

*Chapter 1***Transfiguring God:
Revolution, Religion,
Romanticism**

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During the 1790s, the English looked across the Channel at a hurly-burly French Revolution that would sweep away a monarch's divine right, desecrate mighty cathedrals, and change the face of God. The English had under Henry VIII desecrated their own Catholic altars, would in 1649 decapitate King Charles I, and murder one another during the Civil War of 1640 to 1660. English religious fury, from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, filled the ground with corpses and left upon the landscape many a ruined church or abbey to become an ivy-covered icon of poetry and chiaroscuro drawings. French revolutionary violence was not to be so pleasantly portrayed. The news in 1789 that aristocrats and priests were hanging from lampposts, at times with their severed genitals crammed into their mouths, was shockingly brutal. Some smugly thought that French barbarism simply arose from evil habits acquired in living for centuries under a bloody Catholic anti-Christ. But more disturbing than Papist spiritual corruption was the spectacle of the deist Robespierre, who, in fighting off both Catholics and atheists, convinced the National Assembly to vote the Supreme Being into existence. England, alarmed at such spiritual arrogance, would wage war against the French revolutionary government, as it would against Napoleon, its imperial heir. But both before and after fighting the impious French, in what some described as no less than a religious war, Britain underwent religious transformations as important as any that occurred across the Channel.

Those transformations, from roughly the 1770s through the 1870s, grew out of long-standing compromises of "Church" and "chapel,"

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between those sworn to the doctrine of the Anglican Church and the Nonconformists, those seeking salvation outside the established church in plain or extravagant styles of “low” Protestant belief. Unlike radical dissent, Methodist enthusiasm spread everywhere within and without the Anglican Church – in the universities, in churches, chapels, in the unadorned “meeting-house,” and in the open fields with English workers and peasants. Methodism, later organized evangelicism, and Christian moralizing tracts may have absorbed political anger and saved England from revolutionary ruptures. The extent to which this was true is still a thorny historical question. Obviously many believers were less concerned with politics than with their personal fear of God’s discontent. On the other hand, everything religious was political and everything political religious. Methodists celebrated the Good Shepherd, but they were not always sheeplike and sometimes showed something like Calvinist political fire. What Christian revolutionaries, reformists, and reactionaries had in common, especially in times of crisis, was doctrinal allegiance. That Calvinists and High Anglicans or Methodists and Scottish Presbyterians consorted at times did not negate the signs by which one believer espied evil in the beliefs of another. Methodists were especially talented at expressing Christian love as doctrinal disgust, above all, with those Unitarian intellectuals – they were also called Arians – who admired Christ as a sublimely moral but completely *human* being. Charles Wesley, prolific writer of hymns, called upon the Holy Trinity to show no mercy to Unitarians:

O might the blood of sprinkling cry
 For those who spurn the sprinkled blood
 Assert Thy glorious Deity,
 Stretch out Thine arm, Thou Triune God!
 The Unitarian fiend expel,
 And chase his doctrine back to hell.

(Manning 1942: 17)

If the hymn has worked its spell, those like the pioneering scientist and rational dissenter Joseph Priestley, the essayists William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, and one of England’s greatest poets, Coleridge, may be conversing today with Satan, for all were connected to Unitarianism. Priestley probably escaped hell, as he did riotous mobs, by fleeing to America. Coleridge found salvation, so we must assume, by converting to Trinitarian Anglicanism. We can only wonder about the fate of Hazlitt, who vaulted over Unitarianism into permanent

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philosophical radicalism, or Lamb, who clung stubbornly to the Arian heresy.

Religious hatred, or at least its invective, would gradually yield to liberal religious reform. Statutory acceptance of Catholics, Jews, and Dissenters into civic life would not be complete until the 1880s, but it had begun in the 1790s and was increasingly codified in the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. Laws of toleration calmed religious antagonisms during expanding capitalist industrialism, which, like all productive systems, was impossible without social order. Such laws eventually shortened the reach of religion. By the 1890s it was no longer necessary to test beliefs in order to assure social usefulness. This gradually accepted toleration was far from spiritual indifference. The invisible hand of the market still traced the mysterious ways of God. Capitalism incorporated, as it does today, many spiritual strains, one example of which is defined by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. But such spirituality was not defined with machine-like precision. If faceless supernatural authority was vital to prosperity, individuals of all religious stripes bowed even to its dim shadow. Catholicism, Judaism, and Dissenting Protestantism were all eventually drawn into the apparatus of state, economy, and culture. To be sure, religion would long continue to lay vulgar shibboleths even on the tongues of great poets – T. S. Eliot, another Unitarian convert to Anglicanism, comes to mind. But the British embrace of spiritual variety slowly effaced both established and Nonconformist Christianity as, at best, the Empire's high moral force and, at worst, its shabby moral alibi.

