Romanticism as Religion: Beyond the Secularization Narrative in Readings of British Romantic Poetry

by

Devin Jane Buckley

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_____

Approved:

_____
Thomas Pfau, Advisor

_____
Robert Mitchell

_____
Victor Strandberg

_____
Nicholas Halmi

_____
Michael Gillespie

_____
Gabriel Trop

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2021

ABSTRACT

Romanticism as Religion: Beyond the Secularization Narrative in Readings of British Romantic Poetry
by

Devin Jane Buckley

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_____
Approved:

_____
Thomas Pfau, Advisor

_____
Robert Mitchell

_____
Victor Strandberg

_____
Nicholas Halmi

_____
Michael Gillespie

_____
Gabriel Trop

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School of
Duke University

2021

Abstract

This dissertation examines the philosophy and poetry of three major British Romantic writers (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth) to contest a popular narrative promulgated by literary scholars and intellectual historians that identifies the Romantic movement as a period of progressive secularization in Western modernity. Whether readers subject secularization to critique, such as Charles Taylor does, or welcome it, as M.H. Abrams does, they alike insist that secularization involves a cultural shift from a transcendent ontology to an immanent one and that Romanticism was essential to this shift. I argue, on the contrary, that Romanticism offers a robustly transcendent ontology and that the failure to recognize this very often results from a reader's reliance on a limited conceptual framework (a Christianity vs. secularism binary, or, in its broader form, secularism vs. organized religion). Thinking in terms of this dichotomy leads readers to misinterpret and overlook genuinely transcendent (i.e. religious) ideas and dispositions in Romantic writers and, therefore, mischaracterize them as secular. The term "secular" effectively erases alternative forms of religiosity, including what I term "Romantic religion," by tossing idiosyncratic theologies and spiritualities together with genuinely irreligious and immanentist philosophies into one single category defined strictly in terms of negation (i.e. that which is not Christianity/organized religion). This tendency is clearest when readers implicitly synonymize "religion" with Christianity, or "transcendent ontology" with Christianity, or "belief in God" with "belief in patriarchal, personalist monotheism." When readers inherit philosophical and theological concepts strictly from

orthodox Christianity, they overlook novel forms of religiosity found in the Romantic period. For example, a writer's rejection of personalist monotheism or a writer's belief in the infinite temporality or cyclicity of the universe is mistaken for evidence of atheism (one of the many terms subsumed by "secular").

Treating each author in each chapter, I argue that Coleridge accommodates Romanticism to Christianity, while Shelley and the young Wordsworth redefine "God" as a transcendent real absolute manifest as the universe/Nature, rather than a man who creates and intervenes in the universe/Nature. To break away from the Christianity vs. secularism framework, I use concepts not only from Christian theology (Coleridge), but also Neoplatonism (all authors), Indian Vedic philosophy (Shelley), and Zen Buddhism (Wordsworth). I argue that none of these writers ought to be regarded as secular, since none of them reject religion per se. To go even further, Romantic religion not only redefines religiosity such that the experience of God can take place outside the clerical, dogmatic, and institutional boundaries of recognized major world religions (in Romantic religion it occurs within aesthetics and the inner life of feeling) but it can also be absent from the experiences of persons traditionally identified as religious solely on the basis of their creedal assent, outward conformity to a given moral law, and/or participation in the ritual practices of an institution. Nonetheless, as the case of Coleridge shows us, Romantic religion is not mutually exclusive with being religious in a traditional sense since Coleridge retains a Romantic sensibility even after converting to Anglicanism.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who taught me to love literature and to think for myself. Without their moral support and intellectual engagement, I would not be who I am today.

Contents

Introduction

The past several decades of scholarship in Romanticism have been dominated by historicist, materialist, and post-modern approaches (e.g. Jerome McGann, Paul de Man, Alan Liu) that largely reject the humanist scholarship that defined the study of Romanticism in the mid-twentieth century (e.g. M.H. Abrams, Earl Wasserman, Geoffrey Hartman). Though opposed to each other (often radically) in their hermeneutic approaches, both traditional humanists and their critics nonetheless share an interpretive commitment to a progressive secularization narrative in which the Romantic period is seen as a cultural inflection point in the West's gradual rejection of religion. Some of these readers regard religion with hostility while others treat it as valuable but obsolete (Abrams). While humanists like Wasserman sometimes emphasize Romanticism's spiritual orientation, they often oppose the category of the "spiritual" to the theological and religious. Scholars like McGann or de Man understand the Romantic period as a phase in inevitable secularization but hope to evacuate it of the religious vestiges that Wasserman and Abrams celebrate in 'secular' form. While humanists and anti/post-humanists usually celebrate progressive secularization, Christian intellectuals like Charles Taylor and John Milbank often lament it.

Narratives of progressive secularization in modernity, whether they subject secularization to critique, such as Charles Taylor does, or welcome it as M.H. Abrams does, alike insist on a cultural shift from a transcendent ontology to an immanent one. Such narratives identify Romanticism as a key moment in secularization since it helps this shift to an immanent framework occur. Geoffrey Hartman writes that the Romantic

period constituted a "time when art frees itself from subordination to religion or religiously inspired myth and continues or even replaces these."[1] Romantic "art is linked to the autonomous and the individual" so that "the problem of the subjective, the eccentric, the individual grows particularly acute."[2] Intensified subjectivist immanence appears in the wake of a loss of communal participation in the transcendent real.

On the contrary, the Romantic period's prominent figures (Coleridge, Wordsworth, and even Shelley) are not, as I argue, 'secularizing' but are resisting immanent or subjectivist frameworks in favor of a transcendent real Absolute (what David Bentley Hart terms "God" properly defined). Nonetheless, many Romantics are often mistaken as operating within strictly immanent terms (and, therefore, 'secularizing') due to their emphasis on affective, intuitive, and aesthetic modes of insight. Yet, feeling and aesthetic experience acquire importance for the Romantics, not because they can supplant the transcendent, but because they can better disclose the real transcendent absolute (God) than discursive reasoning can. In short, I am making a very similar claim for British Romanticism to one offered by Alexander Hampton with regards to early German Romanticism (thus, emphasizing a continuity in Romanticism broadly speaking). Hampton writes that Romanticism provided a "creative remaking of the world that allows immanent reality to reveal the greater transcendent divine reality."[3] Rather than move the West towards immanence it sought to "devise a

---

[1] Geoffrey Hartman, "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self Consciousness,'" in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), 52.
[2] Ibid, 53.
[3] Alexander Hampton, *Romanticism and the Re-invention of Modern Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 202.

language of transcendence for an immanent age."[4] The key claim, which we must not overlook in Hampton's statement is that in Romanticism immanent reality is itself the means by which transcendent divine reality is revealed. Thus, Romanticism, in Hampton's account and in mine, articulates a symbolic ontology, that is, an ontology in which the transcendent real appears immanently—in fact, must appear immanently. Romantic religion (I borrow the term from Hampton) posits a belief in God (understood as a transcendent real absolute) over and against immanent ontologies found within theology itself (e.g. nominalism and voluntarism) as well as within Enlightenment forms of rationalism, materialism, and mechanism. Far from assisting our progress towards a description of the world in strictly immanent terms, the Romantic writers I address insist on the intimate and necessary connection between the immanent realm (e.g. sensory experience, feeling) and the transcendent such that the immanent presence of the transcendent allows sensuous reality to manifest higher transcendent reality.

Aside from Hampton, one prominent scholar resisting the secularization thesis (this time in the context of British Romanticism) is Colin Jager. While Jager challenges the secularization thesis, he does not describe British Romanticism as a renewal of religion. Borrowing the term "differentiation" from Jose Casanova, Jager insists that secularization does not entail "religious decline or religious privatization" but the

[4] Ibid, 3-4. "Immanent age" is a term that encompasses a variety of positions that do not all agree. What is central is the rejection of transcendence in both ontology and epistemology. The Romantic turn to transcendence includes 'pious' immanent frameworks and atheistic ones alike. Different Romantics respond in different ways to "immanent" thinking and I will not be tracking precise differences between "immanent" thinkers, though I will note that they include variously Baruch Spinoza, David Hartley, Joseph Priestly, the French materialists (Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Baron d'Holbach), Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Locke. Furthermore, Romantic religion also resists in various ways dualism (e.g. Descartes and Kant). Hampton focuses largely on Spinoza and post-Kantian German thought.

"emancipation of a variety of forms of cultural authority from religious control" such as the spheres of politics, economics, education, etc.[5] Jager insists that we should understand "secularization itself as differentiation rather than transformation of religious content."[6] This is not to "simply argue that romantic-era writers are more 'religious' than we had thought" but to illustrate the manner in which the concept of design operates alongside differentiation such that "differentiation does not necessarily entail either religious decline or religious privatization."[7] While Jager emphasizes how secularization narratives overlook an underlying stasis of belief within structural change, Hampton and I argue that Romanticism constituted a significant transformative shift in theology or a renewal of religion as a response to immanent ontologies. In other words, I (and Hampton) argue that the Romantics were indeed more 'religious' than has been assumed.

I reject secularization narratives in British Romanticism on different terms than Jager does by emphasizing Romanticism as a renewal of transcendence against immanence. As I stated earlier whether they come from a position of sympathy towards religion or advocate for 'secularism,' readers of the Romantic period fundamentally agree on the turn to immanence in the Romantic era. M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* conceptualizes Romanticism as a translation of Christianity into secular concepts. He writes, "The title *Natural Supernaturalism* indicates that my recurrent, but far from exclusive concern will be with the secularization of inherited theological ideas

---

[5] Colin Jager, *The Book of God* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 28.
[6] Ibid, 39.
[7] Ibid, 38-9.

and ways of thinking," noting that "it is a historical commonplace that the course of Western thought since the Renaissance has been one of progressive secularization, but it is easy to mistake the way in which that process took place."[8] Thus, from the beginning Abrams clarifies that his concern will never be to doubt the given progressive secularization narrative, but to detail accurately how it occurs. In Abrams' account Romantic writers both British and German operated in a world "founded on secular premises" in which they sought to "save traditional concepts, schemes, and values" from Christianity. [9] This "general tendency" in the Romantic era to "naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine" occurs through what Abrams frequently terms "translation" of Christian ideas.[10]

In his account, Blake's apocalypticism, for example, becomes a "translation" of Christian millenarianism. Shelley's revolutionary optimism reveals a sense of providence, though his concept of history is now deprived of God as agent in history, since he hoped to "assimilate what seemed intellectually and morally valid...to his own agnostic and essentially skeptical worldview."[11] Creation, fall, and redemption, are also translated into Fichte's ego or Schelling's Absolute as each reveals an original unity that falls into division (of subject from object) eventually seeking its reconciliation or redemption in higher unification (this is also said to play out in Hegel's dialectic). Schiller's essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* articulates a secular *felix culpa*. Even John

---

[8] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 12-13.
[9] Ibid, 13.
[10] Ibid, 68.
[11] Ibid, 67.

Keats "whose philosophic stance was that of humanistic naturalism, undertook to project his own 'system of Salvation,' in the form of modified classical myths of *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion.*" Coleridge, though "a professing Christian, carried on a lifetime's struggle to save what seemed to him the irreducible minimum of Christian creed within an essentially secular metaphysical system."[12] It is Wordsworth, however, who features most in Abrams's book and Abrams reads him, much like Geoffrey Hartman does, as a secularizing humanist.

Abrams's understanding of secularization is often enabled by a kind of dichotomous thinking (e.g. nature/supernature). Abrams writes:

> "In its central tradition Christian thought had posited three primary elements: God, nature, and the soul; with God of course utterly prepotent, as the creator and controller of the two others and as the end, the telos, of all natural process, and human endeavor. The tendency in innovative Romantic thought…is greatly to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God, leaving as the prime agencies man and the world, mind and nature, the ego and the non-ego, the self and the not-self, spirit and the other, or (in the favorite antithesis of post-Kantian philosophers) the subject and the object."[13]

Abrams characterizes God as a being, not Being (the latter being what D.B. Hart identifies as God properly defined). Furthermore, God in this context is understood as voluntarist agent found next to or within nature. Implied here is a separation between nature and supernature as well as between mind and God. God needs to be explicitly mentioned to be present at all. 'He' is demiurgic "creator and controller." Thus, for Wordsworth's *Prelude* to include God, God must arrive on the scene as agent to exert an influence on nature, which is ultimately separate from 'him' and functioning on its own.

---

[12] Ibid, 67-8.
[13] Abrams, 91.

In this account Romantic thought subtracts God, since Abrams has defined God as a kind of person who can exit the stage and not as a transcendent higher reality that manifests in the aesthetic reality of nature and art.

Charles Taylor, writing from a perspective sympathetic to religion, also characterizes Romanticism as secularization through a turn towards immanence. He identifies Romanticism within a larger trend towards "modern internalization."[14] What particularizes Romanticism as a movement, for Taylor, is its reaction to the Enlightenment and the eighteenth-century: "Against the classical stress on rationalism, tradition, and formal harmony, the Romantics affirmed the rights of the individual, of the imagination, and of feeling…This notion of an inner voice or impulse, the idea that we find truth within us, and in particular in our feelings—these were the crucial justifying concepts of the Romantic rebellion in its various forms."[15] Romanticism is principally conceived in this account as rebellion involving the turn towards inner feeling against devotion to outward ontic order.

The turn towards internalization is, for Taylor, the turn away from transcendence and towards secularism (immanence). He clarifies, furthermore, that Romanticism rejects religion. Though Romanticism "sees us as needing to receive power from elsewhere than autonomous reason to achieve fulness" such that "there are often echoes here of a religious critique of modern, disengaged, unbelieving reason," the "sources of power are not transcendent. They are to be found in Nature, or in our own

---

[14] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 368.
[15] Ibid, 369.

inner depths, or in both."[16] There are "certain analogies to the religious reaction to the unbelieving Enlightenment…but they are views which intend to remain immanent, and are often as hostile, if not more so, to religion than to the disengaged ones."[17] Romanticism is secular insofar as it is immanent and affective, not to mention hostile to religion.

While Taylor is correct to assert that many Romantic writers emphasized feeling's connection to truth and moral meaning, this turn inward and emphasis on feeling is not an abandonment of transcendence, but a turn towards it. The rebellion against what Taylor terms the "self-sufficient power of reason" is a rejection of Enlightenment immanence not only rationalism. In fact, Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth all evince what Taylor limits to "religious faith in a strong sense" which is "the belief in transcendent reality, on the one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other."[18] Like Abrams, Taylor understands Romanticism to be immanent since he assumes that nature and the inner self are in opposition to transcendence, yet it is this division between supernatural/natural, feeling/reason, and sensory/spiritual that writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley reject.

Part of the reason why so many readers insist that the Romantics are proposing an immanent ontology is that readers often tacitly synonymize a transcendent ontology

---

[16] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.
[17] Ibid, 10.
[18] Ibid, 510.

or religious orientation with Christianity (as Taylor does).[19] A hidden conceptual move can often be found in the thought of even very intelligent promulgators of the secularization thesis which goes as follows: X rejects Christianity, therefore X rejects religion, therefore X is secular, therefore X rejects the transcendent and has an immanent ontology. Whether readers regard secularization as cultural progress or decline, the common foundation of many progressive secularization narratives is a problematic conceptual dichotomy, namely, a Christianity vs. secularism binary (in its broader form, it is organized religion vs. secularism).[20] In arguing that Romantic religion offers a robustly transcendent ontology, therefore, I will also be arguing that the failure to recognize this very often results from the reliance on a limited conceptual framework (the Christianity vs. secularism binary), which leads readers to misinterpret and overlook genuinely transcendent (i.e. theological) beliefs and dispositions in Romantic writers. In this binary the term "secular" effectively erases alternative forms of religiosity, including Romantic religion, by tossing alternatives together with genuinely irreligious and immanentist philosophies into one single category defined strictly in

---

[19] By "Christianity" I mean, at the very minimum, a personalist monotheist religion with a church that posits the Deity to be a creative, omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good man and which privileges specific texts from antiquity, namely, the old and new testaments, as uniquely divinely inspired revelation from which it attempts to derive metaphysical and moral truths. By "orthodox Christianity" I mean an organized religion which conforms to the above definition while also positing the trinity, which includes the belief that a man named Jesus, who is both 100% God and 100% human, walked the earth and performed miracles, died for sins of humanity, and will eventually return to initiate an apocalyptic transformation of the universe to bring about the kingdom of God.

[20] It should be noted that those who confine legitimate religiosity to organized religion end up, paradoxically, undermining their own organized religion insofar as all forms of organized religion necessarily rely on an initial foundation that is itself unorganized. For example, Islam is founded on the premise that the archangel Gabriel delivered the word of God directly to the prophet Muhammad. Initial private 'revelations' and/or encounters with God are constantly drawn from to establish claims within organized religions and the decision to label those private experiences as truly 'religious' over the private experiences of, say, a Romantic poet is arbitrary.

terms of negation (i.e. that which is not Christianity). In this binary, a non-church-going Neoplatonist, for example, can be wrongly grouped together with a proponent of philosophical naturalism under the common label of 'secular.' This has the effect of invisibilizing the religiosity of the former by blurring it together with the explicitly irreligious. In its crudest form, the Christianity vs. secularism binary stages a false choice between personalist monotheism and atheism, as we shall see in the chapter on Shelley. Yet this dichotomy persists because it is a deeply engrained cognitive habit and because some professionally thrive off the opposition it offers, in particular conservative and/or orthodox Christians and leftist[21] anti-Christians. In other words, this polarity serves a political function insofar as it perpetuates a sort of symbiotic antagonism between the 'secular' left and the 'religious' right, both of whom point to some undesirable moral flaw in the other to compel allegiance to their side. If alternatives are erased by setting up a rhetorical binary, then persons can be forced to choose between conservative Christianity and left-wing 'secularism.'

[21] I avoid the use of the word "liberal" since there are several increasingly popular left-wing political positions that are critical of classical liberalism and which would be perceived by a classical liberal like John Stuart Mill as illiberal.

When merely defined against Christianity, the term "secular" has the effect of implicitly rendering Christianity normative.[22] Even those who are hostile to Christianity end up affirming it so long as they merely define themselves against it and work with its moral and ontological terms. Within the Christianity vs. secularism conceptual framework non-Christian religious ideas and practices are often wrongly interpreted as lack of religion (e.g. lack of Church attendance might be taken as evidence of 'secularism' when, in fact, a poet enters the woods rather than Church to find God).[23] As Alexander Hampton notes in his reading of Romanticism in relation to the Platonic tradition, "What has hindered an understanding of Romantic religion in the past has been the narrowly defined conceptualization of the term itself. All too often this has left Romantic religiosity to be judged against an ossified understanding of religion as institutional and doctrinal."[24] In exploring Romanticism's reworking of religion, we can re-evaluate the secularity/religiosity of our culture today. Hampton writes:

> "the twentieth century has seen the increasing withdrawal of religion into private forms. This is reflected in overall institutional decline and the recent growth of the 'spiritual but not religious' category. However, the legacy of

---

[22] In a point similar to my own, George Orwell brilliantly argues in an appendix on Newspeak in his novel *1984* that the possibilities of thought can be restricted by the restriction of language: "The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever." George Orwell, "The Principles of Newspeak," in *1984* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1949), 441-2.

[23] It should be noted that Christians may also enter the woods to find God. St. Francis's relationship to Nature is often very Wordsworthian and his fraternal addresses to natural objects (terming them brother or sister) could easily be taken for paganism out of context.

[24] Hampton, 5.

> Romanticism extends beyond these outcomes. It opposed the institutional tendency toward ossification, while at the same time its expressed desire for community resisted this privatisation. This suggests that Romanticism may yet have a contribution to make, as a movement which continually seeks to renew religion. Romanticism's story is one of re-enchantment, and transcendence regained; as such, it can tell us much about the shape of religion today."[25]

While Hampton's argument concerns German Romanticism exclusively, we may also say of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley that "the Romantic concept of religion was neither the assertion of an immanent form of secularised religion nor an attempt to return to an orthodox theology of transcendence as it had been constructed in the past."[26] In other words, we ought to recognize as religious beliefs, practices, and attitudes that fall outside of institutional authority and orthodoxy even as the Western Christianity vs. secularism dichotomy tends to categorize theologies not belonging to institutions or obvious dogmas as irreligious.

The purpose of my dissertation is not so much to argue in favor of or against any particular theology but to argue that Romantic writers, including the young Wordsworth and Shelley, do not reject religion but develop their own idiosyncratic religions. To recognize and nuance the genuinely religious nature of much Romantic thought, we must reject the Christianity vs. secularism binary that has served as the foundation for progressive secularization narratives. This will require abandoning and rethinking assumptions about fundamental terms, notably, the very word "God," which takes on new meaning for many of the Romantics.

---

[25] Ibid, 8-9.
[26] Ibid, 7.

Whereas Jager redefines secularism as differentiation and claims that secularism understood as 'unbelief' has not really taken place at all, some Christian intellectuals such as John Milbank and others associated with the Radical Orthodoxy movement (Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock) regard 'secularism' as the dominant ideology in the Western world and leave its meaning vague. The first sentence of the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy* asserts secularism's triumph: "For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity."[27] Nonetheless, they insist that "the logic of secularism is imploding." In short, the Radical Orthodoxy movement (RO) insists that 'secularism' testifies to its own "lack of values and lack of meaning" through its denial of transcendence. This manifests ontologically, normatively, and aesthetically (the anthology addresses all these categories and takes the intraconvertability of the transcendentals as an assumption). RO posits that secularism's collapse into incoherence is best evinced in relativism and immanentism. RO's use of the term "secular" illustrates exactly why it is problematic. In their usage the term "secular" at times refers to relativism, other times to materialism, other times to postmodernism, etc. By undermining one of the many meanings of "secular" they assume they have undermined the secular as an entire category, thus leaving us with Christianity as the only viable alternative in the binary. If we discard the term "secular" we can prevent the sort of equivocation that the term permits through being broad,

[27] "Introduction," *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 1.

vague, and merely negatively defined against Christianity (or institutional religion more broadly). Even if reductive materialism is incoherent, this says absolutely nothing about the viability of Romantic religion, which insists on the reality of the transcendent just as adamantly as the RO movement does without being Christian.

Despite misinterpreting Romanticism as a 'secular' movement, Charles Taylor does adds some nuance to the definition of "secularism," proposing in his book *A Secular Age* that secularity is a condition in which belief in God is considered one option among others. This definition he opposes to the following meanings of secularism: 1) the evacuation of God from public space and the differentiation of various spheres (e.g. economics) from religion 2) loss of belief, that is, fewer people professing religious belief or attending Church. Jager recognizes only these last two, arguing that left-leaning intellectual elites confuse 1 for 2. Given that so many people still hold religious beliefs, Jager concludes that the secularization hypothesis is false since it rests on a category error. Taylor's third definition disambiguates the political from the metaphysical meaning of "secular." As Taylor notes, the U.S. presents an example in which a vast number of people can be considered believers at the same time the structure of

government separates Church and State.[28] Secularism in the third sense, for Taylor, manifests in this sort of structure in the West, since the separation of Church and State reveals that belief in God is optional. This is true insofar as belief is not compulsory in the sense of being institutionally mandated (within narrower milieus beliefs can still be controlled locally, of course, with certain opinions and behaviors being socially approved of or disapproved of). The notion of belief as optional, however, differs from relativism. One can think that belief is an option in the sense that belief cannot or should not be compelled by force, while still thinking that truth is not an option philosophically speaking. In other words, one can insist that there is one single true belief without

[28] I would like to note that I believe the separation of Church and State does not necessarily entail relativism in the sense that the Good is up to each individual (RO sometimes appears to treat classical liberalism as leading to a philosophically incoherent pluralism/relativism). Rather, the separation of Church and State could also emerge from a pessimism about human nature as it does in the thought of James Madison (exemplified by Federalist paper No. 10) in which the separation of Church and State is part of a larger project to prevent tyranny, not a system in which the Good is up to personal preference. In Madison's liberalism no individual or group should hold total power, since it will inevitably abuse such power and detract from the Good even as it claims to represent it. By preventing tyranny from crushing a minority opposition, Madison's liberalism aims to protect those who might uphold the Good against an unjust authority. In that case, belief is not an option because Truth or the Good are themselves up to one's own preference (a kind of voluntarist individualism) but, rather, the Good is best protected by a system of checks and balances on power. To be sure, such a system also can hinder a society from achieving the Good, but Madison's pessimism leads him to see the greater danger in tyranny than in slow progress. In short, the values of classical liberalism are not intrinsically incompatible with religious belief. It's possible for a Christian to believe that a theocracy is more detrimental to the realization of virtue than a classically liberal society.

insisting that others be forced into conformity with it (atheists as well as believers insist on absolute truth).[29]

I do not disagree with Taylor that Western society treats belief as optional in a political sense (though I think that individuals do not treat belief as optional in a philosophical sense), but I would contest his claim that what he terms the "Romantic critique of disengaged reason" or "autonomous reason" has "echoes of a religious critique…Except that the sources of power are not transcendent. They are to be found in Nature, or in our own inner depths…our own deepest feelings or instincts."[30] On the contrary, I not only see the Romantic critique of Enlightenment as affirming the transcendent, but I see the Romantic project exemplified by figures like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, as resisting the dichotomy Taylor poses—that of reason/feeling and natural/supernatural. In fact, I see Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge as Romantic

---

[29] Michael Gillespie reminds us in an essay that "liberalism and religion have not always been at odds." He writes, "The Christian element in liberalism was clear through the seventeenth-century but was over time concealed and forgotten. The goal of early liberal thinkers (especially in Britain) was to establish not a secular state, but a confessional one, and for most of them (Spinoza excepted) this meant a Protestant state. To establish such a state they recognized that it would clearly be necessary to suppress what Hobbes called 'The Kingdom of Darkness,' but by this they meant not religion as such or even Christianity, but scholastic Catholicism with its Aristotelian foundations." For Hobbes, this meant establishing a leviathan to "establish a uniform religious practice (but not belief) and thus eliminate all possibility for religious conflict. While Hobbes' notions were not liberal in their own right, they provided the ontological and anthropological framework within which liberalism developed. This development was decisively pushed forward by John Locke, who accepted Hobbes' notion of individualism, and the need to prevent religious conflict, but argued for the toleration of multiple (although not all) forms of religious practice and belief. His grounds for supporting toleration were not rooted in any skepticism about religion but in the conviction that if human beings are saved by faith alone, the coercion of conscience was senseless." Michael Allen Gillespie, "The Inevitable Entanglement of Religion and Politics," in *Politics, Religion, and Political Theology*, Boston University Studies in Philosophy, Religion, and Public Life, ed. Allen Speight and Michael Zank (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2017), 67.

[30] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 9.

figures critiquing modernity from a theological standpoint not radically different from the RO movement itself.

Instead of straightforwardly rejecting religion in favor of 'secularism,' Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge affirm an abstract notion of "God" that can exist outside the framework of Christianity. In other words, they affirm what D.B. Hart terms God properly defined, that is, God understood as the transcendent Itself, not an anthropomorphic demiurge shaping and modifying 'his' creation from within as if 'he' were another object.[31] In other words, their notion of "God" does not refer to an entity within time and space, but to an idea of atemporal and aspatial absolute Being, Truth, and Goodness Itself. Romantic religion also rejects dualism, asserting that immanent nature participates in the transcendent rather than existing alongside it. While Coleridge accommodates this notion of God as a transcendent real absolute to Christianity, Wordsworth affirms it independently of Christianity through Nature worship, while Shelley affirms it in spite of Christianity. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley may be 'secular' in Taylor's third sense (they desire a society in which belief is not institutionally compelled). However, this does not entail that they are bereft of religion. Each writer differs with regards to exactly how he characterizes the experience of God (Coleridge experiences it as *logos*, Shelley as *Eros*, and Wordsworth as the child's unselfconscious and imaginative joy in Nature), yet all three insist on transcendence through their

[31] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

shared rejection of the following theological concepts that are often believed to give rise to secularism:

FIRST: All three reject what David Bentley Hart would term the "god" of the New Atheists. In other words, they reject "god" when "god" is understood to be a being among beings rather than the ground of Being. They reject a god that is of the same kind as discrete objects, acting within time as a direct cause (a demiurge). Such a god or demiurge, as opposed to God, would not be the essence of existence but another natural entity. This rejection manifests in Coleridge as a rejection of natural religion, which Coleridge takes to be idolizing the faculty of the understanding (e.g. Paley and Priestly). It takes form in Shelley as qualified atheism (i.e. he rejects personalist monotheism but not immaterialism per se). Whereas Coleridge and Shelley rebel against theological frameworks (natural religion and Deism), Wordsworth manifests belief in Being through a positive encounter with Nature. This conception of God as the transcendent itself, leads to Romanticism's rejection of the following theological concepts:

SECOND: All three reject a God understood as voluntarist personality, that is, a god whose omnipotence manifests itself in the power to issue arbitrary law and shape nature according to whim, rather than the Good. In rejecting a notion of God as voluntarist, they also reject a notion of political authority as legitimated by an analogous voluntarism or legalism. Examples include England's blasphemy laws, libel laws, and restrictions on voting, university admissions, and parliamentary membership based on religious profession. In other words, belonging to the Church of England was compulsory. In place of voluntarism, each defines the 'true' God as a transcendent Being

convertible with the Good. Thus, their resistance to authoritarianism does not emerge from a freewheeling libertarianism, but a notion of freedom as the ability to act in accordance with the Good. Obviously, a thinker like Coleridge differs from Shelley in his notion of the Good, yet both, along with Wordsworth, agree that the flourishing of humanity does not consist in everyone acting on whim, but in accordance with a higher, universal, transcendent Good.

THIRD: All three reject materialism, including its precursor, nominalism (the assertion that the only things that have real being are particulars instead of universals), in favor of a participatory ontology in which things have reality in virtue of their partaking in that which is transcendent to them and yet wholly immanent in them. This also entails a rejection of dualistic ontologies that sever the material from the immaterial, the sensuous from the spiritual, and the natural from the supernatural (all philosophical moves that Milbank believes are the foundation for 'secularism'). Rather than replace Christianity/religion with mere subjective self-assertion as in Hans Blumenberg's account of modernity, these Romantics recognize and respond to the theological crisis that Michael Allen Gillespie identifies at the basis of modernity itself, the crisis of nominalism and its voluntarist and nihilistic drift, seeking instead an ontological wholeness that would allow for reason and revelation to be one (revelation, as I will later argue appears as Poetry).[32] This entails a phenomenology and epistemology in which Truth is disclosed non-discursively as in Plotinian mysticism. Obvious figures

[32] See Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

associated with an empirical and materialist position include Hume, Locke, and Hobbes but also Hartley (whose associationism Coleridge repudiated after having formerly endorsed it), as well as the French school of philosophy represented by figures like Condillac (who was influenced by Locke) or d'Holbac (whose *System of Nature* at first attracted Shelley before he ultimately rejected materialism, referring to it as the "juvenile" philosophy in "On Life").[33]

When religious thinkers like Joseph Priestly attempt to combine Christian theism with materialism, they often rely on a concept of God as demiurge and on proofs for the existence of God that Coleridge and Shelley reject, such as inferential arguments from design (see point 1). Furthermore, Coleridge and Shelley's obsession with materialism stems from their shared realization that, as D.B. Hart puts it, the "only fully consistent alternative to belief in God properly understood is some form of materialism or physicalism or, to use the term most widely preferred at present, naturalism."[34] They also recognize that materialism leads to an incoherence, since one can no longer have faith in the human mind, that is, make claims about the truth of materialism or anything at all when mind itself is reduced to material flux. Wordsworth does not engage in direct attacks on materialism as do Coleridge and Shelley, but his anti-materialism manifests more in his assertion of the transcendent Being manifested in Nature, one which humanity participates in and, therefore, becomes unified within.

---

[33] Shelley, "On Life," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), 506.
[34] Hart, 17.

FOURTH: Far from dividing reason from feeling, all expand reason so as to include affective and aesthetic experience. In other words, Romantic religion valorizes non-discursive or experiential 'Truth' over and above analytic rationality such that the kind of knowledge obtained in mystical experience is, for them, higher than the kind of knowledge obtained in, say, empirical observation or logical deduction (Coleridge, for example, differentiates the understanding and its prudential calculations from reason as *logos*). While Coleridge praises intuitive or non-discursive forms of knowledge, intuitive mysticism is the primary means by which God is disclosed in Shelley and Wordsworth. Romantic religion does not celebrate irrationalism. Rather, it treats feeling or affect as a part of reason (i.e. "feeling intellect"). Aesthetic experience, like feeling, does not work against reason or outside Truth, but allows for the revelation of Truth non-discursively. For these Romantic poets, the experience of Beauty in Nature, for example, is an experience of God, since Beauty is the manifestation or irradiation of the transcendent in the immanent. Rather than segregate religion from art, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge resist the 'secularizing' move to treat art as an isolated sphere. Kant, for example, makes disinterestedness an essential criterion to aesthetic experience and Kierkegaard later posits the ethical and religious as over and against the aesthetic.

In short, Romantic religion redefines religion as the intuitive experience of absolute Being, Consciousness, and Bliss through an encounter with Nature and Beauty. God properly understood, according to all three, is a cosmic principle that makes it tenable for the human mind to have meaningful interpretations of reality, that is, for us to be able to take the human mind and heart seriously at all in their reasoning and

feeling as a source of Truth. Furthermore, Nature is the symbolic manifestation of the transcendent in Romantic religion, not something separate from that God. Furthermore, it is because of the immutable and immaterial nature of the transcendent real and of the participation of the human mind and immanent nature in It, that Truth, Goodness, and Beauty can be intimated at all. The highest expression of that Truth in Romantic religion is Poetry. In focusing on the genuine theological thinking of Wordsworth and Shelley, in addition to Coleridge (whose theological commitments are more obvious), I believe one can approach Romanticism, not as a movement that simply rejected religion in favor of 'secularization,' but as a period of time and sensibility in which specific metaphysical notions are rejected, many of which are associated with 'secularism' (nominalism or materialism, nature/supernature dualism, voluntarism, the demiurgic god, etc.) More specific chapter summaries are as follows:

Coleridge

Coleridge's relationship to theology may appear straightforward when contrasted with that of Wordsworth and Shelley. While the early Wordsworth refrains from dogmatic assertions and Shelley provocatively revels in self-declared atheism, Coleridge identifies as a Unitarian and later as an Anglican. Nonetheless, many of the components of Coleridge's Christianity correspond with the Romantic religion of Wordsworth and Shelley. In my first chapter I argue that Coleridge's version of Christianity assimilates a Romantic sensibility rather than working against it. A good point of comparison can be found in the thought of John Milbank, who also attempts to assimilate a Romantic sensibility to Christianity. He distinguishes two trends within

Catholic theology: 1) the Romantic, which understands the late medieval division between natural and supernatural as providing a foundation for 'secularism' and the autonomy of human reason, which is to be countered by a turn within theology towards Wordsworth's "feeling intellect" 2) the Classical, which seeks to maintain the division between natural and supernatural as well as between faith and reason without reiterating the same errors of figures like Ockham and Hobbes.[35]

Coleridge's Christianity corresponds to what Milbank calls Romantic orthodox Christian theology insofar as Coleridge attempts to reunify thought and feeling (or, reason and affect) as well as natural and supernatural. To use his own terminology, Coleridge distinguishes, but does not divide, feeling and intellect. While Shelley and Wordsworth also suture the same divides, they do so through qualified monism and a notion of an impersonal absolute. Coleridge, on the other hand connects this union between feeling and intellect, as well as nature and supernature, explicitly to the Christian *logos*. Coleridge does not cease to valorize the imagination when he develops towards orthodox Anglicanism. Rather, he treats the imagination as the location whereby the *logos* discloses itself to the human mind.

Coleridge frequently insists that the *logos* cannot be separated from affective and sensory life. In the *Statesman's Manual* he writes that the truths and principles contained in scripture are "not so properly said to be confirmed by reason as to be reason itself!"[36]

---

[35] See John Milbank, "The New Divide: Romantic Versus Classical Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (January 2010): 26-38.
[36] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 21.

However, the same "principles…disjoined from…the emotions that inevitably accompany the actual intuition of their truth" are like "arms without hearts, muscles without nerves."[37] Coleridge denies the distinction between reason understood as Enlightenment rationality (this he identifies with the Understanding) in favor of a model of reason as *logos*, but this *logos* is intrinsically bound up with feeling. To know is to feel, not because feeling replaces knowledge but because the intuition of Truth (in a Plotinian sense) "inevitably" results in affective relationships to what one knows. Coleridge goes so far as to claim that not feeling indicates a failure to properly comprehend and manifest the transcendent True and Good. Unlike Kant, Coleridge does not conceive of affectivity as irrational Other within oneself in need of being temporarily silenced for the business of rationality to take place.

In the *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge makes feeling essential to morality and reason by contrasting Christianity with both stoicism and sentimentalism, writing that the "evil achieved by Hobbes and the whole school of materialists" is "inconsiderable" next to the "sentimental philosophy of Sterne, and his numerous imitators."[38] Yet, Christianity is "fundamentally opposite" to Stoicism, since Christianity's "aim…is to moralize the affections" by "bringing the feelings to a conformity with the commands of the conscience. Its especial aim, its characteristic operation, is to moralize the affections. The Feelings, that oppose a right act, must be wrong feelings."[39] Coleridge, thus, situates

---

[37] Ibid.
[38] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. Johnathan Beer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 26.
[39] Ibid, 64.

Christianity as an alternative to two problematic interpretations of affect's relationship to the Good: sentimentalism and stoicism. He proposes Christianity's distinctive moral intentionality as the one most in accordance with the moral architecture of the soul as it is revealed through reflection. Coleridge defines the principles of moral architecture to be prudence, morality, and religion. For Coleridge, prudence signifies the faculty of understanding and sense, morality "the heart," and religion "the spiritual," that is, the will. Though these are arranged in a hierarchy, reason itself (*logos*) incorporates them all and does not simply stand over and against them as an isolated faculty.

To vindicate the emotional dimension of inner experience, Coleridge desynonymizes sensibility and feeling. In keeping with his somewhat Kantian duality between nature and super-nature or spirit, Coleridge treats sensibility as belonging to determinative nature, as outside the will and, therefore, outside morality. Feeling, on the other hand, he characterizes as a state of the will such that it is indivisible from and necessary for an evaluation of moral intentionality. In other words, feeling is not a part of determinative nature strictly, but involves the will as spirit. In other words, feeling constitutes a kind of intentionality that counts as a moral act. Sentimentalism's mistake, according to Coleridge, is to treat sensibility as normatively sufficient, while stoicism disregards affect by not comprehending the role of the will in affect as feeling. In fact, Coleridge goes as far as to assert that feelings which oppose a "right act" must be "wrong feelings," suggesting that a proper affective attunement not only sets one up to commit right actions, but constitutes a moral act in its own right. Thus, Coleridge

believes an apologetics for Christianity cannot and should not arise from discursive reasoning, but phenomenological reflection.

Not only does affect bear an essential relationship to reason, but reason manifests through imagination. In the *Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge notes that imagination is the "reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with truths, of which they are the conductors."[40] The symbol does not merely appear to the mind, but manifests through and in the mind. Coleridge's language is unsurprisingly Platonic. The "self-circling energies" recall the hypostases of Plotinus, though the term "consubstantial" invokes a specifically Christian vocabulary. Imagination is a kind of incarnation of reason (*logos*) in which reason appears within the sensory world, fully immanent and yet fully transcendent. It is incarnation in the sense that it reconciles and mediates transcendence and immanence so that its manifestation in the senses (the immanent world) is nonetheless consubstantial with its transcendent being. It is for that reason that Coleridge contrasts the symbol with allegory. Whereas allegory is "a translation of abstract notions into picture-language," symbol is a "translucence…of the Eternal through and in the Temporal."[41] It "always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative."[42]

---

[40] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 29.
[41] Ibid, 30.
[42] Ibid.

The human imagination for Coleridge, operates analogously with the symbol, in that it manifests or discloses truth without representing it literally or discursively. As he writes in the *Biographia*: "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."[43] Coleridge's capacious notion of the 'symbol' not only unifies nature and supernature, but it also unifies poetry and religion. In the *Statesman's Manual* Coleridge claims that art is continuous with religion, not separate from it, declaring that there is a common essence between religion and art, namely the "union of the Universal and the Individual."[44] Again, Coleridge distinguishes but does not divide. Art religion for Coleridge does not consist in the replacement of religion with an isolated aesthetic sphere as in a strict aestheticism (such as that exemplified by Kierkegaard's aesthete). In fact, Coleridge's Christianity incorporates a Romantic sensibility that allows for symbolic truth to manifest in poetry as well as in nature since the degree to which something is genuine Poetry (in the universal sense) is the degree to which it is symbolic Truth (Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* invokes a similar understanding of poetry's relation to Truth, though Shelley does not use the word "symbol"). Scripture, for Coleridge, is foremost Poetry, not because scripture reduces to poetry as in a secular humanist account, but because Poetry is Truth's means of revealing itself.

Thus, poetry, but also music and the visual arts are not simply redeemed by depicting Christian content in a strict representational sense in Coleridge's aesthetics.

---

[43] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.
[44] Ibid, 62.

Rather, the Eternal (his term) manifests in all forms of genuine art. The Eternal also occurs in Nature as itself a kind of art. Nature is not, as in natural religion, empirical evidence of God's handiwork allowing us to infer a demiurge, but itself a symbol of God as transcendent. Coleridge writes, "True natural philosophy is…the study of…*symbols*" and we can find in Nature, which is the "poetry of all human nature," the "correspondences and symbols of the spiritual world."[45]

Shelley

Though wildly hostile to Christianity, Shelley does not, in fact, reject the idea of divinity or immaterialism. In my second chapter I argue that Shelley's self-identification as an atheist signals his disrespect for and rejection of the notion of "God" understood as demiurgic and voluntarist (exemplified by Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound*). Since he believes that Deism and not just Christianity promotes the notion of God as a demiurge, he calls himself an atheist. Shelley takes metaphysical issue with the notion of God understood as an all-powerful legalistic person standing outside Nature who one day decides to create everything and he also sees such a concept of God as a tool of political abuse since this God is invoked to justify violence and oppression. It is telling that even in *Queen Mab*, an early polemical poem which denounces institutional religion, Shelley appends a footnote to the Fairy's statement "there is no God!" which clarifies that it is only a specific definition of God that Shelley rejects, not the notion of God: "This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a

[45] Ibid, 70.

pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken."[46] In my second chapter on Shelley I attempt to discern what Shelley's idea of God is both from what he says God is not and by what he shows God to be throughout his poetry and prose.

While Shelley has typically been identified with skepticism or idealism, I argue that both these interpretations overlook what I would term his theological apophaticism and mysticism. While Platonic readings of Shelley did affirm his commitment to the transcendent, they have been explicitly rejected by recent materialist scholarship and these early Platonic readings often mistook Shelleyan transcendence as a rejection of the sensuous world or misinterpreted his Platonic metaphysics as covert Christianity. Thus, in drawing out Shelley's theology, I do not merely repeat earlier Platonic readings, but challenge the dualistic assumptions often latent to these arguments and add greater metaphysical nuance when comparing Shelley's similarity to the (Neo-)Platonic tradition than these scholars have, in part by comparing him with one specific thinker in this tradition, namely, Pseudo-Dionysius. I also make the novel argument that Shelley's view of God resembles that of the Indian Vedantic tradition even more than that of (Neo-)Platonism.

Shelley's One, like Brahman is a positive, though ineffable, Absolute beyond multiplicity, transcendent to subject and object distinction, and entirely removed from space-time, which may be eternal in both directions, without jeopardizing the One as ultimate ground of existence as such. Though becoming is its manifestation, Vedanta

---

[46] Percy Shelley, "Queen Mab," line 13, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

considers the One to be ontologically prior to becoming—much like the "Power" that is there in *Mont Blanc*. It is the transcendent rendered immanently present as Universe (*maya*) in an endless cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction symbolized by the word "OM." Shelley's concept of the "one mind" is a kind of absolute consciousness existing above individual ego akin to the Vedic notion of the atman-Brahman equivalence (i.e. the real self is God, not the 'I'). In other words, Shelley's God, like Brahman, eliminates the division between subject (understood as self-conscious ego) and object (understood as external matter knowable through sense-impression) in the single concept of the "the one mind," thus unifying thoughts and things in a transcendent real absolute that collapses the perceived difference between realism and idealism. The mystical experience of God, is, therefore, the experience of non-duality.

In addition to positive experience, Shelley's 'faith' in transcendent Being also emerges out of a terrifying recognition that the alternative to transcendence is materialistic nihilism. In other words, his belief is always accompanied by the horror of unbelief. Thus, the final lines in *Mont Blanc* assert the presence of "Power" partly through asserting that the opposite is too terrifying an option to allow, namely the idea that the human mind is not oriented towards transcendent meaning at all, but encounters only empty vacancy. Shelley rejects genuine philosophical atheism largely through conceiving of its only alternative to be morally and epistemologically unacceptable. What Shelley demonstrates true skepticism towards is discursive reasoning. Poetry in the universal sense indicated in the *Defense of Poetry* is an alternative epistemology, not merely an art form, akin to revelation; it is not irrational. In other

words, for Shelley, Poetry is Truth and Truth is Poetry. Poetry in the universal sense signifies for Shelley what "symbol" means for Coleridge. Both "Poetry" and "symbol" indicate the non-propositional manifestation of Truth (i.e. revelation). Poetry, for Shelley, is the experience of God.

In *The Refutation of Deism* Shelley aims to demonstrate the inadequacy of discursive reasoning to assert truths about God at the same time he attacks the demiurgic god. The dialogue does not lead the reader to conclude that one ought to believe in philosophical atheism. In fact, it leaves the reader unable to commit to God (as defined in the text) and unable to commit to philosophical atheism. In the dialogue God has been conceived by the Christian as voluntarist demiurge unpalatable to both conscience and reason, while the Deist reveals the inadequacy of Enlightenment rationalism so that he leaves open revelation as something opposed to reason, yet necessary for belief and, indeed, any metaphysical and normative system whatsoever. Nonetheless, the third available position (implied only, never represented by a speaker) is not a joyous, liberating atheism, but a terrifying philosophical atheism envisioned as nihilism.

The dialogue does not end with both parties gladly joining together to experience new-found meaning in a utopia based on immanentist humanist principles of natural rights, having left superstition behind. Rather, the dialogue ends with the Deist promising to believe in the wildest creed in order to salvage moral and metaphysical beliefs if he fails to apply rationality so as to adequately respond to the devastating deconstruction performed on his arguments by the Christian. If there is any position one

can say the text brings us toward, it is an either/or between 1) embracing what David Bentley Hart would term the "nonsensical sense" of rejecting both reason and God in favor of a genuine vision of total absurdity/philosophical atheism in which no metaphysical or normative claims can be made at all or 2) an assent to magic. Both options are meant to be unappealing. Given that Shelley asserts that the mind cannot arbitrarily believe in something (but must find the belief credible), the dichotomy at the end of the *Refutation of Deism* takes on an even more sinister dimension, since the Deist will not be able to assent to that which he finds to be irrational even if he wants to. Both Deist and Christian fail to realize that the God they fear losing has never actually been under discussion. Thus, we have an implied fourth way, though one that Shelley reveals, not in this dialogue, but in his poetry—the apophatic path wherein transcendent Being is intimated, not proved, through aesthetic experience as that which can reconcile reason and revelation, natural and supernatural.

In the *Refutation of Deism* Shelley produces the effect he believes philosophy should have, as stated in his short essay "On Life." The dialogue leaves a vacancy. However, the term "vacancy" is a vexed one for Shelley, since it always hovers between two meanings: vacancy understood as emptiness or sheer negation of meaning and vacancy understood as incomprehensible fullness given as blankness. When philosophy negates something worth negating then that emptiness becomes the possibility for fulfillment; falsehood is negated to make room for truth. When nothing can come to fill the vacancy, however, one is left with nihilism. While Shelley argues that philosophy should leave vacancies in the sense of annihilating falsehoods, it should not leave us

with empty vacancy as the only option. Yet, it requires more than strict argumentative discourse to make vacancy signify. To make vacancy signify, one requires Poetry as that which can unite mind with world/God.

While the movement of philosophy as discussed in "On Life" concerns the negation of falsehood, Poetry takes an apophatic approach to Truth, discerning the reality of that which exceeds analytic comprehension. In other words, Shelley's 'good' kind of vacancy, better termed blankness, appears as symbolic encounter. To approach God apophatically does not mean that "God" can encompass any set of characteristics that are simply unknown to us. Rather, for Shelley, the transcendent defeats comprehension through excess. Thus, God is more beautiful than any individually beautiful thing, for God is infinite Beauty itself (in this respect Shelley is very Pseudo-Dionysian). For Shelley, the kind of blankness experienced in the encounter with the incomprehensible is not the same kind of vacancy that occurs from the annihilation of reality, truth, or a value. Philosophy, that is, propositional discourse, can and should leave a vacancy, as he writes in "On Life" when clearing away untruth, but to discover truth, one must move beyond the analytic reasoning of philosophy.

In *Mont Blanc* Shelley demonstrates exactly the sort of apophatic mysticism that is the only means to glimpse the absolute. Far from being a poem demonstrating atheism or 'secularism,' *Mont Blanc* articulates an experience of God through a poetic-mystical intuition given in aesthetic experience, though the God revealed to Shelley is clearly not the God of orthodox Christianity. In *Mont Blanc* the transcendent resembles the Vedic concept of Brahman more than it does the personal Christian God in that God is

depicted as removed, simple, and transcendent Power. Furthermore, the universe is identical with this impersonal Power in the sense that Power manifests as universe. Shelley will provide an excellent metaphor for this in *Adonais* when he metaphorizes the One as white radiance appearing in creation as the multiplicity of colors (incidentally, the *Upanishads* employ the same exact metaphor). Not only does Power lack agency, but it is not responsible for an act of creation. Rather, as atemporal and spatial ground of existence, It has reality whether the universe extends infinitely forwards or backwards in time (as Shelley appears to believe it does).

While remaining equally religious, *Adonais* reveals different aspects of Shelley's God than does *Mont Blanc*. It is also Shelley's most explicit commitment to a notion of the One and, for that reason, features in debates over Shelley's Platonism. While *Mont Blanc* does characterize the absolute as the Good and True, since the mountain has the power to undo "codes of fraud and woe" for those with the right vision (Poets), it primarily portrays God as apophatic, serenely transcendent One that may at any moment upheave matter in an endless cycle of destruction and rebirth. While still acknowledging the transcendent's might, the vision of God in *Adonais* downplays this notion of Power as overwhelming force to emphasize the One's softer aspects. This is no indication that Shelley changed his definition of God. Rather, *Adonais* reveals that he expands his concept of the absolute to incorporate Love and Beauty into Power.

