanding 'act upon the minutest particulars of the body'.¹⁴

Like Blake, Swedenborg is emphatically neither a deist nor a Unitarian. His great bulwark against these positions is his insistence on the 'Divine Humanity' of Christ. The deists' belief 'in an invisible Divinity, which they call the Being (*Ens*) of the universe' is wrong, 'because no idea can be formed of it'; while 'Those who, like the Socinians [Unitarians], deny the Divinity of the Lord and acknowledge only His Humanity, are . . . outside heaven.' But nor does Swedenborg believe in the Trinity: his habitual locution 'The Lord' always first and foremost connotes Christ, but 'they cannot in heaven distinguish the Divine Being into three, because . . . the divine Being . . . is one in The Lord' (pp. 3-4).

Swedenborg's rejection of the abstract 'invisible Divinity' of deism is shared by Blake; as witness his two etched tracts of 1788 called 'There is no Natural Religion', concluding 'He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only', where the idea of God as an averaged-out 'ratio' of everything is much the same as Swedenborg's abstract '*Ens*' or '*Being*'.¹⁵ Blake also shares his insistence on the human form as the only valid way of

perceiving not only God, but also the soul and the other spiritual realities Swedenborg calls angels. In the tract 'All Religions are One' (also 1788), however, Blake substitutes the words 'Poetic Genius' for 'God', in a radical revision of terms we shall consider later: 'That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius . . . which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon' (*Complete Writings*, p. 98). For Swedenborg, the human form simply carries on while the physical one falls away: hence, according to Morton D. Paley, the tradition in English funerary sculpture initiated by Blake's Swedenborgian friend John Flaxman, of depicting the souls of the dead as human figures physically rising from their bodies.¹⁶ Hence too, perhaps, Blake's routine use of the naked human form to depict spiritual states in his art. For Swedenborg, 'The whole heaven viewed collectively is in the human form', being 'the Divine Sphere' of the Lord as embodied in all the angels (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 25, 5). Furthermore, though the 'Grand Man' constituted by heaven as a whole is 'too vast to come into the view of any angel, . . . they occasionally see remote societies, consisting of many thousands of angels, as a [single man] in such a form' (p. 26). This idea of great masses of separate beings suddenly merging into a single one, and back again, is a staple motif of Blake's later prophetic books, as when the host of heaven takes on the form of Ololon in *Milton*.¹⁷

Bearing all the above in mind, it is time to turn more directly to Blake's poetry, if that is the right word for what is at once perhaps his most innovatory and antinomian work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790, with 1793 additions). From its title onwards, this collage of prose explosions proclaims its opposition to orthodox religious structures and dualisms, including Swedenborg's. After a verse 'Argument' describing the expulsion of the just man by the 'sneaking serpent' of complacent orthodoxy (I, 16), Blake presents us with a complex mixture of dates and biblical references which can be untangled as follows. The revival of the 'Eternal Hell' which he announces in 1790 is a Christ's lifetime of thirty-three years from the 'New Heaven' announced by Swedenborg's first revelations in 1757: hence Swedenborg is now at best the angel guarding the tomb from which this new revelation has emerged. The Eternal Hell is linked through references to Isaiah with the 'red man' Esau returning to claim the birthright stolen from him by Jacob (another 'sneaking serpent?'); the fact that Blake himself was thirty-three in 1790

suggests that this red rebel is himself. From here we move to the crucial statements, 'Good is the passive that obeys reason: Evil is the active springing from energy. / Good is Heaven; Evil is Hell' and 'Energy is the only life and is from the body, and reason is the bound or outward circumference of energy' (II, 1-2, 5-6, 11-13, 26-8).

This identification of what is conventionally stigmatized as Evil or Hell with the 'Energy' which is 'Eternal Delight' (II, 29) is clearly extremely subversive. To glance back at one of the themes of the last chapter, it may have links with Knight's ideas of the life-force at the root of the ur-religion and of the unstoppable flood of pent-up human need which becomes the French Revolution. Its relationship to Swedenborg is not, however, one of pure subversion. Many commentators have pointed to Blake's annotations to Swedenborg's *Wisdom of the Angels concerning Divine Providence* (also 1790), which attack him as a 'Spiritual Predestinarian'. Despite this in-house dispute within an antinomianism in which 'more abominable than Calvin'¹⁸ is the supreme insult, however, the *Marriage's* image of one state being the 'circumference' of another comes directly from Swedenborg. Thus in *The Wisdom of the Angels concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, Swedenborg describes Divine Wisdom as spiritual light, by which man 'shakes off the Darkness of natural Light, and removes its Fallacies from the Centre to the Circumference', of which Blake writes approvingly, 'When the fallacies of darkness are in the circumference they cast a bound about the infinite'.¹⁹

When not presented as the terminal destination of sinners (as it usually is not), Swedenborg's idea of hell is also something which Blake adapts rather than simply rejecting, as in a 1790 note to *Heaven and its Wonders, and Hell* (trans. 1784) on the statement that 'under every mountain, hill, rock, plain, and valley, there [are] particular Hells of different extent'. Blake's comment is 'under every *Good* is a hell, i.e. hell is the outward or external of heaven & is of the body of the lord, for nothing is destroy'd'.²⁰ The idea that oppositions exist to be overcome is foreshadowed in an earlier note on Swedenborg's attempt in *Divine Love and Wisdom* to dissolve the absolute barrier between good and evil by stating that though evil comes from nature, the man who 'believes that all his Life is from God . . . acts with God as from himself'. Blake's approving comment that 'Good & Evil are both Good & the two contraries Married' (p. 91) suggests a possible source for the title of *Marriage*, but he could also have found it in Swedenborg's own statement in *Divine Providence*, that 'in

the universe, and in all and everything therein, which was created by the Lord, there was a marriage of good and truth' which 'after the creation, was separated in man' but that ultimately 'the marriage of good and truth should be restored'.²¹ Since he persistently identifies good with the heat of love and truth with the light of wisdom, Swedenborg's 'marriage' of the two is not so different from Blake's 'marriage' of the fiery energies of hell with the enlightened reason of heaven.

To pick up one or two further points. Swedenborg's own idea of 'energy' is at one point related to what he calls the 'prolific principle' in plants, invisible to the microscope.²² For Blake, 'Some will say, "Is not God alone the prolific?" I answer, "God only acts and is in existing beings or men"' (*Marriage*, IV, 116-17). This refusal to allow the principle of prolific energy to be drained off into a single 'essence' as God can be related to the notes where Blake disagrees with Swedenborg over such statements as 'the Divine is not divisible' and 'is not one and the same Essence one and the same Identity?', to which Blake responds 'from one Essence may proceed many Identities, as from one Affection may proceed many thoughts. Surely this is an oversight . . . for if all but God is not Infinite, they shall come to an end, which God forbid' and 'If the Essence was the same as the Identity, there could be but one Identity, which is false' (*Complete Writings*, p. 91). This refusal of an essentialism in which God takes over the active and energetic functions belonging to separate 'identities' is perhaps Blake's most fundamental disagreement with Swedenborg, and can also be found in his mild but continued corrections of the word 'God' to 'Poetic Genius' in his notes to *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*. Hence the comment on 'the reception of Love and Wisdom constitutes affinity with [the Lord]' becomes 'He who Loves . . . if he has wisdom may perceive it is from the Poetic Genius, which is the Lord'; and 'The Negation of God constitutes Hell' becomes 'The Negation of the Poetic Genius' (p. 90).

This replacement of 'God' with 'Poetic Genius' is not inconsistent with the antinomian idea of the third age of individual revelation, of which Swedenborg's own announcement of the 'New Heaven' based on his own visions is an expression. The rigidifying of such an announcement into a fixed chronology with a 'Church of the New Jerusalem' to impose it on others was clearly a dead end for Blake: nonetheless, if *The Marriage* criticizes Swedenborgianism in the light of this logical impasse, it does so in largely Swedenborgian terms.

If Blake's 'Poetic Genius' deconstructs Swedenborg's 'God', it also joins hands at crucial points with the comparative mythography at the heart of the radical deist/atheist discourse of the 1780s and 1790s:

The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with gods or geniuses, calling them by the names, and adorning them with the properties, of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity.

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of and enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects. Thus began priesthood – choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounced that the gods had ordered such things.

Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast. (*Marriage*, IV, 1–16)

These simple assertions, which are reiterated and elaborated throughout Blake's work, can clearly be read in an atheistic way. All religions are simply extensions of primitive animism, which resulted from the free play of the poetic imagination over the natural and then the political worlds, until usurped by a power-seeking 'priesthood' with a vested interest in denying the purely human, psychological origin of 'all deities'.

This passage has accordingly been related to Volney by Thompson, and by Mee in somewhat general terms to Knight's *Priapus*.²³ One passage of the latter may, however, offer a more specific source. According to Knight, the fact that 'not only men, but all animals, and even vegetables, were supposed to be impregnated with some particles of the Divine Nature' is illustrated by Egyptian animal worship, where

The learned and rational merely respected and revered the sacred animals, whilst the vulgar worshipped and adored them . . . different cities adopting different animals as their tutelar deities, in the same manner as the Catholics now put themselves under the protection of different saints and martyrs. Like them, too, in the fervency of their devotion for the imaginary agent, they forgot the original cause. (*Priapus*, pp. 31–2)

To turn this into the gist of Blake's passage, we would need to change the 'learned and rational' into 'poets' and align our sympathies more with 'the vulgar', but the dying fall on 'they forgot' is very similar.

About the same time as his annotations to Watson on Paine, Blake wrote in his copy of Francis Bacon's *Essays, Moral, Economical and Political*, 'Every Body Knows that this is Epicurus and Lucretius & Yet Every Body says that it is Christian Philosophy; how is this Possible? Every Body must be a Liar & Deceiver.'²⁴ Somewhat later, in 1804, he wrote in his notebook the lyric which begins 'Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau!', and ends with the beautiful stanza:

The atoms of Democritus
And Newton's particles of light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.²⁵

Putting all these names together, it is reasonable to discern a single Enlightenment materialist tradition which Blake is rejecting: Democritus was the founder of the atomic theory which Epicurus developed and passed on to Lucretius; Bacon falsely pretended this tradition could be reconciled with Christianity and Newton extended it to light itself; the French *philosophes* Voltaire and Rousseau and their followers now overtly use it to mock Christianity, but in vain: 'You throw the sand against the wind' (3). Nonetheless, these passages can be read as simply underlining the *incompatibility* of the two doctrines: the hypocrisy of pretending Bacon was a Christian is also something the arch-atheist Richard Carlile stresses in his call to scientists to come clean, *An Address to Men of Science* (1821).²⁶ The 1804 lyric, while certainly committed to Israel's tents, plays fascinatedly with the image of the atomists' universe as 'sand': uncontrollable by their attempt to fix a 'mocking' meaning to it, but providing the ground of Egyptian captivity on which the truer vision of Israel's shining tents is pitched.

We shall encounter Newton, Voltaire and Rousseau again in similarly ambiguous roles; for the next part of this chapter I shall be considering Blake's engagement with various traditions outside Christianity, including some based on the classics. In doing so, it is necessary to bear in mind such statements as 'The Greek & Roman Classics is the Antichrist'.²⁷ However, even such a remark of his more orthodox later life chiefly stresses the Christian and classical views as irreconcilable 'contraries', like innocence and experience, or heaven and hell, and as in the above annotation on Bacon. In 1798, the same year as the latter annotation, he was also commenting

on Watson that 'mankind are in a less distinguished Situation with regard to mind than they were in the time of Homer, Socrates, Phydias, Glycon, Aristotle, etc., . . . Paine says that Christianity put a stop to improvement, & the Bishop has not shewn the contrary' (*Complete Writings*, p. 388).

If nothing else, such remarks at least show a nuanced knowledge of classical writing, art and thought, of a kind sometimes denied by critics eager to stress Blake's 'anti-hegemonic' allegiance to the native radical-enthusiast tradition first, last and always.²⁸ In particular, Blake was in contact from the start of his career with a number of purveyors of unorthodox views of classical and other mythology: he engraved designs for Jacob Bryant's *New System of Mythology* (1774–6) and Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation* (1791), and was a friend of John Flaxman, the Swedenborgian who designed classical ware for Wedgwood and almost certainly introduced Blake to the Neoplatonist 'English pagan', Thomas Taylor. I shall return to Taylor shortly; for the present, I would like to focus on a single possible instance of Blake's use of such mythological lore: 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'The Little Girl Found' (1789), two poems initially included in *Songs of Innocence* but later transferred to *Experience*. The little girl of both poems is Lyca, who has wandered away from her parents, sleeps, and is found by a lion and lioness who take her to their cave. In the second poem her parents, exhausted after searching for her, are ambushed by the lion who licks their hands and, transformed to a 'spirit armed in gold', leads them to the still sleeping Lyca where they take up a contented residence, no longer afraid of 'the wolvis howl' or 'the lions' growl' (36, 51–2).

It has been convincingly argued that the two poems echo the myth of Persephone, particularly as described in the Eleusinian mysteries, whose two parts celebrated first the rape of Persephone into the underworld by Pluto, and then her mother Ceres' search for her culminating in their festive reunion.²⁹ If so, and if my earlier suggestion of an echo from Knight in *The Marriage* is right, then Knight's *Discourse on Priapus* may have suggested some of Blake's imagery. Knight sees Ceres as 'the prolific power of the earth' (p. 71), which in her daughter Persephone is mingled with its destructive power – in rotting dead bodies and so forth – as symbolized by her abduction to the underworld. The myth thus involves various ambivalent images surrounding Persephone, who is 'the goddess of fertility as well as destruction'. The same combination of meanings

appears in a series of ancient sculptural images Knight immediately goes on to describe, of which the most alarming is 'the organ of generation, mounted on the back parts of a lion, and hung round with various animals'. Knight assures us, however, that the lion-phallus simply represents 'the co-operation of the creating and destroying powers', while the animals show the 'replenishing of the earth' produced by this co-operation (p. 73). In another such emblem, 'this union of destroying and preserving attributes is represented by the united forms of the lion and the serpent crowned with rays'; and in another a 'tiger is sucking the breast of a nymph; which represents the same power of destruction, nourished by the passive power of generation' (p. 74).

'The Little Girl Lost' indicates from the start a link between Lyca and 'the earth', which will eventually arise from sleep 'And the desert wild / Become a garden mild' (7-8). The imagery of reunion with the principle of fertility after a period of near-death might well fit Knight's account of the Persephone myth, and one later passage in particular can be related to his list of emblems of the 'creating and destroying powers' combined: 'Leopards, tigers play / Round her as she lay, / While the lion old, / Bowed his mane of gold, / And her bosom lick' (41-5). The lack of a final *s* on the last word indicates that it is the leopards and tigers who are doing the licking, while the lion bows in a more general surrender of his destructive powers. As far as the lion-serpent 'crowned with rays' goes, the lion duly acquires a crown in 'The Little Girl Found' (37). If the resemblance between these images is more than fortuitous, Knight may also have suggested the name of Blake's Lyca in an earlier description of the 'Lycaean Pan' as 'the divine essence of light incorporated in universal matter', a possible analogue to Persephone's 'heat that pervades the earth' (p. 36).³⁰

If even roughly right, these links with Knight would go along with a reading of the poem as affirming Lyca's willingness to venture away from her parents into the embrace of what only seems to be a 'dark side', which most readers agree involves some kind of sexual experience. However, a different view is taken by Kathleen Raine, to whom I owe the general idea of a parallel between these poems and the Persephone myth, but who believes that 'there is no ground for the often expressed view that Blake regarded experience as a state of equal value with innocence, or indeed of any value at all; it is a state of delusion, "Error, or Creation"'.³¹ Accordingly, she offers as a

model the Neoplatonist Thomas Taylor's account of the Persephone myth, as expounded in his *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (1791).

Before exploring this further, a few words on Taylor are in order, whether or not his 1791 book is likely to have influenced Blake's 1789 poems. Raine argues that Blake may have attended some of his lectures at their mutual friend Flaxman's house in the 1780s, and David V. Erdman gives evidence of personal contact somewhat later.³² Following on from such earlier works as *Concerning the Beautiful, Hymns of Orpheus* (both 1787) and *Commentaries of Proclus* (1789), the *Dissertation on the Mysteries* reads numerous classical texts and accounts of religious rituals as disguised allegories of the soul's unwilling descent into the material body, and its eventual return therefrom. Starting with a reading of the account of the underworld in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* in these terms, the *Dissertation* applies them to the Eleusinian mysteries' presentations of the Persephone myth and others. Despite his antimaterialism, it is interesting to compare Taylor's contemporary reputation with those of other 'pagans' such as Darwin and Knight. The *Dissertation's* anonymous and undated publication from Amsterdam suggests an attempt to shelter from the opprobrium invited by the defiant prefacing of his previous *Commentaries of Proclus* with Isaac D'Israeli's assertion that 'Mr T. Taylor, the Platonic Philosopher and the *modern Plethon*, consonant to that philosophy, professes Polytheism'.³³ The indefatigable T. J. Mathias brackets 'Taylor, England's gentile priest' firmly with 'Priapus' Knight and Darwin as a 'would-be restorer of unintelligible mysticism and superstitious pagan nonsense'.³⁴ Like Knight and Darwin, Taylor not only treats paganism with more respect than Christianity, he also refuses to condemn the graphic sexuality of some of its imagery: thus a key moment in the mysteries represents the exposure to Ceres of the genitals of the matron Baubo, thus luring her into 'corporeal life' on which Taylor remarks that, 'exhibitions of this kind in the mysteries were designed to free us from licentious passions . . . through the awful sanctity with which these rites were accompanied'.³⁵

To return to the 'Little Girl' poems: according to Taylor, Persephone represents the soul forced to desert its immaterial state and enter the world of 'generation' as symbolized by Pluto. Ceres, meanwhile, is the intellect, bereft without the soul but fertile when rejoined to it. For Raine, Blake's Lyca is thus the soul/Persephone,

separated from the intellect/Ceres by a spiritual sleep expressing her sensual hankering to descend into the pit of matter/Pluto/the lion.³⁶ Despite her mother's heroic quest to find her, Lyca's continued sleep points us back to the beginning of the first poem, where we are told that only 'in futurity' will the earth rise from sleep and the desert become a garden. Though she grudgingly acknowledges that a more positive symbolism underlies the transformation of the lion (matter) to 'a Spirit arm'd in gold', Raine insists that Lyca's sensual sleep is a disaster for all concerned.³⁷

These two irreconcilable readings are complicated further by Blake's shifting of the two poems from *Songs of Innocence* to *Songs of Experience*: the first context suggests that as a child whatever Lyca does is right, and the second that something is very wrong somewhere. While I think the initial inclusion in *Innocence* clinches the matter, it is hard to be sure Raine is completely wrong: again and again in Blake's poetry a libertarian or even libertine insistence on bodily and sexual fulfilment as a way out of the impasse of falsely imposed ideas of 'innocence' seems to vie with a distrust of material 'Nature' which can indeed be related to the traditions of Neoplatonism.

The next arcane 'tradition' I wish to touch on is the related one of alchemy: the mixture of science and mysticism whose central image of turning base matter into gold implies that the material world is redeemable and hence to be accepted – though perhaps in Neoplatonic terms it still needs redeeming by the spiritual. This may be relevant to *The Book of Thel* (1789–90), where a young shepherdess from a vaguely indicated spiritual realm leaves her sisters to bemoan the universal fact of transience in the physical world, only to be confronted by a series of beings who attest to the benign recycling of matter: a lily who is happy to provide food for lambs; a cloud who is happy to dissolve in watering the flowers; and a worm who contradicts Thel's fear of the grave by appearing as a helpless, weeping baby, tended to by a clod of clay who points out that 'we live not for ourselves' and that even the earth is valued by 'he that loves the lowly' (84, 87). Persuaded by these arguments, Thel is about to enter her own grave (from which the clay has promised she will be able to return) when she is confronted by 'a voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit' (113), complaining in a series of rhetorical questions about the restraints on happiness imposed by the physical body, whereupon Thel flees back 'with a shriek' to her spiritual realm (124).

For Raine, this ending supports a Neoplatonic reading whereby the grave symbolizes the 'descent' into the body itself by a soul which, confronted by the miseries that descent will entail, prefers to remain unborn. As such – and I am still following Raine's argument here – the ending seems to conflict with the rest of the poem, which can usefully be read in the light of the idea that as with the alchemical conversion of base matter to gold, the clay of earth is really divine. Clues to alchemical sources can be found in some of the names in the poem: thus the strange name of Thel's mother, 'Mne Seraphim', is a slight alteration of the alchemist Cornelius Agrippa's name for Venus – 'Bne Seraphim'.³⁸ Except for its antimaterial ending – which most critics other than Raine read as a critique rather than an endorsement of Thel's 'virgin' fear of sex – the poem does seem to involve an 'alchemical' acceptance of death and/or matter as necessary aspects of the natural cycle, as exemplified by the 'crowning' of the clod of earth by the God who 'loves the lowly'.

Both alchemy and Taylor's brand of Neoplatonism offer possible sources for the central and extraordinary innovation of Blake's Prophetic Books: his deployment of a cast of precisely differentiated characters who are neither human nor explicable in Christian terms (like those of Milton's *Paradise Lost*), nor in those of any other existing mythology (as in Jones's Hymns). The first such poem, *Tiriël*, is crowded with names of alchemical significance, the endlessly complaining Tiriël himself denoting mercury or the 'base matter' which seeks to escape its condition and be turned to gold (but in this case emphatically is not). Blake might also have been influenced by Taylor's robust polytheism: all the Olympian gods find their place in the *Dissertation*'s master-narrative of the descent of the soul, and are vehemently defended by Taylor as necessary parts of 'antient wisdom', which he opposes to the theory of William Warburton 'that the grand secret of the mysteries consisted in exposing the errors of Polytheism, and in teaching the doctrine of the unity, or the existence of one deity alone' (p. 374). I would argue that Blake's private mythology of figures such as Urizen, Orc and Los is based on a similar sense of the usefulness of polytheism as a psychodramatic construction, requiring its own field of free play away from 'the doctrine of the unity'. Hence, as we shall see, *The First Book of Urizen* pits the wholly positive collective of 'the Eternals' against the disastrous attempt of one of their number to assert 'the

existence of one deity alone'. In his fall from Eternity, Urizen also seems to enact the descent into matter which Taylor sees the mysteries as describing.

Mention of Urizen brings us to the last of the occult 'isms' to be touched on: Gnosticism, which has many points of contact with the other traditions mentioned but also with Christianity in its more antinomian manifestations. According to Crabb Robinson, Blake once told him that 'Nature is the work of the Devil' and when this was queried, 'I was triumphantly told that this God [of Nature] was not Jehovah, but the Elohim, and the doctrine of the Gnostics [was] repeated with sufficient consistency to silence one so unlearned as myself'.³⁹ The Gnostic position was that the creator of the natural universe is not the ultimate God (Jehovah) but the Elohim, a lesser 'emanation' or group of them whose involvement in matter rather than the spirit equates them with the Devil. In one tradition, Manichaeism, the flat opposition between Jehovah and the Devil or Elohim is an eternal, unavoidable fact; in others, such as the 'Behmenism' founded by the German mystic Jakob Böhme, the interplay between them is more dynamically dialectical, involving much imagery of 'marriage' leading to the proliferation of new forces and emanations, which can be related to the 'chemical weddings' of opposites crucial to alchemy.

The overlap between Behmenism, alchemy, Swedenborg and the ideas of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is suggested by Blake's statement there that 'any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of [the alchemist] Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen produce ten thousand volumes of equal value with Swedenborg's' (IV, 248-50). To complete the set of overlaps, as it were, the basic Gnostic opposition between the gods of spirit and matter is also central to Neoplatonism as expounded by Taylor, for whom also 'the immediate artificer of the universe is not the ineffable principle of things' but a 'great Demiurgus of the world', whose lack of perfection is the inevitable result of the fall away from primary unity which is then repeated and exacerbated in his creations.⁴⁰

So far, this chapter has attempted to open up some of the positions and stances with which Blake seems to be dialogically engaged up to and around 1790: ideas of mere one-way 'influence' are too simple where Blake is concerned. For clarity, I have had to take them one at a time, and the last few examples have taken us a long way from a

sense of how Blake connects them to the political and social issues of his day, especially as focussed by the turmoil following the French Revolution. I shall now attempt to rectify this by relating the issues discussed above – and particularly the significance of Blake's casts of non-human characters – with the pressing events and issues of the 1790s, in the context of a series of middle-length poems (or prophecies): *The French Revolution*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America*, *Europe*, *The Song of Los*, *The First Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Ahania*. Their themes and 'plots' will, I hope, become sufficiently clear in the process of exploring them in terms of three major areas: the figure of Urizen, the figure of Orc, and the issue of gender.

It used to be a truism of Blake criticism that 'Urizen' personifies 'Reason', and conveys Blake's hatred of the Enlightenment rationalism of Newton and Locke.⁴¹ However, an examination of his first named appearances, and those of one or two clearly related figures who appear a little earlier, suggest a different and cruder origin, in the immediate context of the French Revolution:

Then old Nobodaddy up aloft
Farted and belched and coughed,
And said, 'I love hanging and drawing and quartering
Every bit as well as war and slaughtering.'

Then he swore a great and solemn oath:
'To kill the people I am loth;
But if they rebel they shall go to hell:
They shall have a priest and a passing bell.'⁴²

This grotesque God of the French *ancien régime* receives a more elaborate treatment in *The French Revolution* (1790–1), most of which describes a meeting of Louis XVI's increasingly despairing court as the Estates General gather outside. In an attempt to rally them, the Archbishop of Paris describes a dream he has had in his 'golden tower' where 'the repose of the labours of men / Waved its solemn cloud over my head' (129–30). Massive church taxation was one of the third estate's main grievances, and here the labours of the people are converted directly into the 'repose' of the archbishop. In his dream, he is visited by 'An aged form, white as snow, hovering in mist, weeping in the uncertain light' (131). Though surrounded by the prostrated hosts of heaven, the form whispers 'like the voice of a grasshopper' that he is being deserted by a 'godless race' who are ceasing to pray and preparing 'to root up and pull down and

remove, / And Nobles and Clergy shall fail from before me' (136, 142-3). The people 'shall drop at the plough and faint at the harrow, unredeemed, unconfessed, unpardoned', while the priest rots next to the lawless lover and the king next to the ploughman (148). In his hypocritical weeping, his tolerance of death from overwork so long as the ritual of confession has taken place, and his insistence on class distinctions even in the grave, this is clearly the God of the upper classes, in whose name the archbishop exhorts the king to 'let the Bastille devour / These rebellious seditious; seal them up, O Anointed, in everlasting chains' (156-7).

In reply to the archbishop, the public-spirited Duke of Orleans voices Blake's critique of a religion coldly oblivious to the 'flaming' differences of experience on which equal rights are based:

go, merciless man, enter into the infinite labyrinth of another's brain
Ere thou measure the circle that he shall run. Go, thou cold recluse,
into the fires
Of another's high flaming rich bosom, and return unconsum'd, and
write laws.
If thou canst not do this, doubt thy theories, learn to consider all men
as thy equals. (190-3)

Similar associations of coldness and uncomprehending jealousy of new political forces accompany the 'starry king' of 'A Song of Liberty' (1792-3) which ends *Marriage*: 'Flagged with grey-browed snows and thunderous visages, the jealous wings waved over the deep' (v, 9). Even after his catastrophic overthrow by the 'new-born fire' of equality, he tries to tie everyone to the same laws: 'With thunder and fire, leading his starry hosts through the wide wilderness, he promulgates his ten commands, glancing his beamy eyelids over the deep in dark dismay' (v, 18).

The first mention of Urizen by name⁴³ is in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, whose heroine Oothoon challenges his wish to tie everyone to the same laws, in terms reminiscent of those of the Duke of Orleans:

O Urizen, creator of men, mistaken demon of heaven
Thy joys are tears, thy labour vain, to form men in thine image.
How can one joy absorb another? Are not different joys
Holy, eternal, infinite? And each joy is a love. (114-17)

Removed from the immediate context of the French Revolution, though still an upholder of oppression in the forms of slavery and the

sexual double standard, Urizen here emerges clearly as the creator-God of the Old Testament, imposing a unitary moral code on humanity by claiming to have formed it in his own single image. It is sometimes suggested that Urizen's name is a pun on 'your reason' and the 'horizon' or circumference of energy which reason represents in *Marriage*; but here it is religious morality, based on a unitary creation myth, that is most clearly being attacked.⁴⁴

This origin in creation myths, plus a prevailing weather imagery I shall discuss in a moment, might suggest as an alternative source the Greek sky-god Uranus, who punished his deformed children the Cyclopes by imprisoning them underground in Tartarus, from whence they later broke out in rebellion.⁴⁵ Such straightforward classical references are more common than often thought in Blake, who in 1817 engraved Flaxman's compositions from Hesiod's widely known *Theogony*, from which he could have got all this information.⁴⁶ In such epithets as 'starry', 'mistaken demon of heaven' and above all 'weeping', Urizen repeats Uranus's role as a sky and weather god whose primal act is the fertilization of the earth goddess Gaea through rain, sometimes accompanied by thunder and snow.

Most of the traits listed above are combined in his first full-dress appearance in *America*.⁴⁷

and Urizen, who sat

Above all heavens in thunders wrapped, emerged his leprous head
From out his holy shrine, his tears in deluge piteous
Falling into the deep sublime. Flagged with grey-browed snows
And thunderous visages, his jealous wings waved over the deep;
Weeping in dismal howling woe he dark descended, howling
Around the smitten bands, clothed in tears and trembling, shuddering
cold. (205-11)

In particular, 'his tears in deluge' while 'his jealous wings waved over the deep' resemble the rain shed by the aged figure chasing Oothoon across the sea in the title page of *Visions* (though there he also combines aspects of her actual male persecutors Bromion and Theotormon). The whole *Gestalt* unmistakably invokes the image of the birth of religion as seen through the legs of Anubis, the dog-star god who announces the swelling of the Nile, which Blake engraved from a rough idea by Fuseli for Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation*. Darwin's note refers this image to Volney's *Travels*, but its imagery unmistakably evokes the more outspokenly atheist *Ruins*, just published in France and possibly being translated for Joseph Johnson as

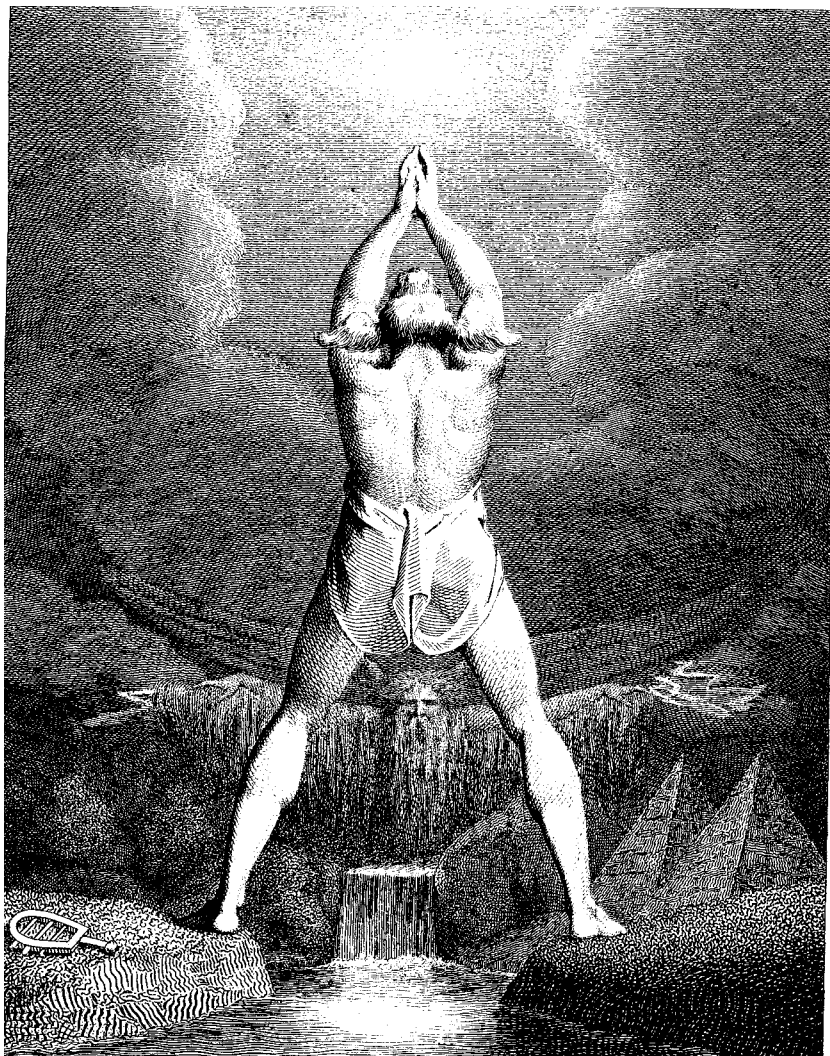


Plate 4. *Fertilization of Egypt*, from *Economy of Vegetation*, III, illustrating lines 129–34: ‘Sailing in air, when dark MONSOON inshrouds / His tropic mountains in a night of clouds; / Or drawn by whirlwinds from the Line returns, / And showers o’er Afric all his thousand urns; / High o’er his head the beams of SIRIUS glow, / And, dog of Nile, ANUBIS barks below’. Engraved by Blake from a design by Fuseli, this image illustrates Volney’s ideas of the birth of religion, and suggests a model for Blake’s later depictions of Urizen. Copied from *The Botanic Garden* (1791), in the author’s possession.

Fuseli and Blake worked on the picture. The engraving is well discussed by Mee, though his description of the dog-headed figure as the 'priest of Anubis . . . turning his attention away from the river to praise the bearded figure which hovers above it' misses the fact that the figure is Anubis himself, communing with the 'watchdog' star of which he is the icon: we thus see in a single image the natural facts of star and flooding river, and two phases of the subsequent anthromorphic religion in the frankly symbolic Anubis and the more abstracted and terrifying sky/rain god who is, very arguably, the model for Urizen.⁴⁸ In *America*, however, the Nile of the Fuseli/Darwin picture has become 'the Atlantic sea' (213), the source of oppressive power as far as American Independence and the slavery of *Visions* are concerned.

The image of Urizen as embodying the materialism of Bacon and Newton as well as autocratic religion only emerges gradually: in *Europe*, he presides from the background over the druidism whose 'ancient temple serpent-formed' (72) wreathes round the whole of Albion, but is centred at 'golden Verulam', the St Alban's from which Francis Bacon took his viscounty. Here druidism 'changed the infinite to a serpent' (86): 'Then all the eternal forests were divided / Into earths, rolling in circles of space, / . . . / . . . and man became an angel, / Heaven a mighty circle turning, God a tyrant crowned' (86-93). God's tyranny, man's confinement to a single moral code as an angel, the mathematical sidelong figure eight to which infinity has been reduced, and Newton's rule-bound clock-work cosmos are here all conflated as a single catastrophe of the imagination which enables 'Urizen on the Atlantic' to impose on Albion's empire his 'brazen book / that kings and priests had copied on earth' (104-5). Ironically, however, this leads to increasing disaffection: the 'youth of England' curse while 'aged ignorance preaches canting' (111, 113) and the 'Guardian of the secret codes' is driven from his mansion (possibly a reference to the sacking of Lord Chancellor Mansfield's house in the 1780 Gordon riots in which Blake may have participated). Even more ironically, when conservative orthodoxy has tried in vain to blow the last trump of divine judgement as a final warning against such disobedience,

A mighty spirit leaped from the land of Albion

Named Newton: he seized the trump and blowed the enormous blast.

(145-7)

However, this blast destroys not the rebels but the conservative angels themselves. In giving this triumphant revolutionary moment to Newton, Blake allots him a similar role to that of Voltaire and Rousseau in *The Song of Los*. He is at once symptom of imaginative impoverishment and the means of overthrowing it: by undermining superstition, Newton has rendered the old unquestioning obedience to state religion impossible.

With *The Song of Los*, Blake universalizes his history of Urizenic religion with a two-part before-and-after structure between which *America* and *Europe* are chronologically sandwiched. The first part of the *Song*, 'Africa', ends with the first line of *America*, while the second part, 'Asia', begins by referring back to the 'howl' from *Europe* over the French Revolution. Though brief, the *Song* contains some of Blake's most densely packed references to world religions other than Christianity, as opened up by recent comparative mythographers such as Bryant, Knight, Jones and Volney. Since most of these have been very expertly unpicked by Jon Mee, I shall focus on just a few.⁴⁹

Blake's history begins with the founders of the human race Adam and Noah 'shuddering' and 'fading' (10) as a Moses-like Urizen turns their experiences into 'laws to the nations' to be handed down 'By the hands of the children of Los' (8–9) – the prophets in their negative aspect as founders of priestcraft. With this event, worldwide racial and cultural differences start to appear: 'Black grew the sunny African, / And Rintrah gave abstract philosophy to Brahma in the east' (10–11).⁵⁰

The reference to Brahma constitutes one of Blake's few but significant allusions to Indian religion, for which Kathleen Raine and others cite Sir William Jones on 'a *technical system of logick*, which the Brahmans had communicated to the inquisitive Greek'.⁵¹ For Blake, this communication goes via Egypt: 'abstract law' is given next to the Egyptian alchemist Trismegistus and then to the Greeks Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato (18–19). Then, astonishingly, it is passed on to a Jesus entrapped in the Urizenic sexual repressions of *Visions*:

Then Oothoon hovered over Judah and Jerusalem,
And Jesus heard her voice (a man of sorrows); he received
A gospel from wretched Theotormon.

(22–4)

As 'the human race began to wither' (25), the sons of Los complete the spread of religion by instituting those of Mahomet and Odin, 'Till a philosophy of five senses was complete. / Urizen wept and

gave it into the hands of Newton and Locke' (47–8). As in *Europe*, however, handing this power to Newton leads straight towards the present age of revolution: 'Clouds roll heavy upon the Alps round Rousseau and Voltaire (49), and 'Africa' concludes with the first line of *America*: 'The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent' (52). In *The French Revolution*, Voltaire and Rousseau are also associated with clouds, but these rain down fire and thunder on the royal forces, in support of the revolutionary hero Lafayette (276, 283). If clouds are the product of Urizen's imagination-deadening rain of tears, they are also the store places of Orc's cathartic fire. This may explain why they also hang 'on the mountains of Lebanon round the deceased Gods / Of Asia' (50–1): the first of Volney's *Ruins* is actually Palmyra in Lebanon.

If, in the last two poems considered, Urizen has become identified with Enlightenment rationalism as well as primitive religion, that identification proves his own undoing. As Mee says, 'The Enlightenment cult of Reason is represented as the latest of a long series of mystificatory religions' (139), rather than as the unique evil some readings of Urizen as 'Reason' pure and simple try to maintain.

At least this is true as far as the 'continents' cycle is concerned. While Mee rightly argues that *The First Book of Urizen* also profoundly subverts the certainties of orthodox Christianity through wholesale biblical parody (*Dangerous Enthusiasm*, p. 171), here we arguably enter a far less politicized territory where the Neoplatonic image of a descent into matter comes to the fore. Nonetheless, the brief 'Preludium' introduces Urizen as primarily an embodiment of politically motivated priestcraft – 'Of the primeval priest's assumed power' – and his first speech summarizes the unitary metaphysics repeatedly and parodically linked with the Ten Commandments:

One command, one joy, one desire,
One curse, one weight, one measure,
One King, one God, one Law. (82–4)

In a new development, this insistence on unity is now constantly contrasted with the fluidity and multiplicity of 'the Eternals', for whom

Earth was not, nor globes of attraction.
The will of the Immortal expanded
Or contracted his all-flexible senses.
Death was not, but eternal life sprung. (36–9)

This picture may well owe something to Swedenborg's ideas that 'the will and understanding are what constitute the [internal] man' and that angels can coalesce and separate at will.⁵² For Swedenborg, however, the final such coalescence of angels is into a single 'grand man' animated by the single will of The Lord, whereas in *Urizen* no such single figure presides over the Eternals' collective. As Mee has pointed out (p. 180), the Gnostic idea of a single ineffable Yahveh or Jehovah under whom a collective of Elohim acts as the 'demiurge' which creates matter does not fit either, and seems to be being parodied: 'The Eternals are plural like Elohim, while the role of Yahveh as the one God of the Hebrews is caught by the representation of Urizen as a mysterious and isolated being.'

Urizen is indeed 'A self-contemplating shadow, / In enormous labours occupied' (21-2), possibly in echo of the Brahma to whom he gave 'abstract philosophy' in *The Song of Los*, and who is described thus in Jones's 'Hymn to Narayena': 'Wrapt in eternal solitary shade, / . . . / Ere spirits were infused or forms display'd, / BREHM his own mind survey'd' (19, 22-3). Unable to stand the 'unquenchable burnings' in which the Eternals 'die', or lose their separate identities (56-7), Urizen seeks 'for a joy without pain, / For a solid without fluctuation' (50-1) in the material universe he now sets about creating round himself. Guarded by the 'Eternal Prophet' Los to stop him reinfecting Eternity with this mad scheme, he undergoes numerous transformations marking the fall of both himself and of human consciousness into matter: hence in seven days of parodic creation he is confined to a monstrous body whose 'minute particulars' are very much an expression of his warped 'will and understanding', as Swedenborg might put it. Meanwhile, the 'Rage, fury, intense indignation' of the Eternals express themselves in fiery 'Enormous forms of energy' which appear to Urizen as 'the seven deadly sins of the soul' (88, 92, 93), continuing the central theme of *Marriage*. For his part, confronted with the material world he has created, Urizen curses it, 'for he saw / That no flesh nor spirit could keep / His iron laws one moment' (444-6). From 'the sorrows of Urizen's soul' appears a 'cold shadow . . . / Like a spider's web, moist, cold, and dim' (455-6) and 'twisted like to the human brain. / And all called it *The Net of Religion*' (467-8).

Images of the horrors of religion continue in *The Book of Ahania*, to which I shall only refer briefly. Here Urizen is wounded by a ball of fire thrown at him by his rebellious son Fuzon, and in revenge

fashions a bow from the body of a serpent with which he shoots the poisoned rock of 'Mount Sinai' at Fuzon. While he plans this, there grows from beneath his foot the 'TREE OF MYSTERY', to which he then nails Fuzon's body (*Ahania*, 94, 127-9). This clearly contains an allegory of man's sufferings at the hands of religion – decoyed by a serpent into subservience to the Mosaic law, then crucified in the name of religious mystery – but also some interesting possible allusions to Knight and Darwin. Thus the 'pillar of fire' created by the track of Fuzon's fireball is explicitly that which led Moses from Egypt (45), but in Knight's terms might also be linked to the Egyptian obelisks which 'represented the generative power of the Ερως [Eros], the Osiris, Mithras, or Bacchus, whose centre is the sun, incarnate with man' (*Priapus*, pp. 68, 32). In his claim to be 'God . . . eldest of things!' (86) and with 'his tresses / That gave light to the mornings of Heaven' (89-90), Fuzon is clearly on one level the Egyptian sun religion overthrown by Judaeo-Christianity. In what happens next there seems to be a perverse redeployment of the images of the second compartment of the Portland Vase, as expounded by Darwin in *The Economy of Vegetation*. These too include a dead youth, a bow (that of Eros) and a bearded older man with a tree apparently growing from beneath his foot. If we take the central female figure as another version of Urizen (whose 'parted soul' has indeed just become his female emanation, Ahania; 32), her position *vis-à-vis* the snake between her knees seems closely echoed when 'an enormous dread serpent, / Scaled and poisonous horned, / Approached Urizen even to his knees, / As he sat on [or at least under] his dark rooted oak' (*Ahania*, 61-4). Given that Blake probably engraved the Portland Vase plates for Darwin's poem, he is likely to have known the note in which Darwin links its two trees to those of Life (which Eros is flying past?) and Knowledge/punishment (which the grim Urizenic Pluto seems to be guarding) (see plate 3, and *Economy*, Additional Note XXII to II, 321; p. 57). With the ghastly creations of the Net of Religion and the Tree of Mystery, we shall abandon Urizen to further torments and oppressions in *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*, and return to the figure who is Urizen's main opponent in the 'continents' cycle (and of whom Fuzon seems a more flawed reworking): Orc.

While Urizen rains water from the sky, 'Red Orc' is constantly identified with fire and perhaps prefigured in the 'high flaming rich bosom' of the people which, according to the Duke of Orleans in *The*

French Revolution, the Urizenic Archbishop of Paris tries to but cannot 'measure' (191-2). Another prefiguration is perhaps in the reference in *Marriage* to Edom or Esau, the 'red man' whose vengeful reclaiming of his birthright is prophesied in Isaiah, as well as in *Marriage*'s whole imagery of fiery energy battling with limiting reason. A more specific prefiguration is in 'the new-born fire' of 'A Song of Liberty': 'On those infinite mountains of light, now barred out by the Atlantic sea, the new-born fire stood before the starry king'.⁵³

The Orc whom we first meet by name in *America* also emerges mid-ocean from the drowned continent of Atlantis ('those vast shady hills between America and Albion's shore, / Now barred out by the Atlantic sea'; 107-8), symbolizing the potential link between American and European liberation which Urizen and the 'Guardian Prince of Albion' try to suppress.

And in the red clouds rose a wonder o'er the Atlantic sea –
Intense, naked, a human fire, fierce glowing as the wedge
Of iron heated in the furnace. His terrible limbs were fire,
With myriads of cloudy terrors, banners dark and towers
Surrounded; heat but not light went through the murky atmosphere.

(24-8)

In Orc's 'heat but not light' there is perhaps an echo of Swedenborg's equation of heat with divine love and light with divine wisdom:⁵⁴ in the terms of *Marriage*, Orc is id-like passion opposed to superego-like received wisdom. Or primary to it: 'Then, Mars, thou wast our centre, and the planets three flew round / Thy crimson disc; so ere the sun was rent from thy red sphere' (33-4). Despite the cosmological oddity of 'the planets three', this identification of Orc with a pre-solar Mars may be related to the idea of a primal fiery explosion from which the sun and other planets emerged, which Blake could have found in Darwin's *Economy*: 'Through all his realms the kindling Ether runs, / And the mass starts into a million suns' (1, 105-6).

Darwin's poem may also be a source for the idea of a giant form through whose agency the fire of freedom spreads from America to France: like the electricity drawn from the clouds by Benjamin Franklin, 'The patriot-flame with quick contagion ran, / Hill lighted hill, and man electrised man' (II, 367-8). While 'Sad Superstition wails her empire torn', the 'Giant-form on GALLIA's plains', hitherto

chained 'By the weak hands of Confessors and Kings' (II, 375, 377, 380), also awakes:

– Touch'd by the patriot-flame, he rent amazed
The flimsy bonds, and round and round him gazed;
Starts up from earth, above the admiring throng
Lifts his Colossal form, and towers along;
High o'er his foes his hundred arms He rears,
Plowshares his swords, and pruning hooks his spears. (385–90)

The 'hundred arms' are an allusion to the giant Briareus, whose relevance to Orc I will consider shortly; more broadly, the image of the common people as a sleeping giant who only has to rend his ideological chains to restore peace to the world is rooted in a long radical tradition, which Blake links to many other powerful images through Orc. Thus he is also a prime spokesman for the antinomian belief that Christ's resurrection may be repeated in new terms at any moment – 'The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their stations; / The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrapped up' (37–8) – and that then not only the Ten Commandments and the moral law but religion itself will be made redundant:

The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands
What night he led the starry hosts through the wide wilderness –
That stony law I stamp to dust, and scatter religion abroad
To the four winds as a torn book, and none shall gather the leaves.
(61–4)

As we shall see, this identification of Orc with a new Christ who parallels but also displaces the old is carried through in *Europe* and *The Song of Los*.

But in tying some of the imagery already discussed together, it is useful to consider Orc's name. Though commentators have related this to the Latin for 'whale' or even the Greek for 'testicles', there seems more mileage in the often-suggested link with 'Orcus', one of the Latin names for hell and hence cognate with the *Marriage's* 'the eternal Hell revives'.⁵⁵ Less often considered, however, is the allusion included in the first naming of Orc as such in *America* by Albion's Angel (except in the 'Preludium', which was written later and is discussed below):

Art thou not Orc, who serpent-formed
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children?
Blasphemous demon, Antichrist, hater of dignities?
(54–6)

While Hell and its serpent-emissary Satan might be said by an orthodox angel to devour mankind, the most celebrated devourer of children as they are born is the classical Cronus, the first three letters of whose name spell *Orc* backwards. If this derivation seems far-fetched, it can be compared to those of *Los*, clearly identifiable with the sun ('Sol'), and *Thel*, who seeks gentle oblivion by a river comparable to *Lethe*. Cronus' other main associations are with time, a happy golden age and the castration of his father *Uranus*, in revenge for the imprisonment of his brothers the Cyclopes in *Tartarus*. As has already been suggested, *Uranus*' main role as a rain and sky god makes him a clear model for *Urizen*, though with the last two syllables reversed, and though *Orc* is not *Urizen*'s son, their relationship is generally depicted in the Oedipal terms of youth overthrowing impotent old age. In *The Book of Ahania*, *Urizen* is in fact wounded in the groin by his very *Orc*-like son *Fuzon*, from which *Ahania* springs as do *Aphrodite* and/or the *Furies* in various accounts of *Uranus*' wound.⁵⁶

As the bringer of a new golden age after the death of the old *Urizenic* religions at the end of *The Song of Los*, *Orc* combines the ideas of *Cronus*/*Saturn* and the returned Christ of the millennium. This idea is very strongly prefigured in the design of the plate on which he is first identified by Albion's Angel in *America*, where the bloodcurdling violence of the text is superimposed against possibly the most idyllic scene Blake ever produced, with two children lying down with a ram beneath a tree harbouring birds of paradise as a gorgeous sun rises behind them.⁵⁷ But all of the aspects so far mentioned can be related to *Cronus*' association with *Time*, in its dual aspects of destroyer – eating its own children, incapacitating the old – and restorer – bringer of new energies and the 'thought-creating fires' of progress (*Song of Los*, II, 6). *Time* as the destroyer of superstition appears in Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*

– Here *Time*'s huge fingers grasp his giant mace,
And dash proud Superstition from her base,
Rend her strong towers and gorgeous fanes, and shed
The crumbling fragments round her guilty head. (II, 183–6)

rather as the starry king is 'Buried in the ruins' of his 'castles, slings and rocks' in 'A Song of Liberty' (*Marriage*, V, 15–16). While *Cronus*' eating of his and his sister-wife *Rhea*'s children might seem to constitute him as a life-denying figure, these children are the future

Olympian gods; and Blake establishes from his first naming that Orc specifically threatens the children of Enitharmon who, in *Europe* and *Song of Los*, represent various false religions.