Some religious shifts occurred almost imperceptibly amidst Christian spiritual exercises that had hardly changed in two hundred years. That most important of Christian preparations – for early death – obviously did not need much revision. Many people, above all laborers, lived arduous, brief lives, dying between the ages of 30 and 40. True, there were Methuselan wonders like Wordsworth who died at 80, and the indefatigable Hannah More, who published her moral tracts until the age of 90. More typically, Keats died at 26, Shelley at 29, Byron at 36, Austen at 42, Wollstonecraft at 38. Someone like Keats, who disdained religious superstition, prepared for early death by writing sonnets, while nearly everyone else read printed sermons or listened to them in Anglican cathedrals or Dissenting chapels. Prayers were offered up at morning, noon, and night. Life at birth, marriage, and death was marked by the solemn words of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* or of Dissenting hymns. When the devout were not

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praying or singing, they were reading their sermons, the Bible, poetic renderings of the Psalms, polemical religious pamphlets, and among their favorite books, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684) whose hero, Christian, they cheered on to Paradise.

The souls of Dissenters were attended to mostly in solitude or in the modest chapel's choral singing. The souls of middle-class and aristocratic sinners were succored by an Anglican rector, vicar, or curate – in short, the high and the low of the established clergy. Whether a wealthy dilettante who lived in London far from his parish or a poor, zealous shepherd of his flock, the parson was important in social and economic life. And he could wear many hats. He could be a natural scientist, a progressive agricultural reformer, a cranky justice of the peace. He could be Thomas Malthus, frightening all of Britain with nightmares of engulfing population, an itinerant preacher trotting on horseback from village to village, or an urbane essayist like Sidney Smith. These motley Christian soldiers gained luxurious or pitiful livings from their parishes, but most earned enough with which to court, for instance, the likes of Jane Austen's women. Her clergymen, always awkward lovers, can be duplicitous bores like Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or kind men like Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Austen pushes spirituality into the margins when describing husband hunting, for her women have less need of God to find conjugal happiness than they do of good taste and common sense. But nowhere in her irony is the value of even a superficial layer of religion called into question, no more than it was by the most radical critics of society. William Cobbett, for instance, that belligerent radical Tory, in his *Rural Rides* (1822–6), lashed out at most Anglican parsons, together with Quakers and Jews, as hypocritical blood-suckers of the nation's wealth. But he also defended religion as a guarantee of a free-born Englishmen's liberty. Tom Paine was often shunned, even by radical friends, not only because, as it was rumored, he was a disagreeable drunk, but also because some whiffed the smell of atheism about him.

Atheism was not, at least before Shelley, a common Romantic revolutionary principle – it was reason for shame. And, indeed, when the young Shelley published *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), he committed an act of social disorder which led to his being expelled from Oxford. Seven years later he would begin his lifelong exile on the Continent. In Great Britain, as in America and Europe, deep or superficial religious belief was an ordinary part of a morally ordered life. Within the swaying moral order, however, writers held, not only

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to strikingly various Christian doctrines, but radically different conceptions of the nature of religion itself. At one extreme were the guardians of orthodox religion and morality. The moralizing tribes were legion. Cobbett despised them as those who earnestly wished to convince the poor of the blessedness of their condition. The Gospels declared that the wretched poor had a better chance of getting to heaven than the rich. At the other extreme are Blake's wildly radical "Christian" notions of the mind which countered the moralizing of writers like Hannah More and of those of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. "Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody poor," was Blake's response to the jejune simplicities of Christian moralizing. Many other contraries and confluences could be traced through Austen's High Church civility, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's early radical rationalism and their later Tory Anglicanism, Keats's rejection of Christian superstitions, Byron's contempt for Christian hypocrisy and guilt, or Shelley's atheistic – or as his Victorian admirers preferred – his *agnostic* politics and poetics. In order to suggest how such various opinions and even religious styles bristle together or clash with one another, we must glance back to just before the French Revolution, when religion and reason were sometimes strongly, sometimes only delicately, connected.

The Fragility of Enlightenment

In the last half of the eighteenth century, the middling classes, the aristocracy the high and the low Anglican clergy, the angry Dissenting preachers, the country gentry, the artisans, the poor working classes were all born with expectations of a direct relation to God. This immediacy was important even among Anglicans, who come as close to Catholic mediation as is possible for a Protestant, but it was also politically indispensable to Protestant Dissenters – Quakers, Baptists, Anabaptists, Methodists, Unitarians, Presbyterians, and the like. That direct relation to God with the Inner Voice and the Inner Light implied also a direct inspiration from even the most cryptic words of the Bible. One need only think back to *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which, like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was very widely read, to remember how, alone on his island, Robinson interprets the ups and downs of his day with often ambiguous passages of the Scriptures. This heritage of Protestant faith in the immediacy of God's word echoing in the individual mind informs British Romanticism, no less than

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Catholic ritual informs quite differently French and some German Romanticism.