Despite their different atmospheres, the two poems remain consistent in their admixture of Neoplatonic and Vedic sensibilities. Like *Mont Blanc*, *Adonais* posits a version of qualified monism which asserts that the Universe is the manifestation of the

One and that the real self (*atman*) is identical with God ("the one mind"), not the individual ego. Shelley treats Power as convertible with Love, understood as *Eros*, since Love (*Eros*) is, for Shelley, a grounding energy of animated existence and an expression of the One's internal dynamism. As the irradiation of the Good/the One, Beauty or the Beloved acts as goal and motivation of *Eros*, the unitive drive, and, therefore, is inseparable from Love and Power. In other words, the pull of Beauty on the soul is the longing for God, that is, the drive and motivation of all living and becoming. Finally, the two poems share the same epistemology. As in *Mont Blanc*, the knowledge of God in *Adonais* derives from a poetic-mystical intuition, accessible only through the imagination, not through discursive reason or empirical induction.

After examining Shelley's Pseudo-Dionysian metaphysics in *Adonais*, I illustrate how that metaphysics is essential to Shelley's political beliefs using the example of Shelley's feminism. In doing so I argue against a scholarly commonplace that the political Shelley is incompatible with the theological/Platonic Shelley, a commonplace which often rests on dualistic metaphysical assumptions. Far from simply resisting asceticism in favor of libertinism, Shelley draws on his Neoplatonic metaphysics of qualified monism to sacralize erotic love in a manner that allows for women's liberation from patriarchy and sexist double standards in sexual morality. Shelley's free love philosophy resists legalistic moral frameworks which evaluate the moral and spiritual worth of sexual relationships in terms of contracts, such as the institutional codification of marriage by the State and Church (which effectively turned women into male

property and was controlled by the Anglican Church) or what Shelley terms "the despotism of positive institution" over "passion."[47]

Of course, it is possible to agree with Shelley's sexual morality without agreeing with him that marriage ought to be abolished. One could insist that institutions are a necessary evil and that certain contracts (such as marital contracts) are valuable insofar as they can compel the fulfillment of responsibilities or offer rights to both parties without making the legal status of a relationship vis a vis an institution the criterion for evaluating the morality (i.e. 'goodness') of a romantic relationship. Before the (relative) normalization of homosexuality in the first world, there were, surely, plenty of loving and committed relationships that were not—and, indeed, could not be—legitimated by institutions. Likewise, there have been many institutionally codified relationships that have never been loving or committed, such as the sorts of marriages Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft criticized.

Shelley's key move in his rethinking of sexuality morality is to mobilize an idea of divine *Eros* to legitimate relationships solely on the basis of love, while condemning purely legalistic means of defining relationships (i.e. institutional, economic or otherwise). His free love philosophy can be found in a variety of texts from *Queen Mab* (1813) to *Laon and Cythna* (1817) and *Rosalind and Helen* (1819) but this philosophy is best exemplified by his mature work *Epipsychidion* (1821) and, for that reason, I principally focus on that text. By arguing in *Epipsychidion* that all things are ultimately identical in

---

[47] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 2:251.

the One, Shelley replaces patriarchal hierarchy with a notion of identity and equality between the sexes. By employing sexual union as a metaphor for the return to the One and by insisting that the sensual participates in, rather than conflicts with, the spiritual, Shelley resists dualistic and puritanical theologies that condemn the carnal by opposing it to the spiritual.

Finally, I argue that political action more broadly is theologically inflected for Shelley insofar as utopia, understood to be an ideal, though not necessarily realizable, political society, relies on undermining the concept of the voluntarist God in favor of a notion of God as the transcendent Good Itself. Utopia is necessary as an ideal in the sense that the Platonic form is understood as a limit point towards which finite things may approximate, though finite things always fail to instantiate a form wholly. The ideal, for Shelley, is necessary to motivate political action but does not entail that reality will necessarily be perfected.[48] While having high ideals, Shelley's viewpoints about how to arrange political society tend towards a more practical-minded liberalism. Furthermore, his utopic thinking does not lead to the elimination of authority per se (or a transcendent Good) in favor of anarchy. Rather, the justification of political authority for Shelley is premised on authority acting so as to realize the Good. Thus, Shelley refers to tyrants as anarchs—those responsible for instigating irrational disorder. Rather than reject normativity as such, Shelley rejects false appeals to normativity (i.e. laws that do

[48] In the chapter I focus on *A Philosophical View of Reform* as the text in which Shelley advocates for gradualist progress and classical liberalism, suggesting that such progress occurs through people acting as though an ideal end may be realized, even though, he admits, this end may be impossible to achieve. Certainly, he does not say utopia is inevitable. This should caution against a reading of *Prometheus Unbound* as in any way prescriptive or prophetic with regards to political reality for Shelley.

not align with the Good.) What matters to Shelley is not demolishing the notion of good and evil, but promoting true beliefs about what is good and what is evil, which involves identifying and dismantling ideological misrepresentations of good and evil whether they occur in religion, culture, or politics. In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley notes that Prometheus represents an improvement on Milton's Satan since he suffers for the Good, whereas Satan simply asserts his will (a move that merely replicates voluntarism). The destruction of Jupiter is not the liberation of the voluntarist will, but the destruction of the voluntarist God for the sake of the Good.

Wordsworth

My third chapter on Wordsworth argues that Wordsworth, like Shelley, conceives of God as an impersonal, transcendent real absolute immanently present in nature. However, unlike Shelley, Wordsworth does not conceive of the divine essence and its expression in the universe as *Eros*. For both Shelley and Wordsworth, the moment of mystical revelation, that is, the encounter with God, constitutes a kind of ego-death or state of non-dualism. However, Wordsworth's paradigm for union with the transcendent is not romantic love, but the child's unselfconscious imaginative absorption in Nature. For Wordsworth, the divine reveals itself best in the mind of a child who does not even consciously realize that (s)he is experiencing the divine. Alienation from the divine, in Wordsworth's account, occurs when the mature self-consciousness of adulthood and its instrumental/practical relationship to the world eclipses the original absorptive consciousness of imaginative childhood.

Far from absenting God from nature, Wordsworth incorporates the natural it into the supernatural. When Wordsworth addresses Nature, he does not simply refer to material nature but to what is always already a spiritualized nature. In other words, "Nature" functions as a term for the whole of reality, both material and immaterial, experienced as a unity. If we were to borrow Shelley's terminology, we might say that for Wordsworth Nature is the One, including both the invisible transcendent/God and the visible, immanent realm that participates in It. Nature is not a material realm opposed to the transcendent for Wordsworth. When scholars like M.H. Abrams assert that "God has become a nonparticipant"[49] in Wordsworth's *Prelude* it is only because they assume that Wordsworth's Nature is purely immanent and supervened by an agential God entirely distinct from nature. Much like Shelley, Wordsworth's "God" does not signify a personality but a sort of Power or energy convertible with Being. As such, it is devoid of agency at the same time it grounds, encompasses, but also infinitely exceeds the universe that symbolizes It. The expression or unfolding of this Power precisely is the realm of becoming and visible nature. "Power" or "Being" is intuited through a mystical state of consciousness referred to as imagination. Far from proving itself autonomous to Nature, the imagination is the special kind of consciousness that unites Wordsworth to Nature/the transcendent. Therefore, in recalling the phenomenology of his imaginative consciousness in childhood and its transformation in adulthood, Wordsworth's *Prelude* examines his relationship to God/Nature.

[49] Abrams, 95.

In the *Prelude* Wordsworth portrays childhood imaginative consciousness as eliding the subject-object dilemma in an existential oneness with God akin to what one Zen Buddhist critic (R.H. Blyth) describes as the Zen state. The child not only has being-in-the-world but a kind of being-with-the-world (that is, being with God through Nature). At the same time, the child doesn't experience a simple identification with world, that is, (s)he doesn't think that (s)he is God. (S)he exists in a kind of indifference to difference or unawareness (Zen), since the desire for identification with God emerges only after the division of consciousness in the alienated adult mind. The child also has wonder—(s)he is constantly excited by the question of existence, the that-ness as well as the this-ness of everything around him. (S)he has hyper-awareness without self-conscious alienation. (S)he resides entirely in a temporality of the present that does not anticipate loss or look backward nostalgically or regretfully. His/her self is not yet divided, just as (s)he is not yet divided from God. It's no surprise that the moments in the *Prelude* when Wordsworth seems to divide God almost dualistically from Nature occur only in his adulthood and he often corrects them by returning to a notion of the "one mind" or "one life." Nonetheless, Nature is not simply loved as abstract Nature in *The Prelude*, but as this natural thing (an ash tree or a stone). The particulars of Wordsworth's life experience are what enable access to the universal. His love for beings as entities in possession of their own essential reality, enables the poet's connection to Being itself. The spots of time glow with visual vividness precisely because they are imbued with the invisible. Wordsworth loves Being only because he has loved being.

The theme of divinity's closeness in childhood is perhaps even more explicit in the "Intimations Ode" than even the *Prelude*. Like the *Prelude*, the theological work of this Ode is in its phenomenological work. The "Intimations Ode" does not just tell us how the speaker feels, but examines the speaker's feeling as vision of reality. Against a humanist reading which would treat the ode as personal experience without metaphysical baggage, I assert that this ode addresses the actual metaphysical state of the speaker's soul in relation to the world and to the transcendent Being behind it, namely God, even if that God is a sort of original One or simple unity of Being. What I would regard as the Neoplatonic and Zen tendency of Wordsworth's thought is the shift to an understanding of knowledge as 'experiential,' not in the sense of empiricism, but in the sense that a phenomenological examination of self and world allows one to testify to non-discursive Truth. Revelation occurs through poetry as feeling intellect. The pre-existence of the soul in the ode does not concern a moment in time in which the speaker was identical to the One and forgot upon being born but describes a metaphysical state prior to time which is analogized by the child's unawareness of time's passage. The intimations of immortality that the speaker experiences gesture symbolically to a prior unselfconscious unity with the divine and forward to a de-alienation of adult consciousness that will once again unite the mind to God/Nature.

In the *Intimations Ode* there is a tragic irony to Wordsworth's child since (s)he is the better philosopher than the adult and yet strives to become an adult precisely because her/his innocence cannot allow him to understand what adulthood is. The child envisions maturity as a kind of expansion of freedom or intensification of her/his own

state. The child's innocence paradoxically grants her/him unity with God through Nature, while preventing the child from mentally resisting the inevitability of alienation. Like the girl in "We are Seven" childhood in the Ode lacks a fear of death because death is not real for the child. In both the "Intimations Ode" and "We are Seven" children are in possession of special knowledge at the same time they are ignorant. Their special knowledge, in fact, manifests as ignorance. The girl in "We are Seven" appears as a kind of holy fool. She knows more than the speaker insofar as she understands that time is unified in God. God's transcendence is one in which there is no division, though the girl does not know this propositionally. Furthermore, her intuitive understanding of this demonstrates that she is ignorant of what the adult speaker knows: that death divides. However, the adult speaker cannot look beyond the division to unification. By the end of "We are Seven" there is no reconciliation between the adult perspective and the child's. It simply ends in incommensurability.

Another manifestation of self-division in the "Intimations Ode," arises in the speaker's aesthetic experience. Even as he announces the loss of what he felt in childhood, he continues to describe Nature as beautiful, illustrating that one tragic feature of alienated self-consciousness is precisely its ability to recognize its own divided state without being able to change it. The world does not become devoid of God in adulthood. Wordsworth still has his "intimations" of divinity, but these intimations are in response to a beauty that is at a remove and diminished. He can only experience the fullness of divine joy vicariously through memory. In a sense it would almost be a relief to the speaker if he could simply dismiss the vision of childhood as an illusion, now

seeing clearly in adulthood that Nature has no quality of divinity. Instead, he is forced into reconciling the alienation of his adulthood with the visionary experience of childhood that lingers with him in memory.

Nonetheless, there is one consolation of adult consciousness made possible by the adult's unique capacity to recognize tragedy and suffering, namely the ethical state. Wordsworth's mystical moments are almost always moments when he is alone with Nature. They do not take place within the human social sphere. What enables him to hear the "still sad music of humanity" in *Tintern Abbey* is precisely his fall out of unity with Nature. Whereas *The Intimations Ode* and *The Prelude* romanticize unity with the divine in childhood, address the crisis of losing this union, and hope for its return, *Tintern Abbey* thematizes the unexpected "gift" that follows from self-aware and suffering adulthood. While still celebrating monistic mysticism, Wordsworth emphasizes that being with others ethically requires understanding tragedy and loss. The child, though with God through imagination, cannot be with others. In other words, for Wordsworth, ethical space requires empathy, which requires knowledge of suffering and evil. That capacity is brought on only by a 'fall' into maturation. In the same way the girl in "We are Seven" fails to comprehend death, she fails to comprehend the tragedy of human experience due to her ignorance of it. She will not be able to relate to an adult who weeps at the grave she plays on. The alienation from the transcendent that inevitably emerges in maturity brings a different kind of 'philosophic mind' from what children possess, namely the ethical mind. Though Wordsworth identifies love and goodness with the divine, his mystical experiences are always a retreat from the social

and political sphere. For Shelley, the encounter with the absolute brings on a strong sense of moral principle and desire to shape the world in accordance with the Good, but for Wordsworth the ethical space expands when the mystical space recedes (and vice versa).

1. Coleridge's Romantic Christianity

In Taylor's formulation of Romanticism as a period in which "the old order based on the ontic *logos* was no longer acceptable" the later Coleridge can only be understood as reactionary, or at least as repudiating his former beliefs.[50] Yet, Coleridge is not so much an example of a former Romantic turned conservative later in life, but someone who finds his way into Anglicanism by way of his Romanticism. Even for the older Anglican Coleridge, as I hope to show in this chapter, the inner realm of self, including feeling, is integral to an insight into the ontic *logos* itself, not a retreat from it. While the early Wordsworth and Shelley incline towards a monistic pagan mysticism, Coleridge brings Romanticism's unification of reason and feeling, as well as its unification of natural and supernatural, into Christianity. As such, Coleridge's theology corresponds closely to what the contemporary Christian intellectual John Milbank terms Romantic orthodoxy.[51] For Coleridge, feeling belongs to the will and is necessary to the manifestation of the *logos*. Feeling, as well as aesthetic experience, are the non-discursive means of transcending fallen intellect, not an immanent replacement for the transcendent. Furthermore, in Coleridge's theological anthropology, feeling does not retreat into the irrational but belongs to higher Reason which, for Coleridge, is primarily intuitive (as opposed to the Understanding which is instrumental and analytic). As he writes in his "Essay on Faith": "Reason and its Objects are not things of Reflection, Association, Discursion," that is, "Discourse in the old use of the word as opposed to

---

[50] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 380.
[51] See John Milbank, "The New Divide: Romantic Versus Classical Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (January 2010): 26-38.

Intuition. 'Discursive or intuitive'—Milton, Par. Lost."[52] Furthermore, Reason is transcendent but includes the immanent: "Reason does not indeed necessarily exclude the Finite…because it includes them *eminenter*."[53] In Coleridge's symbolic theology, aesthetic experience and feeling (forms of non-discursive knowledge) reveal the ontological priority of transcendent reality as ontologically dependent on the sensuous realm for its manifestation. In other words, God (the transcendent) necessarily has immanent presence and one of the ways in which the transcendent is rendered immanently present is through affect and the aesthetic. In Coleridge's version of Romantic Christianity, the domain of non-discursive/intuitive insight (feeling, aesthetic experience) does not signal a turn towards immanence but reveals the necessary incarnation of the transcendent.

The fact that Coleridge's Christianity develops out of what was already within Romanticism itself demonstrates that a Romantic sensibility is not mutually exclusive with Christianity. By "Romantic sensibility" I mean an understanding of aesthetics and the sensory as symbolically manifesting an essentially non-propositional Truth and participating in transcendent Being and the Good (God); a notion of intuition and feeling (both exemplified within aesthetics) as revelatory of this non-propositional Truth rather than as irrational or opposed to reason; an understanding of Nature as symbolic manifestation of God; an understanding of world as united with mind (against the Cartesian division of mind and world and Lockean and Humean accounts of mind as

---

[52] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shorter Works & Fragments*, ed. H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 839.
[53] *Ibid*, 839.

built upon sense impression); and an understanding of faith and belief as a way of life rather than as mere assent or affirmation of a creed.

It should be emphasized that each one of these aspects of what I term a 'Romantic' sensibility refers to or implies the other. To treat mind and world as united allows both Nature and interiority to symbolically reveal the same transcendent Truth. To treat feeling and intuition as genuine knowledge, rather than something to be cast aside so that a discursive or instrumental reason can function, permits the aesthetic a place in the revelation of Truth. To understand Truth as something that is participated in and lived by a thinking, feeling, acting person in their intentional relations rather than something possessed by the discursive reason (like a fact or, in the terms of analytic philosophy, truth statement) naturally leads to a conceptualization of faith or belief as non-reducible to propositions and their affirmation.

Many of these philosophical positions I have identified as 'Romantic' align with a basically Platonic ontology insofar as they imply that intelligible Truth, Being, and the Good (all signified as unity in the term 'God') are manifested necessarily through lower, material reality, but especially in aesthetic experience. Thus, it is not surprising that the Romantic Coleridge, who wholeheartedly endorses the Romantic sensibility outlined above, would be drawn to the Neo-Platonists (in particular the thought of Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus) and sympathize with Platonized Christianity (including the thought of the Cambridge Platonists). If we understand many Romantic writers to be

positing a participatory ontology[54] we can understand how they allow the inward or interior (e.g. feeling, aesthetic sensibility, the imagination) to function as a means of transcendence, rather than a turn towards immanence. In Neo-Platonism, inwardness is compatible with outward vision and experience since mind and world are not taken to be radically separate to begin with. The turn inward is not a skeptical move, that is, a rejection of the outer as an illusion, but an attempt to grasp an even higher (transcendent) immaterial reality that is implied in the outward world which participates in it, not to mention that the movement towards knowledge of higher reality is precisely a movement of desire that is affectively charged.

1.1 Coleridge's Symbol as a Model for the Transcendent's Immanent Presence

As Nicholas Halmi makes clear in *Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, the concept of the symbol was not peculiar to Coleridge, but integral to Romanticism's ontology. Halmi argues that the conceptualization of the symbol was an attempt to develop an ontology that could avoid the perils of dualism and unqualified monism. Halmi observes that the Romantics responded to "the loss of certainty in a transcendental signified standing outside and ensuring the integrity of the order of signs" evident especially in the Enlightenment's use of allegory, such that "the Romantics had to redefine those conditions, not epistemologically but—more fundamentally—

[54] By "participatory ontology" I mean that the sensory world and mind have their reality in virtue of participating in a higher transcendent reality, which also allows, in virtue of an ontological unity, mind and world to be fitted to one another. The forms in the world can be, for example, recognized by the mind since the transcendent absolute One unites both mind and world. Thus, in a participatory Neoplatonic framework, epistemology follows ontology.

ontologically."[55] Halmi astutely observes that the Romantics wished to "extend the symbol's domain from aesthetics to the whole of reality."[56] Thus, "Romanticism's symbolist theory…was a consequence of its desire precisely to overcome this dualism" of Enlightenment allegory or of any Gnostic account of reality.[57] Tom McFarland notes the tension Halmi does in the case of Coleridge, writing that "Coleridge's mind was ruled, from early to late, by the tragic tension of the 'I am' and the 'it is.'"[58] McFarland notes that Descartes's dualism and Kant's transcendental idealism cut the "I" off from exterior reality, while Spinoza's monism and necessitarianism destroyed free will and consequently morality. He insists that idealists like Fichte and Berkeley rendered the 'I' solipsistic even if they granted it agency. "Coleridge's most radical objection to pantheism, [was] its subversion of morality" as it also was for Friedrich Jacboi.[59] Yet, Coleridge "would not abandon the 'it is'—like Berkeley—to fashion a verbal victory for the 'I am.'"[60] In McFarland's account Coleridge finds resolution only in the Trinity, for

[55] Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.
[56] Halmi, 18.
[57] Ibid, 17.
[58] Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 195.
[59] McFarland, 198.
[60] Ibid, 181.

which Plato[61] paved the way.[62] While it's true that Coleridge recognized a need to reconcile the transcendent with the immanent, the solution to the dichotomy between self and world was present within Coleridge's Neoplatonic concept of the symbol prior to his Trinitarianism.

Coleridge's idea of the symbol reflected an ontology in which non-discursive insight can be held in highest esteem for its ability to go beyond the limitations of intellect and unite the self with the transcendent real absolute. Douglas Hedley, aligning Coleridge with Plotinus rather than Plato, rightly observes: "Symbols are expressions of ideas which cannot be expressed in discursive terms."[63] Thus, "Coleridge reveals his adherence to the tradition of philosophizing from Plotinus to Schelling which envisages artistic and imaginative expression as a key to reality" and "the concept of imagination in Coleridge lies rooted in Neoplatonism."[64] As Coleridge declares in the *Biographia Literaria*: "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in

---

[61] My claim that Coleridge is predominantly Neoplatonic stands against McFarland's Platonic reading. McFarland's inability to read Coleridge's Plotinism stems from his reading of Plotinus against Plato as a representative of immanentist pantheism: "Plotinus, Porphyry, Jamblichus, and Proclus had, in the ostensible process of developing the position of Plato, actually achieved an elegantly co-ordinated anti-Platonist pantheism," 91. McFarland earlier states that "Pantheism, as the hypothetically complete form of 'it is' thinking, wages mortal war with the sense of 'I am,'" 88. On the contrary, I read Plotinus as more successfully reconciling exterior and interior than Plato. While Plato rejects the poets in *Republic* Plotinus's ontology allows art to sensuously manifest Beauty as symbol, rather than fail in mere imitation, thus linking poetry with philosophy and 'I am' with 'It is.' Nonetheless, there is precedent in Plato. Plato's *Ion* as well as *Phaedrus* do, unlike the *Republic*, offer a language of poetic production and divine madness that can be adapted to a notion of poetic intuition that aligns with reason.
[62] Ibid, 207.
[63] Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy, and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128.
[64] Ibid.

the infinite I AM."[65] The primary imagination, for Coleridge, effectively functions as the faculty of Platonic vision, not a mechanical capacity for invention. As Hedley observes:

> "Plotinus was eager to emphasize the symbolic presence of the intelligible in sensible reality, and insisted against Plato—who had so notoriously banished the artists from the city state—that true art is a reflection of the real presence of the divine reality; the artist has privileged access to the ideas, and creates a mirror in which the divine is reflected."[66]

The imagination, site of the divine I AM and non-discursive manifestation of Truth, allows for the immanent world of sense to be infused with the higher reality of reason.[67] As Coleridge writes in the *Statesman's Manual*, imagination is the "reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with truths, of which they are the conductors."[68] The "self-circling energies" recalls Plotinus's account of lower reality (including Intellect, Soul, and the

---

[65] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.
[66] Hedley, 129.
[67] For a reading of chapter XIII of the *Biographia* as more Plotinian than Schellingean see Douglas Moffat, "Coleridge's Ten Theses: The Plotinian Alternative," *The Wordsworth Circle,* vol. 13, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 27-31.
[68] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 29.

Sensory) as a circle around the One as its center,[69] while the term "consubstantial" suggests sacramentality.[70]

In Coleridge's account, reason does not keep the sensory in check from above, but is within the sensory. Reason infuses Images of Sense. Hedley is right to attribute this intuitionist account of transcendence as primarily Plotinian, experiential, and mystical: "Plotinus is nevertheless a model of philosophical mysticism for Coleridge, whose philosophical mysticism is idealist and yet deeply suspicious of abstract conceptuality; a system of thought that is contemplative and yet very much a philosophy of life and experience."[71] I would, however, modify one of Hedley's assertions: Neoplatonism does not constitute idealism, since it posits the transcendent absolute as real. As Seamus Perry notes, Coleridge was scornful of "Both idealism and materialism…later in life: 'Materialism on the one hand, and Idealism, rightlier named Subjective Idolism on the other' (Aids 399)."[72] Participation by the mind in Truth is not the product of the subject, but a unity between mind and real forms. Most likely, Hedley

---

[69] Plotinus describes the soul's approach to the One, which is simultaneously self-knowledge, as a circular movement: "If then a soul knows itself for the rest of the time, and knows that its movement is not in a straight line, except when there is a kind of break in it, but its natural movement is, as it were, in a circle around something, something not outside but a centre, and the centre is that from which the circle derives…" Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.9.8. Likewise, Plotinus describes God as "outside" and "within" with all things "touching him in a kind of circle and depending on him." Furthermore, "Intellect-Being, coming to be from that Good and as if poured out and spread out" like a circle "would be agreed to have its power from the centre and to have in a way the centre's form, in that the radii in the circle coming together to one centre make their terminal point at the centre like that to which they are carried and from which they, so to speak, grow out," Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.8.18.

[70] J. Robert Barth reads the Coleridgean symbol as a sacrament. He argues that the "true symbol for Coleridge might said to be 'sacramental'" since both symbol and sacrament serve as "sensible sign," "efficacious sign," "union of a subject and an object" and "one of the ways in which God shares divine power with the human family." J. Robert Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 39-40.

[71] Hedley, 11.

[72] Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111.

insists on reading Coleridge's Plotinism as idealist because he wants to distinguish it from empiricism (itself associated with deistic and unitarian tendencies). Yet, Neoplatonism had appeal for the Romantics precisely insofar as it was a form of realism.

Nonetheless, higher reality may be felt inwardly, even if it is not generated by the subject, since it is primarily intuition and feeling that reveal non-discursively the transcendent in the immanent. Coleridge emphasizes the real presence of the transcendent in the symbol by contrasting symbol with allegory: Allegory is "a translation of abstract notions into picture-language" while the symbol is a "translucence…of the Eternal through and in the Temporal."[73] The symbol "always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative."[74] Likewise: "…by a symbol I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents."[75] Importantly, Coleridge does not limit the symbol to works of art. Poetry, religion, and Nature, though distinguishable from one another, are alike symbols, since they all sensuously manifest the transcendent real absolute.

In this sense, Coleridge's notion of the symbol bears similarity to Pseudo-Dionysius's notion that "The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good."[76] All disclosure of the transcendent is in different ways an aesthetic experience. Thus,

---

[73] Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 30.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, 79.
[76] Pseudo-Dionysius, "Divine Names" in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 77.

Coleridge writes in the *Statesman's Manual*, "Hence, Religion has been the parent and fosterer of the Fine Arts, as of Poetry, Music, Painting, &c. the common essence of which consists in a similar union of the Universal and the Individual. In this union, moreover, is contained the true sense of the IDEAL."[77] Likewise, in *A Lay Sermon*: "Religion is the Poetry and Philosophy of all mankind."[78] Coleridge does not separate religion from art, but instead understands the symbol to itself be the transcendent sensuously manifest. In Neoplatonic fashion, Coleridge conceives of Beauty as irradiation of the inexhaustible absolute and does not set the aestheticized sensory world against the Good. David Jaspers puts it nicely, though he limits this sensibility to Coleridge and does not emphasize its applicability to a Romantic sensibility more broadly:

> "Poetry is a means of self-examination, of discovering the nature of the relationships between the self and the material world, and of glimpsing thereby a wholeness and an ideal which the aesthetic mind of the poet identifies with God and the Beautiful, and which the later Coleridge regarded in a more theological light, as the infinite or the transcendent perceived in the secret places of the heart and mind of man."[79]

For Coleridge, Nature is the "poetry of all human nature" and to study it is "to find therein correspondences and symbols of the spiritual world."[80] Therefore, "True natural philosophy is…the study of…symbols."[81] In other words, Coleridge believes the disclosure of God is poetry and that may take place through religion, art, nature, and even the lived experience of the individual, as the sensuous realization of the *logos*.

---

[77] Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 62.
[78] Coleridge, "A Lay Sermon," in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 197.
[79] David Jaspers, *Coleridge as Poet and Religious Thinker* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 1985), 34.
[80] Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 70.
[81] Ibid, 79.

Coleridge's statements exemplify Alexander Hampton's assertion about Romantic religion: "To actively engage this participatory ontology, Romanticism turned to the language of neither philosophy nor theology, but to aesthetics, which combined both. In turn…all reality came to be aestheticised within a participatory framework, wherein all creation had the potential to disclose the presence of the divine."[82] The realm of the aesthetic manifests the divine precisely because it engages in symbols.

Though Halmi describes the symbol as the Romantic reconciliation of transcendent with material, he ultimately finds it "illogical and methodologically dubious."[83] Halmi writes that the "self-contradictory characteristics of Romantic symbolist theory" was its "reciprocally affirming metaphysics of participation and semiotics of identity. That is, the symbol was supposed to be identical to, by virtue of being part of, its referent."[84] By rendering the part equivalent to the whole, the Romantics could "foster a sense of the harmony of the human mind with nature, of the unity of seemingly disparate intellectual disciplines."[85] Furthermore, "This is what Coleridge meant when he called the symbol 'tautegorical'—expressing the same thing as itself."[86] The "relation of signifier to signified in the Coleridgean symbol is one of part to whole" yet Coleridge "had to transform the second relation into the first in order to avoid the error that he was to accuse Jacob Boehme of having made: the error of

---

[82] Alexander Hampton, *Romanticism and the Re-invention of Modern Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 7.
[83] Halmi, 25.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid, 24.
[86] Ibid, 17.

conceiving God as 'a Whole composed of Parts, of which the World was one.'"[87] Coleridge, therefore, transforms "a relation of participation into one of identity in defiance of logic."[88]

Yet, I wonder if we ought to take Coleridge (and the Romantic symbol) so literally. Halmi's reading leaves Coleridge either incapable of understanding his own contradiction or simply recalcitrant in the face of it. We ought to keep in mind that contradiction in the discursive Understanding was precisely one mark of Reason's transcendence in Coleridge's account. Instead of reading Coleridge as self-contradictory might we not interpret him, as Douglas Hedley does, as "a philosophical mystic" who has the "temper of mind in Plotinus that veers between a strongly contemplative rationalism and an emphasis upon that which resists conceptual analysis: will; life; experience; God."[89] As Owen Barfield notes, Coleridge "held that reason itself transcends the understanding" and "the understanding alone is itself doomed to failure."[90] In the understanding, "Contradictories cannot be reconciled, but by that very token they can point the mind back to the source from which they spring."[91] The "immediate product of reason in the understanding is the principle of contradiction."[92] Thus, Barfield writes, citing the *Aids*, "It is indeed a 'test and sign' of any truth of reason that 'it can come forth out of the moulds of the understanding only in the disguise of

---

[87] Ibid, 116.
[88] Ibid, 117.
[89] Hedley, 11.
[90] Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (Barfield Press, 2014), 201.
[91] Ibid, 201-2.
[92] Ibid, 151.

two contradictory conceptions'" which is not to say that every contradiction in the understanding can be reconciled, only that intuitive truths pertaining to reason alone cannot be comprehended by the understanding.[93] As Coleridge writes, the thoughts and "doctrines of the pure and intuitive reason, which transcend the understanding, and can never be contemplated by it" will only become "false and falsifying perspective" when attempted to be known by the understanding.[94] For example, the understanding fails to comprehend transcendent Being (God) which is present in all things:

> "That hidden mystery in every, the minutest form of existence, which contemplated under the relations of time presents itself to the understanding retrospectively, as an infinite ascent of Causes, and prospectively as an interminable progression of Effects—that which contemplated in Space is beheld intuitively as a law of action and re-action, continuous and extending beyond all bound—this same mystery freed from the phenomena of Time and Space, and seen in the depth of real Being, reveals itself to the pure Reason as the actual immanence of ALL IN EACH. Are we struck with admiration at the beholding of the Cope of Heaven imagined in a Dew-drop? The least of the animalcula to which that drop would be an Ocean contains in itself an infinite problem of which God Omni-present is the only solution."[95]

The Understanding cannot interpret atemporal and aspatial Being. It only thinks in terms of beings, positing infinite regress in time or infinite efficient causality when the "depth of real Being" exceeds time and space in a vertical relation. The "immanence" of the transcendent as "ALL IN EACH" will befuddle the Understanding as a "problem" or contradiction. Transcendent "infinity" can only be known by spiritual intuition, that is, Reason: "Only by the intuition and immediate spiritual consciousness of the idea of God, as the One and Absolute, at once the Ground and Cause…do we arrive at…real,

---

[93] Ibid.
[94] Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 56.
[95] Ibid, 50.

objective necessity."[96] Likewise, the "*Logos*, as no mere attribute or quality, no mode of abstraction, no personification" constitutes one of the "truths which can only be found within" and "intuitively will they discover" such truths only when the Understanding has been left behind. In short, to remain in the Understanding is to have a Humean world of brute facts uninfused by ideas and spirit:

> "[The Understanding] strikes death through all things visible and invisible; satisfies itself then only when it can explain those abstractions of the outward senses, which by an unconscious irony it names indifferently facts and phaenomena, mechanically—that is, by the laws of Death; and brands with the name of Mysticism every solution grounded in Life, or the powers and intuitions of Life?"[97]

The symbol is only a contradiction for those who allow the Understanding sole explanatory power since the Understanding thinks in terms of generalization and discrete objects. Yet, the failure of the understanding reveals the need to exceed analytic intellect and the empirical in order to intuit what lies beyond intellect. As Coleridge writes, "the reduction of the sands of the Sea to number should be found a less stupendous problem by Archimedes than the simple conception of the Parmenidean ONE."[98]

Since the symbol manifests something spiritual or intelligible rather than material, the logic of discrete objects does not apply to it, so the transcendent Absolute must not be understood as a physical part like a slice of pie. The symbol appears illogical when one attempts to comprehend it through the Understanding as a discrete object.

---

[96] Ibid, 32.
[97] Ibid, 96.
[98] Ibid, 51.

Coleridge, who operates in a Neoplatonic tradition, is acutely aware of the difficulties with the presence of the immaterial. Frederic Schroeder notes that Plotinus identifies this problem and resolves the difficulty in his reading of Plato's day and sail argument in *Parmenides*:

> "If the Form is wholly present in the many particulars, which are separate from it, Parmenides argues that it will be separated from itself and lose its identity. Socrates answers that day may be wholly present to different places and yet not lose its identity in this manner. Parmenides rejoins that if the form of Largeness (μέγεθος) is present to the large particulars as a sail is stretched out over the heads of sailors, then a part (μέρος) and not the whole Form will be present to each particular. The Form will be divided (μερίζεσθαι) among the many particulars…If the Form is present to the many particulars as day is present to Athens and Sparta, it need not be divided. Indeed, whether we view 'day' as a unit of time or as daylight it will be immaterial and hence indivisible. Thus Plotinus (who construes 'day' as 'daylight') interprets the 'day' and 'sail' argument."[99]

"Part" in an ontology of participation, does not entail division. A form may be wholly present without reducing to its part, since the part of the form was never a part in the sense of being a segment or piece of a thing. Thus, the form is wholly present to the objects that participate in it. Yet, the form does not reduce to what participates in it. Beauty may be fully 'present' in the beautiful insofar as the beautiful discloses Beauty as transcendent intelligible ground of beauty, not because this beautiful thing = Beauty. Thus, the form is sensuously embodied, but not exhausted. Halmi notes that "what made the sumbolon an especially suitable means of representing the transcendent, which resists being depicted in images or explained discursively" was its non-mimetic character.[100] He also notes that "Pseudo-Dionysus" defended the symbol as "a necessary

---

[99] Frederic Schroeder, *Form and Transformation: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 8-9.
[100] Halmi, 105.

accommodation to the human mind, which can approach the supersensible only by means of the sensible" and that "his theory of the symbol still assumed the Neoplatonic logic of a graduated approach to transcendence, as explained by Plotinus."[101] However, Halmi adds that Pseudo-Dionysius defined "image and its referent as one of dissimilarity, [while] the Romantics defined it as one of partialness."[102] Pseudo-Dionysius's idea of dissimilarity ought to be qualified, since Pseudo-Dionysius develops a conception of the disclosure of the transcendent by interpreting God's Beauty, for example, as infinite excess, not total dissimilarity. The *Divine Names* states: "Given that the Good transcends everything…its nature, unconfined by form, is the creator of all form. In it is nonbeing really an excess of being. It is not a life, but is, rather, superabundant Life. It is not a mind, but is superabundant Wisdom."[103] God does not appear as a being since beings are in time and space. Yet, this does not make God a "nonbeing" but an "excess of being" (my italics).

Partialness, not in the sense of a discrete object ("sail"), pertains to Pseudo-Dionysius, insofar as he posits a Plotinian conception of participation ("daylight") except that what enables the light we see would be more light than light, a kind of absolute light. This allows the symbol to be inexhaustible, since the symbol would wholly exhaust that which it represents if the part were truly identical to the whole. Literal identity, not presence, leads to Spinoza's equation of God with universe. We can understand Coleridge's insistence on the partialness of the symbol and the wholeness of

---

[101] Ibid, 106.
[102] Ibid, 17.
[103] Pseudo-Dionysius, 73.

manifestation, not as a contradiction, but as a restatement of the paradoxical nature of the transcendent. The symbol does not set the absolute entirely before us in literal identity, nor does it cut a slice from the whole, but gives sensuously to intuition the absolute as incomprehensible, inexhaustible, transcendent and real. The symbol reveals intellect's own failure before that which is beyond intellect.

Though he doesn't use the term "symbol" the Neoplatonic apophatic Christian thinker Nicholas of Cusa provides a helpful parallel. In *The Vision of God* (1453) Cusa develops what is essentially a symbolic theology and insists, like Coleridge does, on paradox as intrinsic to the transcendent's manifestation. Cusa reads creation as a contracted image of God the absolute who is in everything yet transcendent: "you are in all!"[104] Both Cusa and Coleridge define reason as non-discursive mystical intuition.[105] Since the aesthetic or symbolic intuitive knowing can go farther than analytic understanding Cusa appeals primarily to the imagination for explanation. To help his fellow monks grasp how God could be present in all at once, he asks them to visualize an icon whose gaze appears to fix solely on each person who looks at. Cusa writes,

> "O Lord, you are wholly present at the same time to all these things and to each…The painted face demonstrates this for me. For if I am unmoved, its gaze seems to be moved with me, because it does not leave me. If while I am moving, another who looks at the face remains standing, the gaze likewise does not abandon this person…neither standing nor being moved can properly befit a face absolute from these conditions, because it exists above all standing and motion,

---

[104] Nicholas of Cusa, "On the Vision of God," in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. by H. Lawrence Bond (Paulist Press, 1997), 258.

[105] Douglas Hedley reads Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* itself as an imagistic or experiential reflective exercise in the manner of Cusa: "I wish to consider Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* as a text akin to Bonaventura's *Journey of the Mind Into God* or Nicholas of Cusa's The *Vision of God*: a tradition which pursues the Platonic vision up the divided line" though I might add that the emphasis on transcending intellect especially in Cusa aligns more with Plotinus than Plato or, at least, a Plotinian interpretation of *Phaedrus*, *Ion*, and *Symposium*." Hedley, 8.

> in simplest and most absolute infinity…Hence, I experience how necessary it is for me to enter into the cloud and to admit the coincide of opposites, above all capacity of reason…above reason…there you are, my God."[106]

Though the paradox is none the less resolved, the metaphor makes intuitive sense. The icon's gaze is wholly present in each observer all at once. What Cusa terms "reason" corresponds roughly to what Coleridge terms "Understanding," since Coleridge aligns Reason itself with intuition. Cusa's illustration makes sense of how there can be multiple "symbols" of God since God is not like a finite volume of liquid that must be poured into each object. Thus, to talk of a symbol as being a "part" of God does not make sense unless one redefines "part" as a kind of delimitation or contraction of what is infinite excess. To do so is still to posit a participatory ontology not a strict identity.

More importantly, however, what is at stake in Coleridge's conception of the symbol is not just the problem Halmi identifies—the need to overcome dualism and close the ontological gap between mind and world—but a way of reading embodied, lived, sensuous experience as infused with *logos*. Contrary to Seamus Perry's claim that Coleridge's thought is divided such that he posits "two deities," one "a traditional language of transcendent omnipotence" and another "alternative, immanent One Life," Coleridge wishes to illustrate the ontological dependence of the *logos* on the sensuous despite its ontological priority so as to incorporate aspects of lived experience (e.g. feeling) and aesthetics into Reason.[107] By doing this, Coleridge can preserve a hierarchy

---

[106] Cusa, 251.
[107] Perry, 76.

of reality while redeeming the sensory world by elevating it into God, rather than leaving it behind as a once useful signpost. Furthermore, Coleridge's symbolic ontology applies outside Christianity, since it is an instance of Romantic religion's more general symbolic *methexis* (i.e. participatory ontology).

1.2 Feeling and Transcendence: Coleridge's Philosophical Anthropology of the Passions

Contra Taylor's claim that "once one admits that access to the significance of things is inward…one can quietly slip one's moorings in orthodox formulations," Coleridge reveals how the turn towards the inner life and emotions can be used to affirm the ontic *logos*.[108] Coleridge illustrates how the inner life can signify the divine by formulating an ontology in which the *logos* itself is rendered ontologically prior to yet dependent on the sensory world and embodied, lived experience. In other words, instead of replacing the *logos* with feeling and inwardness, Coleridge posits the realms of feeling and aesthetics as the necessary incarnation of the transcendent *logos*. Nonetheless, in discussing Coleridge's ontology of the *logos*, I will not be addressing his theology as it relates to the doctrinal concerns of Christianity (e.g. atonement, predestination, original sin, justification, Biblical and clerical authority etc.). Though it is

[108] Taylor, 371.

true that Coleridge understands "God" to be the *logos* of Trinitarian Christianity, my concern is with Coleridge's relationship to Romantic religion in general.[109]

Coleridge's incorporation of feeling[110] into *logos* responds to and ultimately rejects a prevalent idea of the passions in the eighteenth-century as external to and in antagonism with the moral self and reason. As Douglas Hedley rightfully observes, "For all his emphasis upon the 'will', Coleridge is not a voluntarist. He does not affirm the will over reason. In fact, his criticisms of both [William] Paley and Schelling…rest upon their construal of God as in some sense primarily 'will.'"[111] Furthermore, "in response to both, Coleridge upholds the characteristically Platonic insistence that the divine will is identical with his nature as good and rational."[112] Part of Coleridge's insistence on the incorporation of feeling into the will stems from his rejection of voluntarism.

As Thomas Pfau notes, the attempt to empower reason in the eighteenth-century against voluntarism resulted in an opposition between reason and passion. In the wake of Thomas Hobbes's "extreme voluntarism" which rendered the will irrational (not

---

[109] For studies of Coleridge focusing on Christian doctrine, scripture, and the Anglican Church see J. Robert Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); Jeffrey Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible and Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Ben Knights, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Anthony John Harding, *Coleridge and the Inspired Word* (Kingston : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985); Herrick Wright, *Coleridge and the Anglican Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

[110] While an analytic reader will want a distinction between feeling, emotion, and affect, Coleridge does not provide this. He often uses the terms "feelings," "affections," and "emotion" interchangeably, though he does sometimes distinguish between feeling and sensibility, which I hope will be clear later in this section. Thus, I do not want to introduce hard and fast analytic distinctions which are not true to Coleridge. The reader should, however, take my usage of these terms to roughly mean "feeling" as both somatic and cognitive event characterized by intentionality and non-reducible to discursive or propositional content. What is crucial is that feeling is not to be regarded as spontaneous and mechanistically determined 'mere' somatic affect. What I hope to articulate in this section is feeling's relation to the will, which makes it of moral value and a manifestation of reason.

[111] Hedley, 10.

[112] Ibid.

intrinsically related to reason) such that "human agents" are "determined by blind and unself-conscious compulsion, itself the offshoot of a mechanistic theory of life as sheer tropism triggered by contingent objects of desire," writers like Anthony Ashley-Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury and Frances Hutcheson attempted to rehabilitate reason at the cost of opposing it to the passions. Pfau writes:

> "it is clear that the only way to answer Hobbes was by reclaiming the inner life of the person as an authentic and significant source of moral reflection and responsible action. Yet this prolonged effort at rehabilitating reason as something more than mere calculation—indeed, as substantially free—comes with two significant qualifications. First, reason is no longer juxtaposed to the will, but to the passions. Second, thinkers from James Harrington [to the]…Earl of Shaftesbury, to Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant replace the Aristotelian-Thomist dialectic that had posited the will in a necessary relation with the intellect with an empirical antagonism between selfish passions and rational interests."[113]

In other words, rather than confront voluntarism or nominalism, both are sidestepped for a drama between "selfish passions" and "rational interests." Thus, by reuniting the passions (feeling) with reason itself, Coleridge (and other Romantics) hoped to relocate the transcendent Good and reason in the inner life. Pfau notes that the Earl of Shaftesbury anticipates "Coleridge's later, neo-Platonist view of human personhood as constitutively self-aware and continuous, a claim most palpable where the operation of conscience is involved."[114] Shaftesbury, like Coleridge, rejects Locke's British empiricist conception of consciousness as contingent on mere sensation. Like Coleridge, Shaftesbury "insists on self-awareness as an absolute given, a reality ontologically convertible with the very fact of our existence as persons."[115] Yet, for

---

[113] Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 215.
[114] Ibid, 241.
[115] Ibid, 238.

Shaftesbury, the "affections are no longer complemented by an account of conscience" as they are for Coleridge. Instead, Shaftesbury hopes to control natural affections strictly through an "aesthetic regimen" in which he replaces "introspection and self-examination" or what Coleridge terms "reflection" with the cultivation of 'taste.'"[116] Pfau notes that "Unlike the neo-Platonists, however, Shaftesbury pursues this objective in distinctively modern, anti-metaphysical ways…" since the "harmonious ordering of the affections unfolds as a strictly immanent process, and it is not to be supervised by or answerable to the superego of any institution or transcendent deity."[117] Likewise, Hutcheson locates the Good inside "moral sense" and not transcendent reality but "the scope of the good towards which Hutcheson's moral sense orients the individual has significantly narrowed in comparison to Shaftesbury" to mere intrinsic benevolence.[118] Moreover, this benevolent sense is dissociated from practical reason and cognition. This comes across clearly in Hutcheson's assertion, quoted by Pfau that "our moral Actions and Affections may be in good order, when our Opinions are quite wrong."[119] Pfau argues that this "innate faculty" thus "obviates any further need or desire to reason about our ends" and sense theorists thus end up "collapsing the will into a nature they simply choose to interpret as inherently benevolent."[120]

Not only does Coleridge reject the eighteenth-century variants of voluntarist and hedonist philosophy offered by Locke, Hobbes or Mandeville, but he also rejects what

---

[116] Ibid, 233.
[117] Ibid, 240.
[118] Ibid, 271.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid, 280.

Pfau terms the "nervously anti-metaphysical tendencies of moral sense philosophy."[121] To do this, Coleridge redeems the will and human consciousness's transcendent nature by incorporating the passions (feeling) into the spiritual will and constructing a metaphysical hierarchy with a symbolic ontology. He rejoins the will to reason through rejecting the voluntarist dichotomies between selfish passion/rational interest and will/reason by expanding reason such that the *logos* must manifest in the emotional life and relationships of the human person because to know the transcendent Good is to feel a certain way (this is not the same as reducing the Good to innate benevolence). The non-discursive nature of the Good (the Absolute) is not a marker of inarticulate immanence, as in moral sense theory, but of the genuinely transcendent metaphysical nature of the Absolute which cannot be properly captured in language or comprehended by finite intellectual analysis. Whereas Hutcheson's pre-discursivity works against cognition as a sort of kindly impulse, Plotinian intuition (also non-discursive) goes above thought to access a Good that is real.

As Thomas McFarland notes, "it was Platonism's affirmation of the whole man—not just man thinking, but man thinking and feeling and longing—that Coleridge emphasized."[122] Furthermore, "Platonism, with its array of emotionalized abstractions—justice, beauty, the good—and its constant sense of unexpressed significance, its dramatic intensity, its appeal to the sense of rapture, has, in all ages, been the mark of an orientation opposed to limited, drily technical or cognitive modes of philosophizing. It

[121] Ibid, 275.
[122] McFarland, 210.

has been especially favorable to the emotionalizing of philosophy."[123] The tradition of Platonism, which Coleridge absorbed not only from his own early readings in Iamblichus, Proclus, Plotinus, and Plato, as well as his readings in the Cambridge Platonists (e.g. Ralph Cudworth and Henry More) gave Coleridge a way of negotiating the "I am" and the "It is" not by replacing the transcendent real with an immanent affective regime like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, but by articulating the emotional life as the realization of the Good in the will.

This Neoplatonic ontology emerges as late as the *Opus Maximum*. As McFarland observes "Plato is absent from the various schemes for the work" because the work as whole was "indeed, essentially an expansion and elaboration of Platonism."[124] More accurately, the *Opus Maximum* expresses a Neoplatonic ontology since lower realities are brought up into the higher and not left behind in ascent:

> "These emotions, affections, attachments, etc. are indeed the prepared ladder by which the lower nature is taken up <into>, and made to partake of, the higher, even as we are taught to give a feeling of reality to the higher by means of associating it with the lower through this common medium. It is true, likewise, that it is by this process that we are enabled gradually to see the reality of the higher—the reality of the objects of reason…and finally to know that they are pre-eminently real. If you love not your earthly parents whom you see, by what means will you love your heavenly father who is invisible?"[125]

While the finite nature of the human mind requires finite means to gain insight into the infinite (*logos*), this is not a kind of accommodationism in which worldly affect functions merely as a means to an end since we are too weak to access the spiritual

---

[123] Ibid, 209.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas MacFarland and Nick Halmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 91.

directly. Feeling is not the process by which we are taken from the lower nature away to the reality of the higher, abandoning lower nature once it has served its purpose to elevate us. Rather, the emotional life draws us into the *logos* with itself and is necessary to the manifestation of the *logos* by being the means of its realization. Earthly love is the symbol of divine love. And this can only be known through feeling love.

Though Coleridge uses the term "associating," the insight into higher reality does not come about through a process of psychological conditioning in which lower realities are repeatedly used as reminders of higher reality. Feeling is not something that we train ourselves to "associate" with higher reality just as we train ourselves to associate a shape with an arbitrary assigned meaning. Feeling is "taken up" into and "made to partake of" reason, that is, to be of the nature of reason, to participate in it as its image, just as a symbol is of the nature of that which it intimates, even if the symbol does not exhaust what it symbolizes. Feeling is not merely useful or something to make reason palatable like a pleasant flavor added to cough syrup. Rather, feeling incarnates higher "reality."