Like Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*, Blake seems to back the much-repressed Titans and Cyclopes of Cronus' generation as against the father who imprisoned some of them and the gods of 'state religion' who overthrew all of them. According to Robert Graves in *The Greek Myths*, the brothers that Cronus was avenging on his father were the one-eyed blacksmith Cyclopes imprisoned either in Tartarus (Orcus?) or the volcano Etna, and his other brothers included the hundred-handed giant Briareus and the Titan Atlas, banished 'to a British island in the farthest west' and the West African Atlas Mountains respectively.⁵⁸ In *The Song of Los*, we learn that before his American resurrection, 'Orc on Mount Atlas howled, chained down with the chain of jealousy' (I, 21) – the West African Atlas merging into the Atlantic-covered Atlantis, as the etymology of these names implies. Thus most of Orc's main associations – the smithying (the 'wedge of iron heated in the furnace' (*America*, 23–6)), the hundred-handed giant (i.e. the people), the Western or 'Atlantic' imprisonment – seem to be included in this myth, which Blake could have got from Hesiod, engrafting onto it radical significances already partly in the air, as in Darwin and other sources.

In Christian terms, Orc as 'time' embodies but also parodies the millennarian idea of the second coming of Christ as a political transformation. In *Europe*, we cover a much longer period, both before and after the revolution of *America*. We now learn that Orc has been chained down for 1,800 years (i.e. since the birth of Christ) by his parents Los and the more dominant Enitharmon, who keeps him bound to prevent him harming her other children – representing various aspects of orthodox religion. She does, however, allow him a conditional liberty to entertain and revivify her court like a mixture between Bacchus and Milton's Samson; and after waking from a long dream climaxing in the American Revolution, she unwisely orders him to 'smile', whereupon he escapes her clutches, 'And in the vineyards of red France appeared the light of his fury' (200).

Thus outlined, the poem can be seen as depicting a semi-conscious, half-repressed and half-liberalized Europe whose amused toyings with the revolutionary forces unleashed in America give it more than it bargained for. The links between Orc and Christ

implied by the 1,800-year time span are reinforced by repeated echoes of Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'. In Milton's poem, the birth of 'the Heav'n-born childe' in midwinter introduces the ideas of Nature and her 'paramour' the Sun, abashed before the 'greater Sun' of Christ. To reassure her, Christ brings war to an end, at least temporarily; and the music accompanying his birth identifies him as 'the mighty Pan', for whom eventually 'Time will run back and fetch the age of gold' (135). Already 'Th'old Dragon' is 'under ground / In straiter limits bound', as witnessed by the routing of the pagan gods, like night spirits dispersed at sunrise.⁵⁹

Europe literally reverses many of these ideas and images: the abashed couple of Nature and the Sun have become the arrogant Enitharmon and a 'Los' whose name spells 'Sol' backwards; the pagan gods to be routed have become state religion in the shape of Enitharmon's children; and, above all perhaps, the 'Heav'n-born childe' has become a 'secret child' and merged with the bound 'Dragon' in the figure of Orc. The 1,800-year 'sleep' of Enitharmon / *Europe* is a parody of the temporary 'peace' following Christ's birth: only with the new day of revolution will time 'run back and fetch the age of gold', that is, the age of Saturn/Cronus whose name 'runs back' in that of Orc.

At the start of 'Asia', the second part of *The Song of Los*, the 'howl from Europe' leads 'the kings of Asia' to lament that their ancient religious systems are under threat from the 'thought-creating fires of Orc' (II, 6), although many of their favourite practices sound more like those of the British government at war with Orcian France in 1795. Thus they want their counsellors to 'fix allegoric labour, / To invent allegoric riches', to 'call for fires in the city' and to 'cut off the bread from the city': which could be linked respectively to the introduction of paper money, the burning of Priestley's house in the state-instigated Birmingham riot of 1791, and the refusal to distribute or lower the price of bread despite wartime scarcity. All this is to be done to keep the people cowed and imaginatively repressed, 'That the pride of the heart may fail' (II, 17-27).

Apart from as the traditional home of despotic empires, Asia is chiefly important as the site of Judaea, that is, the birthplace of state religion, whither Urizen now returns to stay 'in his ancient place'. As Orc's 'raging in European darkness' becomes visible as 'a pillar of fire above the Alps', the 'sullen earth' shrinks; but as the last of many other shrinkings throughout the poem, this signals the final moment

of transformation when the dead rise from their graves and the earth is 'convulsed' into a state of orgasmic fertility:

The grave shrieks with delight and shakes
 Her hollow womb, and clasps the solid stem;
 Her bosom swells with wild desire,
 And milk and blood and glandous wine
 In rivers rush and shout and dance
 On mountain, dale and plain.

(II, 59–64)

As in the Book of Revelation, a final cosmic battle over Jerusalem heralds the millennium, which Blake was not the only poet to depict in such sexualized terms (see William Cowper's *The Task*, VI, 763–8: 'Rivers of gladness water all the earth, / And clothe all climes with beauty; the reproach / Of barrenness is past. The fruitful field / Laughs with abundance'). In Blake's yet more graphic version, the words 'clasps the solid stem' presumably refer to Orc's 'pillar of fire . . . / Like a serpent of fiery flame', which thus literally consummates the Second Coming. But if Orc *is* Christ, he is not the 'Jesus' of 'Africa', but time itself, running backwards and in doing so reversing the Urizenic 'progress' of religion.

In the Urizen cycle, Orc only appears in *Urizen*, as a baby who is chained down to his rock as a kind of 'prequel' to his feats in the 'continents' cycle. It is arguable that by now he is also imaginatively chained down – and that that chaining down has something to do with sex. It is as if the orgasmic climax of *The Song of Los* is also the end of this character other than as a cipher in other people's power games, and the forces he represents are no longer really imaginable very positively in a poem about complex bonding relationships rather than stark oppositions. This is also perhaps the case in a part of *America* which I have not touched on: the 'Preludium' in which a chained Orc seems repeatedly to rape 'the shadowy daughter of Urthona', who seems to be suffering horribly from bearing his children in the similar 'Preludium' to *Europe*. Put very simply, the *America* Preludium shows Orc in a bad light, his liberating 'energy' turned into a brutal domination of someone else; and also, for some critics, throwing a shadow over his appearance in *America* proper and giving rise to the idea of an inevitable 'Orc cycle', in which revolution turns to oppression.⁶⁰ I would argue that the Preludiums are not really continuous with the poems they introduce, but offer different scenarios, in which sex has become a complicating and tormenting factor.

So far I hope I have shown some of the ways in which Blake unpicks many of the assumptions of orthodox religion by setting them in contexts which reverse their normal meanings. But in the area of sexual relations, such reversals of specific meaning do not so easily upset the broader conventional paradigms within which they operate. This is perhaps particularly the case with the idea of 'emanations', by which Blake effects some fascinating reshuffling of different aspects of characters such as Urizen and Los, but in a way which reiterates the traditional idea of a 'fall' from male to female. When these female emanations then start having sexual relationships with their menfolk, there is a real problem of identity: are they now autonomous 'personalities' (however provisional that term needs to be when applied to Blake), or are they chiefly reminders of a Neoplatonic distaste for a 'fall into matter' which is all too conveniently symbolized by a collapse into the arms of seductive womanhood?

I shall be considering this issue particularly in the cases of *Europe* and *Urizen*, but shall look first at *Visions*, where this is not the problem and where sexual inequality is strikingly related to the whole structure of Urizenic religion. Based on the Ossianic poem 'Oithona', whose abducted heroine chooses death over dishonour, it reverses such traditional attitudes in the story of Oothoon, who, setting off to meet her lover Theotormon, is instead raped by the brutal Bromion. For the rest of the poem, the three characters explore their feelings about this event as expressed in a symbolic physical grouping: Bromion and Oothoon bound back to back in a cave while Theotormon hugs himself in grief.⁶¹ The identification of Oothoon with 'the soft soul of America' (3) and Bromion's arrogant boasting that 'Thy soft American plains are mine' and 'Stamped with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun; / . . . / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent' (20-3) suggest that she is the spirit of American freedom trying to bring her message to Theotormon's Britain, but prevented by the persistence of slavery in America and the British West Indies. Theotormon seems to rule the waves (called 'Theotormon's reign'; 15), and his self-tormenting, inward-turned attitude to the whole situation makes him an effective parody of a British liberalism too weakened by self-doubt to try to remedy things. On this political level, the only hope for reform in England is suggested, but no more, in the repeated refrain 'The daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs' (43, 103, 218).

But as this refrain implies, the poem also engages with debates about feminism, or at least with a woman's right not to be wholly defined by what has been done to her sexually and against her will. Whether or not Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was published before Blake wrote it, he had illustrated some of her work and would know her views within the Joseph Johnson circle. Daringly, though 'Bromion rent her with his thunders' (16) certainly sounds like rape, Oothoon never makes an issue of her unwillingness, seeking instead to win Theotormon round by celebrating the pleasures of desire and querying the whole ethic of modesty. It is in this critique that the religious issues begin to emerge, perhaps beginning with Oothoon's claim to 'call with holy voice' for Theotormon's eagles to 'rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast' (37-9). The image here recalls Prometheus, whose daily torment by Zeus's eagles for aiding mankind is one of this period's great images of moral superiority over a perverted justice which claims to be divine, although her apparently masochistic pleasure at the sadism she has brought out in Theotormon - 'Theotormon severely smiles; her soul reflects the smile' (41) - is one of the poem's complicating aspects.

She goes on to argue that one person cannot be made in another's image or judged by their experience, giving a list of examples culminating in the parson's lack of right to 'claim the labour of the farmer' (128) who pays him tithes: how is the 'labour' of the two comparable, and if they are not, how does the parson convince the farmer that he must pay him? At this point, Oothoon's question elongates into its own answer with a picture of the priest's use of his religious ideology to enslave the population as a whole, throwing up on the way yet more examples of how people are constantly made to subordinate their own needs to those of others.

With what sense does the parson claim the labour of the farmer?
 What are his nets and gins and traps, and how does he surround him
 With cold floods of abstraction and with forests of solitude,
 To build him castles and high spires, where kings and priests may dwell,
 Till she who burns with youth and knows no fixed lot, is bound
 In spells of law to one she loathes. And must she drag the chain
 Of life in weary lust? (128-34)

Eventually, 'the wheel of false desire' produces 'the abhorred birth' of a son who must in turn 'dwell with one he hates, and do the deed

he loathes'. It is an extraordinary passage, in which a standard dissenting query about tithes broadens into a critique of state power and a family structure where individual feelings are routinely crushed, with religion as the central force holding all these centrifugal concerns together. The critiques thus linked are at the cutting edge of radical thought: the linking of church taxes with those maintaining the monarchy and aristocracy was a key issue in the early stages of the French Revolution and a major element in Paine's *The Rights of Man*.⁶² The critique of marriage and the family closely resembles that of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790): 'A brutal attachment . . . has led [parents] to force their children to . . . do violence to a natural impulse, and run into legal prostitution'.⁶³

Later, Oothoon challenges Theotormon's need to define her sexual feelings in the terms of his conventional code of modesty:

And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty,
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite?
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed. (168-70)

Since sexual feelings are unavoidable, the result of the code of modesty is secret masturbation, one of the birthplaces of religion:

The youth, shut up from
The lustful joy, shall forget to generate and create an amorous image
In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.
Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of continence,
The self-enjoyings of self-denial? Why dost thou seek religion? (180-4)

Her critique here is close to Freud's idea of sublimation: that the highest and grandest ideas emerge from the repression of feelings thought to be the lowest and dirtiest.

A virtually opposite view of women's relationship to Urizenic religion appears in the figure of Enitharmon in *Europe*, who at one point upbraids a briefly glimpsed Oothoon: 'Why wilt thou give up woman's secrecy, my melancholy child?' (182-3). Enitharmon is a staunch proponent of female power based on a religion of false prudery:

That woman, lovely woman, shall have dominion
. . .
Go, tell the human race that woman's love is sin,
That an eternal life awaits the worm of sixty winters
In an allegorical abode where existence hath never come.

Forbid all joy, and from her childhood shall the little female
Spread nets in every secret path. (35-41)

Perhaps even more than in *Visions*, one of the main arguments of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) emerges clearly from Enitharmon's embodiment of it: that through 'a romantic species of modesty' which sees even an understanding of botanical reproduction as inconsistent with 'female delicacy', women's 'artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning' and 'illicit sway'.⁶⁴ In presenting traditional Christian repression of 'woman's love' as a female plot, Blake expands on a note he had made earlier on Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (1788): 'whatever is Negative is Vice. But the origin of this mistake in Lavater & his cotemporaries is, They suppose that Woman's Love is Sin; in consequence all the Loves and Graces with them are Sin'.⁶⁵ The phrase 'woman's love' is itself ambiguous: is it women loving or having sex with men, or men loving or having sex with women? The shift within the phrase 'woman's love' itself from women as subjects to women as objects seems to enact the suppression it describes.

In her dream, Enitharmon rejoices to see her repressive code ramifying outward into a wider social oppression throughout Albion:

Enitharmon laughed in her sleep to see (Oh, woman's triumph!)
Every house a den, every man bound; the shadows are filled
With spectres, and the windows wove over with curses of iron.
Over the doors *Thou shalt not*, and over the chimneys *Fear* is written.
With bands of iron round their necks fastened into the walls
The citizens, in leaden gyves the inhabitants of suburbs
Walk heavy; soft and bent are the bones of villagers. (131-7)

This, clearly, is the landscape of 'The Garden of Love' and 'London' in *Songs of Experience*, where political tyranny thrives on the religion-sanctioned stifling of passion, especially within the institution of marriage. This is 'woman's triumph!' insofar as 'Over the doors *Thou shalt not*' (or 'hindering of act in another' – Annotations to Lavater, p. 88) is pre-eminently what the code of female modesty is all about, though we may argue it is an eminently necessary one in an age where most of the power to 'act' lies with men.

The Enitharmon we meet in *Urizen* is a far more sympathetic figure, but her birth from the self-division of Los makes her the first major example of the system of 'emanations', or females born from the fall into disintegration of previously male figures, to which the idea of the female becomes increasingly tied in Blake's

later poems. Though originally an 'Eternal' set to stop Urizen from spreading his mad religion further by confining him to a fixed form (i.e. the human body), Los has eventually become exhausted by his task and is now a partial prisoner of the Urizenic mindset, unable to bridge the gap back to Eternity and, worse, afflicted with pity for Urizen. It is this pity that now oozes out of him to form 'a round globe of blood / Trembling upon the void' (*Urizen*, 293-4) which, after branching out 'Fibres of blood, milk and tears' (311) becomes Enitharmon, 'a female form trembling and pale' (314). Since 'pity divides the soul' (288), the Eternals are horrified at 'the first female form now separate' (322), so they finally flee from the world, closing it from their sight with the dark curtain called 'Science' (331).

This emergence of a female figure from a male one is the first of what Blake will soon come to call 'emanations', and here continues the idea of Los as the falling Adam. The idea that Enitharmon represents at once the female principle and a form of pity for others which is really a reprehensible kind of self-division of an essentially male spiritual wholeness, arguably expresses a sexual and ethical politics which will become increasingly essential to Blake's system from now on. The attack on pity has earlier had a politically radical expression in 'The Human Abstract' in *Songs of Experience*: 'Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody poor'.⁶⁶ Now, however, there is little feeling that Los's pity is inadequate because he should be rectifying an injustice instead: Urizen deserves his fate and Los has done the best he could for him. Rather, there is a crypto-Nietzschean idea that one should have the strength to live with one's necessary cruelty, rather than 'looking back' (280) as Los fatally does before this calamity. As the disastrous embodiment of such a glance backwards, Enitharmon subliminally recalls both Lot's (Los's?) wife and Eurydice, whose stories encode a similar somewhat relentless message.

This negative reading of Enitharmon as a disaster area is supported by the Eternals' revolted establishment of materialist science to stop her or any future beings from glimpsing Eternity. A more positive reading is possible, however, in that the couple do at least give birth to Orc, who (if we feed this poem into the 'continents' cycle) will eventually help lead a way back to Eternity. Indeed, Los's backward-looking pity for Urizen was also his grief over the severed connection with all the other Eternals, and as the incarnation of that

grief Enitharmon does in a sense represent his only remaining link with them.

With the advent of sex, Los is called *man* for the first time: 'Man begetting his likeness / On his own divided image' (337-8). Arguably he becomes a man in other ways too: jealously resenting his child in ways described in purely human terms in the darkly Oedipal *Song of Experience* 'Infant Sorrow', and eventually binding him to a rock with 'the Chain of Jealousy'. To take a brief dive into the undergrowths of mythology: the cause of Los's resentment is Orc's quasi-incestuous relationship with his mother from conception on: lying on her bosom by day and in her womb only at night, and growing from a 'worm' to 'a serpent / . . . / Round Enitharmon's loins folding' (346-50). In an alternative creation myth to Hesiod's, Robert Graves describes how Euronyme, the goddess of all things, mates with her serpent-son Ophion to produce the universe, but when he claims the credit she bruises his head and banishes him underground.⁶⁷ As well as sources such as Jacob Bryant, Blake may have got a hint of this myth from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (x, 580-2), where the devils 'fabled how the Serpent, whom they called / Ophion, with Euronyme, the wide- / Encroaching Eve perhaps' once ruled Olympus. If Enitharmon echoes Euronyme as well as Eve at this point, Los's paternity of Orc may itself be in doubt; as is hinted by the fact that conception seems to take place when Enitharmon flees from Los 'In perverse and cruel delight' and then 'sick, felt a worm in her womb' (334-5, 341-2). Thompson has related this passage to the Muggletonian idea of 'the Serpent-Angel's actual copulation with Eve and transmutation into flesh and blood in her womb'; and, as another possible link between the pre-Christian myth and antinomian byways, Northrop Frye refers at one point to 'the gnostic cult of the Ophites, who worshipped the serpent as Jesus' (137).⁶⁸

The last emanation I would like very briefly to consider is Ahania, who emerges from Urizen when he is wounded by Fuzon – in a possible echo of Venus' birth from Uranus' genitals. Angrily spurned by him at first, in the final part of *The Book of Ahania* she becomes a redemptive force, reminding him of the unbounded oneness they used to enjoy in Eternity in terms reminiscent of Oothoon's offer of group sex to Theotormon at the end of *Visions*.⁶⁹ Herself a Ceres-like fertility figure, Ahania also reminds Urizen that in Eternity he was a sower with a 'lap full of seed' and a 'hand full of generous fire' who was meant 'On the human soul to cast / The seed of eternal science'

(*Ahania*, 225–6). In other words, *Ahania* both recalls and is Urizen's 'better side'; but in acknowledging that Urizen even has a better side, Blake finally kills off the old Urizen who represented the irredeemable wrongness of state religion and 'the primeval priest's assumed power'. With its hint of redemption, *The Book of Ahania* opens by a crack the door that will finally readmit Urizen to the pantheon of the Eternals in *Vala, Or the Four Zoas*, where 'bright *Ahania* took her seat by Urizen in songs & joy'.⁷⁰ And with this readmittance, arguably, comes Blake's acceptance of the *right* kinds of primeval priest and state religion. As the whole idea of emanations as embodying a suspect 'pity' has implied from the start, the female principle does indeed prove treacherous to the stark oppositions from which the Urizen cycle set out.

The great epics *Vala*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem* accompany a return to something like recognizable Christianity in Blake's work. Though *Vala* concludes 'The dark religions are departed, & sweet science reigns', the now-redeemed science is largely that of Christian understanding rather than the tent of ignorance imposed on Urizen's world by the outraged eternals. In response to *Milton's* opening question as to whether those feet walked on England's mountains, *Jerusalem* restores at least some kind of biblical religion to the state of Albion. In retrospect, the violent satire of the Urizen cycle becomes only a phase of this larger redemptive story, but in the context of the 1790s it still reads like a phase in which the tigers of wrath may have been wiser than the horses of instruction.

CHAPTER 4

The tribes of mind: the Coleridge circle in the 1790s

Coleridge wrote obsessively about atheism in his prose outpourings and it haunts his poetry, whether in such explicit embodiments as ‘the owlet Atheism’ unable to see the sun in ‘Fears in Solitude’, or in the more subtextual perturbations of his great symbolic poems ‘Kubla Khan’ and ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’. In an understandable oversimplification, this obsession has sometimes been presented as a betrayal of his youthful ‘Jacobinism’, a belated turning to a religiose and German-inspired interest in metaphysics to cover his retreat into political reaction. Hence in Thomas Love Peacock’s parodic *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), the Coleridge-figure Mr Flosky reels from disappointment with the French Revolution to the conclusion that

the overthrow of the feudal fortresses of tyranny and superstition was the greatest calamity that had ever befallen mankind; and that their only hope now was to rake the rubbish together, and rebuild it without any of those loopholes by which the light had originally crept in. To qualify himself for a coadjutor in this laudable task, he plunged into the central opacity of Kantian metaphysics, and lay *perdu* several years in transcendental darkness, till the common daylight of common sense became intolerable to his eyes.¹

This neat reversal of Coleridge’s image of the sun-blind ‘owlet Atheism’ is not quite accurate, in that he was passionately and ‘metaphysically’ Christian from his most outspokenly radical phase (around 1793 to 1796) to his most conservative; nonetheless, the nature of his Christianity itself changed dramatically, and many of his writings on the subject before and after that change constitute an enthralling catalogue of the positions available at the time that *could* be charged with atheism, within the psychodrama of self-accusation

and self-exculpation staged by a brain exceptionally alert to the resonances of the word.

The first of these positions was the Unitarianism which he was later to reject as 'Atheism or Spinosism', and to which he became passionately converted at Cambridge following the expulsion of the inspirational Unitarian lecturer William Frend for both denying the Trinity and supporting the French Revolution in 1793.² Though Coleridge never met Joseph Priestley, he clearly took him as something of a role model in his Unitarian period, planning to follow him to Pennsylvania in the ill-fated 'Pantisocracy' scheme with Robert Southey and others. He also, arguably, took over many of Priestley's tactics as a religious 'stirrer', challenging his many infidel friends to defend themselves in ways which he himself clearly found almost addictively liberating.³ Though it is sometimes argued that he was frightened away from his youthful 'Jacobinism' upon discovering to his horror that he had fallen among infidels, it is nearer the truth to say that, like Priestley, he actively constructed the interlocutory 'circle' by which he was surrounded in the 1790s, in full knowledge of its religious unorthodoxy. For the first part of this chapter I shall be exploring some members of this circle partly in terms of their interactions with Coleridge, but partly for their own sakes and for the picture they help to construct of 'Romantic' atheism and free-thought in the 1790s.

Unitarianism – itself hovering ambivalently between freethought and Christianity – at this time constituted a political and literary as well as a religious culture, to introduce which more fully I shall now devote some time to its greatest literary figure, Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Though only slightly acquainted on a personal level, she and Coleridge were well aware of each other's work and had at least two highly significant exchanges of view, as we shall see.⁴ I shall not, however, simply be discussing her in relation to him, but in terms of her stature both as a poet in her own right and as a representative of a Unitarian tradition whose importance in the radical culture of the 1780s and 1790s cannot be overestimated.

Barbauld's *Poems*, 1773 represent this tradition in already mature and confident form. In 'The Invitation' she describes Warrington Academy for Dissenters, where her father John Aikin taught alongside Joseph Priestley, as a place where 'heav'n-born science plumes her eagle-wings' outside an Oxbridge tradition where 'Too long had bigot rage, with malice swell'd, / Crush'd her strong pinions'. Along

with travellers, physical scientists, politically radical 'patriots' and poets, the Academy will produce preachers who 'Draw the dread veil that wraps th'eternal throne, / And launch our souls into the bright unknown'.⁵

Priestley, who combines most of these abilities, is addressed in 'The Mouse's Petition' as if from the subject of one of his 'experiments with different kinds of air':

If e'er thy breast with freedom glow'd,
And spurn'd a tyrant's chain,
Let not thy strong oppressive force
A free-born mouse detain. (9-12)

Not completely tongue-in-cheek, this early animal liberation poem anticipates Coleridge's 'Jacobinical' 'To a Young Ass', and raises the kind of unorthodox religious speculation to be found throughout Barbauld's work: 'If mind, as ancient sages taught, / A never dying flame, / Still shifts thro' matter's varying forms', then killing a mouse may 'Dislodge a kindred mind'; alternatively, if this life is all we share, pity should persuade Priestley 'That little *all* to spare' (29-31, 36, 40). It is left open whether this life is only the mouse's 'all', or man's too.

In her more specifically religious 'Hymns', there is a somewhat chilly sense of God's non-approachability: a creator 'unbounded, and alone', he will be essentially unaffected when the sun and earth expire, as they will, 'Amidst the common ruins of the sky':

Th'eternal fire that feeds each vital flame,
Collected, or diffus'd, is still the same.
He dwells within his own unfathom'd essence,
And fills all space with his unbounded presence.
(Hymn 1, 9, 46, 51-4)

The calm acceptance of the ultimate collapse of the universe echoes a major materialist motif from Lucretius to Hume; and the idea of energy or 'fire' as the divine essence, by definition coextensive with all matter whatever its current form, suggests a variant of pantheism. While Christ is apparently given full divine honours in the account of his resurrection, discreet Unitarian qualifications are evident in such phrasings as 'Descended *like* a pitying GOD' and 'The *Man* of Calvary' (Hymn III, 19; V, 23; my emphases).

In the larger-scale 'An Address to the Deity', many aspects of the great Romantic lyrics of Coleridge and Wordsworth are anticipated.

The opening address to 'God of my life! and author of my days!' takes Barbauld to a present tense trance-like state where 'all my sense is lost in infinite, / And one vast object fills my aching sight' (19-20). As after the 'glad preamble' of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* or the first part of Coleridge's 'The Eolian Harp', however, the mood cannot be sustained: 'But soon, alas! this holy calm is broke', as worldly concerns return (21). On one hand is the temptation to take transient pleasures at face value (as in the 'present gifts / Of humbler industry' of *The Prelude* (1805), I, 144-5); on the other, to despair in adversity, losing the awareness that 'GOD is seen in all, and all in GOD' (56). As often for Coleridge, if not pantheistically identical with God himself, Nature is his handwriting:

I read his awful name, emblazoned high
With golden letters on the illumined sky;
Nor less the mystic characters I see
Wrought in each flower, inscribed in every tree. (57-60)

As in Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', this awareness carries over into 'busy crowded cities', and as in Coleridge's 'Religious Musings' leads to an actual identification of the self with God: 'Thus shall I rest, / . . . / And feel myself omnipotent in thee' (69-72).

'A Summer Evening's Meditation' also plunges us into a present tense moment as the stars and planets appear just after a rain storm in a sky 'worthy of the Master; he, whose hand / With hieroglyphics elder than the Nile / Inscribed the mystic tablet' (31-3). In the evening silence

the self-collected soul
Turns inward, and beholds a stranger there
Of high descent, and more than mortal rank;
An embryo GOD; a spark of fire divine. (53-6)

This spark is the 'that of God in every man' of Quaker and other Dissenting traditions; the metaphor of fire again conveying the idea of eternal energy which will outlive the sun both on this particular evening and when it finally 'Forgets his wonted journey thro' the east' (60). Thus uplifted, the poet's soul takes a sort of space flight past the planets - neatly identified with their appropriately superseded myths (thus Saturn 'Sits like an exiled monarch'; 81) - and into

the dread confines of eternal night,
To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,

The desarts of creation, wide and wild;
Where embryo systems and unkindled suns
Sleep in the womb of chaos.

(93-7)

This scary Lucretian chaos of perpetual creation⁶ attests to the scientific interests of many of Barbauld's poems, and raises the question of God's actual physical whereabouts in this universe: 'does the beamy shoulder of Orion / Support thy throne?' (104-5). As in the great sceptical climax of Wordsworth's 'Prospectus' to the *Excursion*, God is asked to look on man with pity, 'not in thy names / Of terror clad; not with those thunders armed / That conscious Sinai felt' (106-8). In Blakean terms, God's Urizenic roles as material creator and thundering law-giver are to be set aside, although once again the climactic 'unveiling' – typical of so much poetry of the time – may or may not finally explain 'all these splendors' in the future.

In 'To Mr [S. T.] C[olerid]ge' (1797; published 1799), Barbauld is among the first to identify Coleridge's enmeshment in the 'maze of metaphysic lore' as the main threat to his poetic and political potential. Speaking with an insider's knowledge of the temptation for 'each mind / Of finer mould, acute and delicate' to rest 'Midway the hill of science' in a place where 'huge shadows stretch / And seem realities; while things of life / . . . / Fade to the hue of shadows', she exhorts a Coleridge 'Of Science – of the Muse beloved' to launch into 'fair exertion, for bright fame sustained, / For friends, for country'.⁷ This echoes the contrast Coleridge himself sets up in 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement' (1796), between 'pampering the coward heart / With feelings all too delicate for use' and going forth, 'Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in Christ'.⁸

Though not a feminist (see the slyly undermining 'The Rights of Woman'), Barbauld was a political radical long before Coleridge and, arguably, long after too. 'To the Poor' (1795) is an outburst of resentment against the rich who, 'to heaven and fate resigned, / Bear *thy* afflictions with a patient mind' and who then threaten the poor with Hell if they protest. Though the poor man must 'Bend thy meek neck beneath the foot of power', he should not 'deem the Lord above like lords below' but 'Prepare to meet a father undismayed, / Nor fear the God whom priests and kings have made'.⁹ Though the appeal to keep the peace should be noted, the instinctive identification of the conventional God with priestcraft and kingcraft here

recalls the 'God and his priest and king' of Blake's *Experience* 'Chimney-Sweeper', as well as many passages from Coleridge's 'Religious Musings'.

Though Coleridge would soon abandon such radical rhetoric, 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven', Barbauld's last poem for which she was attacked so viciously that she ceased publishing, shows her still engaged with a later, more evolved phase of political radicalism. In some ways like the first half of Coleridge's recantational 'Fears in Solitude' (1798), the poem deplores French military expansionism while arguing that a Britain 'who has shared the guilt, must share the woe'.¹⁰ From a celebration of such heroes of radical Dissent as Milton, Newton, Cowper, Sir William Jones, the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, the prisoner reformer John Howard, Davy, Franklin and Priestley, we move to a panoramic picture of the rise of the 'Spirit' or 'Genius' of civilization, very much along the Lucretian lines of Knight's *Progress of Civil Society*, with its transfer of power from the Mediterranean to the northern nations headed by Britain, until we too have become decadent:

Arts, arms and wealth destroy the fruits they bring;
Commerce, like beauty, knows no second spring.
Crime walks thy streets, Fraud earns her unblest bread,
O'er want and woe thy gorgeous robe is spread,

. . .

With grandeur's growth the mass of misery grows. (315-20)

While Coleridge's 'Fears' attacks Britain for faults of irreligion rather than rank inequality before calling it to arms against France, Barbauld maintains the kind of attack on wealth in some quarters as a source of want in others that unites Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* and Cowper's *Task* with Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy', and like Goldsmith but also like Volney, she decides that once a civilization is dead it is unrestorable: like Volney's Palmyra, for which it is another name, 'In desert solitudes then Tadmor sleeps' (249).¹¹ As at the end of *The Deserted Village*, the only hope lies in America, whither the pantisocrat Coleridge once planned to follow Priestley: 'For see, - to other climes the Genius soars, / He turns from Europe's desolated shores; / . . . / Thy world, Columbus, shall be free' (321-2, 334). One reason for the poem's critical unpopularity was certainly its pessimism about Britain's chances in the war - even a kind of gloomy welcome of the prospect of French invasion as the not-distant 'hour' which features so prominently in the apocalyptic imagery of Blake

and of Coleridge's 'Religious Musings' in the mid 1790s (47). Another reason must have been the poem's total lack of religious reference, transferring such apocalyptic language to the agency of a 'Spirit' of potent but impermanent cultural awakening, more like Blake's Orc or Shelley's West Wind than the caring God or Christ of Barbauld's earlier poetry:

There walks a Spirit o'er the peopled earth,
Secret his progress is, unknown his birth;
Moody and viewless as the changing wind,
No force arrests his foot, no chains can bind;
Where'er he turns, the human brute awakes. (215-9)¹²

Unfortunately, unlike Orc or the West Wind, the Spirit is going in the other direction: as the Anglo-American war of 1812 looms, he is about to turn his back on Europe forever: a pitiless nineteenth-century law of survival of the fittest rather than an eighteenth-century Rational Dissenter's God of universal benevolence.

As expressing a whole complex of ideas and attitudes which might broadly be defined as 'Unitarian', then, Barbauld was a significant and wide-ranging poet in her own right. Despite the pious look of some of her verse, she denounces political inequality as a trick of priests and kings, denies the divinity of Christ and hints scepticism about such matters as the after-life and the concern of God for his creation, beyond the general notion of an undying 'energy' which seems at times to make him pantheistically synonymous with nature and with the pitiless laws of social change. As Jonathan Wordsworth has said, Barbauld 'pushes Unitarian pantheism further towards Spinoza than Coleridge would have dared to go'.¹³

'There is a God – Coleridge! Though I have been told (*indeed* I do not believe it) that you doubt of his existence and disbelieve a hereafter. No! – you have too much sensibility to be an Infidel.'¹⁴ These words from his beloved Mary Evans, quoted by Coleridge to Robert Southey, demonstrate that it was possible even for those who felt they knew him well to doubt his religion, at least in the heady mid 1790s. The same conclusion of infidelity might easily be drawn – and was – from the friendships and correspondences he deliberately cultivated with such declared atheists as William Godwin and John Thelwall, and with such less clearly declared unbelievers as Southey, Humphry Davy and, indeed, William Wordsworth. It might be argued that after the collapse of the 'Pantisocracy' scheme with

Southey, he continued the same idea of a remote settlement of like-minded people in the West Country, the Lake District and various projected foreign parts, sometimes with the Wordsworths and Southey in various combinations, but with Thelwall, Godwin and Davy also high on the invitation list. It is as if he needed to be in intense relationships with unbelievers whose other views he ardently shared, and whose conversion to his brand of religious enthusiasm was to be one of his main – and most enjoyable – tasks.

It was one in which he was often partially successful. As Nicholas Roe has argued, Robert Southey's shifting views make him a useful 'weathercock' of the period's ideological tendencies, and in 1794 he was pondering becoming a parson while vehemently denying 'the necessity of an established religious faith, and of a religious establishment'.¹⁵ In Nether Stowey, Thomas Poole's cousin John wrote of both poets: 'Each of them was shamefully hot with Democratic Rage as regards politics, and both Infidel as to religion. I was extremely indignant.'¹⁶ More discerning of fine distinctions among his fellow radicals, Thomas Poole himself singled Southey out in particular on their first meeting: 'In Religion, shocking to say in a mere boy as he is, I fear he wavers between Deism and Atheism.'¹⁷ As a Godwinian believer in rational rather than emotional or habitual motives for all actions, Southey was teased for being 'averse to Gratiitudinarian Flourishes' by Coleridge, who also described him to the Unitarian George Dyer in 1795 as 'truly a man of *perpendicular Virtue – a downright upright Republican*', but then added, 'He is *Christianizing* apace'.¹⁸ According to Roe, it was ironically Coleridge's 'Christianizing' of Southey that undermined the Godwinian ideals behind Southey's – though not Coleridge's – commitment to the Pantisocratic scheme, which finally collapsed the same year.¹⁹ In the period of their major collaboration from 1794 to 1795, however, their different religious starting points seem to merge comfortably on a middle ground of rational deism, in which God's existence is affirmed but Christ is chiefly a human prophet of revolution.

As with Barbauld, the following brief survey of some of Southey's work is not restricted to its bearing on Coleridge's, but attempts some estimate of its significance in its own right. In *Wat Tyler* (1794), the republican play about the fourteenth-century Peasants' Revolt whose pirated publication in 1817 later so embarrassed him, Southey presents through the revolutionary priest John Ball the Painite idea of a Christ whose main message is 'Woe unto ye, / Ye that are rich

. . . / Sell that ye have, and give unto the poor'.²⁰ After the failure of the Peasants' Revolt he has helped to lead, Ball confides to the God who has enabled his 'ardent mind / To pierce the mists of superstitious falsehood' that he should have taken a harder line when the peasants had the upper hand, but 'the seemly voice of pity has deceived me' (III, i; p. 97). This pity led him to plead for the life of the Archbishop of Canterbury, whom we have seen telling the king to lie to the peasants because 'my Christian power / Absolves you of your promise' and that 'It is the sacred privilege of Kings, / Howe'er they act, to render no account / To man'. The play ends as Ball is hauled to execution, still exclaiming against 'the gore-dyed throne; / That altar of oppression, fed with rites / More savage than the priests of Moloch taught' (II, ii; p. 95; III, ii; p. 98).

Also in 1794, Southey wrote the second and third acts of another play about revolution, *The Fall of Robespierre*, which Coleridge began and then published as his. Though it does not favour Robespierre, the play does celebrate the revolutionary National Convention in which active debate between passionately held points of view leads ultimately to the right decisions. It also, in passing, shows awareness of religious nuances: thus Robespierre justifies his execution of Hébert and others partly on the grounds that they 'durst defy / Omnipotence!', and in the play's final speech after Robespierre's own execution, Barrere spares a moment from his vision of a tyrant-free France to denounce 'Hébert's atheist crew, whose maddening hand / Hurl'd down the altars of the living God, / With all the infidel's intolerance'.²¹ In the specific identification of Hébert, Southey avoids the general tarring of all the revolutionaries as equally atheistic, as in much British propaganda. Indeed, the phrase 'atheist crew' was later applied to the Robespierrists by Wordsworth, who had spent long enough in France at the relevant times to know better.²²

Begun in 1793 and much revised – with Coleridge's help – for its 1796 publication, *Joan of Arc* is a thinly veiled attack on Britain's war with revolutionary France, transposed to the fifteenth century. In the words of one sympathetic critic, Anna Barbauld's brother John Aikin, 'we know not where the ingenuity of a crown lawyer would stop, were he employed to make out a list of innuendos'.²³ In addressing Joan's visions, Southey's preface asserts that 'The aid of angels and devils is not necessary to raise her above mankind; . . . the Maid of Orleans acts wholly from the workings of her own mind,

from the deep feeling of inspiration' (p. 3). Joan herself describes how when young, 'forms of worship' taught her 'artificial awe' of the 'GOD of Terrors'; but in riper years she 'saw the eternal energy pervade / The boundless range of nature' and 'forsook / The house of worship', having 'no thought of sin' (III, p. 28). Arguing that 'Nature doth lead to sin', the priests threaten her with trial by ordeal for witchcraft, from which she is saved by a timely miracle. In depicting the English, the poem cleverly reverses the implications of some key moments from Shakespeare's great 'God on our side' drama, *Henry V*. Thus the prayer where Henry 'gave God the glory' after Harfleur is described as 'impious' in the light of his many brutalities (II, p. 17). Later, a common English soldier echoes Shakespeare's Williams in complaining that '[we] in obedience to our chiefs, / Durst disobey our God', and curses the Archbishop of Canterbury as 'the proud prelate, that blood-guilty man, / Who, trembling for the church's ill-got wealth, / Bade our Fifth Henry claim the crown of France!' (IX, p. 62).

However much of a 'weathercock' in some respects, Southey was highly consistent in others, including his scheme for the major poetic undertaking of his life: his series of massive epics set in as diverse a range of religious cultures as possible. He seems to have planned this from his time at school, from which he was expelled in 1792 for publishing a satirical school magazine called *The Flagellant*, which attacked flogging in blasphemous language as 'the will of Satan'.²⁴ Some time before this, he read Picart's *Religious Ceremonies* (1723), which 'impressed my imagination strongly; and before I left school, I had formed the intention of exhibiting all the more prominent and poetical forms of mythology which have at any time obtained among mankind, by making each the groundwork of an heroic poem'.²⁵ The fact that he was at the same time reading Rousseau, Voltaire and Gibbon suggests the all-religions-are-equal scepticism that may have underlain this idea. In this context, the superstitious Catholicism attacked in *Joan of Arc* can be seen as only the first of a survey of other such superstitions: the Islam of *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801); the Aztec religion of *Madoc* (1805), where Catholicism is trounced again too; and the Hinduism of *The Curse of Kehama* (1810). While the cruelties of these religions are highlighted in the depiction of such horrors as Aztec human sacrifice and the enforced widow suicide and body-crushing Juggernaut which were to become standard in nineteenth-century stereotypes of Hinduism, there is also a clear

fascination with the varieties of religious practice, as demonstrated by copious notes drawn from Sir William Jones and other sources. In the broadly deistic convictions of their more sympathetic characters, there is often a sidelining of the claims of Christianity; this is at any rate the conclusion of an unsigned *Monthly Mirror* review of *The Curse of Kehama*:

we verily believe that Mr Southey will never acquire all the fame, which his poem is capable of conferring, until he obtain readers who reverence and adore his deities; and that time can never come until *The Curse of Kehama* be translated into *Hindoostanee* . . . [It] is calculated to expose our holy and sublime miracles and mysteries, as written in the Sacred Volume, and poetically used by Milton, to all that sort of contempt, which the idle and profane wit of infidelity can heap upon it.²⁶

Marilyn Butler has rightly argued that the massive influence of Southey's epics on such second-generation Romantic poets as Shelley and Byron has been critically undervalued, to the distortion of our sense of the real literary history of the period.²⁷ I shall return to *Thalaba* later in connection with Shelley, particularly in relation to Southey's influential handling of the imagery of the temples of non-Christian religions.

Coleridge's next 'commune' after the collapse of Pantisocracy was the area round Nether Stowey, whither he was invited by the radical tanner Thomas Poole. The Stowey commune was built up by Coleridge's assiduous wooing of William and Dorothy Wordsworth to nearby Alfoxden, and almost augmented by the recruitment of the most celebrated radical of the day, John Thelwall. Seeking a lower profile and fewer government spies on his tail after his hair-breadth acquittal for treason, Thelwall spent part of 1797 at Stowey, where Coleridge looked for a home for him until local harassment of the circle there (including Poole, for establishing a Poor Man's Benefit Club) led to the following plea to stay away: 'If *you* too should come, I am afraid, that even riots & dangerous riots might be the consequence . . . what can it be less than plot & damned conspiracy – a school for the propagation of demagoguery & atheism?'²⁸

In his associates and the general impression he gave to outsiders, then, Coleridge's public image was one of atheism; and, in an often repeated pattern, his fascination with Thelwall's infidelity seems to have been one of the major planks of their friendship. Thus even before they met, he wrote to Thelwall 'Let me see you – I already

know a Deist, & Calvinists, & Moravians whom I love & reverence – & I shall leap forwards to realize my *principles* by *feeling* love and honour for an atheist', and signed off by inscribing this foundational difference between them in the already projected communal retirement: 'We have an hundred lovely scenes about Bristol, which would make you exclaim – O admirable *Nature!* & me, O Gracious *God!*'²⁹ Thelwall had already made their differences highly explicit in a letter of 10 May 1796, criticizing the religious passages of 'Religious Musings' as 'the very acme of abstruse, metaphysical, mystical rant', and its phrase 'th'imbrothelled atheist' as 'one of those illiberal and unfounded calumnies with which Christian meekness never yet disdained to supply the want of argument'. He goes on, "'*Lovely* was the *death* of him whose life was love'" is certainly enough to make any man sick whose taste has not been corrupted by the licentious (I mean "pious") nonsense of the conventicle.' Conceding the possibility that 'my irreligious principles dictate the severity of this criticism', he says Milton's religious poetry is even worse and that 'while I was yet a Christian, and a very zealous one (i.e. when I was about your age), I became thoroughly convinced that Christian poetry was very vile stuff – that religion was a subject which none but a real infidel could handle poetically'.³⁰

There is much of interest in this letter: the identification of the word *atheist* as a trigger for unthinking abuse tallies closely with similar points in Samuel Francis's *Watson Refuted*, published the same year, while the history of conversion from exceptionally zealous Christianity, obviously offered to Coleridge as a 'natural' progression, mirrors that described by Godwin in 'Of Religion'.³¹ Thelwall's preference for a suitably distanced, 'infidel' poetic treatment of religion may relate to his enthusiasm for Darwin's *Botanic Garden*, a copy of which was among the books seized as evidence of treason in his 1794 arrest.³² As the letter shows, from the first the friendship was based on poetry as well as politics; something further indicated in the tonal and stylistic resemblance between Coleridge's blank verse 'Conversation Poems' written between 1795 and 1798 (from 'The Eolian Harp' to 'Frost at Midnight') and Thelwall's 'Lines Written at Bridgewater . . . in Quest of a Peaceful Retreat' (July 1797). The latter poem paints an idyllic picture of the projected Stowey commune, with their wives and children in the background with the Wordsworths and Poole, while in the foreground Coleridge and Thelwall 'delve our little garden plots' and debate

The knotty point – perchance of import high –
 Of moral truth, of causes infinite
 (Creating power, or uncreated worlds
 Eternal and uncaused!), or whatsoe'er
 Of metaphysic or of ethic lore
 The mind with curious subtlety pursues,
 Agreeing or dissenting . . .³³

Whatever Thelwall's objections to Milton's explicitly religious passages, they clearly do not extend to the famous description of the devils' theological debates in *Paradise Lost* II, whose mocking tone this gently echoes. The parenthesis about 'Creating power, or uncreated worlds, / Eternal' resembles the debate between creationist and materialist theories of the universe which Knight's *Progress of Civil Society* begins by declaring unresolvable in a similar satiric passage. The previous winter, Coleridge had raised the issue of materialism in a different context – the death of Thelwall's mother – but in a similar gentle quasi-agnostic tone:

Well, true or false, Heaven is a less gloomy idea than Annihilation! – Dr Beddoes, & Dr Darwin think that *Life* is utterly inexplicable, writing as Materialists – You, I understand, have adopted the idea that it is the result of organized matter acted on by external Stimuli. – As likely as any other system; but you *assume* the thing to be proved . . . I do not know what to think about it . . . but . . . I want to see your Essay on Animal Vitality of which Bowles, the Surgeon, spoke in such high terms, – Yet *he* believes in a *body* & a *soul*.³⁴

The projected religious debates were, then, clearly planned with relish on both sides, and within the shared awareness of much political, poetic and personal common ground, even though Coleridge later denied these links and Thelwall angrily denied his denial.³⁵ Much the same could be said of Coleridge's relationship with William Godwin, whom he first met and argued with in London in 1795 (along with his friend Holcroft, whom Coleridge disliked because 'He absolutely infests you with *Atheism*'), and whose views he vehemently attacked in his Bristol *Lectures on Revealed Religion* the same year.³⁶ On the dispersal of the Stowey commune, or rather on his move to the Lake District in the wake of the Wordsworths, however, Coleridge tried to woo Godwin thither in terms which, like his earlier invitation to Thelwall, entwine differences over atheism with the beauties of the prospective landscape: 'if, according to you & Hume, impressions & ideas *constitute* our Being, I shall have a

tendency to become a God – so sublime & beautiful will be the series of my visual existence . . . you must come & write your next work at my house'.³⁷ He also knew what this next work should be, despite Godwin's recent turn to play-writing:

ardently as I wish you success on the stage, I yet cannot frame myself to the thought, that you should cease to appear as a *bold* moral thinker. I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which the human feelings form affinities with them – in short, I wish you to *philosophize* Horn Tooke's System.³⁸

Tooke's theory of language, as outlined in *The Diversions of Purley* (1786), insists on its materiality as a system of 'arbitrary signs'; what is interesting is that Coleridge's own wish to reconcile this with a virtually opposite, quasi-Platonist theory ('elevating, as it were, Words into Things and living things too'), is passed on to Godwin in the name of the latter's reputation as a 'bold' (i.e. atheistic) thinker.³⁹ It all sounds like a complex fantasy of getting materialism to discover Platonic spiritual truths lurking within its own recesses, without Coleridge having apparently lifted a finger to make it do so. As with his other, more drastically influential fantasy that Wordsworth should show in *The Recluse* how those disillusioned with the French Revolution could still enjoy their previous sense of activism undiminished, Coleridge seems to have relied on his friends to perform circle-squaring feats which he would distrust as mere wish-fulfilment if he attempted them himself.

By Godwin's own account, he began to soften his atheism somewhat after discussions with Coleridge earlier in 1800: 'My theism, if such I may be permitted to call it, consists in a reverent and soothing contemplation of all that is beautiful, grand, or mysterious in the system of the universe . . . into this train of thinking I was first led by the conversations of S. T. Coleridge.'⁴⁰ This is a very limited idea of 'theism', however: as Godwin's later unpublished essay 'Of Religion' (1818) puts it, 'Nothing can tend more to enlarge, to give the highest serenity, and the noblest and kindest tone to the human mind, than the contemplation of the works of that principle that has made us what we are.' Beyond that, however,

I think there is no analogy between what we call contrivance and the fabric of the work, between a watchmaker, and the mighty, the stupendous, and to human fancy the infinite scenes in the midst of which we dwell. And I am confounded at those events which constitute the history of the world; I see in those events nothing that answers to my idea of a moral governor.⁴¹

What Godwin's 'theism' chiefly implies is a recognition of emotional needs which revolt from 'the coldness and selfish concentration which have usually been ascribed to the atheist', and which demand exercise in the imaginative contemplation of nature and great works of art. This amounts virtually to a manifesto for 'Romantic' values as a substitute for religious ones, rather than as the corollary of them for which Coleridge would argue; nonetheless, it is one highly influential and significant outcome of Coleridge's programme of fraternal quarrels with fellow radicals over the atheist issue.