Some of those with the Inner Light and whom both the Church and the chapel trained to be submissively devout were inevitably seduced by the great English Deists or French Jansenists, by skeptics from Montaigne to David Hume or at least by the rational dissent of Arians like Joseph Priestley. And once tempted to adopt the ideas of outlandish French philosophical deists like Voltaire and Rousseau, our perhaps once devout believer was, in the eyes of orthodox Christians, lost to the true God. Our convert to reason would, of course, grant that, even in doubting an orthodox God, some form of God, indeed some form of divine something at the center of things, was a good idea. Voltaire wryly insisted that, indeed, his wife, his tailor, and his accountant should remain devout believers, but that the living, thinking, feeling, and dying of enlightened thinkers should be done with reason, by which the mind sees itself and things as they are, without supernatural mystery or fear of transcendent punishment. Many dissenting, deist, similar "theist," and rationalist ideas were congenial to pious believers who cherished mental independence and political liberty. But not all rationalist and religious tendencies in the 1790s sat well together. The rationalism which led to materialism, historical necessity, and an absent deity produced the intellect one sees in Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1793–4). But others – well-read, articulate artisans, for instance, and admirers of technological progress – could also be, if they did not enjoy the vagueness of Deism, God-fearing Bible-thumpers, with fever in their eyes and promises of fire and brimstone on their tongues. Influential books like John Locke's *Essay on Toleration* (1667), of course, helped to establish common political assumptions among such varieties of religious and rationalist thinkers. And even those who sought supernatural revelation grounded the mind in the physical world with Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

No Romantic writer, in fact, however drawn to Platonism or Neo-Platonism, visions, fantasies, allegorical dreams, or folkloric superstitions, ever leaves this Lockean empiricist tradition behind. Everything begins in the senses, after which the senses can be played with, jumbled together in kinesthesia, set against or with each other in visionary correspondences, associated with a godly voice, as they later were by the orthodox Coleridge, or made into intimations of transcendence as they were by Keats and Shelley. The Protestant Inner Light that survives in British Romanticism may have a distant origin in God but it often shines immediately upon and as if within the stuff of the

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world. It may be that no human impulses to transcendence ever escape the metaphors drawn from the phenomenal world. But Romantic transcendence rarely seems to want to fly beyond the matrix of sensual metaphor. This was as true of Locke as it was of Coleridge, who never disengaged his mind from the excitement of sensual impressions. He actually drove those sensual impressions into the center of supernatural apprehension. The primordial Romantic spiritual event is actually a spiritualized empiricist moment, a heuristic moment, or an epistemological model of beginnings, in which the new Romantic Adam is born, one who must feel the electric connections of body and mind before he can understand the origins of God. William Blake anathematized Voltaire and Rousseau and mocked the empiricist who could not see – as Blake could – an entire world in a grain of sand. But even he insisted on precise sensual perception of that very grain of sand. As he makes clear in *Milton* (1809–10), the world begins anew with the birth of William Blake, a new Adam of poetic consciousness, into whom Milton's soul had entered through the left big toe, now inhabiting a body burning with joyful perceptions of the defining lines of all individualized life, all sharply perceived material things.

Many ideas separated revealed religion and its frightening mysteries from rationalist belief in metaphysical transparency and universal benevolence. But passionate believers and lukewarm Deists are to be found on the same side in struggles for tolerance and individual liberty. English Calvinist rage, for instance, that of the revolutionary seventeenth century, can be glimpsed still in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century party politics. Severe Calvinists could actively struggle for political liberty even as they accepted their catastrophic inheritance of sin and possible eternal damnation. On the other hand, readers of Rousseau's writings on humankind's original goodness, though wary of Rousseau himself, saw the reasonableness of his political ideas based on an assumption of human goodness. A cheerful deist like Benjamin Franklin, too pragmatic to be either a Calvinist or a Rousseauist, contemplated in the 1780s the prospect of human progress in his American ambassadorial office in Paris, certain that God was kind, that people were good, and that the world was not all that bad. But what in the 1790s was to happen in those Parisian streets where the good-humored Franklin once strolled disrupted social accord between, on the one hand, Cathedral and chapel, and, on the other, religion and reason. The hope for progress and for more personal liberty and for what the American Declaration of Independence

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called a *right* to happiness – all such good will for many Europeans stopped suddenly short.

The fall of the Bastille in 1789 incited in Britain, besides newspaper headlines and the government's fear, common congratulations for the Revolution from dissenting groups and radicals of less devout persuasion. Although decried by Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), writers like Blake, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, as well as journalists and even moderate Church of English ministers who envisioned a French constitutional monarchy, looked hopefully upon events. Sanguinity, however, especially from 1793 on, turned pale as pamphlets, newspapers, books, and fleeing French émigrés told of how guns, pikes, and the guillotine were bringing forth rivers of blood. This was blood of a new kind. In his *The French Revolution: A History* (1837), upon which Dickens drew to write *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Thomas Carlyle claimed that what happened in 1793, that is, seemingly indiscriminate massacre, was something for which language had not yet found a name. What seemed beyond a name was neither mass violence nor the sheer volume of blood – far from it. Killing many thousands at a time was new to no one. History, long before the Shoah and the specter of nuclear apocalypse, had been filled with those proud to have been the agents of human extermination. Religious and political memory bristled with images, to name just a few, of Joshua's founding of Israel, the Roman flattening of Carthage, the Catholic erasure of the Albigensians, and the Black Legend, with which Protestants adorned the facts to make sixteenth-century Catholic *conquistadores* even more exterminatory than they were. Explanations for all such horrors and their fantastical exaggerations abounded in the works of those who honored and those who denigrated religious and imperial violence. But the French Revolution placed upon a stage – it was indeed a very theatrical revolution – a people acting, not for God, Satan, or only for nation and empire; but in their own name in search of liberty, social justice, nature, and reason. When Parisian revolutionaries worshiped with grand pomp at spectacular altars of Nature and Reason, they were worshiping themselves. The original theoretical rupture is there in Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), which extended Locke's theories to reinforce the idea that government was no longer established by a spiritual covenant but by contractual agreement with the people. Robespierre, the most demonized of French Revolutionaries, revered Rousseau. This well-known reverence invited observers to link intellectually ruptured religious covenants and the exterminating angel of revolutionary self-righteousness. The