Nonetheless, the realm of feeling and sensation is not ontologically prior to the "objects of reason." This hierarchy differentiates Coleridge from moral sense theorists since moral sense theorists locate the origins of the Good in immanent moral sense, whereas Coleridge indexes feeling to a metaphysical Good prior to feeling. God is "pre-eminently real" for Coleridge. Nonetheless, feeling is not optional. It is the revelation of reason. Thus, when Coleridge states that one cannot love God without loving one's parents he does not imply that one must learn to love one's parents in order to love God

as one must learn algebra in order to prove theorems. Rather, to love God entails a way of being in the world and being with others. Rather than positioning God or higher reality as exclusively competing with lower reality, Coleridge makes worldly, affective intentionality the expression of the *logos* itself.

The language of "the prepared ladder" obviously recalls Diotima's ladder in Plato's symposium. Yet, Coleridge remains more Plotinian than Platonic, since he does not kick the ladder away once it has taken him upwards. Hadot notes that Plotinus borrows Plato's language from the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* but transforms its meaning. Whereas "Platonic love is only a means or a method, each stage of which is indispensable, but which is left behind once the goal is reached. Plotinian love has an entirely different psychological content."[126] Hadot writes, "As a gift of the Good, Plotinian love is immediately love of the Good. It is the invasion of the soul by a presence…But though the soul moves and is transported, this movement is not an ascent towards an end point where love ends…Right from the start the beloved was the Good, and in the experience of union, it will continue to be so."[127] Like Plotinus, Coleridge still treats reality (the forms) as transcendent, yet he does not, as Plato does, regard the material world as "means or method" but as that in which the Good/God is directly present (as symbol).

To read Coleridge as strictly Platonic leads to a misreading of Coleridge as someone who opposes the transcendent to the immanent. This is what Seamus Perry

---

[126] Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 53.
[127] Ibid, 55.

does when he aligns Coleridgean transcendent reason with "Platonic counter-sensuousness."[128] Thus, Perry reads Coleridge's Platonism as "a renunciatory ascent from the natural to the ideal."[129] Perry phrases it perhaps most strongly when he writes: "Well, then, one might ask with Hopkins, 'To what end serves Mortal Beauty?'; and old Coleridge especially would follow Milton in answering, to no good end at all."[130] For Perry, Coleridge simply shuttles back and forth between two polar positions on god, mind, and the sensory world, never resolving them. Perry writes: the "anti-Platonic deity who presides over this atonement of nature has his most striking and fertile formulation in the doctrine of the One Life" which is "very different to the Reason's transcendent deity."[131] Furthermore, the "supramundane Platonic deity…finds its sublunary parallel in the sovereign ego of the mighty idealist consciousness" as opposed to a "dissolution of…[a] 'Unity of Consciousness' amidst the world it contemplates."[132] Thus, Perry pits reason and transcendence against the sensory.[133] Neoplatonic ontology, however, which Coleridge is more committed to than any ascetic version of Platonism, not only is a form of realism (not idealism) but a symbolic reconciliation of transcendent and sensuous/immanent. Perry and McFarland read Coleridge as counter-sensuous insofar as they read him as a Platonist, though Perry characterizes Coleridge as split into

[128] Perry, 68.
[129] Ibid, 63.
[130] Ibid, 65.
[131] Ibid, 68.
[132] Ibid, 103.
[133] Perry also aligns Coleridge's sensuous side with Aristotelianism. He writes, a "tenacious adherence to the empirical world of sense amounts to an 'Aristotelian' counter-current," 57.

different personalities, while McFarland points to the Trinity as the resolution of the 'I am'/ 'It is' against Plotinian pantheism.

Yet, even without the Trinity, Coleridge's Plotinian philosophical anthropology allows transcendent reason to be embodied. For Coleridge, the turn inward is at once a turn towards God. The "true self—this self in God—is within ourselves" as Pierre Hadot writes of Plotinus's philosophy.[134] For Plotinus "everything is within us, and we are within all things. Our 'self' extends from God to matter."[135] For Plotinus, the "spiritual world was nothing other than the self at its deepest level."[136] During "certain privileged experiences…we can identify ourselves with it. We then become this eternal self; we are moved by its unutterable beauty, and…we identify ourselves with divine Thought itself" or what Coleridge would call the divine "I AM." Furthermore, the hierarchy of reality, mirrored in the self, is such that for both Coleridge and Plotinus "Each degree of reality can only be explained with reference to its superior level: the unity of the body is explained by the unity of the soul which animates it; the life of the soul requires illumination by the life of higher Spirit; and finally, we cannot understand the life of the Spirit itself without the fecund simplicity of the absolute, divine Principle, which is, in a sense, its deepest intimacy."[137]

The turn inward to transcend is probably best evident in Coleridge's attempt at meditative exercise in the *Aids to Reflection*, a disparate collection of quotations,

---

[134] Hadot, 27.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid, 25.
[137] Hadot, 27.

commentary and provocative questions. The *Aids* is also, perhaps, the most explicit articulation of Coleridge's philosophical anthropology. Coleridge binds together the transcendent Good (reason) and feeling, but subordinates feeling to reason. To borrow his own phrasing, Coleridge distinguishes without dividing. For him, reason cannot be fulfilled without feeling, though reason can be and should be differentiated from and made superior to feeling as its guide. In other words, Coleridge creates a hierarchical arrangement of what he terms the "moral architecture" of the human soul in the *Aids to Reflection*, defining the "principles of moral architecture on the several ground of prudence, morality, and religion."[138] This three-fold distinction—prudence, morality, and religion—is one that Coleridge maintains throughout his writings and it signifies a hierarchy in the internal life.

For Coleridge, prudence signifies the faculty of understanding and sense, morality "the heart," and religion "the spiritual," that is, the will. Coleridge writes, "the second requires the first, and the third contains and supposes both the former; yet still Moral Goodness is other and more than Prudence, or the Principle of Expediency; and Religion more and higher than Morality."[139] It is through the practice of reflection that one comes to learn to distinguish these faculties within himself/herself, comprehending their proper hierarchy. In so doing, one achieves moral insight by learning that morality, as a faculty governing feelings of right and wrong, is not sufficient unto itself, but must serve a higher spiritual purpose (a transcendent normative Good) and that prudence,

---

[138] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. Johnathan Beer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.
[139] Ibid, 8.

which alone is merely a calculating capacity, a power to discern the best means to a given end, must have recourse to morality to determine what ends are proper to pursue at all. Thus, Coleridge distinguishes between morality as faculty and the transcendent Good realizable by the will (the spiritual). An important consequence of this hierarchy is that while feeling is necessary for the *logos* to manifest, reason imbues feeling only in an ideal situation. In other words, feeling or affective life can go awry (i.e. one's emotions can sometimes be irrational, self-destructive, and immoral), but a flourishing human life in accordance with reason cannot lack an affective component.

Writing about scripture in the *Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge declares that the truths and principles contained therein are "not so properly said to be confirmed by reason as to be reason itself!"[140] However, the same "principles…disjoined from…the emotions that inevitably accompany the actual intuition of their truth" are like "arms without hearts, muscles without nerves."[141] A quick gloss of this may lead one to conclude that Coleridge is asserting that emotions result naturally from an impactful event or that they 'color' experience as a sort of aesthetic addition or as necessary causal aftereffect. What the visceral analogy makes clear, however, is that Coleridge's claim about the relationship between truth and feeling is actually far stronger. Just as muscles require nerves for the expression of motion, that is, to properly be said to be muscles at all, an aesthetic intuition of truth cannot occur without a transformation of the person manifest in affect. In Coleridge's view, truth does not reduce to feeling. Nonetheless,

---

[140] Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual," 21.
[141] Ibid.

reason remains inextricably bound up with affect since affect is not a mere 'coloring' or dressing. Feeling is part of the will, of intentionality, not something that happens to a person as it does in Hume's and Hobbes's account. What I am emphasizing here is that Coleridge's will, though wholly spiritual, nonetheless cannot be detached from affect.

To be sure, Coleridge believes one can assert the correctness of moral proposition (and even act on it) without feeling, but, for Coleridge, such a move illustrates a failure to perceive the *logos*, since a true and full intuition of truth necessarily involves the whole person. Truth is perceived as something of ultimate cosmic relevance, as something with consequences for lived experience. To encounter truth is to define one's relationship to life, to world, and to others. Thus, Coleridge writes that the truths of the principles contained in scripture are not only accompanied by emotions, but the entire act of perception of truth, that is, the moment of knowledge and comprehension, occurs through feeling as itself part and parcel with a sort of Plotinian intuition. Likewise, the truths or principles Coleridge reads in scripture are not "confirmed by reason" but are reason, since reason does not operate in parallel to life or to art. Rather, it is always already imbuing life and art. Implied is a metaphysics of participation epitomized by the symbol—reason appears in and through that which participates in it, including the realm of affect and aesthetic experience.

Nonetheless, Coleridge sees a danger in failing to preserve an internal hierarchy. If intellect or reason are merely subsumed into feeling, one runs the risk of validating a vulgar sentimentalism. In other words, if every feeling is regarded as identical to rationality and the direction of divine *logos*, then one can sanction an emotive

impulsivity under the guise of reason (e.g. because I feel that such and such should be the case, it should be because my feelings are right). In the *Aids to Reflection* Coleridge rejects sentimentalism for its moral dangers, while still also upholding affect's moral importance. In so doing, he argues that affect is a necessary component to Christian morality, carefully opposing Christian morality to philosophies that oppose the passions to reason. On the one hand, Coleridge states that the "evil achieved by Hobbes and the whole school of materialists" is "inconsiderable" next to the "sentimental philosophy of Sterne, and his numerous imitators."[142] Yet, Christianity is "fundamentally opposite" to Stoicism. Coleridge writes in a small section titled "The Christian No Stoic":

> "…to this sect [of ancient philosophy] Christianity is fundamentally opposite. For the Stoic attaches the highest honor (or rather, attaches honor solely) to the person that acts virtuously in spite of his feelings, or who has raised himself above the conflict by their extinction; while Christianity instructs us to place small reliance on a Virtue that does not begin by bringing the Feelings to a conformity with the Commands of the Conscience. Its especial aim, its characteristic operation, is to moralize the affections. The Feelings, that oppose a right act, must be wrong feelings. The act, indeed, whatever the agent's feelings might be, Christianity would command; and under certain circumstances would both command and commend it—commend it, as a healthful symptom in a sick patient; and command it, as one of the ways and means of changing the feelings, or displacing them by calling up the opposite."[143]

From these statements Laurence Lockridge concludes correctly that Coleridge hopes to "enlarge the sphere of moral responsibility to include the content of the emotional life."[144] Lockridge, however, interprets Coleridge as a strong adherent of reformed theology, not Neoplatonism as I and Hedley do. Lockridge writes, "unlike…the Cambridge Platonists…[Coleridge] dwells on man's evil potential" and the

---

[142] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 60.
[143] Ibid, 96.
[144] Laurence Lockridge, *Coleridge the Moralist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 137.

"self is realized through alienation."[145] Coleridge "retains an Augustinian sense of the depravity of the will."[146] Thus, "His 'right road' is, therefore, Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine."[147] On the contrary, what Coleridge describes as Christian is a Neoplatonic alternative to two problematic interpretations of feeling's relationship to the good: sentimentalism and stoicism. As Hedley writes, "morality is not a matter, for Plotinus or Coleridge, of moral behavior but of vision."[148] While Coleridge identifies his conception of moral intentionality as specifically Christian, this understanding of the relationship between the passions and the Good applies to non-Christians proponents of Romantic religion, Wordsworth and Shelley included. For the Romantics, insight into the Good is simultaneously being moved by and towards the Good.

Sentimentalism, (Coleridge gives Laurence Sterne as an example) goes awry in that it valorizes mere sensibility (we might say the same of moral sense theory), treating sensibility as sufficient, while stoicism disregards the emotions by not comprehending the role of the will in feeling. In his section "On Sensibility" in the *Aids* Coleridge attacks sentimentalism, writing, "If Prudence, though practically inseparable from Morality, is not to be confounded with the Moral Principle; still less may Sensibility, that is, a constitutional quickness of Sympathy with Pain and Pleasure, and a keen sense of the gratifications that accompany social intercourse, mutual endearments, and reciprocal preferences, be mistaken, or deemed a Substitute for either. Sensibility is not even a sure

[145] Ibid, 220.
[146] Ibid, 219.
[147] Ibid, 220.
[148] Hedley, 166.

pledge of a good heart…"[149] Sensibility is "a quality of the nerves, and a result of individual bodily temperament."[150]

Coleridge observes that sensibility does not follow the Good necessarily. One may take pleasure in evil. One may obey a friend's request merely out of social gratification and Coleridge is at pains to distinguish his Platonic moral philosophy from any kind of hedonistic utilitarianism or assumption of human benevolence. He writes: "The vilest appetites and the most remorseless inconstancy towards their objects, acquired the titles of the Heart, the irresistible Feelings, the too tender Sensibility… and if the Frosts of Prudence, the icy chains of Human Law thawed and vanished at the genial warmth of Human Nature, who could help it?"[151] Furthermore:

> "Sensibility and all the amiable qualities may likewise become, and too often have become, the panders of Vice and the instruments of Seduction. So must it needs be with all qualities that have their rise only in parts and fragments of our nature. A man of warm passions may sacrifice half his estate to rescue a friend from prison; for he is naturally sympathetic, and the more social part of his nature happened to be uppermost. The same man shall afterwards exhibit the same disregard of money in an attempt to seduce that friend's wife or daughter."[152]

Since sensibility can be disordered, driving us away from that which we should strive for and driving us towards that which we should not, it cannot be relied upon to remain constant in its preferences. Therefore, sensibility is not sufficient for morality: "the very term Sensibility, marks its passive nature; and in its mere self, apart from Choice and Reflection, it proves little more than the coincidence or contagion of

---

[149] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 57-8.
[150] Ibid, 58.
[151] Ibid, 61.
[152] Ibid, 60.

pleasurable or painful Sensations in different persons."[153] Coleridge deems sentimentalism and moral sense theory inadequate, since they do not subordinate sense to prudence (as a practice of achieving ends) and religion (the faculty that proposes good ends through conscience). As Hedley observes, the "sentimentalist maintains that virtue is the fullest expression of the natural benevolence of man" and Coleridge "is convinced that benevolent sentiment can no more furnish moral ideas than mere sympathy or selfishness."[154] Nonetheless, Coleridge does not banish the passions from reason.

Rather, in Coleridge's Romanticized Christianity, the passions must realize that which is above them, namely the transcendent metaphysical Good. This view aligns Coleridge with the Neoplatonic tradition more than stoicism, since stoicism measures moral value against inclination. Though Coleridge resembles Kant in that he upholds a conception of moral law in which certain visible, exterior, moral acts are imperative—For him, conscience, not affect, determines which actions must and must not be taken in the world—Coleridge ultimately redeems feeling by proposing that feelings are moral acts necessary for the realization of the Good. Claud Howard who, like Hedley, reads Coleridge as a Platonic idealist (I read him as a realist) emphasizes that Kant propels Coleridge to Platonism: "In his positive insistence upon the value of feeling in morals in opposition to stoicism, Coleridge departs from Kant by the impelling force of his own emotional nature. It is this that most fundamentally differentiated his philosophical

[153] Ibid, 58.
[154] Hedley, 159-60.

position from that of Kant. It was this emphasis upon feeling that related him more closely to the Platonists than to Kant."[155] Lockridge also observes, "Coleridge wishes, however, to retain feeling as an essential component of morality, whatever its theoretical awkwardness within a Kantian superstructure…"[156] Lockridge, however, still formulates Coleridge's moral thought within a Kantian framework, not a Neoplatonic one, though his ultimate conclusion is correct: "our respect for the moral law is itself a kind of inclination, indicating a coincidence of duty and inclination even in the abstract, and because our feelings, given this linkage, must themselves be considered moral acts."[157] Feelings count as moral acts for Coleridge because feeling is a kind of intuitive knowledge in which the transcendent Good can rendered immanently present.

Coleridge recognizes that to evacuate the emotions from the moral life is to remove a kind of knowledge and to deplete action of moral value. He writes, "Seek not altogether to dry up the stream of sorrow, but to bound it and keep it within its banks. Religion doth not destroy the life of nature but adds to it a life more excellent."[158] We may understand by "Religion" the spiritual dimension of the self, namely, the will. The will does not counteract "the life of nature," which includes the realm of desires and emotions, but contains it. Though the Good exceeds the passions, it cannot be disclosed and fulfilled without them. Thus, Coleridge urges the reader not to "dry up" the "stream of sorrow" but "bound it and keep it within its banks," suggesting that sorrow ought to

---

[155] Claud Howard, *Coleridge's Idealism: A Study of its Relationship to Kant and the Cambridge Platonists* (Gorham Press, 1924), 84.
[156] Lockridge, 111.
[157] Lockridge, 140.
[158] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 95.

be ordered, not eliminated. We might compare Coleridge's conception of religion to that of John Henry Newman, who writes, "religion may be made a subject of notional assent…Theology, as such, always is notional…religion, as being personal, should be real."[159]

Stephen Prickett correctly describes Newman's view as a sort of Romantic Christianity directly influenced by Coleridge. Prickett insists that Newman has an "essentially 'poetic' view of assent as an imaginative act involving the life of the whole person."[160] He adds, "What establishes Newman so clearly as belonging to the tradition of Coleridge is this sense of an over-riding 'life' in ideas…Our ideas do not float free in the pure aether of reason. They are part of our whole framework of life, and cannot be separated from it."[161] J. Robert Barth notes that this presence of ideas is itself the manifestation of the transcendent in the immanent: "Deeper and more comprehensive than the understanding, the imagination is, in fact, a faculty of the transcendent, capable of perceiving and in some degree articulating transcendent reality."[162] Prickett rightfully connects this kind of Romantic Christianity to Platonism: "'Imagination' is an organizing power, but its powers of organization are directly associated with a very different transcendent quality reminiscent of Plato's 'recognition' theory of knowledge."[163] Imagination is not an ability to invent, but a faculty of Platonic vision (i.e. the divine "I

---

[159] John Henry Newman, "The Philosopher," in *The Genius of John Henry Newman: Selections from His Writings*, edited by Ian Ker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 42.
[160] Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 199.
[161] Ibid, 185.
[162] Barth, 21.
[163] Prickett, 195.

AM"). Prickett's greatest insight is perhaps not only his realization that "Coleridgean principles are being applied and simultaneously transformed in the *Grammar*" but that the common term is Romanticism, since both Newman and Coleridge are resisting rationalist and empiricist conceptualizations of belief and knowledge. Pricket writes, "Must we chosen between Locke and Montaigne?—or does the Romantic tradition of Coleridge offer a different set of conceptual possibilities?"[164] According to Prickett, Newman's answer is "yes." To be religious is not merely a matter of assenting to theological and moral propositions, but of discerning, embodying and living the Good, which requires not just the intellect, but the imagination and the emotional life. It is a sign that one has a merely notional (not real) relationship to the Good (i.e. moral Truth) if one does not feel.

In Coleridge's Romantic Christianity, the failure to experience appropriate sorrow or pain signals a moral failure. It is not enough to merely help another, if one does the action without genuine feeling. For Coleridge, "we have a duty, also, to have proper feeling" as Lockridge writes.[165] Coleridge writes in "The Christian no Stoic" that "Religion…doth not only permit but requires some feeling of afflictions. Instead of patience, there is in some men an affected pride of spirit suitable only to the doctrine of the Stoics as it is usually taken. They strive not to feel at all the afflictions that are on them; but where there is no feeling at all, there can be no patience."[166] Any religion that heralds an elimination of passion is a distortion of nature and works against the Good.

---

[164] Ibid, 194.
[165] Lockridge, 137.
[166] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 63.

Furthermore, Coleridge calls attention to how this denial of feeling not only constitutes a moral failure, but an instance of pride. The pride of Stoical doctrines consists in the insistence that one can obtain mastery over the inner life and in the implied superiority the Stoic feels over others unable to achieve such self-mastery. Furthermore, the pride of Stoical doctrine is self-isolating; in being unaffected by the world, a person loses the world, including the world of others. There is, thus, a selfishness to Stoicism, since it prefers self-protection over suffering and neutralizes the external, falling into solipsism. According to Coleridge, to be in the world requires being affected by the world and to know the Good requires loving the Good, which is a fundamentally Neoplatonic and Romantic sensibility. As Hedley writes, the "mixture of the noetic and the affective has its roots in Plato's *Symposium*, but its most striking philosophical expression is in Plotinus."[167]

Nonetheless, Coleridge is not suggesting that suffering is valuable in its own right. Obviously, it would be better if the causes of suffering and sorrow were not present. Nonetheless, Coleridge deems sorrow the appropriate feeling for the tragic. Sorrow or melancholy has moral value as a state of intentionality in which what is intended is suffering or injustice. This does not imply that one should be miserable all the time. Joy may be the most appropriate response when one is intending a different aspect of reality. What Coleridge shows us is that feeling constitutes not only a kind of knowledge but a moral act in and of itself. To connect the Good to feeling, we do not

[167] Hedley, 11.

have to usurp the Good with mere feeling as in moral sense theory. There are, indeed, "wrong Feelings," as Coleridge suggests since feelings are subordinate to the Good. What Coleridge and the other Romantics realize is that feeling constitutes a moment of recognition and realization of the Good. It is a moral act in its own right, not a distraction from moral action and worldly business. It can be the case that feeling a certain way about something is morally insufficient when one does not act to, say, eliminate someone's suffering, yet performing a good action in and of itself is also not morally sufficient. There are certain ways one ought to feel. A sociopath who lives an externally virtuous life out of self-advancement, even when (s)he has done nothing harmful, is still a moral failure. Coleridge anticipates Iris Murdoch's insight that the introspectable world of thoughts and feelings constitutes moral activity, as does one's vision. Murdoch gives the example of a mother-in-law who "feels hostility to her daughter-in-law" but who has "decided to behave well."[168] Supposing this mother-in-law recognizes her judgments as cruel and actively cultivates a more loving and just attitude towards her daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law may be said to have "in the interim been active, she has been doing something…something which is somehow worth doing in itself…[she] has been morally active," even if the daughter-in-law is not privy to this since the mother-in-law's outward behavior does not change.[169]

What Murdoch and Coleridge draw attention to is that feelings constitute moral acts in and of themselves. In other words, one ought to feel a certain way about

---

[168] Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics* (Penguin, 1950), 313.
[169] Ibid, 314.

something regardless of whether this leads to external action (feeling is an internal act). To be sure, right feelings predispose one towards right actions, for Coleridge, but that alone is insufficient. For that reason, he writes, "Christianity instructs us to place small reliance on a virtue" that does not conform feelings to conscience. Nonetheless, as his attack on sentimentalism demonstrates, one should not rely on feelings alone to lead a moral life, since feelings can direct one to evil just as much as they can direct one to the good. The faculty of prudence, itself a neutral faculty of calculating means to ends, can then be utilized in service of feeling, but it does not provide a check on feeling itself. Only what Coleridge terms "Religion" or the spiritual dimension of the human being—the highest in the hierarchy consisting of a will in accordance with reason as manifest in the conscience—can determine what actions should or should not be taken. He writes that Christianity commands foremost the right act "whatever the agent's feelings must be."[170]

Coleridge, thus, agrees with Kant insofar as he distinguishes right moral action from feeling. However, he deviates from Kant's position, understood as a form of stoicism, since stoicism only conceives of virtuous action as that which defies feeling, valorizing the ability to extinguish the affections. Ultimately Kant effects a divide between feeling and the good that the Plotinian Coleridge does not. As Hedley writes, "happiness as immutable pleasure is exactly the goal of ethics for Plotinus."[171] Coleridge and Murdoch recognize that one may have to act against feeling, but such an act is

---

[170] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 96.
[171] Hedley, 154.

analogous to the healing process—what Coleridge termed "a healthful symptom in a sick patient" as (s)he progresses toward "changing the feelings, or displacing them by calling up the opposite."[172] When feeling is not in harmony with the Good, this manifests as a symptom of illness, both necessary and painful, but having as its end goal the transformation of the human person back into health, that is, of training feeling itself into harmony with the Good. Acting against feeling is commendable only insofar as it is symptomatic of personal transformation. Feelings can and must be shaped for both Coleridge and Murdoch and this can occur through the mode of self-conscious reflection and the cultivation of habit. It is the business of reflection to lead us to an awareness of our emotional states and to shape them, that is, to "moralize" our affections so that we can achieve the proper stance towards the world and others. Feelings do not matter because they predispose actions, though this is certainly true, but because they can be right and "wrong." Perfection, for Coleridge, consists in conforming the feelings to conscience, in other words, harmonizing prudence and morality to religion. This internal harmony within the self is not only the goal of reflection, but necessary for incarnating the Good.

The Neoplatonic-Romantic's emphasis on immutable metaphysical Good not only distinguishes it from eighteenth-century moral sense theory, but also from contemporary humanist immanent ethical frameworks that attempt to redeem emotion, such as Martha Nussbaum gives us in *Upheavals of Thought*. Nussbaum, like Coleridge,

[172] Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 96.

rejects a model of emotion as force bombarding the self from without. Nussbaum identifies her own view as neo-Stoic[173] and contrasts it with that of an imagined "adversary" who functions as a compilation of conventional accounts of emotions in moral philosophy. The adversary holds the "view that emotions are 'nonreasoning movements,' unthinking energies that simply push the person around…like gusts of wind," a view usually connected with "the idea that emotions are 'bodily' rather than 'mental.'"[174] For Nussbaum, however, emotions are judgments. They are "identical with the acceptance of a proposition that is both evaluative and eudaimonistic, that is, concerned with one or more of a person's important goals and ends."[175] To be sure, Nussbaum differentiates her account from an egoistic instrumental or utilitarian one, but her analysis remains situated within what Coleridge would term the prudential realm of the Understanding, since Nussbaum grounds evaluative judgments in a strictly eudaimonistic framework and reduces emotion to propositional assent while the Coleridgean Neoplatonic account valorizes feeling precisely insofar as it allows us to transcend the Understanding and perceive Truth non-discursively.

---

[173] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Nussbaum refers to her view as *neo*-Stoic, since the Stoics, in her account, were right to treat emotions as evaluative judgments, but wrong to advocate their eradication. There seems to be a tension internal to the Stoical account as she presents it. For example, Nussbaum notes that "Chrysippus plausibly said that grief (along with the other emotions) contains not only the judgment that an important part of my life has gone, but that *it is right* to be upset about that," 47. At one point Nussbaum criticizes Seneca for having wrong values since Seneca would urge her to distance "myself from the grief with the thought that virtue is sufficient for happiness," 86. This Senecan viewpoint seems to be the one Coleridge is targeting in his attack on Stoicism.
[174] Nussbaum, 25.
[175] Ibid, 41.

As Hedley writes, "Alasdair MacIntyre, Williams, and Nussbaum" all take the "Aristotelian option" as "more attractive in the fragmented 'post-modern' environment than Kantian ethical universalism" but "Coleridge, as a sturdy Platonist, would be alarmed by the idea that virtues can and should be contingently embodied in communities, because ethics for him is stamped with the eternal: moral action is the outward sign of an adherence of the soul to the absolute good."[176] Indeed, the eudaimonistic account ultimately contextualizes the Good rather than treating it as ahistorical transcendent Absolute. Eudaimonism defines the Good within personally relevant "projects." In Coleridge's symbolic ontology, the Good may be entirely immaterial and unchangeable, but it is nonetheless dependent on the sensuous world to manifest. This includes the realm of embodied emotion and aesthetics. Coleridge may have been a staunch Anglican later in life who derived his ideas of morality from orthodoxy Christianity, but he is characteristically Romantic in his insistence that art and emotion symbolize the spiritual Good and that we give life to Religion by accessing Truth through the imagination. While other Romantics like Shelley may reject Christianity in favor of their own Romantic religion, Coleridge makes Christianity his Romantic religion.

[176] Hedley, 179.

2. The Soul of the Universe: Shelley's Impersonal God

That Shelley's thought, especially in his mature years, was deeply indebted to Platonism has been acknowledged by many critics with James A. Notopoulos's study *The Platonism of Shelley* perhaps best exemplifying this kind of reading.[177] Nonetheless, despite Shelley's language of Platonic transcendence, he is often taken at face value as an "atheist." Martin Priestman in *Romantic Atheism* describes him as without question "vociferously atheist."[178] This assumption of atheism becomes most problematic when it fits into larger secularization narratives, such as that of M.H. Abrams's foundational *Natural Supernaturalism,* which argues that the Romantics 'translated' Christian concepts into secular humanist terms.[179] In Charles Taylor's narrative of modernity, the entire movement of Romanticism constitutes a turn towards immanence away from transcendence and, therefore, a form of secularization.[180]

Even when scholars such as Notopolous or Earl Wasserman admit Shelley's Platonic inclination and longing for transcendence, Shelley's belief in God is denied,

---

[177] James Notopoulous, *The Platonism of Shelley* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1949).
[178] Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). One of Priestman's goals in the book is to increase the "sense of shock" regarding atheism as a real part of an anti-religious turn in Romanticism in opposition to accounts that would attempt to read it as liberalizing or reformative, 1-2. Priestman expresses frustration with readings that secretly re-Christianize Romanticism, often by misinterpreting, in his opinion, the use of scripture as a sign of covert religiosity. An example of the type of argument Priestman opposes would be David Jaspers' claim that Romanticism as a phenomenon in which the Bible's "authority within literature and art becomes ever more established" even as it is 'secularized.' See David Jaspers, *The Sacred and the Secular Canon in Romanticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 5.
[179] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971).
[180] Taylor argues that "[In Romanticism] there are often echoes here of a religious critique of modern, disengaged, unbelieving reason," yet the "sources of power are not transcendent. They are to be found in Nature, or in our own inner depths, or in both." There are "certain analogies to the religious reaction to the unbelieving Enlightenment…but they are views which intend to remain immanent, and are often as hostile, if not more so, to religion than to the disengaged ones." Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9-10.

since the Platonic absolute, that is, transcendent real Being convertible with Truth, Goodness and Beauty, is not understood to be God simply because it is not a person. Thus when Priestman writes, "atheism denotes the belief that there is no God" he gives us little more than a tautology, since the most important term in the sentence—"God"—has not been defined.[181] When God is taken to be an intervening person in the universe, Shelley's Platonizing can be interpreted as atheistic subtraction of doctrine or translation. "Secularization" when applied to the Romantics in Abrams's or Taylor's account, therefore, functions as a term for the degree to which an author's metaphysics deviates from that of orthodox Christianity. The misunderstanding goes farther when the Romantic author's difference from orthodoxy or rejection of institutional religion is virtually synonymized with a fall away from transcendence into immanence.

Secularization narratives thus tacitly assume Western Christianity to be theology itself before they write their narratives about the Romantics, such that the Romantic turn from Christianity becomes a turn from the transcendent. In so doing these narratives axiomatically assert a theological origin point and measure the degree of Romanticism's departure from it. Such an approach will necessarily occlude how a Romantic like Shelley formulated a radically different theology and unique conception of God, rather than merely rejecting the transcendent in favor of a 'secular' worldview indifferent to or hostile to religion, religion being understood as institutional and doctrinal. It is especially important to resist a definition of Shelley as an "atheist" in our current era in

[181] Priestman, 7.

which the term "atheism" has become increasingly associated with what D.B. Hart terms "some form of materialism or physicalism or, to use the term most widely preferred at present, naturalism."[182] We are in danger of mischaracterizing Shelley by continuing to refer to him as an "atheist" and, therefore, misunderstanding the manner in which his poetry aspires to reveal the transcendent and, in fact, appeals to it as that which might undo "codes of fraud and woe."[183]

2.1 Shelley's Vedic One in Mont Blanc: Towards a Theology of Power

I wish to make two counterintuitive claims about Shelley through a theological reading of *Mont Blanc*, a poem often misread as exemplifying Shelley's atheist secularism: First, Shelley's Platonic language in that poem and elsewhere reveals a commitment to a transcendent real absolute that ought to be properly characterized as "God." My second claim is more shocking: Shelley's God, termed "the One" or "Power" and "the one mind" even more closely resembles "the One" of Advaita Vedantic Hinduism than it does the One of Neoplatonism, though one may draw similarities between Plotinus's *Enneads* and the *Upanishads* sacred to Vedanta. To reveal the hidden God in *Mont Blanc* I will read the poem in the context of Shelley's other writings on God and alongside the "Nasadiya Sukta" or the "Hymn of Creation" from the oldest of the *Vedas*, the *Rigveda,* as well as alongside minor selections from the *Upanishads*. In doing

---

[182] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 17. Though Hart is an Eastern Orthodox theologian, he responds to New Atheist naturalism by *expanding* the definition of "God" to the transcendent itself and then arguing negatively for the transcendent by revealing its only alternative (naturalism) to be philosophically incoherent.

[183] Percy Shelley, "Mont Blanc; Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," line 81. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

so, I do not wish to declare that Shelley was an Indologist or to amass from philological evidence proof that his beliefs derive from India. Rather, I wish to draw out Shelley's own theology through abstract comparison with Vedic philosophy, specifically Vedanta. Juxtaposing Shelley's ideas with Christian theology frames him negatively, that is, as an "atheist" denying doctrine.

Even those who challenge the secularization thesis, do so by contextualizing *Mont Blanc* within Christian discourse, not by reading it as an experience of a non-Christian God. Colin Jager writes, "a reading that sets itself the task of figuring out what beliefs or unbeliefs the poem expresses—tangles itself up in the question of religion, *even if the reading concludes that the poem 'expresses' atheism.*"[184] He adds, "atheism is a Christian concept" emerging from "shifts *within* Christianity."[185] Even Robert Ryan who comes closest to my reading, still refers to Shelley out of habit as an "atheist" in *The Romantic Reformation* even as he insists that Shelley, along with the other Romantics, sought to liberalize Christianity. Ryan writes, "In this sense, Shelley's atheism, his intolerance of all religion, can be seen as an expression of respect for a purer conception of divinity than most of the world was able or willing to imagine."[186]

---

[184] Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 614. Jager follows Charles Taylor in resisting an account of religion that reduces it to 'belief' and reads *Mont Blanc* as radical non-cognitivism. He perhaps overstates the case: "Is Shelley a Platonist? An idealist? A skeptic?...the poem insists that none of this matters," 623. While Jager is right to read Shelley's *Mont Blanc* as anti-rationalist or anti-cognitivist this stems, in my argument, from Shelley's poetic mysticism, since his experience of God *exceeds* rationality, not because it does not matter what the poem 'expresses.' In other words, the poem expresses the transcendent (God) *as* non-cognitive (i.e. extra-rational).
[185] Jager, 618.
[186] Robert Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195.

My goal is to resist the claim that Shelley liberalized Christianity by insisting that he instead desired to replace it with a different theology. I also wish to go into greater depth and precision with regards to Shelley's theology when most critics at best note his spirituality in passing, perhaps most obviously Ryan, who limits his commentary to the following: *Mont Blanc* is "one of the greatest religious poems of our literature" and "In 'Mont Blanc' Shelley emphasized the absolute otherness of supreme power in order to rescue the concept of divinity from anthropomorphisms that, in his view, have corrupted religion from the start."[187] This way Shelley could replace them with a notion of the "unknowable otherness of God."[188] Reading Shelley with Vedanta will function as a needed paradigm shift to remove us from the Christianity versus secularism problematic and the corresponding notion that Shelley merely wished to reform instead of replace Christianity. It will help to illumine, through positive comparison, what Shelley's God is, namely a God very much like Brahman, also termed "the One" in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* and this resemblance would stand even if Shelley had never heard of India.

He had, of course, heard of India and in 1812 requested from the reformer, writer, and bookseller Thomas 'Clio' Rickman copies of "[William] Robertson's Historical Disquisition on India [1791]" as well as the collected works of the well-known Indologist Sir William Jones, who acquired an interest in Hinduism while serving as a

[187] Ryan, 195.
[188] Ibid, 202.

judge in British Bengal.[189] Importantly, Jones displays in his writing what Martin Priestman calls an "enthusiastic empathy with Hinduism which fits well with Jones's liberal Whig background" even if his empathy had its "limits" and the "Hymns are crammed with cultural information new to Jones's readers" which does not simply use and distort Hinduism to serve a narrative affirming the superiority of England or Christianity.[190] In other words, Shelley could have genuinely learned something about Indian philosophy and mythology through them.

Though none have taken up a detailed examination, other scholars have noted the similarity between Shelley's metaphysics and that of Vedanta. H.G. Rawlinson writes of both Shelley and Wordsworth, "their pantheism is full of unconscious reminiscences of Hindu thought, which reached them through the medium of Neoplatonism. Nowhere is the Vedantic doctrine of Maya more magnificently propounded than in *Adonais.*"[191] Nigel Leask observes that "Shelley's interest in India transcends the level of biographical anecdote" and "much of his poetry led the nineteenth-century French orientalist Edgar Quinet to write, in his lecture notes on *Génie des religions*, 'Shelley completely Indian.'"[192] J.J. Clarke notes in *Oriental Enlightenment* that thought from "India…captured the minds and imagination of the Romantics" and "the primary intellectual impetus for the new orientalism lay not so much in

---

[189] Shelley to Clio Rickman, December 24, 1812. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1:344.
[190] Priestman, 49.
[191] H.G. Rawlinson, "India in European Literature and Thought" in *The Legacy of India*, ed. G.T. Garrat (New Delhi: Black & White, 2005), 33-4.
[192] Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 71.

disinterested scholarship as in the growing sense of disillusionment with prevailing European modes of thought and belief, on the one side Judeo-Christian whose spiritual traditions were proving unsatisfactory, and on the other the materialism and anti-religious stance of the Enlightenment which appeared to abolish the possibility of spirit altogether." He identifies, importantly, an association between Indian philosophy and Vedanta specifically (as opposed to say, a dualistic Indian philosophy like Samkhya): "Indian thought became selectively identified in the minds of European intellectuals with the monistic and idealist philosophy of the Vedanta, an attitude which inevitably gave rise to the myth of the exalted spirituality of India by contrast with the materialist West."[193] An Indian scholar based at the University of Calcutta goes as far as to assert that "The uncompromising monism which Shelley sought to develop during the latter part of his life, so reminiscent of Upanishadic ideas and imagery clearly indicates that the poet had, under the influence of Hindu thoughts and Hindu ideals deviated from his erstwhile teachers Plato and Berkeley."[194]

Before the theological significance of *Mont Blanc* can be drawn out, it is necessary to first briefly examine Shelley's thoughts about "God" both as a concept and as a word (he was careful to distinguish the two) so that we can understand what the terms "God" and "atheist" signified for him. In an early 1811 letter to his friend Jefferson Hogg,

---

[193] J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 54-5, 56. Clarke identifies Sir William Jones (1746-94) as a figure of influence. Jones served as judge on the Calcutta Supreme Court and translated a great number of Indian texts.

[194] Amiyakumar Sen, *Studies in Shelley* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1936), 269. Sen also argues that Shelley read Jones as early as 1811, since Shelley's description of Camdeo in an 1811 letter to Elizabeth Hitchener describes Camdeo as the "god of *mystic love*" which corresponds more to Jones's "Hymn to Camdeo" than's Southey's Camdeo, 248.

Shelley writes, "The word 'God' has been [and] will continue to be the source of numberless errors… it does not imply 'the Soul of the Universe the intelligent & necessarily beneficent actuating principle'—This I believe in." He adds, "I may not be able to adduce proofs, but I think that the leaf of a tree, the meanest insect on wh. we trample are in themselves arguments more conclusive than any which can be adduced that some vast intellect animates Infinity—If we disbelieve this, the strongest argument in support of the existence of a future state instantly becomes annihilated. I confess that I think Pope's 'all are but parts of one tremendous whole' something more than Poetry…"[195]

This tendency of mind was only to intensify in his later poetry and find its epitome in *Adonais* (1820) which declares without ambiguity that Keats "hath awakened from the dream of life…The One remains, the many change and pass"[196] and "He is made one with Nature…He is a portion of the loveliness."[197] Raymond Schwab notes in passing that in these lines (as well as the poem as a whole) Shelley is not interested in "exploiting a setting or extending a vocabulary" as Southey does in his Indian epic *The Curse of Kehama* (1810). Rather, in Shelley "a doctrine was sought within a new spiritual climate beyond the games of the imagination" and "One can not believe that the echo of Vedanta has not infused new life…"[198]

---

[195] Shelley to Hogg, December [*for* January] 3, 181[1]. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:35.
[196] Percy Shelley, "Adonais," line 52. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).
[197] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 42-3.
[198] Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 196.

It is clear from the above letter that Shelley's One or "Soul of the Universe" may be characterized as some kind of animating "intellect" but definitely not a person, much like the One of Vedanta. Curiously enough, Shelley's phrase the "Soul of the Universe" is the exact same phrase used by Juan Mascaró, translator of the *Upanishads*, to describe Brahman. Mascaró writes that the authors of the *Upanishads* show "their burning uplifting faith in the soul of man which is one with the Soul of the Universe."[199] This phrasing echoes the *Chandogya Upanishad's* statement: "an invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Atman. THOU ART THAT."[200] This true self beyond personhood is identified with transcendent consciousness (not ego-consciousness or self-consciousness) in the *Upanishads' Supreme Teaching*: "the Soul is Brahman, the Eternal. It is made of consciousness and mind: it is made of life and vision."[201] This Eternal of the *Upanishads* or what Shelley terms "vast intellect" or "Soul of the Universe" is not the fallen intellect of Plotinus that performs discursive analysis, and which must be transcended to unite with the One. It is the One, which is ultimately non-distinct from the true self and a positive consciousness beyond rationality not to be adduced by proofs. Ultimately, what Shelley offers is what Mascaró attributes to the authors of the *Upanishads*: a kind of poetic-mystical seeing, not to be confused with an argument from design or inference to God through reason.

Importantly, this "Soul of the Universe" or "the one Spirit" or "Power" persists as a transcendent real absolute even if the realm of becoming is infinite in both

---

[199] Juan Mascaró, introduction to *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 43.
[200] Upanishads, 117.
[201] Ibid, 139.

directions and cyclical, since the One is the atemporal and aspatial ground of becoming which "wields the world with never wearied love / Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above" as Shelley writes in *Adonais*.[202] This is crucial to mention, since Shelley understood Deism to be a belief in a demiurgic creator who begins a universe separate from 'him' in a specific moment. This distinction is made in the supposedly arch-atheistic *Queen Mab* (1812) in which Shelley footnotes the fairy's declaration "There is no God!" with "This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken."[203] Shelley rejects the title "Deist" since he finds Deism still too anthropomorphic and incompatible with a belief in an eternal or cyclical universe. Shelley's impersonal One, by contrast, exists in an eternal and cyclical universe which is non-distinct from it.

This view of Deism appears in Shelley's dialogue *A Refutation of Deism* (1814), which stages an argument between a rationalist Deist Theosophus and a Christian Eusebes in which the Deist's arguments, later refuted by the Christian, include an inference to God as a designer (watchmaker) from the evidence of design (the watch), the fitness of things for their ends, a benevolent creator implied by harmonious natural order, and the existence of motion. The argument based on motion includes a note by Shelley citing the unitarian natural theologian William Paley, who also provided the watchmaker analogy Shelley's Deist utilizes. In fact, most of the Deist's arguments derive from Paley's arguments in *Natural Theology* (1802). This is worth emphasizing,

---

[202] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 377-8.
[203] Shelley, "Queen Mab," line 13. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

since Paley was a strong *Christian* apologist, something Shelley was obviously aware of, since he also cites Paley's apologetic text *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794) in the same dialogue. Even though Shelley's two interlocutors consist of a Deist and a Christian, Shelley attributes Paleyian arguments to the *Deist*, not the Christian. Thus, Shelley conflates Deism with natural theology. Deism, in Shelley's account, does not radically redefine the concept of "God" found in Christianity but merely subtracts doctrine and then attempts to replace fideistic religion with rationalism. The Christian in the dialogue refutes the Deist's natural theology only to convince the Deist that he ought to embrace Christianity against reason since doing so is the only alternative to nihilism. Ultimately, the dialogue ends up leaving us theologically directionless, since it reveals the three positions under consideration (nihilism, revelation and rationalism) to all be inadequate.[204]

Thus, it makes sense why Shelley called himself an atheist even when his prose and poetry insists on the existence of the transcendent One. For Shelley, the Deist considers God to be a person and implies that 'he' is some sort of efficient cause, that is, a deliberate designer acting as first billiard ball necessary to set in motion a self-sustaining mechanism. "Everything which begins to exist must have a cause: every combination conspiring to an end implies intelligence," states Theosophus the Deist.[205] For the Deist, the term "intelligence" does not signify the essence of existence or soul of the universe. It implies a self-aware thinking person and it implies an exact beginning to

---

[204] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Refutation of Deism," in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E.B. Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1:93-123.
[205] Shelley, "A Refutation of Deism," 112.

the universe coupled with teleological and harmonious order. The Deist's biggest mistake, however, as the Christian emphasizes in the dialogue, is not to be found within any individual argument the Deist makes. Rather, his error consists in the very urge to reach God through discursive rationality. God, for the Deist, is very much like him or, as the Christian Eusebes states, "The God of the rational Theosophis is a vast and wise animal."[206]

From Shelley's perspective Deism and Christianity are not sufficiently transcendent, since they make God a person. Shelley writes in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener, "Southey agrees in my idea of Deity, the mass of infinite intelligence. I, you & he are constituent parts of this immeasurable whole.—What is now to be thought of Jesus Christs divinity.—To me it appears clear as day that it is a falsehood of human-kind." He then cautions Hitchener, "Love God if thou wilt…but recollect *what* God is." The use of an italicized "what" instead of "who" is telling. The same letter hopes to undermine Deism by stating "life is infinite," followed by the question "How, on this hypothesis are we to arrive at a first cause?" It now makes sense why Shelley refused to align himself with Deism though he states in the same letter that the Deity is a unifying "mass of infinite intelligence."[207] Clearly, Shelley associated "theism," including Deism, with a belief in a temporal beginning to a natural universe caused by a supernatural anthropomorphic mind distinct from that universe. In contrast, Shelley merges

[206] Ibid, 121.
[207] Shelley to Elizabeth Hitchener, January 2 1811 [for 1812], *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:215.

supernatural with natural and insists on the eternality of the universe as phenomenal manifestation of the One.

Shelley's God, like "the One" of Vedanta, is an impersonal and transcendent absolute manifest as *maya* (universe) and knowable only through an apophatic poetic-mystical intuition that transcends both discursive reason and empirical sense-impression. Shelley's theology and concordant epistemology reject not only Christianity, but also Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism, both of which Shelley associated with Deism and natural theology. Thus, Shelley's self-declared title of "atheist" does not so much signal his denial of God, as much as it signals his disassociation from Christianity as theology, Christianity as political and moral oppressor, and Deism as stripped-down Christianity grounded in Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism. In fact, Shelley's religiosity or spirituality, if you prefer that term, was so palpable that even the middle-aged conservative Southey did not take Shelley at face value as an atheist since, as Shelley told Hitchener, "I have lately had some conversation with Southey which has elicited my true opinions of God—he says I ought not to call myself an Atheist, since in reality I believe the Universe is God."[208] Shelley's statement might as well have come from the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* which declares, "God is in truth the whole universe" and "inmost soul of all."[209]

Nonetheless, since Shelley's One is not personal, it becomes easy to mistake him for an atheist. The One is an it not a he, and can never be addressed or petitioned,

---

[208] Ibid.
[209] *Upanishads*, 90.

pleased or displeased. It neither rewards nor punishes. It does not start up the universe at a particular moment nor does it act as a guiding providence to direct the universe towards a predetermined end, nor does it violate its own 'laws' through miracles. Additionally, Shelley's One, like Brahman is a positive, though ineffable, Absolute beyond multiplicity, transcendent to subject and object distinction, and entirely removed from space-time, which may be eternal without jeopardizing the One as ultimate ground of existence as such. Though becoming is its manifestation, the One is ontologically prior to becoming—it is the "Power" that is there in Mont Blanc: the transcendent rendered immanently present as Universe in an endless cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction. "The Word OM," which combines in a single sound the ideas of creation, preservation, and destruction is, as the *Prasna Upanishad* states, "the transcendent and immanent Brahman the Spirit Supreme."[210] Brahman, like Shelley's God, is both beyond the universe and within it as an energy not an act. Martin Priestman notes that William Jones, whom Shelley had read, suggests in his "Hymn to Narayena" that the Indian "'sublime view' of creation as 'rather an *energy*, than a *work*' has Egyptian, Persian, Orphic, and Platonic analogues, and [Jones] presents it as the common property of the 'wisest' ancients and 'most enlightened among the moderns.'"[211] Indeed, the *Katha Upanishad* characterizes Brahman as passionate energy pervading all things, stating that the "whole universe comes from him and his life burns through the whole universe"

[210] Ibid, 73.
[211] Priestman, 71.

and the "Spirit, though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside."[212]

Alternatively, we might say that for Shelley and for Vedanta, the universe is the symbol of God in the Coleridgean sense of symbol, being both an image of the transcendent One and its real presence. The "one mind" does not involve the "I" of self-consciousness. It reduces neither to ego nor to the sum of transitory mental events. Rather, Shelley's "one mind," as he calls it in his essay "On Life" (1819), like the One of Vedanta, pervades existence as absolute Consciousness convertible with Being. God is as the *Prasna Upanishad* states, "the Eternal among the things that pass away, pure Consciousness of conscious beings, the One…"[213]

Mont Blanc serves as an excellent case study for Shelley's theology since the poem, as I have already mentioned, is taken as an example of Shelleyan secularism and for seemingly good reason. The mountain was typically understood as evidence for the creator by tourists with Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sunrise" constituting a notable example. As Ryan points out, *Mont Blanc* is "in refutation of the argument from design."[214] Shelley obviously rejected this tradition, though not because he disavows the transcendent (God) but because he disavows the inference from design to a creative personality. Nonetheless, *Mont Blanc* is taken by scholars to be evidence of Shelley's skeptical or idealist atheist replacement for conventional piety. Charles Vivian, an influential early reader of the poem, writes, "Shelley's theory of knowledge at this time

---

[212] *Upanishads*, 64.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ryan, 198.

was a compromise between empiricism and idealism; he was, so to speak, half an empiricist and half an idealist."[215] Earl Wasserman states that in "beholding the oneness and immediacy of the scene at Mont Blanc and experiencing the identity of his mind with the world it perceived" Shelley gives an "atheistic rendering of Berkeley." He adds, "In effect, Shelley's metaphysical speculations recapitulate the course of eighteenth-century empiricism and result in a special brand of idealism rooted in a persistent epistemological skepticism" which Wasserman later terms "phenomenalism." [216] Even as Ryan reads *Mont Blanc* as a religious poem, he still describes *Mont Blanc* as at best "agnostic" in virtue of its skepticism and Berkeleyan idealism.[217]

Yet, such readings impose onto Shelley a distinction I believe Shelley wishes to transcend through his concept of the one mind. Shelley's God, like Brahman, resolves the division between subject (understood as self-conscious ego) and object (understood as external matter knowable through sense-impression). By conceiving of "the one mind," as unifying thoughts and things Shelley defines God as a transcendent real absolute that collapses the perceived difference between realism and idealism. Though Wasserman acknowledges what he terms the "implicitly religious"[218] character of *Mont Blanc*, he nonetheless deems Shelley a secularizing atheist, since Wasserman remains

---

[215] Charles Vivian, "The One 'Mont Blanc,'" *Keats-Shelley* 4 (Winter 1955): 55-65. Vivian treats "Mont Blanc," as halfway point between Shelley's early empiricism and his later idealism: *Mont Blanc* was different from "the thoroughgoing empiricism of Queen Mab; and it was different from his later position, the thoroughgoing idealism of *Prometheus Unbound*," 55.
[216] Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 136-8.
[217] Ryan writes that "from the start of the poem he has insisted in a Berkeleyan manner that his own mind substantiates whatever he seems to perceive in this landscape…" and "…belief in a transcendent order is possible, but it must be tendered carefully, indeed skeptically…" Ryan also suggests that Shelley's skepticism might derive from Plato, 201-2.
[218] Wasserman, 238.

committed, as many readers do, to the definition of God Shelley rejects, namely the Creator-agent responsible for the 'beginning' of a finite universe which is separate from him.