Another freethinking circle with which Coleridge developed significant contacts in the late 1790s was the Lunar Society. He met and debated atheism with Darwin in 1796, hailing him as 'Dr Darwin, the everything, except the Christian! . . . the most inventive of philosophical men. He thinks in a *new* train on all subjects except religion.'⁴² As Ian Wylie has pointed out, *The Economy of Vegetation* lies behind 'Religious Musings's' comparison of kingship with 'the Simoom . . . before whose purple pomp / Who falls not prostrate dies!' (269–70) and the hailing of Franklin as 'the Patriot Sage' who 'Call'd the red lightnings from th'o'er-rushing cloud' in the name of freedom (234–5).⁴³ More broadly, the poem's 'Philosophers and Bards', destined to temper the violence of revolution while understanding its causes, may be identified with the Lunar Society – with Priestley, of course, at their head. Through his Bristol connections, Coleridge was on closer personal terms with the Lunar alumnus Thomas Beddoes – whose materialism we have seen him linking with Darwin's in a letter to Thelwall above – and the son of another Lunar luminary, Tom Wedgwood, who became Coleridge's patron and who in 1798 introduced into Beddoes's influential Bristol scientific circle the young scientist and poet Humphry Davy.⁴⁴

Meeting Coleridge the next year, Davy was soon to become another candidate for the projected commune with Godwin and Southey around 1800–1801, first in southern Europe and then in the Lake District: in 1801 Coleridge wrote excitedly to him about his latest ideas: 'To whom should a young man utter *his Pride*, if not to a young man whom he loves?', although 'I expect in you (in some points) a determined opponent'.⁴⁵ Unlike Thelwall and Godwin, Davy is not an older infidel Coleridge hopes to bring round, but a younger disciple he hopes to bring with him on a 'Christianizing' progress beyond an initially shared theory of energy as the principle unifying mind and matter. Thus in 1800 he wrote enthusiastically to

Davy about 'the power & "eternal Link" of Energy', echoing 'Lines Descriptive of Feelings Produced by a Visit', published earlier in the year, where Davy similarly related the 'living energy / That still has warm'd my beating heart' to

The mystic laws from whose high energy
The moving atoms, in eternal change,
Still rise to animation.⁴⁶

The friendship continued at least to 1809 although, according to Molly Lefebure, Davy 'never gave any indication whatever of being a Christian in terms of personal belief', preferring an 'essentially Celtic pre-Christian paganism . . . a form of spontaneous pantheism'.⁴⁷ It was through discussions with Davy in 1800 that Coleridge seems to have developed what he called 'My Spinosism (if Spinosism it be and i' faith 'tis very like it)', while Davy was planning a long poem to be called *The Spinozist*.⁴⁸ The significance of Spinoza to assessments of Coleridge's pantheism or otherwise will be considered shortly: here it is instructive to look at the strongly free-thinking elements in some of Davy's poetry published alongside Coleridge's in *The Annual Anthology*, 1799, edited by Southey.

In 'Extract from an Unfinished Poem on Mount's Bay', Davy contrasts the druids whose 'harp was heard, swept by the breeze / To softest music, or to grander tones' (19–20)⁴⁹ with the monks and priests whose 'Dire Superstition raised the gothic fane' on St Michael's Mount in Cornwall; and them in turn with

He who follows Nature: He who seeks
Amidst thy craigs and storm-beat rocks to find
The marks of changes teaching the great laws
That raised the globe from Chaos. Or He whose soul
Is warm with fire poetic, He who feels
When Nature smiles in beauty, or sublime
Rises in majesty.

(43–9)

Despite the interruption of religious superstition, then, the ancient druids and modern scientist-poets form a continuum in their equal responsiveness to the 'sublime' and 'beautiful' in Nature. This Burkian aesthetic pairing appears throughout Davy's 1790s poetry, and also seems to dictate the single significantly pro-Christian remark in his notebooks, that 'Sublimity is the characteristic of the future state in the religion of Jesus', whose 'parts are arranged with the most beautiful symmetry'.⁵⁰ 'Ode to St Michael's Mount, in

Cornwall' describes how the 'Fancy' inspired by the same scenery gave way to reason, truth and philosophy: 'But now to awful reason given, / I leave her [Fancy's] dear ideal heaven, / To hear the voice of TRUTH' which in turn leads to 'Divine PHILOSOPHY'

Above delusion's dusky maze
 . . .
 To view a gleam of purest light
 Bursting through Nature's misty night,
 The radiance of the skies.⁵¹

Whether the light is that of the inner secrets of Nature or a truth beyond Nature is left unclear in this ending, but the replacement of Fancy's 'heaven' with philosophy's 'skies' suggests the former.

'The Sons of Genius' gives a more full-length depiction of the scientific vocation:

Whilst Superstition rules the vulgar soul,
 Forbids the energies of man to rise,
 Rais'd far above her low, her mean controul,
 Aspiring Genius seeks her native skies.⁵²

Though the sons of Genius love Nature, 'Yet not alone her beauties claim their care, / The great, sublime and terrible, they love' (55-6), as well as Newtonian science and Athenian liberty:

To scan the laws of Nature, to explore
 The tranquil reign of mild Philosophy,
 Or on Newtonian wings sublime to soar
 Thro' the bright regions of the starry sky.

Ah! who can paint what raptures fill the soul
 When Attic Freedom rises to the war? (77-82)

They also know how to realize 'The fair, sublime, immortal hopes of man' (85): although 'Like the tumultuous billows of the sea / Succeed the generations of mankind', only the sons of Genius leave a 'vestige of their lives behind' (107-10) because

Like yon proud rocks amidst the sea of time
 Superior scorning all the billow's rage,
 The living Sons of Genius stand sublime,
 The immortal children of another age. (115-18)

If man's 'immortal hopes' are realized anywhere, it is purely in terms of the pagan idea of posterity. Nigel Leask describes the later foundering of the friendship (about 1809) in terms of Davy's abandonment of the idea that matter may be activated by the same

‘high energy’ as the mind and towards the more ‘passive’ atomism of the prevailing Daltonian chemistry: as early as 1801 he wrote to Coleridge, ‘Nature has no archetype in the human imagination’. Coleridge’s later disgusted response after Davy’s knighthood in 1812 implies a sense of betrayal on both scientific/religious and political fronts: ‘H. Davy is become Sir Humphry Davy & an Atomist!’⁵³

So far, this outline of his intellectual relationships in the 1790s has depicted a Coleridge often suspected of atheism, keenly interested in atheism and perhaps drawn to atheists as a way of exploring potential aspects of his own intellectual make-up; but as emphatically no atheist himself. Unitarianism was crucial in this: among radicals of the time it was the main alternative to Painite deism or Godwinian atheism, and according to Roe it was its continuing millenarian belief in the necessity of progress that saved Coleridge from the violent ideological lurches into nihilistic depression of those – like Wordsworth – who had pinned their hopes on Godwinian reason alone after their disillusion with the French Revolution. Earlier in this book I considered the great Unitarian guru Priestley partly as a ‘stirrer’, whose insistence on a rational discussion of religion helped to launch avowed atheism in Britain but whose own religious views on many matters were relatively orthodox. From another angle, however, Unitarianism could be seen as itself dangerously atheistic; and this was to become Coleridge’s own view from about 1801. Before considering his reasons for changing his mind, I shall now look more closely at what Unitarianism meant to him when he was most committed to it.

Coleridge’s 1795 *Lectures on Revealed Religion*, ‘intended for two Classes of Men – Christians and Infidels’, give a densely packed picture, both of the kinds of atheism he thought current among radical circles, and of the Unitarian ideas he was later to denounce. Many of his arguments here are perfectly orthodox, drawing heavily (for instance) on Paley’s *View of the Evidences of Christianity*, and anticipating many of the anti-Paine arguments of Watson’s *Apology for the Bible*, which Coleridge greatly approved of on its publication the next year.⁵⁴ The third lecture concludes with a ringing denunciation of modern ‘dim eyed Sons of Blasphemy’ such as Godwin, whose *Political Justice* ‘teaches that filial Love is a Folly, Gratitude criminal, Marriage Injustice, and a promiscuous Intercourse of the Sexes our wisdom and our duty’ (pp. 164–5).

Lectures 1, 5 and 6 in particular, however, contain more controversial material. Aiming to rebut some of the leading atheist arguments of the day, Lecture 1 argues from a largely deist perspective, whereby nature is a book in which God has left 'the Transcript of himself' (94).⁵⁵ However, Coleridge goes on to take seriously the atheist argument that if God is immaterial he cannot act on matter, and 'If he be material and omnipresent how is there room for any thing else in the universe?' (96). In refutation, he cites the transmateral forces of gravity and magnetism: the 'energy'-based model for God which he was for a while to share with Humphry Davy before rejecting it along with the Newtonian 'materialism' he clearly still favours at this point. He next tackles the Democritan/Epicurean derivation of the universe 'from the accidental play of Atoms acting according to mere mechanical laws', using the argument of the absurdity of a 'blind watchmaker' to be popularized by Paley's *Natural Theology*, but available in other sources from Cicero to Priestley (97–8). He extends a similar argument to the more modern 'hylozoic' theory of atoms having unconscious impulses to combine in certain ways, perhaps even leading to the production of man from the unstable conditions of the earth in its early overheated or inundated stages: 'The atheistic Philosophers suppose, that in this uncommon state of Nature the Elements might [concur] unthinkingly to produce Man – self-conscious, intelligent Man!' (101–2). Such 'atheistic Philosophers' would clearly include Darwin; in the following year Coleridge was to begin to suspect the Newtonian physics held up as a proof of divine design throughout these lectures of a similar materialist tendency to deny God any serious agency in creation – even in the vitalized form of Boscovich's atomic theory that matter 'consists of *physical points* only, endued with powers of attraction and repulsion', as propounded by Priestley himself in *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*.⁵⁶

Coleridge goes on to consider miracles, rebutting Hume's view that the balance of probability is against them with an argument from Hartley's *Observations on Man* that the same was said of magnetism and electricity before their experimental proof. God's need to use miracles at all is explained in terms of the world having 'Its infancy, and its Childhood and its Youth', with the Jews being gradually prepared for the next stage of fuller understanding through direct intervention in their affairs.⁵⁷ This idea of a gradual evolution of awareness is continued in the next two lectures, Lecture

2 justifying the apparent irrationality and cruelty of the Old Testament God in terms very close to those to be used by Watson against Paine in the following year, and drawing heavily on Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*. Lecture 3 presents the specifically Unitarian view of Christ as indeed solely a man, but one whose existence and teachings in such benighted times were themselves miraculous, and accompanied by further educative miracles of which the greatest was the resurrection, effected to instil the wholly new idea of the immortality of the soul.

This Unitarian view is continued in Lecture 5, which argues that the false idea that Christ died to atone for our sins, rather than as an example to us and a proof of his own sincerity, is based on metaphors derived from an ancient culture of sacrifice but not meant literally, though similar ideas still linger in the belief that prayer can 'work a change in the immutable God'. The idea of a universal 'original sin' for which his sacrifice was meant to pay 'appears to me not to be Blasphemy only because it is nonsense' and the Calvinist who cowers before the allied notion of predestined damnation 'is not an Atheist only because he cannot make himself certain that there is not a God!' (203-5).

Lecture 5 also contains more abstruse material, apparently attacking the Gnostic and Platonic 'heresies', but also displaying Coleridge's continuing fascination with the kind of arcana I have explored in relation to Blake, and of which he confessed to Thelwall the following year, 'your philosophy-dreamers, from Tauth, the Egyptian to Taylor, the English Pagan, are my darling Studies'.⁵⁸ Now, however, he ridicules the Gnostic belief 'that matter was self-existent and its intractability the Cause of Evil. From God, or the supreme mind they supposed a derivation of Aeons or Intelligences by efflux or emanation' (197). Among the lowest of these are human souls, whereas 'Christ' as a higher Intelligence was pure spirit which entered the human body of Jesus from baptism to just before his crucifixion, after which he was resurrected in purely spiritual form. In denying Christ's real death the Gnostics also denied the duty of Christian martyrdom and in their contempt for matter they went either to extremes of asceticism or of a sensuality which they thought could not affect the soul. Their indulgence of worldly desires and social convenience first gave Christianity a bad name and then, once absorbed into it, led to the corruption of its original egalitarian purity (201-2).

The Gnostic corruption of early Christianity was assisted in another way by the Platonic idea that the three main qualities which 'must be in God in an infinite degree' are 'Life or Power, which Plato calls the Spirit'; 'Intelligence . . . which in our version is rendered by the Word'; and Benevolence. To say that 'These three principles are equally God, and God is one' is just 'a mysterious way of telling a plain Truth, namely that God is a living Spirit, infinitely powerful, wise and benevolent'. However, 'From the Gnostics the Christians had learnt the trick of personifying abstract Qualities, and from Plato they learned their Trinity in Unity.' In talking of Christ as 'the Word' (which Coleridge translates as 'Intelligence'), St John's Gospel is not giving credence to the Trinity, as usually assumed, but using the Gnostics' and Platonists' own language against them by stressing the unity of the Word with God (208-9).

The *Lectures* are not all as abstrusely theological as this account makes them sound: in particular, they frequently segue from religion to fiery republican politics in ways which belie Peacock's suggestion that Coleridge's 'metaphysics' replaced his Jacobinism rather than accompanying it. Nonetheless, he did replace one form of metaphysics with another: three years after telling his brother George that 'I have snapped my squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition', he claimed in a letter to Poole to have overthrown 'all the irreligious metaphysics of modern Infidels, especially the doctrine of Necessity'. As this and a following letter make clear, these 'infidels' now include such heroes of Rational Dissent and his own 1795 lectures as Locke, Newton ('a mere materialist'), Hartley and, by implication anyway, the necessitarian Priestley.⁵⁹

This retraction of his earlier beliefs was accompanied by many others, some of them virtually simultaneous with the *Lectures* themselves: thus Coleridge's attack on the Gnostic idea of 'Intelligences' seems belied in the climax of 'Religious Musings' (1796), in a passage already written in 1794:

ye of plastic power, that interfused
Roll through the grosser and material mass
In organizing surge! Holies of God!
(And what if Monads of the infinite mind?) (405-8)

Elsewhere, at various times, he 'utterly recants' the Unitarian disbelief in the efficacy of prayer (*Lectures*, p. 203 n1), and comes to believe in 'an original corruption in our nature' from which we can

only be 'redeemed' by Christ 'in a mysterious manner as an effect of his crucifixion' (p. 206 n2).

An 1806 letter to Thomas Clarkson indicates how far Coleridge has shifted on a number of points, especially those of Platonism and the Trinity.⁶⁰ In precisely the Platonic terms ridiculed in lecture 5, the Trinity is now affirmed as a highly allegorical representation of 'Being, Intellect, and Action, which in their absoluteness are the Father, the Word, and the Spirit' (p. 1196). God is 'absolute Being'; the 'Word' is this Being's 'Idea of himself . . . co-existing with, and yet filiated' by him as a Son; and 'the action of Love, by which the Father contemplates the Son, and the Son the Father' is the Spirit (p. 1195). Given this highly abstract reading of the way in which 'the Idea of God involves that of a Tri-unity', 'Unitarianism in its immediate intelligential . . . consequences, is Atheism or Spinozism – God becomes a mere power in darkness, even as Gravitation, and instead of a Moral Religion of practical Influence we shall have only a physical Theory . . . a dull and cold moonshine, or rather star-light which shews itself but shews nothing else' (p. 1196). It might be thought that if the only way out of the 'cold' atheism lying at the end of the Unitarian road is to picture a state of mutual adoration between being and its idea of itself, this is not the series of assertions about certain events happening in the history of the universe to which most Christian Trinitarians would assent. If the production of 'a Moral Religion of practical Influence' can only be at the expense of a mere 'physical theory', then we are left none the wiser as to how the universe came to be created, let alone what degree of divinity or otherwise resided in the historical person Jesus.

Thus the resurrection has 'no possible meaning' other than 'the Sleep and Change (probably by strict analogy the growth) of Death (for growth of body and the conditional causes of intellectual growth are found all to take place during Sleep . . .)' (p. 1197). In other words, Christ's resurrection is not an historical event but an allegory for the after-life, which Coleridge links to 'intellectual growth'. He does this by postulating a general human progress towards making the 'consciousness of a continuousness an object of secondary consciousness' and thus approaching 'some faint glimmering of that State in which Past, Present, and Future are co-adunated in the adorable I AM'. This 'sense of continuousness' is not just that of the individual's existence in time, but of being continuous with a larger whole, and is only built up through social intercourse or 'the action

of kindred souls on each other', whereby 'the human race not by a bold metaphor, but in a sublime reality, approach to and become, one body whose Head is Christ (the Logos)' (p. 1197).

This casting around for symbolic roles for Christ might indeed seem 'boldly metaphoric' rather than conventionally Trinitarian, and the impassioned dwelling on the translation of 'Yahweh' (Jehovah) as 'I AM' suggests the kind of desire to fuse individual self-consciousness with external reality which is easily translatable into the much less specifically doctrinal terms of the Romantic 'egotistical sublime'. This idea was already present in 'Religious Musings', where the 'elect of Heaven' sees in God 'Nature's essence, mind, and energy!' (49) and makes 'The whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows!' (154).

Yet to reduce God back to an 'energy' which informs both nature and the individual minds which contemplate it seems to be the danger Coleridge repeatedly tries to avoid, while also repeatedly drawn to it. In particular, 'Spinozism' or pantheism which sees God as simply another term for nature rather than external to it, is the site of one of his most intense philosophical struggles. It is the one already adumbrated in 'The Eolian Harp':

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved woman!

...

For never guiltless may I speak of him,
The Incomprehensible! save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*.

(44-50, 58-60)

Already, in 1795, the assertion that God simply *is* the energy that animates nature seems too close to Spinozan pantheism unless accompanied by the feelings of humility and faith which make this 'a Moral Religion of practical Influence' rather than 'only a physical Theory'. As Thomas McFarland points out, Coleridge's key image here may derive from Leibnitz's attack on Spinoza for believing 'that God is a spirit diffused throughout the whole universe, which animates organic bodies wherever it meets them, just as the wind produces music in organ pipes'.⁶¹ And yet it was as late as 1817 that Coleridge added lines 26-33 which boost the pantheist side of the

argument with the exclamation 'O! the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul'. The fact that the later Coleridge supplements his earlier dangerous pantheism rather than the repentant pietism of the poem's ending, indicates that the struggle with the Spinozism which he identifies with 'Atheism' to Clarkson is never fully resolved.

In his brilliantly argued *Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought*, Nigel Leask explains the continuity between the original poem and its addition in relation to the 'dynamic philosophy' of the 'Necessity' of creative energy being transmitted from one source to another both in material processes ('abroad') and the mental association of ideas ('within us') (pp. 88–91). Coleridge gleaned this satisfying fusion of a scientific with a religious/Unitarian outlook from David Hartley and Joseph Priestley, and – as we have seen – shared it for a while with Humphry Davy. Hartley's 'doctrine of association' explained psychological processes as inevitable mechanical responses to external stimuli and was thus the key link between the mind and the 'doctrine of necessity' which connected the physical world back to the first cause. The fact that he named his first son after him indicates how important Hartley was to the young Coleridge; the name of his second son, Berkeley (born 1798), already indicates the shift to Platonic idealism as an escape from the 'metaphysics of modern infidels' of which Hartley had come to seem the prime exponent.

As Davy's defection from the unifying mind/matter theory of a single 'energy' demonstrates, the attempt to tie a belief in the mind's creative power to the physical sciences came to seem increasingly like giving too many hostages to the fortunes of scientific advance. As with Swedenborg's move to 'spiritual' researches after failing to find the soul in the structure of the brain, Coleridge's move to Platonist idealism may have been triggered by coming too close to the centre of the materialist thought of his day, rather than through blithely ignoring it. As he says in *Biographia Literaria*, the writings of mystics like Böhme and George Fox were 'a pillar of fire throughout the night, during my wanderings through the wilderness of doubt, and enabled me to skirt, without crossing, the sandy deserts of utter unbelief'.⁶² As we have seen in the letter to Clarkson, however, this move away from matter could lead to a metaphysics of almost total abstraction, in which most of the normal associations of 'God', 'Christ', 'Spirit', 'Trinity' and 'Immortality' are lost.

The fact that Coleridge's shift to Platonic idealism was also connected to his long German visit of 1798–9, and subsequent involvement with the philosophy of Schelling and Kant, contributed greatly to the image of a retreat into reactionary obscurantism so brilliantly satirized by Peacock. However, Leask suggests that the idea of a wholly reactionary later Coleridge, rejecting his earlier religious unorthodoxy along with his 'Jacobinism', is too simple. The idea of 'one life' connecting all living beings with the universe has radical political antecedents in the theories of James Harrington and other seventeenth-century republicans; and in his turn towards idealist philosophy Coleridge was not simply retreating into obscurantism, but finding ways of refining the 'one life' theory which could still be seen as radically empowering. For Leask, German philosophy was in fact partly a way of saving 'Spinozism' or pantheism from its inherent danger of seeing everything as already determined and hence unchangeable by human decision: Coleridge's approving account of Schelling's 'Plotinized Spinozism' suggests a marriage of consciousness-empowering Platonic idealism with a pantheism which is 'not necessarily irreligious or heretical; tho' it may be taught atheistically' (p. 129).

Thomas McFarland argues, however, that this marriage of Plato's extension of human consciousness into a universal principle ('I am') and Spinoza's extension of matter into one ('it is') was impossible, and that his 'inability either really to accept or wholeheartedly to reject pantheism is the central truth of Coleridge's philosophical activity' (*Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, p. 107). As Coleridge admits at the end of *Biographia Literaria*, 'The ready belief which has been yielded to the slander of my "potential infidelity" I attribute in part to the openness with which I have avowed my doubts whether the heavy interdict under which the name of Benedict Spinoza lies is merited on the whole or to the whole extent' (p. 287). Followed as it is by a firm denial of Unitarianism's claims to Christianity, and a climactic affirmation of the Platonized Trinity involving 'adoration', 'the great I AM' and 'the filial WORD' described in the letter to Clarkson (pp. 288–9), the feeling of a habitual defensive reflex in this sentence is unmissable. Between the 'potential infidelity' of Spinoza and the 'pagan' origins of Neoplatonism (as identified in Coleridge's reference to 'the English pagan' Thomas Taylor) there is never any final synthesis, only continual movement. It is arguable that the necessity of such continuing movement between the two

equally but oppositely attractive poles of infidelity underlies the fundamental imagery of his poetry: the 'intellectual breeze', the unimpeded voyage or walk, as contrasted to the dreaded stasis of lime-tree bower, ice-bound pole or silent sea.

To explore these tensions more fully in Coleridge's poetry, I shall begin with his most firmly Unitarian poem, 'Religious Musings'. Published in 1796 and subtitled 'A Desultory Poem, written on the Christmas Eve of 1794', it opens with echoes of Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', but emphasizes from the start the Unitarian view of Christ as purely human:

For chiefly in the oppressed Good Man's face
The Great Invisible (by symbols seen)
Shines with peculiar and concentrated light,
When all of Self regardless the scourged Saint
Mourns for th'oppressor. O thou meekest Man!¹⁶³

It was, then, chiefly through the symbolism of his death that Christ 'on the thought-benighted Sceptic beamed / Manifest Godhead' at a time when 'Idolatry / Split and mishap'd the Omnipresent Sire' into a polytheism which may also evoke Trinitarianism (30-3). Awoken by this event, the human soul ascends through hope, faith and love to a similar 'self-annihilation' to make 'God its identity: God all in all!' (43). The 'elect of Heaven' thus sees in God 'Nature's essence, mind, and energy!' (49) and makes 'The whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows!' (154), and this is 'the Messiah's destined victory!' (158). In the meantime, however, failure to recognize this ultimate Self has bred 'Fiends of Superstition' from bloodthirsty priests to slave-traders (135-41) to the current military alliance against revolutionary France in the name of 'Deity, Accomplice Deity' (187). The problem began with the institution of Property, 'twy-streaming fount, / Whence Vice and Virtue flow' (204-5): 'from Luxury and War / Sprang heavenly Science; and from Science Freedom' (224-5). Watching sympathetically as revolution spreads from 'the Patriot Sage' Franklin's seizure of lightning (see once again Darwin's influential passage on this) to the uprising of those who 'toil and groan and bleed' in France, 'Philosophers and Bards' are now ready to mould 'Confusion' into the Platonic 'perfect forms' they have imagined when 'Beneath some arched romantic rock reclined' (234-50).

For now, the 'wretched Many' gape 'at pageant Power, nor recognise / Their cots' transmuted plunder!' (263-4), but 'Yet is the day of Retribution nigh' when 'the Great, the Rich, the Mighty Men, / The Kings and the Chief Captains of the World', 'like stars of Heaven', 'shall be cast to earth' (303, 309-12). Already in France 'she hath fallen / On whose black front was written Mystery; / . . . / . . . / mitred Atheism!' (330-4); a 1797 note adds 'the Babylon of the Apocalypse does not apply to Rome exclusively; but to the union of Religion with Power and Wealth, wherever it is found' (315n, p. 121). The Revolution is seen in decidedly millenarian terms: 'The Saviour comes! While as the Thousand Years / Lead up their mystic dance, the Desert shouts! (359-60), watched over by the Philosophers and Bards Milton, Newton, Hartley ('he first who marked the ideal tribes / Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain', 369-70) and Priestley. As in the millenarianism of Blake's *Song of Los* or Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the language of time suddenly becomes concrete as 'the hour' of Apocalypse ushers in the millennial 'Years' when 'Time is no more'. In a final vision 'The veiling clouds retire' to reveal God's throne, attended by

ye of plastic power, that interfused
Roll through the grosser and material mass
In organizing surge! Holies of God!
(And what if Monads of the infinite mind?) (405-8)

As well as strongly anticipating Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', this passage suggests the idea of Neoplatonic or Gnostic demiurges, a step down from 'the infinite mind' because embroiled in matter but necessary to organize it, that we perhaps find in Los's role in Blake's *Urizen*. For Coleridge too this provides a model for the poet's own function: before joining their 'mystic choir' for good, 'I discipline my young and novice thought / In ministeries of heart-stirring song' (411-12). The idea that in the act of creation the poet can reduplicate the 'infinite mind', of which he can become a 'monad' or independent projection, will recur throughout Coleridge's work.

'Religious Musings', then, repeats many aspects of Unitarian poetry as we have considered it in Barbauld, and looks forward to a great deal that is crucial to Coleridge's more famous poems of a few years later. In one respect, however, it is arguable that its millenarian optimism swamps one important structural similarity between Barbauld's 'Address to the Deity' (for example) and many of those

poems: the confession of personal failure and inability to continue in the same vein after the initial paean-like preamble. In 'Religious Musings', this moment is perhaps echoed in the lurch from 'The plenitude and permanence of bliss!' (134) to the denunciation of 'Fiends of Superstition!' in the next line, leading to all the horrors which the Revolution will have to remove before we return to the veil-lifting climax of the end. This is, however, the world's fault rather than Coleridge's; whereas in 'The Eolian Harp', 'France: An Ode', 'The Ancyent Marinere' and 'Kubla Khan' an initial excited movement breaks off through a mixture of external pressure and some failing of will or vision on the part of the poet or narrating protagonist. In a pattern which becomes that of the great Romantic 'therapeutic lyric' as a whole, the attempt to wrestle with the consequences of that failure then enables a final resolution at a new, more enlightened level.⁶⁴

I discuss above the way 'The Eolian Harp' (1796) enacts a crucial debate between 'spontaneous' pantheism and a conventional piety of which Coleridge's fiancée Sara is made the representative. There the 'one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all' (47-8) is close to Barbauld's 'Th'eternal fire that feeds each vital flame, / Collected, or diffus'd, is still the same' (Hymn 1, 51-2), in which the divine unity implied in the word *Unitarian* seems coterminous with the divine 'all' (*pan*) of pantheism. In Barbauld's 'Address to the Deity', a moment where similarly 'one vast object fills my aching sight' is broken off in the next line, 'But soon, alas! this holy calm is broke; / My soul submits to wear her wonted yoke' (20-2); just as Coleridge's 'intellectual breeze' is broken off by 'But thy more serious eye a mild reproof / Darts, O beloved woman!' (49-50): only if he humbly acknowledges himself 'a sinful and most miserable man' ought he to speak of 'The Incomprehensible' (59, 62). Even given the apparently 'therapeutic' re-establishment of harmony with Sara to which this conclusion leads, the poem is strangely broken-backed: it is hard to read without blaming her for breaking the beautiful pantheism of its premature climax, even though this sexual division of roles is prefigured in the earlier eroticization of the harp's music as 'Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover', pouring 'such sweet upbraiding as must needs / Tempt to repeat the wrong!' (15-17). Yet, just as the wind needs the harp's protests to make its presence felt at all, Coleridge ventriloquizes through 'Sara' the objections to pantheism he would

himself voice through his lifelong philosophical wrestlings with 'Spinozism'.

Furthermore, this use of Sara as the conventional Christian raises the question of the different levels of discourse the later Coleridge would approve of for different levels of intellect, and virtually for different classes. A suggestive link with the ideas of Darwin on one hand and Thomas Taylor on the other is offered by his fascination with the split between the conventional religion of the Greeks and that taught in the secret Eleusinian and Samothracian mysteries. As described in 1825, the latter bears a strong resemblance to the 'one Life within us and abroad' of the pantheistic part of 'The Eolian Harp' (26): 'the productive powers or laws of nature are essentially the same with the active powers of the mind'.⁶⁵ In the same passage he describes the role of the poet as 'under the disguise of popular superstitions . . . to communicate as much and no more of the doctrines preserved in the Mysteries as should counteract the demoralizing influence of the state religion, without disturbing the public tranquillity' (p. 349). Casting Sara as the public, the poem could thus be seen as enacting the poet's role of allowing pantheistic truths to be only glimpsed while ostensibly bowing to the 'popular superstitions' which they would disturb if promulgated too openly.

Something of the same movement can be seen in 'Kubla Khan', where an initial apparently spontaneous vision is then withdrawn from and finally presented as too disturbing to 'the public tranquillity' to be fully voiceable:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

(39-44)

With its sunny dome and caves of ice, linked by a river born amid images of panting sexuality and ending in a lifeless ocean, the poem is often rightly seen as supremely embodying 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'.⁶⁶ This balancing principle can in turn be linked to the pantheist sense of wholeness, which refuses to focus on anything without being aware of its opposite. But these images can also be seen to represent the necessary balance between the beautiful public face of 'the state religion' – the sunny dome – and the Eleusinian style cave-bound

mysteries of life and death, with their nihilistic 'voices prophesying war!' accessible only to the initiate Khan himself.

Coleridge's two major poems of political recantation, 'France: An Ode' and 'Fears in Solitude', both follow the pattern of initial celebration, awareness of failure and reaffirmation of purpose on a different level. In both, 'atheism' or 'blasphemy' are decisive indicators of the wrong direction that has been taken. In 'France', the first stanza celebrates natural scenes as evidence of Coleridge's love of 'divinest Liberty' (21); the next shows that principle realized 'When France in wrath her giant-limbs upreared' (22); and the third expresses the first moment of misgiving: "'And what," I said, "though Blasphemy's loud scream / With that sweet music of deliverance strove!"' (43-4). His hopes that these were just storms temporarily obscuring the rising sun of freedom are dashed with the French invasion of Switzerland in stanza 4, and in the final stanza it is clear that 'The Sensual and the Dark rebel in vain, / Slaves by their own compulsion!' (85-6). Liberty flies 'Alike from Priestcraft's harpy minions, / And factious Blasphemy's obscener slaves' (95-6) back into the natural world of sky and sea where Coleridge achieves orgasmic communion with it in the closing lines:

Yes, while I stood and gazed, my temples bare,
And shot my being through earth, sea, and air,
Possessing all things with intensest love,
O Liberty! my spirit felt thee there. (102-5)

'Fears in Solitude' presents a very similar scenario in a more discursive, blank verse mode which Coleridge himself called 'a sort of middle thing between Poetry and Oratory'.⁶⁷ Beginning with a celebration of the 'Religious meanings in the forms of Nature' (24) found at last by one 'who, in his youthful years, / Knew just so much of folly' (14-15) as to make him wise, it moves on to a denunciation of the British crimes which still undermine his sense of peace: slavery, oligarchic institutions, an indolent clergy, and the general 'blasphemous!' reliance on oaths rather than natural sincerity. Especially because the last brings God's name into disrepute,

the owlet Atheism,
Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,
Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,
And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven,
Cries out, 'Where is it?' (82-6)

Atheism is an 'owlet' presumably because it fancies itself wise although new-hatched and only equipped with the night vision of learning, useless for seeing the self-evident truth of religion. Another of Britain's crimes has been the war-lust whipped up by the press; nonetheless, Coleridge now calls on his country to 'repel an impious foe, / . . . / still promising / Freedom, themselves too sensual to be free' (139-43).

The traits of sensuality and impiety which prevent France from liberating either itself or others in both these poems are repeatedly paired by Coleridge, as in the phrase 'imbrothelled atheist' which so offended Thelwall in 'Religious Musings'.⁶⁸ They are also personified by the two figures Sensuality and Blasphemy who guard the entrance to the 'cave of Atheism', in the dream vision which dramatically introduces the first lecture on *Revealed Religion* and which interestingly prefigures much of the imagery of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'. Coleridge begins by describing the 'Valley of Life' at whose entrance stands 'The Temple of Religion', a 'large and gloomy pile' full of superstitious emblems and crowds of people 'dancing about in strange ceremonies and antic merriment', which he has to enter before being led by one of its black-robed priests into a dark hall with incomprehensible 'Mysteries' phosphorically inscribed on its walls; there he confronts the Goddess Religion herself, whose 'features blended with darkness rose to my view terrible yet vacant' (*Lectures*, 89-90). On emerging, he joins forces with 'a few whose Eyes were piercing, and whose Foreheads spoke Thought' in abandoning what they now call 'the Temple of Superstition'; having 'nearly gone round half the Valley' they meet a woman 'clad in white garments of simplest texture' who also claims to be called 'Religion'. She leads Coleridge and a few others to a hill from which they can see the whole valley and beyond; but then 'with the rapid Transition of a Dream' he finds himself back with the majority of the refugees who 'had in their eagerness to recede from Superstition completed almost the whole of the Circle, and were already in the Precincts of the Temple when they abruptly entered a Vast and dusky Cave' (p. 91). At its entrance are two figures, the female Sensuality and the male Blasphemy, the latter of whom 'uttered big words, yet ever and anon I observed that he turned pale at his own courage'. This cave of atheism, within the very precincts of the Temple, is 'unnaturally cold', and inside is a man 'poring with a microscope over the Torso of a statue, which had neither basis, nor

feet, nor head . . . but on its breast . . . was written NATURE!' (p. 92). As this Darwin-like old man explains the 'Mystery' of an infinite Series of Causes as a string of blind men leading each other into the distance with no one at their head, Coleridge awakes from his dream laughing.

Richard Watson and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's brother John Aikin have both been cited as possible sources for this vision; nonetheless, it clearly takes off into its own imaginative territory, which is in many ways close to that of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' (first version, 1798).⁶⁹ The crowd of piercing-eyed sceptics fleeing from superstition could well be echoed both in 'the bright-eyed marinere' (24) who disrupts the 'merry din' (8) of the wedding feast and in the crew who so merrily 'drop / Below the kirk' (26–7) of home until, having overshot their goal, they become trapped – first in ice and then on a barren sea where they are claimed by two figures (unnamed in the first version), a sombre male and a red-lipped sinisterly seductive woman who 'makes the still air cold' (190).⁷⁰ The white-clad figure of true Religion, who offers salvation halfway through the doomed journey, resembles the albatross who frees them from the ice and is hailed as 'a Christian soul . . . in God's name' (63–4). Coleridge's sudden dreamlike self-division between following Religion to safety and continuing with his companions is echoed in the split between the mariner's welcome of the albatross and his motiveless shooting of it – a split mirrored in the crew's similarly schizophrenic attitude to the bird as freer from and bringer of the 'fog and mist' (98). The sun that rises 'Like God's own head' (93) after the albatross's death arguably carries overtones of the apparent enlightenment and clarity the keen-eyed crew seek in Nature, until they realize that it will becalm them even more effectually than the 'mist' which would, in any case, eventually have been dispersed by the 'good south wind' following in the bird's wake (69).

Of course the parallels are not exact, but the vision from Lecture 1 helps to fill out the idea that the poem is, at least on one level, a quite tightly woven allegory of the experience of 1790s radicals overshooting a desirable halfway point in their desire to escape from the mindless festivities of home, and of the split consciousness of one of their number between the blessings of stopping halfway and the guilt of leading others into a despiritualized wasteland. In this context, Coleridge's later account of Barbauld's criticism that the poem had 'no moral', and his own rejoinder that it had 'too much',

is particularly interesting: often taken as a warning against allegory hunting in the poem, its arguable real meaning is that Barbauld knew only too well that it expresses the Unitarian dilemma of how far to go in rejecting orthodox Christianity, and that Coleridge wished he had covered his traces better.⁷¹ If her brother's *Hill of Science* really was a source for the Lecture 1 vision, Barbauld's warning in 'To Mr Coleridge' not to stop 'Midway the hill of science' surrounded by the 'spleen-fed fog' of metaphysics, but to re-enter 'Active scenes . . . For friends, for country' suggests a keen awareness of the mental dangers described in 'The Ancyent Marinere', written about the same time as her poem.

The picture I have tried to give of a Coleridge torn between the unorthodoxies of pantheism and idealism can be related to one of his most characteristic stylistic tropes: the double or even triple negative. We have seen how this sense of self-division is reflected in his prose, in such phrasings as 'the openness with which I have avowed my doubts whether the heavy interdict under which the name of Benedict Spinoza lies is merited on the whole or to the whole extent' (*Biographia Literaria*, p. 287). In his verse too, the device tends to occur at crucial moments of resolution: 'Nor in this bower, / This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd / Much that has sooth'd me' ('This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison', 45-7). More clearly related to a move towards philosophical resolution is Sara's 'interruption' of 'The Eolian Harp's' drift towards pantheism: 'nor such thoughts / Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject' (50-1); another is 'Nor will I not thy holy guidance bless, / And hymn thee, GODWIN!', at the start of the sestet in his 1795 sonnet 'To William Godwin' (9-10). In the former, a kind of ghost image induced by the reader's propensity to overlook one of the three available negatives evokes a happy momentary fantasy of Sara not rejecting Coleridge's vain babblings; in the sonnet, the incongruity between its religious language and its addressee is further brought out by a similar ghost image of Coleridge firmly withholding his blessing from Godwin - as he was soon to do. While the double negative is a perfectly acceptable element of the sub-Miltonic poetic diction Coleridge never fully turned his back on, in his hands it often becomes a way of surmounting crucial moments of decision by momentarily evoking the possibility of having one's cake and eating it.

The same could be said of 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities': the lynchpin of Coleridgean aes-

thetics and – for some – therefore of ‘Romantic’ and perhaps even universal aesthetics too.⁷² Here and in many of his refusals to pursue projects to an irrevocable conclusion, Coleridge is expressing the desire to have everything at once by having nothing completely. This tendency was most sharply observed by the Unitarian minister’s son who in 1798 had just watched Coleridge abandon his own Unitarian calling, upon receiving Tom Wedgwood’s offer of a £150 yearly stipend, ‘in the act of tying on one of his shoes’.⁷³ On the six-mile farewell walk which followed this moment, the young William Hazlitt observed that Coleridge ‘continually crossed me on the way by shifting from one side of the foot-path to the other’ (p. 113) – an early glimpse of his hero’s ‘instability of purpose’ which Hazlitt then went on to amplify in the definitively endless thousand-word sentence, with a few extracts from which I shall conclude this chapter:

Next, he was engaged with Hartley’s tribes of mind, ‘etherial braid, thought-woven’, – and he busied himself for a year or two with vibrations and vibratiuncles⁷⁴ and the great law of association that binds all things in its mystic chain, and the doctrine of Necessity (the mild teacher of Charity) and the Millennium, anticipative of a life to come – and he plunged deep into the controversy on Matter and Spirit, and, as an escape from Dr Priestley’s Materialism, where he felt himself imprisoned by the logician’s spell, like Ariel in the cloven pine-tree, he became suddenly enamoured of Bishop Berkeley’s fairy-world, and used in all companies to build the universe, like a brave poetical fiction, of fine words . . . and then he fell plump, ten fathoms down (but his wings saved him harmless) into the *hortus siccus* of Dissent, where he pared religion down to the standard of reason and stripped faith of mystery, and preached Christ crucified and the Unity of the Godhead, . . . but then Spinoza became his God, and he took up the vast chain of being in his hand, and the round world became the centre and the soul of all things in some shadowy sense forlorn of meaning, and around him he beheld the living traces and the sky-pointing proportions of the mighty Pan . . . [then he] wedded with truth in Plato’s shade, and in the writings of Proclus and Plotinus saw the ideas of things in the eternal mind, . . . and entered the third heaven with Jacob Behmen, and walked hand in hand with Swedenborg through the pavilions of the New Jerusalem . . . or wandered into Germany and lost himself in the labyrinths of the Hartz Forest and of the Kantian philosophy, and amongst the cabalistic names of Fichte and Schelling and Lessing, and God knows who.⁷⁵

Whatsoe'er is dim and vast: Wordsworth in the 1790s

Wordsworthian 'Nature-worship' is so often assumed to be a harmless expansion of our poetic vocabulary whose absence now seems unthinkable, that we are in danger of forgetting how crucial the substitution of 'Nature' for 'God' was in atheist discourse. A roll-call of the great founding texts – *On the Nature of Things*, *The System of Nature*, *The Ruins* . . . to which is added, *The Law of Nature*, *The Temple of Nature* – may help us to reposition the coded significance of any heavy stress on this word at a time when the 1793 French constitution had recently been celebrated round 'a colossal statue of the Goddess Nature, spurting water from her breasts into an ornamental pool, on the site of the Bastille'.¹ At the same time, 'Nature' clearly also does have a place in Christian discourse, so long as it is seen as a series of signs of God's handiwork: hence such titles as Paley's *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. In many of his most striking uses of the word, Wordsworth is simply silent on any such signifying function; one of the greatest difficulties his work presents is in the interpretation of these silences.

In 1820, long after they had both returned to the Anglican fold, Coleridge was still able to write about Wordsworth as follows:

I will not conceal from *you* that this inferred dependency of the human soul on the accidents of Birth-place & Abode together with the vague misty, rather than mystic, Confusion of God with the World & the accompanying Nature-worship, of which the asserted dependence forms a part, is the Trait in Wordsworth's poetic Works that I most dislike, as unhealthful, & denounce as contagious: while the odd occasional introduction of the popular, almost the vulgar, Religion in his later publications (the popping in, as Hartley says, of the old man with a beard) suggests the painful

suspicion of worldly prudence (at best a justification of *masking* truth (which in fact is a falsehood substituted for a truth withheld) on plea of Expediency) carried into *Religion*. At least, it conjures up to *my* fancy a sort of *Janus*-head of Spinoza and Dr Watts, or 'I and my Brother, the Dean'.²

Whatever Coleridge's own investment in Spinozan pantheism, his main charge against Wordsworth in the above passage is clear: that he confuses God with the world and worships nature purely in terms of its specific manifestations; and that his occasional references to God as a separate being are so crudely conventional as to be patently insincere. This is more or less what I shall be arguing in what follows.

Coleridge also picks up here – and mirrors in his Chinese-box parentheses round the keyword 'falsehood' – an aspect of Wordsworth's work which is often commented on but harder to quantify by chapter and verse: his tendency to 'mask' or 'withhold' crucial parts of what he seems to be saying. The idea behind the title of a Heinrich Böll story, *Dr Murke's Collected Silence*³ – 'collected', that is, from numerous tape recordings of shorter silences – might well be applied to much of Wordsworth's *œuvre* in the 1790s – though no collection of William Wordsworth's finest silences would be complete without those occasions where he says too much rather than too little about a subject, so that its outline becomes lost in 'vague, misty' qualifications. I shall argue that, in particular, trying to read his religious position or otherwise from much of his work is often a matter of negotiating between deliberate omissions of religious affirmation in contexts which precisely lead us to expect it, and the above-mentioned kind of massively qualified overstatement. As for 'the old man with a beard', he is less in evidence in the earlier poetry I shall be chiefly looking at than in the later, avowedly orthodox poetry Coleridge is discussing: but it is interesting to note that for Coleridge at least, Wordsworth's religion is even more suspect in his 'Christian' phase than it is in his pantheist phase. There are in fact one or two 'poppings up' of the old man with a beard in the earlier poetry: in looking at some examples of this, I shall try to show how Wordsworth takes care to situate such beliefs in minds presented as less developed than his own at the time of writing.

But I wish first to consider another kind of silence and withholding: Wordsworth's deliberate suppression of many of his own actions and beliefs in the formative 1790s and beyond, through some of literature's most notorious acts of non-publication. His active

involvements with French revolutionary currents of thought and radical Godwinian infidelism in the mid 1790s are well recorded; described by Coleridge in 1796 as 'a republican and at least a *semi-atheist*', it was arguably Wordsworth's recruitment to the Nether Stowey commune which excited so much government attention that Thelwall had to be warned to stay away.⁴ According to one recent biographer, this desperado image can be amplified by other darkly hinted possibilities ranging from full-blown sexual libertinism to a later phase of spying on fellow radicals as a government double agent.⁵ Whatever the truth of these allegations, the standard question about Wordsworth's 'at least semi-atheism' is not whether it existed but how long it lasted – as witness Coleridge's later worries about Spinoza and Dr Watts.

And yet apart from *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), which will be discussed later, he published little that hinted at his more radical views until the carefully aimed and constructed *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. Thus, whereas 'Coleridge and Southey, Lloyd, and Lambe and Co.' are all featured as kneeling to the Frenchman Lepaux 'whom Atheists worship' in *The Anti-Jacobin's* great list of traitors 'The New Morality' and its accompanying Gillray cartoon, Wordsworth received no such honour.⁶ The work which would have put him firmly on the map as a political radical at least as dangerous as the Coleridge of the mid 1790s was 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff . . . by a Republican', probably written in 1793 but neither sent nor published.⁷ Though the 'Letter' does not focus on religious issues, it vigorously defends the French revolutionary government's seizure of church property, and savages the English clergy for defending 'slavery civil and religious . . . with a servility which has prejudiced many people against religion itself' (*Prose Works*, p. 31). Overwhelmingly political in purpose, it attacks the supposedly 'levelling prelate' Bishop Watson for withdrawing his earlier qualified support for the revolution, following the church expropriation and the execution of the king. What is most interesting for present purposes is the emphasis Wordsworth places on what he calls 'faults of omission':

As a teacher of religion your lordship cannot be ignorant of a class of breaches of duty which may be denominated faults of omission . . . From your silence respecting the general call for a parliamentary reform . . . what can be supposed but that you are a determined enemy to the redress of what the people of England call and feel to be grievances?

From your omitting to speak upon the war . . . we are necessarily led also

to conclude that you have no wish to dispel an infatuation which is now giving up to the sword so large a portion of the poor . . . [B]y giving no opinion on the reform of the legislature . . . undoubtedly, you have some secret reason for the reservation of your sentiments. (p. 49)

To be so ready to deduce so much from carefully situated silences alone, and then to suppress the work containing the accusation, Wordsworth must at least have a considerable amount going on in his head about the importance of silence as a strategy, albeit in a somewhat conflicted way. In a very real sense, in this passage Wordsworth seems to be addressing his future, if not quite already his present, self.

Another example of self-silencing is the periodical he planned with his friend William Matthews in 1794, to be called *The Philanthropist: A Monthly Miscellany* – a title which Wordsworth argued would ‘be noticed’ as declaring an unambiguously radical agenda based round ‘the topic of general politics’ but also including original poetry and the lives and opinions of such defenders of freedom as Milton, Algernon Sidney and (significantly?) Machiavelli.⁸ The magazine would include translated extracts from ‘the french monitor’, the French National Convention’s official newspaper, and be relayed throughout Britain and especially – at a time when the French-fomented Irish revolt of four years later was already expected – in Dublin, whither Wordsworth offered to go himself to make arrangements. While there is no hope of interesting the Anglican clergy, ‘The dissenters . . . would receive a work like ours with pleasure’ (*Letters*, I, p. 126). The letter outlining these and other ambitious plans to Matthews was written on 8 June 1794; by 7 November he was explaining that ‘The more nearly we approached the time fixed for action, the more strongly was I persuaded we should decline the field’, a view with which Matthews fortunately agreed (p. 134).

Other declinings of the field can be seen in the non-appearance of such major, substantial works of the mid 1790s as *Salisbury Plain* and *The Borderers*, both only published after massive revision in 1842; as well as such inflammatory shorter pieces as ‘Imitation of Juvenal: Satire VIII’, unpublished in the poet’s lifetime. All of these pieces contain devastatingly ‘infidel’ moments along with their political Jacobinism, as I shall discuss shortly. The greatest example of strategic silence, *The Prelude*, is perhaps not often enough seen in this larger context of systematic self-suppression, although on its eventual

1850 publication Thomas Babington Macauley wrote, 'The poem is to the last degree Jacobinical, indeed Socialist. I understand perfectly why Wordsworth did not choose to publish it in his lifetime.'⁹ In that lifetime it was the avowedly orthodox *Excursion* that was read as his major testament of faith; it is arguable that if *The Prelude* had been in circulation from 1804–5, it would have been taken as a very plain statement of pantheist infidelity as well as of Jacobinism, through whose lens all his subsequent work would have been more sharply scrutinized for similar tendencies than it was. As it is, *Lyrical Ballads* and the other shorter poems on which his early reputation chiefly rested are too impressionistic, or too filtered through the personae of their supposed speakers, to have enabled any such single picture to emerge.