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revolutionaries had, indeed, reached back to the Old Testament, proudly calling their political policy the *Terreur* and themselves *terroristes*. That rhetoric struck pious observers as sacrilegious effrontery. A primordially frightening, wrathful God had been given a purely human face. The new humanly determined contract began as arrogant iconoclasm and ended in revolutionary cannibalism. The *terroristes* had first devoured God, then each other.

Those with an unshakeable religious belief in traditional concepts of good and evil easily accounted for and condemned the French Terror. This was not so easy for philosophical radicals and rationalist dissenters. For some observers, the events of the 1790s transformed reason and religion into *one* beast with two heads. The center of European civilization that formerly was God was shown by rationalism to inspire debilitating primitive fear, but where did modern Terror come from if God and his Satan were now erased? An immensely popular book like Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) argued that rationality, free of God and left to itself, would produce a benevolent, just society. In the very same year in which Godwin published his popular book, the Terror undermined those arguments. It could now be imagined that the human mind left to its own devices could become as fanatic as any that Christianity had produced. Not everyone, of course, was bewildered by the Revolution. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant, essayists like Arthur Young and William Hazlitt, radicals like William Blake and William Cobbett all kept faith with the notion that the Revolution was, for all its violence, a step forward for humanity. Blake's system of psychic contraries protected him from historical shock because his system, by definition, depended upon such extremes – of love and anger, peace and violence. But for many, especially for poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who had cut loose from traditional religion, the Revolution, if it did not destroy the rational foundations of social hope, certainly fractured them.

This is not to say that everything instantly changed. Literary historians have shown how writers in Britain after the French Revolution continued all through the first decades of the nineteenth century to link their politics, reactionary or "liberal," to the confrontations of Dissent and the Church (Woodring 1970, Ryan 1997). But simultaneously, and over many more decades, the question of an unfathomable origin of violence, subject neither to religious nor rationalist understanding, began to take shape in all European culture, thrusting Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey (along with others in Germany and France) into intellectual limbo. Wordsworth and Coleridge would slowly

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climb out of that limbo and return to the Church. But the newly revealed beast of the 1790s does not simply slouch towards Bethlehem to be transfigured by a new, adjusted coupling of eighteenth-century reason and religion. Nor does it simply come to rest in the day-to-day politics of the Romantics. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey returned to conventional worship and to conservative Tory politics. But this return to orthodoxy was a psychic retreat, for they continued to be haunted by the social hope that had crashed amidst the violence of the 1790s.

Coleridge, for example, would never stop thinking about his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, 1800, 1816), which clearly confronts the origin of violence. And though it is a poem one can tie to Unitarian ideas, Coleridge, even later as an orthodox Anglican, would never disown it, one of the most complex religious poems in the English language. The significance of his story can only be pondered by the Mariner's mesmerized listener and by us, his readers. In this working out of meaning, even Coleridge, the Anglican Tory, believed that neither religion nor reason by itself could produce civilized order or allow escape from what had exploded in the French Revolution as a kind of primordial human violence. Coleridge cultivated, along with every other Romantic writer, his version of a new mental faculty that had to precede any hope in purely rational political or sacramental religious order, and he, like all other Romantic writers, called this mental faculty by an old name – the imagination.

Imagination, or Spiritual Reinvention

Of all British cultural concepts, the most complex is that of the Romantic imagination. It cannot be defined with only a few principles, for it is a complex sense – and no more than a sense – of a new de-Christianized or re-Christianized world. Imagination is not only creativity, invention, genius, or mental fecundity. It involves more than inventing a story or painting a compelling picture, although Romantic imagination includes all such creativity. Romantic imagination is a meta-faculty, like that in Descartes' thinking thing, that can only be conceived of by itself. It is the mind observing sensations and impressions – and above all the mind observing itself while it observes its sensations, impressions, the world, and beliefs. A sign of this shifting self-consciousness is the Romantic obsession with trying and trying again to define what imagination was, is, or can be. Understanding

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this self-conscious complexity is not made easy by the fact that now, long past the moment of its Romantic emergence, the aura of the imagination still haunts sophisticated intellectual as well as popular platitudes. No matter that grand, metaphysical concepts of imagination have been deflated in modern culture. It still flourishes in both sclerotic but dominant ideals and in counter-cultural spasms of liberation.