Since I will be likening Shelley's God to the One of Vedic philosophy, it is worth giving a sample of how God is conceptualized in the *Vedas*.[219] The *Rig Veda* (10:129) or the "Hymn to Creation" is short enough to read in full:

> "Nor aught nor naught existed; yon bright sky
> Was not, nor heaven's broad woof outstretched above.
> What covered all? what sheltered? what concealed?
> Was it the water's fathomless abyss?
> There was not death - hence was there naught immortal,
> There was no confine betwixt day and night;
> The only One breathed breathless in itself,
> Other than it there nothing since has been.
> Darkness there was, and all at first was veiled
> In gloom profound, - an ocean without light. -
> The germ that still lay covered in the husk
> Burst forth, one nature, from the fervent heat.
> Then first came Love upon it, the new spring
> Of mind - yea, poets in their hearts discerned,
> Pondering, this bond between created things
> And uncreated. Comes this spark from earth,
> Piercing and all-pervading, or from heaven?
> Then seeds were sown, and mighty power arose -
> Nature below, and Power and Will above.

[219] Someone may wonder why I do not bring the *Bhagavad Gita* into my discussion of Shelley. For one thing this text was written about 1500 years after the Rigveda well after the development of institutionalized Hinduism. Thus, the *Gita* is concerned not just with mystical philosophy, but with affirming social hierarchies and obligations that Shelley would have rebuked, such as the caste system. Shelley seems more aligned with an early Vedic sensibility in which *rishis* (Poets) commune with the divine individually through Nature. In the *Gita*, for example, Arjuna laments (rather misogynistically) to Krishna, "When unrighteous disorder prevails, women sin and are impure; and when women are not pure, Krishna, there is disorder of castes, social confusion." Krishna chastises Arjuna's despair, but not Arjuna's social values. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 7.

Who knows the secret? who proclaimed it here,
Whence, whence this manifold creation sprang? -
The gods themselves came later into being. -
Who knows from whence this great creation sprang? -
He from whom all this great creation came.
Whether his will created or was mute,
The Most High seer that is in highest heaven,
He knows it, - or perchance e'en He knows not."[220]

I do not hope to exhaustively analyze this difficult Hymn, but I would like to make a few observations about how the "Nasadiya Sukta" conceives of "God" and the experience of God that I believe are akin to how Shelley does. The One in the "Nasadiya Sukta" and in *Mont Blanc* may be characterized as impersonal, extra-rational, transcendent real Absolute manifest as universe. As ground of becoming, this One is outside time and space and, thus, there is no moment in time in which it 'begins.' Nonetheless, it encompasses all things, since "other than it there nothing since has been." Even "the gods," as the Hymn tells us, come later than creation and the god that sits in highest heaven, that is, the "Most High" seer may not even know the nature of the transcendent One. Creation or, more properly, manifestation, is also clouded in unknowing, since creation concerns the origin of existence as such, not a beginning in time. Thus, the question of the universe's beginning or duration is misleading, since the universe may just as well be eternal or even cyclical, extending infinitely forwards and backwards in time, without compromising the higher reality of the One as ultimate ground of existence outside of space-time. Not only is Brahman non-distinct from the Universe, but it is entirely possible for the universe to be without beginning without

[220] The translation here is from Max Müller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1860), 564.

compromising the existence of Brahman/the One/God. This is, in fact, the exact theological position held by the Indian theologian Ramanuja (tenth to eleventh century), since it makes perfect sense to him to suppose the universe is eternal if it is indeed the phenomenal manifestation of the infinite Brahman.[221]

The creation hymn's language testifies to intuitionism and apophaticism by refusing to state directly and literally anything about God's nature. Instead, it uses double negation—the title translates to "not the not-existent," coincidences of opposites—there is no "confine betwixt day and night"—paradox—"the only One breathed breathless"—and a persistent interrogative mode—"Who knows from whence this great creation sprang?" Yet, this rhetoric does not undermine belief in God or encourage skepticism but rather reveals God as in excess of discursive rationality. As the *Katha Upanishad* states, God is "eternal, unchangeable, and without beginning or end: indeed above reasoning."[222] God is "higher than the highest thoughts, in truth above all thought."[223]

Finally, the imagery of the Hymn reveals its conception of the One. Oceanic depth and breath image God as emanating forth and sustaining a realm of becoming which participates in It, as water and wind contain change within a larger stable medium. Imagery of veiling and darkness further characterizes the ascent to God as apophatic since God's infinite excess appears to the finite mind much like the ocean depths: a darkness unfathomable. Imagery of heat and force, sparking, and piercing in

---

[221] Hart, 102.
[222] *Upanishads*, 61.
[223] *Upanishads*, 58.

the Hymn characterizes God's manifestation as one of power that is at once generative and destructive. The One of the Hymn might as well be described by Shelley's lines from *Mont Blanc*:

> "Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
> Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene;
> Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
> Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
> Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,"[224]

Despite the emphasis on infinity, force, and unearthly inaccessibility, this One, in grounding existence, gives rise to Love and mind as the Hymn states. The "Nasadiya Sukta" does not yet give us a concept of Atman, the idea of true self or soul that is non-distinct from Brahman. This is a concept to be elaborated on in the *Upanishads* and it is crucial to Vedanta. Yet it is important to mention here. Atman, in virtue of its identity with Brahman, consists of consciousness above self-consciousness. To reach it, one must go beyond the 'I.' As the *Katha Upanishad* states, "The light of the Atman, the Spirit, is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle" and is "beyond reason."[225] This Atman-Brahman equivalence is worth keeping in mind when we consider Shelley's idea of "the one mind," as he terms it in his essay "On Life"[226] since Shelley's "one mind" consists of a kind of consciousness beyond self-consciousness that

---

[224] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 60-4.
[225] *Upanishads*, 61.
[226] Shelley writes, "the existence of distinct individual minds…is likewise found to be a delusion. The words *I*, *you*, and *they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind." Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On Life," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), 508.

pervades all beings and unites them. It is the "one mind" that Shelley describes in the opening stanza of *Mont Blanc*:

> "The everlasting universe of things
> Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
> Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
> Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
> The source of human thought its tribute brings
> Of waters—with a sound but half its own,
> Such as a feeble brook will oft assume,
> In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
> Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
> Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
> Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves."[227]

Shelley's description of the universe, including the mind which converges with that universe, consists of water imagery, as does the One of the Creation Hymn, an imagery which conveys a darkness or "gloom" belonging to the unfathomable depths of transcendent Being as well as the monistic unity in which flux inheres. The seeming division between external and internal, mind and world, is lost as subject and object merge in a single oceanic mass of the one mind. Wasserman observes an apparent paradox in the language: "By defining the universe as constituted of things rather than of thoughts and then by predicating the existence of those things exclusively in mind, Shelley formulated a syntax which, by fusing the externalizing subject (universe of things) and the internalizing predicate (flows through the mind), denies both that 'things' are mental fictions and that there is any real distinction between thing and thought."[228] For Wasserman, "The paradox of Shelley's ontological circle is sustained by the imagery and syntax: mind is the center to which everything must be referred, and

[227] "Mont Blanc," lines 1-11.
[228] Wasserman, 222.

yet the mind is also the circle within which everything is contained."[229] Thus, for Shelley, "reality is neither the subjective impression nor the external thing, but the active and irresolvable mental tension between the two."[230]

Yet, if we take the "everlasting universe of things" to subsume human mind and the rest of nature in an absolute consciousness beyond the 'I', then the paradoxical syntax identified by Wasserman has a similar effect to the riddles of the "Nasadiya Sukta." Shelley points to a transcendent reality through paradox. His language does not aim to trap us in an ontological circle, but to go beyond the rift between subject and object which is the peril of empiricism and idealism alike. In place of both external reality and subjectivism, Shelley offers instead an extra-rational intuition of the one mind as absolute beyond ego and world. The empiricism/idealism tension that scholars situate Shelley's poem in emerges only when the poem is taken to portray mind as a subject encountering an object, the "I" inside peering upon the outer and shaping it.

This is a division which the one mind transcends. For Shelley, all is as the mind perceives only because everything is mind; Being and Consciousness are convertible. When mind is misunderstood to be the mind of the self-aware subject and not the "vast intellect" animating Infinity, then the poem appears idealist, since the problem of how the 'I' comes to know what is external to it is sustained. Instead, we ought to compare Shelley's "vast intellect" to what is said in the *Chandogya Upanishad* about God: "in the inner world Brahman is consciousness; and we should consider that in the outer world

---

[229] Ibid, 223.
[230] Ibid, 227.

Brahman is space. These are the two meditations."[231] Likewise, what appears to be empirical "skepticism" in Shelley ought instead to be read as a rejection of empiricism. Shelley does not indicate that we ought to give up on knowledge that falls outside the bounds of sense-impression, rather he shows that higher knowledge will not be obtainable from sense-impression which, again, relies on a dualism between 'I' and external objects.

Shelley's "everlasting universe" can instead be read as a reconciliation of the real and the ideal in the One, which is indistinguishable from the self; external and internal turn out to be illusions. We may compare this qualified monism to the *Supreme Teaching* of the *Upanishads*:

> "There the Spirit knows not, yet knowing not he knows. How could the Spirit not know if he is the All? But there is no duality there, nothing apart for him to know. For only where there seems to be a duality, there one sees another, one feels another's perfume, one tastes another, one speaks to another, one listens to another, one touches another and one knows another. But in the ocean of Spirit the seer is alone beholding his own immensity. This is the world of Brahman…"[232]

Brahman, like Shelley's "one mind" becomes paradox when sundered into duality. It is irrelevant to worry over whether the mind is shaping what it takes in or if the mind is determined by what is without, since "mind," understood as transcendent absolute in which there is no distinction, consists of positive unity, a unity imaged consistently in Vedic thought and in Shelley as oceanic mass. Thus, Shelley's closest insight into the One in *Mont Blanc* appears in a trance which, though not the perfect

---

[231] *Upanishads*, 115.
[232] *Upanishads*, 137.

unity with the absolute that he desires, nonetheless brackets his own experience of duality: "I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / To muse on my own separate fantasy."[233] The lines recall Shelley's description of reverie as an experience of absorption into the One: "Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being."[234] To further emphasize the collapse of subject and object (i.e. identity of soul and God) in reverie, he describes the sensation of absorption from both directions (self into universe and universe into self). It is only in the non-discursive space of the imagination that mystic insight occurs. Thus, he searches, as the next half of the stanza:

> "In the still cave of the witch Poesy,
> Seeking among the shadows that pass by
> Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,
> Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast
> From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!"[235]

Never does Shelley doubt "thou art there!" as he exclaims in the last line, a preview to the later statement "the Power is there."[236] Shelley consistently affirms the reality of the transcendent while denying the capability of sense-impression alone to reach it. Vivian notes this feature when he observes that Shelley "had an intuitive awareness of something permanent, something apart from the flux of sense experience" and "Mont Blanc symbolizes this principle of permanence."[237] Despite acknowledging

---

[233] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 35-6.
[234] "On Life," 507.
[235] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 44-8.
[236] Ibid, line 127.
[237] Vivian, 56.

that "The Principle of Permanence is not manifested to mortal man, in the midst of his ever-changing sensations, except by intuition" Vivian stops himself from crossing into theology by psychologizing. The poem concerns "the mind and its mystery" and the "ghosts" are not symbols of an elusive God, but the "elusive traces of the mind's mysterious operations: shadows of subliminal mental activity, and ghosts—i.e., reflections or Lockean 'ideas'—of 'all things that are' in the objective external world."[238] On the contrary, this mysterious principle of permanence Shelley searches for, is unseen Power itself, not the mystery of his own psyche. Mind, for Shelley, has a metaphysical significance, not merely a psychological one. The "shade of thee" and "Ghosts of all things that are" are the traces of the unseen transcendent which the mind has access to in virtue of its participation in absolute Mind. Thus, we also see in these lines Shelley's characteristic insistence on an inevitable return to the One, since these shadows of the absolute will be recalled by the "breast / From which they fled." The Platonic imagery of shadows on a cave wall does not suggest that the subject constitutes reality (idealism) as much as it suggests the limitations of the empirical approach. All that can be found by a subject searching amidst sense-impressions are phantoms and faint images, that is, symbols which gain meaning only when one leaves empiricism behind and takes the mystical path of the skylark.

This One persists beyond becoming, just as the mountain stands beneath the "waterfalls" which "leap for ever" and the "river" which "ceaselessly bursts and raves."

[238] Ibid, 61.

Change or life is characterized by tumult and colliding forces. Mont Blanc contains a "flood of ruin."[239] where "glaciers creep / Like snakes"[240] and uninhabitable wastes stretch "peopled by the storms alone"[241]or by avalanches which leave "mangled soil" and trees "Branchless and shatter'd."[242] The mountain is a place where "woods and winds contend."[243] Nonetheless, this sublime imagery of woods and winds does not describe naturalistic conflict but suggests a metaphysical commingling of the insubstantial (wind) with the substantial (trees) and hints at a transcendent Power which underlies the universe of contending forces. This is further evident in the imagery of the second stanza which describes the mountain trees as a "brood of pines" which cling like:

> "Children of elder time, in whose devotion
> The chainless winds still come and ever came
> To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
> To hear—an old and solemn harmony;"[244]

We get the sense that nature, with all its potential for destruction, nonetheless has the potential to inspire devotion—indeed the winds express "devotion" to the pines by seeking to "drink their odours." It is in synesthetic sensuous delight or aesthetic feeling that prayer to the transcendent is made. It is as if all nature sings a liturgy, an "old and solemn harmony" to sublime and impersonal Power, that is, Brahman who "burns through the whole universe."[245] The pines and chainless winds that "ever came" and which date back to "elder time," point towards the One as incomprehensible

---

[239] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," line 107.
[240] Ibid, lines 100-1.
[241] Ibid, line 67.
[242] Ibid, 110-11.
[243] Ibid, line 10.
[244] Ibid, lines 20-4.
[245] *Upanishads*, 64.

primordial origin of becoming. Change and force, including destruction, do not testify to the chaos of a godless universe, but are the expression of the unknowable God manifest as universe. Like the "Nasadiya Sukta", when faced only with inscrutable symbols, one cannot make declarations about transcendent origin, but only ponder it in the interrogative, as the following lines do:

> "Ghastly, and scarr'd, and riven.—Is this the scene
> Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
> Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
> Of fire envelop once this silent snow?"[246]

To these questions Shelley answers in *Mont Blanc* in the same manner as the "Nasadiya Sukta": "None can reply—all seems eternal now."[247] Yet, much like the Vedic hymn, unknowability for Shelley is only an invitation to an apophatic ascent and mysticism, not a skeptical closure. Thus, he writes:

> "The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
> Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
> So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
> But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd."[248]

Nonetheless, the transcendent One cannot be seen directly but through the veil of becoming symbolized by the "etherial waterfall, whose veil / Robes some unsculptur'd image;"[249] Shelley's strongest assertion of faith, however, appears in the final stanza:

---

[246] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 71-4.
[247] Ibid, line 75.
[248] Ibid, lines 76-9.
[249] Ibid, lines 26-7.

"Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,
The still and solemn power of many sights,
And many sounds, and much of life and death.
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them. Winds contend
Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
Over the snow."[250]

These lines echo the "Nasadiya Sukta": a "mighty power arose - / Nature below, and Power and Will above" and the *Katha Upanishad* which declares, the One is "Truth and Power."[251] Mont Blanc, like the "only One which breathed breathless in itself" emanates forth Nature while itself remaining impassable and self-contained. Breath imagery also invokes a sense of the One animating existence in this poem as in the Nasadiya Sukta: the winds "heap the snow with breath." Mont Blanc stands as the "still and solemn" God, the Unchanging above a universe of change, the One beyond the many. It is the apophatic absolute which "none beholds" cloistered in self-contained solitude. The One's supra-sensory and supra-rational nature lead to an imagery of coincidences of opposites in the stanza: life and death; darkness and light; heat and cold; stillness and dynamism; strength and fragility; apocalyptic flash and glacial gradualism. Cosmic and insubstantial star-beams mingle with the material change symbolized by the heaping piles of snow that will repeat the endless natural cycle of avalanche and evaporation.

---

[250] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 127-39.
[251] *Upanishads*, 63.

Mont Blanc is an abiding simplicity out of which multiplicity emerges; it is the source of many "sights and sounds" and the ethereal silence that the ear hears when it encounters the sound of the infinite. It remains supernaturally detached, yet grounds becoming:

> "All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
> Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.
> Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,
> Remote, serene, and inaccessible."[252]

Mont Blanc is the One that breathes breathless, while the "things" of becoming "breathe with toil and sound" passing through "death and birth." In addition to breath imagery, "subside, and swell" returns us to oceanic imagery and "revolve" adds a wheel-like image reminiscent of endless cyclicity. Mont Blanc is no beneficent personality to whom one can petition or expect guidance. It is silent, indifferent, profoundly distant, and even dangerous. It is transcendent Power itself rendered wholly immanent in Nature. Power abides by itself as pure Being, producing in time generative destruction and destructive creation.

To gaze upon Mont Blanc as it "gleams on high" is not to stare into an atheistic void or to refuse all insight through radical skepticism. Mont Blanc is not a vision of the great nothingness lying beneath human perception as we wrongly assign interpretability and meaning to things that have none. Shelley is unambiguously affirmative. Even if it stands at a remove, the speaker knows at the very least: the Power is there. Vivian is right, though he doesn't realize the theological significance of his assertion: "Shelley

[252] Ibid, lines 96-7.

assures himself, the Principle does have being… 'the power is there'—the power of or the Principle behind the sights and sounds…the intuition represented by the Mont Blanc symbol is a valid insight."[253] Shelley knows Power to be real because he has the kind of knowledge that the "poets in their hearts discerned," as the "Nasadiya Sukta" states. In Vedanta and in Shelley Poetic activity is theology, since it is the poets who are, as the Hymn tells us, "Pondering, this bond between created things / And uncreated."

The theological significance of the line "The Power is there" most fully appears only through intertextual reading. To give a few important and brief examples: In *Adonais* Shelley synonymizes "Power" with "the One" since Keats's "presence" is "Spreading itself where'er that Power may move / Which has withdrawn his being to its own."[254] The opening lines to "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" read: "The awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen among us;"[255]The most telling connection, however, between "Power" and the idea of God appears in Shelley's short little-known essay "On Christianity"[256] composed around 1817 in which Shelley uses Christ as a proxy to state, "There is a power by which we are surrounded" and "This power is God."[257] Furthermore, "the word God according to the acceptation of Jesus Christ" is "the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the

---

[253] Vivian, 64.
[254] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 375-6.
[255] Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," line 92. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).
[256] One of the few sustained analyses of this essay is given by Michael Scrivener who claims that it is a "project of finding appropriate ways to express his libertarian ideas" and "undermine Christianity and replace it with an uncompromising humanism." Thus, Scrivener reads the fragment politically and not theologically. See Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton UP: 1982), 90-2.
[257] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On Christianity," in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E.B. Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 252.

circle of existing things. It is important to observe that the author of the Christian system had a conception widely differing from the gross imaginations of the vulgar relatively to the ruling Power of the Universe. He every where represents this power as something mysteriously and illimitably pervading the frame of things. Neither do his doctrines practically assume any proposition which they theoretically deny. They do not represent God as a limitless and inconceivable mystery affirming at the same time his existence as a being subject to passion…"[258]

Such lines enable an appreciation of the theological significance of "the Power is there." In this statement Shelley declares his vision of the "Soul of the Universe," his experience of God.

> "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?"[259]

Ultimately, Shelley's final rhetorical question is no more 'skeptical' than the "Nasadiya Sukta" when it asks, "Who knows the secret? who proclaimed it here, / Whence, whence this manifold creation sprang? - / The gods themselves came later into being. - /Who knows from whence this great creation sprang? –" Like the anonymous authors of the *Rig Veda*, Shelley's ponderous unknowing rejects one kind of certainty only so that his poetic mysticism can take apophatic flight. Both Shelley and the Hymn illustrate that the best language can do is point beyond itself.

---

[258] Shelley, "On Christianity," 250.
[259] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 138-44.

In his final question Shelley cautions us that the price of disavowing the intuition that "the Power is there" is to turn all to mere "vacancy." As Vivian writes, "If no human imaginings ever went this far, there would be no apprehension of the Principle; and without this apprehension no ultimate meaning would be perceived in anything."[260] The transcendent remains a "secret" in the "strength of things" and the universe—"earth" and "stars" and "sea"—either testifies to it or we mislead ourselves. It is one thing for God's radical transcendence to appear as "silence and solitude" to the finite mind and another for there to be nothingness beyond our illusions. If there were not a harmony between intuition and the real, then we would be trapped in a tragically delusive solipsism and the divine we think we sense in Nature might as well be a blank. As Frances Ferguson notes, it is impossible to see Mont Blanc as blankness: "for all his efforts to counter the myth of natural religion…Shelley does not destroy the mountain's symbolic value."[261] Yet, this is not because *Mont Blanc* is a humanist allegory for the inevitability of human consciousness to assign meaning and see relationship with the world, as Ferguson reads it, but because meaning is real and the mind participates in it through the one mind.

Far from merely rebelling against religion, Shelley redefines the very meaning of "God." The poem evinces a spirituality unintelligible from a Western Christian standpoint, but entirely intuitive from an Eastern Vedic one. Like the One of the Nasadiya Sukta this God is removed and knowable only in the intuition of poetic vision

---

[260] Vivian, 65.

[261] Frances Ferguson, "Shelley's *Mont Blanc*: What the Mountain Said," in *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism,* eds. Karl Kroeber and Gene W. Ruoff (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 1993) 335-44 (336).

and approached through questions not declarations. Mont Blanc's "unresting sound"[262] is the OM: It at once symbolizes creation in its unknowable primordiality, preservation in its snowy serenity, and destruction in its avalanches, glaciers, and abyssal ravines. Its indifference to humanity is not a testament to atheism proper, but to the impersonal transcendence of the One for which all change is nothing. It is God the person Shelley denies, whether 'he' is the "creator" of the Deists setting in motion a mechanism he retreats from or the god-man Christ. Thus, if by "atheism" we mean genuine philosophical atheism, Shelley is no atheist, as even the conservative Southey noted, for Shelley finds the universe to be the appearance of the transcendent and ineffable One, the essence behind the veil of existence.

2.2 The Shelleyan Theology Extended: Power is Love is Beauty in Adonais

While remaining equally religious, *Adonais* reveals different aspects of Shelley's theology than does *Mont Blanc*. It is also Shelley's most explicit commitment to a notion of the One and, for that reason, features at the center of many debates about Shelley's Platonism and his commitment to transcendence. *Mont Blanc* does characterize the absolute as the Good and True, since the mountain has the power to undo "codes of fraud and woe" for those with the right vision (Poets), but it primarily portrays God as apophatic, serenely transcendent One that may at any moment upheave matter in an endless cycle of destruction and rebirth. While still acknowledging the transcendent's might, the vision of God in *Adonais* downplays this notion of Power as overwhelming

[262] Shelley, "Mont Blanc," line 33.

force to emphasize the One's softer aspects. This is no indication that Shelley changed his definition of God. Rather, *Adonais* reveals that he expands his concept of the absolute to incorporate Love and Beauty into Power. Power encompasses the dancing Shiva that leaves Mont Blanc branchless and shattered, as well as the gentle hand of Parvati who lifts each flower to receive the sun. Despite their different atmospheres, the two poems remain consistent in their admixture of Neoplatonic and Vedic sensibilities. Like *Mont Blanc*, *Adonais* posits a version of qualified monism which asserts that the Universe is the manifestation of the One and that the real self (*atman*) is identical with God, not the individual ego. Power is convertible with Love, understood as *Eros*, since Love (*Eros*) is, for Shelley, a grounding energy of animated existence and an expression of the One's internal dynamism. As the irradiation of the Good, Beauty or the Beloved acts as goal and motivation of *Eros*, the unitive drive, and, therefore, is inseparable from Love and Power. Lastly, the two poems share the same epistemology. As in *Mont Blanc*, the knowledge of God in *Adonais* derives from a poetic-mystical intuition, accessible only through the imagination, not through discursive reason or empirical induction.

The interpretive history of *Adonais* consists largely of an early to mid-twentieth century Platonic reading, exemplified by scholars like Carl Grabo and Earl Wasserman, followed by a late twentieth-century rejection of the Platonic reading, usually in favor of a purely immanent reading. This reaction is exemplified by scholars like Kenneth Neill Cameron and Michael Scrivener, both of whom insist adamantly that Shelley's metaphysics is materialist and that Shelley segregated poetry from philosophy. Some more contemporary scholars are divided in their response. Donald Reiman, for example,

states that Shelley posits an "idealistic monism."[263] His "doubt as to what constitutes reality" when "ordinary human cognitive faculties are untrustworthy" leads him to conclude that "earthly existence is illusory, and moments of imaginative inspiration are glimpses into a reality in which the Good, the True, and the Beautiful exist in perfection." At the same time, Reiman immanentizes *Adonais* by stating that the poem merely celebrates "the eternity of art" because the "dead poet will live to inspire others."[264] For the most part, the contemporary consensus on *Adonais* is anti-Platonic and anti-theological, with one of the few exceptions being Robert Ryan, who reads Shelley's assertion of atheism as indicative of his "respect for a purer conception of divinity," though Ryan is here referring to *Mont Blanc*, not *Adonais*.[265] Ryan is right, nonetheless, to assert that it was "conventional and coercive religiosity that provoked Shelley, when he arrived in the valley [of Chamonix], to register as an atheist."[266] Atheism is always, for him, the rejection of a super person, not the divine.

I will, for the most part, be defending a Neoplatonic reading of *Adonais* against strictly immanent contemporary readings, but with some important differences. For one thing, I do not find it useful to label Shelley a Platonist, but to insist that Shelley's own idiosyncratic theology overlaps with a great deal of Platonic thought, in particular Neoplatonism.[267] This modified claim should head off anti-Platonic readings that benefit

---

[263] Donald Reiman, *Percy Bysshe Shelley, Updated Edition* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 113.
[264] Reiman, 117-8.
[265] Robert Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195.
[266] Ryan, 197.
[267] Whenever I use the word "Platonic" or "Platonism" I mean any variety of Platonism from views endorsed in a Platonic dialogue to Neoplatonism broadly speaking. When the distinction matters, I will make it.

from denying Shelley's alleged Platonism by pointing to specific ideas endorsed by Plato that Shelley does not endorse.[268] As Tracy Ware, one of Shelley's late twentieth-century Platonic readers notes, "Shelley differs from Plato in radical ways, as the very fact that he is defending poetry shows." Even though he could "find support for his convictions in the dialogues" we should not take him as a priest of "systematic Platonism."[269] Secondly, I would like to add a great deal more theological detail and elaboration than classic Platonic readings have given, since they often only briefly mention, as Carl Grabo does, that *Adonais* is a poem in which "Shelley expounds his Platonism" since it contains Neoplatonic terms such as "the One" and the "burning fountain."[270] While this kind of reading is basically true, it needs greater depth. I provide this by identifying the poem's philosophy more specifically with that of the Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius by reading *Adonais* alongside the *Divine Names*. I also note instances in which Shelley's philosophy aligns with Vedic philosophy and Upanishadic ideas, often more so than with Neoplatonism. As we shall see, his most important and contested metaphor of Life as a dome of many-colored glass sundering the white radiance of Eternity mirrors the

---

[268] C.E. Pulos, an early Platonic reader of Shelley, is well aware of Shelley's disagreements with Plato. Pulos notes that in Shelley's preface to his translation of *The Symposium*, Shelley claims that Plato had "profound" and "remarkable intuitions" into "the nature of mind and existence" at the same time Shelley objects to Plato's "'views on 'the government of the world,' and 'the elementary laws of moral action'; and he concedes, furthermore, that the dialogues are 'stained by puerile sophisms.'" C.E. Pulos identifies these "sophisms" with what Diogenes Laertius termed the "induction of dialectic." Pulos goes on to give several examples from Shelley's notes in which Shelley identifies a "sophism" in Plato. C.E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 70-1.

[269] Tracy Ware, "Shelley's Platonism in *A Defence of Poetry*," *SEL*, 23 (1983): 549-66, 550. In his essay Ware makes several great comparisons between Shelley and Plato, but ultimately concludes that Shelley immanentizes Plato. Thinking of *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, Ware writes, "Both [Shelley and Plato] perceive the poet as under the influence of forces larger than himself. Both perceive the poet as an agent of divinity, the location of which is within the psyche for Shelley," 554.

[270] Carl Grabo, *The Magic Plant* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 366.

Svetasvatara Upanishad, which uses the exact same metaphor to describe Brahman's appearance as universe (*maya*).

Far from simply resurrecting the claims of early Platonic readers, I challenge problematic dimensions of those readings which have contributed to their decline, such as the sleight-of-hand importation of Christian ideas into Shelley or the misunderstanding of Shelleyan transcendence as a rejection of the world. For example, some Platonic readings assert that *Adonais* testifies to Shelley's belief in the immortality of individuality. Carl Grabo, for example, writes that the union with the One which Keats achieves is one in which there is not a "complete loss of personality. The soul survives as a cell which is yet a constituent part of a larger whole."[271] Carlos Baker acknowledges that in *Adonais* there is "the survival of the poet as a spiritual essence merged in the world-soul."[272] Yet, he also states, "If Shelley has in mind any specific location for the region to which Adonais has risen, it is the third heaven of Dante's *Paradiso.*"[273] Baker also claims, "The 'One Spirit' which Shelley worshipped seems to have connections with St. Augustine's concept of *Caritas.*"[274] Others go as far as to conflate Shelley's One with a personal God. Ellsworth Barnard claims that Shelley demonstrates an "avowed mysticism in which Platonic, neo-Platonic, and Christian elements are fused" and that in his "mature years" he believed "in a creative and personal God, who 'comprehends within himself all that constitutes human

[271] Grabo, 368.
[272] Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 250.
[273] Baker, 249.
[274] Baker, 253.

perfection.'"[275] Barnard even acknowledges in a footnote that he has changed Shelley's original phrase "comprehends within itself" to "comprehends within himself" when quoting from Shelley's *Essay on Christianity*. Andrew Welburn, an avowed Christian reader of Shelley, declares Shelley an atheist but reads his poetry as unwittingly promoting Christianity. Welburn writes, "Above all, his fidelity to the 'atheistic' humanism of the eighteenth-century seems to have prevented Shelley from ever realising the full extent of the congruence between his own imaginations and the Christian spirit."[276]

Subsuming Christian doctrines into Shelley's Platonism makes it easy for materialist critics to refute Shelley's Platonism by illustrating that Shelley did not believe in Christian ideas. My Neoplatonic-Vedic reading, by contrast, rejects any notion of Shelley's Platonism as somehow covertly Christian or even covertly Deistic. He was unquestionably hostile to Christianity—indeed to any form of organized religion or belief in an anthropomorphic Deity. He disavowed scriptural narratives as accounts of magic from antiquity arbitrarily canonized in a holy book[277] and blamed Christianity for various social evils on account of its false morality and superstition. To be sure, Shelley's

---

[275] Ellsworth Barnard, *Shelley's Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1937), 18.
[276] Andrew Welburn, *Power and Self-Consciousness in the Poetry of Shelley* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 186.
[277] In a letter to his father Timothy, Shelley argues against the factual accounts of Christianity and the arbitrary privileging of the Bible as a source of truth: "Supposing twelve men were to make an affidavit before you that they had seen in Africa, a vast snake three miles long, suppose they swore that this snake eat nothing but Elephants, & that you knew from all the laws of nature, that enough Elephants cd. not exist to sustain the snake—wd. you believe them? The case is the same, —it is clearly therefore proved that we cannot if we consider it believe facts inconsistent with the general laws of Nature, that there is no evidence suffic[i]ent, or rather that *evidence* is insufficient to prove such facts," *Letters*, 45. This does not, of course, indicate that Shelley believed there was no truth ever to be found in religious books, only that whatever truth content they contain exists in virtue of their being poetry not in virtue of their witnessing to supernatural events.

morality and metaphysics overlap to some extent with those of Christianity, but that is no indication that Shelley is secretly Christian or that he is secularizing/liberalizing Christianity. As I've been consistently arguing, his core beliefs correspond more with philosophies that predate Christianity, such as Advaita Vedanta. Shelley concedes in the *Defence* that Christianity, like any other philosophy, may get some things right despite its harmful or otherwise improbable claims. He rails against the "Christian and Chivalric systems" for the "evil produced by these systems."[278] At the same time, he acknowledges that they "produced the poetry of sexual love. Love became a religion." [279] He is thinking especially of Dante's *Vita Nuova*.

Any given philosophy may agree with another partially. Yet, the fact that any school of thought may overlap with the Good or the True does not prove the truth of that philosophy in its entirety. It is difficult to imagine how Shelley should be considered covertly Christian on account of his promoting compassion or self-sacrifice unless one subtracts the narrative and doctrines from Christianity that Shelley found ludicrous such that "Christianity" signifies nothing other than a compassionate orientation towards others—something a multitude of other religions enjoin. We might just as well assert that what Shelley agrees with in Christianity derives from Christianity's influential forerunner, Neoplatonism—and, as Rawlinson suggests,

---

[278] Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), 523.
[279] Ibid, 525.

Neoplatonism has an even more ancient forerunner in Vedic philosophy.[280] Shelley was quite aware of this chain of influence, since he has his Deist state in *A Refutation of Deism*: "I am willing to admit that some few axioms of morality, which Christianity has borrowed from the philosophers of Greece and India, dictate, in an unconnected state, rules of conduct worthy of regard…"[281] Similarly, in the *Defence* Shelley insists that "Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths" found in "Plato" and "Christianity, in its abstract purity, became the exoteric expression of the esoteric doctrines of the poetry and wisdom of antiquity."[282]

Welburn might as well insist that Christianity is deformed Neoplatonism or that Neoplatonism is distorted Vedic philosophy. Describing everything outside oneself as a modification of oneself fixes the normativity of one's own creed by tacitly taking it as the measure of all things. This is exactly what narratives employing the Christianity vs. secularism binary hope to achieve and why it is so useful to a Colin Jager style of post-secularism in which everything is constantly referred back to Christianity, including atheism.[283] In likening Shelley to pre-Christian philosophies, we can step outside of Western decline or progress secularization narratives that hinge on this fundamental,

---

[280] Rawlinson writes, "Shelley and Wordsworth looked to France rather than Germany for inspiration, but their pantheism is full of unconscious reminiscences of Hindu thought, which reached them through the medium of Neoplatonism." H.G. Rawlinson, "India in European Literature and Thought" in *The Legacy of India*, ed. G.T. Garrat (New Delhi: Black & White, 2005), 33.
[281] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Refutation of Deism," 1:93-123, footnote 14.
[282] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 525.
[283] In his assessment of Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, Jager asserts, "atheism is a Christian concept" emerging from "shifts *within* Christianity," 618. This is integral to his larger argument that any "reading that sets itself the task of figuring out what beliefs or unbeliefs the poem expresses—tangles itself up in the question of religion, even if the reading concludes that the poem 'expresses' atheism," 614. Jager all but synonymizes "religion" and "Christianity." Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

flawed dichotomy. As Timothy Webb recognizes, Platonism (and other Greek thought) had an appeal for Shelley since it was "outside the orbit of Christianity and central to Shelley's reaction was the opportunity it seemed to present of discovering an antidote to a system founded on 'fear and self-contempt and barren hope.'"[284]

My theological reading of Shelley also rejects the notion latent to some Platonic readings that Shelley's belief in the transcendent One constitutes a flight from politics or the world. As we saw in *Mont Blanc*, the absolute Good motivates political change; it does not distract from it, since the mystical insight produced by the mountain has the power to undo "codes of fraud and woe," at least for those gifted with right vision (true Poets). As he writes in the *Defence*, "Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" and the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Yet, post-theory readers who have been conditioned into associating a transcendent absolute with oppressive ideologies will be especially averse to the Platonic reading. Shelley's recruitment of Platonism into a sort of cosmic-scale political battle between social Good and Evil brings together tradition and radicalism in a manner that may be baffling to anyone committed to a notion that social justice requires dismantling normativity, doing away with immaterialism, or abandoning a belief in absolute Truth or Goodness. For example, Jerrold Hogle, coming from the perspective of Derridean de-centering writes, "For him, particularly in the works just prior to his drowning, we must be made aware that we in the West are poised between continued submissions to the 'One' of

[284] Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1977), 214.

tyrannizing centers and new realizations that a 'One' of never-ending change may free us, if we accept it, from the oppressions of existing absolutes."[285] Hogle expresses an understandable concern about the power of absolute claims to tyrannize—something Shelley was well aware of—but Hogle goes wrong in assuming that an unchanging transcendent One can only imply tyranny.[286] On the contrary, it is the transcendent absolute standing behind Mont Blanc that motivates Shelley's desire to "dissect the religious, monarchical, and patriarchal 'codes of fraud and woe' that have confined or still imprison personal development and the most loving kinds of human interaction," to use Hogle's own words.[287] It is because Shelley believes in absolute Love that he registers and resists failures of love (social evil) which do not match with a moral truth that he believes stands outside historical contingency. As I will later elaborate on in the next section, even a supposedly 'secular' cause, such as feminism, is bound up, for Shelley, with his theology and motivated by his longing for transcendence. Politics and Platonism are not at odds; they are co-dependent.

The reading of Shelley as an ascetic is even more implausible than a reading of him as apolitical. Nonetheless, this is what some early Platonic readers offer. Peter Butter, for example, insists that the poet admired "Jesus and Socrates" as exemplars of "Souls, fated to descend into the world of generation, [who] may remember their proper

---

[285] Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley's Process* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 26.
[286] Perhaps part of Hogle's resistance to what he terms the "Plotinian" reading of Shelley is that he associates it with dualism. Hogle writes, "How can the more strictly Neoplatonic or semi-Gnostic interpretations speak of an Other completely removed from the metaphors that seem to conceal it?" 9. As I've stressed repeatedly now, a symbolic theology, such as that of Pseudo-Dionysius, insists that metaphor realizes the transcendent as much as it insists on the infinite excess of the transcendent to any one metaphor.
[287] Hogle, 25.

habitation and keep themselves free from the corruptions of passion" despite the "degradation" following from the "incarnation of spirit."[288] Responding to this sort of reading, the anti-Platonic Scrivener remarks, "Some critics have suggested that the trajectory of Shelley's development can be charted as veering away from politics, society, even life itself, and toward a Platonic mysticism, an asocial spirituality, a *contemptus mundi* akin to that of the medieval ascetics." Scrivener gives the example of Ross Woodman who reads *Adonais* as, in Scrivener's words, a poem about "an absolute conflict between life and death, matter and spirit, so that the triumph of spirit is identical with the spirit's release after death." Milton Wilson, he argues, asserts that "Shelley the radical is eclipsed by the Platonist who sees human life itself as an evil from which death delivers us."[289] It is understandable why readers might reject the Platonic-transcendent reading when it becomes virtually synonymous with a puritanical or anti-political reading of Shelley.

Yet, even if one demonstrates that Plato's *Phaedo* expresses an extreme asceticism or contempt of matter akin to a death wish, this still would be no proof that *Shelley's* version of Platonism endorses such a revulsion to the sensory world. C.E. Pulos notes that a major difference between the two is Shelley's belief in corporealized divinity.[290] Pulos writes, "While Plato ascends progressively from particular beauties to Beauty, Shelley tends to reverse this process and to seek Beauty in its earthly manifestations. Furthermore, while Plato seeks Beauty through dialectic, Shelley apprehends it only

---

[288] Peter Butter, *Shelley's Idols of the Cave* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1954), 103.
[289] Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 272.
[290] Pulos, 88.

through imagination and feeling." Furthermore, "Shelley's belief in the existence of an absolute Beauty, although it cannot be apprehended in our mortal state, reaches a climax in *Adonais*."[291] Again, Platonism constitutes more of an influence on Shelley's own idiosyncratic theology than a defining label. As I've already stated, Shelley is often more Vedic and Neoplatonic than Platonic. Contrary to Milton Wilson's claim that Shelley endorses a fierce "Platonic dualism," what Shelley really offers is a symbolic monism in which the entire sensuous Universe manifests the transcendent.[292] One of the most distinctive features of Shelley's theology is its anti-asceticism. Shelley's theology places the divine within the sensory, rather than treating the sensory as an obstacle or as merely instrumental in the ascent to God.

In a puritanical or iconoclastic metaphysics, an evil sensuous world competes with an otherworldly transcendent God for our attention. For Shelley, however, there is no conflict between earthly desire and heavenly desire; the former is an expression of the latter. No wonder then that there may be an allergic reaction to transcendence especially when Platonic readers like Wilson assert that *Adonais* reveals "a Platonic opposition of the most uncompromising sort. To be born is to be degraded."[293] Even more strongly, Ross Woodman claims that Shelley was "eager to escape the dungeon of the flesh" by "Following the path of ascent marked out by Plato's Eros in the *Symposium*." This sort of claim reaches its apex in Woodman's declaration that "*Adonais*

---

[291] Pulos, 78
[292] Milton Wilson, *Shelley's Later Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 243.
[293] Wilson, 244.

emerges as a metaphysical defense of suicide."[294] Any Platonic reading of Shelley that pits transcendence against immanence, or suggests that Shelley had ascetic tendencies, certainly needs correction, but not by a thoroughgoing secular (materialist) revision. In fact, Shelley held Christianity in contempt largely because he considered it asocial and ascetic. The Deist in *A Refutation of Deism* conveys Shelley's own views succinctly:

> "The apathy to love and friendship, recommended by your creed, would, if attainable, not be less pernicious. This enthusiasm of anti-social misanthropy, if it were an actual rule of conduct, and not the speculation of a few interested persons, would speedily annihilate the human race. A total abstinance from sexual intercourse is not perhaps enjoined, but is strenuously recommended, and was actually practised to a frightful extent by the primitive Christians."[295]

Shelley, in fact, recruits Neoplatonic concepts to redeem the world, not reject it. For Shelley, the transcendent is really and wholly present within the Universe and, for that reason, one ought to find asceticism repellent, not the sensory world. One ought to, in fact, find asceticism to be a rejection of "God." Shelley's "One" does not constitute a replacement for religion or politics or earthly delight. It is a theological replacement for

---

[294] Ross Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), xiii.
[295] Shelley, "A Refutation of Deism," 105.

all forms of organized or institutional religion[296] and his mystical theology is world embracing, rather than world rejecting, since it is symbolic, not iconoclastic.[297]

Having now reviewed what is valid in the revolt against the Platonic Shelley and how such criticisms can reshape a new, less problematic Platonic reading, I would also like to illustrate what is invalid about the anti-Platonic readings. Essential to so many arguments that eliminate Platonism, transcendence, or immaterialism broadly speaking from *Adonais,* is the claim that poetry cannot convey metaphysics or philosophy—what I will hereafter refer to as the 'just poetry' argument. A few words need to be said against this argument before we look at *Adonais* and resurrect the Platonic reading, since any philosophical reading of that poem can be dismissed so long as the just poetry presumption prevails. Michael Scrivener, an exemplar of this position, writes, "the Neoplatonic One to which the postmortal spirit returns is a metaphor, a symbol, and must be understood as a poetically useful fiction." Scrivener insists that only prose can reveal what Shelley believed and rejects what is really a Christian, not Platonic, notion of personal immortality: "One can scan the entire corpus of Shelley's prose for his

---

[296] Ellsworth Barnard rightly asserts that in Shelley there is a "denial of the need, in religion, of any organization whatsoever," and that Shelley "repudiated formalism and authoritarianism of every kind." He adds, "Everyone who knows Shelley's work knows that he had a religion—unless religion is to be limited to some kind of religious *orthodoxy*," 4-5.

[297] Kenneth Neill Cameron at times suggests that a reading of transcendence into Shelley is anti-science, anti-rationality, and/or anti-logic. Cameron writes, "Those who have argued that Shelley became an immaterialist have usually argued also that he abandoned his beliefs in an ordered universe, in science, and in rational logic, substituting for them God, intuition, and mysticism," 153. On the contrary, a mystical reading of Shelley asserts that there is *more* to heaven and earth than what falls within the scope of science and discursive reason. This is quite different from rejecting science and rationality in their entirety. One might also mention that a belief in an ordered Universe was central to many arguments *for* the existence of God, especially those of natural theology (e.g. William Paley). As I've mentioned already, Shelley rejected the arguments of natural theology because they made *inferences to a creative Deity* from the natural order, not because he rejected science. Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

statements concerning death and immortality without finding a single dogmatic sentence affirming immortality." He concludes, "*Adonais* is yet another defense of the imagination" and nothing more. [298] Scrivener undermines the potential for *Adonais* to do philosophy by simply assuming that poetry does not express metaphysical meaning—a prosaic prejudice made even more painful by his decidedly unromantic use of the term "symbol." He likewise disenchants the imagination by assuming it is not indexed to the transcendent. This is ironic considering that so much of the Romantic project consisted of linking the imagination to higher divine reality. Consider Coleridge's arch-Romantic assertion in the *Biographia*: "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM".[299] To treat the realm of imagination, aesthetics, and feeling as contentless design or mere sensation, is counter to the sensibility of Romanticism.[300] As Tracy Ware notes, "Without Plato's philosophical trust in reason,

---

[298] Scrivener, 272.

[299] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.

[300] In some ways the attitude of contemporary critics with regards to the relationship between poetry and philosophy resembles that of the *philosophes*. C.E. Pulos notes that Shelley called Plato a poet in the *Defence* because he thought of poetry as the highest form of philosophy, whereas the *philosophes* intended to disparage by Plato by calling him a poet. "The *philosophes*, on the other hand, meant that Plato lacked their solidity of thought and knowledge. As dogmatists, they had no intention whatever of identifying metaphysics with poetry," 72.

but with his own Romantic trust in the imagination, Shelley argues that it is poets who provide the 'probable accounts'" of higher reality.[301]

Possibly the most thoroughgoing secular reading of Shelley is offered by Kenneth Neill Cameron, who also offers the 'just poetry' argument to eradicate metaphysics from *Adonais*. He writes, "To understand Shelley's attitude toward Platonic metaphysics, one must take into account a distinction he made between 'philosophical' and 'metaphorical' expressions of ideas." He adds, "Shelley felt that it was legitimate to express metaphorically ideas that might be dubious philosophically."[302] Cameron insists that there is no indication whatsoever of a belief in a "transcendent spiritual godhead" whether Christian or Platonic in any of Shelley's writing.[303] It should be clear at this point that this claim is plainly incorrect. Shelley's innumerable statements about the one Spirit should be taken even more seriously when considered alongside his denouncements of materialism. He writes in a letter to Horace Smith, echoing his statements from the *Defence*, "the doctrines of the French, and Material philosophy, are

---

[301] Ware's Platonic reading of Shelley is more nuanced than most. At the same time "Shelley found in Platonism support for his conviction that pure imaginative intuitions have priority over philosophical systematizing" Ware insists that Shelley was aware of the irony in *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, 551. "Poetry is relegated by Plato to the status of opinion" rather than knowledge, 553. Ware argues nevertheless that Shelley derives the idea of poetic mysticism from Plato even though Shelley rejects Plato's rationalism. Likewise, Ware argues that Shelley derives from Plato a connection between morality and art but redefines what that relationships means.

[302] Cameron, 159. It appears that in select moments we are meant to accept poetic surface meaning so long as it promotes a purely immanent view of things, since Cameron deduces Shelley's belief that "Necessity must therefore be of the essence of the power of matter" from the following lines in *Queen Mab*: "Spirt of Nature! all-sufficing Power, / Necessity! thou mother of the world!" 167. Naturally, he does not quote Shelley's *prose* footnote qualifying the fairy's declaration "there is no God!" with "This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken." If prose trumps poetry, then we ought to turn down a notion of Power as necessitarian matter in favor of Power as Spirit.

[303] Cameron, 439.

as false as they are pernicious; but still they are better than Christianity, inasmuch as anarchy is better than despotism."[304] In "On Life" Shelley writes unequivocally, "This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds."[305] Cameron asserts with confidence that Shelley "was not skeptical about the existence of God; he was sure there was none" only because he, like so many materialist readers, wrongly assumes that Shelley's rejection of a personal, creative Deity is a denial of God.[306]

It's clear why the 'just poetry' argument is attractive to those who hope to negate theology in *Adonais*. The 'just poetry' argument demands that the burden of proof rest with the Platonic-transcendent reading by assuming materialism unless proven otherwise, while also stonewalling metaphysical readings by preventing poetry from doing philosophy in the first place.

To support the assertion that Shelley dissociated poetry from philosophy, Cameron quotes very selectively from Shelley's letter to Elizabeth Hitchener. It's worth reviewing the letter in its larger context since it does, indeed, reveal a great deal about what Shelley thought about personification and religion:

> "Imagination delights in personification…Mars was personified as the god of war, Juno of policy &c. but you have formed in your mind the Deity of virtue; this personification, beautiful in Poetry, [is] inadmissible in reasoning…There is such a thing as virtue, but *what who* is this Deity of virtue? Not the Father of Christ, not the source of the Holy Ghost—not the God who beheld with favor the coward wretch Abraham, who built the grandeur of his favorite Jews on the bleeding bodies of myriads…"[307]

---

[304] Quoted in Ryan, 221.
[305] Shelley, "On Life," 506.
[306] Cameron, 157.
[307] Shelley to Elizabeth Hitchener, June 11, 1811. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:101.