Before looking more closely at some of the longer works indicated above, it will be useful to consider briefly some of Wordsworth's earliest poems, also unpublished in his lifetime. Before his involvements with the ideas of the French revolutionaries and then of Godwin, these are not atheistic but do reveal an early identification with Protestant humanism, in which attacks on 'superstition' greatly outweigh any notes of more positive religious affirmation. 'Lines Written as a School Exercise at Hawkshead' (1784–5) centres around the personified figure of 'Education', who celebrates the Reformation when 'Science with joy saw Superstition fly / Before the lustre of Religion's eye' (43–4).¹⁰ This 'Religion' is, however, defined entirely in terms of new mental freedoms: 'No jarring monks, to gloomy cell confined, / With mazy rules perplex the weary mind' (49–50); now, with 'Philosophy her guide' (52), she honours Bacon more than the warmongering Edward III (56). 'Immortal Science' is now free to teach her charges to 'follow Nature to her secret springs' (76), in pursuit of which the young Wordsworth is exhorted to 'Awake, awake! and snatch the slumbering lyre' (109). It is notable that it is the 'Nature' of Enlightenment science he is called on to follow here, rather than the ineffabilities of 'Romantic' Nature: though he was only fourteen when he wrote this, it is a passage worth remembering when considering Wordsworth's many later claims to an early sense of poetic vocation.

'The Vale of Esthwaite' (1787), despite its unfinished state, is a considerable poem in its own right, but particularly interesting in its treatment of the death of Wordsworth's father, for which now 'I mourn because I mourned no more' (433). The speculations about

an after-life which follow are distinctly agnostic: though 'A still Voice whispers to my breast, / I soon shall be with them that rest' (444-5), he chiefly visualizes his 'weary body sleep[ing] / In peace' (456-7) like those in Gray's *Elegy*, or his soul turning to Esthwaite in its last conscious moments,

If no vast blank impervious cloud
The powers of thought in darkness shroud,
Sick, trembling at the world unknown
And doubting what to call her own, . . . (500-3)

There may be a 'world' beyond this and the soul may retain something of its own, but the last moments of life may equally be covered in the 'vast blank impervious cloud' not just of fading consciousness but of final extinction.

Turning now to the explicitly radical poem that Wordsworth did publish, having written it in the heady years 1791-2 during his second visit to revolutionary France, *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) begins as a travelogue of his earlier tour through the Alps with Robert Jones, but rises to a climactic celebration of the French Revolution in its closing lines. Though it does refer to God at times, this is usually either in immediate conjunction with other more tangible forces, or as part of a received view on which Wordsworth is commenting. Hence the 'God', who in the opening lines bestows the gift of beautiful scenery on man, is emphatically 'Nature's GOD', and is soon replaced by (a now female) 'Nature' who takes over such functions for most of the rest of the poem (3, 13). On republication in 1849, Wordsworth's extensive revisions sometimes hint at unorthodoxies in passages where they might otherwise not be noticed. Hence the idea that 'human vices have provok'd the rod / Of angry Nature to avenge her God' (486-7) by depasturing parts of the Alps is presented as part of folklore in the 1793 text - 'Thus does the father to his sons relate' (489) - but significantly as simple fact in the 1849 revision.¹¹ The Rousseauesque primitive who 'all superior but his God disdain'd' is clearly expressing his own view, and when 'He holds with God himself communion high', the 1793 version adds that 'the savage Nature humbly joins the rite' (551-4) - another dilution of divine agency excised in 1849. God is directly addressed at the end of the poem, but swept along in a sentence conjoining him closely with the energies of French liberty: 'Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride / Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and

Pride' (791–2); in 1849, this God of progressive energy is replaced by a God 'by whom the strifes of men are weighed / In an impartial balance' – above rather than within the conflict (652–3).

Perhaps the strongest pro-religious moment in the 1793 version – not substantially changed in 1849 – is the lament over the recent expulsion of the monks from the Chartreuse monastery, where 'Blasphemy the shuddering fane alarms' (61). There is a certain ambiguity in Wordsworth's handling even here, however: Religion, 'that Power whose frown severe / Tam'd "sober Reason" till she crouch'd in fear' (55–6), is pointedly described as 'the "parting Genius"' (72), in reference to the routing of the pagan gods in Milton's 'Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity'¹² – an event to be poetically mourned but ideologically welcomed. (The fullest account of Wordsworth's torn loyalties between 'the mighty projects of the time' (443) and the 'unworldly votaries' of the Chartreuse – decided very much in favour of the latter – appears in Book VI of the 1850 *Prelude*; significantly the whole issue is omitted from the 1805 version's less conflicted attempt to depict his youthful support for the revolutionary anticlericalism of 1790.¹³)

An important index of Wordsworth's political radicalism in the dark mid 1790s, though still classed as 'Juvenilia' by de Selincourt and Darbishire chiefly because once more Wordsworth suppressed it for his lifetime, is 'Imitation of Juvenal: Satire VIII' (1795–6). Putting contemporary names to the Roman butts of Juvenal's republican assault, it moves from demanding 'who sees majesty in George's face?' (9)¹⁴ to querying the linguistic convention implying that we all 'revere' reverend bishops and 'worship' Lord Mayors. If 'Common-sense' does not sweep 'this curst Pharaoh-plague' away (15–16), we shall become like autocratic Egypt, with Queen Charlotte's tears over her husband's madness as dangerous as a crocodile's, while 'Bishops, of milder Spaniel breed, shall boast / The reverence by the fierce Anubis lost'. (Here there may well be an echo of Fuseli and Blake's 'Fertilization of Egypt' engraving for Darwin's *Economy*, where the daunting Anubis-figure with his back turned to us has distinctly spaniel-like ears.¹⁵) As it is, the Duke of York is futilely trying to use 'the logic of [the] sword' to restore Religion's 'creeds' in a France which has rejected them (43–4). If kings were 'a people's choice' (101), we would have automatically preferred Thomas More over Henry VIII and Raleigh over James I, who was as impervious to good instruction as Nero, and who disgraced the monarchy by his

homosexuality, seeking 'Food for sick passion in a minion's cheek' (110). The 'printer's boy' Benjamin Franklin overshadows all of France's 'Bourbon spawn [of] scoundrels' (153-4), and so forth.

Other classical translations from this period seem to offer an outlet for ideas which might seem more shocking in original work. The translation of Catullus' 'Lesbia' (1795-7) – the archetypal *carpe diem* poem – is based on the proposition that 'we, when once our . . . light / Is set, must sleep in endless night' (7-8): the demand for instant sexual gratification this non-belief in an after-life leads to takes on a specific meaning in the light of the relationship with Annette Vallon amid the 'let's do it' infidelism of France in 1792. The translation of Catullus' 'Septimius and Acme' (1795-7) explores at greater length a similar abandonment of all other laws for that of love. Interestingly, a parody of the same poem by George Ellis in *The Anti-Jacobin* (1798) describes Charles James Fox and Horne Tooke falling into a drunken embrace in which revolution takes the place of orgasm. Thus where Wordsworth's Acme declares 'Love our sole master, as my bosom owns / A flame that with far more resistless sway / Thrills through the very marrow of my bones' (18-20), Ellis's Tooke bumbles:

So, my dear Charley, may success
At length my ardent wishes bless,
And lead through Discord's low'ring storm,
To one grand RADICAL REFORM!¹⁶

The last of these shorter unpublished early works I shall consider is 'Argument for Suicide' (1796-7?), a stark Godwinian polemic against those who condemn others to drudgery in 'the mine' or 'the battle' and yet religiously forbid them to take the only available way out of their misery: 'Live, if you dread the pains of hell, or think / Your corpse would quarrel with a stake' (7-8). The poem concludes:

most fantastic are the magic circles
Drawn round this thing called life – till we have learned
To prize it less, we ne'er shall learn to prize
The things worth living for. –

(12-15)

As in the apparently frivolous Catullus imitations, but also in much of Wordsworth's most serious subsequent poetry, the 'magic' of religious prohibition has to be replaced with a matter of fact acceptance of the reality of death, which alone will allow us to discover and value 'the things worth living for' in the life we have now.

As well as such short pieces, Wordsworth devoted enormous effort in the mid 1790s to writing two major works whose non-publication at the time is proportionately more significant: the play *The Borderers* (1797) and before that the poem recently pieced together by Stephen Gill in its earliest, partly fragmentary form as *Salisbury Plain*, written 1793–4.¹⁷ As reassembled by Gill, *Salisbury Plain* is a bleak depiction of a state of mind profoundly alienated from society, rather than the coincidence-ridden melodrama it became when later reworked as *Guilt and Sorrow* (largely rewritten in 1798, but only published in 1842). An opening comparison of the lot of ‘savages’ with that of the civilized concludes that the latter suffer more when they can remember better times or are conscious that social distinctions make others better off: both states later to be exemplified in the female vagrant’s narrative at the centre of the poem. For now, the choice between civilization and savagery seems to be enacted by the poem’s protagonist, an unnamed ‘traveller’ crossing the plain towards Stonehenge and leaving behind him Salisbury Cathedral, whose ‘distant spire / That fixed at every turn his backward eye / Was lost, tho’ still he turned, in the blank sky’ (39–41). Like the spire that is one of the last sights of home in ‘The Ancyent Marinere’, this spire suggests religion as that-which-has-to-be-left-behind, its special significance still instinctively looked back to for comfort but gradually becoming lost against the ‘blank sky’ of adult awareness.

On approaching the potential alternative shelter of Stonehenge, however, a ‘voice as from a tomb’ warns him that it is still haunted by its past use for druidic human sacrifice: ‘Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire, / Far heard the great flame utters human moans’ (93–4). In the now-raging storm, the only shelter he can find is a ruined ‘lonely Spital’ dedicated to the Virgin in medieval times but now known as ‘the dead house of the plain’ (123, 126). Of the plain’s three religious locations, this is the one he chooses, though it now only represents the shell of a charitable impulse which has long been ‘ruined’. In this dead house of charity he encounters a female vagrant whose tales of other roamers of the plain evoke a whole fractured community of solitaries and visionaries. Thus another traveller found a ‘new murdered corse’ in the spital (153), and an old man told her of another man’s visions at Stonehenge: first, once more, of ‘the sacrificial altar fed / With living men’ (184–5), but then of how

Long bearded forms with wands uplifted shew
To vast assemblies, while each breath of night
Is hushed, the living fires that bright and slow
Rounding th'aetherial field in order go. (191-4)

This complication of the Stonehenge image perhaps relates it to revolutionary France, Wordsworth's conflicts over which clearly underlie the poem at some level. Here the image could represent at once the meaningless human sacrifice of the guillotine, and the transmission of rational enlightenment to 'vast assemblies' such as those which met in the Champ de Mars in the peaceful early years of the revolution during Wordsworth's first visit, or that in which Volney's wise Legislators explain to the multitude the derivation of religion from astronomy (chs. 19-22). By the fragmentary end of the poem, however, the Stonehenge image reverts to its earlier prime use as an emblem of religious superstition.

All this is cut from the later version, as are two highly erotic stanzas (24-5, lines 208-25) about the vagrant's breasts which – though ostensibly lamenting the loss of their former beauty – underline the social unorthodoxy (at least) of the time shared by the two outcasts in what Wordsworth originally intended to title *A Night on Salisbury Plain*.¹⁸ These passages are followed by the vagrant's account of her life which, extracted as 'The Female Vagrant', was to become by far the most politically radical contribution to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Early in this tale of rural expropriation, urban unemployment, economically forced conscription, war against American liberty, massacre of loved ones, madness and non-provision for war widows, the vagrant describes her father looking back at the church steeple of the home from which his family has just been evicted:

There at my birth my mother's bones were laid
And there, till then, he hoped his own might rest.
Bidding me trust in God he stood and prayed:
I could not pray. (266-9)

The trust she was enjoined to place in God would not, judging by her subsequent story, have in any case been repaid. If she does have a view of God, it is as a quasi-pantheist 'Spirit of God' which 'diffused through balmy air / Quiet that might have healed, if aught could heal, Despair' (359-60): that is, a possible psychological benefit from a purely natural phenomenon, as so often in Wordsworth's religious-sounding formulations. The same kind of benefit,

without religious reference, is the only one on offer in the poem's final farewell to the two travellers, as they breakfast in a 'lowly cot' on the morning after the storm: 'all the happiest find is but a shed / And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread' (422-3).

In the fragmentary ending assembled by Gill, the final nine or so stanzas are directed squarely at the links between Superstition and political oppression, with Stonehenge once again the dominant linking image. Though the 'horrid shrieks' of the druids' victims no longer rise 'To Daemon-Gods a human sacrifice', 'reason's ray' can still do little more than, like lightning, 'Reveal with still-born glimpse the terrors of our way' (425-7, 429-32). Even in the wealthiest countries, the poor are taught to bless as charity the 'scanty dole' which 'Oppression' has not managed to waste on itself (436-8). Not only is private life 'Unblessed by Justice', but in public life all nations 'for empire strain' against each other, as witness the brutal conquest of Peru by Spaniards who at home weep 'tears of fear at Superstition's nod' (443, 448, 461). Demanding (like Blake as well as Godwin) 'Must Law with iron scourge / Still torture crimes that grew a monstrous band / Formed by his care?' (519-21), Wordsworth concludes with an unmistakable echo of Darwin's lines on Time from *The Loves of the Plants* ('Here Time's huge fingers grasp his giant mace, / And dash proud Superstition from her base, / Rend her strong towers and gorgeous fanes, and shed / The crumbling fragments round her guilty head'):¹⁹

Heroes of Truth pursue your march, uptear
Th'Oppressor's dungeon from its deepest base;
High o'er the towers of Pride, undaunted rear
Resistless in your might the herculean mace
Of Reason; let foul Error's monster race
Dragged from their dens start at the light with pain
And die; pursue your toils, till not a trace
Be left on earth of Superstition's reign
Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum's plain. (541-9)

In *The Borderers* (1796-7),²⁰ the brooding nihilism which often threatens to overwhelm *Salisbury Plain* is externalized in the figure of the atheist villain, Rivers, although no real way out from it is suggested. Mortimer, the leader of a medieval band of outlaws waging war on both English and Scottish governments, is persuaded by his right-hand man Rivers to kill a blind old man, Herbert, whose understandable opposition to his daughter's marriage to Mortimer is

presented by Rivers as part of a sinister plan to make her a great lord's mistress. From here on the play revolves solely around this murder, which Mortimer eventually performs – after numerous false starts – by abandoning Herbert to the elements. When a beggar woman Rivers had bribed to lie reveals Herbert's innocence, Rivers is stabbed by one of the gang while Mortimer vows to wander the earth in search of expiation and eventual death.

In dramatic terms, the play is almost heroically incompetent. Herbert never fully articulates his reasonable objections to the marriage, or registers any awareness of the numerous attempts on his life; and Rivers's evidence against him seems to consist as much in his supposedly not being Matilda's real father as in his planning to sell her to the wicked lord whom – in another finely undramatic touch – we never meet. The potential tension of the murder is completely dissipated by being stretched over five acts, in which the supposed desperado Mortimer does nothing at all but fail to stab the old man, leave him on a heath, look for him again, and wander away at the end. Although they theoretically offer the potential alternatives of personal and political commitment, Matilda and the rest of the gang are ciphers.

Nonetheless, as often with Wordsworth, the omission of so many elements apparently essential to the genre in which he is working, coupled with an obsessive repetitiveness about one or two others, ensures that the emphasis falls where he wishes: in this case, on the motives and psychology of Rivers. In the play's most – indeed only – crucial scene (IV. ii), he explains his life story to Mortimer. Sailing to Syria as a young man, 'a foul conspiracy' against his honour led him to head a mutiny and abandon the ship's captain to his death on a desert island. This crime took place after weeks of being becalmed 'Beneath the burning sky on the dead sea' (IV. ii. 16), and led to him first being acclaimed then shunned by the crew, who had concocted the unexplained slur so that he should take the blame for the unpopular captain's death. Once ashore he hid in a convent until the awareness that it represented a 'slavery' worse than prison filled him with a new 'salient spring of energy', whereupon he joined the crusades (105, 119). He tells Mortimer how, contemplating the desert, he experienced a proto-existentialist conviction of personal freedom, whose Lebanese setting and sense of being whisked out of the body to see the future carry strong echoes of the start of Volney's *Ruins*:

When from these forms I turned to contemplate
 The opinions and the uses of the world,
 I seemed a being who had passed alone
 Beyond the visible barriers of the world
 And travelled into things to come

... .

Is not shame, I said,
 A mean acknowledgement of a tribunal
 Blind in its essence, a most base surrender
 Of our own knowledge to the world's ignorance?

(IV. ii, 141-5, 147-50)

He is so grateful to the villainous crew for bringing him to this conviction that – he now reveals – he has similarly entrapped Mortimer into virtually re-enacting his original crime, whereby

I've joined us by a chain of adamant;
 Henceforth we are fellow-labourers to enlarge
 The intellectual empire of mankind.

(IV. ii, 187-9)

Though this revelation triggers his downfall, there is no suggestion that Rivers ever recants his weirdly existentialist perspective: his last words proclaim that like someone whose shout has brought a 'heap of rubbish' down on his head, 'I die without dishonour' (V. iii, 254-5).

Wordsworth's rivetingly fixated preface to *The Borderers*²¹ revolves entirely around the perverse psychological process by which a man like Rivers converts his original crime into a principle underlying all his future actions, reliving the illusion of 'liberty and choice' (p. 67) whenever planning those repetitions of it to which he is compulsively drawn by a hankering for the 'strangeness' and '*double entendre* in vice' (p. 65). 'Having shaken off the obligations of religion and morality', his reluctance to ascribe events he cannot control to any other human agency 'impells him to superstition', although 'his creed is his own: it is made and not adopted'. Showing 'the dangerous use which may be made of reason when a man has committed a great crime', the play also shows how, once we are launched on such a career of self-justification, 'The vessel keeps sailing on, and we attribute her progress in the voyage to the ropes which first towed her out of harbour' (p. 68).

This image of a ship overshooting its goal, the induction of Rivers's crime by a long becalmment at sea, the name of the *alter ego* through whom he repeats it ('Mortimer' meaning 'dead sea'), and

Mortimer's final wandering doom, all suggest the basic situation of 'The Ancyent Marinere'. Writing later, Wordsworth himself claimed that in the conception of that poem 'I myself suggested . . . some crime was to be committed which should bring upon the Old Navigator . . . the spectral persecution, as a consequence of that crime, and his own wanderings'.²² Wordsworth also suggested the killing of the albatross and the mariner's strangely alienated relationship with the rest of the crew. The clear link between these suggestions and the action at the heart of *The Borderers* would confirm the subtext discussed in the last chapter, of an allegory of 'going too far' in the rejection of traditional morality and religion (an idea also present in the planned joint poem 'The Wanderings of Cain', which was shelved in favour of the 'Marinere').

In what sense, then, is the underlying theme of *The Borderers* different from that of Coleridge's 'recantation' poem? The key difference, it seems to me, is that there is no recantation and no idea of religion as a providential force in the narrative. Apart from occasionally functioning as part of the play's nominally medieval background, religion functions purely psychologically: as something there is no way back to once discarded. Nor is there any sense that divine providence has plans of its own: the squalid muddle of Herbert's death and the failure of various vague attempts at rescue or resuscitation do not even rise to the level of dramatic irony, except through images of compulsive repetition – the fact that in abandoning rather than stabbing the old man Mortimer's crime mirrors Rivers's even more closely than Rivers intended has no significant outcome, except for holding out a hope of rescue which proves fruitless. The play's only conclusion is a complete deferral of conclusion: Mortimer's final resolution to wander where

No human ear shall ever hear my voice,
 No human dwelling ever give me food,
 Or sleep or rest, and all the uncertain way
 Shall be as darkness to me, as a waste
 Unnamed by man! and I will wander on
 Living by mere intensity of thought,
 A thing by pain and thought compelled to live,
 Yet loathing life, till heaven in mercy strike me
 With blank forgetfulness – that I may die. (v. iii, 267–75)

If heaven does have a part to play in this, it is only in bringing on

the oblivion of death through natural decay, to be followed – the final resounding silence suggests – by nothing.

Mortimer's vow of future silence resembles that of Iago's last speech, one of many hints that the Iago-like Rivers has indeed coupled him with himself 'by a chain of adamant' (IV. ii, 187). More broadly, given the play's whole theme of repetition-compulsion, the only clear final distinction between the two main characters lies in what Mortimer may or may not discover or become in his silent wanderings. Unlike Coleridge's unstoppably garrulous mariner, he is no escapee from the silent sea, but a personification of the Dead Sea itself, filled with no outlet by the atheist vision of Rivers.

To conclude on *The Borderers*: the commonly made identification of Rivers with Godwin – another older rebel leading younger rebels astray – is borne out by a moment in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth borrows one of Rivers's phrases – 'the immediate law / Flashed from the light of circumstances / Upon an independent intellect' – to describe Godwin's view of morality as purely contingent.²³ Nicholas Roe has argued that in putting such rationalist language into the mouth of the murderous Rivers, Wordsworth was underlining 'the similarities between Godwin's arrogant abstraction and Robespierre's visionary politics'.²⁴ The picture of liberation from ordinary morality leading straight to a revelling in unjustified violence as a moral good in itself does indeed seem to draw its obsessive force from the Reign of Terror in a France from whose grip on his mind Wordsworth seems to be painfully trying to disentangle himself in *The Borderers*. His nominal hero Mortimer achieves no such disentanglement, however, and the one moral force allowed any serious agency for good remains the rest of his gang of free-booters, eternally pitted against two governments alike – rather as Wordsworth still inhabits the mental borderland between the rival tyrannies of Britain and France.

While the new phase of poetry Wordsworth embarked on from about 1797 aims consciously at resolution and quietude rather than the *Sturm und Drang* of the mid 1790s, it is by no means a simple return to the customary beliefs so violently rejected in *Salisbury Plain* and *The Borderers*. Another early poem not to see print until massive revision as part of *The Excursion* (1814) is *The Ruined Cottage* of 1797–9. The two points I wish to look at very briefly in relation to it are its treatment of death and its establishment of an immobile aesthetic very different from Coleridge's wandering one.

The bulk of the poem, about the decline and death of the cottage's erstwhile owner Margaret, is introduced via a meditation on death by the pedlar Armytage to the poem's narrator:

we die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left. (68–72)²⁵

Poets who call the groves, hills, streams and 'senseless rocks' to mourn the dead are right, and one can sympathize best with the dead through objects they knew – such as the cottage well, whose abandoned state brings Margaret forcibly back to the pedlar's mind. The poem ends with another such meditation: 'She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here' (512), a peace such that

what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was. (520–4)

In Armytage's stoical turning from the scene – 'I turned away / And walked along my road in happiness' – and the quiet conclusion where he and the poem's speaker reach 'A rustic inn, our evening resting-place' (538), the reader is implicitly admonished to look for no more than such comforts from the story. The resounding silence here is any mention of an after-life: it is entirely in the 'meditations' of those who live on that Margaret continues to exist.

This refusal of a consolatory belief in an after-life typifies Wordsworth's work at least until 1805, the year of his brother John's death.²⁶ Also highly typical of one of his strongest sources of poetic effect is the immobility of his subject matter and – as far as possible – of his treatment of it. Of course language is a dynamic medium in which motion through time cannot be refused, but here Wordsworth uses a number of devices to keep our attention focussed on a single situation if not a single object. This is achieved through a series of revisitings at different times and, initially, through different perspectives. The poet-narrator's initial description of the cottage is followed by Armytage's explanation of how it came to look as it does, using its various details as springboards for a series of freeze-frame accounts of its and Margaret's decline on his various routine visits. Giving all

the active movement in space to the observer and only movement in time to the object of his observation enables a sense of intense 'dwelling' on but not entirely with that subject. This effect is repeated again and again by Wordsworth, in poems as different as 'The Thorn' and 'Lines . . . above Tintern Abbey', and crucially throws the emphasis of such poetry on to the 'thinginess' of things, rather than their role as purveyors of some truth beyond themselves. If there is some progress towards a larger understanding in such poems, it is very much via the objects we first thought of – plus perhaps a shift in our way of thinking about them – rather than by 'reading' them off as signs of something more general which can be taken away and applied to something else. They are existences, not essences.

The main contrast here is with Coleridge, for whom immobility in a lime-tree bower, a silent sea or a cottage at midnight is something to be escaped from by appeal to images of motion in which either the speaker of the poem or those he cares about or, preferably, both, will be impelled into some new situation of on-going activity. In his intellectual life too, as we have seen, Coleridge is always escaping from one point of view to another that seems to offer more unconfined prospects – even if that eventually leads him back to needing its opposite again on the principle that the other grass is always greener. Much of what feels weighty in Wordsworth by contrast to such flightiness relates to his refusal to take his eye off the object, because of his profound recognition that there is no elsewhere – that the objects of our perception, and our perceptions of them, are all there are.

As I have argued in detail in an earlier book, *The Prelude* of 1805 owes a considerable debt to William Cowper's *The Task* (1785).²⁷ This debt may partly have come via Coleridge, whose 1797 plan for a long blank-verse poem to be modelled on *The Task*, but describing the course of a brook and involving much joint exploration of streams in the Quantocks with the Wordsworths, may have fed into Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, begun the next year as 'the poem to Coleridge' in a similarly collaborative spirit.²⁸ This is suggested by the controlling metaphor of a river or stream of inspiration which, however, also echoes Cowper's own frequent use of the same image.²⁹ As well as many echoes of imagery and language, there are substantial structural parallels between *Task* I–IV and *Prelude* I–VIII, with both poets escaping from a failed attempt at tackling an

imposed topic to a handling of their own experiences, first as nature-loving schoolboys, then in London and elsewhere and finally in rural retirement, accompanied by very comparable critiques of modern education. The parallels continue as both poems launch into denunciations of political tyranny, especially in France (*Task* v; *Prelude* IX–X), before concluding with reaffirmations of the value of rural retirement, mingled with apocalyptic visions of a better world either to come or to be located within the self (*Task* vi; *Prelude* XI–XIII).

The Task is, however, fervently Evangelical: hence a look at some of its echoes in *The Prelude* should help us to calibrate the degree of Wordsworth's distance, if any, from a highly influential but conventionally religious presentation of parallel topics and experiences. To start with a minor example: while both criticize the decline of learning at the old universities, Cowper looks back to 'ancient days, / When learning, virtue, piety and truth / Were precious' and 'There dwelt a sage call'd Discipline' (*Task* II, 700–2), whereas Wordsworth sees the remnants of such old piety and discipline, especially compulsory chapel attendance, as breeding-grounds of hypocrisy (*Prelude* III, 415–527). While partly echoing Cowper's nostalgia for the days when scholars sat 'Like caterpillars' over their books (*Prelude* III, 465), he also rejects it as an unhelpful and probably false illusion (491–6) – even though positively linked for him (but not Cowper) with the humanist Renaissance, 'When Learning, like a stranger, came from far, / Sounding through Christian lands her trumpet' (475–6). In pitting learning against religion rather than allying the two, and in showing nostalgic yearnings like Cowper's up as themselves part of the problem, this passage exemplifies Wordsworth's customary mixture of sympathetic homage and criticism towards the poem he clearly takes as his model on many occasions.

It is, however, in more explicit accounts of the relations between man, nature and God that the poems often seem to come closest, yet reveal some of their most significant differences. Thus in *The Task*'s sixth and last book, 'The Winter Walk at Noon', Cowper extends the image of the walk to describe the ideal human relationship with God:

Happy who walks with him! whom what he finds
Of flavour or of scent in fruit or flow'r,
Or what he views of beautiful or grand
In nature, from the broad majestic oak

To the green blade that twinkles in the sun,
Prompts with remembrance of a present God! (VI, 247–52)

In a comparable passage in his eighth book, Wordsworth declares himself 'Happy in this, that I with Nature walked' (463), since thus 'first I looked / At man through objects that were great and fair, / First communed with him by their help' (450–2). The 'deformities of crowded life' only get in the way 'if we would wish to think / With admiration and respect of man', and 'pursue the mind / That to devotion willingly would be raised, / Into the temple and the temple's heart' (467–71). Introducing the whole passage with an invocation to 'the God / Of Nature and of man' (436–7), Wordsworth proceeds to replace this already highly qualified 'God' with his two constituent elements. Thus 'Nature' provides the 'great and fair' objects (see the 'beautiful and grand' ones of Cowper's passage), but in order to conduct the mind, not to God but – with powerful, insistent repetition – to 'man', who occupies the very 'temple's heart' of Wordsworth's 'devotion'. This qualification of 'God' as somehow belonging to nature and/or man, and surrounding of the idea of 'man' with the highest possible religious associations, is habitual in the earlier Wordsworth. In the 1850 revision, revealingly, the 'man' of line 468 becomes 'earth's rightful lord, / Here placed to be the inheritor of heaven' – thus completing the Cowperian circle back to God which the 1805 *Prelude* had deliberately disrupted.³⁰

One of the most striking structural parallels between the two poems is their turn to the theme of political oppression about three quarters of the way through, in *Task* v and *Prelude* ix–x. For both, a revelling in images of revolution abroad (specifically in France: Cowper wishes the Bastille 'were fall'n at last'³¹) gives way to a sense of insecurity about England's future, followed by a picture of the inadequacies of rationalism and, at last, a turning away from politics while claiming a renewed sense of spiritual direction. For Cowper, finally, only the man saved by Christ is truly 'free': 'He looks abroad into the varied field / Of nature', and 'Calls the delightful scen'ry all his own' (*Task* v, 733–41). For Wordsworth, a similar language of ownership is applied to his initial revolutionary euphoria: 'earth was then / To me what an inheritance new-fallen / Seems, when the first time visited' (*Prelude* x, 728–30). But whereas the primary site of Cowper's imagery of freedom is the biblical heaven – 'Free by birth / Of no mean city; plann'd or ere the hills / Were built' (*Task* v, 763–5) – for Wordsworth it is emphatically 'Not in Utopia' but

in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all. (*Prelude* X, 723, 725-7)

Wordsworth's 'in the end' here is firmly non-religious. So, bearing in mind the strong parallels with Cowper, is the presence which finally saves him from the clutches of Godwinian rationalism, in which he is 'endlessly perplex'd / With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground / Of moral obligation' (*Prelude* X, 893-5). This account mirrors Cowper's portrait of an unsaved man ensnared by a deist 'philosopher' who makes 'him hear / Of rectitude and fitness, moral truth / How lovely, and the moral sense how sure' (*Task* V, 671-3). For Cowper, 'The STILL SMALL VOICE is wanted. He must speak, / Whose word leaps forth at once to its effect' (685-6); for Wordsworth, the quiet voice springing as if from nowhere is his sister Dorothy's,

now speaking in a voice
Of sudden admonition, like a brook
That does but cross a lonely road; and now
Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn, . . .
(*Prelude* X, 909-12)

The substitution of a real, human relationship for the divine communication signalling a Christian 'born again' conversion experience is typical of Wordsworth's repeated secularizations of his Cowperian model.

In one interesting case, the reverse appears to happen. *Prelude* XI's crucial account of 'spots of time' when 'The days gone by / Come back upon me from the dawn almost / Of life; the hiding-places of my power / Seem open' (*Prelude* XI, 257, 333-6) owes a great deal to the beginning of *Task* VI, where the sound of church-bells

With easy force . . . opens all the cells
Where mem'ry slept. Wherever I have heard
A kindred melody, the scene recurs,
And with it all its pleasures and its pains. (*Task* VI, 11-14)

(In the earlier *Descriptive Sketches*, line 627, Wordsworth quotes this passage directly in the image of sounds unlocking 'Thought's "memorial cell"'.) For both poets, the theme of memory leads to that of the deaths of their fathers, Cowper describing his sense of guilt at having 'lov'd, but not enough' (*Task* VI, 37) in interestingly complex but purely psychological terms, with no reference to

religion except for a veto on any attempt to pray that things could have been different (29–56). Wordsworth's reminiscence also centres on guilt: his ardent wish to go home from school for Christmas was shortly followed by his father's death, which appeared to him

A chastisement; and when I called to mind
That day so lately past, when from the crag
I looked in such anxiety of hope,
With trite reflections of morality,
Yet in the deepest passion, I bowed low
To God who thus corrected my desires. (*Prelude* XI, 369–74)

This punitive God, detached for once from his usual accompanists man and nature, seems at first glance to be starkly affirmed as an active force in human affairs, 'the old man with the beard'. This is particularly so if we hastily read the 'reflections of morality' and 'passion' as belonging to 'I looked', which would leave the statement that God 'corrected my desires' as a simple declaration of fact. Whether or not Wordsworth initially intended this ambiguity to cover his tracks, it is removed by the 1850 revision's semicolon after 'hope' (XII, 313): clearly the idea that 'God . . . thus corrected my desires' is actually part of the reflections Wordsworth made on the event at the time which, though passionate, were 'trite'. Given that he earlier defines such spots of time in terms of the soul 'Remembering how she felt, but what she felt / Remembering not' (*Prelude* II, 335–6), the weight thus falls on the intensity of emotion felt, not on the literal content of his thoughts as a thirteen-year-old. The 'God' of this passage thus becomes relativized and psychologized, though not completely negated: part of the 'obscure sense / Of possible sublimity' described in Wordsworth's earlier definition of such moments (*Prelude* II, 336–7).

The Prelude's climax on Snowdon also has strong echoes of *The Task*, though typically Wordsworth translates to a physical landscape what is a purely spiritual epiphany in Cowper. At the climax of *Task* V, the redeemed soul perceives 'A ray of heavenly light, gilding all forms', recalls the moment when every star 'Sent forth a voice, and all the sons of God / Shouted for joy', and addresses them as 'ye shining hosts, / That navigate a sea that knows no storms, / Beneath a vault unsullied with a cloud' (*Task* V, 810, 821–4). When Wordsworth arrives above the clouds on Snowdon,

instantly a light upon the turf
Fell like a flash. I looked about, and lo,

The moon stood naked in the heavens at height
Immense above the head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent rested at my feet. (*Prelude* XIII, 39–44)

From 'the sea, the real sea' below, 'Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice' (49, 58–9). From their respective images of shouting ecstasy and fusion with heavenly bodies overlooking a sea-like sky, both poets move to perhaps their most self-consciously sublime attempts to define the relations between God, nature and the mind. For Cowper,

In that blest moment Nature, throwing wide
Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile
The author of her beauties, who, retired
Behind his own creation, works unseen
By the impure, and hears his power denied.
Thou art the source and centre of all minds,
Their only point of rest, eternal Word! (*Task* V, 891–7)

For Wordsworth, the scene on Snowdon appeared

The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an under-presence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
Or vast in its own being – above all,
One function of such mind had Nature there
Exhibited by putting forth, and that
With circumstance most awful and sublime:
That domination which she often times
Exerts upon the outward face of things.

(*Prelude* XIII, 69–78)

While both passages involve similar elements – Nature unveiling something momentous, God being concealed but somehow connected to the mind – Wordsworth's is clearly far more contorted than Cowper's, particularly in the layers of sublime obfuscation surrounding the idea of God. Are we in fact considering God or just the sense of him; is it he or that sense that is dim or vast, or simply equivalent to something else which may be dim or vast (in which case which – dim or vast?); are any or all of these things the 'under-presence' to infinity, or to a mighty mind that feeds on infinity, or are they in fact that mind or infinity which happens to be exalted by an otherwise undefined under-presence? Having established all this, did

the Snowdon experience actually involve whatever we are talking about, or was it just an image of it? The second half of the quote is somewhat simpler, only leaving open whether the 'she' who dominates external appearances is Nature or the mind: a point never cleared up in the remaining six lines of the sentence, or the remaining thirty-odd lines of a passage which continues to pile up abstract sublimities in the same way (up to 119). Burke's identification of sublimity with obscurity clearly has a great deal to answer for in such passages, and particularly perhaps in letting any God that would be recognizable to Cowper slip away under the guise or in the presence (even this is obscure) of 'whatsoe'er is dim / And vast'.

To conclude on *The Prelude* more generally: the passages looked at do not exhaust the poem's many possible references to religious belief or experience. Robert M. Ryan cites as 'reminiscent of the psychology of conversion' such lines as 'Gently did my soul / Put off her veil, and, self-transmuted, stood / Naked as in the presence of her God'.³² He also rightly indicates the 'ironic distance' between the Wordsworth of 1804/5 and his younger revolutionary self in his account of 'a time / In which apostacy from ancient faith / Seemed but conversion to a higher creed'.³³ But where Ryan stresses the word *seemed* as the index of this ironic distance in this last passage, one could as easily point to *as* in the first passage as indicating exactly the same distance from the religious experience Wordsworth is so closely shadowing there. As I hope the comparison with Cowper has shown, passages 'reminiscent' of conversion experiences work at least as much through implicit contrasts as through parallels with them; and there is usually a weasel *as* or *seemed* or *I thought* somewhere in the vicinity. Anything more pious tends to be credited to Coleridge: thus the line 'With God and Nature communing' (II, 446) depends on an *if* conditional on Coleridge's influence ('the gift is yours', 448); and Coleridge is also directly credited for the somewhat dutiful-sounding splitting of an earlier pantheism ('The rapture of the hallelujah sent / From all that lives and breathes and is' (XIII, 262–3)) into separate spheres of interest which 'God and man divided, as they ought' (XIII, 268). If the whole poem can be seen as rising to a single final affirmation, the last line, 'Of substance and of fabric more divine' (XIII, 452), looks soaringly transcendent until we note that it defines 'the mind of man' as opposed to 'the earth', in a familiar attempt to adjust yet again the rival claims of material nature and human imagination.

Having looked at some of Wordsworth's greatest 'Collected Silences', it needs to be noted that the embargo on unconventional religious views in his published work was not total. Moving back in time to *Lyrical Ballads*, published just before he started work on *The Prelude* in 1798, we may note that some of the anti-religious impetus of *Salisbury Plain* survives in the extracted 'The Female Vagrant', whose heroine still 'could not pray'³⁴ despite an added second stanza on her pious upbringing. Other lyrical ballads are at least teasing in their refusal to offer the expected kinds of reassurance: the emphasis in 'We Are Seven' is not on the baffled interlocutor's insistence that the girl's dead siblings are 'in heaven', but on hers that they are still present because they are still lying physically in the churchyard. The same comfort – if comfort it is – is drawn from the conservation of matter in 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal', from the 1800 second volume:

No motion has she now, no force
 She neither feels nor sees
 Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
 With rocks and stones and trees!

(5–8)

The most celebrated contemporary proponent of such material consolation was Erasmus Darwin, whose *Zoonomia* provided the source for 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill: A True Story'.³⁵ Though the cruel landowner Harry's succumbing to Goody's curse that he 'never more be warm' might easily be read as a simple tale of divine retribution, for Darwin it is purely an illustration of the powers of psychological suggestion – a point endorsed by Wordsworth in the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'I wished to draw attention to the truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous. The truth is an important one; the fact (for it is a *fact*) is a valuable illustration of it.'³⁶ In the insistence here and in the poem's subtitle on 'fact', Wordsworth is stressing the evidence that the psychosomatic powers of the imagination are '*almost* miraculous', not that any real miracle has taken place. There would be very little point in writing the poem if it had been simply the fiction of providential justice it so closely parallels and parodies.

The fact that *Lyrical Ballads* opened with precisely such a tale of supernatural retribution in Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner', which Wordsworth implicitly claimed as his when he republished the

initially anonymous collection under his sole name in 1800, may have helped at the time to mask the insistent materialism of most of his contributions. Of course, there are many poems of spiritual elevation in natural surroundings, such as 'Lines Written in Early Spring', 'Expostulation and Reply' and 'The Tables Turned', but here it is worth re-emphasizing that to attribute such elevation to such surroundings in the 1790s could easily be a sign of infidelism. This is very clear, for instance, in the unregenerate Southey's 1795 lyric, 'Written on Sunday Morning':

Go thou and seek the House of Prayer!
 I to the Woodlands bend my way,
 And meet Religion there!
 She needs not haunt the high-arch'd dome to pray,
 Where storied windows dim the doubtful day;
 At liberty she loves to rove.³⁷

Southey's 'sweet music of the vernal grove' (line 6 of the same poem) is a close relative of 'The Tables Turned's' 'impulse from a vernal wood' which can teach us more than all the sages: it is only in omitting Southey's tactless insistence that such failed teachers include those of the church that Wordsworth avoids drawing the same sharp contrast between 'natural' feelings and those imposed by conventional religion, a point underlined by both poets in their selection of such significant times as Sunday morning or the early spring of Eastertide.

It is 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', however, prominently placed at the end of the 1798 edition, that spells out most fully what might or might not be a religious position about natural surroundings. It was also the poem that attracted most universal praise, even from critics hostile to other aspects of the collection such as Southey, who precedes his famous assault on the 'Dutch attempt at German sublimity' of 'The Ancyent Marinere' with a worry that 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' will 'promote the popular superstition of witchcraft'.³⁸ One older critic, Dr Burney, while joining this chorus, added that the 'Lines' were 'somewhat tinctured with gloomy, narrow and unsociable ideas of seclusion from the commerce of the world': a significant point when one bears in mind that the usual abbreviated title 'Tintern Abbey' is a misnomer. Whether viewed primarily as an image of a lost religious community, or as the populous resort of tourists and beggars it had now become, the eponymous Abbey is by definition absent from the

lines written a few miles upstream from it.³⁹ It is only when secluded beyond and 'above' this communal centre, in a different landscape, that Wordsworth can grope towards the 'sense sublime' in which 'the burthen of the mystery' is lightened as we 'see into the life of things', and 'A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought'⁴⁰ enables him

to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(108–12)

While 'mystery' does not only connote the acceptance of ignorance imposed on us by religion in this period, it often does; and it is at least interesting to hear it described as a burden rather than a fact to be accepted or celebrated. The 'life of things' we see into when it is lightened determinedly avoids religious reference, preparing us instead for the idea of a life-energy which connects nature and consciousness – as in Coleridge's 'Eolian Harp', but without any of his worries about such a possible heresy. Lines 108–12, quoted more fully above, climactically attribute many functions which should belong to Christ – anchoring, guiding, guarding – to the formulation which is the real keystone of the poem's architecture, 'nature and the language of the sense'. It is the founding of everything religion was supposed to offer on Lockian material nature and the Lockian psychology of sensory perception that Wordsworth slips in, in a sentence structure which half buries this crucial phrase. Instead he throws the attention on to the more reassuring idea that all this is to do with the 'soul', unless we realize how slipperily that word is positioned, as if it followed and spiritually amplified 'heart' (meaning simply 'feelings'), whereas it actually means 'essence' of 'my moral being': that is, 'my present character has been *entirely* built up through physical nature and my sense-experience of it'.

To boil down Wordsworth's meaning in this way may seem reductive, but such a feeling is arguably more of a tribute to the beautifully ample and leisurely feeding-out of what he is saying in sentences that seem as if they could go on without effort forever, than to an actually different content from that just outlined. That content is often identified as coming from Locke via Hartley via Coleridge:⁴¹ if so, Wordsworth betrays none of Coleridge's fear of

such environmental necessitarianism, and has certainly not turned the corner into the Berkeleian talk of Nature as 'that eternal language which thy God / Utters' of 'Frost at Midnight' (65-6), also written in 1798. The clash between the two becomes explicit in Coleridge's strictures in *Biographia Literaria*, chapter XV, on Wordsworth's claims in the *Lyrical Ballads* preface that country people speak a 'more emphatic language . . . because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'.⁴² For Coleridge, 'the best part of language . . . is derived from reflections on the acts of the mind itself' and hence 'by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed nor reaped'.⁴³ Where Wordsworth sees mountains as fundamental to the moral instruction of their inhabitants, Coleridge sees vicars.

I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which the materialism of Wordsworth's part of *Lyrical Ballads* is at least partially masked, and that of the majority of his most sustained early writings withheld through non-publication. I shall conclude by discussing a work which seems neither to mask nor withhold its apparent infidelism: the 'Prospectus to *The Recluse*', published in the preface to *The Excursion*, 1814. As part of the unpublished poem now usually called 'Home at Grasmere' and dated 1800, it originates from the same secretive mode as *The Prelude*, but after Wordsworth's growth to respectability and various surface declarations of faith (Coleridge's 'Dr Watts'), he seems to have deemed this passage safe to publish in introducing the work which was supposed to set the seal on his orthodoxy. Speaking of his poetic mission, he consciously echoes Satan's skirting of Heaven while flying through Chaos towards Earth in Book II of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:⁴⁴

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
 Deep – and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
 To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
 All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
 That ever was put forth in personal form –
 Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones –
 I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out

By help of dreams – can breed such fear and awe
 As fall upon us often when we look
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man –
 My haunt, and the main region of my song. (28–41)⁴⁵

For Blake in 1826, this re-enactment of Satan's flight through Chaos towards Earth in Book II of *Paradise Lost* recalled Solomon's contempt for 'Jehovah as a Very inferior object of Man's Contemplation' when he 'became a Convert to the Heathen Mythology': a remark which goes along with the charge that when Wordsworth's 'Natural Man ris[es] up against the Spiritual Man . . . he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher'.⁴⁶ According to Henry Crabb Robinson, Blake claimed that the above passage gave him a bowel complaint and asked 'Does Mr Wordsworth think his mind can surpass Jehovah?'. Quoting this question, M. H. Abrams replies firmly, 'No, he did not'; it is just that the mind of man surpasses 'in the challenge it poses to its poetic explorer, the traditional subject matter of Milton's epic'.⁴⁷ For Robert M. Ryan, similarly, Wordsworth 'is not repudiating Milton's belief in a noumenal order, but only the "personal form" in which Milton clothed his conception of the Divine'.⁴⁸

I think Blake is right. Though, as Abrams points out, the invocation to Urania and some parallels with Milton's own occasional accounts of his journey through his subject matter suggest that it is *Paradise Lost's* author Wordsworth is comparing himself to, the dynamics of the passage suggest a much stronger identification with its antihero. It is thus with a very strong whiff of blasphemy that he insists, yet again, on the 'Mind of Man' as that 'very world that is the world' for whose sake all the supernaturalism of conventional religion is to be rendered redundant, and which he will continue to devote all his efforts to prising carefully away from its ancient obedience.

CHAPTER 6

Temples of reason: atheist strategies, 1800–1830

In the thirty or so years after 1800, the term ‘atheism debate’ is less appropriate than for those before it. This is chiefly thanks to the disappearance of a shared middle ground which accompanied the legal clampdown on subversive views in the mid 1790s: now, the main tools used to overcome infidelity are the courts and prisons, or the confident tones of orthodox apologists for whom their opponents are not, as it were, in the same room. On the other side, the infidels are now those who have firmly made up their own minds, but are confronted with a limited range of strategies for communicating their views, in the light of the ever-present possibility of prosecution. The four possible strategies were: to publish and be damned; to write but not to publish; to publish under a pseudonym; and to write with enough of an air of disinterested scholarship to avoid prosecution.

While the last three of these were chiefly adopted by respectable middle-class writers with reputations to preserve, the first was carried to new heights of deliberate confrontation by radicals with less to lose: a few upper-class Bohemians like Percy Shelley, but more often artisan-class agitators consciously using the battle-cry of a free press to mobilize anti-government resistance across a range of issues.¹ Within this diverse range of strategies, however, three main reasons for rejecting orthodox religion are particularly focussed on by infidel writers of all classes: science, comparative mythology, and political utility. All of these, but especially the last, feed in turn into issues of political action and organization.

To explore the issues raised by science I shall, however, begin by looking at the work of one Christian apologist. Perhaps the best-known image from the whole atheism debate is the opening of William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802):

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground . . . I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given.²

It is a strategically brilliant opening: the image of the 'heath' on to which we are thrust along with the author subliminally connotes (before we have time to focus on it *as* an image) the dreariness of original ignorance, which is still persisted in by those materialists who maintain that like the stone the physical universe has 'lain there forever': indeed the stone *is* metaphorically the materialists' universe, since they see no essential difference between such an unorganized piece of matter and the goal-directed living forms on which Paley intends to concentrate.

After a close description of the watch's 'parts, and of their offices, all tending to one result', Paley goes on: 'This mechanism being observed (it requires indeed an examination of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood), the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker' (p. 3). Within the parenthesis lies the justification for the whole book: we grow to accept the notion of a designer through close 'examination' of nature, supported by the right kind of 'previous knowledge'. Though the link is not made explicit until the end of chapter 2, it is already rhetorically clear that the watch represents the universe, made unthreateningly explicable to our non-expert common sense, but still requiring a scientifically gifted mentor to point out the links between its various 'parts, and their offices, all tending to one result'.

In his disinterested politeness of tone, Paley is perhaps the last of the Christian apologists to speak as if engaged with relatively like-minded people in an on-going 'debate'. Earlier, his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) had addressed some of the egalitarian discourses of the 'radical decade' of the 1780s in terms of a common-sense Christianity all could be presumed to share.³ *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), though chiefly directed against Hume's 'Essay on Miracles', could also be read as the first of many counterblasts to Paine's *The Age of Reason*, Part I, attempting to justify biblical revelation in terms of the remaining common ground

of belief in a creator which still united Christians with deists such as Paine.

By the end of the 1790s, it was ground that could no longer be assumed as common: partly through the agitation surrounding Paine, deist language had increasingly been either dropped hastily or replaced by declarations of thoroughgoing atheism, founded on philosophical materialism. The argument had thus shifted from the specifics of biblical discussion to the scientific basis of 'natural religion' itself. In defending this basis, the language of controversy needed to be replaced by a more judiciously scientific language, to counter the tone of abstracted indifference to the theological implications of their assertions which was perhaps the most dangerous and infuriating trait of the scientific materialists. Accordingly, by far the majority of writers specifically cited in *Natural Theology* are scientists, and their findings usually cited approvingly or without comment.