Imagination in its contemporary forms – in its extreme apprehension, for instance, of what André Gide in his *Journals* of 1893 called the *mise en abyme*, the infinite regression into mental mirrors of mental mirrors – has imposed itself on those trying to understand it, to the point that it has become an unquestioned mental given. And even in its more mundane and less disconcerting versions, as when politicians invoke new political and social “visions,” echoing Shelley’s transformation of poets into the ultimate legislators, the Romantic imagination remains a hovering presence. The presence sheds its aura also upon the narrated or archetypal *unconscious*, which also is like the sea or the sky in that it is just there – a part of the mind that, despite psychology or neural surgery, remains unexplainable by any other part of the mind. Not every one attains this imagination, as conceived by the Romantics. And it is not enough simply to have it; *it must also leave its mark in time and space*. It must shape human memory. Without both its emotional effect and its historical presence, we assume that even the most brilliant imagination is, as Thomas Gray proclaims in *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* (1751), simply “wasted.” Indeed, those in whom the imagination is at work are touched by a form of saving intellectual grace, which saves the self not in eternity but in social time. Pascal, the seventeenth-century Jansenist mathematical genius and religious epistemologist, claimed that the imagination always lost its way in contemplating the hidden God. This claim is reversed by the British Romantics. For them God would not simply remain hidden, he would completely disappear without the grace, not of Christ, but of the human imagination. In this sense, Romantic imagination, like its modern derivatives, is a rich reflection or, if we prefer more sober words, a simulacrum of a once purely religious idea.

Romantic writers did not, of course, invent the idea of imagination. They put it together out of old and not-so-old ideas, parts here and there of elaborate systems like Plato’s or the eighteenth-century *je ne sais quoi* of aesthetic mystery, pieces of old theories of memory as decaying yet recaptured thought, or eighteenth-century psychologies drawn from all that is the opposite of Platonism – empirical associationism, replete with physiological vibratiuncles, cellular somethings

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shimmering in reticulated neurological webs. All such mental bric-a-brac was at times excluded from, at others tied to, grander memories of epic and adventurous Protestant vision, allegorical dreams, and the vestiges of the Stoic *recta ratio*, or accumulated wisdom and reason. Out of all these and other elements – too many to mention here – the Romantics made of the imagination something it had never been. And they put it to uses previously unknown.

Reimagining God

For eighteen centuries in Christian Europe, the ultimate object of reverence was, as it still is for most people, nothing less than God. In the poem that remained the most important for all English readers, *Paradise Lost* (1667), a Protestant poem of classical restraint, the epic poet can only justify the ways of God to humankind if God helps him in every utterance. Romantic imagination, however, changes the doctrine by which divine presence is revered. In a world where, for intellectuals, God became opaque, a concretized human imagination became as necessary to God as God was to all previous history. Even if Coleridge traced poetic imagination back to Yahweh's declaration "I am that I am," it is in the poetic imagination that the ancient God would be sensually and ideally recovered. In society and culture at large God's presence was, of course, still felt to be clearly there. Many writers then, as today, wrote as sincere Protestants, Catholics, or mystics. Romantic imagination, however, allowed those without a truly immediate God – and with anguish at that absence – to write with the same power, if not with the same confidence, as the orthodox or mystical believer.

Because thought itself seemed unthinkable outside a Christian context, it is not surprising that Romantic poets wrote in Christianity's verbal shadow. The religious words or phrases of the day in Romantic writing now linger in whispering footnotes. But they once jumped from the page with a life now mostly lost to us. Arthur Young, for instance, in his *Travels in France during the Years 1787, 1788, and 1789* (1792), points to the word "regeneration," one of the common revised theological words of revolutionary *terroristes*. The new French political resonance of this old word, combining Christian hope and revolutionary liberation, would not be lost on Young's British Protestant audience. The connected word, "unregenerate," in Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" (1795), codifies a Protestant notion concerning salvation that

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identifies the speaker as a potential spiritual friend or enemy, depending on whether one is Methodist or Calvinist, and on what one means exactly by unregenerate. And all this in a poem where erotic pantheism, once expressed, is then suppressed with a bow to orthodox Christianity. Assuming that Coleridge's readers were attuned to the new, revolutionary connotations of regeneration evoked by Arthur Young, the word "unregenerate" might have had a strange new resonance. Most readers probably heard only the theological connotations of the word, which were, however, enough to electrify it with conflicting religious sensibilities. Many Protestant believers today still commonly use the word "unregenerate." Many other readers have not the slightest idea of what it means. Unfortunately the word dies within the poem unless it is *felt* in its religious entwinement. When Coleridge used the word "unregenerate," he called up powerful apocalyptic fear and trembling, set in severe counterpoint to the equally powerful and joyful pantheist eroticism of the poem.