Clearly, Shelley opposes personification taken literally and he attributes this error to those who believe in a personal God, particularly the Christian God. He does not deny poetry's ability to convey philosophical ideas, but cautions against the attribution of abstract qualities (goodness) to a person who governs the universe. What has reality, for Shelley, is the transcendent Good, not a virtuous being. Shelley's attack on anthropomorphism slides immediately into an attack on Christianity as a religion opposed to the Good, since the actions of its God are evil. His overarching point is not that poetry cannot reveal metaphysical truth, but that personified deities, especially ones that enjoin atrocities, are bad. The letter in no way refutes a possible commitment to a Platonic metaphysics. In fact, Shelley's resistance to the notion of a good God in favor of a notion of God as the Good should strike the reader as rather Platonic.

When Shelley complains in his fragment *Speculations on Morals* about "the abuse of a metaphorical expression to a literal purpose," a phrase also quoted by Cameron, Shelley is not banishing philosophy from poetry. He is attacking sophistry. Here is the full statement:

> "A common sophism, which, like many others, depends on the abuse of a metaphorical expression to a literal purpose, has produced much of the confusion which has involved the theory of morals. It is said that no person is bound to be just or kind, if, on his neglect, he should fail to incur some penalty. Duty is obligation. There can be no obligation without an obliger. Virtue is a law, to which it is the will of the lawgiver that we should conform; which will we should in no manner be bound to obey, unless some dreadful punishment were attached to disobedience. This is the philosophy of slavery and superstition."[308]

[308] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Speculations on Morals" in *Prose Works*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1897), 2:197.

Shelley's remarks say nothing at all about poetry; they merely protest taking expressions such as "Duty is obligation" literally to make invalid inferences. His main interest lies in opposing an account of moral action as obedience to a voluntarist super-agent who punishes and rewards those who abide by his commands. He hopes to replace this with a morality in which the Good, when properly recognized, compels goodness through its intrinsic desirability—an idealistic position, perhaps, but not an anti-Platonic one. For Shelley, inclination ought to align with the Good since the Good is ultimate happiness and pleasure, not a law forcibly and arbitrarily imposed or a duty to be performed with disinterest. He adds:

> "In fact, no person can be BOUND or OBLIGED, without some power preceding to bind and oblige. If I observe a man bound hand and foot, I know that some one bound him. But if I observe him returning self-satisfied from the performance of some action, by which he has been the willing author of extensive benefit, I do not infer that the anticipation of hellish agonies, or the hope of heavenly reward, has constrained him to such an act."[309]

Shelley never insisted that poetry could not be a vehicle for philosophy. On the contrary, his entire *Defence of Poetry* insists on the intersection of the two and on imagination's divinity. Poets are precisely those who see the True, the Good, and the Beautiful even in an evil time. Much like the Vedic *rishis*, Shelley understood Poetry to be a form of non-discursive mystical intuition. If poetry could be wholly translated into prose, then there would be no need for it to exist. In the 'just poetry' argument, poetry, indeed all aesthetics, becomes nothing more than a plaything for an idle mind, since the

[309] Shelley, "Speculations on Morals," 197-8.

only function the aesthetic can have is to offer a sort of contentless pleasure, with truth being confined to the sobriety of prose.

When Shelley cautions against taking a metaphor literally, he is thinking of figurative expressions such as "Duty is obligation," "Time heals all wounds," "the work of art spoke to me," "Wisdom and Benevolence ruled over the land," "The sea called to me," "Fate is cruel," "the ghosts of my past haunt me," etc. Yet, the empty clichés and tropes of personification tossed out in speech and poetry, are entirely different from the terminologically precise, nuanced, and ubiquitous theological language of *Adonais*. The only way one could claim, as Cameron does, that *Adonais* "Often presented as asserting Platonism and immortality…in fact asserts neither" would be to drain poetry of the spiritual significance that Shelley worshipped it for.[310] Yet, the spiritual dimension of Shelley's poetry is so self-evident that even Scrivener slips in saying that Shelley thought of "poetry as a spiritual activity."[311] Stuart Curran, who claims Shelley for the camp of secular skepticism, somehow ends up asserting, "Shelley proved himself the greatest religious poet in the English language between Blake and Yeats."[312] It seems that the attempt to preserve *Adonais* while removing the religiosity is much like trying to preserve an ice cube while removing the water.

Ultimately, the strategy of the 'just poetry' dismissal is obvious. One does not have to engage with theology if one denies the poetic medium itself the very power to

---

[310] Cameron, 422.
[311] Scrivener, 280.
[312] Stuart Curran, *Annus Mirabilis* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1975), 205.

do philosophy by reducing it to a bunch of colorful fluff.[313] It's interesting to consider how different this contemporary attitude is from that of an earlier generation of scholars like Wasserman who regard the formal, aesthetic elements of poetry as constitutive of meaning and, for that reason, labor over the minutiae of diction, tone, irony, allusion, imagery, meter, metaphor etc. Grabo states the antithesis of what Cameron does: "Shelley in his practice and theory drew no such distinction between poetry and philosophy…Shelley's verse divorced of all but its purely emotional content would be infinitely less than it is; for he raises in his poetry the fundamental questions of philosophy."[314]

Ultimately, it is unreasonable to believe, given Shelley's uninhibited attacks on organized religion, that he would have adopted terms in *Adonais* with known theological connotations without endorsing them in the slightest. Certainly, Keats's immortality as a poet could be praised without invoking the One and a mass of other Platonic diction? Ultimately, there is a greater probability that Shelley meant what he wrote than that he made assertions antithetical to his own beliefs because they sounded good in verse. Why would he not employ a naturalistic language to convey a naturalistic meaning if it were so intended? In fact, the early stanzas of the poems do exactly this when they despair over the loss of Keats. It is in the beginning of *Adonais* that we find the language of a purely immanent outlook. A despairing vision of reality as nothing but

[313] Of course, this is not to say that poetry is not emotional or aesthetic. My claim is rather that the emotional and the aesthetic are themselves inextricable from the philosophical and that it was part of the Romantic project to insist on this. The emotional and the aesthetic are the mode of the theological in Shelley.
[314] Grabo, 184.

matter gives way to a final Platonic fulfillment made more redeeming through contrast with its bleak alternative. Unsurprisingly, the only lines materialist readers do seem to take seriously are ones such as "the intense atom glows / A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose."[315]

Yet, the early materialist stanzas have not been lost on Platonic readers. They instead contextualize them within the entire poem. Wasserman, for one, insists that *Adonais* "passes through stages." An initial "materialistic monism" progresses to a "dualism of Nature" in which "mind terminates in decay" while the animated cycles of matter continue.[316] It is only in stanza 38 at the lines "he doth not sleep / he hath awakened from the dream of life" that the poem "establish[es] the position that the last movement will elaborate and celebrate," namely that "Ultimate reality is neither matter nor vitality, but spirit."[317] I would amend Wasserman's statement only by insisting that, for Shelley, vitality is spirit, but nonetheless, Wasserman's overall point holds. He rightly identifies Stanza 38 as the turning point, though not the apex, of the poem's Neoplatonic transcendent affirmation. Far from indicating, as Cameron would have it, that the "philosophical attitude underlying the stanza is skeptical," the doubtful disjunction "he wakes or sleeps" in stanza 38 signals a transition, not an uncertainty.[318] This is especially clear given stanza 39's doubt*less* declaration: "Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep, / He hath awaken'd from the dream of life."[319] By the way, these

---

[315] Shelley, "Adonais" lines 178-9.
[316] Earl Wasserman, *The Subtler Language* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), 319-20.
[317] Wasserman, 343-4.
[318] Cameron, 438.
[319] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 343-44.

are the same lines identified by Raymond Schwab and H.G. Rawlinson as expressing the Indian philosophy of Vedanta.[320] Stanza 41 continues the newfound confidence by declaring, "He lives, he wakes—'tis Death is dead, not he; / Mourn not for Adonais."[321]

Above all, however, the scholarly rejection of theology in Shelley, especially his Platonizing, derives from an unjustified rationalist prejudice. The privileging of prose over poetry by critics feels almost like the vengeful return of the Enlightenment's ghost rising in backlash against Romanticism's own valorization of the imagination over discursive reason. As we saw in *Mont Blanc* and the Vedic creation hymn, the aversion to dogmatic declaration affirmed poetic mysticism's unique access to divine knowledge. Poetic paradox enables an apophatic ascent to the Absolute which resides beyond language. As Carl Grabo observes, "in attempting to rationalize mystical lore, which is always in part emotional and intuitional, there is inevitable loss. A meaning which is felt escapes the precision of a prose definition." In the case of Shelley, the "poetic form, it is true, permits him to avoid too precise an answer. The answer is by implication, is expressed in a symbol…"[322]

Ultimately, the appeal of Neoplatonism for Shelley derives from the fact that is blurs the line between poetry and philosophy. In the Neoplatonic view of things, glimpsing Truth is a sort of sightless seeing, an inner intuition rather than an empirical

---

[320] Raymond Schwab identifies "Vedanta" in *Adonais* in *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 196.; Rawlinson writes, "Nowhere is the Vedantic doctrine of Maya more magnificently propounded than in *Adonais*," 34.
[321] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 361-2.
[322] Grabo, 184.

observation. Grabo terms it an "inward looking."[323] Thus, the employment of symbols, as in poetry, is the best one can do to convey an ineffable experience. As Shelley writes, "How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being"—yet he continues to write.[324] This is because poetry acts as an apophatic ascent; it is a symbolic disclosure not a skeptical closure. Shelley's thoughts are reminiscent of Pseudo-Dionysius:

> "How then can we speak of the divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding? How can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnameable?"[325]

The fact that the One infuses the things of experience renders it intuitable, even if only as a thing infinitely removed, which is why Pseudo-Dionysius answers his own question by stating, "One can neither discuss nor understand the One" and yet "numerous symbols are employed to convey the varied attributes of what is an imageless and supra-natural simplicity."[326] Curiously, even supposedly secular readings, such as Hogle's deconstructionist reading of Shelley, unwittingly echo this. Hogle asks, "What in the Spirit allows it to be so multiple and yet so withdrawn, so 'inside' the poet's thoughts and words and so 'outside' them…What, finally, is the nature and basis of a preconscious infusion that forces Shelley's awareness into

---

[323] Grabo, 181.
[324] "On Life," *SPP*, 506.
[325] Pseudo-Dionysius, "Divine Names" in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 53.
[326] Pseudo-Dionysius, 52-3.

transformations by transmuting itself through him and them?"[327] The deconstructionist's account of "a multiple concealment of what the referent seems to refer to, the 'inmost naked beauty' implied by the veiling process" could pass for a description of the apophatic ascent to God. Nonetheless, Hogle takes his own reading to be anti-religious, largely because he associates religion with revealed dogma.[328] In Shelley's Pseudo-Dionysian metaphysics, symbols continue to proliferate because the absolute One is an inexhaustible wellspring "beyond and above consciousness," as Shelley puts it in the *Defence.* "Poetry," Shelley continues, "for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains."[329] This is not because "there is never the wholeness of meaning," desired as Hogle puts it, but because the wholeness of meaning is in such excess of each symbol.[330] Truth remains absolute for Shelley; it is our access to the One which is partial and shifting.

While many critics read the poem from beginning to end, I would like to begin my reading of the poem with the stanza that most unambiguously declaims Shelley's commitment to the One, stanza 52, since it is most indicative of his theology and can be considered a key to the rest of the poem. Shelley's (in)famous declaration about the One and the many is as follows:

---

[327] Hogle, 6.
[328] Ibid, 4.
[329] Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 515-6.
[330] Hogle, 23.

"The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!"[331]

Carl Grabo's reading has not become less apposite with time. Shelley gives us an account of "the spirit's return to…reabsorption in, the One, which is in neo-Platonism God, not a person but the infinite and mysterious source of energy and life." He is initially right in asserting "The passage, though it expresses a belief in the conservation of spiritual energy, would seem to imply also the loss of individual identity."[332] Yet, his later claim that "the reunion with God, who is all…does not imply complete loss of personality" Christianizes his Platonic reading.[333] Naturally, this provokes the sort of reaction exemplified by Cameron who writes that "the One" functions purely as a necessitarian "unifying force within matter rather than a transcendent spiritual godhead of which the world is an imperfect reflection."[334] Yet, the language in this stanza works against both a materialist interpretation and a Christian one. Far from illustrating a One which reduces to some collective interrelation of particles, the diction clearly invokes a notion of abstract transcendence by contrasting "Earth's shadows" with "Heaven's light," classical Platonic images frequently employed by Shelley to distinguish the "imperfect reflection" from the unknowable transcendent One. This hierarchy of being is, of course, also conveyed in the metaphor of the dome itself which contrasts lower

[331] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 460-5.
[332] Grabo, 366.
[333] Ibid, 368.
[334] Cameron, 439.

reality (multiplicate colors) with higher reality (the white radiance of eternity) without dualistically severing them.

Far from deriving from the poem itself, the anti-Platonic reader imposes materialism upon it in contradiction with the poem's own language and then deflects Platonic readings with the 'just poetry' argument. Of course, the 'just poetry' argument, fairly applied, ought to undermine Cameron's claim that "the 'one' concept is rather that of Parmenides than of Plato," since both concepts are metaphysical, even if one posits a transcendent One and the other an immanent One.[335] If we are unable to derive philosophy from metaphor, then we should be equally unable to assert that the poem avows materialism, since materialism is just as much a metaphysical position as immaterialism. For some, the desire to neutralize the self-evident is so strong that they fall into circular logic. Cameron writes, "Despite the usual interpretation of this stanza, Shelley could not have been referring to the Platonic 'One'; or to a supernatural 'Heaven' or 'eternity,' because he had no belief in them."[336] To rephrase, he insists that Shelley could not have been referring to the Platonic One because Shelley does not believe in the Platonic One and because he does not believe in the Platonic One he, therefore, could not have referred to the Platonic One. This circular claim goes alongside the assumption that one cannot deduce what Shelley believed from his poetry.

Even if they err in remaining wholly immanent, anti-Platonic readings, unlike their Platonic counterparts, at least recognize and emphasize Shelley's love for vitality

[335] Cameron, 439.
[336] Ibid, 442.

within matter, which is contrary to any ascetic rejection of the world. Immanent readers are correct in concluding that, for Shelley, everything exists within the One, but wrong in understanding the One to be the supreme totality of all matter rather than the absolute in which all matter participates. Shelley's One and the many is much like those of Pseudo-Dionysius in *The Divine Names*: "You will find nothing in the world which is not in the One, by which the transcendent godhead is named. Everything owes to the One its individual existence…Given this power of God's unity, we must be returned from the many to the One."[337] In this ontology, the One is immanent in all things insofar as the One "embraces everything in its transcendent infinity."[338] What Cameron reads as a purely immanent "unifying force within matter" is better understood as the necessary participation of the immanent in the transcendent since "Without the One there is no multiplicity, but there can still be the One when there is no multiplicity, just as one precedes all multiplied number."[339]

While the sun/shadow imagery in stanza 52 obviously draws from Platonism, the dome of many-colored glass mirrors nearly perfectly a metaphor for God's manifestation in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*: "May God, who in the mystery of his vision and power transforms his white radiance into his many-coloured creation, from whom all things come and into whom they all return, grant us the grace of pure vision."[340] Whether Shelley was aware or not of the content of this Upanishad is irrelevant. We find

---

[337] Pseudo-Dionysius, 129.
[338] Ibid, 102.
[339] Ibid, 128.
[340] *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 91.

the same imagery in Shelley and the Indian text because we find the same theology. If readers would have us erase the transcendent One from *Adonais* in virtue of its being just poetry, then why not erase the One from the *Svetasvatara Upanishad,* which is likewise metaphor? Or wipe away God from the "Hymn of Creation" in the *Rig Veda*? Perhaps then we can all achieve greater clarity once poetry has been replaced by Marxist manifestos written in the unambiguous daylight of academic prose.

Far from being 'just poetry,' the imagery of the white One splintered into colors reveals a complex and subtle metaphysics. Thanks to Life, which is the dome of many-colored glass, the One wholly appears and yet is distorted by the condition for its appearance (duality). Each delimited expression of its essence is not *un*truthful, since every color distils some real part of the One, at the same time each partial revelation differs infinitely from the original truth to which it belongs. Shelley's choice of the word "stain" is slightly ambiguous since the word can connote impurity, whereas a term such as "dye" does not, though both "stain" and "dye" can invoke a sense of saturated richness. "Stain" and "dome" combined bring to the mind's eye stained glass and, therefore, convey beauty, not blemish. The metaphor does not demonstrate, as Wilson suggests, "Shelley's contempt of time," or the need for the "victory of the white radiance over the many-colored dome."[341] Wilson's language of "victory" misleadingly stages the relation between Being and beings as a holy war. Shelley merely posits a contrast between transcendent self-containment (the One) and worldly manifestation (the many)

[341] Wilson, 245.

without implying at all that the latter is evil. To be sure, the variegated splendor of Life constitutes a distortion, but that is quite different from saying it is a defilement, error, or corruption.

What the dome metaphor reveals is that the symbol emerges only when the One becomes hidden. The One becomes hidden the moment is it revealed to a subject. Recall the lines from the *Upanishads* about God: In itself, the "Spirit knows not, yet knowing not he knows" because "there is no duality there, nothing apart for him to know. For only where there seems to be a duality, there one sees another." True knowledge of God can only come when there is no knowledge of God because there is nothing but God. There is only "the ocean of Spirit the seer," self-beholding and self-contained.[342] In other words, the moment the white radiance appears to an ego looking on it instead of belonging to it, all the splendors of the Universe emerge. Emanation is not error or evil, but an explanation for the delimitation of God necessary to phenomenal manifestation. "Manifestation," rather than "creation," is the proper way to describe the origin of the Universe in this theology, since there is no deliberate act or point in time associated with God's emergence as Universe. Nor is there a fall narrative explaining why God has been obscured. Necessity is the mother of the Universe only insofar as it is of the nature of the One is to appear as existence, not because it 'decides' to do so. We might think of this as a process of organic unfolding, even though it does not occur within time. The "dome of many-colored glass" follows from the One as artlessly as illumination follows from the

[342] *Upanishads*, 137.

sun. It is akin to the process of non-rational, non-agential emanation described by Pseudo-Dionysius:

> "Think of how it is with our sun. It exercises no rational process, no act of choice, and yet by the very fact of its existence it gives light to whatever is able to partake of its light, in its own way. So it is with the Good. Existing far above the sun, an archetype far superior to its dull image, it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity, such as this may be, to receive it. These rays are responsible for all intelligible and intelligent beings, for every power and every activity."[343]

For Shelley, as for Vedanta, the Universe is an illusion (*maya*), but to say so requires careful qualification. The Universe is not illusory in the sense that it is wholly generated by our subjectivity, as if the mind were a projector devoid of external causes, nor is *maya* a trick played by demonic intelligence, nor is the sensory of an altogether different ontological kind from the spiritual godhead. As we saw in *Mont Blanc*, Shelley's philosophy is not Berkeleyan subjective idealism, nor Spinozistic immanent monism, nor Kantian dualism, nor skepticism. It is a symbolic, apophatic theology of qualified monism. For that reason, it resembles Vedanta and Neoplatonism. As Butter puts it, Shelley expresses in this poem "first of all, his faith in the One Spirit, which is both immanent in nature and transcendent."[344] Far from indicating a "fundamental dualism," as Fogle's Platonic reading insists, the dome metaphor illustrates that the immanent realm of becoming belongs to Being just as the color spectrum belongs to whiteness.[345] There is no color that is not within white. In it, even opposites collapse. Red is just as much a part of white as its opposite, green. To assert, as Fogle does, that

---

[343] Pseudo-Dionysius, 72.
[344] Butter, 129.
[345] Richard Harter Fogle, *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 239.

"The 'dome of many-colored glass' was perhaps as dear to him as the 'white radiance of eternity,' although he did not find the two very compatible," is to fail to do the metaphor justice, since what Shelley's metaphor succeeds so brilliantly at, is capturing how the many is encompassed by the One even as the empirical eye sees irreconcilable difference.[346] The Universe, as phenomenal manifestation of the One, constitutes a multiplicity of delimitations, each of which really participates in the transcendent (God), but nonetheless differs from it, just as each Hindu God is an avatar of Brahman. Mystical seeing does not sweep *maya* away as if it were a curtain hanging before God. Mystical insight comprehends the One as the white radiance out of which *maya* is woven.

Yet, even Shelley's image of white radiance falls short of conveying the transcendence of the One, since whiteness can still be visualized by his reader. Thus, whiteness serves to metaphorize apophaticism as well. Whiteness is a visual paradox, seeming empty and yet being full. Like the snowy dome of *Mont Blanc*, whiteness appears as vacancy only to finite subjectivity. God's white radiance blinds through excess. This Vedantic sensibility is expressed well in *The Sensitive Plant*:

> "For love, and beauty, and delight
> There is no death nor change: their might
> Exceeds our organs—which endure
> No light—being themselves obscure."[347]

What we have in stanza 52 of *Adonais* is not just an ontology of the symbol, but a symbol itself. Shelley's dome and light image reveals God as unimageable.

---

[346] Fogle, 240.
[347]Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant," conclusion, lines 21-4. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

Even though Shelley does not reject the immanent sphere, the completion of unity with the One can only be affected through death of the empirical self, which is why Shelley declares, "Die! / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!" Stanza 53 repeats that view: "'Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither, / No more let Life divide what Death can join together" (lines 476-7). Nonetheless, the praise of death is not an injunction to suicide. As M.H. Abrams observes, "We should not read the transport of Shelley's imagined escape from his own circumstances at the end as revoking the celebration of the life force against which it is deliberately counterpoised."[348] I would modify Abrams's statement only by insisting that the transcendent is not so much the counterpart to the life force, but its culmination and its essence. The one Spirit's plastic stress is the cause of life, permeating it, shaping it, driving it, completing it, and lifting it into itself. The One is the absolute Life in which all life participates. Shelley's mentality is, once again, captured by a quotation from Pseudo-Dionysius:

> "The transcendently originating Life is the cause of all life…It may be contemplated and praised amid every manifestation of life, for it lacks nothing or, rather, it is overflowing with life. It is absolute Life and working far beyond life it transcendently fashions all life, or however else one may humanly praise the ineffable Life."[349]

As Fogle observes, "Shelley, despite his brave words, is not wholly anxious to desert the beautiful world of appearances." Yet, this is not, as Fogle suggests, because "the cold perfection of the One" presents a chilly alternative to the flame of Life.[350] Far from being "cold," the One, as we have already seen, is that which enkindles the flame

---

[348] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 441.
[349] Pseudo-Dionysius, 105.
[350] Fogle, 238.

of life, being itself the supreme flame. Yet, the beauty of the world is all the soul now sees. For the vision to be complete, death must trample the world to fragments. Yet, to leave a known behind for an unknown is difficult, even if one intimates that within the unknown resides something infinitely greater.

It also seems clear at this point that the debate over Keats's immortality in the poem by both Platonic readers and anti-Platonic readers alike misses the point if readers treat immortality as persistence of individuality. Keats is immortal in the sense that *atman* is *Brahman.* The empirical self, which is a part of the dream of life, ought not to be mistakenly identified with the real self. Timothy Webb unwittingly identifies Vedanta in Shelley when he writes, the "mysterious ideal to which he [Shelley] addresses himself is beyond the obscure comprehension of man…It seems to be an animating spirit, a principle of life" and "Though this principle or power may seem to be withdrawn when the human being, animal, or plant is seen to die, or when the inanimate object alters its form, this may be an illusion due to the imperfect nature of our organs of perception. What we can recognise is the existence of an animating principle, its mysteriousness, its power, and beauty."[351] Keats is made one with Nature not because he is "Dust to the dust!" but because, as stanza 38 declares,

> "the pure spirit shall flow
> Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
> A portion of the Eternal, which must glow
> Through time and change, unquenchably the same,"[352]

[351] Webb, 245.
[352] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 338-41.

Only the empirical Keats has been extinguished. Rather, his empirical form was drawn from the "burning fountain," held for a moment, and spilled back into the Eternal glow, which burns "unquenchably the same." This Eternal is not merely the immanent totality of all time and change, but the transcendent absolute in which all immanent reality participates since the stanza makes it clear that the Eternal exists outside "time and change." Water imagery appears here as a metaphor for the endless procession away from and back into the simple unity of the one. The "pure spirit shall flow" back to its source, just as the rivers flow back to the ocean in *Mont Blanc*. The stanza also conveys the transcendence of the One through the language of paradox. Shelley also performs a coincidence of opposites to convey the transcendence of God, as he did in *Mont Blanc*, by bringing together fire and water imagery in the burning fountain. The "fire for which all thirst," as Shelley later terms it, is an image both intensely sensory and yet almost impossible to visualize.[353] As Fogle writes, these lines reveal an "incongruity [which] is symptomatic of an imaginative breaking-down of the bars between the senses which is essentially synaesthetic in mode" and characteristic of Shelley's "urge toward Oneness."[354]

What the poem truly dramatizes is not so much Keats's immortality but Shelley's insight into the nature of reality. He realizes that Keats, along with all else in existence, is a *symbol*. For that reason, he addresses the reader in the last line of stanza 51 asking, "What Adonais is, why fear we to become?"[355] If the poem merely metaphorized Keats's

---

[353] Ibid, line 485.
[354] Fogle, 132-3.
[355] Shelley, "Adonais," line 459.

poetic legacy beyond the grave, then why should Shelley invoke the term "we" and include *us* in his question? We have in this line further evidence against any reading that would hope to reduce the poem to a Keats's lasting literary significance. The question assumes that *we*, not just great poets, are a portion of the Eternal.

This participation all of nature in the Eternal is emphasized in stanza 43:

> "He is a portion of the loveliness
> Which once he made more lovely: he doth bear
> His part, while the one Spirit's plastic stress
> Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there
> All new successions to the forms they wear;
> Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight
> To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;
> And bursting in its beauty and its might
> From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light."[356]

The fact that this is not the immanent One of pure matter is evident from the directionality of Spirit, which sweeps through the world and up into transcendence. The Spirit present in all Nature, moves "*From* trees and beasts and men *into* the Heaven's light," (my italics), effectively reversing the direction of light in the dome metaphor in a return to the white radiance. Additionally, we learn that the same Power behind Mont Blanc's destructive potential turns out to also constitute the interconnective energy binding reality together. Welburn comes closer to the truth than the materialist reader when he states that Shelley "comes close…to the Ahrimanic mythology of 'barbarous nations' in his naked intuition of an inhuman Power" on Mont Blanc, but Welburn fails to see that Shelley's God also encompasses Love.[357] The Christian Welburn is dismayed

[356] Ibid, lines 379-87.
[357] Welburn, 128.

by an "inhuman Power" in Shelley which he identifies with the Zoroastrian "terrifying figure of Ahriman [who] must again be faced by the individual consciousness of the poet, who can no longer share the burden of fear with an infinite and benevolent Father."[358] Yet, for Shelley, the beautiful and the sublime collapse in the One just as destruction and creation are both expressions of Brahman. The "one Spirit" which ripples through the Universe bursts forth in both "beauty" and "might." The lines respecting the "dull dense world" do not reject matter in an ascetic gesture but reject the vision of uninspired matter offered by a purely immanent framework. Without the "Spirit coeternal with the Universe" there is only meaningless succession, a churning of dead matter, not the vivified flux of a realm of becoming yearning for Being. Analogously, in the realm of politics, without absolute Truth and Goodness, there is only human custom.

The equation of Power with Beauty and Love appears in Stanza 42:

> "He is made one with Nature: there is heard
> His voice in all her music, from the moan
> Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
> He is a presence to be felt and known
> In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
> Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
> Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
> Which wields the world with never-wearied love,
> Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above."[359]

Keats does not just have lasting presence on the bookshelf or in human memory, but is palpably present in all of nature, since he is identical to "that Power" which "has withdrawn his being to its own." We must not forget that Shelley groups Keats in with

[358] Ibid, 129.
[359] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 370-8.

less aware and even unconscious entities. Keats belongs to the one Spirit along with "night's sweet bird" (an animal), "herb and stone" (both animate and inanimate organic matter), and "darkness" and "light" (even more basic physical components of reality). The stanza's point is not that Keats is merely physical, but that the physical is not merely physical, since basic living things and even fundamental elements equally belong to Power. Keats, as well as all else of beauty in this world, constitutes a "portion of the loveliness" and "doth bear / His part." If Shelley meant for this poem to simply attest to Keats's poetic immortality, he would not focus on Keats's unity with Nature, which resides outside of culture nor would he emphasize all of nature's participation in the one Spirit. So much of poem does not discuss Keats but the whole of reality. His death occasions a reflection on the identity between self and God.

Shelley's poetic mysticism comes across especially in the phrase "he is to be felt and known" since the speaker gains his theological certainty only through intuition. Cameron almost acknowledges this when he writes, "the essential character of the power or principle inherent in nature cannot yet be known" but he quickly neutralizes it by scientizing it, claiming that what Shelley really meant was a hidden scientific property or "substance" not a theological mystery. It is clear from the Neoplatonic diction, however, that Power is not variable x, but a mystical absolute. Furthermore, even if Power consists of a "capacity for existence, motion, or growth," as Cameron put it, this does not its preclude its being spiritual in nature.[360] In the Pseudo-Dionysian

[360] Cameron, 166-7.

ontology, existence and motion are the natural expression of the One's internal dynamism. For both Shelley and Pseudo-Dionysius, all life and being and movement are the expression of absolute Life, Being, and Love—in short, Power. As Pseudo-Dionysius puts it, God is the "self-moving power directing all things to mingle as one."[361]

Since materialist readers often find it difficult to distinguish theology in general from personal theism, they mistake Power for God's immanent replacement. Not only is Power God in Shelley's theology, but Power is both transcendent and immanent. Cameron writes, "As it [Power] is inherent in matter, one need not assume a creative God."[362] In saying as much, he oddly makes the same assumption about God as the Christian Wilson who writes, "The last two lines introduce a somewhat jarring echo of Christianity. In merely Platonic terms, while the natural may be impelled by love of the divine, the divine can hardly be expected to love the natural…"[363] Butter likewise mistakes the word "Love" as evidence of Shelley's belief in a personal, creative God, writing that the lines at the end of stanza 42 reveal that "God is Love. In fact, he [Shelley] was moving—in spite of early prejudice—towards the idea of a personal God, and even towards the idea of God as creator, a belief which he had earlier passionately opposed."[364] What Cameron and the Christian Platonic readers of Shelley alike assume is that Love implies personality and agency. The difference is that Cameron rules out the existence of God in the poem on the basis that the Power pervading all things is

[361] Pseudo-Dionysius, 84.
[362] Cameron, 167.
[363] Wilson, 248.
[364] Butter, 129.

sufficient explanation for existence and does not require us to introduce Love, while Wilson inserts God into the poem by insisting that Shelley implies that there must be more than Power since Shelley uses the term Love. In fact, what Shelley does in *Adonais* is define "Love" in such a way that it is convertible with Power and in no manner connected to a creative or personal Deity.

"Power" does not create. Power abides as ground of existence and aggregating principle and for that reason is capable of sustaining and kindling reality. It is "the Spirit coeternal with the Universe" that Shelley specifically opposed to a notion of a personal, creative Deity in the *Queen Mab* footnote. As we saw in Pseudo-Dionysius's analogy of the sun, the theology of Power presents an alternative to the anthropomorphic demi-urge who pushes the Universe into motion. Power emanates or unfolds according to its own nature, not by a deliberate act. Nor does Power's inherence within matter exclude the possibility of its transcendence as has been assumed. Rather, power's force within matter testifies to the transcendent's presence within the immanent.[365] Not only does Shelley invoke the term "Power" but he uses rather precise ontological terms to describe its relationship to the sensory world. To say Power "wields the world" and "sustains it from beneath" is to describe an ontological relationship of grounding. Existence as such, even as it is eternal and cyclical, rests on "Power" as its transcendent source. Power

[365] Butter, despite reading Shelley's Platonism through both a Christian and ascetic lens does seem to distinguish between a dualist and a symbolic metaphysics when he argues that, even though "The images we have been considering—robe, lute, lamp, nest, boat, veil—have been in origin dualistic" there are in "Shelley's later works two main tendencies: 1) towards using the images in a more consciously symbolic way, 2) towards overcoming their basically dualistic character. He was never really content with the 'ghost in the machine' theory; but was always seeking some more unified conception," 114.

pervades it, not as an interfering agent, but as a vivifying principle. It is "spreading itself" and "moves" through all things. The phrase "kindles from above" further indicates that Power is transcendent to reality and constitutes a sort of infinite source of energy. Life is a fire set by Power. Power is not categorically distinct (dualism) from the world we experience but differs in virtue of infinite excess. The ontology outlined here is that of participation.

Stanza 42 also explains how Power can be convertible with Love, since Love, in Shelley's Neoplatonic metaphysics, precisely is what Power is, namely, the dynamic and aggregating principle responsible for being, motion, change, and unification. M.H. Abrams describes the Neoplatonic origin of Shelley's Power-Love equation:

> "for this centripetal force [in existence] the most eligible general name is 'love.' The inclusive application of the term to all the cohesive forces in the human and nonhuman universe had been common among the Neoplatonists, for whom dispersion and integration, as we have seen, had been primary metaphysical categories. In Proclus, as Anders Nygren points out in *Agape and Eros*, '*Eros is the bond of union in existence*,' the '*universal force of cohesion* in the most comprehensive sense of the term'; and for the Pseudo-Dionysius it is similarly the general 'unifying and cohesive force.'"[366]

Shelley affirms the same view of *Eros* as unitive power in "On Love":

> "we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. This is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing that exists. We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its own likeness."[367]

---

[366] Abrams, 294.
[367] Shelley, "On Love," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), 504.

In its language of thirsting and kindling, *Adonais* replicates the language of "On Love" and conceives of the aggregating principle (Power) in erotic terms. Power unites "*every thing* that exists." To say Power "wields the world with never-wearied love" is precisely to say that the "vibrations" binding together and moving the universe, are of the nature of sexual love. Desire characterizes becoming's relationship to Being as well as the relationship between beings. In each being's pull towards another, it does not abandon God, but participates in God which is ultimate Love. The notion consistently appears throughout Shelley's writing, such as in *Epipsychidion* where, despite his later disillusionment with 'Emily,' union with the earthly beloved symbolizes union with the ideal One. In *The Sensitive Plant* lovers are used as an archetype to describe the relationship between things in nature. Consider the description of the paradisiacal flowers in *The Sensitive Plant*:

> "For each one was interpenetrated
> With the light and the odor its neighbor shed;
> Like young lovers whom youth and love make dear,
> Wrapped and filled by their mutual atmosphere."[368]

For Shelley, *Eros* is not a selfish or predatory force, but the commingling power[369] of existence. Love is not an act performed by a Deity, but the nature of the One itself, the Energy and Energizer of the entire Universe, both the cause of yearning and yearning itself. It is the supreme motivator of existence and movement, the drive to unity itself. Power is "never-wearied" in *Adonais* because it can never be expended; for

[368] Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant," 1, lines 66-9.
[369] The term "Power" also appears in *The Sensitive Plant* to describe the "Lady" tending the garden, who herself functions as a symbol of God: "There was a Power in this sweet place, / An Eve in this Eden; a ruling grace / Which to the flowers did they waken or dream / Was as God is to the starry scheme:" 2.1-4.

Love to be expended would be for existence as such to cease. As Pseudo-Dionysius writes, "Abolish the Good and you will abolish being, life, desire, movement, everything."[370]

In Shelley's account, desire for the Beloved constitutes an urge for ego-dissolution, not the longing of an ego to consume everything into itself. *Eros* is what Fogle describes as Shelley's "intellectual and emotional urge toward Oneness" which expresses itself as "a blending of all sensation into one mystical, ineffable, supersensuous harmony; a dissolution which involves the spirit itself in willing self-surrender."[371] It is a longing for completion through the transcendence of alienation and duality. The beloved, Shelley writes, is "a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise" and "To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it."[372] The compulsion to seek out and fuse with the beloved is an expression of the desire to return to the One, which is the ultimate Beloved. Loving another being is to discover the true self outside the ego. It is to find the "soul within the soul," the *atman* that is identical to *Brahman*.[373]

Elham Nilchian compares Shelley's divinization of the Beloved to Sufism, insisting that "the Romantic subject seeks perfection through an obliteration of its own self in the face of an idealised other conceived as a whole. The male subject's search for

---

[370] Pseudo-Dionysius, 87.
[371] Fogle, 136.
[372] Shelley, "On Love," 104.
[373] The phrase resembles "this soul out of my soul" in line 238 of *Epipsychidion*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

an ideal female other[374] and his desire to lose self in order to become one with her has connections with Sufism, where this loss of self is referred to as *fanaa*."[375] Shelley, assuming "the role of a mystic/Sufi subject, longs for loss of his own self in the other as a means of attaining a genuine and lasting cure for his inner alienation."[376] Importantly, the language of erotic love (not sympathy) characterizes self-loss in particular. Nilchian writes, "It is the difference between fellowship (self's relation with the world outside) and love (self's relation with the other as its own self) that generates the distinction between selflessness and self-loss. Whereas selflessness is when the self has the ability to leave itself and inhabit the place of the other, the idea of loss of self originates from the self's desire to either unify with the other or dissolve in her."[377] Sympathy or friendship preserves a difference of individuals, whereas divine yearning seeks unindividuated oneness. Friendship preserves duality by positing a relation between subjectivities whereas love desires to overcome duality.

Nilchian resists the notion common to Western readers that the desire for the ideal beloved constitutes a form of narcissistic self-projection and an urge for "dominating or possessing the other."[378] Westerners usually insist that the other be recognized and appreciated as different and individual. This view assumes not only that the real self is the ego but that ego subjectivities are irreconcilable. Thus, it misinterprets

---

[374] Though the poet in question is male, it seems obvious that there is nothing intrinsically male about the quest for the ideal beloved. If the poet had been female, the same relationship could obtain with the male representing Beauty. One wonders, would readers still characterize this poem as narcissistic self-projection or as consumptive desire if it were written by a woman to describe her desire for a man?
[375] Elham Nilchian, "Shelley's Quest for Persian Love," *The Comparatist*, 40 (2016): 222-44, 222.
[376] Nilchian, 224.
[377] Ibid, 223.
[378] Ibid, 224.

the erotic quest for the ideal beloved as a quest to gratify the ego when, in fact, the desire to find self in another should be understood as a desire to realize the ultimate identification of all things in the One. Shelley's desire to fuse with other is, in Nilchian's words, not self-projection but a longing for "self-perfection through losing his egotistic self for that idealised Being" and "Shelley's image of the mirror of man's soul that reflects only 'the forms of purity and brightness' echoes the Sufi conception of the self as being so purified that it only reflects the qualities of the ultimate being or God."[379] This is difficult to conceive for Westerners wedded to a notion that self consists in individuality and that God is a person distinct from individual souls rather than an ultimate One lying beyond the illusion of multiplicity.

For Shelley, this self-loss does not involve a rejection of the senses (asceticism). Rather, self-loss consists in a sensory flood. Divinity reaches all the way down and embraces the senses in itself. As Shelley puts it in "On Love," "all sensations" of the whole symbolize Love in "thirsting" to correspond with another. Fogle puts it nicely when he states that in Shelley, "Sense is translated into a mystical and ecstatic plane of experience in which sense is as it were drowned, merged with emotion until it no longer has a separate and unique identity."[380] He argues that this comes across most in Shelley's tendency to abstraction and synesthesia:

> "Synaesthesia in Shelley is the poetical expression of a conscious, intellectual quest after a cosmic and psychic unity, in which the merging into Oneness of disparate physical phenomena symbolizes the ideal unity toward which the

[379] Nilchian 223.
[380] Fogle, 136.

> spirit strives. In the final stage of this process sense and spirit are themselves one, fused by the intellect, sensation and emotion into an imaginative whole."[381]

According to Fogle, To *A Skylark* best reveals that Shelleyan mystical experience is a sort of infinite sensuousness: "The lark's song is so copiously, so generously bestowed upon the listener that it suggests a kind of *outpouring*, an *overflowing* bounteousness."[382] The bird's divine superabundance results in a chain of similes, none of which suffices to access the absolute. Shelley's bird is a god to be approached apophatically, but not ascetically. After all, the poet remarks, "I have never heard / Praise of love or wine / That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine."[383] In *Adonais* the One itself is the Absolute sensuous (white light containing all colors) not an evacuation of the senses (vacancy).

Stanza 54 elaborates on this theology of Power/Love by extending the equation to Beauty. Moreover, in this stanza Shelley drops Keats from the conversation and speaks entirely in broad metaphysical terms, ending with Shelley's own relationship to, "That Light" which "now beams on me." Clearly, the chief difficulty with rationalizing away the mass of Platonic vocabulary as just poetry celebrating Keats's "literary immortality,"[384] is the extent to which this poem's subject matter is in such excess of Keats. One must ask, what work could these lines be doing if not describing an ontological structure of the Universe?

---

[381] Ibid, 138.
[382] Ibid, 134.
[383] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To A Skylark," lines 63-5, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).
[384] Cameron, 438.

> "That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,
> That Beauty in which all things work and move,
> That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse
> Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love
> Which through the web of being blindly wove
> By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
> Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
> The fire for which all thirst; now beams on me,
> Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality."[385]

Again, the classic Platonic reading is mostly correct, but superficial and implicitly Christianizing. Grabo writes:

> "It is, I think, the most concise as well as the most beautiful definition of the Platonic philosophy of the One, in whom are summed the absolutes of Truth, Love, and Beauty, and to which the mutable forms of matter imperfectly aspire. It trusts that the All-Love, All-Goodness will know what is best."[386]

Indeed, the One, in Shelley's account, is convertible with Truth, Love, Goodness, and Beauty, but Grabo treats the One as an agent when he states that it "will know what is best." Grabo also uses the phrase "in whom" instead of "in which" to describe what Shelley understands to be an abstract beyond personhood (i.e. the one mind). The "sustaining Love" in stanza 54 does not describe an attitude of a divine agent, but, again, the unitive force present throughout the Universe. Love/Power, in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius, "something penetrating unhindered into and through all things, energizing them."[387] "God is Power" writes Pseudo-Dionysius. "The benefits of this inexhaustible Power reach out to humans, to animals, to plants, and indeed to all of nature. They enable the assembly of all things…"[388] Evil, can be understood as that which tends

[385] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 478-86.
[386] Grabo, 370.
[387] Pseudo-Dionysius, 116.
[388] Ibid, 111.

towards disaggregation and death. It is the principle of alienation and negation, that which works to annihilate Beauty and Life.

Beauty does not bring the soul to itself by an act of grace but pulls with magnetic attractiveness on the soul which inherently wishes to realize itself. Beauty, as irradiation of the Absolute is the mechanism of Love, the cause of longing, the Beloved itself. "That Beauty in which all things work and move" is, therefore, also Power, since all liveliness is generated by yearning for Beauty. Pseudo-Dionysius articulates the same idea as Shelley:

> "Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty. And there it is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being…The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good, for everything looks to the Beautiful and the Good as the cause of being…"[389]

Beauty drives the erotic dynamism otherwise termed "Power." For "When we talk of yearning…in the mind or in the spirit or in nature, we should think of a unifying and co-mingling power…"[390] Importantly, "both the yearning and the object of that yearning belong to the Beautiful and Good."[391] Power is both the object of desire motivating all movement (the Beloved/Beauty) as well as the process of desiring itself (Loving Beauty). Thus, Love loves even when it has its object, which is itself. Desire does not expire in having, as was proposed in Plato's *Symposium*. Shelley expresses a similar thought in the *Defence*: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own

[389] Pseudo-Dionysius, 77.
[390] Ibid, 83.
[391] Ibid, 82.

nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own."[392] *Eros* drives the self to reach beyond its ego. The culmination of Love is the recognition of an identification between the true self and that Beauty for which it yearns. Worldly entities do not compete with the One for the soul's attention; they enact divine Love, just as one who marvels at the beautiful, marvels at Beauty.

Thus, Love equates with Power and Beauty and the Good in the Shelleyan theology, as it does for Pseudo-Dionysius. The One "is stirred by it and he stirs it. He is moved to it and he moves it. So they call him the beloved and the yearned-for since he is beautiful and good and, again, they call him yearning and love because he is the power moving and lifting all things up to himself." God is "yearning on the move" and "divine yearning shows especially its unbeginning and unending nature traveling in an endless circle."[393] Becoming and matter reflect God's unbeginning, unending internal dynamism which appears as the cyclicity and eternity of the Universe. *Eros,* made manifest, is precisely the teeming of the entire Universe. As Shelley writes in "On Love," Love is "the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but everything that exists."[394]

Far from promoting a *contemptus mundi*, Shelley's theology rejects such a mindset as impious. Shelley's God is "the fire for which all thirst." To reject passion, pleasure, and beauty is not to become closer to the transcendent, but farther from it. That which

---

[392] Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 517.
[393] Ibid, 83.
[394] Shelley, "On Love," 504.

the ascetic holds in the greatest contempt, sexual love, symbolizes, God/the divine. To believe that Shelley rejects the world because he posits a transcendent One is to entirely misunderstand what he has done with Neoplatonic metaphysics. By interpreting God as *Eros*, and by proposing a symbolic ontology, Shelley renders the sensuous world an expression of the divine. In doing so, he sacralizes what the puritan hates (e.g. sexuality, art) in short, all the vibrancy of life. Obviously, this is not to say that Shelley does not acknowledge the existence of evil; his poems are filled with grief for suffering and tragedy. After all, Keats's reunion with the One escapes the "world's bitter wind."[395] Yet, in his Neoplatonic and Vedic theology, evil is understood to be a vacancy, not a part of God, nor an entity opposed to God. The triumph of evil in the Shelleyan Universe is not the corruption of spirit by the clod of matter, but the obfuscation of God's radiance within matter by darkness.

Beauty is Love and Love is Power, the "electric life running through all things" and the "all-penetrating spirit."[396] This life of nature, which appeared distinct from Keats in stanza 19, turns out to be a preview of the divine nature with which Keats is united:

[395] Shelley, "Adonais," line 457.
[396] Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 535.

"Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean
A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst
As it has ever done, with change and motion,
From the great morning of the world when first
God dawn'd on Chaos; in its stream immers'd,
The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light;
All baser things pant with life's sacred thirst;
Diffuse themselves; and spend in love's delight,
The beauty and the joy of their renewed might."[397]

We feel the presence of Mont Blanc in the images of Ocean, bursting and ceaseless motion. Yet, *Adonais* adds a "softer light" to the "Heaven flash" of *Mont Blanc*. Life in this poem is a "quickening," an erotic dynamism both intense and gentle in which all "things pant with life's sacred thirst" and "spend in love's delight." Shelley's poetry offers a portrait of life and being as a sacralized sexual cycle of desire and fulfillment mirroring the internal dynamism of the One which is absolute Life, Beauty, Love, and Power. *Adonais* is no Platonic retreat from the sensory, nor a secular alternative to Christianity. In the Shelleyan theology, it is those who hold the world in contempt who are the true atheists.

2.3 Theology as a Basis for Politics: Shelley's Neoplatonic Feminism

As we saw in the previous section, so much of the critical resistance to Neo-Platonic readings of Shelley derives from an erroneous assumption that the political is somehow mutually exclusive with the theological. For anti-Platonic readers, to speak of a serene transcendence in *Mont Blanc* is to neglect the poem's political interest and its urgency to action. We also saw that, to a certain extent, this same false dichotomy

[397] Shelley, "Adonais," lines 163-71.

between the theological and the political was made by early Platonic readers who imagined Shelley's flight into the One to be an abandonment of all worldly projects. In the case of post-theory scholars, such as Jerrold Hogle, who is principally influenced by Derridean deconstruction, the very notion of an absolute One is perceived as incompatible with social justice, largely because various oppressive ideologies have claimed to act in the name of immutable truth (e.g. natural law claims that make women subordinate to men). Many scholars who endorse Shelley's radical politics, such as his feminism or his class politics, might want to will Shelley into being a materialist since they associate revolutionary progress with a rejection of immaterialist metaphysics.

On the contrary, the transcendent One symbolized by Mont Blanc is that which motivates political change. Just as transcendent Beauty sacralizes the sensuous world instead of negating it, the vision of the Good inspires the destruction of "codes of fraud and woe." Far from engendering a spiritual *contemptus mundi*, the transcendent motivates Shelley's interest in the world, including his desire for social change. As we shall see, one of the areas in which Shelley's philosophical theology informs his politics is, in fact, his feminism. Far from simply resisting asceticism in favor of libertinism, Shelley draws on Neoplatonic metaphysics to promote an idea of sacred carnal desire that allows for women's liberation from patriarchy, sexism and puritanical, repressive attitudes about sexuality. Shelley's free love philosophy resists legalistic moral frameworks which evaluate the moral and spiritual worth of sexual relationships in terms of contracts, which is how he understood the institutional codification of marriage by the State (which effectively turned women into male property, often binding young

women in indissoluble union with older men and then imposing a demand for fidelity only on the woman). Condemning both matrimonialism and prostitution, Shelley promotes the idea that love is both necessary and sufficient to render a sexual relationship sacred and moral. While Shelley acknowledges that two people who are married may love each other, it is their love, not their marital status (the latter is merely legal and defined by institutions) that makes the relationship good according to Shelley's philosophy of love. Prostitution, on the other hand, is inherently loveless and unequal (i.e. patriarchal) and, therefore, never good.

While he clearly promotes free love, Shelley would likely be perplexed by contemporary attempts to understand sexual morality strictly in terms of 'consent.' While the idea of 'consent' is itself fraught, since there are situations in which a person may superficially agree to something while still being incapable of genuinely free, rational consent (i.e. one is too young, one is uninformed, the parties involved do not have equal power, one is not in the right state of mind, one is acting under social pressure, or one has been emotionally, economically, or politically manipulated by false consciousness and ideology etc.), none of this is Shelley's concern, since he does not evaluate sexual morality on the basis of 'consent' (though he clearly condemns sexual coercion).[398] Almost certainly, Shelley would find today's attempt to reduce sexual morality to a matter of consent to be a replication of the transactional/contractual logic that he hated about matrimonialism.

---

[398] One might also note that just because a person 'chooses' to do something does not mean what they 'choose' to do is healthful, empowering, or moral. Self-cutting and drug addiction are two obvious examples.