When more controversial figures appear they are usually discussed glancingly, in relation to some minor point in which Paley's larger disagreements with them are only implicit. Thus Hume – the great enemy of *Evidences* – is challenged in passing for condemning idleness as 'simple and merely bad'. 'But how', Paley mildly objects, 'does he distinguish idleness from the love of ease? or is he sure, that the love of ease in individuals is not the chief foundation of social tranquillity?' (p. 548). Lurking behind the ostensible point – that vice is only an excess of potential virtue – is a strong hint that orthodox tranquillity is preferable to restless inquiry for its own sake, such as Hume's.

A more direct target of much of *Natural Theology* is Erasmus Darwin, but even he is only actually named twice: once for a simple point of scientific fact, but once for an account of the growth of shoots and roots from corn grains with which Paley clearly disagrees. To Darwin's argument in *Phytologia* that these are adapted to react spontaneously to stimulation from air and moisture, Paley queries: 'Who, to use our author's own language, "adapted the objects?" Who gave such a quality to these connate parts, as to be susceptible of different "stimulation": as to be "excited" each only by its own element, and precisely by that, which the success of the vegetation requires?' (p. 388). Though Darwin is apparently simply trying to account for a biological process, Paley signals a potential danger in ascribing it to a combination of intrinsic properties and external

stimulation alone. This sideswipe is clearly of a piece with Paley's far more substantial attack on the great French biologist and *philosophe* Buffon – the only such sustained attack on an individual writer in the book.

This takes place in chapter 23, 'Of the Personality of the Deity', where Paley mounts an assault on what he sees as the main hallmark of contemporary atheism: the replacement of 'an intending, contriving mind, in the structure and formation of the organized constitutions which the world contains', with '*unconscious* energies, of a like kind, in that respect, with attraction, magnetism, electricity, &c.; without any thing further'.

In this, the old system of atheism and the new agree . . . For instance, I could never see the difference between the antiquated system of atoms and Buffon's organic molecules. This philosopher, having made a planet by knocking off from the sun a piece of melted glass, in consequence of the stroke of a comet; and having set it in motion by the same stroke, both round its own axis and round the sun, finds its next difficulty to be, how to bring plants and animals upon it. In order to solve this difficulty, we are to suppose the universe replenished with particles endowed with life, but without organization or senses of their own; and endowed also with a tendency to marshal themselves into organized forms. (pp. 458–9)

The 'antiquated system of atoms' is that of Epicurus and Lucretius, and it is indeed the basis for much of the 'new' materialist scientific thinking, including the evolutionism at which Buffon occasionally hints. In a sarcastic footnote on one such hint, Paley comments: 'I trust I may be excused for not citing . . . a grave assertion of this writer, that the branches of trees upon which the stag feeds break out again in his horns. Such *facts* merit no discussion' (pp. 461–2).

Paley goes on to quote Buffon's assertion that "'When [the] nutritious and prolific matter, which is diffused throughout all nature, passes through the *internal mould* of an animal or vegetable, and finds a proper matrix or receptacle, it gives rise to an animal or vegetable of the same species'" and asks 'Does any reader annex a meaning to the expression "internal mould" in this sentence?' (p. 462). While a present-day reader may think of DNA here, Paley concludes that Buffon's internal moulds differ 'in nothing from the "essential forms" of the Greek Philosophy'. Though such biology may nominally acknowledge God as a 'first cause':

In one important respect, however, the theory before us coincides with atheistic systems, *viz.* in that, in the formation of plants and animals, in the

structure and use of their parts, it does away final causes. Instead of the parts of a plant or animal, or the particular structure of the parts, having been intended for the action or the use to which we see them applied, according to this theory they themselves have grown out of that action, sprung from that use. (p. 465)

For Paley, then, evolutionism is highly dangerous for suggesting that a single 'portion of living irritable matter', in interaction with its environment, is all that is needed to recreate the whole of life as we know it, with no 'final causes' beyond the first to help it on its way. It is also dangerous for postulating for this process a timescale of millions of years ('for our theorists, having eternity to dispose of, are never sparing in time', p. 464), and thus challenging the Mosaic dating of creation.

It is only after a great deal of science – most of it less aggressively combative than the above – that Paley starts to turn to some of the other religious and political controversies of the time. Thus the penultimate chapter 26, 'Of the Goodness of the Deity', addresses the problem of evil, and in doing so has this to say on the injustice of social inequality:

The order of generation proceeds by something like a geometrical progression. The increase of provision under circumstances even the most advantageous, can only assume the form of an arithmetic series. Whence it follows, that the population will always overtake the provision, will pass beyond the line of plenty, and will continue to increase till checked by the difficulty of procuring subsistence. Such difficulty therefore, along with its attendant circumstances, *must* be found in every old country: and these circumstances constitute what we call poverty, which, necessarily, imposes labour, servitude, restraint. (p. 540)

A footnote points clearly to Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), which argued against any attempts at social amelioration because these would only expand population beyond the food supply. Malthus's book polarized political opinion from its first appearance, especially in such attempts to draw moral and religious conclusions from its 'scientific' evidence as that anyone seeking Poor Relief should be denied it and thus taught:

that the laws of Nature, which are the laws of God, had doomed him and his family to starve, for disobeying their repeated admonitions; that he had no claim of *right* on society for the smallest portion of food, beyond that which his labour would fairly purchase; and that if he and his family were saved from feeling the natural consequences of his imprudence, he would

owe it to the pity of some kind benefactor, to whom, therefore, he ought to be bound by the strongest ties of gratitude.⁴

It was for such invocations of God's approval for withdrawing even the parish Poor Relief that currently existed that the radical William Cobbett took to addressing Malthus simply as 'Parson', and William Hazlitt evoked the image of the above passage being 'stuck on the church door' of every parish. If Paley's adoption of Malthus's arguments suggests an essentially conservative acceptance of poverty as providentially inescapable, however, it is with some reservations: 'It need not however dishearten any endeavours for the public service, to know that population naturally treads upon the heels of improvement. If the condition of a people be meliorated, the consequence will be, either that the *mean* happiness will be increased, or a greater number partake of it' (*Natural Theology*, p. 541). In trying to hold the balance between Malthus's social *laissez-faire* and the utilitarian ideal of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' most strongly associated with radical freethinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and William Godwin (whose *Enquiry into Political Justice* was Malthus's chief butt), Paley declares himself a Christian conservative who has not abandoned all the benign progressivism of the Enlightenment.

Returning to Paley's attack on materialist science, however, the seriousness of the issues raised in *Natural Theology* was illustrated some years later by the case of the physiologist William Lawrence. Lawrence fell foul of the medical establishment for *An Introduction to Comparative Anatomy and Physiology* (1816) and *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man* (1819), where he argued that life was a result of physical organization rather than a quasi-electro-chemical 'vital fluid' which would somehow indicate the existence of a soul. He was suspended from the Royal College of Surgeons and refused the copyright of the offending books, which ironically added to their circulation in pirated editions by radical publishers, including Richard Carlile.

Lawrence begins *Lectures on Physiology* with a 'Reply to the Charges of Mr Abernethy', the professor who has accused him 'of propagating dangerous opinions, – and of doing so in concert with the French physiologists: – the French, who seem to be considered our natural enemies in science, as well as politics'.⁵ To the charge of belonging to 'a party of modern sceptics!', he replies: 'if this party includes those who doubt . . . the electro-chemical doctrine of life, I

can have no objection to belong to so numerous and respectable a body . . . I never met with even the shadow of a proof that the contraction of a muscle or the sensation of a nerve depended in any degree on electrical principles' (p. 6). Since it is clear that life 'is immediately dependent on organization', it would be utterly unreasonable 'to conceive that life is independent from the animal body, in which the vital phenomena are observed' (p. 7). Turning the tables on his opponents, he argues that 'the theological doctrine of the soul, and its separate existence, has nothing to do with this physiological question, but rests on a species of proof altogether different . . . An immaterial and spiritual being could not have been discovered amid the blood and filth of the dissecting-room' (p. 7).⁶ Lawrence stresses that the theory of 'this subtile and mobile vital fluid is brought forward with more ambitious pretensions' than to explain the great physiological questions: it aims 'to add a new sanction to the great principles of morals and religion' (pp. 10–11). These, however, ought to be grounded 'in the common sense, in the mutual wants and relations of mankind', rather than such 'abstruse metaphysical researches', and Science has opened 'a temple, where all may meet. She never inquires about the country or sect of those who seek admission . . . The philosopher of one country should not see an enemy in the philosopher of another: he should take his seat in the temple of Science, and not ask who sits beside him' (p. 14).

Accordingly, much later in the book, the 'witty and charming' Voltaire is cited just before a querying of the book of Genesis 'as a narrative of actual events, authenticated by the highest sanction' (p. 229), since 'the entire or even partial inspiration of the various writings comprehended in the Old Testament has been and is doubted by many persons, including learned divines, and distinguished oriental and biblical scholars' (pp. 229–30). Not only is there an 'irreconcilable opposition between the passions and sentiments ascribed to the deity by MOSES, and that religion of peace and love unfolded by the Evangelists', but also the simultaneous assembly of all animal species before Adam and then Noah is 'zoologically impossible' (p. 230). Since different species are clearly adapted from the start to different environments, why should we 'give to an allegory a literal construction, and the character of revelation' (p. 235)?

I shall return to the ideas of Genesis as an allegory, and of Science as a temple, later in this chapter. As a concluding point on Lawrence,

it has to be admitted that his replacement of the theory of a common human ancestry from Adam and Noah with the findings of 'comparative anatomy' led him straight to the racist theories that would later be identified with 'social Darwinism', moving as if inevitably from different skull shapes via 'Differences in Moral and Intellectual Qualities' (chapter VIII) to affirmations of Caucasian superiority and fitness to rule.⁷

For one contemporary commentator, however, what was important about Lawrence was his refusal to 'crouch' to 'the established impostures of the day'. Richard Carlile's *Address to Men of Science* (1821) protests vehemently that, though all modern scientists are materialists at heart,

when that spirited young man, Mr Lawrence, having obtained a professor's gown in the College of Surgeons, shew[ed] a disposition in his public lectures to discountenance and attack those established impostures and superstitions of Priestcraft, the whole profession . . . suffered the professor's gown to be stripped from this ornament of his profession and his country, and every employment to be taken from him, without even a public remonstrance, or scarcely an audible murmur!⁸

Written during one of many imprisonments for publishing 'blasphemy', the title of Carlile's pamphlet is worth quoting in full:

An Address to Men of Science; Calling upon them to Stand Forward and Vindicate the Truth from the Foul Grasp of Superstition; and Obtain for the Island of Great Britain the Noble Appellation of The Focus of Truth; whence Mankind shall be Illuminated, and the Black and Pestiferous Clouds of Persecution and Superstition be Banished from the Face of the Earth; as the only sure Prelude to Universal Peace and Harmony among the Human Race. In which a Sketch of a Proper System for the Education of Youth is Submitted to their Judgement.

After a brief introduction, we are told that: 'Our Chemists have proved themselves the greatest of all revolutionists, for they have silently and scientifically undermined all the dogmas of the priest, upon which the customs and the manners of society seem hitherto to have been entirely founded' (p. 5). It is, then, 'the Man of Science who is alone capable of making war upon the Priest, so as to silence him effectually', but:

It is evident that Men of Science have hitherto too much crouched to the established tyrannies of Kingcraft and Priestcraft . . . This has given room to the advocates of superstition, to put forward as an authority for their dogmas, the names of Bacon, of Newton, of Locke, and many others . . . I will not believe that Bacon, or Newton, or Locke, in the latter part of their

life, had any other ideas of the Christian religion, or any other religion, than I have. In their days, the faggots had barely been extinguished, nor was the fuel which supplied them exhausted. (p. 9)

There follows a lengthy account of Newton's hypocritical vendetta against the deist mathematician William Whiston, whose membership of the Royal Society he blocked on account of his unorthodox views. Of Locke, Carlile is more approving, though with reservations:

Locke was thought to have gone to an extreme in his time, but I now consider his writings to be scarcely worth reading, as far as they apply to toleration in matters of opinion, or to political economy and political government. The sentiments which I have put upon paper would have been called high treason a century ago, and the author hung, beheaded, embowelled, and quartered, with the general approbation of the people. (p. 16)

What has made the difference is 'the progressive power of the printing press', which 'has come like a true Messiah to emancipate the great family of mankind' from the 'double yoke' of priestcraft and kingcraft (p. 18).

Despite the general pusillanimity of the scientific community, however, their achievements still strike terror to the hearts of despot:

The horror which was so lately expressed by the Emperor of Austria at the progress of Science, and at the revolution which Sir Humphry Davy had made in the science of Chemistry, is a specimen of that feeling which pervades all such men. This imbecile idiot quivered at an observation of his own physician about the state of his own constitution, and forbade him ever to use the word in his presence again! (p. 21)

Another important 'infidel' issue of the period is that of mythology and comparative religion. Sir William Drummond's *The Oedipus Judaicus*, printed anonymously in 1811 and only circulated privately, falls very much in the myth-deconstructing tradition of Payne Knight's *Priapus*, Volney's *Ruins* and Dupuis's *Origine*. Despite an immediate branding of Drummond as an 'infidel' by the Archbishop of Canterbury's chaplain George D'Oyly, and a correspondence about the book as a hot freethinking property in Erasmus Perkins's *Theological Inquirer* in 1815, Drummond declared himself a 'theist' simply trying to clarify some particularly obscure passages of the Old Testament.⁹

The way Drummond does this, however, involves such an 'alle-

gorical' reading of these passages as to suggest that much of the rest of the Old Testament must also be purely symbolic: an approach which, as he points out in his preface, is generally adopted by Christian apologists when looking for premonitions and prophecies of the coming of Christ, even while they insist on the literal truth of all the rest. In describing this literalist reading, he gives vent to the kind of Paine-like satire which doubtless helped to make the book controversial:

They see no allegory in the first chapters of Genesis; nor doubt, that far the greater portion of the human race is doomed to suffer eternal torments, because our first parents ate an apple, after having been tempted by a talking serpent. They find it quite simple, that the triune Jehovah should dine on veal cutlets at Abraham's table; nor are they at all surprised, that the God of the universe should pay a visit to Ezekiel, in order to settle with the Prophet, whether he should bake his bread with human dung, or with cow's dung. (p. vii)

Even more controversial, however, is the main basis of most of his allegorical explanations of passages from Genesis, Joshua and elsewhere: the Egyptian astrological zodiac. Much prefatory material is devoted to proving that the established Greek zodiac is based on an earlier Egyptian one, which in turn has close links with Indian versions as described and depicted by Sir William Jones, and with Mithraic imagery. The discussion of the Indian zodiac indirectly raises the vexed problem of how to keep the vast reaches of Indian history within the Mosaic timescale for the creation of the earth, Jones's desperate attempts to conform to which are tacitly undermined by Drummond's attribution of a much earlier date than Jones's to the first Indian zodiac (p. lxx; note to plate 10). Another point of interest in these early discussions of plates is Drummond's careful treatment of the kind of 'obscene' imagery for which Knight had been so notorious: in one of the Mithraic pictures, a figure discreetly urinating with his back to us is glossed thus:

I have directed my engraver to alter the attitude of one of the figures, (in Plate 13) whose action, however, may still be understood. The ancients were not offended by such representations as those, which are found on the Mithraic monuments, because they considered them as merely symbolical; but the moderns entertain very different notions concerning these things, and it is needless to shock delicacy, even where we may think it more fastidious than necessary. (p. lxxvii)

It could be argued that throughout the book Drummond habitually

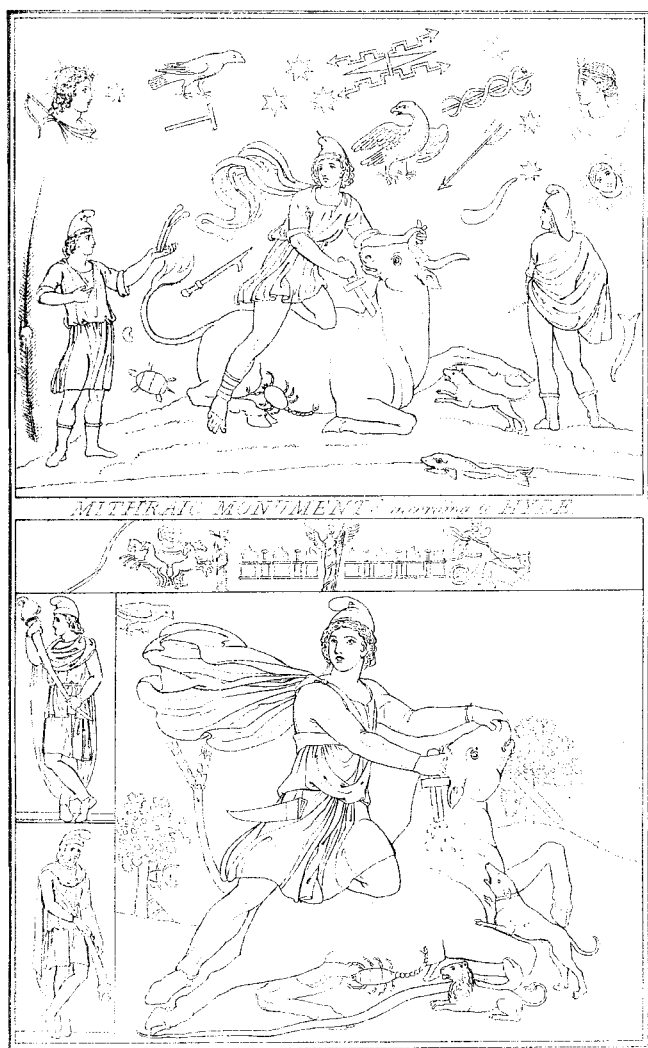


Plate 5. 'Astronomical' depictions of Mithras, plate 13 of Sir William Drummond's *Oedipus Judaicus* (1811). For Drummond, 'The Mithraic monuments appear to have been constructed while the vernal equinox corresponded with *Taurus*' and are 'direct[ly]' alluded to in Jacob's speech to Joseph in Genesis 49: 22–6 (though the directness of the allusion depends on knowing that the bull was the emblem of Joseph's son Ephraim). See p. lxxvii in the 1811 edition.

'alters attitudes' from more blatantly infidel precursors in the name of a delicacy brought on by fear of prosecution, but in such a way that they 'may still be understood'.

Among the many sources cited in these introductory arguments, the two most prominent are Dupuis and Kircher, from whose *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* Drummond copies his own title: the chief reference being to the idea of riddles rather than specifically to the figure of Oedipus.¹⁰ It is upon Kircher's diagrams of the Egyptian zodiac and the 'Camp of the Hebrews' as a symbolic arrangement of the twelve tribes in imitation of it that Drummond's argument is largely based (although as with the Mithraic picture, he allows himself to 'slightly alter' Kircher's diagrams at will).

Thus in the main body of his book, Drummond argues that Genesis 49, in which the dying Jacob describes and makes prophecies about his twelve sons, tallies so well with the twelve 'houses' that it becomes clear the twelve tribes of Israel are simply zodiacal symbols. Genesis 14, describing Abraham's victory over the mighty 'King of Elam' who had captured Abraham's brother Lot, really describes the overthrow of the old zodiacal system by a more universalist understanding of nature in which Abraham symbolizes the sun and Lot (whose name is related to the Greek Latona) the moon. In the book of Joshua, a literal reading of the seizure of the Promised Land by the Israelites is full of the most 'extraordinary examples of violence, injustice, and cruelty . . . and when, for all answer, we are told, that these horrors were perpetrated by the express command of God himself, we must either believe and renounce the use of our reason, or disbelieve and renounce the professions of our faith' (pp. 155-6). Once again, the way out of this dilemma is to see that the various tribes overthrown by Israel really represent old, false ways of fixing the zodiacal calendar derived from Egypt: hence the first and most significant such tribe, the Canaanites, really stand for 'those who fix the time', on the basis of an etymological link with the time-god 'worshipped under the names of *Chon*, *Chiun* and *Chaon*, by the Egyptians, and idolatrous Jews, and the Syrians' (p. 205).

It is in the account of Joshua that Drummond also gives his fullest account of why such references should abound in the books supposedly written by or about the great founder of Judaism, Moses, whose historical existence he does seem to accept. Brought up among the Egyptian élite, Moses was aware that their religion,

which had its basis in the observation of such natural phenomena as the changing positions of the sun and stars at different times of the year, also had its esoteric and exoteric sides: 'In the recesses of their colleges, the learned Egyptians undoubtedly taught a pure and beautiful system of theology', but for the common people this was obscured rather than explained by the literal promulgation of its symbols as actual divinities: 'Science itself was scarcely so much an object with the Priests, as the art of concealing it from the people. Hence the numerous and complicated symbols of the Egyptians; – hence the use of hieroglyphics even after the invention of letters.' Though we may be tempted to see such 'Priestcraft' as 'the base offspring of ambition and hypocrisy', 'it must be confessed that science never can be the portion of the vulgar, and must always be confined to the few' (p. 163).

Thus when, after the 'escape from Egypt' which may itself be largely allegorical of the escape from the old 'vulgar' beliefs, Moses 'founded a college of Priests, whose influence he desired to render permanent, it might be necessary to enter into many explanations, and to expound many propositions, which were above the capacity and beyond the sphere of the illiterate vulgar', who were constantly in danger of slipping back into idol worship despite the prohibitions of the Ten Commandments – as witnessed by their reverence for the Tabernacle, which, 'as I have proved elsewhere, was indubitably a type of the universe' (pp. 166–7). To keep his future priests from doing the same, Moses chose the somewhat roundabout expedient (we may think) of showing that the old astrological religion of 'Tsabaism' was not only based on astronomy, but on inaccurate astronomy: 'Now in order to destroy Tsabaism, it was necessary to show, that it was a system of astronomy imposed on the vulgar as a system of theology. Nor was this all. The system of astronomy was as false as the religion' (pp. 173–4). The Egyptian priests had themselves known that the popular system, on which their calendar was based, was inaccurate, but hushed it up by making every new king swear 'that he would allow no alteration to be made upon the duration of the month, or of the year': by revealing this esoteric knowledge to his own priests, Moses would separate them off from the popular beliefs still widely represented even in Jewish symbolism (p. 176).

Where the argument becomes more complicated is in the astrological details by which he accomplished this plan, but one of the

most striking of these is the fact that under the old system the year began (i.e. 'the Sun rose from the lower hemisphere' at the spring equinox, p. 192) in the house of the bull (Taurus), whereas in the more accurate revised system it began in the house of the ram (Aries). All this is allegorized in the story of the false worship of the Golden Calf on the flight from Egypt, but also in many encoded references to the ram or lamb as the symbol of the Jewish faith, ranging from the alternate names of Joshua (which also means Saviour) to the 'Paschal Lamb' which was sacrificed just before Passover (a term itself really signifying the transition of the equinox from the bull to the ram; pp. 365–81). And so the book continues, with the 'novelty in some of my opinions' for which Drummond hopes 'I may be easily pardoned, if I confine the distribution of the copies of this work to a narrow circle' (p. i).

A bridge between the politely reticent scholarship of Drummond and the bare-knuckle pugnacity of Carlile can be found in the work of the latter's friend and associate Robert Taylor, the author of *The Diegesis; Being a Discovery of the Origin, Evidences, and Early History of Christianity* (1829). Published by Carlile, the book is mock-respectfully dedicated to the 'Master, Fellows, and Tutors of St John's College, Cambridge', who once praised Taylor as a student there and who should thus 'appreciate (far beyond any wish of mine that you should *seem* to appreciate)' the present book by 'Robert Taylor, A. B., Prisoner, Oakham Gaol'.¹¹ The 'most glorious cause' for which he suffered this 'unjust imprisonment' was free speech or blasphemy, depending on one's point of view. Yet, like other infidel polemicists of the time, Taylor prefixes his name with the 'Rev.' acquired earlier in his career, and he gravely opens his book by stressing that 'the Christian religion is matter of most serious importance' (p. 1). This is, however, by way of arguing that its claims to impose moral obligations 'which would not otherwise be incumbent upon us' are the only justification for its 'whole apparatus of supernatural phenomena'.

The book goes on to argue that Christianity contains no new revelations, and hence it is important because 'no wise and good man could possibly be indifferent' to its falsehood in claiming to do so. Tracking over the same comparative religious ground as Knight, Volney and Dupuis, Taylor dismisses the classical evidence for an historical Jesus as a series of later church forgeries, and argues that 'the superstitions of India [got] footing in Egypt; the Chrishna of the

Ganges [became] the Christ of the Nile', and that the sign of the cross 'was the most sacred symbol of Egyptian idolatry' (p. 201). The main source for the Christian sacraments was the Eleusinian mysteries, whose presiding gods Ceres and Bacchus become the bread and wine of communion, the latter god lending his alternative name 'Yes' to the root of 'Jesus' (pp. 212–13).

Like Drummond and most of their joint predecessors, Taylor quotes 'the learned researches of the pious Sir William Jones' in support of the idea of a world ur-religion, referring to 'his established conviction "that a connection exists between the old idolatrous nations of Egypt, India, Greece, and Italy, long before the birth of Moses"' (p. 243).¹² More specifically, he quotes him at length on the parallels between 'Chrishna' and Christ which Jones himself seems unable to account for, and concludes that 'Nothing in the whole compass of ecclesiastical history has so perplexed and distressed the modern advocates of Christianity, as these surrenders made by their own best and ablest champion, to the cause of infidelity. Our evangelical polemics, indeed, lose all temper upon hearing but an allusion to this most unluckily discovered prototype of their Jewish deity' (pp. 170–1).

Drummond's book is far more cautious than Taylor's, in not venturing to 'comparative-religionize' the New Testament as well as the old, as well as in its initially declared 'theism'. But perhaps the most important difference between the two books lies in their attitudes to knowledge as an élite province: in its anonymity and restricted circulation, as well as its ultimate approval of the priestly encodements of astrological knowledge it describes, *Oedipus Judaicus* instinctively aligns itself with the secret-keeping classes. *Diegesis*, by contrast, assumes from the start that secrecy is a fundamental crime against humanity, only to be overthrown by trumpeting its lies from the roof-tops.

Moving on from mythographic criticisms of religion to those founded on questions of social utility, similar issues of how far to go in undeceiving the people remain paramount. Though William Godwin's most influential work was produced in the 1790s, it is appropriate to return to him here because his clearest declarations of atheism – 'Of Religion' and *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* – were written in 1818 and 1835 respectively. Since neither was published in his lifetime, it might be argued that they are not strictly

relevant to the public debate; but both works bring together and make more explicit views that could be and were deduced from his published work and are likely to have been already fully known to personal acquaintances, who include a large proportion of all the major writers of the period. However, his caution in publishing these two texts is also significant: Godwin's ability to avoid the prosecutions and imprisonments of a good number of his friends for political or religious subversion depended on a very canny sense of how far it was possible to go in publishing one's actual views, and of the appropriate register in which to do so.

The problem of whether and how far to 'undecieve' the masses about the faith in which they were raised is in fact one of the major preoccupations of these two works. Their other main concerns include a sheer visceral horror at the cruelty of God as envisaged by Christianity; and the question of the kinds of mentally elevating beliefs and practices that might still be viable in a post-religious world. It will be easiest to begin with the concern over cruelty, since this extends into almost every aspect of Godwin's disgust with religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

Before the 'conversion from Christianity' described in 'Of Religion',¹³ Godwin was himself a Dissenting Presbyterian minister, and as such he published in 1784 *Sketches of History. In Six Sermons*, dedicated to Richard Watson, newly appointed Bishop of Llandaff and at that time a focus for liberal religious and political opinion. Godwin's sermons are apparently orthodox enough, but begin with a meditation on a text from Leviticus describing Aaron's uncomplaining acceptance of the death of his two sons because they had put incense in their censers: 'And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.'¹⁴ Though the gist of the sermon is that we must accept such treatment, it contains the significant reservation that 'God himself has not a right to be a tyrant' (p. 12).

The *Sketches* were written and probably delivered as sermons during Godwin's seven-month tenure as a minister in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, in 1782-3 (p. 3). According to the autobiographical sketch which opens 'Of Religion', however, by this time he had already begun doubting his Christianity and abandoned it in 1781, resuming it 'under the mitigated form of Socinianism' (Unitarianism) in 1782 and taking 'final leave of the clerical profession' in 1783 (p. 64). Though he only finally abandoned Christianity in 1788,

these dates clearly suggest that the convinced surface of the sermons conceals many doubts; and in this context it is instructive that they focus from the start on the problem of divine cruelty.

'Of Religion' (1818) focusses this issue unforgettably in an imagery of perpetual surveillance, from which the individual is never allowed a moment's freedom: 'We have a tyrant perpetually controlling us with his lash, with this additional horror, that he is acquainted with all our most secret motions, and sits like Jeremy Bentham, perched on the top of his Panopticon to spy into our weaknesses' (p. 65). The reference to the circular panopticon prisons devised by Bentham to enable constant observation of inmates pinpoints the difference between Bentham's coercive model of utilitarianism and Godwin's anarchist version of it. The image also provides a suggestive link with the central horror of Godwin's most famous novel, *Caleb Williams*: the relentless tracking of Caleb's movements by the agents of his former master Falkland. Rather as the favoured secretary, Caleb, progresses to enforced continued servitude and then harried exile upon discovering that the revered Falkland is a murderer, Godwin describes in 'Of Religion' his own progress from being initially considered 'set apart' (p. 63) for the ministry, to an increasing sense that this calling stifled his ability to question God's existence, to his final self-expulsion from it on voicing his religious doubts. And as Caleb never manages to bring his accusations to open court until the ending of which there are two versions – one making him successful, one unsuccessful – so Godwin seems to have deferred declaring his case against God publicly during his lifetime: very possibly with a similarly uncertain courtroom scene in his mind.¹⁵

The essay's argument that religion is a 'corrupter of human understanding' which turns its adherents into 'intellectual eunuchs' (pp. 67–8) is expanded by the much fuller *Genius of Christianity Unveiled* into a sustained attack on the doctrines of divine retribution. The first of its fifteen essays, 'On a State of Future Retribution', sets the tone, querying the idea that rewards and punishments after death will rectify the injustices of this world, pointing out that poverty and misfortune often lead to the very 'sins' to be punished, and concluding with a series of bloodcurdling passages from the Gospels and Revelation describing the torments awaiting the great majority of the human race.

Other essays deal with such mainstays of atheist argument as the temporal causes behind the spread of Christianity (Essay IX, 'On the

History and Effects of the Christian Religion', covering some of the same ground as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*), miracles (Essay XV, 'On Miracles', in the footsteps of Hume), and nature as a self-sustaining system (Essay XIV, 'On Nature'). On one topic in particular Godwin takes a distinctly harder line than many of his precursors: the character of Jesus. Fully accepting the Gospels as an accurate historical portrait (unlike such 'mythographic' atheists as Volney or Dupuis), he refuses to follow either Paine or Percy Shelley in presenting Jesus as a noble-souled revolutionary or pacifist misunderstood by all around him. Though Jesus' doctrine of love is briefly considered as a 'grace' in Essay XI ('On the Mixed Character of Christianity, its Horrors, and its Graces'), in the longer Essay VIII ('On the Character of Jesus') the horrors are well to the fore: it is Jesus personally who dwells not occasionally but repeatedly on the punishments to come for all who disbelieve in him, or of whom he disapproves for any reason whatever. The violent clearing of the temple, the denunciations of scribes and Pharisees as vipers, the dooming of inhospitable cities such as Bethsaida and Capernaum to a fate worse than Sodom's, the division of mankind into sheep and goats of whom the latter are consigned to 'hell, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched': all are part of the same intolerant outlook which was simply expanded on rather than distorted by the gloating vision of the early church father Tertullian with which the chapter ends: 'How many sage philosophers, who persuaded themselves that they had no concern with God, that their souls would never transmigrate into other bodies, now blushing in red-hot flames with their deluded scholars'.¹⁶ As these philosophers are joined by poets, tragedians and dancers all suffering appropriate torments, the sadistic antihumanism of the early Christian outlook is allowed to speak for itself.

The next issue I wish to focus on is Godwin's concern with how far to go in disabusing the common people about the religion which may well be the mainstay of their sense of morality. 'Of Religion' argues that 'the removal of this fabulous and imaginary restraint upon human excesses may be dangerous to vulgar minds':

It is like taking away the extended ribband which divided the garden of the Thuilleries in the time of the French Revolution, upon the removal of which the whole mob rushed in impetuously, like the billows in a tempest . . . I am therefore disposed to timidity and caution as to the sudden promulgation of principles of infidelity to persons without education. (p. 66)

The 'timidity and caution' prescribed here is of a piece with Godwin's clear indecision about publishing this very text, and also with the fear of mob violence which made him distance himself early on from the French Revolution: though the storming of the Tuileries is only used as a metaphor, the Burkeian argument that the infidelity of the *philosophes* led straight to the Reign of Terror may have influenced even Godwin.

In *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, the prefatory 'Preliminary Essay: On the Exoteric and Esoteric in Philosophy and Theology' begins by considering how 'The Ancient Egyptians, the Pythagoreans, the leaders of the Hindoo religion in India, the Druids, and a number of speculative men in all ages, have been of opinion, that there is one set of doctrines that it is convenient should be recommended to and imposed upon the vulgar, and another that should be communicated only to such as were found unquestionably worthy of that favour and distinction' (p. 99). Here we are back with the intellectual class distinction which so fascinated Sir William Jones in Brahminism and Erasmus Darwin and Coleridge in the Egyptian and Eleusinian mysteries. Godwin is, then, certainly addressing an intellectually respectable argument for withholding the whole 'truth' from the masses, which may have exerted a strong influence on his own practice if not his theory. Nonetheless, he continues:

The question is the same as that of political liberty and slavery. . . . So long as we were divided into two classes, the master and the slave, both parties were corrupted – the lower by the condition of their existence, being precluded from every generous motive, every impulse of a loftier sort, and the higher impelled from the first hour of their moral existence to the practice of tyranny and despotism. But that time is happily gone by. (pp. 99–100)

The third issue to be briefly considered here is that of what Godwin envisages as a substitute for religion. 'Of Religion' expatiates at length on a programme of nature worship which looks very like a manifesto for Wordsworthian Romanticism, and may partly spring from the very partial influence of Coleridge discussed above in chapter 4: 'The man of nature . . . must be a lover of nature. Nothing can tend more to enlarge . . . the human mind, than the contemplation of the works of that principle that has made us what we are' (p. 68). To this love of nature, Godwin adds what sounds something like Matthew Arnold's plea for a 'high culture' as a substitute for a receding 'sea of faith':

To me a gallery of admirable paintings is the genuine Temple of God . . . To bring this still nearer to our idea of a temple, let concerts of music be from time to time performed in this gallery; let me witness in it the execution of the finest compositions of Handel. In that case I shall be sure to see assembled, in addition to the works of art that adorn the walls, a number of human beings seated in decent order, dressed with more than their normal attention to neatness and propriety, and with their countenances composed to serenity and happiness. (p. 69)

If this returns us virtually to the atmosphere of a church, it is a fully secular church – somewhat reminiscent of the ‘Ethical Churches’ actually established later in the century, and well described in I. D. MacKillop’s *The British Ethical Societies*.¹⁷ We shall consider one version of a ‘Temple of Reason and Truth’ when we come to Eliza Sharples; and in the next chapter I shall consider some treatments of similar temples in poetry.

Far from such fancies, however, is a work by ‘Philip Beauchamp’ called *An Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind*, published by Carlile in 1822 and acknowledged as a formative influence by John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography*.¹⁸ ‘Beauchamp’ would appear to be the classical scholar George Grote, acting in close collaboration with the ageing father of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham. Insisting precisely on the social *non*-utility of even the most deistically ‘natural’ religion, Grote argues that the belief that God can interfere in the normal course of nature is ‘extra-experimental’, that it undermines the trust in previous experience on which rational judgement depends: ‘What steps do you take to prove that a man has committed murder? You produce a witness who saw him level his pistol at the head of the deceased, heard the report, and beheld the man drop. But this testimony d[e]rives all its persuasive force from the warrant and countersign of experience.’¹⁹ This rigidly deterministic ‘warrant of experience’ can only be undermined by such things as the belief in prayer, which tries to suspend the necessary laws of cause and effect in favour of ‘expectations from the divine attribute of *pliability*’, and hence ‘cannot fail to introduce complete inactivity among the human race. Why should a man employ the slow and toilsome methods to which experience chains him down, when the pleasure which he seeks may be purchased by the simple act of prayer?’ (pp. 106–7).

At this point the argument begins to express an essentially managerial concern over working-class shiftlessness: ‘Why should he

plough, and sow, and walk his annual round of anxiety, when by mere expression of a request, an omnipotent ally may be induced to place the mature produce, instantly within his grasp?' The conventional argument that God helps those who help themselves merely implies 'either that the individual is not to rely upon God at all, in which case there is no motive to offer up the prayer, or that he is to feel a reliance, and yet act as if he felt none whatever'. In the latter case, the belief that God will provide will 'make him undertake any enterprises whatever, without regarding the adequacy of his means', and assume that he 'may securely marry without any earthly means of providing for his family, inasmuch as God will be sure to send him some' (pp. 107–8).

Here Grote repeats some of the ideas of Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) and anticipates those of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859). Such advocacy of restraint to the poor in the name of economic individualism is part of the anti-communalist tendency which attracted criticism of Benthamite utilitarianism from more left-wing positions. In conclusion, however, Grote uses an imagery of all-out class war to describe the alliance between state power and priestcraft to undermine the people's confidence in their own judgement: 'Irreligion and heresy become crimes of the deepest dye, and the class are thus secured, in their task of working on the public mind, from all competition or contest. Under the protection of such powerful artillery, this corps of sappers and miners carries on a tranquil, but effectual, progress in the trenches' (p. 139).

A similar combination of proto-socialism, atheism and a somewhat 'managerial' view of the working class is represented by Robert Owen. His *A New View of Society, or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to the Practice* (1813–16) appeared during the new bubbling up of radical opinion surrounding the fall of Napoleon and preceding the hardening of opposition to such opinions after the Peterloo massacre. Based on Owen's own very successful running of the New Lanark cotton mills on humanitarian lines since 1797, it was well placed to receive respectable endorsement for its arguments that social discontent was largely a matter of poor management of the rapidly expanding labouring class, and that a paternalistic stress on morality coupled with decent treatment was the best way of tackling such problems for the future.

Owen's clearly good 'practice' was, however, accompanied with the less comfortable 'principle' that human character, opinion and ultimately even volition were formed almost entirely by social environment and education and that, just as they could be moulded anew by specific environments such as New Lanark, they were generally simply corrupted by a shared environment dominated by sectarian and irrationalist education. Though *A New View* did not stress such views greatly (indeed its first essay was initially dedicated to the great Evangelical Suppressor of Vice William Wilberforce), they are clear in its professed wish to replace 'all former *moral* and *religious* instruction', to remove all 'jealousies . . . on account of one religious sect possessing a decided preference over the others', and to free the idea of Sabbath rest from that of 'a day of superstitious gloom and tyranny over the mind'.²⁰ According to Gregory Claeys,

Owen's notion that environment determined character seemed to leave little room for sin, original or otherwise . . . Consequently, the 'New Views' demanded a national, non-sectarian system of education, and soon the clergy were Owen's most implacable enemies. When Owen in 1817 finally denounced every religion which did not inculcate humanity and charity – which for him meant all creeds as they were then practised – their fears were fully confirmed.²¹

In his 'Second Lecture on the New Religion' (delivered 1830), Owen leaves no doubt as to his hostility to all religions as currently practised. After listing the four universal religious principles – that priests must be believed, that disbelief is the greatest of all sins, that we should only love and hate what priests tell us, and that we will be eternally punished or rewarded according to our beliefs – he insists that:

when religion is stripped of the mysteries with which the priests of all times and countries have invested it . . . all its divinity vanishes; its errors become palpable; and it stands before the astonished world in all its naked deformity of vice, hypocrisy, and imbecility . . . For all these fundamental suppositions on which the religion of the world alone rests are destructive of the well-being and happiness of the human race, each of them being in direct opposition to every fact of which man has hitherto acquired any accurate knowledge. (p. 310)

Accordingly, in superbly tribune-like manner, Owen garners the approval of the packed meeting in the Freemasons' Hall to an 'Address to His Majesty' and 'Petition to both Houses of Parliament',

humbly requesting on behalf of the people a change from 'the unnatural religion in which they have unfortunately been educated, from infancy, for the religion of truth and nature' (p. 320). This 'new religion' is broadly that of Godwin and the *philosophes*; what is extraordinary is the social support for it on which Owen was able to draw.

Among the many influenced by Owen's ideas, some carried them into new areas of social struggle. Among these areas was feminism, and as Barbara Taylor has pointed out, 'every Owenite feminist was, in contemporary terminology, an "infidel" opponent of organized religion'.²² One of these was Frances Wright (1795–1852), who emigrated from Scotland to America in 1818 and there began in 1829 what may have been the first ever course by a woman 'of popular lectures in which the reigning orthodoxy was hardly assailed'.²³ A review by the *New York Courier and Enquirer* describes her parting address at the Bowery Theatre, New York, as 'a singular melange of politics and impiety, eloquence and irreligion, bold invective and electioneering slang. The theatre was very much crowded, probably 3,000 persons being present; and what was the most surprising circumstance of the whole, is the fact that about *one half of the audience were females – respectable females*'.²⁴ One of Wright's discourses, 'On the Nature of Knowledge', begins by demonstrating her philosophical learning with a very slow Lockian build-up to the question of what we can know, and goes on to question the way we tend to overvalue words as 'the very substance of knowledge' (*Isis*, p. 250). Slowly, however, the argument becomes politicized as she points out that language is often ideologically determined: arguing that 'our knowledge is supplied by our own individual sensations', she states that 'I have been led to inspect, far and wide, the extensive and beautiful section of this country which is afflicted with slavery' and, though it is full of 'religious shepherds of all persuasions . . . I have never heard *one* bold enough to comment on the evil which saps the industry, vitiates the morals, and threatens the tranquillity of the country.' The reason is obvious: 'The master of the slave is he who pays the preacher, and the preacher must not irritate his paymaster' (pp. 252–3).

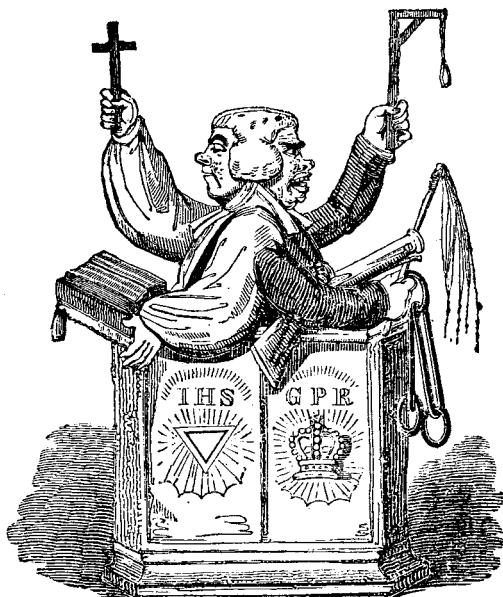
Towards the end of the discourse, Wright turns to the importance of education and free speech for women, whose present ignorance is no surprise 'when efforts, as violent as unrelaxed, are every where made for its continuance':

It is not as of yore. Eve puts not forth her hand to gather the fair fruit of knowledge. The wily serpent now hath better learned his lesson; and, to secure his reign in the garden, beguileth her *not* to eat. Promises, entreaties, threats, tales of wonder, and alas! tales of horror are all poured in her tender ears. Above, her agitated fancy hears the voice of a god in thunders; below, she sees the yawning pit; and, before, behind, around, a thousand phantoms, conjured from the prolific brain of insatiate priestcraft, confound, alarm, and overwhelm her reason! (p. 255)

So well do 'the supporters of error' understand 'that if the daughters of the present, and mothers of the future generation, were to drink of the living waters of knowledge, their reign would be ended', that far from obeying the command to be fishers of men, 'we find them every where *fishers of women*. Their own sex, old and young, they see with indifference swim by their nets; but closely and warily are their meshes laid, to entangle the female of every age' (p. 255).

Though Wright stayed in America, her lectures had a crucial influence on those of Eliza Sharples, which probably qualify as the first systematic declarations of infidelism by a woman in Britain. I shall consider these shortly, after returning once more to Sharples's common-law husband Richard Carlile. The links between political and religious repression made by such middle-class figures as Godwin, Grote, and even Owen, were constantly and vividly dramatized in the struggles for the freedom to print potentially subversive ideas mounted by such artisan-class radical printers and publishers as Daniel Isaac Eaton, William Hone and Carlile.

Carlile was an archetypal stirrer and mixer: the texts he chose to publish, his own vitriolic writing style and the on-going drama of his many prosecutions and imprisonments are constantly worked into new and infuriating combinations, as witnessed by the pamphlet 'A Letter to the Society for the Suppression of Vice, on their Malignant Efforts to Prevent a Free Enquiry after Truth and Reason', published after his 1819 imprisonment for publishing Paine's *Age of Reason*. Though I have already considered one example of Carlile's general style and approach, the 'Letter' repays scrutiny in its entirety as a printed artefact. The first four of its sixteen pages are taken up with his letter from Newgate Prison to the society whose prosecution put him there, beginning: 'ASSOCIATED PERSECUTORS . . . Having immured me within the walls of a prison, methinks I see a demonic smile glide over your several cheeks with the glowing expression of "we have now crushed him". – Be not too sanguine' (p. 3).²⁵



THE CLERICAL MAGISTRATE.

“ *The Bishop.* Will you be diligent in Prayers—laying aside the study of the world and the flesh?—*The Priest.* I will.

The Bishop. Will you maintain and set forwards, as much as lieth in you, quietness, peace, and love, among all Christian People?—*Priest.* I will.

¶ The Bishop laying his hand upon the head of him that receiveth the order of Priesthood, shall say, **RECEIVE THE HOLY GHOST.**”

The Form of Ordination for a Priest.

— “ The pulpit (in the sober use
Of its legitimate peculiar pow'rs)
Must stand acknowledg'd, while the world shall stand,
The most important and effectual guard,
Support, and ornament of virtue's cause.

Behold the picture! Is it like?

THIS IS A PRIEST,
made ‘according to Law’,



"I venerate the man, whose heart is warm,
Whose hands are pure, whose doctrine, and whose life
Coincident, exhibit lucid proof
That he is honest in the SACRED CAUSE."

THIS IS

A PRIEST

made according to Truth,
The guide of Old Age—
the Instructor of Youth ;

Plate 6a & b. An anticlerical image and an orthodox response: George Cruikshank's woodcut *The Clerical Magistrate*, from William Hone's *The Political House that Jack Built* (London: William Hone, 1819); and *A Priest*, from the anonymous retaliatory *The Real or Constitutional House that Jack Built* (London: J. Asperne and W. Sams, 1819), 8th edn. Both pieces include quotations from the same passage in William Cowper's *Task* (II, 332–75), demonstrating Cowper's ambivalent perceived status both as a defender of anti-corruption protest and of religious orthodoxy.

Not only do the society's members conceal their identities for fear of 'infamy', working only through 'a hungry lawyer' whom Carlile gleefully identifies in full as 'Prichard, of Essex-street, in the Strand', they have also sidestepped the due process of law by having him remanded before trial: 'You appear to be following the course which the Attorney General (Shepherd) followed towards me in 1817, in regard to the Parodies; that is, you have no hopes of being able to obtain the verdict of a jury against the work, and you are anxious to glut your vengeance with punishment before trial' (p. 5). A footnote explains that 'The writer of this letter was eighteen weeks in the King's Bench Prison for re-publishing the Parodies, and was never brought to trial; it was he who challenged the Attorney General to bring the Parodies before a jury, which led to so grand and noble a result.'

The 'Parodies' were the work of another radical publisher, William Hone, and included 'John Wilkes's Catechism', 'The Sinecurist's Creed' and 'The Political Litany', as well as 'The Bullet Te Deum', 'The Canticle of the Stone' and 'The Order for the Administration of the Loaves and Fishes; or, The Communion of Corruption's Host', all of whose deliberately blasphemous mingling of political attack with religious liturgical forms is clear from the titles, and which were published at only twopence each. Withdrawn by Hone, they were republished by Carlile in 1817 at the same price 'and sold by those who are not afraid of incurring the Displeasure of his Majesty's Ministers, their Spies or Informers, or Public Plunderers of any denomination' – as each title page helpfully pointed out. The 'noble result' to which Carlile refers above is, ironically, the arrest of Hone prompted by this republication, which led eventually to his acquittal by a jury in a celebrated case which made him 'the most popular man in Britain'.²⁶ Contributors to Hone's defence fund included Shelley, William Lawrence and, mysteriously, 'The spirit of Sir William Jones'; his acquittal was hailed by Keats and deplored by Wordsworth.

Defending Paine, Carlile asks the society: 'Is there not a Bishop amongst you that can again attempt what Watson has vainly attempted?' Even if so, 'The press, that dreadful park of artillery, will continue to open its destructive fire on superstition, bigotry, and religious and civil despotism; and what shall check its career?' (p. 6). These ideas are then amplified in a long extract – which is also a plug – from *The Principles of Nature* by Paine's American supporter Elihu

Palmer, just published by Carlile's own press: 'An awful contest has commenced, which must terminate in the destruction of thrones and civil despotism – in the annihilation of ecclesiastical pride and domination; or, on the other hand, intellect, science, and manly virtue will be crushed in one general ruin, and the world will retrograde towards a state of ignorance, barbarism, and misery.' Fortunately, 'the art of printing' renders such retrogression almost impossible: 'the guarantee for moral and political emancipation is already deposited in the archives of every school and college, and in the mind of every cultivated and enlightened man of all countries' (pp. 10–11).