Many crucial words in Romantic literature are packed in this way with theological meanings Romantically recontextualized. Perhaps because the Christian word "grace" had a long history of bloody violence attached to it, Romantics tended to avoid it. On the other hand, "joy" could resonate with memories of apocalyptic splendor even in the lyrics of the atheist Shelley, singing only of flowers or the breeze. Many writers of the day may use, in one place or another, all the old religious words but often substitute, for instance, "dejection" for "despair," "power" for "God," "peace" for "grace," "symbols" for "signs," "voice" for "Word," "intensity" for "passion," or, quite famously, "Beauty" for "Truth." These semantic substitutions position the writers less as expressing spiritualized emotion or religious memory than as self-consciously interpreting their perceptions of the emotion. Despair, for instance, as a theological device, brilliantly kept even the unbeliever within the fold. Because it is a sin, *despair*, however painful, defines the spirit of the unbeliever in God's universe. But *dejection* is concretized in the individual mind, free to define its particular loss, its particular void, its particular pain.

Blake's are the most elaborate of poetic variations upon Christianity of any poet of the age. But his transformations of God and Satan into mental faculties are, after all, a recalling of human projections back down to the mind from the heavens. And there in the marvelous mind of Blake, God and Satan occupy a new stage, from which Blake hisses at priestly mystery and Christian mumbo-jumbo in, for instance, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794) or *The Book of Urizen* (1795). It would

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be wrong to think that Blake was not a Christian, but he was a Christian of an antinomian tradition in which God's grace became nearly synonymous with the simple joy of being alive. That joy is incomplete unless liberated from the obsessive, timorous death-consciousness of traditional Christianity. Death in Blake is, indeed, a secondary matter, and hence his modest interest in everything that touches on what might happen after death. His Christianity was so radical as to pass out of Christianity into something else. He transforms straight Christian paths to heaven and hell into painful mental cycles. The mind in such poems as "The Mental Traveller" (1803) traces a circle, in which the end meets its beginning, eternally dismantling, reshaping, and dismantling all over again the God hovering within the thought that produced him.

Redesigning cycles of life and death, however, raised the danger of entrapment in cycles apparently new but theologically ancient. And if the new poet and the old priest try, as Blake believed, to make poetry simply in different ways, are not the old priest and the new poet, even in their differences, somehow the same? Hence the many Romantic attempts to define what a poet is – marking differences from the religious prophet, yet granting to the poet ancient prophetic gifts. Even in the most radical challenges to a Judeo-Christian God, the poet must avoid sophistications of the trap that catches Satan in *Paradise Lost*. When Satan cries out rebelliously "Evil be thou my good!" he trumpets a false cry of liberation. God has set the defining term "good" of which "evil" can only be its reversed reflection. The false dialectic in Satan's claim allows God his eternal primacy. God will always have the last word, if he is always granted the first. The problem was to write one's way out of this suffocating Alpha and Omega of Judeo-Christian discourse, using many of its words and concepts, without sliding back into it or finding new words for religious emotions translated into psychic states. Sometimes the poets twist that discourse into new psychic forms, by borrowing its expression, or, more rarely, throwing it over, as Byron's anguished hero of *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem* (1817) tries to do. Manfred moves beyond Milton's Satan in claiming that the mind is "its own place" and the maker of its own "heaven and hell," but there is no more compelling Protestant reminiscence in the liberated mind than facing heaven and hell caught between good and evil inwardly. St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, defines a not dissimilar new psychic slavery in the sinner liberated from the old slavery of the Mosaic law. The nineteenth century would have to await Nietzsche for a glimpse of how one might think completely beyond a

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Christian system of good and evil or slavery and freedom. Still, Romantic writers did confront a wide audience's religious sensibilities, and showed how and why those sensibilities needed to be changed, striking examples of which appear in the works of Byron and Scott.

Byron's fame was instantaneous with the publication of the First Canto of *Childe Harold* (1811). His immense celebrity, his world-weariness, his cavalier sexuality, and his image as a mad, bad child, diseased by the Spirit of the Age, cannot be underestimated. Thomas Carlyle, in *Sartor Resartus* (1831), thought Byron's discontent dangerous enough to advise the public to stop reading him: "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe" (Carlyle 1831: 143). Bertrand Russell reserves an entire chapter for the "Byronic" in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1945: 746–52), for there are few historical contradictions more revealing than trying to cast off the religious ghost, while sickening unto death in its grip. Scott's own fame as a popular poet was eclipsed by the scurrilous Byron until he recaptured it as the author of the Waverly novels, between 1815 and 1825. The effect of Scott's astounding influence upon the novel in Europe and America was to produce, for a new social world, historical narrations of old ideas and patterns in a "Romanticized" past. This fictionally ordered past would often spill out later in nineteenth-century Britain and America as cultural nostalgia, nationalizing myths, sentimental ethnic and even racist longing. But dogs are not responsible for their fleas, and chanting nationalist claptrap was not part of Scott's serious intentions. He is a complex narrator of religious sensibility. He can, for instance, in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), present a theologically pure and moving Presbyterian heroine like Jeanie Deans and, at the same time, her father, Douce Davie Deans, whose theological purity belongs to a savage past. Scott's novels display both Protestant and Catholic political causes, whose doctrines, sects, manipulators, or maddened fanatics, fictional or historical, drive toward historical dead-ends. Although Scott is often considered the reactionary and Byron the liberal, when it comes to their portrayal of religion, rigid categories obscure the related effects of their writing. With the same effectiveness as Byron, who ridiculed religious hypocrisy and moral "cant," Scott relegates much religious fervor to absurd fanaticism or folkloric antiquarianism. Although they are in so many obvious ways dissimilar, both Byron and Scott measure social good against religious doctrines that are dangerous, whether expressed in posturing or in sincerity.