Considering that he condemns prostitution for its commodification of women, he would very likely find today's attempted normalization of prostitution under the spiritless term "sex work" in certain left-wing circles to be deeply troubling, not only because of its physical and psychological harm to women, but because of its fundamentally anti-Romantic outlook that leads it to view human relationships in strictly commercial terms (i.e. bodies are understood as property to be lent out by 'consenting' owners). So-called 'sex-positive' third wave feminism, however, was not the dominant ideology of Shelley's time. His primary enemy was a puritanical and misogynistic type of Christian morality.

However, it's worth noting that the growing left-wing movement today to legalize prostitution emerges, in part, out of a rebellion against the "sex-negative" (to borrow their own language) religious attitudes Shelley condemned. As we shall see, this movement ironically ends up replicating the logic of religious sex-negative ideology insofar as third wave feminism reduces sex to the purely material and legitimates patriarchy's ownership of women. It thus perpetuates the very beliefs about sex that Shelley rejects. Sexuality is, for both the puritan and today's advocate for prostitution purely physiological, not spiritual or intimate (i.e. not Romantic) and it, thus, may or may not have a 'consensual' cash value attached to it in the same manner as toilet scrubbing or car washing.

Shelley's Romantic free love philosophy is, therefore, relevant for our contemporary culture not only because he demonstrates that the political can work in tandem with the theological, but because he disrupts the false choice between a

puritanical, that is, 'sex-negative' religious morality and today's loveless, transactional 'secular' alternative. Since many third wave feminists promote license and condemn any criticism as a vestige of religious sex-negativity, the irony is that many of them might call Shelley "sex-negative" if they came across his attack on prostitution. Shelley shows us that we can value intimacy and spirituality while also rejecting puritanical and misogynistic ideology. One does not have to be okay with commodifying women to be "sex-positive." In fact, Shelley's Romantic philosophy is far more positive than today's commercial one since his divinizes and socializes the erotic while the latter treats desire as asocial and meaningless—no different from the need to scratch oneself.

Above all, it's important to emphasize that Shelley's anti-puritanism is never anti-religious. Shelley's resistance to patriarchal, misogynistic, and repressive attitudes about women and sexuality (which can be found in a variety of religions, not just Christianity) derives from his spirituality, not from atheism, irreligiosity, or a materialist ontology. In other words, Shelley mobilizes divinized *Eros* (i.e. transcendent Love) to replace an evaluation of sexuality in terms of legal/illegal with a notion of sexuality in terms of good/bad. His qualified monism promotes a notion of identity (and, therefore, equality) of the sexes in the One. While he discards marriage as a moral and spiritual requirement for sex, it is only because he insists that love alone (which may not be present in marriage) can sacralize desire and pleasure. As such, Shelley's free love philosophy is anti-contractual and anti-institutional only because he celebrates the real presence of the transcendent in the sensuous and sensual.

In other words, Shelley's feminism is not merely a political issue, but a metaphysical one. His feminism relies on his symbolic theology, which understands the sensuous Universe to be a manifestation of the divine, and his understanding of *Eros* (the aggregating principle) to be the essence of God. These ideas motivate his rejection of any ascetic ideology which would posit an antagonistic relationship between the sensual and spiritual such that the denial of the sensory world (e.g. abstinence from food, sex, music, visual beauty etc.) constitutes a spiritual or moral achievement (as his early Platonic readers assumed). Since Shelley conceives of nature as sacred, he views human institutions (the State and the Church) as irrelevant or superfluous in matters of sexual morality. Since he makes sentimental love both necessary and sufficient for moral and spiritual meaning in sexual matters, he actually condemns loveless marriages for the same reason he condemns libertinism and prostitution—all are loveless. While his free love philosophy can be found in a variety of texts throughout his career from his early polemical *Queen Mab* (1813) to *Laon and Cythna* (1817) and *Rosalind and Helen* (1819) this philosophy is best exemplified by his mature work *Epipsychidion* (1821) and, for that reason, I will principally focus on that text. By arguing in *Epipsychidion* that all things are ultimately identical in the One, Shelley replaces patriarchal hierarchy with a notion of identity and equality between the sexes and he employs sexual union as a metaphor for the return to the One. Shelley's feminism, therefore, demonstrates how religiosity does not entail a retreat from the political realm any more than a liberal political orientation commits one to materialism. On the contrary, transcendent Beauty, Goodness, and Truth motivate Shelley's feminism. By maintaining a commitment to a transcendent

metaphysics, Shelley provides a more genuinely radical rebellion against patriarchal, sexist, and puritanical ideologies than any merely negative rebellion does (e.g. genuine atheism, materialism, or nihilism).

Perhaps the tendency to oppose the theological to the political among academics has been motivated, in the case of early Platonic readers, by their own religious endorsement of a *contemptus mundi* and, in the case of more contemporary scholars, a Marxist notion that religion is an opiate of the masses and, therefore, counter-revolutionary or a post-structuralist notion that thinking in terms of transcendent absolutes (an integral feature of religion) is intrinsically unjust. While I would not want to endorse a notion as incoherent as Jordan Peterson's "postmodern neo-Marxism," I will say that a commonality between Marxism and various postmodernisms in the academic humanities is certainly a tendency to reject religion. While the views of a structuralist Marxist might be at odds with those of a post-structuralist, the two might very much agree on resisting theological readings of Shelley because one wants to endorse a materialist Shelley, as Paul Foot does in *Red Shelley*,[399] while the other wants to endorse a poststructuralist Shelley, as Hogle does in *Shelley's Process*. Whatever the reason, the assumption that the political Shelley is mutually exclusive with the theological Shelley continues to be a recurring mistake among his interpreters and is symptomatic of a larger cultural tendency in the West to think in terms of Christianity vs. secularism, with 'politics' often being interpreted as belonging to the secular arena.

[399] See Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982).

So long as we apply the Christianity vs. secularism binary, we will not do justice to Shelley's own theology (or that of the other Romantics). If we do not articulate Shelley's "God" on Its own terms, but merely evaluate Shelley in terms of his rejection of Christianity, we lose the nuance and particularity of his philosophical and spiritual thought.

Even post-secular readings of Shelley continue to miss his theology and affirm Christianity as normative theological standard. Colin Jager, for example, makes religion an inescapable topic in discussions of Shelley and writes of *Mont Blanc* that "any interpretation of the poem that concentrates on its various epistemological conundrums will eventually find itself running up against the question of our knowledge of God….a reading that sets itself the task of figuring out what beliefs or unbeliefs the poem expresses—tangles itself up in the question of religion, *even if the reading concludes that the poem 'expresses' atheism*." At the same time, Jager insists that "atheism is a Christian concept" emerging from "shifts *within* Christianity."[400] While I am claiming, as David Bentley Hart does, that many people who identify as "atheists" are merely reacting to an improper definition of God (Shelley included) and are, therefore, not really atheists, Jager goes farther in asserting that atheism *is* a Christian concept.

Far from challenging the Christianity vs. secularism dichotomy, Jager upholds it in order to historicize the emergence of atheism by claiming that "unbelief" became thinkable only through ideological conditions rendered by developments in Christian

[400] Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 614.

history. Jager's brand of post-secularism, though it critiques secular liberal intellectualism[401] by revealing its dependence on what it rejects (Christianity), nonetheless remains historicist in methodology. In other words, Jager attacks secular liberal ideology on its own methodological terms (e.g. historicism) without ever challenging those terms. Even though Jager resists any narrative that "makes atheism external to religion," he avoids attributing any theological content to Shelley's poems.[402] By understanding what he terms 'cognitivism' to be a problematic feature of secularism, Jager can critique 'cognitivism' to critique 'secularism,' thus making his brand of post-secularism palatable to intellectuals who do not wish to engage in theology proper. Instead they can discuss the behavior of persons in history. Jager resurrects religion as an acceptable topic of academic discussion only by killing theology. The more one locates belief in the body or praxis, rather than Platonic heaven, the less one has to worry over the truth claims of theological propositions,[403] which is why Jager ends his discussion of *Mont Blanc* by saying, "Is Shelley a Platonist? An idealist? A skeptic?...the poem insists that none of this matters."[404] Actually, it does.[405]

---

[401] Colin Jager writes in *The Book of God*, "While secularization generally appears as merely a descriptive tool, then, among Western intellectuals it is also a normative theoretical construct, with its own values and assumptions." Furthermore, intellectuals "create and validate an intellectual posture understood as intrinsically antagonistic to religion…[and] the versions of critical thinking celebrated by intellectuals are not expressions of true independence of mind so much as they are expression of class interest," 33.
[402] Jager, *Unquiet Things*, 614.
[403] I want to make it clear that I am not disagreeing with Jager's claim that belief does not reduce to propositional assent. My position is rather that propositional assent is necessary but not sufficient for belief. However, anti-cognitivism, in its extreme form, becomes a way of avoiding theology.
[404] Jager, *Unquiet Things*, 623.
[405] One wonders if Jager would consider Christians who recite the Nicene Creed to be secular since they clearly believe cognitive assent/belief is essential to being a Christian.

Not only does philosophical theology matter in Shelley, but it is inextricable from his politics. *Mont Blanc* is at once a theological and a political poem, since its conception of revolutionary upheaval is bound up with Shelley's metaphysical view of endless universal change. As symbol of transcendent Truth, the mountain promises the destruction of harmful human customs. The "Poets" who can read this symbol are both religious and political figures. Nonetheless, as we saw in the Shelley scholarship, many people believe that liberal politics are mutually exclusive with theological beliefs, often because the latter seems to threaten the return of the reign of Jupiter. Religion looms behind the language of transcendent absolutes like one of Jerrold Hogle's "tyrannizing centers" eager to force "submission" once again.[406] In contrast with religious injustice, a flight from absolutes appears to be liberation. Yet, for those deeply committed, as Hogle is, to social justice, a denial of truth and goodness naturally begs the question as to how a just or loving society could ever be defined or considered worth pursuing. In the very critique of unjust norms and conventions (what Shelley consistently refers to as "custom"), one implies some normative standard of truth and goodness against which the injustices of the social construct are measured.

It is difficult for many Westerners to really think about what they believe, metaphysically speaking, if they assume that an interest in social justice somehow commits them to a materialist metaphysics or to being anti-religious. Someone might simply take on the vague label of 'secular' because she believes her feminism makes her

[406] Hogle, 26.

anti-religious. Since she thinks feminism is anti-religious, she may never study philosophical theology and discover that she actually has theological beliefs. Diehard conservative Christians as well as diehard atheists may both be invested in the conceptual narrowness of a Christianity vs. secularism framework since, by making one's opposite appear to be the only alternative, an ideology can make itself seem the only reasonable option to those who find some aspects of its opposite repulsive. Thus, Shelley is key since he allows us to see that one may fall entirely outside the bounds of any organized religion and even reject a personal, creative Deity, while still fervently believing in God (redefined, of course). In fact, theology and politics coincide in Shelley. There may be many a self-declared 'atheist' today who, if (s)he picked up David Bentley Hart's *The Experience of God*, may find that there is much to agree with in it, but who will never touch that book because his evangelical parents sent him to gay conversion therapy or her parochial school teacher told her that good girls don't like sex. Someone's lived, accumulated experiences of religion drive their opinion of religion just as much, if not more, than abstract philosophical theology.

When Jager declares that for "liberal hawks" like "Ayaan Hirsi Ali" the "defense of the enlightenment and the defeat of terrorism require that we repudiate our romantic impulses in favor of a militant--and military-backed—secularism"[407] he completely overlooks the relevance of misogyny to Ali's atheism. Despite criticizing secularism for "remaking religion as a primarily epistemological concern, a matter of minds rather than

[407] Colin Jager, "Shelley After Atheism," *Studies in Romanticism* 49:4 (Winter 2010): 611-31, 631.

bodies"[408] Jager ignores the very real effect religion has left on Ali's body in the form of female genital mutilation. One does not have to agree with Ali's atheism or attribute misogynistic attitudes to all Muslims to agree with her that the brutalization of women (and its attempted justification with religion) is evil. Pretending that the history of religion has nothing to do with patriarchy, misogyny or hostility to sexuality is not only mentally dishonest, but it can only exacerbate hostility to religion from people like Ali whose justified outrage results from lived injustices. We might also ask who speaks with more courage, a Somali woman who continues to publicly decry religious misogyny despite having a death fatwa on her head, or a comfortable male professor damning Islamophobia in left-wing Western intellectual circles? But that is another matter…

For this reason, Shelley's feminism is extremely important. It demonstrates how a religious sensibility can be preserved while rejecting asceticism, patriarchy and misogyny. Shelley also shows us how we can step out of the Christianity vs. secularism (or organized religion) conceptual binary since he demonstrates a commitment to transcendent reality even though he is not a Christian. At the same time Shelley condemns crimes done in the name of religion, he does not reject the divine or transcendence. Instead of promoting freedom from a normative Good, Shelley's feminism resists the imposture of the Good. In the Shelleyan framework, any ideology that claims that it is the will of God or natural law for women to be subordinate to men is evil. In place of sexism and inequality Shelley substitutes a liberational and egalitarian

[408] Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things*, 243.

Neoplatonic feminism. By examining Shelley's feminist politics, we can understand not only how Shelley's spirituality and politics are intertwined, but we can use Shelley to conceive of a way to reconcile social justice with the idea of a transcendent real absolute in our own era. Nathaniel Brown provides one of the best summaries of Shelley's feminism:

> "Shelley the feminist is…[evident in] his attack on the libertine sexual practice of his own day and his exposure of the period's double-standard, in his elevation of 'sentimental' or romantic love over merely physical desire while nevertheless asserting women's right to complete erotic fulfillment, and in his indictment of patriarchal marriage as degrading to women and his preaching of 'free love' as an alternative. All this prepared the way for the poet's deliberate championship of women against the sexist norms of his age."[409]

Brown is right that "The poet exhibited a lifelong abhorrence for…asceticism." For Shelley, "impulses that in themselves are wholly natural and good are poisoned and corrupted by society's unnatural sexual taboos."[410] In Shelley's view, the puritanical or prudish attitudes about sex that he saw around him, as well as patriarchal double standards, were influenced by Christianity.[411] In Shelley's eyes, chastity emerges as a virtue only when sensual pleasure is held in contempt—a notion Shelley rejects by conceiving of *Eros* as divine and the sensuous world as the manifestation of God.

Shelley blames Christianity for demonizing sex in *A Refutation of Deism*. He writes, "A total abstinance from sexual intercourse is not perhaps enjoined, but is

---

[409] Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.
[410] Brown, 48-9.
[411] Richard Holmes relates a telling scene from Shelley's early life: "his father Timothy gave him some worldly advice in his study with its pictures of Christ crucified and Mount Vesuvius erupting. Tom Medwin happed to be present, and recorded: 'He would provide for as many natural children as [Bysshe] chose to get, but that he would never forgive him for making a mésalliance.' Shelley…stared at his father in silent scorn." Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1974), 36.

strenuously recommended, and was actually practised to a frightful extent by the primitive Christians," a claim to which he attaches a footnote quoting Paul from the New Testament: "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote to me; it is good for a man not to touch a woman. I say, therefore, to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry; it is better to marry than burn (1 Con, chap. vii.)."[412] Even though Shelley is wrong to attribute a puritanical mindset to every person professing to be a Christian, he is right that patriarchy, misogyny, and contempt for sexuality (especially that of women) are attitudes within Christianity. Shelley could not be entirely deluded in interpreting this New Testament passage so, since Shelley's interpretation is the same as St. Augustine's interpretation, though Shelley denounces the sentiment, while Augustine celebrates it. Augustine writes, "the only ones who should marry are those who are unable to be continent, in accordance with that advice of the same apostle: *If they are unable to be continent, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn* (1 Cor 7:9)."[413]

St. Augustine is a good figure to quote from to vindicate some of Shelley's criticisms of Christianity, since he is arguably the most influential Christian theologian

---

[412] Shelley, "A Refutation of Deism," *Prose Works*, 14. In addition to asceticism, one of Shelley's many objections to Christianity was its assertion that those disobedient to its God would be subjected to "hell, which is also called a lake of fire and brimstone, [which] will be material fire, and will torment the bodies of the damned, whether men or devils," forever. Saint Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Random House, 1950), 781. Shelley writes in a letter to his father, "The coming of Xt was called…good tidings, it is hard to believe how those tidings could be good which are to condemn more than half the world to the Devil, for as St. Athanasius says, 'He who does not believe shd. go into eternal fire.'" Shelley to Timothy Shelley, February 6, 1810 [for 1811]. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:46. He writes in his *Letter to Lord Ellenborough*, "Alas! there is no consistency in those persecutors who worship a benevolent Deity; those who worship a Demon would alone act consonantly to these principles, by imprisoning and torturing in his name." Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Letter to Lord Ellenborough," *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:68.

[413] Saint Augustine, *Marriage and Virginity*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1990), 42.

for both Catholics and Protestants and his attitude recurs throughout Christian history. Shelley's attack on religious patriarchy and misogyny is justified when one considers the following comparison between women and slaves, which Augustine makes through an appeal to natural law under God, which the saint believes is verified by the Old Testament:

> "By a mysterious law of nature dominant forces love singularly, but in the case of subordinate ones it is appropriate not only for each to be subject to one superior, but, if natural or social considerations allow it, even for several to be subject to the same superior. One slave does not have several masters, though one master may have several slaves. So we do not read of any holy woman ministering at the same time to two or more husbands…"[414]

Augustine also appeals to the New Testament to justify his assertion that the Lord intends women to be subordinate to men:

> "[the relation between] husband and wife…[is one in which] the second is subordinate to the first. When they maintain among themselves the beauty and orderliness of one being superior and in charge and the other honorably subordinate, they are all good. Husband and wife have a commandment and a model of how they should treat each other. The commandment is this: *Wives should be subject to their husbands, as they are to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife* (Eph 5:22-23)."[415]

Augustine exemplifies religious demonization of pleasure as well, especially sexual pleasure—and even more especially, the sexual pleasure of women. This is evident in Augustine's declared moral preference for the pious submission of a raped adulteress over "married woman who are lascivious with their husbands"[416]:

> "If a man makes use of a woman for some time, until he finds someone else more suited to his wealth and social standing to take as his partner, that state of mind makes him an adulterer, not with regard to the woman he is on the lookout for but with regard to the one he is sleeping with without being married to her…if for her part all she wants from that union is to have children and whatever she

---

[414] Ibid, 48.
[415] Ibid, 207.
[416] Saint Augustine, *Marriage and Virginity*, 46.

> puts up with over and above what serves the purpose of having children she puts up with unwillingly, she is certainly to be preferred to many married women."[417]

In this instance, the author's hatred of sexual pleasure is so intense that he breaks even from marital legalism by placing the patient, abused adulteress higher on the moral hierarchy than the married woman whose husband pleases her. In this sort of puritanical morality, sexual pleasure is regarded as intrinsically evil but something that can be tolerated for its instrumental value. A woman becomes more worthy of praise the more she "puts up with," rather than enjoys the sex act, passively fulfilling her reproductive function by suffering a man (preferably her husband) to "make use of" her: "Marital intercourse for the sake of producing children is not sinful. When it is for the purpose of satisfying sensuality…because there is marital fidelity it is a venial sin."[418] Procreation may be holy, but not sex per se and procreation will ideally be achieved with as minimal enjoyment as possible. Ultimately, the City of God would be one in which sex will become a pleasureless utility no different from flipping a switch:

> "no wild heat of passion would arouse those parts of the body, but a spontaneous power according to need…the male semen could have been introduced into the womb of the wife with the integrity of the female genital organ being preserved, just as now, with that same integrity being safe, the menstrual flow of blood can be emitted from the womb of a virgin…thus not the eager desire of lust, but the normal exercise of the will, should join the male and female for breeding and conception…We speak of things which are now shameful…"

We are a far cry from Shelley's "When soul meets soul on lovers' lips."[419] The language above is obsessively physiological, not spiritual. In the City of God, human

---

[417] Ibid, 37.
[418] Saint Augustine, *Marriage and Virginity*, 38.
[419] This line is spoken by the moon in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound," IV, line 451. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

intercourse becomes indistinguishable from cattle breeding. Whereas Shelley's philosophy of love brings the whole soul into sexuality, the puritan sees only a biological operation having, at best, instrumental value for reproduction. Which is the more 'religious' view of sex? A despiritualized and depersonalized program of "breeding and conception" or when soul meets soul on lovers' lips? As Brown points out, "orgasmic release in Shelley's poetry is experienced as intensely satisfying, because the love evoking it is nearly always sympathetic, the lovers united at all levels simultaneously, so that when for the moment they retreat physically, they are still intimately bound emotionally and psychologically. These bonds are in fact strengthened by the memory of the physical linking."[420]

The quotes above are exemplary instances of attitudes found not only in Christianity, but also in other religions. For example, Augustine's encouragement of female sexual erasure is reminiscent of the practice of female genital mutilation in the sort of conservative Islam that Ayaan Hirsi Ali critiques. I will note (to head off an obvious straw man) that I see no reason why a member of any organized religion could not admit the reality of what has been wrong with their religion and then advocate for that religion to be changed, preserving the good parts. One does not even have to agree with Shelley that marriage should be abolished to admit some of his criticism.

Yet, to pretend that puritanism, patriarchy, and misogyny are inessential to religion, including a religion's foundational scripture, theological history, and cultural

[420] Brown, 73.

practice is simply intellectually dishonest. The RO movement, for example, takes up the strategy of denial: "the *worst* [acts of] Christian puritanism…were the result of late medieval theological deviation…sexual puritanism, political disciplinarianism and abuse of the poor are the results of a *refusal* of true Christianity…"[421] The quotes from Augustine (354– 430 A.D.) prove otherwise, since they reflect attitudes that existed well before the middle ages. Edward Gibbon, whom Shelley references in his *Queen Mab* footnotes, details practices of Christian puritanism and religious violence in the decline of the Roman empire that contradict the above RO statement.[422] 'Secular' hostility to religion is not just due to the moral or intellectual failure of 'secularists' but to the dogmatization of various evils into religion which has engendered hostility to organized religion, of which Shelley's polemic against Christianity is an acute example.

Shelley's philosophy of love could not be farther from a puritanical or a purely physiological view of sex—and as we saw in the above quotations, the former mentality includes the latter. For Shelley, it is only when the carnal is conceived as evil that chastity can be conceived as a moral achievement instead of an absence of divine experience, namely romantic love. Shelley rejects asceticism, not by rejecting the notion

---

[421] "Introduction," *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 3.

[422] Shelley includes this reference to Gibbon in footnote 9 of his Notes to *Queen Mab*: "The first Christian emperor made a law by which seduction was punished with death; if the female pleaded her own consent, she also was punished with death; if the parents endeavoured to screen the criminals, they were banished and their estates were confiscated, the slaves who might be accessory were burned alive, or forced to swallow melted lead. The very offspring of an illegal love were involved in the consequences of the sentence.—Gibbon's Decline and Fall, etc., vol. ii, p. 210. See also, for the hatred of the primitive Christians to love and even marriage, p. 269." Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 2:255.

of a transcendent Good, but by making sexual pleasure participate in the divine. Whereas a puritanical person believes desire and sexual pleasure are always (that is, by definition and essentially) a *libido dominandi*, that is, "ugly and degenerate,"[423] Shelley differentiates divine (good) desire, such as we see in erotic love, from degraded (evil) desire in which sadism is channeled through sexuality (e.g. rape, which, can be within or without marriage). In Shelley's view equality, love and mutual pleasure are beauty and orderliness, not female subordination under a legalistic and alienating law purporting to be natural order and/or the will of God.

Women's self-debasing conformity to puritanical and patriarchal ideology is encouraged, as Shelley realized, by a system of social approval/opprobrium (e.g. a woman is ostracized for violating marital legalism)—but it is also encouraged by a belief in eternal hellfire, an example of what Shelley called superstition.[424] In *Queen Mab* Shelley argues that the ideology of the 'fallen' woman emerges out of a "monkish and evangelical superstition" that promotes "chastity" as a virtue. When misogynistically inflected, the false virtue of chastity creates a virgin/whore dichotomy that focuses sexual guilt and punishment on women. He writes in a footnote to *Queen Mab*:

> "Chastity is a monkish and evangelical superstition, a greater foe to natural temperance even than unintellectual sensuality; it strikes at the root of all domestic happiness, and consigns more than half of the human race to misery [i.e. women], that some few [men] may monopolize according to law."[425]

---

[423] St. Augustine, *Marriage and Virginity*, 37.
[424] See footnote 412.
[425] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 2:255.

In place of asceticism and marriage legalism, Shelley promotes love, not license, however. From Shelley's perspective, erotic love is divine and women are equal to men. Thus, by his standards, loveless union, whether in marriage or prostitution, is equally condemnable. In both cases, women are reduced to slaves and transcendent *Eros* is excluded from sex. It is, in fact, Shelley's sex-positivity that leads him to condemn both prostitution and loveless marriages. The Fairy laments in *Queen Mab*, "Even love is sold," to denounce the obliteration of love by the commodification of women's bodies.[426] His attitude is that prostitution should never be tolerated since it is transactional, dehumanizing, and especially harmful to women. Furthermore, marriage can become a kind of prostitution if it is not grounded on love.[427] For Shelley, what makes desire good is love, not an institutional (marriage) or commercial (prostitution) contract: "the connection of the sexes is so long sacred as it contributes to the comfort of all parties."[428] Shelley believes that the virgin/whore paradigm is what allows prostitution to thrive,

---

[426] Percy Shelley, "Queen Mab," line 189, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

[427] It's important to keep in mind what marriage was like in early nineteenth-century England to contextualize Shelley's (and also Mary Wollstonecraft's) criticisms of this institution. As Nathaniel Brown notes, it effectively turned women into male sexual property: "Still in effect were the sixteenth-century canon law regulations which gave jurisdiction over marriage to the Anglican Church and were administered by Ecclesiastical Courts. These regulations insisted on the absolute bindingness of a validly contracted marriage. In actual practice, a civil remedy had developed through time for hopelessly unworkable marriages, but it was so difficult, so time-consuming, and so expensive to achieve that is was open to very few. Since the end of the seventeenth-century it had been possible to obtain a bill of divorcement by a Private Act of Parliament setting aside canon law, dissolving the marriage, and allowing the right to re-marry—a ceremony that the church disingenuously never refused to perform, though plainly inconsistent with its own laws. The sole ground for suing was adultery; and in the case of the woman, the husband's infidelity had to be proved incestuous for good measure. Obviously, not many women obtained divorces…In a society where the majority of marriages were arranged, mercenary, or the result of the most superficial kind of courtship, such a system produced untold suffering and hardship. It also led to untold hypocrisy. The prevailing double standard, which allowed the husband to commit adultery with impunity while insisting on the wife's absolute chastity, made a mockery of the marriage sacrament," 97. Consider also the implications for domestic abuse.

[428] Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," 252.

since it pigeon holes women into the category of the 'fallen' when they violate marriage legalism. He writes in his footnote:

> "Prostitution is the legitimate offspring of marriage and its accompanying errors. Women, for no other crime than having followed the dictates of a natural appetite, are driven with fury from the comforts and sympathies of society. It is less venial than murder; and the punishment which is inflicted on her who destroys her child to escape reproach, is lighter than the life of agony and disease to which the prostitute is irrevocably doomed. Has a woman obeyed the impulse of unerring nature;--society, declares war against her, pityless and eternal war: she must be made a tame slave, she must make no reprisals; theirs is the right of persecution, hers the duty of endurance. She lives a life of infamy: the loud and bitter laugh of scorn scares her from all return. She dies of long and lingering disease: yet *she* is in fault, *she* is the criminal, *she* the forward and untameable child,--and society, forsooth, the pure and virtuous matron, who casts her as an abortion from her undefiled bosom! Society avenges herself on the criminals of her own creation…"[429]

Shelley's argument is that, in the puritanical view of things, prostitution is actually encouraged because sex has been essentially defined as a *libido dominandi* tolerable only within marriage. In other words, to the puritan sexual pleasure is not good or evil; it is always evil but rendered legal or illegal depending on whether it takes place within or without marriage. No third way is allowed in Christian morality as Shelley sees it, since no morally acceptable relationship can be recognized outside marriage. All extramarital sexual relations are, therefore, placed in the same sordid class of "whoredom" and banished from social acceptability. When the double standard of patriarchal misogyny is added to this, women are forced to either maintain virtue by submitting to the chaste Christian marriage, or 'falling' and accepting their new status as fair game for predatory men. Prostitution is, therefore, less of a threat to puritanical morality than Shelley's Romantic philosophy of love because it confirms for the puritan

[429] Ibid, 254.

his/her belief that sex is a *libido dominandi* and a matter of a woman submitting to a man. Prostitution does not rebel against puritanism or patriarchy; it confirms both.

Though Shelley only mentions women who acquire their fallen status on account of "natural appetite," he must also have been aware of the added cruelty that women experience when they 'fall' on account of rape or coercion. Though society strives to make her a "tame slave," as Shelley puts it, by characterizing her as essentially passive and sexless, it gives her all the blame and agency when it comes to her "fallen" status.[430] Men may receive no punishment for libertinism under patriarchy's double standard, but Shelley observes that their own sexuality is also stifled, though in a different manner from that of women:

> "the evil is twofold. Young men, excluded by the fanatical idea of chastity from the society of modest and accomplished women, associate with these vicious and miserable beings, destroying thereby all those exquisite and delicate sensibilities

[430] One of the best examples of religious cruelty directed towards 'fallen' women were Christian (mostly Catholic) run institutions purportedly interested in the redemption of 'fallen' women, which in reality incarcerated and tortured girls and women (sometimes for the duration of their entire lives) for the sin of alleged or prospective extramarital sex, even when the victims were raped. These facilities included Magdalen laundries and Mother and Baby Homes where women performed forced labor under compulsory silence under the constant watch of nuns, endured daily shaming, performed forced rituals of penance, and were denied medical necessities such as anesthetics and antibiotics, which sometimes led to the deaths of mothers and their babies, many of whom were then buried in mass and/or unmarked graves and, in the case of Tuam Mother and Baby Home, disposed of in a septic tank. It's conceivable that Shelley knew of these institutions. Some early Magdalen laundries in eighteenth-century Britain included the London Magdalen Hospital founded in 1758, the London Lock Asylum founded in 1787, and the Edinburgh Royal Magdalen Asylum founded in 1797. The first Irish Magdalen Asylum was the Dublin Magdalen Asylum founded in 1767. Ireland is a particularly tragic example, though it should be mentioned that such facilities existed the world over including, but not limited to, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, the United States, England, Scotland, and Wales. The last Magdalen laundry in Ireland closed in 1996. For further information see Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and June Goulding, *The Light in the Window* (London: Ebury Press, 2005). One may also access interviews of women online through oral history archives of the Irish Research Council. I recommend this interview: Katherine O'Donnell, S. Pembroke and C. McGettrick. (2013) "Oral History of Mary Smith." Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History. Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, pp.1-76.35. http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MAGOHP31_Mary-Smith.pdf.

> whose existence cold-hearted worldings have denied; annihilating all genuine passion, and debasing that to a selfish feeling…"[431]

His argument is that genuinely loving relationships are more gratifying to men as well as women, but such relationships cannot occur under conditions of sexual inequality. When women are dehumanized, men are also dehumanized. As Shelley writes in his *Essay on the Manners of the Athenians*, "love, which is rather the universal thirst for a communion not only of the senses, but of our whole nature, intellectual, imaginative, and sensitive" involves "The sexual impulse…as a kind of type or expression of the rest, a common basis, an acknowledged and visible link. Still it is a claim which derives a strength not its own from the accessory circumstances which surround it, and one which our nature thirsts to satisfy." In other words, the carnal senses in human beings are inseparable from a higher order phenomenology. Brown cites Leigh Hunt's remark that "Shelley 'had no idea of love unconnected with sentiment.'"[432] The man whose wife is beneath him in character and intellect cannot be truly happy even if he has a greater multiplicity of social and economic choices, which is why Cythna asks, "Can man be free if woman be a slave?"[433] Any ideology or culture which insists on women's inferiority cripples itself. He gives the example of ancient Greece:

> "Women, thus degraded, became such as it was expected they would become. They possessed, except with extraordinary exceptions, the habits and the qualities of slaves…They were certainly devoid of that moral and intellectual loveliness with which the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of sentiment animates, as with another life of overpowering grace, the lineaments

---

[431] Ibid.
[432] Brown, 77.
[433] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, ed. Anahid Nersessian (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2016) Canto 2, line 379.

> and the gestures of every form which they inhabit. Their eyes could not have been deep and intricate from the workings of the mind, and could have entangled no heart in soul-enwoven labyrinths."[434]

We might contrast Shelley's attitude with that of Coleridge, who writes, "Shakespeare, who knew men and women much better, saw that it, in fact, was the perfection of women to be characterless. Every one wishes a Desdemona or Ophelia for a wife…"[435] On the contrary, Shelley insists that a characterless woman is a loss for man, since she deprives him of the equal, fully human fellowship required for love and, therefore, happiness. When woman is rendered less than human through lack of cultivation, her eyes "could have entangled no heart in soul-enwoven labyrinths."

Shelley ultimately attacks prostitution more than marriage for reducing women to slaves. Notably, instead of treating prostitution as hedonism, Shelley's Fairy accuses prostitution of *benumbing* pleasure by calling it "unenjoying sensualism."[436] As Shelley states in his footnote above, prostitution extinguishes all the "exquisite and delicate sensibilities" that make *Eros* transcendent, converting what ought to be "genuine passion" into "selfish feeling" and actually stealing away the higher sensation that comes when physical desire is infused with love. It anaesthetizes female sexuality, turning her into an object onto which a form of debased male desire expels itself. Instead

---

[434]Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Essay on the Literature, the Arts, and the Manners of the Athenians," in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:45-6. Despite being a lover of Rousseau, Shelley asserts in this essay, "Man is in his wildest state a social being," 46. For Shelley, civilization can realize one's humanity just as much as it can corrupt one's humanity. Shelley does not believe that sociality necessarily corrupts intrinsic goodness, as Rousseau seems to argue in "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality." In Shelley's account, denying women education is much like denying the eyeball light in infancy so that vision does not properly develop. Shelley believes that human nature must be brought out by enculturation, not by avoiding enculturation. For Shelley, revolutionary change consists in finding the *right* culture, not doing away with culture.
[435] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On Women." *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi and Paul Magnuson (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), 609.
[436] Shelley, "Queen Mab," line 195.

of a union of souls, that is, prostitution creates an alienated and debased sexual relation of rapacious, solipsistic lust on the part of the male and pleasureless slavery on the part of the female akin to the relationship described by Augustine.

Loveless copulation, whether in marriage or in prostitution, exemplifies the alienation of the sexes that results from inequality under patriarchy and sexism; it enacts a form of desire that is disaggregating in contrast with the aggregating force of divine *Eros*. As M.H. Abrams observes, in Neoplatonism "essential good will be equated with the aggregate of what pulls the sundered parts together" and "essential evil is equated with the aggregate of what drives things apart."[437] The alienation between the sexes resulting from patriarchy and contempt for sexuality effects a disaggregating principle, and, as such, is the very definition of Neoplatonic evil. Thus, Shelley's Fairy fantasizes an alternative utopia in which uncorrupted *Eros* unites man and woman in free and equal relation:

[437] Abrams, 294.

"Then, that sweet bondage which is freedom's self,
And rivets with sensation's softest tie
The kindred sympathies of human souls,
Needed no fetters of tyrannic law:
Those delicate and timid impulses
In nature's primal modesty arose,
And with undoubting confidence disclosed
The growing longings of its dawning love,
Unchecked by dull and selfish chastity,
That virtue of the cheaply virtuous,
Who pride themselves in senselessness and frost.
No longer prostitution's venomed bane
Poisoned the springs of happiness and life;
Woman and man in confidence and love,
Equal and free and pure together trod
The mountain-paths of virtue, which no more
Were stained with blood from many a pilgrim's feet."[438]

Legalism ("tyrannic law") gives way to "confidence and love" only when woman and man are "equal and free," in other words, when equal love determines the moral and spiritual value of desire. It is the realization of the Good, not the freedom from it, that produces genuine happiness. Man and woman walk "With virtue, love, and pleasure, hand in hand."[439] Rather than upend morality in favor of libertinism, Shelley suggests that true morality (the real Good) ought to replace false morality. His utopic vision is of a universe in which pleasure and goodness can be the same through love. Achieving women's liberation, which is real virtue, will require abolishing the idea that chastity is a good, which is why Shelley terms it "dull and selfish chastity, / That virtue of the cheaply virtuous, / Who pride themselves in senselessness and frost."[440] Chastity is "selfish," not because it refuses to gratify others' demands, but because it wrongly

[438] Shelley, "Queen Mab," lines 76-92.
[439] Ibid, line 75.
[440] Ibid, lines 84-6.

views abstinence as a moral achievement. Thus, he accuses it of being a form of solipsism masquerading as virtue. Far from being a moral achievement, Shelley views abstention from physical intimacy as a rebuke of divine *Eros.* The virgin self-imprisons, the lover experiences ecstatic self-loss. The true moral achievement is to love, not to withdraw into insensate and morbid self-containment.

By defending "natural appetite" and female sexuality against an ideal of woman as passive, frigid slave, Shelley resists not only misogyny and patriarchy, but any iconoclastic mindset that would establish an antagonism between nature and spirit instead of seeing the natural as a symbol of the divine:

> "In fact, religion and morality, as they now stand, compose a practical code of misery and servitude: the genius of human happiness must tear every leaf from the accursed book of God, ere man can read the inscription on his heart. How would morality, dressed up in stiff stays and finery, start from her own disgusting image, should she look in the mirror of nature!"[441]

Shelley turns the language of moral judgment against prudery itself by insisting that false 'morality' be ashamed of herself. As Brown says, "sexual shame…was a serious evil to Shelley. By repudiating the innocent beauty of natural desires, prudery degrades the practitioner to a kind of 'moral eunuch.'"[442] Nonetheless, even as he denounces marriage and declares "Love is free"[443] Shelley still anticipates that connections grounded on love will be long lasting: "I conceive that, from the abolition of marriage, the fit and natural arrangement of sexual connection would result. I by no means assert that the intercourse would be promiscuous: on the contrary, it appears,

---

[441] Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," 255.
[442] Brown, 47.
[443] Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," 253.

from the relation of parent and child, that this union is generally of long duration, and marked above all others with generosity and self-devotion."[444]

As Brown notes, there has been a tendency from "late Victorian critics" through twentieth-century critics to interpret Shelley's sexual love purely metaphorically with the "claims of the senses regularly ignored, their very existence often denied. The result has been to see his love poetry as disembodied, incorporeal, devoid of flesh-and-blood reality—which is very different from the way it was intended. Supposedly 'Shelley hated the flesh like a puritan, but instead of mortifying it, he ignored its existence, and glorified love, not as a natural function…"[445] Brown rightfully observes that Shelley's ethereal language is not meant to overcome or eradicate the carnal. Shelley neither condemns carnal desire like a puritan, nor does he sanction every whim of desire like a libertine. Brown notes Shelley's aversion to loveless promiscuity: "Regardless of where the poet encountered libertine behavior, it invariably called down his reproof. In his otherwise laudatory review of *Hogg's Memoirs of Prince Alexy Haimatoff* (1814), he reprimands his friend for what he takes to be the novel's approval of libertine practice, 'the loveless intercourse of brutal appetite.'"[446]

Shelley uses romantic love to differentiate between good carnal desire and bad carnal desire. For that reason, he differentiates between sensuality and vulgarity. While the prude thinks all sensuality is ugly and degenerate, the Romantic poeticizes the sensual and divides it from the vulgar. As Shelley writes in the *Defense of Poetry*,

---

[444] Ibid, 255.
[445] Brown, 45.
[446] Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 78.

"Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life," ruins poetry.[447] The *Eros* of Antonio Canova's *Psyche Revived* (1787) is not the "unenjoying sensualism" of Amsterdam's red-light district. Pleasure, in his account, is rendered sacred with love alone and love can exist both within and without marriage. In other words, *Eros* does not need institutional sanction, whether by the Church or the State, because it is divine in and of itself. Shelley's anti-institutionalism is grounded on his spirituality. This view is given voice by many of Shelley's feminist heroines such as Helen in *Rosalind and Helen*. While Rosalind is entrapped in a loveless marriage, Helen suffers ostracism for her extramarital love for the liberal ex-aristocrat Lionel (a thinly veiled version of Shelley). Helen rebukes the marriage contract and institutional legalism by insisting that she and Lionel have sacralized their own sexual union through love:

> "We will have rites our faith to bind,
> But our church shall be the starry night,
> Our altar the grassy earth outspread,
> And our priest the muttering wind."[448]

The same language appears in *Laon and Cythna* to divinize their extramarital union:

> "There we unheeding sate, in the communion
> Of interchanged vows, which, with a rite
> Of faith most sweet and sacred, stamped our union.—
> Few were the living hearts which could unite
> Like ours, or celebrate a bridal night."[449]

---

[447] Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 521.
[448] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Rosalind and Helen," in *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus,* ed. Stuart Curran (Pennsylvania Electronic Edition), lines 850-4, http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/rosalind.html.
[449] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 6, lines 344-7.

Shelley's whole sensibility rejects any ethic relying on a purely contractual and transactional logic by exalting love. Nature is God and church. Lovers effectively act as priests of nature and sacramentalize their own union. Love spiritualizes desire outside of all institutional laws. This is why, as Brown notes, "As nearly always in his work, the act takes place out of doors, far from society in the bosom of nature, which underscores the act's naturalness and innocence, the supreme physical expression of the rhythms binding the cosmos," as Brown observes. He comments on Laon and Cythna and Rosalind and Helen, saying, "their ecstatic communion alone in nature [is] the only rite necessary to sanctify their union."[450] Helen clarifies that Shelleyan *Eros* is an outward movement toward unification and de-alienation, not an act of domination or consumption: "And so we loved, and did unite / All that in us was yet divided."[451] Helen describes her relationship with Lionel as Pseudo-Dionysius describes *Eros*, namely as a "capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and Good."[452] In Shelley's Neoplatonic love there is no conflict between sensual and spiritual. The former acquires its beauty and goodness because it symbolizes the latter.

Just as he celebrates a divinized form of carnal desire and pleasure, Shelley condemns bad forms of carnal desire. He reserves the term 'lust' for instances in which *Eros* is perverted, that is, "when selfishness mocks love's delight."[453] He describes the

---

[450] Brown, 59-60.
[451] Shelley, "Rosalind and Helen," lines 844-5.
[452] Pseudo-Dionysius, "Divine Names" in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 81.
[453] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 7, line 47.

sexual slavery of women under patriarchy in *Laon and Cythna* in terms of lust: "Thus Cythna mourned with me the servitude / In which half of humankind were mewed / Victims of lust and hate, the slave of slaves."[454] In contrast with a system in which women "minister to lust" Shelley writes, "Never will peace and human nature meet / Till free and equal man and woman greet."[455] The same poem sacralizes the "lawless love"[456] of its protagonists, and refers to "Spirit" as "Nature, or God, or Love, or Pleasure" actually synonymizing pleasure with God.[457] When Othman rapes Cythna, Shelley describes it, not just as "loveless sex" which is a "violation to human nature,"[458] as Brown puts it, but as a blasphemy against sacred passion:

> "One moment to Nature's great sacred power
> He bent, and was no longer passionless;
> But when he bade her to his secret bower
> Be borne, a loveless victim, and she tore
> Her locks in agony…"[459]

While Shelley's promotion of "free love" seems to be, on the surface, a political issue, it is deeply intertwined with his metaphysical thinking about the relation between the sensual and the spiritual. In fact, the relation between lovers turns out to merely be a symbol for the relation of all beings to one another and of being to Being in Shelley's Neoplatonic paradigm. "Love's Philosophy" summarizes the position he will elaborate on in *Epipsychidion*:

---

[454] Ibid, Canto 1, lines 319-21.
[455] Ibid, lines 328-9.
[456] Ibid, 512.
[457] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 5, lines 486-7.
[458] Brown, 79.
[459] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 7, 38-42.

"The fountains mingle with the river
  And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
  With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
  All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
  Why not I with thine?—

See the mountains kiss high heaven
  And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
  If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth
  And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
What is all this sweet work worth
  If thou kiss not me?"[460]

To hold sexual love (*Eros*) in contempt is to reject the very principle of existence—the Power that drives the movement of becoming and the return to Being. As M.H. Abrams observes, the Neoplatonic aggregating principle of *Eros* structures reality for Shelley:

> "his persistent paradigm is sexual love, with the result that in his poetry all types of human and extrahuman attraction—all forces that hold the physical, mental, moral, and social universe together—are typically represented, both in myth and metaphor, by categories which are patently derived from erotic attraction and sexual union."[461]

Brown states the same in a feminist context: "While the erotic in Shelley's work expresses itself primarily in terms of human sexual response, the human is not its only area of expression. Sexual response is shown to operate at every level of the animate creation and, metaphorically, at the inanimate as well" in one "pantheistic whole." The "poet had no hesitation in evoking the workings of the entire cosmos in the language of

---

[460] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Love's Philosophy," *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50262/loves-philosophy
[461] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 298.

sex."[462] When Shelley asks, "what is all this sweet work worth / if thou kiss not me?" he does not express a *carpe diem* pressure to make the most of mortality, as Andrew Marvell does in "To His Coy Mistress." Rather, Shelley insists that to reject love is to reject the divine, since physical love incarnates transcendent *Eros*.

Shunning passion is tantamount to shunning God, since the Universe, which is the unfolded One, is all passion. In his *Defence*, Shelley even describes the apophatic ascent to transcendent Beauty in erotic terms: "Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed."[463] Martin Priestman notes that in the Indologist William Jones's "Hymn to Narayena" 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.'"[464] It's possible, since Shelley had read Jones, that Shelley consciously or subconsciously was thinking of Jones's poem in adopting (and sexualizing) the metaphor of unveiling for the ascent to the absolute/Brahman. Timothy Webb, referring to Shelley's lines, rightfully observes, "Shelley even writes about the poetic process itself in terms which are explicitly erotic."[465] Tracy Ware, echoing Webb, relates these lines to Shelley's Platonism: "The sexual connotations noted by Timothy Webb are very much a part of Shelley's meaning. Webb's insight is important, because it makes one aware that Shelley is not repudiating

---

[462] Ibid, 75.
[463] "A Defence of Poetry," 528.
[464] Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 71.
[465] Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1977) 23.

the natural world in favor of a transcendent realm, despite what critics have said to the contrary."[466]

Shelley's feminist metaphysical framework, epitomized by *Epipsychidion*, defeats patriarchy and sexism, not by denying a transcendent real absolute, but by celebrating the equality of men and women within the One. Love requires equality since Shelleyan love is the recognition of identity between soul and soul, not a difference between superior and inferior. The Beloved is, as Shelley writes in "On Love" a "mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise" and "To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it."[467] Describing the poet's quest for "veiled Divinity"[468] or the ideal Beloved, *Epipsychidion* echoes this language, calling it a search for "this soul out of my soul."[469] *Epipsychidion* also echoes *Laon and Cythna*'s description of sacred love as "two restless frames in one reposing soul" itself an allusion to the contrast between the flux of the many and the stability of the one.[470] By making the beloved the soul within one's soul, Shelley emphasizes the unity of souls within transcendent Love. Brown puts this eloquently and hints at a theological significance: lovers "reflect the spirit of intellectual beauty, in other words, whose pure bright light irradiates and sustains the entire cosmos, according to the poet's

---

[466] Tracy Ware, "Shelley's Platonism in *A Defence of Poetry*," *SEL*, 23 (1983): 549-66, 557.
[467] "On Love," 104.
[468] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Epipsychidion," line 244, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).
[469] Ibid, line 238.
[470] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 6, line 324.

deepest hope, a beauty 'in which all things work and move' (*Ado*. Liv). Insofar as men and women merge their separate identities in mirroring this light, they leave behind them the barriers of sexual distinction and participate in a transcendent unity, whose nature is love."[471]

Love is the realization of another as oneself within the One (God). *Epipsychidion* asserts this beautifully:

> "Shall I descend, and perish not? I know
> That Love makes all things equal: I have heard
> By mine own heart this joyous truth averred:
> The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
> In love and worship, blends itself with God."[472]

The first line also expresses the poem's realization that there is nothing incompatible between divine and corporeal love. To "descend" into matter turns out to not be an abandonment of the transcendent, but a process of discovering it. The finding of Emily is the embrace of a "Vision veiled from me," that is, the recognition of intellectual Beauty's presence in beauty. By referring to her as "this glorious One" Shelley's language insists that the One or the ultimate Beloved has real presence in the form in which it appears (the beloved). Contrary to what some feminist readers have suggested, the achievement of Shelleyan Love would not be a consumption (and, therefore, erasure) of Emily into the ego of the Poet, but a mutual self-dissolution of both personalities in the One. In a sense, "dispersoning" is the goal of the 'subject' as well as his 'object.'

---

[471] Shelley, "On Love," 228.
[472] "Epipsychidion," lines 125-9.

The discovery of identity between two persons amounts to the discovery that both souls are the mirror of God (and, thus, one soul). While Persian and Indian spirituality differentiates between soul (*atman*) and ego and, therefore, treats ego-death or non-duality as a mystical achievement, many of Shelley's Western readers conflate ego and soul and, therefore, see ego-death as a spiritual failure. For example, Michael Tomko, though willing to take Shelley's poem seriously as a theological text, announces his allegiance to the problematic Christianity vs. secularism binary immediately by stating that he will offer us a "re-reading of Shelley as a phenomenological poet who can re-approach the world with Christian and non-Christian readers."[473] Tomko only offers us two options: "belief and unbelief,"[474] the "adamantly secular and resolutely spiritual,"[475] that is, the Christian and the secular. What Tomko refers to as his "post-secular" reading of Shelley really amounts to a reading of Christianity into Shelley. This would better be called, in my opinion, an unsecular reading, since it seeks to negate the non-Christian, rather than expose the theological.