Having re-emphasized the freedom of the press in both the content and context of the Palmer extract, Carlile cheekily concludes what has now become an unashamed sales pitch (actually directed at the pamphlet's purchasers rather than the 'letter's' nominal addressees), by recommending the book to the society's attention and concluding: 'I hope I shall have the pleasure of selling a few copies of this work to your Honourable Society, whether for the purpose of a prosecution or not, I am quite indifferent.' Signing himself 'Gentlemen, Your firm opponent', Carlile nonchalantly addresses the letter from 'Newgate, Feb. 13th, 1819'.

The next page of the pamphlet is simply a copy of the arrest warrant for 'Richard Carlile, late of London, bookseller, for selling a certain blasphemous libel, intitled "Paine's Age of Reason"' or, more specifically, for selling 'another copy to one Thomas Fair', when already under indictment for this offence. Apart from the rhetorical impact of following the fiery discourses of Carlile and Palmer with this chilling legalese, we may be expected to notice two other points. First, that the prosecution is actually brought, not by the society but by George Prichard, already identified by Carlile as the 'hungry lawyer . . . whose clerks and inmates are used as informers to this Society' – Thomas Fair presumably being one of these. The other point to note is the date of the warrant, 'the eleventh day of February, 1819', only two days before the date with which Carlile signs off his letter.

The next page (13), a copy of the brief document committing Carlile to Newgate on the same day, is the last numbered page of the pamphlet, and apparently concludes it by naming him as publisher at the bottom. On the reverse and the next page, however, Carlile blithely continues to ply his business as usual with a list of his recent publications, beginning with the hot-headedly radical 1790s play *Wat*

Tyler, Carlile's pirating of which caused enormous embarrassment to its now ultra-conservative author, Robert Southey. Other works listed include Diderot's *Thoughts on Religion*, as well as Sir William Jones's *The Principles of Government, in a Dialogue between a Peasant and a Squire*. More eye-catching in context, however, are the 'Parodies' for which Hone had been acquitted in 1817 and, above all, the complete 'Political and Theological Works of Thomas Paine', including both parts of *The Rights of Man* and all three parts of *The Age of Reason*. The very last page consists of an advertisement for the new anti-religious periodical *The Deist, or Moral Philosopher*, under which title Carlile proposes to publish 'scarce and valuable Deistical tracts, from the most celebrated ancient and modern writers' (p. 16), and concludes with an account of two tracts already printed in the first number the previous month, one of which is Francis's *Watson Refuted*.

Taken as a whole, the pamphlet is a brilliant conflation of the range of communicative techniques at Carlile's disposal, of which the continued leitmotif is his refusal to be silenced. Confronted with the faceless and nameless society, he revels in names, dates and places, specifying their lawyer, his informant and all the officials involved in his arrest, as well as thrusting his own name at us repeatedly in his triple role of author, printer and bookseller of this pamphlet and all the other texts he obviously 'should' keep quiet about. In continuing to publish at all from Newgate, and in a format whereby the committal document ought to end the story but is in fact followed by a three-page boast of continued production and distribution, Carlile demonstrates the impotence of his enemies within the very grain of the act of publishing.

In one of his periods out of prison, Carlile hired with his friend Robert Taylor a lecture theatre in Blackfriars called the Rotunda, and in 1832 when both were behind bars once more for political agitation and blasphemy, a series of lectures was given there by Eliza Sharples, who would become Carlile's common-law wife in 1833 (following his separation from his first wife Jane, who remained a highly effective business partner). Calling herself 'The Lady of the Rotunda', Sharples published her lectures and other material in the *Isis*, described by G. D. H. Cole as 'the first journal produced by a woman in support of sex equality and political and religious freedom'.²⁷

The first discourse of 'The Lady at the Rotunda', delivered on Sunday evening, 29 January 1832, begins with a due sense of the unprecedented step Sharples is taking:

The task which I purpose to perform, I am told, has no precedent in this country; so I have great need of your indulgent attention and most gentle criticism.

A woman stands before you, who has been educated and practised in all the severity of religious discipline, awakened to the principles of reason but as yesterday, seeking on these boards a moral and a sweet revenge, for the outrage that has been here committed on the Majesty of that Reason and on the Dignity of Truth.²⁸

The outrage to which she refers is the recent reimprisonment of 'the two brave and talented men', Carlile and Taylor. After briefly describing the respectable and religious home she has left 'under the excitement which religious persecution has roused', Sharples declares her intention to speak 'of superstition and of reason, of tyranny and of liberty, of morals and of politics':

Of politics! politics from a woman! some will exclaim. YES, I will set before my sex the example of asserting an equality for them with their present lords and masters, and strive to teach all, yes, *all*, that the undue submission, which constitutes slavery, is honourable to none; while the mutual submission, which leads to mutual good, is to all alike dignified and honourable.

Bearing in mind that the lecture was first delivered on Sunday, it is not too surprising that Sharples presents her conversion from religion in language reminiscent of the 'born-again' revivalism which the mood of the Rotunda meetings must have resembled to many who attended them:

I have been full of superstition, but, I trust, that I have ceased to be so; that I have gained some truth, and enough to become so pleased with it, as to proceed fearlessly in the pursuit of more. And thus it is that I stand here, a novelty among women, to call mankind from the ways and evils of error and of superstition to the paths and pleasures of truth. (p. 2)

If her auditors will offer their protection to sweep the thorns of ignorance and dishonesty from before her feet, 'I will follow with a basket and strew the path with flowers, with the aroma of Araby, and with the bloom of perpetual spring'. In the last sentence here, some of the lush imagery of the Psalms or the Song of Solomon works its way into the specifically feminine traits Sharples is trying to insert into atheist discourse for the first time. Indeed, in her 'Dedication to the Young Women of England for Generations to Come, or until Superstition is Extinct' in the collected *Isis*, Sharples recommends atheism as an aid to beauty: 'the truth of knowledge blands the

cheek, while it expands the mind and gives to the eye such a glowing, intellectual fire as no other grace can bestow. A superstitious woman is never beautiful; while expanding knowledge will put smiles and charms on any face' (p. iii).

The first discourse, however, initially addresses itself to men: 'Sirs, I shall seek to gather power around me in this establishment; and which of you will not accept me for your general, your leader, your guide?' Speaking of the 'happy home and comparative affluence' she has left for 'the ocean of politics', she declares her 'resolve to ride on the whirlwind, and to assist in the direction of the coming storm' (p. 3). This language of imminent crisis, appropriate to the current context of agitation for the 1832 Reform Bill, need not be incompatible 'with suasion, with kindness, with yielding', but is now extended to women, of whom she asks:

Will you advance, and seek that equality in human society which nature has qualified us for, but which tyranny, the tyranny of our lords and masters, has suppressed? . . . I think we have souls, which no scripture has yet granted; that we are worthy of salvation, which no religion has yet promised us; that we are as men in mind and purpose; that we may make ourselves 'helps meet for them,' on the condition that they shall not seek our degradation, that they shall not be our tyrants, but that we shall be free to all the advantages, all the privileges, all the pleasures of human life. (pp. 3-4)

Though in her third Discourse Sharples claims 'I am no atheist, in the vulgar sense of that word . . . I attribute every thing to God, as the first cause and universal creator', she goes on to 'inquire what we mean by the word *god*, what we mean by the *first cause*, what we mean by *universal creation*', and concludes 'that we mean nothing by them, that we know nothing by the use of such words . . . they are mere covers for our ignorance' (p. 17). Her distrust of the power of words to lead us astray extends to an assault on the 'great evil' of fiction which is even 'a blemish in the plays of Shakespeare'. If all this hostility to fiction suggests that Sharples's future discourses will be an imagination-free zone, however, this is belied by the 'allegorical' readings of the Bible to which they increasingly turn. Hence in the twenty-first discourse, the 'mark of the beast' in Revelations is interpreted in the light of the currently popular science of phrenology. Since according to this study of head shapes in relation to mental attributes 'absence of brain from the forehead is the criterion of ignorance', and is well-marked in merchants and kings such as

George III, the mark of the beast is clearly that of the mystery and ignorance which keeps such people in power; and since lambs do have their brains clearly marked in their foreheads, the phrase 'a lamb to the slaughter' clearly denotes 'the necessary struggle between the young reasoners and the despotism of profitable mystery' (23 June 1832, pp. 307–8).

Turning now to more organizational matters: the first discourse is followed by a letter spelling out the way in which Sharples plans to target her audiences. 'Original discourses delivered every week, will be printed every week. I shall lecture twice every Sunday, and three times in the course of the week', on Mondays at half-price to 'meet the means of those who earn their bread by their industry' and on Fridays 'gratuitously, to all well-behaved and decently-clothed people'. However, 'My Sunday's price of admission will never be less than silver; because I wish to keep up a respectable congregation', and the same on Wednesdays when 'I court a more select company'. At sixpence, the price of the *Isis* 'is comparatively high', but 'I do not much admire the cry for cheap publications. I pity, but cannot appeal to poverty and misery for assistance.' Instead, 'I shall expect that common gallantry will induce any gentleman to value my publication as double worth any that comes from other quarters' (pp. 5–6). In many of their letters, her gentlemen readers did indeed emphasize her gender in the most laudatory terms, addressing her as 'Noble Lady' or more enthusiastic variants thereof, and writing philosophic-amatory sonnets in her honour. Despite an initial doubt as to whether to call herself 'Editor' or 'Editress', the dedication to the collected volume firmly plumps for the latter.

The letter to readers also appeals for intellectual support to the two hirers of the Rotunda, to whose imprisonment Sharples owes her current position; nonetheless, each is asked to modify his habitual style somewhat if he wants to be included. Telling Robert Taylor 'I am too serious for much of your wit', she threatens 'I shall clip your wings, if you attempt to soar too high in my publication.' As for Carlile, she warns him to 'be careful; for I do not court a prison.'²⁹ Give us facts without making your inferences and comparisons too strong . . . and let us hope that you will not count a *ninth* year of political imprisonment' (p. 6).

If the Rotunda was run partly as a sectarian 'church', it was one which made use of a powerful pagan or extra-Christian imagery. Even the shape of the Rotunda is brought to bear here: Sharples's

task is far better performed in 'this fair round temple, this epitome of the universe' than 'in the cloistered cell, and under the gothic arch, of the nunnery, the convent, or the abbey' (p. 4). As for her own role, 'I will be the fairy Mab with the magic wand, to call up mind to [*sic*] the ample production of happiness and liberty.' Shelley's poem *Queen Mab*, long a staple of infidel publications, is the clear reference here, but Sharples also picks up on other allegorical female figures pulling aside the veil for enlightened initiates. Many of these refer back through the mystery cults to the Egyptian goddess of 'Nature, the parent of all things',³⁰ the Isis after whom Sharples names her periodical and, indeed, herself:

Let your sons and your daughters come, and, as the Pagans of old personified and deified the virtues and the graces in their temples, and made a pursuit of them a matter of worship and religion, so here will I aspire to be, in example, an Isis Omnia. Here, in this temple, shall every virtue and every grace be taught; not in the sculptured marble or tinted painting alone; but in life and all its practices. (p. 4)

We shall consider such imagery further in the next chapter; but I shall conclude this one with a distinct shift of register. So far, virtually all the infidels surveyed in this book have had discernibly Protestant roots, carrying a shared and assumed hostility to Catholic 'superstition' onto ground where more and more aspects of Christianity itself become tarred with the same brush. To this extent, W. H. Reid's analysis of the aid lent to atheism even by some of the most fervent types of 'enthusiasm' seems accurate enough.³¹ It seems appropriate to end, however, with an isolated but immensely influential defender of infidelity with no investment whatever in Protestant Dissent. William Cobbett, the most effective political journalist to keep up anti-government agitation from the late 1790s through to the 1820s and beyond, came to his radicalism gradually. A vociferous early opponent of Paine and Priestley, he came to share the religious doubts of the former, partly on witnessing the persecution of printers and sellers of *The Age of Reason*.³² As a solid Anglican, however, he disliked both the 'canting gibberish' of Methodists, especially when calling for stiffer penalties for infidels, and the special pleading of the Unitarians, which in 1813 had led to a bill legalizing their rejection of the Trinity. As he wrote in *The Political Register*:

Why do they not come, at once, and ask for leave to deny the *whole* as well as a *part*? They cannot *comprehend* how Christ can be God, by whom he was

begotten. Oh, oh! And can they *comprehend* . . . how all the animals got into one single ark? . . . no, no: I am for no partial repeals: I am for a general Act, permitting every man to say or write what he pleases upon the subject of religion, or, I wish the the whole thing to remain what it now is.³³

At this time Cobbett was equally contemptuous of pleas for Catholic emancipation, seeing the whole issue of toleration for particular sects as a diversion from political reform: 'the agitation of this Catholic question serves, and can serve only, to *amuse the people*, and to keep them divided' (p. 191). By 1824-5 he had changed his mind, however, and with *A History of the Protestant Reformation* he set out to demolish the whole notion that any form of enlightenment or social progress had accompanied the accretions of power to the state and the *nouveau riche* classes by Henry VIII's self-interested 'Reformation' or William III's so-called 'Glorious Revolution'. If this revolution was so glorious, Cobbett asks, why did the Anglican clergy not welcome the French Revolution, which 'taught the world what "Reformations" can do when pushed to their full and natural extent'?³⁴

Aye! aye! But these men had put down all tithes too! Aye, and all bishoprics, and deaneries, and prebendaries, and all fat benefices and pluralities! And if they were permitted to do this with impunity others might be tempted to do the same! Well, but, gentlemen of the Law-Church, though they were wicked fellows for doing this, still this was better than to suffer to remain that which you always told us was "idolatrous and damnable." "Yes, yes; but then these men established by law atheism, and not Church of England Christianity." (*History of the Protestant Reformation*, p. 367)

While retaining a sphinx-like ambivalence about the ultimate rightness of the French Revolution, Cobbett uses the fact that 'to public use they applied the whole of the plunder, while in England the plunder was scrambled for and remained divided among individuals!' (p. 366) as a stick with which to beat the English 'Law-Church', whose massive structure of legal penalties on self-declared Catholics in Britain and especially in Ireland bears the main brunt of his assault.

The book was massively popular, and may have assisted the eventual Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Together with Cobbett's earlier dismissal of the Dissenters' claims to special enlightenment, it marks perhaps the gradual unyoking of the idea of 'freethought' from that of extreme Protestantism. While constantly maintaining his loyalty to the Church of England as a badge of

identification with the common people for whom he claims to speak, he repeatedly demonstrates that his thought is 'free' enough without the need to construct a bogeyman out of any oppressor but the real one: the unholy alliance of wealth and power at the heart of the political 'Thing'. In the nineteenth century, arguably, such free-thought became dispersed beyond the Dissenting traditions in which so much of it had been nurtured, especially as the influence of Methodism and Evangelicalism began increasingly to take over Dissent itself.

CHAPTER 7

Pretty paganism: the Shelley generation in the 1810s

In identifying the strongest infidel currents in the poetry of Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth, I stopped short around 1800. Of course all produced much major work thereafter, but in trying to trace 'Romantic atheism' through the poetry of the Romantic period as a whole, it makes sense to home in now on the new generation of poets who emerged in the 1810s, with only an occasional glance at the continuing work of the older generation. Shelley, Byron and Keats all fit easily into almost any definition of infidelism, and actively and unashamedly declared as much. The simplest task of this chapter, then, will be to produce and discuss some of the abundant evidence for this. A somewhat more challenging one will be to try to trace the lines of this infidel development, not just from the earlier poets already discussed but from some others who also deserve a place in the jigsaw, and from or alongside the contemporaneous works and activities of some of the protagonists of the previous chapter.

To begin with some of the abundant evidence: in Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813) the spirit of a sleeping young woman relates how her mother took her as a child 'to see an atheist burned', forbidding her to weep since he 'Has said, There is no God'. The fairy Queen Mab, her guide to the true nature of the universe, replies:

There is no God!
Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed:
...
The exterminable spirit it contains
Is nature's only God; but human pride
Is skilful to invent most serious names
To hide its ignorance.

The name of God
 Has fenced about all crime with holiness,
 Himself the creature of His worshippers,
 Whose names and attributes and passions change,
 Seeva, Buddh, Foh, Jehovah, God, or Lord,
 Even with the human dupes who build His shrines.¹

All that animates the universe, then, is the 'exterminable spirit' of life; anything else is a human construction to justify the crimes of the powerful. If less insistently than Shelley, as we shall see, Byron and Keats often make similar points, or simply assume them.

Along with its extensive notes, *Queen Mab* contains a riot of allusions to earlier texts, which weave together most of the infidel strands traced elsewhere in this book. Written by Shelley at eighteen, it opens as it means to go on, with Voltaire's infidel battle-cry, 'ECRASEZ L'INFAME!', and a quotation by Lucretius about 'struggling to loose men's minds from the tight knots of superstition'.² In the notes, Shelley quotes or cites Godwin, Gibbon, Drummond, Spinoza, Hume and Condorcet, as well as Newton on the need for evidence even in religious matters, Bacon on atheism as conducive to virtue, and Locke on the delusiveness of religious enthusiasm. The longest quotation, appended to the full text of Shelley's own pamphlet 'The Necessity of Atheism' and other material to make up the note to the 'There is no God' passage (VII, 13), is from d'Holbach's *Système de la nature*.

In its publishing history, *Queen Mab* also intersects interestingly with the 'underground' dissemination of atheist ideas among lower-class readers by publishers such as Richard Carlile and editors such as George Cannon ('Erasmus Perkins'). It was in Cannon's *Theological Inquirer* that large parts of the poem were first circulated beyond the few copies Shelley had had privately printed; it was pirated in 1821 by the underground printer William Clarke, who was consequently imprisoned, and then in 1822 by Carlile who was already in jail.³ Given its interface with this 'radical underworld', the poem is usefully representative in the way it blurs the division we may imagine to exist between high and low literature at the time. Replete as it is with classical cross-references, a highly arty verse structure and a very unplebeian-sounding 'machinery' involving a fairy queen in a flying chariot and a disembodied soul called Ianthe, it nonetheless transmits clear enough signals of its radical ideological affiliations to have fast become an actively shaping

element in the 'making of the working class' in the early nineteenth century.

The more ethereal elements just described themselves belong to a tradition of 'visionary' infidelism which includes Volney and Darwin, as we shall see shortly. Another powerful influence is Southey, whose position for Shelley's generation as one of the most radical of all 1790s poets tends to be obscured for us, both because we have ceased to read him and because of the contempt poured on him by that very generation for recanting his youthful principles. After a dedication to Shelley's first wife Harriet, *Queen Mab* opens:

How wonderful is Death,
Death and his brother Sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon
 With lips of lurid blue;
The other, rosy as the morn
 When throned on ocean's wave
 It blushes o'er the world:
Yet both so passing wonderful!

The irregular short lines and lack of rhyme betoken something distinctly 'experimental', at a time when intricate line variations were almost invariably rhymed, and republican Miltonic disdain for rhyme's 'jingling' meretriciousness was the exclusive province of blank verse.⁴ The poem finally settles into blank verse when it starts to focus on the dreary horrors of the political world (III, 21); until then, it imitates the versification of Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1800), which begins:

How beautiful is night!
A dewy freshness fills the silent air;
No mist obscures, nor cloud, nor speck, nor stain,
 Breaks the serene of heaven;
In full-orb'd glory yonder Moon divine
 Rolls through the dark blue depths.

As well as the unrhymed lines and the direct echo in the first, both openings share an embracing of the 'dark side' of life which, in Southey's poem, is borne out by the hero's cognomen 'the Destroyer' and his role as an undercover avenger dedicated to overthrowing a subterranean world-ruling conspiracy of magicians. This story reprises in more fantastic form that of Southey's other two early works, *Joan of Arc* and *Wat Tyler*, whose protagonists leave their humble rural homes to battle with British feudal and church oppression in

ways carrying heavy Jacobin signals in 1794–5: the move to a fantastic – and extra-Christian – mode in *Thalaba* in 1800 could itself be read as part of a move ‘underground’ by someone still then seen as a dangerous radical and infidel. In a letter to Leigh Hunt implicitly condoning the 1821 pirating of *Queen Mab*, Shelley compares it to that of *Wat Tyler* – ‘a poem written, I believe, at the same age, and with the same unreflecting enthusiasm’ – Southey’s recent failure to suppress which was the cause of much glee in radical circles.⁵

If Shelley is implying an affinity with Southey in his versification and opening, antecedents for the whole structure of *Queen Mab* can be found in Darwin’s *Economy of Vegetation* and *Temple of Nature*. In Shelley’s poem, the soul of the sleeping Ianthe is wafted off by the Fairy Queen Mab in her airborne chariot to her temple in outer space from where they look down on the earth, whose true workings Mab explains. The chariot is described thus:

Behold the chariot of the Fairy Queen!
Celestial coursers paw the unyielding air;
Their filmy pennons at her word they furl,
And stop obedient to the reins of light:

...

From her celestial car
The Fairy Queen descended,
And thrice she waved her wand
Circled with wreaths of amaranth.

(I, 59–62, 105–8)

This is comparable with Darwin’s lines on the Goddess of Botany:

She comes! – the Goddess! – through the whispering air,
Bright as the morn, descends her blushing car;
Each circling wheel a wreath of flowers entwines,
And gem’d with flowers the silken harness shines;

...

Light from her airy seat the Goddess bounds,
And steps celestial press the pansied grounds.

(*Economy*, I, 59–62, 67–8)

It is possible that Darwin’s imagery of an airily delicate goddess in a chariot made of natural objects prompted the whole idea of Shelley’s Mab through its recollections of Mercutio’s speech in *Romeo and Juliet* (I, iv, 53–95). In any case, Shelley’s Mab has the same explanatory function as Darwin’s goddess, who spells out the laws of nature to a group of sensibilitous initiates including a ‘hapless Maid’ soothed to

sleep by a nightingale (I, 25–38), rather as Mab appears only to the specially ‘sincere’ and sleeping Ianthe (I, 124).

Once embarked in the chariot, Ianthe’s soul is wafted into space, where

Spirit of Nature! here!
In this interminable wilderness
Of worlds, at whose immensity
Even soaring fancy staggers,
Here is thy fitting temple. (I, 264–8)

Though clearly in one sense just the sky, ‘the Fairy’s fane’ (II, 21) sports such architectural features as clouds ‘Towering like rocks of jet’, ‘floors of flashing light’, a ‘vast and azure dome’ and ‘pearly battlements’ from which they look down on the universe where

Countless and unending orbs
In mazy motion intermingled,
Yet still fulfilled immutably
Eternal Nature’s law. (II, 11, 32–3, 38, 73–6)

As the first of these quotations suggests, here is another ‘temple of nature’ comparable to Darwin’s, where ‘high in air, unconscious of the storm, / Thy temple, NATURE, rears its mystic form’ (*Temple*, I, 65–6), and from whence we are shown how ‘Rose the bright spheres, which form the circling world’ (I, 228). In Darwin, this launches the poem’s whole materialist account of the formation of the world, organic life, the human mind and society – which, though not so sequentially ordered, is also the range covered by Shelley’s poem.

First, however, we move to another model in which the poet’s persona is whisked to a higher plane by a dream spirit: as in Volney’s *Ruins*, the first sight Mab specifically focusses in on is ‘Palmyra’s ruined palaces!’ (II, 110), closely followed by accounts of the similar destructions of the Egyptian empire as represented by the pyramids, and then of Jerusalem, where once ‘an inhuman and uncultured race / Howled hideous praises to their Demon-God’ (II, 149). From here we move to the similar declines of Athens, Sparta and Rome, in the last of which, ‘Where Cicero and Antoninus lived, / A cowed and hypocritical monk / Prays, curses and deceives’ (II, 179–81). This mixing of a rapid survey of the ‘revolutions of empires’ with denunciations of the claims of Judaism and Christianity to any special treatment, closely echoes that of the disembodied ‘Genius’ by whom Volney’s narrating persona is, like Ianthe, disengaged from his

body and 'lifted by the wing of the Genius' to a point where, 'from above the atmosphere', he looks down at the earth and has it explained to him.⁶

The poem's *ingénue* and the instructor are, however, both women. Before turning to *The Revolt of Islam*, where women also act as liberators from ignorance, I shall take a step back to consider a poetic tradition which had an influence on both Shelley and Keats, as well as being of major interest in its own right: that of deist women poets such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Mary Tighe. Of an older generation than Wordsworth and Coleridge, Smith's and Robinson's broadly deist outlook (like Anna Laetitia Barbauld's) stopped short of atheism while still able to present itself uncomplicatedly as liberty of thought. Of a later generation, and with few overt religious references despite her 'strict religious upbringing' by her Methodist mother, Tighe's essentially 'pagan' poem *Psyche* (1805) usefully bridges the gap between the 1790s and 1810s, in ways we shall see.⁷

One of the 'Jacobin' toasts of 1792 was to the 'lady defenders of the Revolution, particularly Mrs Charlotte Smith, Miss Williams and Mrs Barbauld'.⁸ On Wordsworth's first visit to France, he went armed with a letter of introduction from Charlotte Smith to Helen Maria Williams, about whom he had written his first published poem, 'Sonnet, on seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress' (1787).⁹ If not quite as intense a fusion of Sensibility and pro-French sympathies as Williams, Charlotte Smith was a profounder influence on the early stirrings of 'Romanticism', particularly in her revival of the sonnet form as a *hortus conclusus* for the expression of private feelings of often unexplained melancholy. I wish, however, to concentrate on her political meditation *The Emigrants* (1793), as a significant reconsideration of the links between Sensibility and radical anti-'Superstition', of which she remains a prime exemplar.

The emigrants of the title are exiled French clergy, just landed at Brighton. Smith wastes no time in pointing out their slavery to Superstition: one monk who 'thought that meagre abstinence / . . . / And to renounce God's works, would please that God' is now amazed to receive pity from English strangers who are 'by his dark creed / Condemned as heretics'.¹⁰ A bishop who 'was believed by mumbling bigots / To hold the keys of heaven' (I, 136-7) remembers his 'Gothic dome / That vied with splendid palaces'

(128–9), while a footnote reminds us that ‘France is not the only country where the splendour and indulgence of the higher, and the poverty and depression of the inferior clergy, have alike proved injurious to the cause of religion’ (Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*, p. 93). For Smith, shades of King Lear rise as ‘Poor wand’ring wretches, whosoe’er ye are’ are begged to ‘suspend your murmurs’ in pity for these emigrés (296, 308), as are ‘Ye pampered parasites whom Britons pay / For forging fetters for them!’ (330–1): both classes can ‘learn that, if oppressed too long / The raging multitude, to madness stung, / Will turn on their oppressors’ (334–5), but that then ‘lawless Anarchy’ may force the supporters of revolution to ‘see the temple which they fondly hoped / Reason would raise to Liberty, destroyed / By ruffian hands’ (II, 48–50).

By a typically ‘sensibilitous’ turn, Smith leads from the emigrants’ sufferings to her own, concluding the poem by contemplating her future grave and all the ‘complicated woes that grave conceals!’ (II, 379). Though her apparently irreligious deism may ‘provoke the spleen / Of priest or Levite’ (381–2), she claims that

I made my prayer
In unison with murmuring waves that now
Swell with dark tempests, now are mild and blue
As the bright arch above, for all to me
Declare omniscient goodness, nor need I
Declamatory essays to incite
My wonder or my praise. (II, 401–7)

A similar distrust of ‘priest or Levite’ appears in the following passage, by another writer:

It is the interest of the ignorant and powerful to suppress the effusions of enlightened minds. When only monks could write and nobles read, authority rose triumphant over right, and the slave, spellbound in ignorance, hugged his fetters without repining. It was then that the best powers of reason lay buried like the gem in the dark mine; by a slow and tedious progress they have been drawn forth, and must erelong diffuse an universal lustre – for that era is rapidly advancing when talents will tower like an unperishable column, while the globe will be strewn with the wrecks of superstition.

This paragraph could be taken for a précis of several of Shelley’s works, from *Queen Mab* to the ‘Defence of Poetry’; in fact it is by Mary Robinson, in the preface to her sonnet cycle *Sappho and Phaon* (1796).¹¹ Though Robinson is partly talking about ‘talents’ in general

here, the context suggests that the stranglehold on learning by religious ideology and entrenched power can also be related to that of men, as opposed to the women whose long-suppressed talents are envisioned towering somewhat phallically over the fallen superstition of their oppressors. This is, at any rate, the gist of the story of the ur-poetess Sappho, whose 'exquisite talents' attracted the envy of the powerful, perhaps even including the male poets Ovid and Pope, in accounts of her which tend 'rather to depreciate than to adorn' a reputation which Robinson now aims to restore (Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*, p. 188).

One of the complicating factors for Sappho's reputation was her passion for the unworthy Phaon, whose desertion drove her to suicide: a story which may have analogues in Robinson's own notorious desertion by the Prince of Wales in 1780, putting an end to the 'talents' displayed in her first career as an actress. It may also carry echoes of Mary Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide after her abandonment by Gilbert Imlay in 1795. Published in 1796, the same year as Robinson's cycle, Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* included such pleas to Imlay as: 'For years have I endeavoured to calm an impetuous tide – labouring to make my feelings take an orderly course.'¹² For Sappho, the conflict between reason and passion is expressed in similar terms:

Come, Reason, come, each nerve rebellious bind!

...

Now passion reigns and stormy tumults roll
So the smooth sea obeys the furious wind!

In vain philosophy unfolds his store.

(VII, 1, 7–9, in Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*)

In draping such a contemporary conflict in Grecian dress, it seems to me that Robinson gives an important precedent for the Greek settings of Shelley and Keats. In terms of specific images, *Sappho and Phaon* features a Temple of Venus (XXXIV) and a 'tyrant eagle' (XLIII, 3) which may have echoes in *Endymion* and *Prometheus Unbound*; more to the point is the whole project of establishing a separate realm where passion and the quest for beauty can be played out to their logical extremes away from the political and religious repression of contemporary England. We may remember that around 1796 Wordsworth was translating some of the *carpe diem* lyrics of Catullus for similar reasons; but perhaps it is significant that the Roman culture

traditionally available to the university-educated male poet now begins to give way to a Grecianism which relies less on inbred scholarship than on a sense of freedom to rework imperfectly recorded myths and legends to suit modern concerns, including those of women.

In other ways too, Robinson is a significant bridge between the two 'canonical' generations. The attack on superstition with which this account of her began is continued in *The Progress of Liberty* (written 1798), where it is denounced as 'Thou palsyng mischief, thou benumbing foe / To all the proudest energies of man!'¹³ Though the same poem acknowledges 'that dread pow'r / Which marks th'all-seeing' (I, 736-7), even such broad deist references are absent from the two poems she wrote to Coleridge in 1800. 'To the Poet Coleridge', inspired by his sending her a copy of 'Kubla Khan', repeatedly hails 'thy NEW PARADISE' as a 'new creation' by a 'SPIRIT DIVINE', firmly substituting the terms of individual poetic creativity for the attribution of these things to God in Milton's opening to *Paradise Lost*.¹⁴

'Ode Inscribed to the Infant Son of S. T. Coleridge, Esq. Born 14 September 1800 at Keswick in Cumberland' begins in frankly pagan terms by addressing the sun as 'Spirit of Light, whose eye unfolds / The vast expanse of Nature's plan' and going on, 'Oh pow'r creative, but for thee / Eternal chaos all things would enfold'.¹⁵ Along with this 'Spirit of Light', 'Pensive Reason, pointing to the sky, / Bright as the morning star her clear broad eye,' is asked to 'Unfold the page of Nature's book sublime' for the young Derwent Coleridge (63-5), in possible echo of his father's 'Frost at Midnight', which, however, stresses that the same Lake District scenes will represent for Hartley 'that eternal language which thy God / Utters' ('Frost at Midnight', 60-1). Since Robinson's celebration of this landscape is borrowed entirely second-hand from Coleridge, her omission of anything resembling this crucial point of reference seems deliberate, as is perhaps the 'morning star' of Reason: as I shall show, a crucial image in Shelley's many representations of Lucifer as a Promethean light-bringer. Against his own will, in both these poems Coleridge is co-opted into a vision of poetic imagination and Nature as satisfying substitutes for, rather than expressions of, God.

Another example of the 'Grecianism' of *Sappho and Phaon* is Mary Tighe's *Psyche* (1805). Avowedly a strong influence on Keats, this lushly sensuous poem works out the meta-passionate complexities of

what it means to be in love with Love, in a form which also signals another great predilection of the coming poetic generation: the Spenserian stanzas of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* and Keats's *Eve of St Agnes*. In the first two cantos of Tighe's poem, Psyche and Cupid marry and become separated in accord with the classical myth and in a welter of erotic-pagan imagery,¹⁶ but thereafter they turn into a quasi-Spenserian damsel and incognito knight-errant who overcome various allegorical threats before being finally reunited at the Temple of Venus. Given the Puritan tradition of religious allegory implied by Spenserianism, it is not surprising that Tighe's narrative is constructed around a departure from and return to a temple of the 'true faith' – but in this case, in a thorough paganization of her model, that faith is love.

To return now to Shelley, his *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) combines many echoes of both *Psyche* and *Sappho and Phaon* with others from Darwin and Southey. In outline, the poem is an enactment of the Southeyan narrative in which humble rural protagonists overthrow the centres of power in justified rebellion. Here the rebels are the lovers Laon and Cythna, incestuous siblings in an earlier, suppressed version (1817), but on revision just brought up together from childhood. Their paired names, which were the title of the first version, recall the title of Robinson's sequence and, though Laon is more central than Phaon, in both cases the woman is the stronger partner. The name of their home, 'Argolis, beside the echoing sea' (676), loosely invokes the idea of the current Greek struggle against Turkish rule, though the 'Christian' dimension of that struggle is not mentioned. Having long planned a rebellion, the pair are separated when the troops carry Cythna off to be a concubine to the emperor Othman in the Golden City and Laon is incarcerated. Released by an old hermit, he spreads the word of revolt to the city, only to find that Cythna has already inspired the people to a point where he can lead them to a bloodless victory. Othman summons foreign aid, however, and the couple are eventually burnt at the stake.

Along with its attack on political and religious oppression – the emperor is always abetted by priests, including the Catholic Spaniard behind the burning of the protagonists – the poem is explicitly feminist in giving Cythna the most impressive speeches and the lion's share of the action. In this there may be an echo of Southey's *Joan of Arc*, while the theme of a briefly successful but ultimately defeated rebellion may owe something to *Wat Tyler*. It is written in

the Spenserian stanza form, of which the most celebrated recent example was Byron's univocally macho *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; despite his hero-worship of Byron, however, Shelley is clearly far more indebted to Tighe's *Psyche*, which in turn is far truer to Spenser's most frequent narrative device: the pairing of a hero and heroine devoted to a common goal, whose separations and reunions while vanquishing various enemies construct much of the plot.¹⁷ In a pattern similar to Tighe's, Laon and Cythna are also finally reunited in an after-life of eternal love after numerous separations, during the longest of which each believes the other to be dead. *Psyche's* sexually egalitarian structure helps to bolster *The Revolt's* strongly feminist tone, in which even though Laon is the main narrator, it is very often Cythna's words and deeds he is narrating.

The Revolt too has its temples, in one of which Cythna (thought dead by Laon) presides as the revolutionary priestess Laone, before removing her veil to reveal her identity (V, 2320–2), much as the knight lifts his visor to reveal himself as Cupid at the climax of *Psyche* (VI, 465–9). Other temples and other veils come in here, however, including once again Darwin's temple of a female Nature who is likewise climactically unveiled, and whose throne is surrounded by various allegorical sculptures depicting Time, Dione (i.e. the Earth as Venus), Pain and Death (*Temple*, I, 79–124). The first three seem to be closely imitated in *The Revolt*, where 'Three shapes around her [Laone's] ivory throne appear' (V, 2156): a sleeping Giant whose hand crushes sceptres and crowns; 'A Woman sitting on the sculptured disk / Of the broad earth' suckling a human baby and a basilisk; and a white-winged figure beneath whose feet 'amongst ghastliest forms, repressed / Lay Faith, an obscene worm, who sought to rise' (V, 2157–69). Elsewhere in Darwin, Time specifically represents the destroyer of tyranny (see *Loves*, II, 183–6); Darwin would have had no problem bracketing 'the demon Pain' with the obscene worm of Faith.

The religion with which Cythna replaces this Faith is indeed first and foremost that of Nature:

O Spirit vast and deep as Night and Heaven!
Mother and soul of all to which is given
The light of life,

...
Nature, or God, or Love, or Pleasure,
Or Sympathy. (V, 2197–9, 2205–6)

While we may note that Shelley allows the word *God* into the middle of this list, it is only as subsumed into the female principle of Nature the Mother.

The narrator's visit to the temple of a goddess is one of the most characteristic tropes of infidel poetry, affirming simply by the change of sex the displacement of the God of orthodox religion. The poem's other great temple scene, at the climax of the introductory Canto I, involves a male deity but is introduced through another forceful female figure. The poem begins with the poet-narrator lamenting the final failure of the French Revolution, and then witnessing in the sky a titanic struggle between an eagle and a serpent which the eagle eventually wins, dropping the serpent into the sea. Sitting on the shore is a weeping woman towards whom the wounded serpent swims, whereupon she stops crying and suckles it at her breast, before inviting the poet to accompany her over the sea in a boat with no sails. There she explains that 'Two powers o'er mortal things dominion hold' (I, 347), who first appeared to 'the earliest dweller of the world' as 'A blood-red Comet and the Morning Star', locked in combat (I, 352, 356). With the defeat of the star, the earth-dweller 'turned and shed his brother's blood' and the spirit of the evil comet took over the world:

for his immortal foe,
He changed from starry shape, beauteous and mild,
To a dire Snake, with man and beast unreconciled. (I, 367-9)

Periodically, however, the serpent fought back, as in ancient Athens and the recent French Revolution, which inspired the woman with a dream of a youth with the Morning Star on his forehead. After a period spent in the thick of the 'holy warfare' in France, which makes her sound like an allegorical Mary Wollstonecraft (I, 515), she is now travelling to see him. They disembark at a temple whose many resemblances to Darwin's Temple of Nature need not detain us, in the middle of which an empty throne 'Reared on a pyramid like sculptured flame' (I, 614). As the woman shrieks the spirit's name (which we are never told), everything goes dark until lit by two 'serpent eyes' which then combine into a star hovering over the head of a beautiful youth who now appears seated on 'that cone of flame' (I, 622-39). With little more ado, he summons up the figures of Laon and Cythna, the former of whom narrates the rest of the poem.

The fiery pyramid may owe something to Richard Payne Knight's

Priapus, which relates 'the pyramid of fire' as a symbol of light to the Egyptian myth of the struggle between Osiris and Typhon, 'two opposite powers in the world, perpetually acting contrary to each other, the one creating, and the other destroying' (p. 68). As the representatives of solar light and heat respectively, these two figures may lie behind the Morning Star and fiery comet, who are also readily identifiable with the two warring principles of Zoroastrianism, in which Shelley was deeply interested. Both Knight and Darwin provide numerous instances of serpents as beneficent symbols of wisdom and renewed life, but what is most striking in Shelley's assembly of these images is how totally it reverses traditional Christian iconography. The Morning Star which becomes a serpent combines two of the traditional associations of Lucifer (i.e. 'light-bearer'); the image of a woman welcoming a serpent to her breast in a nurturing rather than a seductive context overthrows the whole debasing iconography of Eve in ways which the woman's prototype Mary Wollstonecraft might well have approved. Further, for all Shelley's general debts to Southey's fantastic mode, the particular one he pays here is by reversing the associations of the temple-enthroned image of Eblis, which Southey introduces thus at the climax of *Thalaba*:

Its stature such, and such its strength,
 As when among the sons of God
 Pre-eminent he raised his radiant head,
 Prince of the Morning. On his brow
 A coronet of meteor flames,
 Flowing in points of light.¹⁸

For all his Luciferian beauty (which we may also compare to the first appearance of Satan to Ambrosio in M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*, another great influence on Shelley¹⁹), Southey's Eblis is the supreme source of evil, to confront and destroy whom *Thalaba* has been transported by a mysterious woman in a sailless boat (XI, stanzas 31-41).

In taking the Morning Star to represent Lucifer's true nature rather than a false one, Shelley's canto I can thus be seen as a reversal of the creeping back to political and religious orthodoxy of which he had begun to suspect Southey from their first meeting in late 1811. This transvalued Lucifer remains a key image for Shelley, reappearing for instance in 'The Mask of Anarchy' as the 'Shape' who reverses the defeat of Hope by the Peterloo troops: 'A Shape

arrayed in mail / Brighter than the viper's scale'; 'On its helm, seen far away, / A planet, like the Morning's, lay' (110-11, 114-15). More substantially, he becomes the light-bearing, God-defying hero of *Prometheus Unbound*.

Rather than attempt to trace the numerous strands of atheist thought and imagery in *Prometheus*, which would require a chapter if not a book to themselves, I shall end this account of Shelley by attempting to situate him in relation to Wordsworth and Coleridge, by way of a look at his 'Mont Blanc' (1816) and *Peter Bell the Third* (1819); then in relation to Byron by way of *Julian and Maddalo* (1819).

It was on the 1816 visit to Chamonix which inspired 'Mont Blanc' that Shelley wrote under 'occupation' in a hotel register the Greek for 'Democrat, Philanthropist and Atheist', and under 'destination' the French for 'Hell'. As Richard Holmes comments, 'Only by considering the reputation Chamonix had among the travelling English at this time, as a natural temple of the Lord and a proof of the Deity by design, is it possible to realize the spirit in which Shelley wrote these entries, and the astounding fury with which they were greeted.'²⁰ One major example of the religious treatment of Mont Blanc is Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni' (1802), although this is largely an unacknowledged expansion of Friederike Brun's German 'Ode' to the Valley of Chamonix which Coleridge had never in fact visited. At an early point in the poem, however, Coleridge/Brun registers something about Mont Blanc which is also crucial to Wordsworth's and Shelley's treatments: the impossibility of keeping one's mind on such a vast object:

I gazed upon thee,
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer
I worshipped the Invisible alone. (13-16)

From this psychologically interesting moment, the poem soon moves to a conventionally religious-sublime mode, asking who could have created such a mighty object and repeatedly answering itself with the exclamation 'God!' By the end, the mountain has become replete with a quasi-political imagery of man's subordination to divine authority: 'Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills, / Thou dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven, / Great Hierarch!' (81-3).

Before turning to Shelley's response to this poem, it is useful to

consider Wordsworth's two accounts of Mont Blanc, in *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) and Book 6 of *The Prelude* (1805) – the latter of which Shelley may or may not have known.²¹ While Coleridge's poem admits only enough terror into his scenery to trigger the right sublime responses, *Descriptive Sketches* focusses entirely on the mountain's 'Horror', as a preface to a gloomy meditation on political oppression:

Six thousand years amid his lonely bounds
The voice of Ruin, day and night, resounds.
Where Horror-led his sea of ice assails,
Havoc and Chaos blast a thousand vales,
In waves, like two enormous serpents, wind
And drag their length in deluge train behind. (693–8)

Since it is evening, the mountain-top only is lit, while 'all is black below' (701): a perception which leads straight into a republican lament that the rich valley of Chamouni has to yield its benefits to the occupying Austrians rather than its native inhabitants. If the mountain is any kind of 'Hierarch', it is a destructive and oppressive one.

The account in *The Prelude* is part of a more complex exploration of the inability of physical reality to match up to imaginative expectation: nonetheless the brief description of the actual sighting of Mont Blanc tallies with Wordsworth's earlier account of the same moment:

That day we first
Beheld the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
Which had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be. (VI, 452–6)

Somehow, the 'soulless' reality has destroyed the imagined mountain, just as having passed the highest point of the Alps unawares destroyed Wordsworth's imagination of such an event. Nonetheless, that very realization brings a darker awareness of universal sameness: both the wild and the serene aspects of the scenery are

Characters of the great apocalypse,
The types and symbols of eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (VI, 570–2)

If this sounds religious, it is so only in a typically baffling way: the last line quotes directly from Milton's description of how God should

be extolled (*Paradise Lost*, v, 165), but goes no further than stating that the Alps have lasted and will last from the start of creation to the end, in all their representative materiality.

Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' is far closer to Wordsworth than Coleridge, not least in its baffling, teasing quality. This is overwhelmingly a place of forbidding destruction which the mind cannot focus on, forcing the poet instead 'To muse on my own separate fantasy'. Does looking at it prefigure death, and does this contain 'gleams of a remoter world'? Does it teach doubt or 'faith so mild, / So solemn, so serene, that man may be, / But for such faith, with nature reconciled' (77-9)? If the latter, many critics have asked in despair, what on earth does this mean: why should a faith which stops us being reconciled with nature be 'serene', or if he means we may be reconciled with nature *with* this faith, why say 'but for', which means the opposite?²² The point is crucial because the passage leads straight to the important statement that 'Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe' (80-1), which can surely only be religious ones since any more immediate intervention in politics by a mountain is hard to envisage. We are, however, assured that the mountain's voice is 'not understood / By all' (81-2).

These are just a few of the conundrums thrown up by the mountain and/or the poem, which concludes

The secret strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (139-44)

This 'secret strength of things' brings us close to the sheer sense of materiality in Wordsworth's 'first, and last, and midst, and without end', rather than to Coleridge's reduction of the mountain to ambassadorial status. The last three lines also seem to affirm this: in particular, they reject the view of Coleridge's favourite Berkeley that places man does not perceive do not really exist. Shelley's 'imaginings' have taken us higher and higher up the mountain to a whole world of stormy activity we cannot see: with a jolt, he now leaves us confronting the fact that the universal existence of matter, as posited by materialists from Lucretius to d'Holbach, is every bit as aston-

ishing as its quasi-magical dependence on our perception postulated by idealists from Plato to Berkeley.

'Mont Blanc', then, shows Shelley taking from Wordsworth the 'Spinoza' rather than 'Dr Watts' side of his religiously enigmatic 'Janus head' – to repeat Coleridge's phrase.²³ Shelley's own account of the same split in Wordsworth's poetic personality can be found in his satire *Peter Bell the Third* (1819). This starts with a rather unfunnily elaborate series of jokes around the fact that, following another spoof of Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*, this is the third poem of that name; but also that all Wordsworth's turns of coat mean that there have in effect been three different Wordsworths. When the dust settles, 'Peter', i.e. Wordsworth, is in hell, i.e. the respectable society of which he has now become a member. Another such member is Coleridge, who understands everything 'But his own mind – which was a mist'. On one hand, like Shelley himself in *The Defence of Poetry*, he rightly believes of poetry how 'Divine it was – a light – a love – / A spirit which like wind doth blow / As it listeth, to and fro'; on the other, 'he in shadows undiscerned / Trusted, – and damned himself to madness' (380–92). This is the picture of Coleridge wandering down the blind alley of religious metaphysics common among the younger Romantics.

Wordsworth's decline is also partly blamed on metaphysics, specifically a copy of Kant the Devil sends him. Before this,

though unimaginative –
An apprehension clear, intense,
Of his mind's work, had made alive
The things it wrought on; I believe
Wakening a sort of thought in sense. (308–12)

After reading Kant, where 'Right – wrong – false – true – and foul – and fair / As in a lottery-wheel are shook' (521–2),

To Peter's view, all seemed one hue;
He was no Whig, he was no Tory;
No Deist and no Christian he; –
He got so subtle, that to be
Nothing, was all his glory. (564–8)

Slowly, a puritanical hatred of pleasure leads him to rave 'Of Baptisms, Sunday-Schools, and Graves' (615), whereupon 'the Reviews, who heaped abuse / On Peter while he wrote for freedom' (619–20), declare him 'the most sublime, religious, / Pure-minded

Poet of these days' (627–8). Peter ends up writing 'odes to the Devil' in praise of violent government repression at Peterloo and elsewhere (634).

This account broadly confirms that what I have tried to argue about Wordsworth in Chapter 5 above was well understood by his poetic successors: that the early Wordsworth who wrote for freedom and worked through an intense psychological grasp of the two realities of material objects and his own thought processes – 'the language of the sense' – was a non-Christian; that he then entered a period of deliberate and much-noticed enigmatic silence which still left his Christianity in doubt – Coleridge's 'Janus-head' – and that he then somehow finessed this into a reputation as a great religious poet, partly by laying great emphasis on the crudely external forms of religion at their least thought through – Coleridge's 'old man with the beard'.

As a transition to discussing Byron, the last poem of Shelley's I shall look at is *Julian and Maddalo* (1819). A celebration of the friendship of the two poets, it is also a voyage into uncertainty about Shelley's brand of atheistic idealism. The Shelley-figure's name 'Julian' itself designates active, committed infidelity, in its allusion to the apostate Roman emperor whose attempt to reverse Constantine's Christianization of the Empire is celebrated by Gibbon. His romantic scepticism is beautifully conveyed through his account of the flat sands near Venice on which he and his Byronic friend Maddalo are riding:

I love all waste
And solitary places; where we taste
The pleasure of believing what we see
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be. (14–17)

As they ride, they argue like Milton's devils

Concerning God, freewill and destiny:
Of all that earth has been or yet may be,
All that vain men imagine or believe. (42–4)

Julian himself 'argued against despondency, but pride / Made my companion take the darker side' (48–9): in particular, Maddalo has less faith in perfectibility but also, it seems, in atheism. As they pass a madhouse where the bell is ringing for prayers, Julian says the madmen have little to thank God for, or to hope for from him, whereupon Maddalo chortles 'You were ever still/Among Christ's

flock a perilous infidel' (115–16). His own view is at once more melodramatic and more fatalistic:

like that black and dreary bell, the soul,
Hung in a heaven-illuminated tower, must toll

...

For what? they know not, – till the night of death

...

severeth

Our memory from itself, and us from all

We sought and yet were baffled.

(123–30)

If such dreary religious rituals do not express the absolute truth, at least they represent a certain truth about human helplessness. To Julian's response that 'it is our will / That thus enchains us to permitted ill - / We might be otherwise' (170–2), Maddalo replies bluntly, 'You talk Utopia' (179). Julian, however, still wishes for 'something nobler than to live and die', as taught by 'those kings of old philosophy / Who reigned, before Religion made men blind' (187–9). In answer, Maddalo offers to show him one of the inmates of the madhouse who thought similarly but has since gone mad, demonstrating 'How vain are such aspiring theories' (201), to which Julian says he still hopes the madness springs from 'a want of that true theory, still, / Which seeks a "soul of goodness" in things ill' (203–4).