But whether the Romantic writer was instantly famous, like Byron or Scott, or slowly taken up, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats,

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Shelley, and last of all Blake, Romantic reshaping of religious sensibilities was a long, adaptive process. If it is true, as T. E. Hulme once wrote, that Romanticism is “spilt religion” (1936: 118), it did not spill in one splash but as a constant flood of contradictory sensibilities, in poems that both troubled and consoled readers. Such poems only gradually led to secularization of the spiritual. The most read of nineteenth-century poets did not include the Romantics but, as Stephen Prickett points out, writers like the Anglican priest and theologian John Keble whose *Christian Year*, first published in 1827, “sold an average of 10,000 copies a year for fifty years” (Prickett 1976: 104). *Christian Year* appeared a few years before Macaulay’s appreciation of Shelley, whose genius, he says, had turned “atheism itself into a mythology” (1831/1907: 403). But most readers were having none of that, and continued to take their religious mythology from the pulpit, in their hymns, and in Keble’s Christian sentiment.

From the 1790s to the 1830s, many readers, even those reading Byron and Scott, were still reading James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730), enjoying the mild religious satire of Robert Burns’s “A Cotter’s Saturday Night” (1785), or were plunged in the Calvinism of William Cowper’s *Olney Hymns* (1779). Writing by women from the 1750s translated Christian ideas into domestic sentiments of novels or moral dialectics of the theater, as in Joanna Baillie’s *Plays upon the Passions* (1798–1812), which were for a time much more popular than the works of Blake, Wordsworth, or Coleridge. The spiritual preoccupations of the major Romantic poets do not intensely affect intellectuals until decades after the publications of the texts in which they occur. Blake, today a popular English poet, was virtually unread before the end of the nineteenth century. To read Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* in the 1820s was a different experience from reading it in the 1880s, after readers had also read George Eliot’s translation of Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus* (1846) in which the spiritual becomes primarily the historical Jesus, or Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) in which God is reduced to overseeing a universe of biological accidents.

And yet the transfigurations of God and the gradual displacement of religious sentiment are also constant throughout nineteenth-century literature. Two examples will have to stand for many that would show how writers continued, decade after decade, to reshape religious and aesthetic sensibilities. Our first example comes from Thomas Macaulay’s review of Thomas Moore’s *Life of Byron* (1830) – a defense of Byron against hypocritical readers and narrow-minded critics. Macaulay easily dismisses the reading public, scandalized by rumors

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of Byron's supposed degeneracy, as "ridiculous" in "its periodical fits of morality":

Once in six or seven years our virtue becomes outrageous. We cannot suffer the laws of religion and decency to be violated. We must make a stand against vice. We must teach libertines that the English people appreciate the importance of domestic ties. Accordingly some unfortunate man, in no respect more depraved than hundreds whose offences have been treated with lenity, is singled out as an expiatory sacrifice. At length our anger is satiated. Our victim is ruined and heart-broken. And our virtue goes quietly to sleep for seven years more. (Macaulay 1830/1907: 616)

Although Macaulay defended Byron against this English hypocrisy, he nevertheless agreed that his poetry was marked by "incorrectness," that is to say, by overblown sentiments and a lack of decorum. He writes here in eighteenth-century aesthetic terms and appeals to the neo-classical concept of "imitation." Nothing could be further from what was gradually being established as the new Romantic sensibility, the replacement (as M. H. Abrams points out) of the "lamp" for the "mirror" and new claims for the moral substance of the imagination. But Macaulay, though still wielding the aesthetic terms of "imitation," then slides toward another test for good poetry and it is not that of the eighteenth century, but a test that measures "the creative power" and "the vision and the faculty divine" (1830/1907: 630). He is quoting from Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), as it was quoted by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Macaulay thought that Byron had not risen to these mental ideals, but clearly they were now the ideals to be achieved, located far to the side of traditional religion and far above the maddened, hypocritical crowd. The quoted words are all "romantically" religious, even theological. And by this time they have become consecrated words in the secular Romantic discourse of imagination.