While Tomko is right that *Epipsychidion* offers a way to "broaden our sense of the capaciousness of Shelley's theological imagination" and that Shelley rejects "Radical Platonism's dualism" in "search for an ethical form of *eros*" Tomko, unfortunately, profoundly misreads the poem's theology by insisting that this search "leads him to a 'unity in duality' that approaches the Christian understanding of human love as

---

[473] Michael Tomko, "Shelley's Unknown Eros: Post-secular Love in *Epipsychidion*," *Religions* 7, no. 9 (2016): 118.
[474] Tomko, 15.
[475] Ibid, 2.

outlined in *Deus Caritas Est*."[476] Tomko wants Emily to be a "divine Other"[477] and criticizes the poem for starting and ending with what Tomko identifies as "philosophical narcissism,"[478] an "aggressive solipsism"[479] and "overflowing egocentricity exhibited in the Florentine's [that is, Shelley's] previous visions that dissolved her into 'one serene Omnipresence.'"[480] In other words, he reads Shelley's monism (and, by implication, thousands of years of Eastern metaphysics) as a failure of love. Ultimately, Tomko asserts that "The poem offers neither an affirmation of faith, nor an equally certain rejection of faith" because he cannot understand that the poem has, in fact, a different faith from that of Christianity.[481]

This misreading of qualified monism and mystical ego-death as forms of narcissism is also true of Shelley's 'secular' readers, such as Nancy Moore Goslee, who accuses the poem of "depersoning or dispersoning" Emily[482] and Ghislaine McDayter who claims, "Shelley is either seen to 'cannibalize' his muse for his personal fulfillment, to 'colonize' her for his own poetic needs, or to ignore her altogether in an episode of narcissistic psychosis."[483] William Ulmer insists that the poem demonstrates the "poet's visionary narcissism."[484] Shelley's "repression of difference" amounts to "metaphorical imperialism" and "shows that even supernal love arises in the wake of power, created

---

[476] Ibid, 15.
[477] Ibid, 7.
[478] Ibid, 8.
[479] Ibid, 15.
[480] Ibid, 13.
[481] Ibid, 15.
[482] Nancy Moore Goslee, *Shelley's Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 148.
[483] Ghislaine McDayter, "O'er Leaping the Bounds: The Sexing of the Creating Soul in Shelley's *Epipsychidion*," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 52 (2003): 21-49, 23.
[484] William Ulmer, *The Shelleyan Eros* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 132.

by economies of force and resistance, banishment and return. Desire modeled on doubling disseminates violence" resulting in the "apotheosis of violence in death."[485] Anne Mellor insists that the union in *Epipsychidion* "necessarily entails the elimination of Otherness" and "the assimilation of the female into the male" rather than a recognition of her as "an independent other" such that the woman is "destroyed, must disappear or die." Mellor's feminism wrongly conceives of desire for the idealized Beloved as selfish:

> "he ignores her human otherness in order to impose his own metaphors, his own identity, upon her, to render her but a clone (or soul mate) of himself. What he desires is absolute possession of the beloved…"[486]

This feminist critique often gets wrapped up with an orientalist critique. For example, Nigel Leask writes, "the Other is often figured as an (often oriental) female who turns out to be [a]…wishful projection of the ego of the male protagonist."[487] John Greensfield writes that Shelley's female characters are "doubly other, displaced both by their cultural exoticism" and "they are created in the European male consciousness" and are "phallocentric projections rather than autonomous human characters."[488] Despite the ubiquitous critique of orientalism[489] none of these scholars entertain the notion that Shelley's theology of love in *Epipsychidion* rejects the Western conception of the self as

---

[485] Ibid, 9.
[486] Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 26-7.
[487] Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6.
[488] John Greensfield, "Transforming the Stereotype: Exotic Women in Shelley's Alastor and The Witch of Atlas," in *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, ed. Marilyn Demarest Button and Toni Reed (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1999), 18.
[489] It's worth noting the strange tension in many writers between "otherness" as a good thing and "otherness" as a bad thing. On the one hand, scholars argue that an ethical stance avoids narcissism by recognizing otherness and, on the other hand, they argue that otherization is tantamount to dehumanization. If identification is narcissistic self-projection/possession and insistence on difference is otherization, there is no way for the Western male subject to win.

ego/personality and the Western insistence that ethical relationality consists of difference and otherization.

What this poem offers is not narcissism, but a de-alienated and non-dual love akin to that of Vedanta and Neoplatonism. Elham Nilchian informs us that the English orientalist Sir William Jones compared Western and Eastern religions in his essay "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus" in the third volume of *Asiatick Researches* (1793). In this essay Jones "depicts the similarities between the systems of thought of seventeenth-century European theology and the Indian Vedantis as well as Persian Sufis. Jones suggests that they all concur in believing that the souls of men are particles of and will ultimately be 'absorbed' in the divine spirit, that the love of God, who is the perfect truth and beauty, is real love, and that the beauties of nature are resemblances of the divine charms."[490] Nilchian insists most on the similarity between Shelley and Sufism, writing, "In Sufi love, contrary to this Hegelian line of thought [in Western readers], the subject's identity is shaped when he is dissolved into the ideal other through love and loss of self. It is critical that the other should be an ideal other for the Sufi subject to be able to love and lose self in her or him." The recognition that other is oneself is, for the Sufi mystic, a moment of self-loss (*fanaa*) not consumption. The metaphor of mirroring (used by Shelley in "On Love"), appears as a metaphor for the fusion with God in Sufi literature. Franklin Lewis notes that, for Rumi, mystical

[490] Elham Nilchian, "Shelley's Quest for Persian love," *The Comparatist*, 40 (2016): 222-44, 229.

achievement is obtained when "the mirror of the soul perfectly reflects the attributes of God."[491]

Rather than reading *Epipsychidion* as an act of egotistical domination, it is better to understand it in terms of Shelley's desire to become "a mirror that reflects the qualities of the other"[492] insofar as both Shelley and his Beloved are recognized to be particles or participants in the one God. Recognizing this involves differentiating the soul from the ego. As Nilchian says, "moments of self-loss, which are abundantly found in Persian poetry, does not seem to the Persian as extreme and exaggerated as it might to the European audience." An identity between souls does not erase individuality. Shelley, in fact, makes it clear that personalities (egos) differ:

> "We—are we not formed, as notes of music are,
> For one another, though dissimilar;
> Such difference without discord, as can make
> Those sweetest sounds, in which all spirits shake
> As trembling leaves in continuous air?"[493]

These lines are not, as Michael Tomko argues, evidence that *eros* has been reconceptualized into Joseph Ratzinger's idea of love as duality in unity, only to be later abandoned in favor of "solipsistic unity."[494] On the contrary, it reflects Shelley's differentiation between individuality and soul. Shelley has not shifted from a "solipsistic" *eros* to "duality in unity" only to return to a solipsistic *eros*. He has clarified what unitive *Eros* is by insisting that true self (soul) is discovered through ego-death.

---

[491] Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalâl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) 417.
[492] Nilchian, 226.
[493] Shelley, "Epipsychidion," lines 142-5.
[494] Tomko, 10.

Unable to think outside of the Christianity vs. secularism dichotomy, Tomko believes the poem ends in spiritual failure because Shelley "can find no justification for two-ness, for the good of remaining two in this moment of unity" and "Emily is lost sight of, almost entirely and almost immediately, abstracted…" What is really a monistic fusion is misinterpreted by Tomko as consumptive and aggressive. Thus, Tomko uses disparagingly a metaphor that recurs throughout Indian Vedanta to celebrate Brahman's all-encompassing oneness, that of oceanic dissolution. Tomko writes, "'Two' loses to 'One.' After the second line, duality is gone…[Emily is] sinking into a nameless ocean."[495] He effectively condemns the *Supreme Teaching of the Upanishads*:

> "There the Spirit knows not, yet knowing not he knows. How could the Spirit not know if he is the All? But there is no duality there, nothing apart for him to know. For only where there seems to be a duality, there one sees another, one feels another's perfume, one tastes another, one speaks to another, one listens to another, one touches another and one knows another. But in the ocean of Spirit the seer is alone beholding his own immensity. This is the world of Brahman…"[496]

All of Sufism and Vedanta would, in Tomko's assessment reflect "The inability to think this mystery—how two 'shall be one flesh,' while still maintaining their own integrity (Mark 10:8)—[which] leads to the beloved's oblivion and a spiral into the self."[497] If there is any narcissistic self-projection at work, it is that of the Christian Tomko who sees everything as a reflection of his own religion or its negation, annihilating Shelley in his project to uphold Christianity as normative standard, and forcing the Bible and Joseph Ratzinger upon us in a *theologia dominandi*. To be fair,

---

[495] Tomko, 14.
[496] *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 137.
[497] Tomko, 15.

Tomko is right that a refusal to recognize and respect individuality is unethical, but *Epipsychidion* does not do this. It acknowledges that Shelley and Emily are "dissimilar" when it comes to their ego but transcends the ego (which belongs to the many) by realizing that their true self is the One soul.

The poem teaches us that identification is not a recognition of likeness between personalities, but of mutual participation in the One. The line "one annihilation" (line 587) is not a statement which "posits a total erasure of Emily's identity *ad nihil*—into nothingness."[498] It testifies to love as non-duality and combines spiritual and sensuous by deliberately conflating death as a metaphor for climax with ego-death (transcendence). In Shelley's qualified monism different personalities exist like Life's dome of many-colored glass. They are different shards of one white radiance of eternity (one soul). Each individual manifests God in a different form just as each individually beautiful thing symbolizes transcendent Intellectual Beauty. The final two lines "Those sweetest sounds, in which all spirits shake / As trembling leaves in continuous air" stresses that Spirit is the core of all different beings, all of which move within an insubstantial whole metaphorized by "air." We find in *Epipsychidion* the same metaphysics as in *Adonais*:

> "…a Soul no less
> Burns in the heart of this delicious isle,
> An atom of the Eternal, whose own smile
> Unfolds itself, and may be felt not seen
> O'er the grey rocks, blue waves, and forests green,
> Filling their bare and void interstices.—"[499]

---

[498] Ibid.
[499] Shelley, "Epipsychidion," lines 477-82.

Just as Keats was "A portion of the Eternal, which must glow / Through time and change, unquenchably the same," the lovers and their environment are "An atom of the Eternal." All blend together in Shelley's monistic vision:

> "Let us become the over-hanging day,
> The living soul of this Elysian isle,
> Conscious, inseparable, one."[500]

Just as in *Adonais* and "Love's Philosophy," Loving turns out to be Being, since paradise is described as a place in which "to love and live / Be one" (lines 551-2). As for Pseudo-Dionysius, *Eros* grounds the animation of all existence, not just human love:

> "The mossy mountains, where the blue heavens blend
> With lightest winds, to touch their paramour;
> Or linger, where the pebble-paven shore,
> Under the quick, faint kisses of the sea
> Trembles and sparkles as with ecstasy.—"[501]

As in *Adonais*, emanation is metaphorized by smiling to convey its effortless and benignant nature. A smile unfolds upon the face as existence unfolds from God in a nonrational process. In *Epipsychidion* the Eternal's "own smile / Unfolds itself" and in *Adonais* the Eternal is "That Light whose smile kindles the Universe, / That Beauty in which all things work and move." Just as Keats was a "presence to be felt" not seen and Shelley's Skylark something "we hardly see, we feel that it is there," the Eternal in *Epipsychidion* "may be felt not seen." The transcendent is revealed only through a poetic-mystical insight, made possible by the fact that nature symbolizes the divine. Just as the white radiance of Eternity transcends and yet is fully immanent within Life's dome of many-colored glass, the Eternal in *Epipsychidion* is "Filling their bare and void

---

[500] Ibid, lines 538-40.
[501] Ibid, lines 544-8.

interstices." Without the power that is there and the human imagination's capacity to intuit it, there would be only the void. This Power, which is Love, manifests in "grey rocks, blue waves, and forests green" as well as human love, all of which are drawn together by the divine aggregating principle in Shelley's qualified monism. Far from being mutually exclusive with spiritual love, Shelley makes carnal love divine.

The false antagonism between spiritual and carnal appears in secular humanist readings, not just religious ones. William Ulmer notes that "humanistic readings of *Epipsychidion*" which credit the poem with a "secularizing power" and a "naturalizing supernaturalism" end up overlooking the fact that the end of the poem, though "self-evidently sensual," moves "beyond bodily constraints. Shelley's lovers become figures of an energy that subsumes individual identity."[502] Ulmer does not make this claim within the context of a metaphysical argument, but a linguistic one. Ulmer's interest lies in how "contraries imply one another" in Shelley's "reflexive formalism."[503] He points out, but does not challenge, the dualism inherent to the secular humanist reading of *Epipsychidion.* Instead Ulmer repeats this dualism by asserting, "These simultaneous drives toward spirit and body generate the poem out of their powerful antagonism" even if he views (unreconcilable) contraries as essential to Shelley's rhetoric.[504] In my argument, to read this poem in terms of a dichotomy between natural and supernatural (between immanent and transcendent) is a problem, whether one arrives at Christianity or secular humanism, since the point of the poem is to assert that the divine has real

[502] Ulmer, 150.
[503] Ibid, 132.
[504] Ibid, 131.

presence within the immanent. Shelley's achievement is to undo the division of natural and supernatural.

Shelley redeems the carnal by intermingling the sensual with the spiritual in *Epipsychidion* to celebrate a unifying *Eros*, not a *libido dominandi*:

> "The glory of her being, issuing thence,
> Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade
> Of unentangled intermixture, made
> By Love, of light and motion: one intense
> Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence,
> Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing,
> Around her cheeks and utmost fingers glowing
> With the unintermitted blood, which there
> Quivers, (as in fleece of snow-like air
> The crimson pulse of living morning quiver,)
> Continuously prolonged, and ending never,
> Till they are lost, and in that Beauty furled
> Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world;
> Scarce visible from extreme loveliness."[505]

Human *eros* incarnates transcendent "Beauty," which encompasses reality in one "Diffusion" and one "serene Omnipresence." Shelley does, indeed, endorse a "reality in which spirit and matter compenetrate," as Tomko puts it, quoting Benedict XVI, but this "sacramental project"[506] is not a celebration of the legalism of "conjugal union"[507] but the anti-legalism of free love. As cause of "motion," Beauty is Power. Far from being in antagonism with immanent reality, the transcendent bears the same sexual relation to the immanent that the lovers bear to one another, embracing and containing the universe as a reflection of itself. The realm of being says to Being what Shelley says to

[505] Shelley, "Epipsychidion," lines 91-104.
[506] Tomko, 13.
[507] Ibid, 12.

Emily, "I am not thine: I am a part of *thee.*"[508] God "penetrates and clasps and fills the world," at the same time It is "scarce visible," infinitely exceeding every form it "fills." The description of an imagined sexual encounter with Emily is simultaneously a description of spiritual monism—not the cold and sterile One posited by Shelley's early Platonic readers, but the dynamic, perpetually enkindling One of Pseudo-Dionysius. To ask if the following describes carnal or spiritual love is already to have missed the point:

> "Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound,
> And our veins beat together; and our lips
> With other eloquence than words, eclipse
> The soul that burns between them, and the wells
> Which boil under our being's inmost cells,
> The fountains of our deepest life, shall be
> Confused in passion's golden purity,
> As mountain-springs under the morning Sun.
> We shall become the same, we shall be one
> Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?
> One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,
> 'Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
> Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
> Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
> Burning, yet ever inconsumable:
> In one another's substance finding food."[509]

This is not just meant to be, as Brown puts it, a "metaphor, much in the manner of the medieval mystic, for conveying something altogether beyond the senses." It takes on a "literalness, impossible to ignore."[510] The poem "moves at its close to a coital climax as powerful and explicit as anything that had yet issued from his pen."[511] The physical and the spiritual union are one in the same: "Like Laon and Cythna at the

[508] Shelley, "Epipsychidion," line 52.
[509] Shelley, "Epipsychidion," lines 565-80.
[510] Brown, 66.
[511] Ibid, 65.

height of their coital trance, the pair will lose all sense of division, the only thing preventing their total fusion being the brute fact of their biological discreteness."[512] When contrasted with Shelleyan *Eros*, asceticism and patriarchy have as much beauty and orderliness as a Soviet housing block.

2.4 Shelley's Anti-Voluntarist Liberalism

We saw in the earlier section how Shelley's feminism is inextricable from his spirituality. I argued this point to contest the assertion found so often within Shelley scholarship that the political Shelley is somehow mutually exclusive with the theological Shelley. In the case of his feminism, Neoplatonic theology mobilizes his celebration of the sensuous world and his anti-institutionalism. Thus, it seems clear that Shelley remains religious in sensibility even as he rejects organized religion. As Charles Taylor observes, the term "secularism" can sometimes refer to "unbelief" and other times to the separation of Church and State, such as in American liberalism. Consequently, there is a possibility for the latter (liberalism) to be confused with the former (unbelief). Shelley presents an excellent case, not only of non-Christian belief in a transcendent real absolute, but of someone whose advocacy for liberalism does not commit him to unbelief. In other words, Shelley demonstrates that it is possible to promote a political structure which rejects government control of religion and allows for liberty of belief and expression without thereby promoting voluntarism or a rejection of a transcendent Good. Even as he argues that the State should have no authority to censor or persecute

[512] Ibid, 68.

belief, Shelley never promotes a relativistic account of truth or morality. Thus, he can help disentangle the notion of secularism as "unbelief" from the notion of secularism as liberalism, such that we can understand how the latter does not commit one to the former. To put it another way, my goal in this section is not to demonstrate that Shelley was a systematic political philosopher. Rather, I'm interested in showing how, for Shelley, the promotion of liberalism does not entail a promotion of voluntarism or moral relativism. Furthermore, Shelley's simultaneous belief in liberalism and a transcendent, normative metaphysics demonstrates why differentiation (to borrow Jager's term), ought not to be mistaken for irreligiosity.

A great example of Shelley's liberalism can be found in his "Letter to Lord Ellenborough," a letter Shelley wrote to Judge Ellenborough to advocate for freedom of the press several months after the bookseller Daniel Isaac Eaton was sentenced to prison and the pillory for blasphemous libel:

> "if you my Lord Ellenborough were a christian bookseller and Mr. Eaton a judge, those arguments which you consider adequate to justify yourself for the sentence which you have passed, must likewise suffice in this suppository case to justify Mr. Eaton, in sentencing you to Newgate and the pillory for being a christian. Whence is any right derived but that which power confers for persecution? Do you think to convert Mr. Eaton to your religion by embittering his existence? You might force him by torture to profess your tenets, but he could not believe them, except that you should make them credible, which perhaps exceeds your power."[513]

If we understand liberalism in the sense in which Shelley meant it, it is not a philosophy that posits the equal truth of all opinion or a celebration of freedom from moral order. Shelley's liberalism is a practical solution for the inevitability of human

[513] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Letter to Lord Ellenborough," 1:65.

disagreement and the reality of power dynamics.[514] There is absolutely no implication in Shelleyan liberalism that freedom consists in liberating oneself from a transcendent Good. His liberalism is rather a makeshift "lesser of all evils" pragmatism that leaves the social and legal open to development. In fact, one could conceivably be a conservative Christian and promote this kind of liberalism, despite knowing that it will allow for the promotion and dissemination of ideas anathema to oneself, because one believes that any ideology given total power (whether a theocracy or Stalinism) will produce more evil than liberalism. In the Shelleyan view, tolerating the incorrect, the offensive and even the insane is, unfortunately, the necessary condition for those who have something true and good to say to be able to promote it.

If we were to find the closest point of comparison for Shelley's liberalism, it would probably be that of James Madison. Madison (b. 1751-1836) was forty-one the year Shelley was born (1792) and the *Federalist Papers,* to which Madison contributed, were published in 1788. Though Shelley makes no mention of Madison directly, he praises the American system of liberalism in *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1820) above any other model of government: "the most perfect of practical governments, [is] the Republic of the United States."[515] Shelley adds, "many new theories, more or less perfect, but all superior to the mass of evil which they would supplant, have been given to the world. The system of government in the United States of America was the first practical illustration of the new philosophy" of a "community administered by

[514] I am totally excluding the economic sense of 'liberalism' from my discussion.
[515] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (London: Oxford University, 1920), 96.

republican forms."[516] By calling the United States "most perfect" Shelley is not claiming that the United States is perfect, but that its form of liberalism is the best "practical" solution seen thus far. In other words, Madisonian liberalism, properly applied, would ideally produce the least evil when compared to other governments that have been tried.

Shelley treats the United States as a symbol of abstract and ideal liberalism and uses it as a point of contrast for what he dislikes in Europe, which may be why he declines to comment on concrete unjust political conditions in North America (e.g. slavery). He contrasts what he calls the "just and successful revolt of America"[517] with the tyranny of the French revolution. He opposes the violence and authoritarianism of Jacobinism just as much as he does that of religion and monarchy, writing that "the French Revolution" has been followed by "a succession of tyrants (for demagogues, oligarchies, usurpers and legitimate kings are merely varieties of the same class) from Robespierre to Louis XVIII."[518] Regardless of whether one agrees that the United States lives up to Shelley's ideal, we can get a sense of the Shelleyan ideal from his praises of the American system, which, again, amounts to an endorsement of what is effectively Madisonian liberalism. The key features of the United States that Shelley celebrates are "no king," "no hereditary oligarchy," "no established Church," "no false representation," and a capacity for constant political change, which he describes as "an institution by which it [America] is honourably distinguished from all other governments which ever existed. It constitutionally acknowledges the progress of

---

[516] Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 12-3.
[517] Ibid, 16.
[518] Ibid, 91.

human improvement."[519] The Americans "judged it possible that other political institutions would be discovered having the same relation to those which they had established which they bear to those which have preceded them. They provided therefore for the application of these contingent discoveries to the social state without the violence and misery attendant upon such change in less modest and more imperfect governments."[520] In other words, Shelley admires a governing structure that allows for present errors to be later corrected without requiring violent revolution. This is what P.M.S. Dawson identifies as "Shelley's gradualism and reformism. His reformist means are always directed towards revolutionary ends, but he has accepted that the necessary transformation of society can only come about through a step-by-step purification and improvement of the old order, rather than by a single apocalyptic stroke."[521]

In his letter to Lord Ellenborough Shelley argues that even those who hold incorrect or immoral beliefs should be not forced to alter them. Above all, the goal is to avoid violence and tyranny. For Shelley, the difficulty with liberal society is that those who are correct about some matter have to use methods other than force and violence to mitigate the effects of those who promote false or evil beliefs (how that occurs and how successful we can expect it to be are matters Shelley never adequately addresses). Generally speaking, Shelley evinces a great optimism in human rationality and the power of persuasion (we might contrast Shelley's optimism with that of more cynical proponents of liberal ideas such as Voltaire or George Orwell). In stating that the

---

[519] Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 12-14.
[520] Ibid, 15.
[521] P.M.S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 6-7.

"falsehood of thy brother's opinions is no reason for his meriting their hatred" Shelley does not suggest that all opinions are equal, only that "to torture and imprison the assertor of a dogma, however ridiculous and false, is highly barbarous and impolitic."[522] Even if a person's opinions were "false as the visions of a Calvinist, it still would be the duty of those who love liberty and virtue, to raise their voice indignantly against reviving a system of persecution," he writes.[523] It's clear that Shelley believes in the Good but realizes others can be wrong about it: "the most unprincipled and barbarous of men are not unprepared with sophisms, to prove that they would have acted in no other manner, and to shew that vice is virtue."[524] Nonetheless, the Platonist in him asserts that if the whole world were full of sophists calling vice virtue and virtue vice, it would not alter in the slightest what is actually true and good. In other words, Shelley endorses a normative, transcendent Good at the same time he promotes liberalism. The Good remains the Good regardless of what people claim it is.

Even factually incorrect beliefs are not to be persecuted in Shelley's liberal government: "Let us suppose that some half-witted philosopher should assert that the earth was the centre of the universe…This man would assert what is demonstrably incorrect;--he would promulgate a false opinion. Yet would he therefore deserve pillory and imprisonment?"[525] Shelley's concern is not with legitimating everyone's claims (relativism). His concern is with establishing a system that prevents tyrannizing others

[522] Shelley, "A Letter to Lord Ellenborough," 72.
[523] Ibid, 66.
[524] Ibid, 73.
[525] Shelley, "A Letter to Lord Ellenborough," 72.

for their beliefs and, to the best one is able, preventing them from tyrannizing each other (a tricky task to be sure). In this same letter to Lord Ellenborough Shelley makes an argument against voluntarism in favor of an immutable Good:

> "duty in similar situations must be precisely the same in all ages and nations.—The opinion contrary to this has arisen from a supposition that the will of God is the source or criterion of morality: It is plain that the utmost exertion of Omnipotence could not cause that to be virtuous which actually is vicious. An all-powerful Demon might indubitably annex punishments to virtue and rewards to vice, but could not by these means effect the slightest change in their abstract and immutable natures."[526]

Not only does this argument reject psychologizing and reductionist (i.e. purely immanent) accounts of morality that would explain it in terms of a behavioral punishment-reward mechanism, it upholds a genuinely transcendent normative Good (God properly defined) against the idea "that God is a venerable old man, seated on a throne of clouds, his breast the theatre of various passions, analogous to those of humanity, his will changeable and uncertain," to use Shelley's own words.[527] Shelley associates Christianity with voluntarism and an anthropomorphic God, which is why Shelley asserts that transcendent Goodness and Truth are higher than God. In the above quotation the implied meaning of God's "omnipotence" is infinite, worldly voluntarist power, which is why Shelley believes God's will is different from and lower than "immutable" Truth and Goodness themselves, since these are transcendent, uncreated, necessary realities and, as such, are not a matter of subjective preference. Shelley's assertion is that the True and the Good are absolute and unchanging regardless of

[526] Ibid, 68.
[527] Ibid.

human ideology or the will of God (so long as "God" is understood to be a demiurge or proper noun). This is a basically Platonic, anti-social constructionist and anti-relativist view of truth and morality. At the same time, Shelley promotes liberty of belief in the State. In other words, Shelley's promotion of liberalism does not entail voluntarism, but exists alongside his belief in the Platonic Good. Shelley's liberalism stems from his concern with preventing tyranny and, much like James Madison, he believes that creating the political conditions for the Good to be promoted unfortunately entails that those who do not represent the Good will be allowed to speak. Both Shelley and Madison believe that liberalism will hinder the quest for the Good less than other regimes that have been tried (e.g. theocracy or the irreligious authoritarianism of Jacobinism). That doesn't mean he thinks liberalism is utopia.

The enemy in Shelley's eyes is not God or the Good. His enemy is the tyrant Jupiter whose imposture of the Good and the True demands revolt. For example, against any ideology that claims that the Good consists in woman's subordination to man by natural law, Shelley maintains that the Good consists in realizing woman's equality with man. Even if every society on earth insisted that the Good consisted in the subjugation of women, it would not, in Shelley's eyes, modify in the slightest the fact that the real Good consists in woman's equality with man. Instead of rejecting the notion of a transcendent real absolute, Shelley rejects false representations of it epitomized in the authoritarian figure of Jupiter. Jupiter stands for the codes of fraud and woe which Prometheus must destroy to deliver the Good. For Shelley, opposing oppressive institutions or cultural attitudes is an act of willing the Good, not demanding freedom

from it. Prometheus overturns what *Laon and Cythna* describes as "faiths which long have held the world in awe, / Bloody and false and cold."[528] The bloodless revolution Shelley fantasizes in *Laon and Cythna* involves unmasking a counterfeit Good/God and replacing it with the real thing. He opens the text with a description of the world as under a delusion, conflating the political with the theological:

> "And the great Spirit of Good did creep among
> The nations of mankind, and every tongue
> Cursed and blasphemed him as he passed; for none
> Knew good from evil, though their names were hung
> In mockery o'er the fane where many a groan,
> As King, and Lord, and God, the conquering Fiend did own."[529]

Shelley invokes the categories of good and evil throughout *Laon and Cythna* repeatedly and condemns custom as false ideology:

> "The eternal stars gaze on us!—is the truth
> Within your soul? care for your own, or ruth
> For other[s'] sufferings? Do ye thirst to bear
> A heart which not the serpent's custom's tooth
> May violate?"[530]

Shelley's ideology critique uses the True and the Good to reject social constructs. As such, it is a theological form of unmasking. "Truth's deathless voice" cries out against "Anarch Custom's reign."[531] Shelley describes revolution as a holy war: a "secret fight / [between] Evil and Good, in woven passions mailed."[532] Call it melodramatic, but this is a far cry from historical materialism or poststructuralism. This cosmic-scale political battle is closer to Zoroastrianism than Marxism. Even as Dawson claims that

---

[528] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 4, lines 130-1.
[529] Ibid, Canto 1, lines 247-52.
[530] Ibid, Canto 8, lines 239-41.
[531] Shelley, "Dedication," in *Laon and Cythna*, lines 86, 118.
[532] Ibid, Canto 5, lines 16-7.

Shelley endorses "enlightened utilitarianism" he undermines his own claim by asserting:

> "A distinguishing mark of utilitarian moral systems is their replacement of the terms 'good' and 'evil' by 'pleasure' and 'pain', with a consequent redefinition of the aims of morality in terms of the promotion of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Shelley's earlier defences of pleasure are directed against an ascetic (and Christian) morality. Such a morality does violence to human nature."[533]

While Dawson is right to assert that Shelley defended pleasure against asceticism, Shelley did so in Neoplatonic fashion by indexing pleasure to the Good, rather than abandoning concepts of good and evil in favor of utilitarianism. Shelley constantly uses the words "evil" and "good" throughout his prose, as in his attack on "evil creeds"[534] in *Laon and Cythna*, his attack on Christianity as an "aggravation of these evils" in *Queen Mab*[535] and his description of priests as "Evil designing men" in his *Address to the Irish people*.[536] *Laon and Cythna* refers to "Spirit" as "Nature, or God, or Love, or Pleasure" thus indexing pleasure to the Good, rather than using a pleasure/pain equation as an immanent replacement for a transcendent normative Good.[537]

Shelley's attacks on Christianity are not just an accusation of hypocrisy. Shelley indicates that in harmful ideology what is really evil is taken to be good by the delusions of ideology itself. When Shelley has the Wandering Jew Ahasuerus declare in *Queen Mab*, "they now / Babble of love and mercy, whilst their deeds / Are marked with all the

---

[533] Dawson, 227.
[534] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 1, lines 17.
[535] Shelley, "Queen Mab," line 252.
[536] Shelley, "Address to the Irish People," in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E.B. Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1:228.
[537] Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, Canto 5, lines 486-7.

narrowness and crime,"[538] Shelley does not merely mean that Christians fail to live up to their rhetoric of "brotherhood," "mercy," and "love." He means that these words can have an Orwellian function insofar as they are used to label their antitheses. In other words, an act of hate may be called love or rationalized into justice by ideology. As Dawson notes, Shelley is involved in a process of "unmasking." In Shelley's view "Tyranny always tries to conceal its true nature by an abuse of language and the Reformer must be adept at stripping it of its disguises."[539] As Shelley's Fairy states, "the name of God / Has fenced about all crime with holiness."[540] Or, as Ahasuerus states, "their conquering troops / Wade on the promised soil through women's blood…to fulfill the blind revenge (Which you, to men, call justice) of their God."[541] The realization of the 'true God' will, for Shelley, involve unmasking the false God, that is, denouncing the "Demon-God" or Jupiter who declares evil to be justice, the chief example of which is the Deity who threatens eternal, material fire for disobedience to his false morality.

•••

Given the dominance Christianity has exerted over the West, we can expect to see the Christianity vs. secularism binary persist for some time, despite its tremendous conceptual narrowness. So long as talk is restricted to Christianity rather than philosophical theology broadly speaking, people will continue to be blind to the variety of theological beliefs and manner of being religious that human beings have invented.

---

[538] Shelley, "Queen Mab," lines 240-3.
[539] Dawson, 204.
[540] Shelley, "Queen Mab," lines 27-8.
[541] Ibid, lines 118-126.

As Shelley shows us, the theological impulse can be latent even within ostensibly 'secular' movements like feminism. It is repressed, unexamined, misrecognized, mislabeled the more a person defines social justice against religion due to historical injustices (e.g. oppression of women) perpetrated in the name of religion. Only when we can differentiate oppressive ideology (Jupiter) from transcendent reality, as Shelley does, will it be possible to become post-secular.

It is, of course, possible to talk of, in fact, to fervently believe in God, without talking about Christianity. Plotinus did it. The authors of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* did it. Neither Neoplatonism nor Vedic philosophy can be called a liberalization or secularization of Christianity; after all, those theologies preceded Christianity. It is also possible to be a feminist, to not be a Christian, and to have God be the entire meaning of one's life. Perhaps, instead of insisting on a postmodern denial of truth or atheism or materialism many Westerners may grow beyond a purely reactive, juvenile rebellion against their ideological forebearer (Christianity) and begin to think metaphysically. Perhaps the term "secular" can then be replaced with more accurate descriptions of belief once Christianity is no longer insisted upon, tediously and persistently, as theology itself.

When Truth, Goodness, and Beauty have been held hostage by codes of fraud and woe, it is no wonder that many people (including scholars, as we have seen) violently reject any idea of transcendence. The irony is that, even if many people described as "secular" or "atheist" might actually hold robust theological views, they will never acquire a knowledge of philosophical theology to recognize it, since the very

idea of theology or metaphysics has become tainted in their minds by historical injustices done in the name of religion. The Shelley scholarship itself is symptomatic of this problem since critics consistently assume that the spiritual Shelley is at odds with the political Shelley.[542] Yet, we must ask, how could someone advocate for love or condemn injustice if (s)he has obliterated a normative Good in favor of a relativist or social constructionist account of morality that treats moral judgments as just types of human behavior? Why summon the energy for 'revolution' if one has not even a modicum of agency? Why ever bother to replace one ideology with another if all are equally fictitious mechanisms of power? Why care about justice or individual rights if materialism is the right metaphysical belief and should destroy those concepts?

Shelley believed that the destruction of Jupiter was a good thing—but only when Jupiter's vacancy was filled. Shelley's Prometheus is no postmodern antihero. By rebelling against the unjust reign of Jupiter, he becomes a martyr for justice. For that reason, Shelley is at pains to distinguish Prometheus from Milton's Satan, since Satan is a voluntarist whereas Prometheus is an agent of the Good. The preface to *Prometheus Unbound* states:

> "The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the

[542] Now might be a good time to note that Plato's analogy of the cave and his discussion of the Good take place in a political dialogue beginning with the question of what justice is. *The Republic* even analogizes the soul and the State. While Shelley's own ideals are in many ways in conflict with ideas of the *Republic* (e.g. Platos' text considers totalitarianism and the treatment of art as propaganda) it is certainly worth calling attention to Plato's own interest in politics.

> mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure."[543]

Even Shelley's claim in the *Defence of Poetry* that "Milton's Devil as a moral being is far superior to his God" is not meant to celebrate Satan as a voluntarist anti-hero worthy of emulation, but to attack a false God. Shelley makes it clear that he finds Satan's qualities to be evil, but that he finds Milton's God to be worse, since this God has the same evil qualities but without the excuse of justified rebellion. Shelley writes, "Implacable hate, patient cunning, and a sleepless refinement of device to inflict the extremest anguish on an enemy, these things are evil; and although venial in a slave are not to be forgiven in a tyrant."[544] In Shelley's view, we are inclined to sympathize with Satan despite his evil, since he is at least involved in the good of resisting evil, whereas the same qualities in God directed are unforgiveable. Nonetheless, even this tendency to sympathize with Satan, produced by the fact that the "wrongs" he suffers outweigh his "faults," is still described by Shelley as "a pernicious casuistry." Thus, we find Shelley championing the Promethean rebellion over the Satanic one in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*: "But Prometheus, is, as it were the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends."[545]

By creating a character (Prometheus) who represents the actual Good against the tyranny of an evil God (Jupiter), Shelley avoids a rebellion of pure negation, which is

---

[543] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound," 206-7.
[544] Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 526.
[545] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound," 207.

what he accuses materialism of being in "On Life." Shelley writes, "materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds" and it was "the shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy[546]…[that] had early conducted me to materialism."[547] The rebellion of mere negation should be preferred by the tyrant of false religion. By rejecting the very categories of good and evil, such a negative rebel implicitly grants ownership of the Good to Jupiter. By staging the rebellion against Jupiter merely in terms of a will to power, a rebellion of mere negation leaves Jupiter assured of the rightness of his reign. The more his adversary mocks the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, the more Jupiter can believe that he owns those concepts, thinking he defines them and protects them against the libertarian and the libertine, which is why Tomko reads the opening of *Epipsychidion* in relation to "Benedict XVI's own philosophic dialogue with Nietzsche on *eros*." By passing over Shelley's unitive *Eros* (redefined as the Good) and substituting for it a selfish Nietzschean *eros*, Tomko hopes to make the only alternative to Christianity nihilism. Thus, he avoids the brilliance of Shelley's rebellion, which is to jump outside this polarity entirely. As Shelley understood it, any rebellion that rebukes normativity alone in favor of "don't tell me what to do," never actually challenges Jupiter's claim to represent the Good. Instead, it allows Jupiter to bask in the comfortable delusion that he is the valiant defender of the transcendent

---

[546] The "popular philosophy" refers to the Scottish Common Sense philosophy associated with Thomas Reid which asserts that perceptions of reality are unmediated, that is, they are direct, objective reports of reality (in opposition to the ideal system of Hume). Shelley "disliked the conservative leanings of the Common Sense School" and "its defence, as Shelley would see it, of custom and prejudice thinly veiled as 'common sense.'" Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63-4.

[547] Shelley, "On Life," 506.

against impertinent Satanic voluntarism. Prometheus, on the other hand, tells Jupiter that he is a fraud. And if Jupiter loses his power but has the privilege of living under Shelleyan liberalism, he can have a platform to voice his dissatisfaction with living in a political system that allows him a platform to speak. Better yet, he might even rant to the indifferent passerby that his liberty to do as he pleases is being impinged upon by his not being allowed to stop others from doing as they please.

From Jupiter's perspective, the challenge to his authority is the same as a challenge to the Good and he, therefore, characterizes those who oppose his will as wantons who prize liberty over the Good. In a sleight of hand, Jupiter converts what is really his own voluntarist will-to-power into a false normativity and accuses those who defy him of acting in favor of subjective preference. For example, to someone who defines Wahhabism as the Good, a woman who wishes to drive is a voluntarist, since she values liberty (understood as freedom from) over the Good. Shelley, in fact, defines true freedom, not in terms of freedom from, but in terms of the realization of the transcendent Good, which is why he calls tyrants Anarchs. He just happens to believe that liberalism as a political system is less likely to hinder the Good from being realized than other political systems (e.g. theocracy, monarchy, the anti-religious authoritarianism of Robespierre etc.) even if Madisonian liberalism is, in virtue of its pessimistic and pragmatic nature, perhaps, intrinsically imperfect and non-utopian. If Shelley believes in political utopia, it may only be as an ideal towards which we aspire. It's unclear if he believes political perfection is inevitable, even if he hopes that progress will be infinite.

What is a lie may be called truth, what is ugly may be called beautiful, what is evil may be called good, and what is hateful may be called loving. As Shelley's Prometheus says, "Evil minds / Change good to their own nature."[548] To unmask codes of fraud and woe is at once a political and a spiritual act since it is done in the name of the Good. What Shelley shows us is that to abandon conviction in Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Love, and transcendence is to concede ownership of these terms to the oppressor. Shelley instead took them up in his fight against Jupiter, which is why he declares in his *Defence*, "to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good."[549] Timothy Webb's comment is entirely accurate: For Shelley, "'atheism' was essentially a refusal to acquiesce in the acknowledged systems of belief with their unfortunate consequences both in morals and politics." Furthermore:

> "what Shelley was fighting against was not God but those distorted projections of our own darker passions which are imposed on us in the name of religion: what he was defying was not the idea of God but those unjust fantasies which had taken its place. In this holy war against the false gods, Shelley found his strongest support in Greek philosophy and literature."[550]

As Shelley puts it, atheism is "a word of abuse to stop discussion, a painted devil to frighten the foolish, a threat to intimidate the wise and good. I used it to express my abhorrence of superstition; I took up the word, as a knight took up a gauntlet, in defiance of injustice."[551] Above all, it is a mythological monstrosity that Shelley rejects, not God properly defined. Shelley's "atheism" does not reject the transcendent but

---

[548] Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound," Act I, lines 380-381.
[549] Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 512.
[550] Webb, 100.
[551] Ibid, 216.

various warped anthropomorphisms. He rejects the Demon-God patriarch who threatens eternal hellfire, who demands woman be a slave, and who rewards the renunciation of the sensuous world. He also rejects the benignant demiurge of natural theology. As he writes in a notebook, "all those persons who deny that this great system of things was arranged by one intellectual being in the same manner as we perceive other thinking agents arrange such portions of it as are submitted to their power, are called Atheists."[552] This is no denial of God. It is a redefinition. It is a shift away from the notion of a personal Deity to that of an impersonal transcendent reality. Shelley rejects God the man and replaces it with God the One. Thus, he proclaims his own religion[553] of Poetry:

> "Poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting: they are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion…A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one."[554]

Any attempt to convert these words into an endorsement of a materialist vision of reality is necessarily going to be strained. Such an attempt runs counter to the overtly Neoplatonic language. Even if one dismisses such language in *Adonais* as 'just poetry,' that dismissal becomes more difficult when one encounters this vocabulary in prose. In

---

[552] Ibid.

[553] When Shelley speaks highly of Christ or Christianity it is not because he secularizes either, but rather because he subsumes whatever truth can be found in Christ's teaching or Christianity under Poetry. For example, Shelley writes in the *Defence*, there is "poetry in the doctrines of Jesus Christ" and that "whatever of evil" there is in Christian doctrines "sprung from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition," 524. In his "Essay on Christianity" (1817) he writes, regarding the name "God," Christ "had contemplated this name as having been prophanely perverted to the sanctioning of the most enormous and abominable crimes," 250.

[554] Shelley "A Defence of Poetry," 513.

this definition Poetry is a term for the Platonic convertibles. It is "the true and the beautiful, in a word the good."[555] Thus Dawson observes rightfully that in "Shelley's argument we will see that it makes any proposal to subordinate poetry to the interests of morality out of the question, for it implies an identification between poetry and morality."[556] Poetry is not a decorative additive. In Shelley's Platonic ontology, the Good and the Beautiful are convertible and, thus, if something fails to be Good, it fails to be Poetry (Beauty) and vice versa. One can create mountains of verse without any of it being Poetry. Likewise, one can be a Poet without ever writing poetry. Of course, none of this commits Shelley to a notion of a personal God, or a Deity endowed with creative intentionality, or a finite universe—notions which are typically associated with a belief in "God." At the same time, Shelley's persistent understanding of higher reality as spiritual (transcendent) distinguishes his qualified monism from the immanent monism of Spinoza. Shelley's ontology and epistemology are closer to those of Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius or even Indian Advaita Vedanta than Western materialism.

It is only because Shelley feels the real presence of the "the eternal, the infinite, and the one" that he pleads in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty":

> "Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate
> With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon
> Of human thought or form, where art thou gone?
> Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
> This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?"[557]

---

[555] Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 512.
[556] Dawson, 241.
[557] Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," lines 13-7.

The absence of the "Spirit of Beauty" pains him only because he has intuited it in the first place. He has already seen this Spirit "consecrate" matter with "thine own hues," just as the white radiance of the One consecrated life's dome of many-colored glass in *Adonais*. Shelley isn't attempting, nor does he expect, an actual dialogue with this Spirit of Beauty, but by addressing it as "thou" rather than speaking of it, he reveals his enduring sense of intimacy with the transcendent at the same time he laments its apophatic distance. The struggle here seems not to be with a genuine loss of spiritual Beauty but with its paradoxical presence and distance, not to mention its existence alongside suffering and evil—this "dim, vast vale of tears."

His disappointment is not disillusionment (i.e. some kind of realization that everything he has believed in is a lie). It is a desire for completion when there is only intimation. For this reason, so many of the similes in this poem describe barely perceptible but still real things. Shelley compares Intellectual Beauty to the transitory, insubstantial, or far removed: "clouds in starlight widely spread,"[558] "memory of music fled,"[559] "mist o'er mountains driven,"[560] "strings of some still instrument,"[561] "moonlight on a midnight stream," etc.[562] The absence felt is not an absence of the transcendent itself, but the absence of a voice to give dogmatic certainty and to convert God into a thing, something Shelley admits to seeking in his immaturity: "While yet a

[558] Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," line 9.
[559] Ibid, line 10.
[560] Ibid, line 32.
[561] Ibid, line 34.
[562] Ibid, line 35.

boy I sought for ghosts" and "I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed; / I was not heard—I saw them not—"[563]

> "No voice from some sublimer world hath ever
> To sage or poet these responses given--
> Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,
> Remain the records of their vain endeavour:
> Frail spells"[564]

This only indicates that superstition is of no avail. One cannot summon phantoms with alchemical incantations. Yet, this is no confirmation of atheism. After all, the poem begins by telling us, as does *Mont Blanc*, that the power is there: The "awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen amongst us" still.[565] A deeper form of spirituality, that of poetic mysticism, has replaced childhood's quest for magic. Simply because there is no apparition nor voice nor miracle does not mean there is no God—properly defined. The Power is there—totally transcendent yet intimately immanent, "dearer for its mystery," yet maddeningly obscure.[566] The speaker's realization is not that God is dead, but that he has been hearing the voice of God all along. It is the voiceless voice of Beauty itself, saturating and sanctifying all the sensuous world. It is present in the "summer winds that creep from flower to flower." It is manifest in the "moonbeams that [are] behind some piny mountain shower," and it is the Love in the "sympathies, / That wax and wane in lovers' eyes;"[567] Shelley's God is not the reward of the obedient, the morbid, and the sexless, who earn the favors of an

[563] Ibid, lines 49-54.
[564] Ibid, lines 25-9.
[565] Ibid, lines 1-2.
[566] Ibid, line 12.
[567] Ibid, line 36.

angry "Demon-god" by spurning life. It is Life—the "Spirit Co-eternal with the Universe."

Thus, it is fitting that this chapter end with the final lines from Shelley's "Hymn," lines which are his own version of prayer, a prayer[568] which does not call upon an anthropomorphic Deity, but which expresses Shelley's own desire to prolong the awareness of invisible reality felt only in rare moments of imagination. His Intellectual Beauty is not a person to dialogue with, but the cause of reverie, that is, "the true and the beautiful, in a word the good" that is the privilege of visionaries to see.[569] Shelley's God is the One which is beyond and which interpentrates the many. It is the Power and the Beauty of which the entire Universe is the manifestation. One does not pray to it, one revels in it like music:

> "Thus let thy power, which like the truth
> Of nature on my passive youth
> Descended, to my onward life supply
> Its calm—to one who worships thee,
> And every form containing thee,
> Whom, Spirit fair, thy spells did bind
> To fear himself, and love all human kind."[570]

What Shelley can teach us today is that those who believe the only alternative to Christianity is secularism, are those whose lack imagination.

---

[568] For an example of Shelley's rejection of petitionary prayer and miracles see Note 15 of Shelley, "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to *Queen Mab*]," 284-293.
[569] Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 512.
[570] Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," lines 78-84.

3. Wordsworth's Nature Religion

Like Shelley, the early Wordsworth conceives of God as an impersonal, transcendent real absolute immanently present in nature. When Wordsworth addresses Nature, he does not simply refer to material nature but what is always already a spiritualized Nature. In other words, "Nature" functions as a term for the whole of reality, both higher and lower, experienced as a unity. I am not the first to note this usage of the term. Newton Stallknecht writes, "Nature has, as we have just stated provisionally, two aspects…the poet's sense of the concrete unity and interpenetration of all things on the one hand, and his sense of a suprapersonal inspiration on the other. The word 'Nature' applies to both experiences" and Wordsworth's Nature is "more similar to mind than matter. This is true even though Nature is recognized as the all-inclusive unity of the world."[571] Nature is not an immanent realm to be opposed to a transcendent one. Likewise, God is not somebody who steps into Nature. To put it another way, in the case of both Shelley and Wordsworth, "God" does not signify an anthropomorphic entity but a sort of Power or energy convertible with Being. It grounds, encompasses, but also infinitely exceeds the universe that symbolizes It. Furthermore, for both poets the transcendent can only be sensed intuitively in virtue of the imagination's participation in It. It cannot be discovered through rational analysis. Wordsworth shares with Shelley a monistic mysticism but with some significant differences. The differences will become clear through readings of Wordsworth's poems,

---

[571] Newton P. Stallknecht, *Strange Seas of Thought: Studies in William Wordsworth's Philosophy of Man and Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 33. Stallknecht sees Jakob Boehme as the key figure of influence on Wordsworth.

but it's helpful to note some of the major ones upfront. One significant difference is that for Wordsworth *Eros* does not constitute the essence of God/Power. Instead, the divine essence consists of joy—part wonder, part familial love, part blissful tranquility, and part infantine playfulness. Wordsworth remains just as enthralled as Shelley is with the idea of the transcendent's real presence in the sensory world, but his paradigm for union with the transcendent is not the embrace of lovers, but the child's imaginative absorption in nature.

Wordsworth's God is more of a mother than a lover. When Wordsworth insists that "all grandeur comes / All truth and beauty, from pervading love" he speaks of a divine warmth symbolized in "the Lamb / And the Lamb's Mother, and their tender ways…" applying, of course, this relationship to himself and Nature.[572] Of course, Nature is not without its moments of sublimity either, but even these produce a meditative state not entirely unlike the meditative state brought on by quiet joy. Both soft beauty and the daunting sublime seem to be aspects of the transcendent (this was also true in Shelley). Also like Shelley, Wordsworth's mystical experiences involve ego-death. Unity with Nature transcends the subject-object distinction through an experience of non-dualism that challenges conventional ideas of selfhood. Even though Wordsworth's spirituality tends to the contemplative while Shelley's tends to the ecstatic, both envision God as the essence of existence, that is, as absolute Being,

[572] William Wordsworth, *Prelude* XIII.151-55, vol. 1, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Consciousness, and Bliss[573] underlying the entire universe and awakening the Imagination to a sense of its ultimate identity with It. Nonetheless, even readers who embrace the idea of transcendence in Wordsworth are hesitant to call him religious. Wordsworth's Nature worship is only analogous to religious faith in Geoffrey Hartman's account: "Wordsworth's attribution to Nature of something which is more properly Imagination's is a similar displacement, a true and vital generosity analogous to religious faith."[574] J.R. Watson writes, "much of Wordsworth's imaginative activity is governed by structures which are close to those of religious experience…"[575] I suggest that we go farther and say that Wordsworth's imaginative activity is religious experience, not merely analogous to it.