As if to demonstrate the importance of practice as against theory, Maddalo takes Julian on a visit to the Maniac, whose ravings about his desertion by his mistress make up the central portion of the poem. In a brief concluding episode, Julian revisits Venice after some years to find many things changed: Maddalo is 'travelling far away / Among the mountains of Armenia' (586–7), but his daughter has grown from a child to a woman, and tells Julian that in the interval the Maniac recovered because 'The lady who had left him, came again' (599), but then 'after all / She left him' (605–6). The poem leaves us in complete uncertainty, as to whether the Maniac went mad again and the whole matter of '*why* they parted, *how* they met' (610): the daughter does know the answers to these questions, but the poem abruptly concludes:

she told me how

All happened – but the cold world shall not know.

(616–17)

One implication of this surprise ending is that these are the wrong

questions: had we been keeping our eye on the ball, the issue was whether it was possible to stay true to the theory of the soul of goodness in things ill, without recourse to the kinds of religious comfort the Maniac, like Julian, has rejected. But in fact we have not kept our eye on the ball: the messy details of this inconclusive love affair have drawn us in to the practice rather than the theory of life, which is precisely the trap Maddalo has laid for Julian.

In some ways, the wealthy and powerful Maddalo occupies a similar position towards Julian as the lady towards the Maniac: appearing and departing at will, and testing the other's idealism by setting up the specific situations in which he finds himself. This impression of Byron as in some way 'managing' Shelley's intellectual extremism from a more worldly perspective is supported by his crossing out of one the latter's shocking hotel register declarations of atheism 'as indelibly as possible', when later visiting the same hotel.²⁴

The picture of Byron drawn in *Julian and Maddalo* is intriguing but hard to pin down. From what position does it make sense to mock Shelley's atheism while seeing life itself as ultimately goalless and futile? One such position might be Humean scepticism as to any kind of knowledge on such matters; another might be a Calvinist conviction of damnation, either applied to the whole human race or just to the odd exceptional being who like Maddalo is 'greater than his kind' (50). All three of these attitudes are at times present in Byron, who does not always seem to go to much trouble to reconcile them. Whatever his philosophical inconsistencies, however, Byron certainly publicized and made glamorous the stance of the solitary individual somehow ennobled by his exclusion from a Christian order in which he may or may not believe.

Partly to throw light on the views in circulation among the Regency smart set in Byron's pre-exile years between 1812 and 1816, it is useful to approach his religious views via the renewed fashion for Lucretius. In 1813, a new translation of *De Rerum Natura* had just been published by Thomas Busby, who collaborated on the first English melodrama with Thomas Holcroft and whose obituary later regretted his 'loose notions on religious subjects'. Addressing the absentee 'gods of Epicurus', Byron wrote in his journal: 'I believe . . . Lucretius (not Busby's translation) about yourselves. Your bard has made you very *nonchalant* and blest; but as he has excused *us* from

damnation, I don't envy you your blessedness *much* – a little to be sure.'²⁵ Referring to his current mistress Lady Oxford's question, 'Have we not passed our last month like the gods of Lucretius?', he goes on approvingly, 'She is an adept in the text of the original (which I like too); and when that booby Bus. sent his translating prospectus, she subscribed. [But then, on seeing a specimen] her conscience would not permit her to allow her name to remain on the list of subscribblers.' This description of his lover as 'an adept' suggests the idea of a quasi-secret society of libertines, and the reference to the 'nonchalant and blest' gods of Lucretius slides easily into this image of choice spirits placed outside the mortal and moral fray. The other main point Byron makes can, perhaps, be related to the vestigial Calvinism by which he was always haunted: it is above all for lifting the fear of damnation that Lucretius has made all of us almost as 'blest' as his own gods.

We may remember, however, that in lifting that fear, Lucretius imposes – or at least demands that we consider – another one: that since it is only made of a chance confluence of atoms, the material universe will one day come to an end. Though Epicureanism demands that we accept this, like our own deaths, as simply inevitable and hence not worth worrying about, in fact *De Rerum Natura* ends by rubbing our noses in a graphic description of a terrible plague in Athens, whose scenes of mass death prefigure the universal annihilation that awaits us all. The idea that facing such prospects is good for one, a necessary and worthwhile price to pay for abandoning the old theology of a punitive after-life, may be one explanation of Byron's terrifying 1816 poem 'Darkness', in which the sun goes out, mankind perishes in agonies of cold and hunger, and the world becomes 'Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless – / A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay'. Finally even the clouds perish but 'Darkness had no need / Of aid from them – She was the universe' (71–2, 81–2).

In a more jocular tone, Byron wrote in *Don Juan* that as part of a classical education, 'Lucretius' irreligion is too strong / For early stomachs, to prove wholesome food' (I, xliii, 1–2). More seriously, however, he wrote to Murray that *De Rerum Natura* would have been the greatest poem ever written if not 'spoiled by the Epicurean system . . . As mere poetry it is the first of Latin poems. What then has ruined it? His ethics.'²⁶ Given Byron's growing engagement with Italian emancipation in 1822, the objection to Lucretius' 'ethics'

might be to his recommendation of withdrawal from active political life; alternatively, it could simply be an uprush of the occasional priggishness with which he was wont to mix his infidelisms.

In what follows, I shall concentrate chiefly on one specific aspect of these 'infidelisms': the Manichaean idea of 'Two Principles'. In the verse-drama *Manfred* (1817), this idea is mainly represented by the figure of Arimanes, whose Hall in act II scene iv can be read as yet another of the infidel temples with which the poetry of this period is infested: in his command over the destructive elements and his fiery throne, Arimanes resembles the Eblis of *Thalaba* as well as the Lucifer of *The Revolt of Islam*. As described by Thomas Love Peacock in a note to *Nightmare Abbey* which also mocks Byron's mixing of this Oriental figure with various motifs stolen from *Dr Faustus* and other Germanic myths, 'Ahrimanes, in the Persian mythology, is the evil power, the prince of the kingdom of darkness. He is the rival of Oromazes, the prince of the kingdom of light. These two have divided and equal dominion.'²⁷

After summoning up the spirit of Manfred's dead sister/lover Astarte at his request, Arimanes reappears in the final scene to demand the dying Manfred's soul, only to be answered,

I do not combat against death, but thee
And thy surrounding angels; my past power,
Was purchased by no compact with thy crew,
But by superior science – (III, iv, 112–15)

On being reminded that his crimes have put him in Arimanes' power, Manfred snaps, 'Must crimes be punish'd but by other crimes, / And greater criminals? – Back to thy hell!' (123–4). While also refusing to pray to God, he then dies in the arms of an abbot, who concludes the play: 'his soul hath ta'en its earthless flight; / Whither? I dread to think – but he is gone' (151–3). This ending seems a magnificent way of having it all ways: on one hand the involvement of the equal-powered Arimanes suggests that the idea of an ultimately beneficent and omnipotent God is a delusion; on the other, once having performed this rhetorical function, Arimanes can be dismissed as a kind of puppet-devil, a representative of an oppressively punitive theology which sounds almost identical to Christianity. In the materialist stoicism of such lines as 'Earth! take these atoms!' (I. ii. 109) and 'Old man! 'Tis not so difficult to die' (III. iv. 151), the play seems to celebrate the liberating power of 'superior

science' even though it does not bring happiness ('The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life', I. i. 12). But in that case, why bring in a supernatural element at all – let alone the plethora of them listed in Peacock's note? Whereas Southey's Eblis in *Thalaba* really does stand for an evil we wish to see destroyed, and Shelley's Lucifer in *The Revolt of Islam* for a good we wish to see restored, Byron's Arimanes stands for both a truth we need to recognize and a superstitious illusion we need to reject. No wonder the abbott is bewildered.

In *Cain: A Mystery* (1821), the largely silent Arimanes is replaced as the representative of 'the great double mysteries! the *two Principles!*' (*Cain*, II. ii. 404) by a highly loquacious Lucifer. Associated with 'The star which watches, welcoming the morn' (I. i. 493), and the power to carry the hero into outer space like Volney's 'Genius' and Shelley's Queen Mab, Byron's Lucifer also resembles these figures as the bearer of an oppositional truth to that of Christianity. But whereas in canto I of Shelley's *Revolt* it was the defeat of the Luciferian Morning Star by the fiery comet that led to man's first act of bloodshed, here the same effect is brought about by Lucifer's general sapping of Cain's belief in the goodness of the God worshipped by the rest of his naïve but virtuous family. Again Byron seems to have it several ways at once: this Lucifer is at once right and bad for you. For chosen spirits, there is no choice but to see through the illusion of a beneficent God, and thereby destroy whatever goodness there is, both in themselves and in others. What seems missing in both these plays is any meaningful depiction of a positive force outside the protagonist's individual psyche which can be pitted against Arimanes or Lucifer without incurring the charge of gullible superstition. What emerges is more a picture of arrest in a certain posture of emotional rejection than of having seen through Christianity to any more positive alternative – which is more or less Shelley's analysis in *Julian and Maddalo*:

pride
 Made my companion take the darker side.
 The sense that he was greater than his kind
 Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind
 By gazing on its own exceeding light.

(48–52)

Where *Cain* seems somewhat more radical is in a despairing science whereby, as in 'Darkness', the earth is subject to successive

cataclysms in which all its occupants are repeatedly destroyed. Its most striking images are those involving the 'mighty phantoms . . . of inexplicable shape' of a previous race, wiped out 'By a most crushing and inexorable / Destruction and disorder of the elements, / Which struck a world to chaos, as a chaos / Subsiding has struck out a world' (II. ii. 44, 55-6, 80-3). Here again is Lucretius' instability of the habitable world, with Darwin's consolation that a new world can just as easily be 'struck out' like a new coin from chaos. The particular theory Byron invokes in his preface is 'the notion of Cuvier, that the world had been destroyed several times before the creation of man', a speculation 'derived from the different strata and the bones of enormous and unknown animals found in them'. Dangerous though speculations about such prehistoric bones could be in the wrong hands, however, Byron is right to stress that Cuvier's catastrophism 'is not contrary to the Mosaic theory of creation, but rather confirms it; as no human bones have yet been discovered in these strata': as so often, Byron presses all the right atheist buttons, without committing himself to a consistent train of argument.²⁸

A more entertaining version of the Manichean 'Two Principles' can be found in *The Vision of Judgement* (1821), where Satan and the Archangel Michael dispute ownership of the recently dead George III's soul, while 'still between his Darkness and his Brightness / There pass'd a mutual glance of great politeness': as the older angel, Satan greets Michael 'as might an old Castilian / Poor noble meet a mushroom rich civilian' (XXXV, 7-8; XXXVI, 7-8). This hint of aristocratic superiority can be related to the game Byron is playing with the poet laureate Southey, whose fawning poem *A Vision of Judgement* claimed George's soul for heaven and was prefaced by his famous call for prosecutions of 'the Satanic school' of poetry, whose 'monstrous combinations of horrors and mockery, lewdness and impiety' are clearly meant to include Byron's.²⁹ In his lordly identification with Satan in this poem, Byron returns the challenge, depicting Southey as a money-grubbing turncoat who so bores the devils and the angels by reading his *Vision* that King George slips into heaven when no one is looking: an indication that for all his 'Satanism', Byron leaves the damning of others to the angelic party.

In a letter to Murray (6 October 1820), Byron plays with Lucretius' idea that though we have no immortal souls, the 'surfaces or cases, like the Coats of an onion' that our bodies must constantly

throw off to be materially perceptible may somehow survive us: 'I do not disbelieve that we may be *two* . . . I only hope that *t'other me* behaves like a Gemman.'³⁰ Arguably the 't'other me' thus atomically projected as his image is almost as real a force as Byron himself in the writing of the period. One famous amplifier of that image was Lady Caroline Lamb, not only in her boisterous lamentations over his desertion of her, but also in the clever *A New Canto of Don Juan* (1819), whose imitation of the comic *ottava rima* style of *The Vision* and *Don Juan* shifts between parody and highly perceptive direct impersonation.³¹

Beginning 'I'm sick of fame' and ending 'But something must be done to cure the spleen, / And keep my name in capitals, like Kean', the poem deftly comments on one of Byron's many self-contradictions: his apparent dismissal of his popular reputation coupled with a clear obsession with it. This framework throws a cynical light on the bulk of the poem, a gleeful account of the end of the world which shifts the gloomy content of 'Darkness' into the humorous register of *Don Juan*:

When doomsday comes, St Paul's will be on fire
 (I should not wonder if we live to see it);
 Of us, proof pickles, Heaven must rather tire
 And want a reckoning – if so, so be it:
 Only about the cupola, or higher,
 If there's a place unoccupied, give me it –
 To catch, before I touch my sinner's salary,
 The first grand crackle in the whispering gallery. (III, 17–24)

This contains an accurately observed compendium of late Byronisms: the possibly insincere positing of a traditionally defined God in order to revel in both the idea of personal damnation ('my sinner's salary') and that of humanity in general ('Of us . . . Heaven must rather tire'), coupled with an above-the-fray aestheticization of the whole business (the 'first grand crackle' heard from 'about the cupola, or higher') – all topped off with a suave assumption of unassumingness ('If there's a place unoccupied'). In another densely packed stanza, Lamb extends the aestheticizing tendency in more disturbing directions:

Mark yon bright beauty in her tragic airs,
 How her clear white the mighty smother tinges!
 Delicious chaos, that such beauty bares!
 And now those eyes outstretch their silken fringes,

Staring bewildered – and anon she tears
 Her raven tresses ere the wide flame sings –
 Oh would she feel as I could do, and cherish
 One wild forgetful rapture, ere all perish! (vii, 49–56)

In an amazing game of mirrors, Lamb seems here to describe herself as sadistically desired by a Byron whose *carpe diem* sexual philosophy can perhaps be equated to the fire which tortures and strips her: the impossibility of her enjoying this process is eerily mingled with the quasi-sympathetic impersonation of his impulse to seize the sexual moment however it may arise.

After much further gleeful depiction of the world going to hell, 'Byron' allots a few stanzas to the salvation of its few virtuous souls before hoping the reader has begun to 'take the joke', which applies to his verses 'and all beside': 'For fame we rant, call names, and fight – / I scorn it heartily, yet love to dazzle it' (192–3, 201–2). If only for the last line's rhyme with 'Hazlitt', *A New Canto* is one of the best imitations of Byron's style in a period rich in such parodies (see for instance Horace and James Smith's much stodgier 'Cui Bono' (1812), in imitation of *Childe Harold*, and Mr Cypress's 'There is a fever of the spirit' in Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, 1818 (p. 224)). In demonstrating that it is possible to get 'outside' the already outsiderly detachment from religious and other commitments of the Byron of *Don Juan*, and showing how essential the vestiges of such commitments are for projecting that detachment as style, Lamb effectively deconstructs the arch-deconstructor.

Thanks partly to his own assertions in his letters, Keats is still often taken as the non-polemical poet *par excellence*, free from the kind of 'palpable design upon us' of which he accused 'Wordsworth, etc.'.³² Included in that 'etc.', however, is a poet who very definitely influenced Keats's practice and theory of poetry before this moment of rejection: Leigh Hunt. A notorious infidel who had been imprisoned for his radical politics, Hunt was an important figure in establishing an aesthetic that deliberately stood outside Christian frames of reference in order to explore the goals of human desire in other terms. As he expressed it in a sonnet 'To Percy Shelley, on the Degrading Notions of Deity' (1818), the 'search for the old golden age' on which we should be engaged is directly opposed by the Christian God, who is really only a projection of human bigotry:

What wonder, Percy, that with jealous rage
 Men should defame the kindly and the wise,
 When in the midst of the all-beauteous skies,
 And all this lovely world, that should engage
 Their mutual search for the old golden age,
 They seat a phantom, swelled into grim size
 Out of their own passions and bigotries,
 And then, for fear, proclaim it meek and sage!³³

Two years earlier, after his first meeting with Hunt, the sound of church bells just before Christmas prompted Keats to write the sonnet 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition', which ends:

Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp –
 A chill as from a tomb – did I not know
 That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;
 That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go
 Into oblivion – that fresh flowers will grow,
 And many glories of immortal stamp. (9–14)³⁴

For Keats, the fresh flowers that will replace conventional religion very often stem from Hunt's 'old golden age' of mythical Greece. In the *Examiner* (the leading radical paper he published with his brother John), Hunt argued that 'We would rather have a Deity, who fell in love with the beautiful creatures of his own making, than one, who would consign nine hundred out of a thousand to destruction for not believing ill of him'; and that pagan beliefs 'dealt in loves and luxuries, in what resulted from the first laws of nature, and tended to keep humanity alive', whereas modern religions 'have dealt in angry debates, in intolerance, in gloomy denouncements, in persecutions, in excommunications, in wars and massacres'.³⁵ Hunt's approval of the pagan celebration of sexual love and 'the first laws of nature' can be linked to an element Keats's friend Benjamin Bailey decried in *Endymion*: 'that abominable principle of *Shelley's* – that *Sensual Love* is the principle of *things*'.³⁶

Endymion conducts the reader through a series of encounters with the gods, whose nature is adumbrated from early on in its hymn to Pan, whose name is etymologically linked to the totalizing 'pan' of 'pantheism':

Be still a symbol of immensity;
 A firmament reflected in the sea;
 An element filling the space between,
 An unknown – but no more! (299–302)

Wordsworth's famous dismissal of the hymn as 'a very pretty piece of Paganism' is ironic since the theology of *Endymion* owes a great deal to Wordsworth's own deliberately non-pinned-down responses to such natural 'symbols of immensity', and, as Ryan notes, specifically to the account of the natural origins of pagan belief in Book IV of his supposedly orthodox *Excursion* (1814).³⁷ Later, Endymion gives a more theoretical account of what Keats calls 'the clear religion of heaven', in terms of a Platonic ladder of perfection from sensuous experiences of beauty to 'a sort of oneness' (I, 796): above all, 'earthly love has power to make / Men's being mortal, immortal' (843-4).

The rest of the poem goes on to exemplify this, as Endymion's sexual passion for the moon goddess Diana impels him to undertake a romance-type journey like that in Tighe's *Psyche*. Rather as Tighe's heroine is joined by a mysterious vizored knight whose assistance on her quest leads her into growing confusion as to who she actually loves, and a subsequent near-conversion to lifelong chastity (IV, 370-509; V, 334-60), Endymion becomes embroiled with an 'Indian maid' who so distracts him from his quest for his first love that he vows celibacy – as does she (IV, 860-976). Both poems end similarly, with the 'distracting' second partners revealing themselves as the lost divine lovers in disguise, and the quests being happily consummated in the protagonists' final ascensions to immortal status. However, whereas *Psyche* and her knight have adhered to a rigorously Spenserian code of chastity throughout their quest, Endymion and the Indian maid have only been held back by her conveniently falling asleep, so that it is by a neat irony that her brief retirement into the chaste worship of Diana is rapidly followed by the revelation that she *is* Diana, for whom chastity is by no means an absolute good (IV, 311-18, 979-87).

At the openings of the third and fourth books, Keats brings out further the oppositional intention behind his pagan focus. In Book III, monarchs and rulers 'in empurpled vests, / And crowns, and turbans' are described as perched on 'Their tip-top nothings, their dull skies, their thrones', while true 'regality' exists only where 'A thousand Powers keep religious state / In water, fiery realm, and airy bourne' (III, 11-12, 15, 31). Whereas a conventional diatribe might well argue that kings are below God, here they are polymorphously displaced by a plurality of gods, who inhabit all the elements and not just the sky of a traditional iconography at once

religious and regal. And lest we imagine that Keats is speaking throughout in an assumed Grecian persona, Book IV begins with an address to the Muse of 'our' England, who is praised for maintaining her independence even while exposed to such influences as the 'eastern voice of solemn mood', which clearly means biblical Christianity.³⁸

In his borrowing of Wordsworth's account of the Greek gods, Keats was probably influenced by William Hazlitt, who arguably took over from Hunt as the primary mentor-figure whom the eternally self-improving Keats seems always to have needed. The two first met when Hazlitt was 'full of ideas for the Round Table [1817] essays which were his chief contribution to *The Examiner*'.³⁹ One of these, 'Observations on Mr Wordsworth's Poem "The Excursion"', criticized Wordsworth's religious didacticism and reactionary politics, but quoted approvingly and at length the passage deriving the Greeks' myths from their responses to nature whereby, for example, 'The nightly hunter, lifting up his eyes / Towards the crescent moon' called on 'the lovely wanderer' to share his sport and thus created the image of Diana.⁴⁰

Hazlitt probably also had an impact on Keats's evolving attitudes on more life-and-death matters. In 'On the Fear of Death' (published in *Table Talk*, 1821-4, shortly after Keats's death but doubtless including long-held views), Hazlitt begins by pointing out the absurdity of wishing to live on into the future when we have no such wish about the past: 'To die is only to be as we were before we were born; yet no one feels any remorse, or regret, or repugnance, in contemplating this last idea'.⁴¹ Though 'I confess I should like to see the downfall of the Bourbons', the prospect of missing such a happy event does not exactly explain the fear of death. The only reason for this is the sense of failing to have lived fully: 'If I had lived *indeed*, I should not care to die. But I do not like a contract of pleasure broken off unfulfilled, a marriage with joy unconsummated, a promise of happiness rescinded . . . I should like to leave some sterling work behind me' (pp. 325-6). Otherwise, there is no cause to complain, although

It has been thought by some that life is like the exploring of a passage that grows narrower and darker the farther we advance, without a possibility of ever turning back, and we are stifled for want of breath at last. For myself, I do not complain of the greater thickness of the atmosphere as I approach the *narrow house*. (p. 325)

The essay is notable for never raising even for a moment the prospect of an after-life except to say that 'religious considerations reconcile the mind to this change sooner than any others, by representing the spirit as fled to another sphere, and leaving the body behind it. But in reflecting on death generally, we mix up the idea of life with it, and thus make it the ghastly monster it is' (pp. 326-7). In rejecting such considerations, the essay seems to contain almost the whole *Gestalt* of Keats's mature thought and work. The image of exploring darkening passages is that of his letter to J. H. Reynolds (3 May 1818) about the youthful 'Chamber of Maiden-Thought' which 'becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open – but all dark – all leading to dark passages'.⁴² The sense of life as a 'contract of pleasure' which must not be broken off unfulfilled, and demanding 'some sterling work', seems literally to drive the later Keats, at least from the discovery of likely imminent death in 1818. Those 'pleasures broken off' are the themes of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and 'Ode to a Nightingale', and ways of avoiding that breakage are sought in 'To Autumn' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. The imagery of the latter also has an echo in Hazlitt's essay: when contemplating a memorial sculpture, 'Why do we not grieve and fret that the marble is not alive, or fancy that it has a shortness of breath? It never was alive.' The image of 'shortness of breath' by which Hazlitt repeatedly conveys the materiality of death resonates strangely with Keats's actual tuberculosis, as well as the youthful 'panting' of the figures on the urn, which places them far above 'all breathing human passion' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 27-8).

The need to create 'some sterling work' to outlive the fact of mortality dominates the opening of Keats's last major work, *The Fall of Hyperion*, but other aspects of that opening also owe a great deal to Hazlitt. The poem begins with a firm contrast between religion and poetry: 'Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave / A paradise for a sect', but 'every man whose soul is not a clod' has dreams which 'Poesy alone can tell'. The problem for Keats is to discover 'Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse / Be Poet's or Fanatic's' (1-17). The whole issue of the overlap of poetic vision and the 'sectarian' narrowness of religion recurs repeatedly in Hazlitt. Thus, despite much initial praise, the essay on *The Excursion* goes on to assail the 'little, narrow, inquisitorial' spirit of Wordsworth's attacks on Voltaire's *Candide* and ends in

'hatred and scorn' for his abandonment of faith in the French Revolution.⁴³

The same charge of 'narrowness' dominates two earlier *Round Table* essays on religious sectarianism, the first of which ('On the Tendency of Sects') begins: 'There is a natural tendency in sects to narrow the mind' (*Complete Works*, IV, p. 47). Dealing largely with those 'who, from their professing to submit everything to the test of reason, have acquired the name of rational Dissenters', such as the Quakers and the Unitarians of Hazlitt's own background (p. 48), this essay is more a warning of the dangers of arrogance than an assault on basic principles. The next but one essay, 'On the Causes of Methodism', however, is a no-holds-barred assault on the whole notion of salvation by faith rather than 'the practical drudgery and trouble' of active virtue, designed to appeal to 'the maudling sentimentalist, the religious prostitute, the disinterested poet laureate, the humane war-contractor, or the Society for the Suppression of Vice!' (p. 60). As the list expands, 'Methodism' clearly becomes a cover term for every kind of religious 'cant' deployed by the forces of political reaction. The inclusion of 'the maudling sentimentalist' and the 'poet laureate' can be related to the same essay's attribution of the 'pining, puritanical, poverty-struck appearance' of many poets to 'their original poverty of spirit and weakness of constitution', since 'those who are dissatisfied with themselves will seek to go out of themselves into the ideal world', whereas those 'in strong health and spirits . . . seldom devote themselves in despair to religion or the Muses' (p. 58).

Though clearly not the whole story as far as Hazlitt's view of poetry is concerned, such sneers at poets are recurrent, as when his critique of Shelley's 'extravagant opinions' leads to a general denunciation of poets as 'bad philosophers and worse politicians. They live, for the most part, in an ideal world of their own; and it would perhaps be as well if they were confined to it'.⁴⁴ These Hazlittian contrasts, between the healthy, practical doers and the poor-spirited dreamers, who may or may not be narrow sectarian fanatics at heart, haunt the opening of *The Fall of Hyperion*, where the Keatsian speaker is firmly contrasted with those who actively 'Labour for mortal good', but still has to ascertain whether he is a true poet, 'a sage, / A humanist, physician to all men', or a dreamer who 'venoms all his days' and 'vexes' the world instead of healing it (159, 189-90, 175, 202). Strongly suspecting the latter, he nonetheless

denounces others of the breed as 'mock lyrists, large self-worshippers / And careless hectorers in proud bad verse' – a list generally taken as aimed at Hunt, Wordsworth and Byron respectively – trusting that 'Though I breathe death with them it will be life / To see them sprawl before me into graves' (207–10).

Given that 'life' in this context clearly means 'poetic immortality', Keats has already apparently passed part of the test by managing to climb the temple steps, proving him one of 'those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest' (147–9). He is, in short, a political radical, not someone like Wordsworth, who according to Hazlitt has checked 'the social affections' for the sake of the 'intellectual activity' of poetry, 'looking down on the frailties of others in undisturbed leisure and from a more dignified height' (*Round Table*, p. 166). For Hazlitt, to 'lift man above his nature more than above the earth he treads', some faith is needed like that in the French Revolution, 'the daystar of liberty' to which 'the prospects of human happiness and glory were seen ascending, like the steps of Jacob's ladder' (p. 169); for Keats, it is the awareness that 'the miseries of the world / Are misery' that has enabled him to mount the temple steps 'As once fair Angels on a ladder flew / From the green turf to Heaven' (135–6).

The setting in which all this takes place strongly resembles many of the other temples of nature we have encountered in this book. It is 'so high, it seemed that filmèd clouds / Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven', before which 'All in a mingled heap confused there lay / Robes, golden tongs, censer and chafing-dish, / Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelleries' (63–4, 78–80). As Eliza Sharples was to prefer the Rotunda, 'this fair round temple, this epitome of the universe', to 'the cloistered cell' or 'the gothic arch' of 'the nunnery, the convent, or the abbey', so to Keats 'grey cathedrals, buttressed walls, rent towers' seem 'but the faulture of decrepit things / To that eternal domèd monument' (67–71).⁴⁵ Like Sharples in her role as 'Isis', the temple's presiding figure, Moneta, is at once goddess and priestess, instructing her initiate while draped in the divine 'veil' of Darwin's Nature, which she eventually parts to reveal an aged face enlivened with 'planetary eyes' that 'in blank splendour beamed like the mild moon' (281, 269).

There are, however, conflicting signals: this is not quite nature's temple since 'Nature's rocks toiled hard in waves and winds' are

also 'decrepit' compared to it, and the huge image which dominates it is that of the overthrown Saturn (69, 224-6). It is, perhaps, the lingering vision of the poetic ideal, superior to both religion and nature, but harking back to a Saturnian golden age now only haunted by those who might be dreamers. As Marilyn Butler argues, Moneta's 'precepts, though clearly preferable to those of the modern self-worshippers, are . . . anything but a simple or idealized vision of art. In the truly evolutionary world, even the verities are not eternal.'⁴⁶ This sense of perpetual evolution is clearly also behind the myth to which Moneta introduces us, joining the poem up to Keats's earlier fragment, *Hyperion*. More tragic than *Endymion* in their depiction of one set of divinities replaced by another, both *Hyperions* clearly imply that 'there really is a grand march of intellect . . . that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest minds to the service of the time being, whether it be in human knowledge or religion' (letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818, in *Letters*, p. 109).

In the same letter, this point emerges from an account of Milton's incomplete mental liberation:

In his time, Englishmen were just emancipated from a great superstition, and Men had got hold of certain points and resting-places in reasoning which were too newly born to be doubted . . . The Reformation produced such immediate and great benefits, that Protestantism was considered under the immediate eye of heaven, and its own remaining Dogmas and superstitions then, as it were, regenerated, constituted those resting-places and seeming sure points in Reasoning. (p. 108)

Later, Keats saw as a sign that 'apparently small causes make great alterations' the furore over Carlyle's publications of 'Tom Paine, and many other works held in superstitious horror'. However, 'They are afraid to prosecute . . . The trials would light a flame they could not extinguish. Do you not think this of great import?' (to George and Georgina Keats, 17-18 September 1819, p. 299). It is in this context of faith in a 'grand march of intellect' that he evolved his theory of life as a 'vale of soul-making', which 'may have been the Parent of all the more palpable and personal schemes of Redemption among the Zoroastrians the Christians and the Hindoos' (to the above, 21 April 1819, p. 257).⁴⁷ This theory of the need to construct our own coherent identities through experience tallies, once again, with Hazlitt's idea that 'If I had lived indeed, I should not care to die . . . I should like to leave some sterling work behind me' (325-6). The

whole struggle of Keats's desperate quest to be a true 'poet', neither dying into nothingness on the temple floor nor living like Hazlitt's Wordsworth or Shelley in a sectarian 'world of his own', takes place against the paramount demand to 'live indeed', since there is nothing else to do.

Conclusion

This book began from a dissatisfaction with two types of attitude to 'Romantic' religious unorthodoxy. By some, such unorthodoxy seems to be too easily taken for granted – either as a guarantee of congenial writers' general up-to-dateness or as part of a conspectus so broad as to merge them harmlessly into a 'philosophical' narrative removed from the hurly-burly of the religious and political pressures they actually lived through. It is to avoid this latter well-worn path that I have – except briefly in relation to Coleridge – utterly failed to engage with the German philosophy which has so dominated readings of the age. Instead, I have tried to recontextualize the issue within the debates taking place in Britain at the time, with the idea of 'philosophy' linked chiefly to the infidelism of the *philosophes*. The other attitude I have set out to query sees the Romantic period as largely irrelevant to a grand narrative in which the occasional scepticism of the eighteenth century remained only ironically hinted until Tennyson gave grudging house-room to 'honest doubt' and Charles Darwin shattered creationist assumptions by single-handedly discovering evolution.

To read only a small selection of the writings presented in this book is enough to become aware that these great Victorian turning-points were only the mildest restatements of views and ideas furiously circulated and debated between the 1780s and 1820s. The major Romantic writers were fully involved in these debates, and seen to be so by their contemporaries. Yet what followed has been a collective amnesia so total that we still largely share it today: though it is now both common and acceptable to reject religious explanations of the world, there is little awareness that most of the arguments individuals may still be stumbling on for themselves, in what can often be a lonely and private struggle, have been part of our cultural and literary heritage for the past two hundred years. Far

from the guilty negativism of 'doubt' and 'loss of faith', Romantic atheism was open, active, gregarious, witty and protean – but now moulders away in forgotten subsections of the 'religion' shelves in our older libraries.

To account for this lapse of memory would take another book, but some of the reasons are perhaps implicit in this one. Little subtlety of argument is needed to identify the first and greatest of them: the blasphemy law which declared Christianity 'a parcel of the laws of England' and was ruthlessly enforced throughout the period, against books such as *The Age of Reason* and individual writers and publishers such as Carlile. Yet the fact that a great deal got through this legal net and was still rapidly forgotten suggests that the law had the support of many hearts and minds: the majority did not *want* to hear too many arguments against Christian orthodoxy. Here the brilliant successes of Methodism and Evangelicalism in diverting incipient protest towards individual and church reformation cannot be overstressed, and nor can the simple conservative weight of the Church of England as part of the very fabric of most people's lives. Nor, finally, can the genuinely traumatic identification of 'infidelity' with the horrors of the French Revolution and the ensuing nationally insulating twenty-year war – an association of ideas which post-1815 infidels and radicals did little to dispel.

There is another crucial reason for the disappearance of widely shared opposition to established forms of religion: the death of deism. The slow killing off of that comfortable middle ground between belief and disbelief in a God we can know anything about has been one of the themes of this book. Probably the majority of the writers considered here were in some broad sense deists, refusing to insist either on the infallibility of revelation unsupported by reason, or on the definite non-existence of God. With the agitation against Paine's *Age of Reason*, however, the word *deism* became loaded with dangerous associations which were never expunged; and on the other side, in retaliation, it was seen as not going far enough. This kind of pro-Painite demolition of Paine's own deism could be found at the height of the *Age of Reason* controversy in Samuel Francis's *Watson Refuted*, and later, far more powerfully and challengingly, in Shelley's philosophical dialogue *A Refutation of Deism* (1814).

Poised between the two rival possibilities of deism and orthodox reliance on revelation, Shelley's dialogue overtly rejects atheism in order to offer it implicitly as the only solution to the traditional

debate over religion. The first half is dominated by the deist Theosophus, who draws on authorities such as Voltaire, Rousseau and Paine to mount a skilful assault on Christianity and all other forms of established religion, while maintaining that the inherent design in the universe indicates an otherwise unknowable benevolent creator. The second half is taken over by the orthodox Christian Eusebes, who draws on sceptics such as Hume and outright atheists such as d'Holbach to undermine any argument for God's existence from design, or from any other kind of reasoning. Finally, Theosophus surrenders, accepting that these arguments lead inevitably to orthodoxy since the alternative is a 'cold and dreary atheism', too 'dark and terrible' to contemplate: 'I am willing to promise that if, after mature deliberation, the arguments which you have advanced in favour of atheism should appear incontrovertible, I will endeavour to adopt . . . the Christian scheme.'¹

It is a deeply ironic ending: knowing Shelley's atheism, there is no choice but to read the dialogue as offering two unacceptable points of view, with the option they both reject held out to the reader as the real alternative. As such, it is an exercise in the kind of prosecution-avoiding cunning to be found in its main model, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. A reader who missed all this might, however, follow Theosophus straight to the arms of revelatory Christianity, which is arguably what a great many Victorian ex-freethinkers did once the protective cover of a comfortable deistic belief in a benign and rationally-deducible God had been hacked away from both sides at once. In a larger irony than Shelley perhaps comprehended, the outspoken atheist tradition so vigorously built up over the revolutionary period from 1782 to the 1820s may have simply fallen a victim to its own argumentative success.

Nonetheless, not everything from the revolutionary period *was* rejected; in particular its poetry came increasingly to be revered, even as orthodox Christianity hardened its grip. Here, a particular spin was given to the story by two opposite but complementary accidents: the great longevity of the Romantic 'first generation' of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, whose belated orthodoxy thus came to seem their leading trait; and the conversely youthful deaths of Keats, Shelley and Byron, whose occasional follies of thought could thus be ascribed to their immaturity. But there may be another reason for their absorption into respectability, relating to a fundamental question about poetry itself: can we ever actually believe

what it is saying? It is partly Keats who taught us to distrust poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and thus eventually paved the way for an 'art for art's sake' aesthetic governing not only what came to be written but also the right way of reading poetry which may originally have been written for the sake of other things as well.

And, as we have seen, Keats was partly echoing Hazlitt's critique in 'On Paradox and Common-Place' of poets as 'bad philosophers and worse politicians', which goes on:

In their days of blissful innovation, indeed, the philosophers crept at their heels like hounds, while [the poets] darted on their distant quarry like hawks . . . Preposterously seeking for the stimulus of novelty in abstract truth, and the eclat of theatrical exhibition in pure reason, it is no wonder that these persons at last became disgusted with their own pursuits, and that in consequence of the violence of the change, the most inveterate prejudices and uncharitable sentiments have rushed in to fill up the void produced by the previous annihilation of common sense, wisdom, and humanity!²

Aimed specifically at Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge, this diatribe is framed within a larger claim that the same thing is happening to the Shelley generation. Hazlitt's picture of poets as bold starters but poor finishers of the game is deliberately contrasted with that of philosophers and 'prose writers' like Godwin, Bentham and – presumably – himself, who 'feel their ground' rather than flying over it. We may feel, from the above glance at *A Refutation of Deism*, that Shelley's cleverness in pursuing his ideas was indeed too clever by half. However, in paving the way for a separation of artistic and rational powers which was indeed largely to come about, Hazlitt eerily echoes T. J. Mathias's or the *Anti-Jacobin*'s attacks on 'philosophical' poets, though for opposite reasons.

Not all radical infidels agreed with such pessimism about poetry in relation to philosophy. In the notes for his doctoral thesis on Epicurus, written about 1839, the young Karl Marx contrasts the liberating materialism of Lucretius – 'fresh, keen, poetic master of the world' – with the prosaic moralism of Plutarch. With his 'bold, thundering song', how 'infinitely more philosophically Lucretius grasps Epicurus than does Plutarch. The first necessity for philosophical investigation is a bold, free mind'.³ For Marx, Hazlitt's prophecy about the Shelley generation was only partly right: though Byron 'if he had lived would have become a reactionary *bourgeois*', Shelley 'was essentially a revolutionist and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism'.⁴

If Shelley was in the advanced guard of anything, it certainly included freethought as well as a commitment to political change, and arose from a real community of enterprise between radicals across a wide social spectrum: the working-class movement was intellectual enough and the intellectuals were popular enough to join forces on many matters in the agitation leading to the 1832 Reform Bill. In Eliza Sharples's rhetoric of 'the coming storm' in that year, there is an echo of Shelley's 'approaching storm' in 'Ode to the West Wind', and perhaps of the apocalyptic millenarianism of the radical dissenting chapel her Rotunda so nearly resembles. One reason for the dispersal of the sense of a common infidel enterprise is perhaps, ironically, that it really was a religious movement, dependent on a great future event to which all efforts should be directed, and after which the lion would lie down with the lamb. In the 1780s and early 90s, that event had been the English Revolution which would shortly follow the American and French ones; in the 1810s and 20s it was what became the Reform Bill. After the crises of non-achievement and very partial achievement respectively, energies dispersed even while government vigilance increased. Thereafter, arguably, renewed activities took place in different spheres: political protest, intellectual 'doubt' (as it became) and even 'Rationalist churches' continued to exist, but no longer within the same mutually supportive arena.

Whatever the relative merits of poetry, philosophy and polemic in conveying a radical vision of the world, this book has aimed to show how the possibility of being an atheist impacted on a wide range of poets and other writers. With some of these it was the very 'possibility' that was most important, either as a reference-point by which to re-evaluate their own positions, or as an ever-present danger to be skirted at all costs. With others the possibility of atheism was an opportunity to make sense of the world in purely human terms, in ways hitherto thought unimaginable.

Glossary of theological and other terms

alchemy	A study ranging from practical chemistry to elaboration of the view that matter is infused with various spirits, capable of transforming it (as in the conversion of base metal into gold) if treated in the right way. Widely thought to have derived from the ancient Egyptian scientific lore of Hermes Trismegistus (or Thoth).
antinomianism	The rejection of the 'moral law' as laid down in the Bible, on the grounds that a third age of direct inspiration to individuals has followed or is about to follow the revelations of the Old and New Testaments.
Arianism	A heresy denying that Christ was coeternal with God: an ancestor of Unitarianism.
Arimanes	The evil principle in Zoroastrianism (see below).
associationism	The view that our thoughts are produced by past chance associations of images and ideas, rather than being innate. Most influentially stated by John Locke, but developed by David Hartley into a mechanistic account of the brain's activities which greatly influenced Coleridge.
atheism	The belief that there is no God. Used almost exclusively as a term of accusation until the 1780s in Britain, when writers began to apply it to themselves, though in danger of prosecution for doing so.
atomism	The belief that matter is ultimately divisible into basic units or atoms. See Epicureanism.
Behmenism	An interest in the writings of the sixteenth-

	century German mystic Jakob Böhme, who saw the universe as divided between various spiritual forces that would eventually be reconciled.
Brahminism	The most usual term for Hinduism, centred on the supreme gods Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Siva the destroyer.
Calvinism	Following the beliefs of John Calvin, especially that salvation cannot be earned by good works, but must be bestowed by divine grace and is predestined – as is damnation. The view of the Presbyterianism from which many ‘Rational Dissenters’ saw themselves as moving on; also the view of the Evangelical Anglicans, but not of the Methodists.
deism	The belief that there is a God who beneficently created the universe, but that little more can be known than that. Also known as ‘natural religion’, i.e., deducible from knowledge of nature and common sense, without needing special ‘revelation’.
demiurge	In Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, the creator of the material universe subordinate to the supreme being, and in some systems the author of evil.
Dissenters	Members of sects outside the Church of England (normally not taken to include Catholics).
Eleusinian mysteries	Rites celebrating Ceres which took place in Eleusis in ancient Greece, in which only initiates were allowed to participate. See mysteries.
enthusiasm	Conviction of personal inspiration; a word often used to condemn religious excesses.
Epicureanism	Following the philosophy of Epicurus, that the universe is a purely material combination of ‘atoms and void’ and that the gods, if they exist, have no interest in human affairs.
Evangelicalism	The Calvinist movement within the Church of England, inspired by the teachings of John Wesley’s associate, George Whitefield.
freethought	The rejection of authority in matters of religious belief: applicable to deists as well as atheists.

Gnosticism	Early Christian heresy including many mystical and Neoplatonic ideas, including that of the demiurge (see above).
idealism	Philosophically, the view that the physical world is dependent on pre-existing ideas, in God's mind and/or the perceiver's. Associated with Plato, Berkeley and Kant.
infidelity	Disbelief in God, at least as usually described. A slightly more acceptable term in the period than <i>atheism</i> , for which it is virtually a synonym.
Manicheanism	The heretical belief that Satan is of equal power with God.
materialism	The view that nothing exists except matter, which is inherently capable of motion. Often connected to Epicureanism.
Methodism	Following the teachings of John Wesley, with much emphasis on individual conversion by faith, but little doctrinal difference from the Anglican church.
millenarianism	The belief that Christ's second coming, followed by his 1,000-year reign on earth, is imminent.
mysteries	Rites and secret teachings observed in ancient Greece, but often thought to have derived from Egypt. See Eleusinian mysteries and Orphism.
natural religion	The belief that the existence of God can be deduced from nature alone: see deism.
necessitarianism	Determinism: the belief that all events necessarily follow from what came before. Probably deriving in part from Calvinist predestination, it was favoured by the scientifically minded tradition of Rational Dissent, particularly David Hartley and Joseph Priestley.
Neoplatonism	A mixture of the ideas of Plato with Eastern mysticism, deriving from third-century Alexandria and such philosophers as Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus. Sees the material world as a clog on the spiritual.
Orphism	A branch of Greek mystery religion associated with the cult and (supposed) poems of Orpheus. See mysteries.

Owenism	The ideas and practices of Robert Owen, who reorganized factories in the interests of the workers and believed that the state should be similarly run; he also believed in rational, non-religious education for all.
pantheism	The belief that the universe (pan = everything) is God, rather than a creation separate from him. Particularly associated with the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza.
Quakerism	The beliefs of the dissenting Society of Friends, with some antinomian and Behmenist influences, emphasizing pacifism, communal worship and plain speech.
Rational Dissent	The view of Dissenters (see above) who insisted on the compatibility of religion with reason, as in the findings of science and a general belief in social progress.
scepticism	The view that we cannot know whether God exists or not.
Socinianism	Unitarianism.
superstition	Religious beliefs and practices held to be irrational: routinely applied to Catholicism by Protestants, but also often to Anglicanism or religion in general, depending on the position of the speaker.
Swedenborgianism	The beliefs of Emanuel Swedenborg and his English followers of the New Jerusalem Church, centring around a non-literal, symbolic reading of the Bible.
theism	The belief in God. A broader term than <i>deism</i> in that it may or not accept the idea of divine revelation.
utilitarianism	The belief that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the sole yardstick of morality and, ideally, law and social institutions.
Unitarianism	The rejection of the Trinity, particularly on the grounds that Christ was human though accompanied by miracles to ensure belief in his teachings. Under the guidance of Joseph Priestley, an intellectually influential branch of Rational

- Dissent in this period, though the denial of the Trinity was still technically against the law.
- vitalism The view that the phenomena of life are produced by a separate vital principle, as distinct from the body's own organization.
- Zoroastrianism The Persian religion founded by Zoroaster, which like Manicheanism sees the universe as divided between good and evil principles (Ormudz and Ahrimanes, or variants of these spellings).

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 110.
- 2 See *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford University Press, 1907), p. v.
- 3 M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 25.
- 4 Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* (Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 74.
- 5 Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 46.

I THE ATHEISM DEBATE, 1780–1800

- 1 William Hammon, ed., *Answer to Dr Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* (London, 1782), p. xvii.
- 2 David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London: Routledge, 1990; first published 1988), p. 113.
- 3 Joseph Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, containing an Examination of the Principal Objections to the Doctrines of Natural Religion, and especially those contained in the Writings of Mr Hume*, in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, etc., of Joseph Priestley*, 25 vols., ed. J. T. Rutt (London, 1818–31), vol. IV.
- 4 *Ibid.*, IV, p. 417.
- 5 Nicolas Walter, *Blasphemy Ancient and Modern* (London: Rationalist Press Association, 1990), pp. 32–4.
- 6 Baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature; or, The Laws of the Moral and Physical World, from the original French of M. de Mirabaud* (London: B. D. Cousins, 1844), I, ch. 2, p. 13. All subsequent quotations are from this translated edition.
- 7 As we shall see in chapter 2, this last idea is taken up by Erasmus Darwin (p. 68). The idea of Mosaic Judaism as fundamentally a degraded version of Moses' own Egyptian education was one of the

polemical weapons with which Darwin, Richard Payne Knight and Thomas Paine stirred up some of the atheism debate's bitterest controversies. For Knight, too, the idea of an ur-worship of the fiery energy animating 'the great whole', masked behind the false distinctions of popular mythology, is crucial.

- 8 See Berman, *History of Atheism*, p. 101.
- 9 Priestley, *Works*, IV, p. 368.
- 10 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, abridged D. M. Low (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), near the end of chapter 15, p. 190.
- 11 Richard Watson, *An Apology for Christianity, in a Series of Letters, addressed to Edward Gibbon, Esq. Author of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 8th edn, printed in *Two Apologies, One for Christianity . . . (etc.) Esq., the other for The Bible, in Answer to Thomas Paine. To which are added Two Sermons, and a Charge, in Defence of Revealed Religion* (London: Scatcherd and Letterman, etc., 1818), pp. 120–1.
- 12 Edward Gibbon, *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. P. B. Craddock (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 283.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- 14 Priestley, *Works*, V, pp. 483, 492, 489.
- 15 Gibbon's reply is quoted in Priestley, *Works*, XVII (London, 1820), pp. 533–4.
- 16 *Ibid.*, XVII, pp. 534–5.
- 17 C. F. C. de Volney, *The Ruins: or, a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires. To which is added, The Law of Nature* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1826), p. 122.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 244–7. See plate 1.
- 19 T. J. Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues*, 13th edn (London: T. Becket, 1805), I, 128n, 114n.
- 20 *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (Oxford University Press, 1906), IV, p. 121.
- 21 *Ibid.*, IV, p. 169.
- 22 Joseph Priestley, *A Continuation of the Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion, and of the Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr Paine's Age of Reason*, in *Works*, XXI (London, 1822), pp. 113–14.
- 23 William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, in *The Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, vol. III, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), p. iv.
- 24 *Ibid.*, III, pp. 49–51; *Writings*, IV, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 335–9.
- 25 William Godwin, 'Cursory Strictures', in *Writings*, II, *Political Writings*, 2, p. 100.
- 26 William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'*, published with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, ed. Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 270.

- 27 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Political Writings*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 33.
- 28 Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, ed. Eleanor Ty (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 49–50.
- 29 For hostile critics such as Richard Polwhele, these explorations were in any case part of ‘unsex’d’ infidelism: drawing ‘each precept cold from sceptic Reason’s vase’, Wollstonecraft is presented as infecting the previously harmless Barbauld (in fact one of her critics), Smith, Robinson (who ‘trac’d the picture of a Deist’s grave!’), and Hays (who ‘assum’d a cynic leer’) with a tendency ‘frantic, midst the democratic storm,’ to ‘Pursue, Philosophy! thy phantom-form’ (Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex’d Females: A Poem* (1798), 54, 94, 104, 37–8, in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 187–8).
- 30 See Godwin, *Memoirs*, p. 235.
- 31 John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 342.
- 32 Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. I, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel, 1954), p. 464.
- 33 Priestley, *Works*, XXI, p. 128.
- 34 Paine, *Complete Writings*, I, p. 470; Priestley, *Works*, XXI, p. 161.
- 35 William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 384.
- 36 Quoted in Berman, *History of Atheism*, p. 120. See p. 132, 28n.
- 37 Ibid., p. 122. See p. 5 and Watson, *Two Apologies*, p. 207.
- 38 Berman, *History of Atheism*, p. 126.
- 39 William Hamilton Reid, *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in this Metropolis* (London: Hatchard, 1800). See Iain McCalman, ‘The Infidel as Prophet: William Reid and Blakean Radicalism’, in *Historicizing Blake*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 24–42.
- 40 Reid, *Infidel Societies*, p. 90; David Williams quoted by Alan Saunders, ‘The State as Highwayman: From Candour to Rights’, in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 269.
- 41 Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1838* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). For a good account both of the Unitarians’ leadership of oppositional groupings countrywide, and also of the limits of their identification with radical causes, see John Seed, ‘“A Set of Men Powerful Enough in Many Things”: Rational Dissent and Political Opposition in England, 1770–1790’, in *Enlightenment and Religion*, ed. Haakonssen, pp. 140–68.