Finally, Romantic imagination coming to the aid, not of failed, false religion, but of failed reason, appears dramatically in a text published over 30 years after Macaulay's, in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873). In the famous Chapter V, "A Crisis in My Mental History," the brilliant political thinker recounts a period of severe dejection. His great predecessor was Jeremy Bentham, a thinker of logical rigidity who wielded the criteria of pleasure and pain and "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" to define ideal social goals. Mill knew the limitations in Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, as we see

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in his essays on Bentham and Coleridge (1838–40), but Mill himself had been educated and worked with those ideals by which social happiness might someday be achieved. That is, until the day when something came upon him, something he compares to what a Methodist might have felt as “the first ‘conviction of sin’” (Mill 1873/1989: 112).

The analogy is a self-conscious one, for Mill takes pains to describe his dejection, or what we would call “depression,” as one not related to religious despair. His sense of emptiness in life did not occur because he had discovered that there was no God. Mill had understood that long before. He had died, not to God, but to the world. To be born again he needed a new power, one to which he was oblivious as a rational atheist. It was the power by which the poetic imagination reconnected one’s self to the outer world of nature, things, and humanity. This new redemptive power was transmitted to him by Wordsworth’s poems:

They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings . . . made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. . . . There have certainly been, even in our own age, greater poets than Wordsworth; but poetry of deeper and loftier feeling could not have done for me at that time what his did. I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in, the common feelings and common destiny of human beings. (1873/1989: 121)

Mill, like Macaulay before him, certifies Romantic imagination, which did not replace God or return readers to God. It musically captured the natural world, the human energy within it, and the mind observing itself observing this world. This connecting power in imagination brought the mind back to itself. Mill did not suffer his depression after any violent historical event, as Romantic writers did after the French Revolution. But the imagination they constructed was suitable for such a mental crisis as Mill’s when, without religious belief, the mind lost faith in itself. What Wordsworth brought to Mill, the social utilitarian, was not a replacement for God, but an anchoring in feelings connected with the world that had been lost along with social optimism in the 1790s, and which made Romantic imagination a matter of mental survival. It is just this mental survival that Mill sought.

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Mill provides a link between our contemporary sensibility and that of the Romantics. After all, during the twentieth century, the most brutish in all history, losing faith in reason is not all that different from losing faith in God. And that loss is displayed throughout twentieth-century literature to be often as catastrophic as the loss of religious faith had been in the literature of the nineteenth.

The Gods in Twilight

Many cultural blurs – many more than have been discussed here – arose in Romantic transfigurations of religion. The eighteenth-century sublime, for instance, and its traditional godly qualities of distant power, and even terror, perceived in art and nature, dissolved into the self-conscious Romantic sublime. Memory, even of the gods, was drawn into what Thomas De Quincey, the English Opium-Eater, called, in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) the “palimpsest” of the human brain. And that suspicion was absorbed into modern forms of the clinically mapped unconscious, where, although now it seems itself a mythical place, Freud first began to trace the illusions of religion. Hope, without which there is no Christianity, was driven by poets like Shelley or philosophers like Schopenhauer into the force of human will, and found a home also in secular, even Marxist, politics. Such transformations are part of the constant modern secularization of religion. Romantic self-consciousness, indeed, prepares for the modern attempt to deconstruct secularized religious discourse and to locate what Kenneth Burke in *Rhetoric and Religion* (1961) called the “god-term” in aesthetic and social semantics. And yet it is Romantic self-consciousness that fashions many new god-terms. One must study, then, both what is taken apart and what has been ideologically put back together.

Religious ruptures and recuperations of religion extend from the Romantics all through twentieth century-literature. And in the social sciences also there has been an osmosis, over the last two centuries of Romanticism and Christianity in the study of religion itself. From Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm to Emile Durkheim’s sociology of religion or Georges Dumezil’s analyses of Indo-European myth or Mircea Eliade’s descriptions of the sacred and profane, Romantic conceptions peek from behind notions of an undying religious imagination. In this sense, if Romanticism, at least amongst intellectuals, displaced Christianity, it also gave it an enduring ideological power in complex

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transfigurations and erasures that are far from complete. We sense these when we agree with Nietzsche that God is dead and when we look about and see that he obviously is not, or when we realize that Western society is no longer Christian and that it still very much is. T. S. Eliot, in *Christianity and Culture*, captured this blur with a useful banality: “a society has not ceased to be Christian until it has become something else” (1939/1988: 10). Eliot’s resigned expectation of continual transfiguration with no sense of what it was to be had been anticipated decades before by the sociologist Durkheim: “the ancient gods grow old or die, and others are not yet born. Hence the futility of . . . old historic memories artificially reawakened: it is from life itself, and not from a dead past, that a living cult can emerge” (Durkheim 1912/2001: 322–3). Modern transfigurations of God, which began in the seventeenth century, are for us still most immediately grounded in post-French revolutionary Romanticism. Romantic poems and stories still speak to contemporary cultural anguish. Many contemporary writers know, as Romantic writers did, how to wait, not for the return of the old gods, but for the arrival of the new. Those writers seem also to know, like the Romantics, that, if indeed the new gods turn out to be false and ugly, we must live simply in and for the world, as intelligently as we can, with no gods at all.

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