2 MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

- 1 Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E. Latham, revised and ed. John Godwin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 10.
- 2 See John Godwin's appendix E, *ibid.*, pp. 268–72.
- 3 'To Mr Creech (Under the Name of Daphnis) on His Excellent Translation of Lucretius', lines 55–8, in Aphra Behn, *'Oroonoko', 'The Rover' and other Works*, ed. Janet Todd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 337. Lucy Hutchinson's earlier translation was unpublished.
- 4 See T. J. B. Spencer, 'Lucretius and the Scientific Poem in English', in *Lucretius*, ed. D. R. Dudley (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 131–64.
- 5 J. M. Good, *The Nature of Things: A Didactic Poem, Translated from the Latin of Titus Lucretius Carus* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1805), p. i. Despite the defence of 'philosophy' quoted here, David Duff points out that both Good and Busby avoid subtitling the work 'a philosophical poem', as Shelley did *Queen Mab*, due to the dangerous associations of 'philosophy' after the French Revolution (*Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge University Press, 1994)).
- 6 Quoted in S. N. Mukerjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth-Century British Attitudes to India* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 72.
- 7 Sir William Jones, Argument to 'A Hymn to Camdeo': '[Camdeo has] at least twenty-three names, most of which are introduced in the hymn', *Sir William Jones: A Reader*, ed. Satya S. Pachori (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 49. Subsequent quotations from Jones's works are taken from this edition.
- 8 Sir William Jones, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Park, 2 vols. (London: Stanhope Press, 1808).
- 9 Jones, Argument to 'Two Hymns to Pracriti', *Reader*, p. 74; 'The Hymn to Bhavani', 65, 72 (p. 79).
- 10 Jones, Arguments to 'A Hymn to Sereswaty' and 'Two Hymns to Pracriti', *Reader*, pp. 54, 74–5.
- 11 See P. J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 26–31, 37–8.
- 12 See 'Hymn to Lacshmi', 252 (*Reader*, p. 73).
- 13 See 'On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India', in Marshall, *Discovery of Hinduism*, pp. 212, 243–4.
- 14 John Wilkes, *An Essay on Woman* (Aberdeen: James Hay, 1788), Book 3, p. 14.
- 15 See Betty Kemp, *Sir Francis Dashwood, an Eighteenth-Century Independent* (London: Macmillan, 1967), and Eric Towers, *Dashwood: The Man and the Myth. The Life and Times of the Hell-Fire Club's Founder* (London: Crucible, 1986).
- 16 See Richard Payne Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus, and its*

Connection with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients, in *Two Essays on the Worship of Priapus* (London: privately printed, 1865), pp. 67–8, 107. For an account of contemporary attacks, see Frank J. Messmann, *Richard Payne Knight: The Twilight of Virtuosity* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), pp. 44–5.

- 17 See *Priapus*, pp. 48–53, 29, 17–25.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 33, 104. Justifying himself against the attacks of T. J. Mathias and others (see below, pp. 77–9), Knight later wrote ‘I have never printed or written any opinion on the subject of Christianity, which I cannot prove to be consistent with the duties of a good man: I might perhaps add, of a good Christian, did I understand the meaning of that term.’ As far as his supposedly ‘obscene’ illustrations are concerned, the ‘most objectionable’ – reproduced here as plate 2 – ‘represents the male human organs of generation erect upon the head of a cock, in lieu of a beak, which head grows out of the bust of a man: beneath it, on the base, is written ΣΩΤΗΡ ΚΟΣΜΟΥ – SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD’. The original has been ‘publicly exhibited for near a century, without corrupting anyone’s morals or religion, that I have heard of’ in the Vatican Palace, where Pope Benedict XIV replied, to a request to remove it, that ‘he had no authority over such a personage, being but his vicar’ (Preface to *The Progress of Civil Society*, see n22 below, pp. xvii, xxi). G. S. Rousseau usefully discusses Knight’s *Discourse on Priapus* in ‘The Sorrows of Priapus: Anticlericalism, Homosocial Desire, and Richard Payne Knight’ (*Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester University Press, 1987) pp. 101–55). However, the plate reproduced there on p. 124 is not an illustration for Knight’s essay but for the piece with which it was jointly published in *Two Essays on the Worship of Priapus* (1865). This second essay, Thomas Wright’s *On the Worship of the Generative Powers During the Middle Ages of Western Europe*, clearly states that the objects depicted in Rousseau’s illustration were discovered between 1838 and 1844 (see p. 123).
- 19 Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem in Three Books*, 2nd edn (London: G. Nicol, 1795).
- 20 Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 107. For a valuable full-length discussion of the links implied in its title, see Andrew Ballantyne, *Architecture, Landscape and Liberty: Richard Payne Knight and the Picturesque* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 21 Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London, 1806), p. 377.
- 22 Richard Payne Knight, *The Progress of Civil Society, A Didactic Poem in Six Books* (London: G. Nicol, 1796), I, 91, 168, 185–6.
- 23 All references to *The Loves of the Plants* and *The Economy of Vegetation* are taken from Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden; A Poem, in Two Parts* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1791), 2nd edn.

- 24 See I, 73n, which argues that these were in any case ‘originally the names of hieroglyphic figures of the Elements’.
- 25 Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society: A Poem, with Philosophical Notes* (London: J. Johnson, 1803), reprinted in facsimile (Menston, Yorks: Scolar Press, 1973), from which all quotations are taken.
- 26 Lucretius, *Nature of the Universe*, III, 14–30; p. 67.
- 27 Ibid., V, 328–30.
- 28 Darwin, *Temple*, Additional Note I, to I, 227, p. 1 (Additional Notes are paginated separately).
- 29 Quoted by Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600–1800* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 198.
- 30 Jones, Argument to and lines 187–8 and 201–3 of ‘A Hymn to Surya’ (*Reader*, pp. 66, 69).
- 31 Jones, ‘Hymn to Narayena’, 71–2 (*Reader*, p. 53).
- 32 Jones, ‘A Hymn to Narayena’, 126 (*Reader*, p. 53).
- 33 Argument to ‘A Hymn to Narayena’ (p. 51). By ‘the moderns’, Jones means Berkeley, by whom he was strongly influenced. For Jerome McGann, this Platonic and Berkeleyan view of the world as something we continually create anew with our imaginations, thus mirroring what Coleridge would call ‘the infinite I AM’ of God, marks the beginning of Romanticism. See Jerome J. McGann, *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. xxii, and *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 130.
- 34 See Knight, *Priapus*, pp. 18, 14.
- 35 Darwin, *Economy*, Additional Note XXII, to II, 321; pp. 53–9.
- 36 Jones, ‘A Hymn to Sereswaty’, 71–2 (*Reader*, p. 53).
- 37 See David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 37–8.
- 38 ‘The Progress of Man’, III, 27–8, p. 81, in George Canning, George Ellis and John Hookham Frere, *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, ed. L. Rice-Oxley (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1924), p. 81.
- 39 Jones, ‘The Enchanted Fruit’, 65–70 (*Reader*, p. 42).
- 40 Canning, Ellis and Frere, *Anti-Jacobin*, nos. XV and XXIII, pp. 57–62, 85–97.
- 41 See too Richard Polwhele, *Unsex’d Females*: Darwin leads women to ‘point the prostitution of a plant; / Dissect its organ of unhallowed lust, / And fondly gaze the titillating dust; / With liberty’s sublimer views expand, / And o’er the wreck of kingdoms sternly stand’ (32–6; Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 187).

3 AND DID THOSE FEET?

- 1 ‘The Tyger’, in *Songs of Experience*, 1–4, and the lyric from the preface to *Milton*, 1–4, quoted from *Blake: The Complete Poems*, 2nd edn, ed. W. H.

Stevenson (London and New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 214, 491. All quotations from Blake's poetry are from this edition, but here I have amended back to the customary spelling of 'Tyger'. The questions of 'The Tyger' may in fact have a specifically antireligious source, in Cicero's *Of the Nature of the Gods* (1. 8), as quoted in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part V: 'For with what eyes of the mind could your Plato have beheld that workshop of such stupendous toil, in which he represents the world as having been put together by God? . . . What tools, what levers, what machines, what servants, were employed in so great a work?' This translation from the edition by J. C. A. Gaskin (together with *The Natural History of Religion*, Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 66.

- 2 See *The Book of Thel*, 114–23; *The French Revolution*, 181–9; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 114–69.
- 3 Edward Larrissy, *William Blake* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 31–2.
- 4 A. L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1958), p. 37.
- 5 E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 3–9.
- 6 Annotations to Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine*, in *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 387, 390. All quotations from Blake's prose, as opposed to his poetry, are from this edition.
- 7 See for example Voltaire on 'History of Jewish Kings and Chronicles', in *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), trans. Theodore Besterman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 263: 'It must be admitted that if the holy spirit wrote this history he did not choose a very edifying subject.' See also Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ch. 15, p. 144: 'The sullen obstinacy with which they maintained their peculiar rites and unsocial manners'.
- 8 'A Descriptive Catalogue', no. VIII, in *Complete Writings*, p. 581.
- 9 See Harvey F. Bellin, "'Opposition is True Friendship': Emanuel Swedenborg and his Influences on William Blake", in *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship: An Anthology*, ed. Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985), p. 48.
- 10 See, e.g., Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 133: 'To read through more than a few pages of Emmanuel Swedenborg's writings induces such mental tedium that few students of Blake succeed in conveying more than the same tedium in their commentaries.' In *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, Jon Mee dismisses the Swedenborg connection within three pages (pp. 49–52); and in *Blake and Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), which does explore the connection in some depth, Kathleen Raine insists that 'There is no literary value in Swedenborg's symbolism, and nothing could be less poetic than the "visions" of that sage' (1, p. 4). I simply disagree with this anxiety to distance the

plodding ‘sage’ from the inspired Blake: given the patent weirdness of what he is doing, and even in the stilted available translations from the original Latin, Swedenborg conveys his endlessly self-elaborating vision with great coherence and power.

- 11 Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Heaven and its Wonders, and Hell: From Things Heard and Seen*, trans. not named, intro. J. Howard Spalding (London: Dent, 1909), p. 1.
- 12 Spoken by Los in *Jerusalem*, ch. 1, pl. 10, line 20.
- 13 See *The Song of Los*, 49; *America*, 28.
- 14 See Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 26. For Blake, see e.g.: ‘[Los] saw every minute particular of Albion degraded and murdered’ (*Jerusalem*, 2, 45[31], 7; p. 724); ‘All Sublimity is founded on Minute Discrimination’ (Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*, *Complete Writings*, p. 453).
- 15 *Complete Writings*, p. 98.
- 16 Morton D. Paley, “‘A New Heaven is Begun’: Blake and Swedenborgianism”, in Bellin and Ruhl, eds., *Blake and Swedenborg*, pp. 15–34; p. 28.
- 17 The idea of the ‘Grand Man’ also underlies the figure of Albion in *Jerusalem* and appears in *Vala* (Night VIII, 1–2; p. 405) in a passage – ‘Then all in great Eternity met in the Council of God / As one Man, even Jesus’ – which Thompson unnecessarily presents as purely Blake’s own attempt to reconcile Christianity with pantheism (see *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 158).
- 18 Annotations to Swedenborg’s *Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Providence*, in *Complete Writings*, p. 133.
- 19 Annotations to Swedenborg’s *Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, in *Complete Writings*, pp. 91–2.
- 20 Annotations to Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell*, in *Complete Writings*, p. 939.
- 21 Emanuel Swedenborg, *Angelic Wisdom concerning the Divine Providence*, unnamed trans. (London: Swedenborg Society, 1857), 10, IV; p. 8.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 3, I; p. 2.
- 23 Thompson’s argument for Volney’s influence on this passage (*Witness Against the Beast*, pp. 199–215) is undermined by the dates: the relevant plate of *Marriage* is normally dated 1790, whereas *Ruins* (1791) was only published in English in late 1792. This was, however, by Blake’s employer Joseph Johnson; and see note 48 below for the possibility that Blake did have early access to Volney’s ideas in 1791, when he engraved Fuseli’s design of ‘The Fertilization of Egypt’ for Darwin’s *Economy*, published by Johnson in 1791. In *Dangerous Enthusiasm* (p. 146), Mee says *Priapus* offers ‘further examples of the process described in plate 11 of *The Marriage* whereby representations come to be reified into deities’.
- 24 Annotations to *Essays Moral, Economical and Political* by Francis Bacon, in *Complete Writings*, p. 397.
- 25 *Notebook Drafts*, c. 1804, VI, 9–12. For a useful linking of this poem to

current atomic theories, see Mary Lynn Johnson, 'Blake, Democritus and the "Fluxions of the Atom": Some Contexts for Materialist Critiques', in *Historicizing Blake*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (London: Macmillan 1994), pp. 105–24.

26 See below, pp. 191–2.

27 Annotations to Dr Thornton's 'New Translation of the Lord's Prayer' (1827), in *Complete Writings*, p. 786.

28 See Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, ch. 7.

29 See Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, I, p. 127. I think Raine is right here, and also in insisting that among Blake's immediate contacts 'the Eleusinian Mysteries were the fashion in and around 1790' (I, p. 126), but less so in trying to link Blake's two poems of 1789 specifically to Taylor's *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* and Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation*, both published in 1791.

30 'Lyca' also means 'wolf', and Blake refers to a 'wolvish howl' as something her parents no longer fear in 'Little Girl Found', 51. Knight discusses this as a false derivation of 'Lycaean Pan' (*Discourse on Priapus*, pp. 35–6), possibly suggesting that it is only the feared significance of Blake's Lyca, not the real one.

31 Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, I, p. 129.

32 Raine follows Foster Damon in arguing that Taylor was the model for Sipsop the Pythagorean in Blake's *An Island in the Moon* (ibid., I, p. 169). Though Erdman dismissed this claim in *Prophet Against Empire* (1954), he produces evidence in his 1977 revised edition that Taylor at some time taught Blake geometry (1977; pp. 102, 506).

33 Thomas Taylor, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, ed. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 344.

34 Mathias, *Pursuits*, III, 31–3, notes m and n; pp. 185–6.

35 Taylor, *Taylor the Platonist*, pp. 403–4.

36 Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, I, p. 140n.

37 Ibid., I, p. 146.

38 This connotation is continued in the echo of Venus's slain lover Adonis in the river 'Adona', beside which Thel laments. Thel's own name may be linked to Thalia ('blossoming'), the muse of pastoral poetry, but Raine suggests a more specific link with the goddess Thalia in Thomas Vaughan's seventeenth-century alchemical tract *Lumen de Lumine* (1651), who presides over the Temple of Nature and leads the hero Philaethes into a cave containing among other natural symbols a serpent (which becomes Blake's worm) and an inner 'Cave of Earth' which is (in Raine's words) 'the inmost sanctuary of nature's mysteries, where death perpetually gives place to regeneration' (*Blake and Tradition*, I, p. 116). 'Philaethes' implies 'seeking Lethe' and contains Thel's name reversed. See below, p. 111.

39 G. E. Bentley, *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p. 545.

- 40 Thomas Taylor, 'To the Artificer of the Universe', 1, in *Miscellanies, in Prose and Verse*, 2nd edn (London: G. Smeeton, 1820), p. 58. Thompson claims that Taylor 'touches at no point on Blake's central stance', and queries the whole idea of Blake's dependence on established 'literary' sources for Gnosticism and alchemical hermeticism. He argues that his best source for such ideas is likely to have been through their influence on those of the German mystic Jakob Böhme (or Behmen), as infused into the English radical tradition by various seventeenth-century religious sects. As for alchemy, 'Blake *could* have found in London, in the 1790s'; copies of the works cited by Raine and other explorers of this tradition, but only in 'editions published in the Civil War and Commonwealth vortex', in collections where 'he would be likely to have found them cheek by jowl with the works of Antinomians, Ranters and Seekers' (*Witness Against the Beast*, p. 41). This tradition too might have reached him through Böhme, but if so then 'Blake has wrested the Behmenite vocabulary back into a markedly antinomian and millenarian tradition' (p. 46) from which Thompson argues he got it anyway.
- 41 See e.g. Jean Hagstrum, 'William Blake Rejects the Enlightenment', in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 142–55, though p. 154 acknowledges he is 'more than an allegorical personification of the faculty Reason'.
- 42 'Let the Brothels of Paris be Opened', *Poems from the Notebook, c. 1791–2*, LII, 5–12.
- 43 With the possible exception of a passing mention in cancelled plate b. of *America*, 5 (see *Complete Poems*, p. 206).
- 44 See Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, eds., *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 49: 'his name comes from the Greek for "to draw with a compass, to circumscribe", and echoes the sound and meaning of "horizon", based on the same Greek word'.
- 45 See Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Dorothea Wender, in *Hesiod and Theognis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 113–87, 616–23; pp. 27–9, 43.
- 46 See *Complete Writings*, p. 877 n3.
- 47 After a brief earlier identification as the perverter of the rebel Orc's 'fiery joy' into 'ten commands' (61).
- 48 See Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, pp. 157–9. After citing Volney's *Travels*, Darwin's note goes on to quote Pluche to the effect that 'as Sirius, or the dog-star, rose at the time of the commencement of the flood its rising was watched by the astronomers, and notice given of the approach of inundation by hanging the figure of Anubis, which was that of a man with a dog's head, upon all their temples' (*Economy*, III, 129n). This point is taken further in Volney's *Ruins*, where the observation that 'the return of the inundation answered constantly to the appearance of a very beautiful star towards the source of the Nile' led to its being called the warning 'dog' or 'barker' (p. 200). In time, 'the people, who could do without further observations of the skies, lost

sight of the motive' for such animal symbolism and came to worship the animals themselves (p. 202). Later still, other religions borrowed other images relating to the Nile, so that when Jews and Christians describe 'God as *the breath of life, moving upon the face of the waters*', they really mean the wind which 'announced the overflowing of the Nile, and seemed to be the preliminary of creation' (p. 228). While the aged Urizenic figure in the Fuseli/Blake illustration could simply be a personification of the flooding itself, his resemblance to the traditional Jehovah suggests a reference to this last passage.

- 49 See Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, pp. 121–60.
- 50 In his treatment of Africa, Blake is arguably working with two traditions: the pro-Africanism of such an antislavery poem as 'The Little Black Boy', where blackness is presented as a way of bearing 'the beams of love' on the Swedenborgian analogy of divine love with the sun's heat; and the identification of Egypt as the birthplace of oppressive religion in sources ranging from Exodus to Volney. Both views have in common the idea of sun worship: hence perhaps the ambivalent neutrality of 'sunny African'.
- 51 Sir William Jones, *Asiatick Researches*, IV (1794), 1701; see Raine, *Blake and Tradition* I, p. 425.
- 52 See Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 26.
- 53 See *Marriage*, II, 5–6; V, 8.
- 54 See Swedenborg, *Divine Providence*, I, p. 1.
- 55 See notes by W. H. Stevenson in *Complete Poems*, p. 188, and by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant in *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 104. See too *Marriage*, II, 2.
- 56 See *Ahania*, 26–37, 95–8; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 178–206; p. 29. See also Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), I, p. 38 n2, to the effect that the spelling 'Chronos', meaning 'Time', is a later version of the original 'Cronus' – the spelling I am using here.
- 57 See *Song of Los*, plate 7, reproduced in David V. Erdman, ed., *The Illuminated Blake* (Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 145 and on the cover.
- 58 See Graves, *Greek Myths*, I, p. 40, citing among other sources Hesiod, *Theogony*, 485–530 (see pp. 39–40 in the Penguin translation).
- 59 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', in *Milton: Poetical Works*, ed. Douglas Bush (Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 64–72, lines 135, 168–9.
- 60 See Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 207–35. My point here echoes Mee's, in *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, p. 191.
- 61 See the poem's frontispiece, reproduced in Erdman, *Illuminated Blake*, p. 125.
- 62 See, e.g., Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, Part I, *Complete Writings*, I, pp. 290–1.

- 63 See Wollstonecraft, *Political Writings*, ed. Todd, p. 21.
- 64 Ibid., pp. 107, 200, 75, 200.
- 65 Annotations to Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*, in *Complete Writings*, p. 88.
- 66 'The Human Abstract', in *Complete Poems*, p. 216, 1–2.
- 67 Graves (*Greek Myths*, I, 27) cites Knight's and Darwin's favoured sources the mystery rituals and Rhodius's *Argonautics*. This myth's obvious parallels with the Eve story were drawn out by Blake's key mythographic source, Jacob Bryant's linguistic derivation of 'Eva' from 'Ophis' (see Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, I, p. 51).
- 68 See Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, p. 96; Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 137.
- 69 See *Visions*, 200–1.
- 70 *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, IX, 350.

4 THE TRIBES OF MIND

- 1 Thomas Love Peacock, *Headlong Hall and Nightmare Abbey* (Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 141–2.
- 2 Letter to Thomas Clarkson, 13 Oct. 1806, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. II, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. 1196. See Nicolas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 84–117.
- 3 I borrow the word *stirrer* for Priestley from Marilyn Butler, ed., *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 83.
- 4 See Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'To Mr Coleridge' (1799), in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 24; and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 31 March 1832, in *Collected Works, Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton University Press, 1990), I, pp. 272–3. Woodring's note (6) to this passage also describes how Coleridge 'walked twenty miles to Bristol and back' to see Barbauld in 1797.
- 5 Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'The Invitation', 98–100, 182, in *Poems 1792* (facsimile reprint, Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1993), pp. 19, 24. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Barbauld are from this edition, which republished many of her 1773 poems.
- 6 See Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, II, 1048–90, pp. 63–4.
- 7 'To Mr Coleridge', 10–13, 33, 40–1, in Wu, ed., *Romanticism*, pp. 24–5.
- 8 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement', 47–8, 61–2. Quoted from *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford University Press, 1912), from which all quotations from Coleridge's poetry are taken unless otherwise stated.
- 9 'To the Poor', 5–6, 12, 18, 21–2, in *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, ed. Paula R. Feldman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

- 10 Quoted *ibid.*, line 46. See p. 55 for a brief account of the attacks on this poem.
- 11 For 'Fears in Solitude', see below, pp. 151–2; for Palmyra see Volney's *Ruins*, pp. 2–6.
- 12 See Duncan Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 15 n34, for a similar Volney–Shelley link.
- 13 Introduction to *Poems 1792*.
- 14 Coleridge, letter to Robert Southey, 21 Oct. 1794, in *Collected Letters*, vol. I, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), pp. 112–13.
- 15 See Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 46.
- 16 See Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 71.
- 17 See Mark Storey, *Robert Southey: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 58–9.
- 18 Coleridge, letter to Southey, 6 July 1794, in *Collected Letters*, I, p. 83; letter to George Dyer, Feb. 1795, quoted in Storey, *Southey*, p. 75.
- 19 See Roe, *Politics of Nature*, ch. 2.
- 20 Wat Tyler, II, i, in *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey, Complete in One Volume* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1847), p. 94. This edition, from which all quotations of Southey's poetry are taken, has no line numbers, so I shall refer to pages only.
- 21 *The Fall of Robespierre*, II, 28–9; III, 189–91, in *Poetical Works of Coleridge*.
- 22 See William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), X, 457, in *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979).
- 23 *Monthly Review*, April 1796, quoted in Lionel Madden, ed., *Robert Southey: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 42.
- 24 See Storey, *Southey*, p. 11.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 26 Feb. 1811, in Madden, ed., *Southey: Critical Heritage*, p. 134.
- 27 Marilyn Butler, 'Repossessing the Past: The Case for an Open Literary History', in Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann and Paul Hamilton, *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 64–84.
- 28 Coleridge, letter to Thelwall, 21 August 1797, in *Collected Letters*, I, pp. 343–4.
- 29 Coleridge, letter to Thelwall, 22 June 1796, *ibid.*, I, pp. 221–2.
- 30 Letter from Thelwall to Coleridge, 10 May 1796, in Wu, ed., *Romanticism*, pp. 149–50.
- 31 See pp. 199–200 below.
- 32 See Roe, *Radical Years*, p. 172.
- 33 'Lines Written at Bridgewater in Somersetshire, on 27 July 1797, during a long Excursion in Quest of a Peaceful Retreat', 101–7, quoted from Wu, ed., *Romanticism*, p. 151.

- 34 Coleridge, letter to Thelwall, 31 Dec. 1796, in *Collected Letters*, 1, pp. 294–5.
- 35 See Roe, *Radical Years*, p. 5.
- 36 See Holmes, *Early Visions*, p. 84. See p. 139 below, for the *Lectures* attacks on Godwin.
- 37 Coleridge, letter to William Godwin, 21 May 1800, in *Collected Letters*, 1, p. 588.
- 38 Coleridge, letter to Godwin, 22 Sept. 1800, *ibid.*, p. 625.
- 39 For Tooke's radical opposition to Platonic 'permanent ideas', see Butler, ed., *Revolution Controversy*, p. 19.
- 40 Quoted in Holmes, *Early Visions*, p. 258.
- 41 William Godwin, 'Of Religion' (written 1818 but unpublished), in Philp, ed., *Writings*, vol. VII, *Religious Writings*, p. 69.
- 42 Quoted in Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin, 1731–1802* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 4.
- 43 See Ian Wylie, 'Coleridge and the Lunatics', in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 30–2.
- 44 See Holmes, *Early Visions*, p. 175.
- 45 Coleridge, letter to Humphry Davy, 3 Feb. 1801, in *Collected Letters*, II, pp. 671–2.
- 46 Coleridge, letter to Davy, 18 Oct. 1800, in *Collected Letters*, 1, p. 638; 'Lines Descriptive of Feelings produced by a Visit to the place where the first nineteen years of my Life were spent, in a stormy day, after the absence of thirteen months', 33–6, in *The Annual Anthology, 1799, 1800*, ed. Robert Southey, facsimile reprint (Oxford: Woodstock, 1997), II, p. 294.
- 47 See Molly Lefebure, 'Humphry Davy: Philosophic Alchemist', in Gravil and Lefebure, eds., *Coleridge Connection*, pp. 98, 100.
- 48 See *ibid.*, p. 102 and *Collected Letters*, 1, 551.
- 49 'Extract from an Unfinished Poem on Mount's Bay', in *Annual Anthology*, 1, pp. 281–8.
- 50 See Lefebure, 'Humphry Davy', p. 98.
- 51 'Ode to St Michael's Mount, in Cornwall', 58–71, *Annual Anthology*, 1, pp. 172–6.
- 52 'The Sons of Genius', 17–20, *Anthology*, 1, pp. 93–9.
- 53 Margin note on Böhme, quoted by Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 92.
- 54 See *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 1, *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 66 n3.
- 55 This idea can be found throughout Coleridge's poetry and is here verbally echoed from Mark Akenside's proto-Unitarian *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, though it is also to be found in Paine's *The Age of Reason* – a work whose explicitly deist passages Coleridge was eager to agree with.

- 56 See Coleridge, *Lectures*, p. 100 n1; pp. 215–17 n1.
- 57 See *ibid.*, p. 112 n1; p. 113.
- 58 Coleridge, letter to Thelwall, 19 Nov. 1796, in *Collected Letters*, I, p. 260. ‘Tauth the Egyptian’ is the mythical founder of alchemy Hermes Trismegistus.
- 59 Coleridge, letters to George Coleridge, *circa* 10 March 1798, and to Thomas Poole, 16 and 23 March 1801, in *Collected Letters*, I, p. 397, and II, pp. 706, 709.
- 60 Coleridge, letter to Thomas Clarkson, 13 Oct. 1806, in *Collected Letters*, II, pp. 1193–9.
- 61 See Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p. 168.
- 62 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1965), p. 83.
- 63 These lines are from the 1796 version of ‘Religious Musings’, 18–22. Unless otherwise indicated, other line references are to the 1794 version, which is printed as the main text in *Poetical Works*.
- 64 See Bloom and Trilling, eds., *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, p. 9.
- 65 ‘Summary of an Essay on the Fundamental position of the Mysteries in Relation to Greek Tragedy’, in Coleridge’s *Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists* (London: Dent, n.d.), p. 350. Nigel Leask valuably discusses this essay and Coleridge’s attitude to the mysteries as a form of ‘clerisy’ in *Politics of Imagination*, pp. 174–209, esp. p. 184.
- 66 See *Biographia Literaria*, ch. 14, p. 174.
- 67 *Poetical Works*, p. 257 n1.
- 68 See note 30 above.
- 69 See Patton and Mann’s note 1, *Lectures*, p. 89. The Aikin prose-poem they cite is *The Hill of Science: A Vision*, which can be found in *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose*, by J. and A. L. Aikin (London: J. Johnson, 1773). Hence the *Hill* itself may be by Barbauld herself before her marriage. It describes ‘a vast extended plain, in the middle of which arose a mountain higher than I had any conception of. It was covered with a multitude of people, chiefly youth . . . About half way up the hill, I observed on each side the path a thick forest covered with continual fogs, and cut out into labyrinths, cross alleys, and serpentine walks, entangled with thorns and briars. This was called *the wood of error*’. This halfway point is more or less exactly that described in Barbauld’s ‘To Mr S. T. Coleridge’: ‘Midway the hill of science / . . . / A grove extends; in tangled mazes wrought’ (1–3). Also of interest in this ‘vision’ are the linked appearances of the writer’s ‘genius’ (as in Volney) and the veiled temple-goddess (as in Darwin’s *Temple of Nature*, and numerous other texts considered in this book, especially perhaps Moneta in Keats’s *Fall of Hyperion*): ‘As I was gazing on these things with astonishment, my good genius suddenly appeared. The mountain before thee,

- said he, is the HILL OF SCIENCE. On the top is the temple of Truth, whose head is above the clouds, and a veil of pure light covers her face' (p. 29). As far as 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' is concerned, I quote in what follows from the thus titled original version, taken not from *Poetical Works* but from Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1968).
- 70 The names 'Death' and 'Life-in-Death' given in the more familiar later version would still fit 'Blasphemy' and 'Sensuality' at some level, but the lack of any names in the first version leaves us wondering more crucially about what they do personify.
- 71 *Table Talk*, 31 May 1830; see note 4 above.
- 72 See note 69 above.
- 73 William Hazlitt, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (1823), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. XVII, *Uncollected Essays*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1933), p. 112.
- 74 'Vibrations and vibratiuncles' are the mechanisms whereby ideas form associations in the brain, according to David Hartley, *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations*, in 2 parts (London: S. Richardson, 1749), I, p. 58.
- 75 'Mr Coleridge', from *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), *ibid.*, II (1932), pp. 32–4.

5 WHATSOEVER IS DIM AND VAST

- 1 John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 99, quoted in Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 90; see also Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 746–8.
- 2 Coleridge to Thomas Allsop, 8 August 1820, in *Collected Letters*, v, p. 95.
- 3 Heinrich Böll, *Doktor Murkes gesammeltes Schweigen* (London: Harrap, 1963).
- 4 See Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, chapters 2 and 5; and Coleridge's letter to John Thelwall, 13 May 1796, in *Collected Letters*, I, p. 216. See also from the same volume the letter to Thelwall, 21 August 1797, p. 343: 'Very great odium T. Poole incurred by bringing us here – my peaceable manners & known attachment to Christianity had almost worn it away – when Wordsworth came . . . You cannot conceive the tumult, calumnies, & apparatus of threatened persecutions which this event has occasioned round about us.'
- 5 Kenneth R. Johnstone, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: Norton, 1998).
- 6 See Canning, Ellis and Frere, *Anti-Jacobin*, pp. 184–5, lines 316 and 336.
- 7 See *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), I, pp. 20–5.
- 8 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2nd edn, vol. I, *The Early*

- Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, revised Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 125.
- 9 Journal, 28 July 1850, quoted in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Wordsworth, Abrams and Gill, p. 560.
 - 10 Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Wordsworth's poems are from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 2nd edn, vol. 1, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952). Line references only are given in the text.
 - 11 The 1849 version is printed opposite that of 1793 in *Poetical Works*, 1, pp. 42–91.
 - 12 Milton, *Poetical Works*, p. 70, 186.
 - 13 Unless otherwise stated, quotes from *The Prelude* are to the 1805 version in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Wordsworth, Abrams and Gill. But here the reference is to the 1850 version, VI, 414–88, esp. 443 and 457.
 - 14 In *Poetical Works*, 1, p. 373; the editors note that Wordsworth borrowed this line from Southey.
 - 15 See above, plate 4, p. 103.
 - 16 'Acme and Septimius; or, The Happy Union', in Canning, Ellis and Frere, *Anti-Jacobin*, pp. 50–1, lines 15–18.
 - 17 *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 21–38.
 - 18 See Wordsworth, letter to William Matthews, 7 Nov. 1794, in *Letters*, 1, 136.
 - 19 Darwin, *The Loves of the Plants*, II, 183–6.
 - 20 Though Wordsworth eventually published this in a heavily revised version, in which Mortimer becomes Marmaduke and Rivers Oswald, my references are to the unpublished 1797 version, in 'The Borderers' by *William Wordsworth*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).
 - 21 In the above edition: my references give page numbers only.
 - 22 Note on 'We are Seven', dictated to Isabella Fenwick, 1843, in *Poetical Works*, 1, p. 360.
 - 23 III. iv, 31–3; see *Prelude*, x, 828–9: 'the light of circumstances, flashed / Upon an independent intellect'.
 - 24 Roe, *Radical Years*, p. 223.
 - 25 'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Pedlar' by *William Wordsworth*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 42–75. My quotations are from the 'D' version of 1799, which is fuller than that of 1798.
 - 26 Even here the acknowledgement is grudging: 'however inferior we may be to the great Cause and ruler of all things, we have *more of love* in our Nature than he has', except 'upon the supposition of *another* and a *better* world' (Wordsworth, letter to Sir George Beaumont, 12 March 1805, in *Letters*, 1, p. 556).
 - 27 Martin Priestman, *Cowper's 'Task': Structure and Influence* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 162–98.

- 28 See Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 108; and preface to *The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850, p. ix.
- 29 See especially *Prelude* (1805), XIII, 172–84; *The Task*, VI, 719–24. All quotations from *The Task* are from *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford (Oxford University Press, 1913).
- 30 *Prelude* (1850), VIII, 335–6.
- 31 *Task* V, 390.
- 32 *Prelude* IV, 140–2; Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, p. 92.
- 33 *Prelude* X, 283–5; Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, p. 85.
- 34 ‘The Female Vagrant’, 62, in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*. All other quotations from *Lyrical Ballads* are from this edition.
- 35 See *ibid.*, p. 282.
- 36 See Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, I, p. 150.
- 37 Southey, *Poetical Works, Complete in One Volume*, p. 122, lines 26–31.
- 38 Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 319–20.
- 39 For an interesting discussion of this point, see Marjorie Levinson, ‘Insight and Oversight: Reading “Tintern Abbey”’, in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 14–57.
- 40 See lines 96, 39, 49, 101–2.
- 41 See Brett and Jones’s introduction to Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. xxxiii–xxxvi.
- 42 Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, I, p. 124.
- 43 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 197.
- 44 See Milton, *Poetical Works, Paradise Lost*, II, 890–1055.
- 45 *Poetical Works*, V, pp. 3–4.
- 46 Blake, *Complete Writings*, pp. 784, 782.
- 47 M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 25.
- 48 Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, p. 35.

6 TEMPLES OF REASON

- 1 Some examples of such writers and speakers have been well explored in Iain McCalman’s *Radical Underworld*, particularly the careers and works of Alexander Wedderburn and George Cannon, alias Erasmus Perkins.
- 2 William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of The Deity. Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (London: R. Faulder, 1802), p. 1.
- 3 Paley’s early sympathy with Dissent was expressed in his statement that in not subscribing to a petition to relieve Cambridge graduates from having to accept the Thirty-Nine Articles ‘he could not afford to keep a conscience’ (See Coleridge, *Lectures*, p. 310 n2); and there is a potential radicalism in *Moral and Political Philosophy*’s sections on ‘the rights of

man', and the comparison of the king to a pigeon pampered by the others though 'the weakest and perhaps worst of the flock', a comparison which may have delayed his church preferment, and earned the ejaculation 'Paley! what, *Pigeon Paley?*' from George III. (See Paley's *Moral and Political Philosophy*, condensed A. J. Valpy (London: A. J. Valpy, 1831), III, i, p. 36; and *Chambers Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, ed. D. Patrick and J. L. Geddie (London: W. and R. Chambers, 1901), II, p. 643.) There is a line of intellectual succession from Paley via the Cambridge Unitarian William Frend to Coleridge, who however finally dismissed Paley as a 'Pseudo-Rationalist' for believing that Christianity was susceptible to factual proof (*Lectures*, p. 186 n1).

- 4 From the *Essay*'s second edition (1803), quoted by William Hazlitt, 'On the Application of Mr Malthus's Principle to the Poor Laws' (1807), in *Complete Works*, VII, p. 351.
- 5 William Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* (London: J. Smith, 1822), p. 5.
- 6 For the links suggested by such passages and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (whose husband was treated by Lawrence), see Marilyn Butler's edition of *Frankenstein: 1818 Text* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. xv–xxi and appendix C, pp. 229–51.
- 7 See Kate Teltscher, 'Empire and Race', in *Romantic Period Writings, 1798–1832: An Anthology*, ed. Zachary Leader and Ian Haywood (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 94, 106–10.
- 8 Richard Carlile, *Address to Men of Science* (London: R. Carlile, 1821), pp. 18–19.
- 9 Sir W. Drummond, *The Oedipus Judaicus* (London: A. J. Valpy, 1811), p. xiii. See also George D'Oyly, *Letters to the Right Honourable Sir William Drummond, Relating to his Observations on Parts of the Old Testament, in his Recent Work, entitled Oedipus Judaicus* (London: Bulmer and Co., 1812); and *The Theological Inquirer; or, Polemical Magazine*, ed. Erasmus Perkins (London: M. Jones, 1815), bound edition, pp. 350–3.
- 10 Interestingly, however, almost the first passage to be 'unriddled' in depth does concern Jacob's accusation to his eldest son Reuben that 'thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it': like the answer to Oedipus's riddle, Reuben's specific emblem is the figure of a man. If Drummond is implying a specific link here, however, he does not say so.
- 11 Robert Taylor, *The Diegesis; Being a Discovery of the Origin, Evidences, and Early History of Christianity* (London: Richard Carlile, 1829), pp. iii–iv.
- 12 Taylor cites *Asiatic Researches*, I, p. 271.
- 13 Godwin, 'Of Religion', in *Writings*, vol. VII, *Religious Writings*, p. 65.
- 14 Godwin, *Sketches of History, in Six Sermons* (1784), in *Writings*, vol. VII, *Religious Writings*, p. 7. The reference is to Leviticus 10: 1–2.
- 15 'Of Religion' was not published at all until 1993, in Mark Philp's edition of the collected *Political and Philosophical Writings*, and Godwin (himself

- rather cruelly?) wished the posthumous publication of his incomplete last work *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* on his daughter Mary Shelley – though it was not in fact published until 1873 (see *Religious Writings*, pp. 77–80).
- 16 *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, in *Writings*, vol. VII, *Religious Writings*, p. 180.
 - 17 I. D. MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1986): see esp. pp. 121–2 for an account of the decoration, music, texts and ritual of one such secular church in the 1920s.
 - 18 See Berman, *History of Atheism*, p. 191.
 - 19 ‘Philip Beauchamp’, *An Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* (London: Richard Carlile, 1822), p. 99.
 - 20 Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 20, 29, 40.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, introduction, p. xi.
 - 22 Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 70.
 - 23 See J. M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Watts and Co., 1929), p. 77.
 - 24 Quoted in *The Isis. A Weekly Publication*, ed. ‘The Lady of the Rotunda’, collected edition, 28 (London: David France, 1832), pp. 442–3.
 - 25 Richard Carlile, ‘A Letter to the Society for the Suppression of Vice, on their Malignant Efforts to Prevent a Free Enquiry after Truth and Reason’ (London: Richard Carlile, 1819), p. 3.
 - 26 See Edgell Rickword, ed., *Radical Squibs and Loyal Ripostes: Satirical Pamphlets of the Regency Period, 1819–1821* (Bath: Adams and Dart, 1971), pp. 18–20.
 - 27 G. D. H. Cole, *Richard Carlile, 1790–1834* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), p. 25.
 - 28 *Isis*, p. 1.
 - 29 Other female collaborators of Carlile’s who *did* ‘court a prison’ include his first wife Jane and his assistant Susanna Wright, whose defiantly atheist *Speech* at her trial in 1822 is well summed up in the typically long-winded title under which Carlile published it (see under her name in the bibliography below).
 - 30 See Knight, *Priapus*, p. 83.
 - 31 Discussed at the end of chapter 1 above, see pp. 39–43.
 - 32 See G. D. H. Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett* (London: W. Collins, 1924), pp. 188–9.
 - 33 15 May 1813, quoted *ibid.*, pp. 190–1.
 - 34 William Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1925), pp. 365–6.

7 PRETTY PAGANISM

- 1 *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem, with Notes*, VII, 2, 13–14, 23–31, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford University Press, 1907).
- 2 Lucretius, *Nature of the Universe*, IV, 7–10, p. 95.
- 3 See Perkins, ed., *Theological Inquirer*, pp. 34–9, 105–11; and Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 660.
- 4 See Milton, preface on ‘The Verse’ to *Paradise Lost*, in *Poetical Works*, p. 221.
- 5 Quoted in Mary Shelley’s note on *Queen Mab*, *ibid.*, p. 829.
- 6 Volney, *Ruins*, pp. 21–2. Though neither Darwin nor Volney is cited in the notes, Shelley was certainly familiar with both. Mary Shelley’s note on the poem apologizes that ‘His readings were not always well chosen; among them were the works of the French philosophers’ (*Poetical Works*, p. 826), who according to Holmes included Volney at just this time (see *Shelley: The Pursuit*, p. 202). His favourite teacher at Eton was James Lind, who as a close friend of James Watt and cousin of James Keir was ‘in thought and spirit a member of the Lunar Society’ and probably introduced Shelley to the works of Darwin, over which he was soon enthusing to his friend T. J. Hogg (see Desmond King-Hele, ‘Shelley and Erasmus Darwin’, in *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Leicester University Press, 1983), p. 137). Though Shelley does not seem to have accepted Darwin’s evolutionism or big-bang theory – preferring the steady state anti-creationism of d’Holbach and others – he extends Darwin’s still-radical idea that chalk and other rocks consist of the remains of dead organisms to the wilder claim that ‘There’s not one atom of yon earth / But once was living man’ (II, 211–2), and repeats Darwin’s ecologically unsound vision of a future where the polar icecaps are ‘unloosed; / And fragrant zephyrs there from spicy isles / Ruffle the placid ocean-deep’ (VIII, 63–5; see *Economy* I, 426–72; IV, 305–50).
- 7 See Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*, p. 371.
- 8 See Roe, *Radical Years*, p. 44.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 10 Charlotte Smith, ‘The Emigrants’, I, 116, 119, 122–3, in Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*, pp. 82–110.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 12 See *ibid.*, p. 178; Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, letter 8, p. 111.
- 13 *The Progress of Liberty*, I, 727–8, from the extract included in Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*, pp. 209–12.
- 14 ‘To the Poet Coleridge’, 6, 54, 2, in Feldman, ed., *British Women Poets*.
- 15 In Wu, ed., *Romantic Women Poets*, pp. 1–2, 7–8.
- 16 See (e.g.) Mary Tighe, *Psyche*, I, 221–30, *ibid.* For her influence on

- Keats, see his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 31 December 1818: 'Mrs Tighe and Beattie once delighted me'. Though he goes on to say 'now I see through them', he wrote this when reacting to what he saw as the failure of *Endymion*. See Greg Kucich, 'Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 44 (1995), pp. 29–39.
- 17 See, e.g., the Redcrosse Knight and Una in canto I of *The Faerie Queene*.
- 18 Southey, *Poetical Works*, Book XII, stanza 27, 6–11. As noted earlier, this edition has no line numbers.
- 19 M. G. Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. Howard Anderson (Oxford University Press, 1995), II, chapter 4, p. 277.
- 20 Holmes, *Pursuit*, p. 342.
- 21 *The Prelude* was of course unpublished until 1850, but in the 1819 dedication to *Peter Bell the Third*, Shelley quotes the lines on the world where 'We find our happiness, or not at all', from *Prelude* (1805), X, 726–7.
- 22 Robert M. Ryan staunchly argues that it must mean what it says, that the mountain does induce a faith which stops us being reconciled with nature – but it remains unclear why this would be a good thing, or make us feel particularly serene (*Romantic Reformation*, p. 199). Others argue it must mean that only through such faith can we be reconciled to nature: far more convincing except that this is not what 'but for' means (see e.g. Wu, ed. *Romanticism*, p. 585 n9, glossing 'But for' as 'Only by').
- 23 See above, p. 157.
- 24 See Holmes, *Pursuit*, p. 342.
- 25 Byron, journal entry, 17 Nov. 1813, in Peter Quennell, ed., *Byron – A Self-Portrait: Letters and Diaries, 1798–1824* (London: John Murray, 1967), p. 211.
- 26 Byron, letter to John Murray, 1822, quoted by Spencer, 'Lucretius and the Scientific Poem in English', p. 160.
- 27 Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*, pp. 159–60.
- 28 *Poetical Works*, p. 521. See M. K. Joseph's description of *Cain* as a mixture of 'Lucretian atomism' with 'Byron's early Calvinism . . . with the deism of *Essay on Man* . . . with Buffon's giants and "organic degeneration", with the spontaneous generation of Erasmus Darwin, and finally with the catastrophism of Cuvier' (quoted in R. F. Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967) p. 324).
- 29 Southey, *Poetical Works*, pp. 768–9. Southey partly had his wish: Winthrop Mackworth Praed's ballad 'Chancery Morals' (1823) gleefully points out how the Lord Chancellor Eldon's attempt to make an example of Byron's 'immoral' *Don Juan* by refusing to protect its copyright against piracy has not only led to a spate of such publications but has lent the boost of 'prurience to publicity', so that the very schoolgirls Eldon was trying to protect are the first to buy it. 'The girls

- of the Academy, / With empty heads and purses, / Bless Charity and Chancery / For cheapening naughty verses'. (Winthrop Mackworth Praed, 'Chancery Morals' 7, 37, in *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 639. I am grateful to Catherine Boyle for bringing this poem to my attention.)
- 30 Quennell, ed., *Letters and Diaries*, p. 530.
- 31 Included as Lamb's in Wu, ed., *Romanticism*. In *British Women Poets*, however, Feldman argues against attributing this anonymously published poem to Lamb (p. 363). The poem is a fascinating record of Byron's 'image' nonetheless, and only a few of my points suffer if it is not hers.
- 32 Keats, letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 Feb. 1818, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 67–8.
- 33 Leigh Hunt, 'To Percy Shelley, on the Degrading Notions of Deity', 1–8, in *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. H. S. Milford (Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 242.
- 34 Quoted from John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 3rd edn, ed. John Barnard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).
- 35 Quoted in Ryan, *Romantic Reformation* (p. 155). I am indebted more widely here to Ryan's excellent account of Hunt's influence on what he calls Keats's 'Politics of Greek Religion'.
- 36 See *ibid.*, p. 160.
- 37 See Keats, *Complete Poems*, note to I, 232–306, p. 587; and Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, p. 157.
- 38 Also resisting the influence of Latin and perhaps of Dante ('fair Ausonia', or Italy), the Muse finally achieved a 'full accomplishment!', presumably in the age of Shakespeare. In thus pitting the English muse against the religious 'eastern voice', Keats presents it as just one among many threats to 'our spirit's wings', which are now again threatened by our 'dull, uninspired, snail-paced lives' (See IV, 5, 10, 15, 18, 25).
- 39 See Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 147.
- 40 William Hazlitt, *The Round Table*, no. XXIX, in *Complete Works*, IV (1930), p. 114. Hazlitt made the same point as Wordsworth himself in Lecture V of *Lectures on the English Poets*, arguing that in natural surroundings 'we can easily form a mystic personification of the friendly power that inhabits them, Dryad or Naiad, offering its cool fountain or its tempting shade. Hence the origin of the Grecian mythology' (*Complete Works*, V (1930), p. 102).
- 41 Hazlitt, *Table Talk, or Original Essays*, in *Complete Works*, VIII (1931), p. 322.
- 42 Keats, *Letters*, pp. 107–8.
- 43 Hazlitt, *Round Table*, in *Complete Works*, IV, pp. 116, 120. In a letter to his brothers George and Thomas (21 Feb. 1818, in *Letters*, p. 76), Keats makes it clear that he has taken to reading Voltaire and Gibbon under Hazlitt's influence.

- 44 William Hazlitt, 'On Paradox and Common-Place', *Table Talk*, in *Complete Works*, VIII, p. 151.
- 45 See Sharples, *Isis*, p. 4.
- 46 Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, p. 154.
- 47 Though Keats does toy with the idea of immortality in this letter, it is in an agnostic parenthesis to the effect that he only takes it 'for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it' (pp. 255–6).

CONCLUSION

- 1 Shelley, *A Refutation of Deism*, in *Shelley's Prose, or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (London: Fourth Estate, 1988), pp. 128–9, 137.
- 2 Hazlitt, 'On Paradox and Common-Place', *Table Talk*, in *Complete Works*, VIII, p. 151.
- 3 Karl Marx, 'Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy', IV, iv, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), I, pp. 468–9.
- 4 Quoted by Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling in *Shelley's Socialism*, published with Shelley's *Popular Songs* (London: Journeyman Press, 1979), p. 16.

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- to his *Observations on Parts of the Old Testament, in his Recent Work, entitled Oedipus Judaicus* (London: Bulmer and Co., 1812).
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