Wordsworth, like Shelley, is often misread as a 'secular' poet because readers (even those sympathetic to his spirituality) operate within a Christianity vs. secularism conceptual framework. In other words, many of them either read Wordsworth's theology as a variant of Christianity or they read him against Christianity by reading him through a psychologizing, materialist or otherwise anti-transcendent (often specifically anti-Christian) framework. Unsurprisingly, my argument regarding Wordsworth's spirituality will be similar in principle to my argument regarding Shelley's. I assert that Wordsworth offers us a new kind of Romantic religion which

---

[573] As I mentioned in the introduction, D.B. Hart uses these three terms to identify a pattern in accounts of the experience of God across different world religions. See David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). We see this pattern in Wordsworth.
[574] Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 257.
[575] J.R. Watson, *Wordsworth's Vital Soul: The Sacred and Profane in Wordsworth's Poetry* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1982), 30.

must be understood on its own terms and not simply defined against Christianity. The term "secular," as I have argued more extensively in the last chapter, bears meaning only through its opposition to institutional religion (most often personalist monotheism) and, thus, effectively erases alternative religions by tossing them together with genuinely irreligious/atheistic philosophies into one single category defined strictly in terms of negation (i.e. that which is not Christianity or institutional religion). My reading of Wordsworth which follows is as much a reading of how Western scholars read Wordsworth as it is a reading of Wordsworth. As we shall see, the tendency of Western intellectuals to implicitly synonymize "God" with the God of the Abrahamic tradition and to measure a Romantic poet's degree of religiosity by his/her conformity to Christian orthodoxy, is truly staggering. It is an excellent example of how a conceptual framework can acquire such a hegemony through historical precedent that it becomes almost impossible to think outside of it.

3.1. Beyond the Christianity vs. Secularism Dichotomy in Scholarly Readings of Wordsworth

I am not the only one to note the vagueness of the term "religion" and the term "secular" in Romantic scholarship. Nancy Easterlin echoes my complaint when she writes in the late nineties, "Given the historically vague or incomplete use of the word *religion* in literary criticism, it is hardly surprising that scholars have lost interest in this

aspect of romanticism."[576] Nonetheless, "in spite of a recent tendency, encouraged by Marxist approaches, to dismiss the metaphysical concerns of romantic poetry as manifestations of a desire for escape, the religious aspect of romanticism has, over the long term, laid constant claim to our attention."[577] To paraphrase Easterlin, the religious nature of Romanticism is so obvious that it breaks the materialist restraints imposed on it by dogmatic scholarship. The problem goes farther. By meaning "Christianity" every time an author says "religion" or by consistently referring to God as "He" an author reinforces a way of thinking more forcefully than if (s)he had outright argued in favor of Christianity or the Abrahamic God (the same strategy is applied by materialist readers when they take materialism as given). Implication engrains cognitive habits so that argument is rendered unnecessary. When a person gives reasons for why we ought to adopt a conceptual framework, definition, or belief, (s)he renders it one idea among many. (S)he raises to awareness alternatives and the possibility of interrogating terms. Through quietly assuming one truth and limiting language in accordance with it, an

---

[576] Nancy Easterlin, *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion"* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996), 10. Easterlin attempts to redeem the study of religion in Romanticism by treating religion in purely behavioral and functional, rather than philosophical, terms which obviously distinguishes her approach to Romantic religion from my own. Easterlin writes, "It is ironic that religion, which has arguably served a central function in the evolution and survival of the human species by producing social coherence, has been equated with solipsistic withdrawal in romantic poetry by critics of diverse orientations and beliefs. A primary reason for this view is that critics have concentrated on the transcendent moment to the exclusion of other concerns," seeing transcendence as the antagonist of the historical and political, for example, 10. She is right when she argues that many scholars dismiss transcendent moments as "episodes of repression or sociopolitical false consciousness," 38. Easterlin perhaps refuses to approach religion philosophically (she offers a reductive account of religion as social glue, which is itself questionable given the social discord human beliefs frequently give rise to) since she understands that the "presently popular paradigms already imported into literary studies," often dismiss religion a priori, 9. Thus, she hopes historicists, relativists, (neo-/post-Marxists) etc. will at least be receptive to a behaviorist approach that does not take transcendence seriously from a philosophical standpoint, but admits its importance as a phenomenon of human behavior and history.

[577] Easterlin, 28.

idea can be gently forced into the idea—an absolute truth that goes without challenge since it goes as unnoticed as the ground beneath our feet. It defines and limits the terms of discussion, rather than being up for discussion itself.

Easterlin, curiously, does not take the meaning of "religion" or even "God" for granted. She asks with a tone of disinterestedness, "Is religion best described in terms of individual experience, as a state of feeling or of heightened consciousness? Or as various social practices, established orthodoxies, belief systems affirmed and perpetuated through ritual practices?" If it constitutes the former, then much of Romanticism would qualify as religious.[578] Aligning herself with William James, Easterlin applies James's discussion of the term "divine" to Wordsworth:

> "In the text between his initial definition of religion and this modification of it, James discusses the problem posed by the word *divine*. Using the example of Emersonian transcendentalism, James notes the replacement of the Christian anthropomorphic deity with the Oversoul, a sort of spiritual essence. Thus, a transcendent, anthropomorphic god is replaced with what is more appropriately termed a quality. Is this a divine being? The same question arises in Wordsworth's poetry with respect to the ambiguous conception of the deity. Although Wordsworth employs the traditional term God, as a term of reference God is almost as unspecific as Emerson's Oversoul, particularly in Wordsworth's early poetry…Hence, in view of both James's example and the apparently equivocal status of the deity in Wordsworth's major poetry, religion seems no longer to require a visualizable godhead or defined ritual structure, so the emotional character of the believer becomes the crux of the definition."[579]

In her argument poetry becomes the site of religion, rather than a temple, mosque, church, or shrine: "In 'Tintern Abbey,' Wordsworth describes and attempts to validate an apparently authentic mystical experience, but since the sociocultural structures that typically confirm such an experience are insufficient, the poet relies on

[578] Ibid, 29.
[579] Ibid, 36.

the subjective resources of poetry."[580] Easterlin is hesitant to assert that an impersonal transcendent absolute is called "God" in different traditions, preferring instead the more scientific sounding, but less accurate term "quality." Wordsworth and Shelley's God, in my reading, is a transcendent essence in which nature participates, not a property/quality of immanent nature in the way that heat is property of molecular movement. Nonetheless, Easterlin comes closer than many other scholars to challenging fundamental critical frameworks (whether Christian or anti-transcendent) to approach Romantic religion anew.

Her approach can be contrasted with that of M.H. Abrams, who insists that Wordsworth's *Prelude* demonstrates a "secular theodicy" depends entirely on his assumption that "God" means the personal male Christian God who creates and intervenes in His creation.[581] Thus, when Wordsworth speaks of Nature without mentioning the Abrahamic God, Abrams wrongly assumes that "God has become a nonparticipant."[582] Abrams writes, "With respect to the relevant conceptual scheme of the *Prelude*, the relevant question is: 'What role does God play within the poem itself?' To answer this question, it is not enough to list the passages in which reference is made to God; for the essential matter is, 'What does God do in the poem?' And to this the answer is patently, 'Nothing of consequence.'" [583] Abrams is right that Wordsworth's few references to the Christian Deity are merely gestural and irrelevant to the poem's

---

[580] Ibid, 36-7.
[581] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 95.
[582] Ibid.
[583] Ibid, 95.

substance, but this is not because Wordsworth represents an instance of what Abrams terms "The tendency in innovative Romantic thought (manifested in proportion as the thinker is or is not a Christian theist)…to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God."[584] Rather God doesn't 'do' anything because God is not an intervening agent, but Being Itself. In a sense, God does everything since everything is God. If one considers the grounding of being by absolute Being to be an activity, then God is everywhere and always active in Wordsworth's Nature. Activity, much like energy itself, is not the same as agency, of course. For God to act on the universe and change it, God would have to be a person outside of it, which is not how Wordsworth (at least in his early years) seems to think of It. No one is perhaps more overtly insistent on the Christianity vs. secularism paradigm than Abrams, but the tendency abounds throughout scholarship.

This is not always the case, of course. Northrop Frye takes a comparative approach to religion, literature, and mythology that is mindful of variety. Never does he implicitly synonymize "religion" with Christianity or another major world religion. Instead of looking for similarities and differences between Romanticism and Christianity, he looks for similarities and differences between Romanticism and various other religions and mythologies from the worship of "sun-gods or tree-gods," to mother goddesses, demon-goddesses like Kali, and demiurgic creators. Frye refers to Christianity as an "artificial creation myth," as opposed to an organic creation myth in

[584] Ibid, 90-1.

which there is an identification between God and nature. He suggests that Romanticism returns to the latter:

> "In the centuries preceding Romanticism, especially during the Middle Ages, the mythology that begins with this artificial creation myth reached its highest point of development. According to it, man and nature were both creatures of God: there are no gods in nature, and what man should look at nature for is the evidence for the intelligent design in its creation that it presents."[585]

Frye gives us a hint as to what it might look like to read Romanticism outside the Christianity vs. secularism binary by putting all religions/mythologies on equal ground as interpretive lenses. Thus, Frye comes the closest of any Western literary critic to outright describing the Romantics as inventors of their own religion, rather than 'secularizers.' Frye compares the "new mythology" of Romanticism to pre-Christian paganism writing, "One [idea] is the revived sense of the numinous power of nature, as symbolized in Eros, Dionysius, and Mother Nature herself. With the Romantic movement there comes a return to something very much like a polytheistic imagination."[586] In his account, Romanticism rejected the Christian notion that "Man should see nature, the [Christian] myth said, with his reason as the work of God. If he attempted to approach it differently, in search of mysterious power or the sense of the numinous, he found powerful forces pulling him in the opposite direction, toward his own reason and his own society."[587] Instead, the Romantics sought an "identity with a God who is the ultimate reality of both man and nature."[588] According to Frye, they

---

[585] Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 7.
[586] Frye, 16.
[587] Ibid, 8.
[588] Ibid, 34.

replaced the notion of nature as created by and distinct from God with the notion of Nature as God. While it's true that Romantics like Wordsworth resurrected pre-Christian ideas, such as monism, the feminine divine, participatory ontology, etc. "paganism" might be a better term than "polytheism," since the latter term implies anthropomorphism. Frye is right that "something of the ancient mother-centered symbolism comes back into poetry. Wordsworth leaves no doubt that he thinks of nature as Mother Nature."[589] However, Wordsworth does not believe the Deity is female anymore than he believes the Deity is male, since sex has meaning only in relation to biological creatures, not transcendent abstracts.

Even scholars who are unsympathetic to religion or to any kind of transcendent metaphysics often operate with a Christianity vs. secularism conceptual dichotomy. Thomas Weiskel, for example, clearly works with an anthropomorphic, patriarchal notion of God even as he implicitly approves of Romanticism's supposed elimination of God from the sublime. Weiskel introduces his book on the Romantic sublime by claiming (rightfully) that the sublime is inseparable from the idea of transcendence: "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human—God or gods, the daemon or Nature—is matter for great disagreement."[590] He also insightfully observes that we see in Wordsworth a "gentling [of] the daemonic," as opposed to Shelley where the daemonic often takes on a destructive element.[591] Weiskel insists that the Romantic

---

[589] Ibid, 18.
[590] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 3.
[591] Ibid, 6.

movement secularized transcendence. He writes, "The Romantic sublime" was "a massive transposition of transcendence into a naturalistic key."[592] In Weiskel's account, God has left the scene: "in the history of literary consciousness the sublime revives as God withdraws from an immediate participation in the experience of men. The secondary or problematic sublime is pervaded by the nostalgia and the uncertainty of minds involuntarily secular."[593] This is very clearly a secularization narrative. For Weiskel, a lost time of magic—no longer possible to believe in—persists in an attenuated form by being translated or 'transposed' to a naturalist framework. "God withdraws," he writes, and "secular" aesthetics fills the vacuum.

Not only does Weiskel reject a robustly spiritual interpretation of Romantic transcendence by immanentizing the Romantic experience of the sublime, but he does so partly because he assumes that "God" signifies the God of the Abrahamic tradition. He also assumes that "nature" excludes God because God is its demiurgic creator.

This is obvious simply in the fact that Weiskel refers to God as "He":

> "The natural sublime was developing independently of literary influence. In one sense, it was a response to the darker implications of Locke's psychology and what that psychology represented of changes in perception. If the only route to the intellect lies through the senses, belief in a supernatural Being finds itself insecure. God had to be saved, even if He had to marry the world of appearances. And so, in the natural sublime, He did."[594]

Though he inherits Christianity's theological terms, Weiskel demonstrates a hostility towards the spiritual and assumes that a transcendent metaphysics is

---

[592] Ibid, 4.
[593] Ibid.
[594] Ibid, 14.

intellectually unacceptable. He writes, expecting our approval, "We might begin by inquiring whether it is possible to *de*idealize the Romantic sublime, since transcendent idealism of one kind or another no longer seems as inevitable for aesthetics as it once did."[595] No explanation is given for why transcendent idealism must be rejected. Or rather, the only reason for rejecting it seems to be subjective aversion: "our own cultural situation comes unavoidably into play. We no longer share in the hierophancy of the sublime which was unquestioned in nineteenth-century critics."[596] Who is "we"? Contemporary Western intellectual elites? And why is the criticism of self-assured conformism valid only of centuries past and not of the present? Weiskel simply assumes that his readers will share his instinctive revulsion toward transcendent idealism and regard any yearning for transcendence as an atavism. Distaste becomes sufficient reason for dismissal.

His language is even stronger in the following statement:

> "If Kant's definition [of the sublime] is to be useful it must be purged of its idealist metaphysics. Can the sublime be construed at all outside the presuppositions of idealism—whether Platonic or Kantian, theological or simply egotistical? It is possible, I believe, to preserve the dichotomous structure of Kant's formulation in a 'realist' or psychological account."[597]

The language of purgation suggests that immaterialism is perceived as an intellectual sin; it needs to be removed not only from scholarship but seemingly also from Romantic era texts themselves. For Weiskel, idealist metaphysics are not 'useful' because they do not fit into the desired explanatory framework, not because idealist

[595] Weiskel, 21.
[596] Ibid, 36.
[597] Ibid, 23.

metaphysics fail to make internal sense, have been disproven, or fail to provide an interpretive framework for understanding Romanticism. Not "useful" turns out to function as a drier, more seemingly rational substitute for 'heresy.' It places us firmly in the mindset of Western positivism. This mentality is embodied by the heroically rigid mind "whose adhesion to the empirical is firm to the point of scepticism toward any particular transcendent schema."[598] Weiskel warns of the risk that lies in opening the mind to the transcendent:

> "If we desert an economic principle—at least the theoretical possibility of roughly calculating gain and loss—we have in my judgment no way to keep the sublime closed to 'mystical' explanations. We should have to concede, for example, that the energy which powers the 'proud flight' of the soul, it's 'joy and vaunting,' may indeed be infused by a daemon or 'collective unconscious' or some suprapersonal reservoir which cannot be refuted or verified."[599]

Ideally, the human mind will be a hermetic vacuum audited by empiricism with no remainder. The language of economics, of instrumental value, of hard and fast "principle," and of pseudo-quantification provides a quasi-scientific authority to what is really a philosophical position. After all, if something in human experience can't be entirely accounted for by material causes, that may suggest that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, Horatio.

Paul Fry offers an even more uncompromisingly materialist reading than does Weiskel. "What unifies and levels being in Wordsworth," writes Fry, "its 'ground,' hence the true object of the imaginative faculty which exists to disclose unity, is the minerality of 'inanimate creation' from which 'sentient beings,' all of whom are linked

---

[598] Ibid, 25.
[599] Ibid.

ontically to the world by their own inanimate (i.e., somatic) nature alone, are estranged by enlightenment anthropocentrism."[600] He adds, "In Wordsworth's view the human is to be understood most radically as the perception of the nonhuman in human identity itself."[601] He insists that Wordsworth recognizes "that the widest commonalty of things is their common objecthood."[602] Fry identifies Wordsworth with a philosophy of "monistic materialism" akin to that of Locke and Hartley.[603] An ontology of reductive materialism seems to appeal to Fry for political reasons. He writes, "Wordsworth's leveling instinct…does not arise initially as a philosophy of human society (republican politics) but as a philosophy of nature which in its turn implies, or at first blush in any case implied, a republican politics."[604]

Fry's monistic materialism certainly erases hierarchy, but we must ask ourselves at the expense of what? Once the hierophancy of the symbol has been replaced with blanket materialism, then, as Fry puts it, the spots of time can be read "more and more carefully [until] we come to realize that they mean absolutely nothing at all."[605] Instead of insisting that the meaning of the spots of time is inaccessible due to being infinite (i.e. saying they are inexhaustible symbols), Fry states that they are utterly meaningless. After all, if consciousness, which brings the sense of meaning to the spots of time, effectively does not exist (immaterial consciousness being irreconcilable with reductive

---

[600] Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 47.
[601] Fry, 10.
[602] Ibid, 13.
[603] Ibid, 10.
[604] Ibid, 141.
[605] Ibid, 128.

materialism), then Wordsworth's subjective intuitions, feelings, and perceptions cannot participate in any transcendent Truth and would be, as Fry says, without meaning. Fry seems to realize at some level the nihilistic conclusion of reductive materialism and its eradication of consciousness. This is strange given that he also wants to endow reductive materialism with political virtue (i.e. republicanism). Yet, if there is no meaning to anything at all because there are no transcendent values and everything is a barrel of pebbles, then what meaning could republican politics have? And how could we ever say that it is something that ought to be pursued?

Could Lucy be a figure of affection if she really were nothing but a mineral composite? If Wordsworth offers us reductive materialism, how can there be sadness to the abrupt knowledge that Lucy "ceased to be"? There is a reason we have

> "She lived unknown, and few could know
> When Lucy ceased to be;
> But she is in her grave, and, oh,
> The difference to me!"

And not:

> She lived unknown, and few could know
> When Lucy ceased to be;
> But she was just some dirt, you know,
> No difference to me!

To say that everything is composed of more basic structures—minerals, atoms, sub-atomic components, etc.—is simply to state an undeniable fact. Yet, to state that reality consists of nothing but that is a different claim entirely. The former is empirical, the latter metaphysical—and it is not a claim that Wordsworth's intensely spiritual poetry supports. While Wordsworth certainly demonstrates, as Fry claims, an interest in

granting value to the non-human, celebrating a sense of fellowship with the non-human, and democratizing literary subject matter, this is not achieved, nor does it have to be achieved, through an ontology of reductive materialism.

To say that "Wordsworth discovers the ontic unity of the human and the nonhuman in the sheer minerality of things" such that he sees people, rocks, trees, animals, etc. as *nothing more* than one great soil composite is far too dismissive of his spiritual language.[606] Wordsworth imbues rocks with God; he does not reduce the universe to rubble. Fry gestures in the right direction when he reads Wordsworth as a poet who offers a vision of the one-ness of all things, but he goes too far in assuming this implies reductive materialism. It is also misleading to assert that reductive materialism entails republican politics, just as much as it is misleading to assert that republican politics entails reductive materialism. A transcendent qualified monism, as we saw in the case of Shelley, offers an egalitarian ontology insofar as it elevates all beings into Being. Difference collapses in the One just as surely as difference collapses in Fry's 'clay ball' ontology. The monism of transcendent plenitude, which Shelley metaphorizes as the One white radiance of eternity in *Adonais*, and which Wordsworth variously calls "Being" and "infinitude," unites all things in the absolute rather than in matter. Perhaps we should ask ourselves which view allows for love? The vision of the universe as a magnificent dirt-clump or as the multi-colored refraction of the One white radiance of eternity?

[606] Ibid, 59.

Whether scholars find transcendence or materialism in Wordsworth (or Romanticism broadly speaking), their readings are often informed by a Christianity vs. secularism paradigm which reads Christianity into texts or reads texts against Christianity. Again, this is not surprising for Western readers given the cultural legacy of Christianity in the West. Whether one laments the decline of 'religion' (often implicitly synonymized with Christianity) into 'secularism' or one celebrates the triumph of 'secularism' over religion, one still buys into this conceptual dichotomy. One reader of Wordsworth who upsets the conventions of the secularization narrative by working outside the limits of the Christianity/secularism binary is Reginald Horace Blyth, a British nipponophile whose book *Zen in English Literature* takes Japanese Zen Buddhism as normative religion, rather than Western Christianity. Whether or not one agrees with Blyth's beliefs, his reading of Wordsworth is certainly novel, informed, and compelling in certain respects.

For Blyth, Wordsworth's poetic career begins in Zen, declines into pantheism and bottoms out in Christian orthodoxy, evinced by what Blyth calls the "imbecile conclusion in one of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets, Forms of Prayer at Sea*, where we are told that the crew, saved from shipwreck by God, are right to give solemn thanksgiving for His mercy (but how about those who were drowned, or died of thirst in an open boat?) and that English sailors will always win naval battles if they ask God to assist them."[607] For Blyth, "The change that took place in Wordsworth as he passed from Zen through

[607] R.H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016), 423.

Pantheism to Orthodoxy" is one of losing God, not moving from secularism towards religiosity.[608] Easterlin echoes this interpretation, writing "Throughout these selected works of Wordsworth's, then, there is an inverse relationship between the representation of valued religious consciousness and the elements of orthodox Anglicanism."[609] While Easterlin notes a decline in his mysticism and the quality of his poetry, Blyth claims that the farther Wordsworth drifts from unity with Nature, marked by a state of unselfconscious absorption (Zen), the farther Wordsworth drifts from God (Blyth's position seems to echo the creed of the *Intimations Ode*). For Blyth, Wordsworth is at his most spiritually insightful when he writes "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" in *Lyrical Ballads*. In these poems, Blyth writes, "Here again, man's extremity, (just that moment of ego-lessness when mental and physical action is suspended), is God's opportunity"; "Zen, religion, poetry 'come of itself.'"[610] It is, Blyth writes, the "thoughtless, almost senseless state" exemplified by the Wordsworthian child's unthinking imaginative intuition into Nature that is the epitome of Zen consciousness, that is, the experience of God.[611] Contrast Blyth with Abrams who describes Wordsworth's idealization of childhood by reference to Christianity: "to become as a child again is to see as Adam saw."[612]

Blyth favors Zen over pantheism since he associates pantheism with discursive theology, which is problematic according to him, since he believes knowledge of God is

---

[608] Blyth, 412.
[609] Easterlin, 48.
[610] Ibid, 248.
[611] Ibid, 413.
[612] Abrams, 412.

only experiential and intuitive (i.e. one only knows God when in the Zen state). Blyth clarifies that his resistance to pantheism does not consist in a rejection of its metaphysical claims but in its very need to translate the experiential into the metaphysical. He writes, "What is wrong with pantheism? It is not that it is not true, it is rather that when expressed in words it becomes false."[613] In Blyth's account Zen becomes pantheism when there is an "intellectual separation of God and man and nature, a separation of Here and Now."[614] He declares, "Symbolism, pantheism, mysticism, religiosity, these are not Zen."[615] The nature of God is only found in the meditative moment of consciousness in which ego disappears and the analytic or intellectual mind gives over to nothing but pure awareness; the attempt to intellectualize Zen is the loss of Zen.

In other words, the knowledge one has of God in Blyth's account is strictly non-discursive, private, and ineffable; it can only be possessed within Zen. Just as in Wordsworth's spots of time, the attainment of Zen consciousness is not an achievement of will nor the product of an external divine force, but an unprompted and entirely spontaneous moment of clarity and absorption. "We empty ourselves and God fills us," writes Blyth.[616] The moments of Zen that Blyth discovers in Wordsworth are not defined by a mood but by a state of mindfulness so intense that the self can hardly be said to be feeling anything at all. Blyth writes, "We may call it [Zen] both 'presence of mind' and

[613] Blyth, 422.
[614] Ibid, 424.
[615] Ibid, 247.
[616] Blyth, 249.

'absence of mind'" since it is "entire engrossment…in what one is doing" especially "with no thought of its relative or absolute value, with no thought of its interest or its profit to himself or others."[617] Blyth insists that Wordsworth fails poetically when he begins to self-consciously reflect on his relationship to Nature. Blyth writes, "We can trace, in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, the growth of a pantheism, a theoretical interpretation of his original insight, which ultimately destroys him."[618] Blyth's language indicates that Blyth still considers "pantheism" to be an elaboration of Wordsworth's "original insight." In his account, pantheism does not make assertions which contradict Zen; rather, it displaces Zen by moving from the experiential to the discursive.

Blyth's Zen Buddhist notion of enlightenment as a state above material or historical determination—indeed above ego itself—clearly conflicts with many contemporary Western approaches to literature from the Marxist to the more generally historicist, positivist, materialist, or postmodern. Alan Liu's "antipostivistic positivity,"[619] for example, rejects the Western Platonist tradition, but just as surely rejects Eastern notions of transcendence and God by implication. Liu writes, "the Romantics reasserted nature's universal truth against that of history in the new form of individuality: the 'original' or transcendentally non-conventional self. If Nature now meant the outdoors specifically, the outdoors was only a setting in which the ancient,

---

[617] Ibid, 6-7.
[618] Ibid, 419.
[619] Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 42.

universal nature could reappear as the individual."[620] As we saw in the Shelley chapter and in Blyth's account of Zen, the identity of universal Nature with the self is a key tenet of several Eastern theologies—a tenet which Wordsworth's early poetry seems to share.

Readers like Liu miss Blyth's insight that identification with Nature can involve non-dualism, that is, the death of the individual self/ego through unity with Nature. In fact, the experience of the ego (felt most acutely in self-consciousness) registers alienation from Nature, not a triumph of selfhood. Transcendence does not necessarily entail a denial of history or a denial that one's individuality has been shaped by history. Rather, non-dualism involves the recognition that the core of self is God (not ego or individuality). In other words, true self goes beyond material and historical determination, even if the personality has been (to some extent) shaped by context. To say that the self transcends historical determination is not to deny the influence of context; it is to deny that historical causation can *exhaustively* account for what the self is. Some historicists acknowledge this. David Simpson, for example, writes, "Subjectivity is neither a 'historically' created automaton, passively reproducing its imprinted culture, nor an exclusively individual entity governing itself by choice and free will."[621] Laurence Lockridge, though not a historicist or Marxist, notes that one can agree with Frederic Jameson's Marxist notion that a text is "on one level about 'the texture of ideology' but still reject Jameson's characterization of the ethical level as merely

---

[620] Liu, 11.
[621] David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 6.

'diversionary.'"[622] In other words, Lockridge notes that it's possible to read a novel or a poem in relation to nineteenth-century imperialism or class interests, but that doesn't mean that it can't also be read ethically. As he puts it, it is absurd to pretend that the "many passages of hefty reflection in Conrad's novel on moral themes of choice, courage, act, and guilt" are simply erased with socio-economic theory.[623]

I propose that we extend Lockridge's logic to the theological so that we can account for Blythean or (Neo-)Platonic readings without making them possible only through the so-called denial of history (as Liu suggests). The zero-sum approach usually ends up insisting that any appeal to the universal or transcendent be done away with since it is a threat to historicism or ideology critique, which must always prevail. Thus, Liu insists that the moment of identification with Nature or imagined transcendence is tantamount to denying history or refusing political activity in favor of luxuriant escapism. Liu writes, "History is denied, and the 'I' engenders itself autogenetically as the very crown of what I have called objectified subjectivity: a mind knowing itself only in the impersonal—'strong in *it*self.'"[624] Liu cites with approval what he calls Karl Kroeber's historicist "call to arms": "Despite critical clichés of the 1960's and 1970's, the primary thrust of Romantic art was toward neither apocalypse nor transcendence but toward the representation of reality as historical process."[625]

---

[622] Laurence S. Lockridge, *The Ethics of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 30.
[623] Ibid.
[624] Liu, 23.
[625] Ibid, 32.

Liu even describes his own blend of historicism and postmodernism in terms of fierce religious opposition: "To make my own opening difference from 'Wordsworthianism' as wide as possible, therefore, I nail on the church door a litany of broken faiths."[626] Much like Weiskel, Liu expresses an instinctual need to purge a transcendent metaphysics from Romanticism. He offers a series of statements that he claims, "counteracts any lingering idealism."[627] Liu's creed, which recalls Ernest Hemingway's "Prayer to Nada," reads as follows: "There is no nature" and "There is no time. There is no affection. There is no self or mind. Therefore, there is no Imagination. (2) What there 'is' is history."[628] One wonders how there can be history if there is no time…or who Liu means to convince if there are no minds…In fact, even if one wants to claim what we experience is a delusion or a social construct, including nature, one has to admit the existence of a mind that generates or undergoes the delusion. Still, Liu does not offer as purely reductive an ontology as Paul Fry does since Liu admits that his experience of walking about "a part of Connecticut not unlike the Lake District" has led him to admit that "I would go so far as to acknowledge the existence of a reservoir, brook, field, and possibly even forest (more certainly, trees)."[629] The closer something is ontologically to a sand particle the more willing he is to believe that it exists—except, of course, for the abstract entity "history," which, unlike the abstract entity "nature," does

[626] Ibid, 38.
[627] Ibid.
[628] Ibid, 39.
[629] Ibid, 38.

exist. Even more strangely, his basis for faith in the existence of mid-sized objects seems premised on a subjective apprehension by a mind that he has just claimed does not exist.

In any case, Liu's "deconstructive materialism" or "denied positivism" as he calls it demonstrates a popular trend in Western scholarship today (the same one identified by Easterlin). Much of this scholarship positions itself against what Liu termed the "critical clichés of the 1960's and 1970's" which aligned Romantic art with "apocalypse" and "transcendence."[630] The key figure in this debate is Geoffrey Hartman, who offers a visionary reading of Wordsworth. Nonetheless, Hartman refers to Wordsworth's poetry as "secular" even as he is incredibly sensitive to Wordsworth's spirituality and longing for transcendence. Thus, his relationship to the secularization thesis is somewhat complicated. Without ever saying "God," Hartman identifies in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and elsewhere, the idea of an impersonal, spiritual Power unifying consciousness with nature. Describing the famous sunrise after a night of dancing in Book IV of the *Prelude,* Hartman says that in this passage there is a sense "of great power exercised gently, of transcendent power exercised daily."[631] Hartman observes that the gentle, subtle, ever-present kindling of life that characterizes Wordsworth's God might make It unrecognizable as transcendent Power: "Perhaps we are accustomed to think of power—of naked, transcendent Power—as catastrophic and deadly. Yet here it kindles the natural world without any destruction."[632] On the one hand, Hartman seems to be saying that God (understood as transcendent impersonal Power) is present everywhere

---

[630] Liu, 39-40.
[631] Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 224.
[632] Ibid.

for Wordsworth as the universe itself, not its anthropomorphic governor. On the other hand, Hartman insists elsewhere that Wordsworth is secular. Perhaps this is a symptom of Hartman's cultural embeddedness in the Christianity vs. secularism dichotomy (and his automatic reliance on its terms) at the same time his own interpretive powers betray that very conceptual framework.

Hartman doesn't assert that the soul is identical with Power/Being in Wordsworth, but he nears this position by stressing their similitude: "A 'morning-knowledge' comes to him [Wordsworth] which suggests that the power of his soul is like the power which revives nature, and him through nature, unapocalyptically…There are visionary moments in which the two powers seem actually to interchange or blend their functions. The tranquility which means decay in the natural world but fixed faith in the spiritual, is, in such moments, one and the same."[633] Nonetheless, Hartman insists that unity between spirit and nature may only "seem" to blend. Hartman never admits an ultimate identity of nature and mind in Wordsworth, largely because Hartman views the imagination as autonomous, that is, as something not determined by nature. Ultimately, the meaning of imagination's "autonomy" comes down to what we understand "Nature" to be in Wordsworth. Is nature the strictly material world or is Nature an ultimate reality or transcendent consciousness (i.e. God) that the imagination participates in?

[633] Ibid.

While I agree with Hartman that we see in Wordsworth "sight revealing a power in the mind independent of sight,"[634] Hartman's insistence on the autonomy of the imagination from nature teeters on a dualism that would render impossible Wordsworth's dream of "the mind of man wedded to the goodly universe."[635] As Stephen Prickett puts it, "Geoffrey Hartman…sees any movement toward transcendence in Wordsworth as being fundamentally opposed to Nature: not (as one might expect) the *via positiva*, the way of affirmation, but the via *negativa*, or way of rejection. According to these views, Wordsworth does not find the solace he seeks in Nature, and finally flees from it to religious belief in disillusion and even terror."[636] Wordsworthian Imagination certainly goes beyond mere sight if one means by sight strictly material determination (i.e. the image on a retina), but this is only because "the power in the mind" to read sense-data participates in the transcendent Power that manifests symbolically as "Nature." In other words, a correspondence between mind and Nature is possible because both participate in a single reality, that is, the transcendent. "Nature" is, in Wordsworth, not just the realm of the immanent or material but a term for universal Being, Consciousness, and Bliss (i.e. God) or what Shelley termed the "one mind" and "the One."

For Wordsworth, "Nature" signifies the transcendent as manifest in the sensuous (rocks, trees, animals, etc.). In other words, "Nature" is a term for a cosmos that always already participates in God. Thus, it makes no sense to say that the imagination is

---

[634] Hartman, 241.
[635] Ibid, 247.
[636] Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 72.

"autonomous" in the sense of transcendent to Nature, if we acknowledge that "Nature" is Wordsworth's God-term from the start. The 'natural' and the 'supernatural' are not dualistically severed. In Wordsworth "Nature" connotes both the One that lies beyond sight as well as the sensuous emanation of that Being as the universe. Imagination may be "autonomous" in the sense that it possesses agency, but not autonomous in the sense of belonging to a spiritual/transcendent realm that excludes Nature. To believe that imagination is autonomous from Nature in virtue of its transcendent character is to wrongly cast "Nature" as purely immanent/material. Even Paul de Man acknowledges in an early essay that Wordsworth has "a double vision that allows him to see landscapes as objects, as well as entrance gates to a world lying beyond visible nature."[637] Additionally, de Man notes that seeing a landscape as a literal object "does not exclude the awareness of a cosmic realm above and a supernatural realm beyond. Both have to be present in the final vision."[638] For Wordsworth, imagination is not simply a cognitive capacity to invent, but a mystical state of consciousness that can recognize the transcendent in Nature.

3.2 The Child as Philosopher: Imaginative Absorption as Model for Mystical Experience

In tracking the development of his Imagination, Wordsworth's *Prelude* tells a story about his relationship to God (Nature). As Easterlin writes, "in The Prelude, Wordsworth…elaborates a monistic conception of reality which is the characteristic

[637] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 132.
[638] Ibid.

result of mystical experience."[639] Like Shelley, Wordsworth uses the terms "Being" and "Power" and "one mind" to describe his intuition of a non-personal transcendent and immanent reality in his experience of Nature. Contra the secularization thesis, I insist that Wordsworth integrates the supernatural and natural rather than replacing the supernatural with the natural. For Wordsworth, the transcendent (God) can be experienced in something as simple as an Ash tree:

> "Foot-bound, uplooking at this lovely Tree
> Beneath a Frosty moon. The hemisphere
> Of magic fiction verse of mine perhaps
> May never tread; but scarcely Spenser's self
> Could have more tranquil visions in his youth,
> More bright appearances could scarcely see
> Of human Forms and super-human Powers
> Than I beheld, standing on winter nights,
> Alone, beneath this fairy-work of earth."[640]

Since the natural is already spiritual for Wordsworth, it does not need to be supernaturalized by the intervention of an anthropomorphic Deity or Spirits/gods. Wordsworth does not need to introduce "magic" (however enjoyable in fairytales) to behold "super-human Powers." The Ash is in and of itself a "fairy-work." Wordsworth does not absent God from the scene; he realizes that nature irradiates God. Beauty itself turns out to be more truly supernatural than the beings of folklore, fairytales and mythology (though those beings may themselves embody Beauty). To understand God to be someone intervening in nature, as Abrams does, is to assume that God is not a part of nature. J. Robert Barth rightfully criticizes Abrams along the same lines I do by

---

[639] Easterlin, 47.
[640] William Wordsworth, *Prelude* VI.101-9, vol. 1, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Hereafter *Prelude.*

stating, "Abrams takes a wrong turn. He does not credit Wordsworth with a sufficiently 'sacramental' view of reality. Abrams takes, implicitly but clearly, a dichotomous view of immanent and transcendent, as if reality had to be either one or the other, and sees Wordsworth making what had traditionally been transcendent, the deity, totally immanent—and therefore totally 'secular.'"[641] However, unlike me, Barth still primarily reads Wordsworth in relation to Christianity and next notes that Wordsworth is more "'Hebraic' than Christian" because "For all his sacramentalism, there is no evidence of such an 'incarnational' sense in Wordsworth" and he "never really integrated Christ into his sacramental view of the world."[642]

Wordsworth's God is not a person, but suprapersonal "Powers." The "Powers" discernable in the Ash are the same "powers" mentioned by young William in "Expostulation and Reply": "Nor less I deem that there are powers, / Which of themselves our minds impress."[643] The term "Power" or "powers," appearing so frequently throughout his poetry has the effect of rendering invisible forces impersonal and without agency, yet undeniably felt in the visible. As Hartman observes, "The 'powers' and 'presences' retained in the final versions of *The Prelude* reflect the same

---

[641] J. Robert Barth, *Romanticism and Transcendence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 26.
[642] Barth, *Romanticism and Transcendence*, 28. Barth also shares my position on contemporary scholarship when he says that Jerome McGann's claim that Romantic scholarship reflects ideological commitments is just as true of "deconstructionist or New Historicist criticism as it is of traditional scholarship and criticism," 3. He declares directly: "Although I am aware, as one must be, of the shifting tides of Romantic criticism in recent decades—poststructuralism, deconstructionism, the New Historicism—my approach to the work of these poets remains rather conventional, accepting the principle that meaning can inhere in poetry, and that words do sometimes stand still enough for us to take in at least some measure of their meaning. I also take the view that poetry can aspire to the transcendent—and even at times attains it," 3.
[643] William Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply," lines 21-2. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

belief [in genius loci, or 'spirit of the place'] purged of some of its anthropomorphism."[644] What Shelley calls the Soul of the Universe, Wordsworth calls the "Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!" and the "Soul that art the Eternity of Thought! / And giv'st to forms and images a breath / and everlasting motion!"[645] Since traditional secularization narratives often assume that 'religion' is synonymous with Christianity (or organized religion), such language in Romantic poetry is typically treated as an indicator of secularity (e.g. Abrams, Taylor). After all, "Powers" doesn't refer to the Abrahamic God, let alone a person-like Deity of any kind. For readers operating outside Western monotheisms, such as R.H. Blyth, whose spiritual foundation is Japanese Zen Buddhism, Wordsworth's poetry is full of God the less it reflects monotheistic orthodoxy. Again, I do not ask my reader to endorse a particular Western or Eastern (or other) spiritual outlook, I insist merely that we abandon the term "secular" to describe Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets, since this term is inextricably linked to a misleading and close-minded conceptual opposition (Christianity vs. secularism). I insist that we instead rethink what we mean by the term "religion" and the term "God" (à la D.B. Hart) such that we can recognize variegated spiritualities as genuinely religious instead of continuing to lump together and despiritualize outlier theologies by merely defining them in terms of their difference from dominant institutional religions. Such a demand does not require my reader to validate the truth claims of any theology in particular.

---

[644] Hartman, 212.
[645] *Prelude*, I.429-30.

Far from being a secular replacement for God, Nature is God in Wordsworth. However, Nature is not just the sum of natural objects (an immanent totality), but absolute Being, Consciousness, and Bliss Itself made manifest as those natural objects. Consider the following passage from the *Prelude*:

> "From Nature and her overflowing soul
> I had receiv'd so much that all my thoughts
> Were steep'd in feeling; I was only then
> Contented when with bliss ineffable
> I felt the sentiment of Being spread
> O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
> O'er all, that, lost beyond the reach of thought
> And human knowledge, to the human eye
> Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,
> O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
> Or beats the gladsome air, o'er all that glides
> Beneath the wave, yea in the wave itself
> And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
> If such my transports were; for in all things
> I saw one life, and felt that it was joy."[646]

Like Shelley, Wordsworth believes that Nature is the ground and source of becoming. The major difference between the two is that Wordsworth conceives of the divine essence as joy, whereas Shelley conceives of it as *Eros*. Both talk of perceiving "one life." As Mark Bruhn has noted, this concept of the one life is not a concept of a material or mechanistic totality: "Wordsworth writes of the 'one life' in terms that are unmistakably unitary and transcendental (or at least 'non-biological')."[647] Bruhn insists rightfully that, for Wordsworth, "to perceive the one *life of* nature is tantamount to

[646] *Prelude*, II.416-30.
[647] Mark J. Bruhn, *Wordsworth Before Coleridge* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10. Bruhn also clarifies that what he calls "Wordsworth's 'One Life' transcendentalism" can "be traced neither to the empiricist tradition of John Locke and Joseph Priestly nor to the historicist tradition of Burke and Thomas Wharton," 11.

perceiving the one *mind in* nature."[648] As was the case for Shelley, "life" and "mind" apply to things both animate and inanimate. Life is not only within that which "leaps, and runs" but is "in the wave itself" and "mighty depth of waters"—water being the ultimate symbol of not only spiritual depth, but unity encompassing change. "Life" turns out to be a synonym for the essence of existence, for the One which both grounds and encompasses the entire universe. As Romantic mystics, both Shelley and Wordsworth offer some sort of intuition into non-duality or the existence of the One as ultimate reality. Far from experiencing an "engulfing solipsism of Imagination" as Hartman puts it, uncorrupted imagination (exemplified in childhood) enables non-dual experience.[649] Wordsworth, also like Shelley, conveys the transcendent nature of the One by addressing it as "Being." Being as such (or God) encompasses seeming opposites, such as stillness and motion, since Wordsworth feels it in "all that moves, and all that seemeth still."

Wordsworth's emphasis on the intuitive or non-analytic quality of divine knowledge comes through in Wordsworth's confusion between thought and feeling or, rather, his insistence on the absorption of thought into feeling, as in the line "my thoughts / Were steeped in feeling." Knowledge of the divine is conveyed by "bliss ineffable" and is "beyond the reach of human thought / And human knowledge." The

---

[648] Bruhn, 103. I do, however, have one major disagreement with Bruhn since he interprets "one mind" to be demiurgic. Bruhn writes, "Wordsworth has come to understand the morally significant 'feelings of delight' that the developing mind experiences in nature as symptoms of an intelligent ontological design or universal 'mind' that organizes and 'animates' what Wordsworth in his later tribute to Coleridge denominates as 'the great system of the world,'" 109.
[649] Hartman, 242.

eternal disclosed in Nature is at once the "eternity of thought" since mind and universe ultimately both belong to the absolute. As Frye aptly puts it, the "central theme of Romanticism is that of the attaining of an expanded consciousness."[650] Instead of losing belief in a "supernatural Being," writers like Wordsworth developed a spiritual intuitionism that resisted both conventional piety and materialism. Instead of characterizing the Romantics as people who rejected a Christian God, we should instead say that the Romantics discovered their own kind of "supernatural Being" in these moments of expanded consciousness. As Frye puts it, "From the [Romantic] sublime develops the sense of nature as oracular, as dropping hints of expanding mysteries into the narrowed rational consciousness."[651] He is absolutely right when he states that this "intuitive or nonanalytic mode of consciousness" is "identified with the imagination in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and in Coleridge: it is often, as in Coleridge, considered to be a superior kind of reason; it is explicitly identified with love (in the sense of eros, of course) in Shelley."[652]

According to Hartman, this moment "which takes the poet to his seventeenth year, marks the approximate end of the soul's broadest identification with the life of the world."[653] Indeed, Wordsworth's relationship to Nature, though 'impaired and restored' in adulthood, never fully returns to what it once was in childhood. Wordsworth does, as Hartman says, grow into a sense of "autonomy" from Nature, but this is, in my opinion,

---

[650] Frye, 46.
[651] Ibid, 29.
[652] Ibid, 20.
[653] Hartman, 222.

a symptom of his alienation from the transcendent. Hartman aligns a sense of autonomy with a movement towards the transcendent because he divides, as I do not, Nature from the transcendent in his reading of Wordsworth. Thus, he interprets "the autonomy of the imagination" as a spiritual achievement, while I read it as a spiritual failure.[654] The separation from "the life of the world" that Wordsworth's encroaching adulthood brings is not evidence of a stronger imagination but increasing self-consciousness. The unity felt with world in unself-conscious childhood is indicative of a stronger imagination. For Hartman, Wordsworth's mature insight is to "recognize the mind as a power separate from nature."[655] He does not read "one life" theologically, as I do. Hartman writes, "all seems in kinship with his soul."[656] Yet, he also claims that Imagination "prophesies nature's death."[657] Hartman asks, "why, then, that occasional tone of doubt"?[658] He refers to the line in *The Prelude* following the assertion about the one life: "If this be error, and another faith / Find easier access to the pious mind…"[659] Hartman makes it clear that he does not understand Wordsworth's assertion about the "one life" to be religious, since Hartman answers his own question by insisting:

> "Part of it [Wordsworth's doubt] is due to religious scruple, for he is according nature a larger role in man's maturing and salvation. But part of it stems from a correlative scruple, his knowledge that to be truly a poet, he must come to know his soul as separate from nature…Nature must lead him to love man, and to the recognition of his transcendent soul, at the danger of being surpassed."[660]

---

[654] Ibid, 227.
[655] Ibid, 229.
[656] Ibid, 221.
[657] Hartman, 230.
[658] Ibid, 221.
[659] *Prelude*, II.435-6.
[660] Hartman, 221.

By saying "religious scruple" Hartman opposes religiosity to Nature worship, rather than calling Wordsworth's worship of Nature religious. He also implicitly excludes the transcendent from Nature by insisting that it is the "transcendent" quality of Wordsworth's soul that threatens to surpass Nature. No wonder he believes that the imagination's "autonomy" from Nature constitutes a spiritual achievement since Hartman believes that, by being 'bound' to nature, the imagination is blocked from transcendence. After all, Hartman doesn't view Wordsworthian Nature as a plenitude of God, but as absence of God: "While Wordsworth's nature is more than the deistic Abstract Void, it is still a void of a kind…because nature can never wholly satisfy imagination."[661] On the contrary, it is precisely Wordsworth's identification with Nature (made possible by imagination) that constitutes the moment of transcendence, since "Nature" signifies the totality of the natural world as the expression/manifestation of God, not some immanent, purely material realm co-existing beneath a transcendent Godhead. Far from being a void, nature is a symbol. By realizing his identification with Nature, Wordsworth realizes his participation in the transcendent. This identification is best realized through intuition, that is, when imagination discloses Truth non-discursively. This manifests as a non-dual experience, that is, an unselfconscious feeling of unity with Nature (what Wordsworth calls 'Joy').

The fact that Imagination constitutes a change in consciousness and not merely the act of invention distinguishes it from mere fantasy. In Book VIII of the *Prelude*, for

[661] Ibid, 233.

example, Wordsworth outlines several moments of fantasy including imagining a black rock to be a burnished shield, envisioning ghosts in his environs, and inventing narratives to dramatize real world events (a dead man becomes a man who died for love, etc.) Yet, the highest point of imagination's exercise is not creative invention (though valuable in its own right) but its mystical function, which is why Wordsworth writes,

> "There came a time of greater dignity
> Which had been gradually prepared, and now
> Rush'd in as if on wings, the time in which
> The pulse of Being every where was felt,
> When all the several frames of things, like stars
> Through every magnitude distinguishable,
> Were half confounded in each other's blaze,
> One galaxy of life and joy."[662]

What imagination allows Wordsworth to experience is the "pulse of Being" itself, namely the palpable energy motivating life (joy). Imagination functions as a special state of consciousness that perceives Being as that which grounds nature and that in which nature participates. The monistic aspect of this mystical experience is conveyed further by the sense of the blending of all things. Every *thing*, every *where*, becomes "confounded" into "one galaxy." This sensation of oneness, furthermore, overcomes the analytic perception of difference (the distinguishable magnitudes). All things feel indistinguishable, though the eye can divide them, because Wordsworth feels that all is God. The illusion of multiplicity breaks down as the mind realizes that the many-colored fragments of life are the expression of one white radiance of eternity.

[662] *Prelude*, VIII.624-31.

Wordsworth's worship of Nature is not 'secular' or unreligious; it is an alternative religion, its own spirituality. This is clear in his phrasing. Wordsworth asks in Book II if "another faith" (my italics) might replace his own. 'Another' faith might find "easier" access to a "pious mind"[663] by virtue of being conventional or ready-made, but that which is easy and convenient is not thereby more convincing or more spiritual. We do not see Wordsworth displaying reluctance about his secularism, but Wordsworth displaying caution about the idiosyncrasy of his faith. After all, he writes in that same section "Of Genius, Power, / Creation, and Divinity itself / I have been speaking" at the same time "my theme has been / What pass'd within me" and "of my own heart / Have I been speaking."[664] He hesitates to commit to ineffable intimations but finds his intuitions too compelling to be dismissed.

Wordsworth's spiritual intuition is never of an anthropomorphic entity that could bestow favors or punishments upon him, nor is it of a transcendent reality that in no way intersects with material reality. Above all, it is a sense of the oneness of all things, of the imbuement of everything with absolute Life, the essence of which is joy. Wordsworth reaffirms this original intuition in Book III:

---

[663] *Prelude*, II.435-6.
[664] *Prelude*, III.171-77.

"To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the high-way,
I gave a moral life, I saw them feel,
Or link'd them to some feeling: the great mass
Lay bedded in a quickening soil, and all
That I beheld respired with inward meaning.
Thus much for the one Presence, and the Life
Of the great whole: suffice it here to add
That whatsoe'er of Terror or of Love,
Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on
From transitory passion, unto this
I was as wakeful, even, as waters are
To the sky's motion…"[665]

The "one Presence" and "the Life" are not arbitrarily capitalized. They are so emphasized because they are God terms. Terms like "quickening" and "Life" convey that the divine is the pulse in the fabric of the universe down to even the most material of objects—rocks. Even "soil" is not static in Wordsworth's account—it quickens with absolute Life. Far from saying that everything reduces to minerality, as Paul Fry suggests, Wordsworth assigns a "moral life" to minerals. Rather than saying that all is sand, Wordsworth says the All is contained in a grain of sand: "the great mass / Lay bedded in a quickening soil." Even the language of embeddedness adds a sense of spirit's deep infusion into material reality, not its radical difference from it. Wordsworth also invokes the archetypal language of breath as a symbol for spirit. Breath, much like water itself, is an excellent metaphor for inspirited reality since it gives the sense of palpable life and insubstantiality simultaneously.

This "inward meaning" of "the great whole" is not just a feeling Wordsworth experiences inwardly, but a meaning that is attributed to objects. In fact, Wordsworth

[665] *Prelude*, III.124-136.

does not seem troubled by whether "inwardness" of meaning belongs to him (is subjective) or is a real 'property' of 'objects' (is objective) because non-duality collapses the two into a single "one mind" or absolute consciousness. Wordsworth treats his own inner imagination as a space within himself that taps into divine meaning. In other words, the same consciousness sensed in nature (the "feeling" in things) is one and the same with the feeling within. Imaginative intuition only reveals Truth insofar as Wordsworth's consciousness and the "forms" of Nature both participate in Truth. As Wordsworth later puts it, there is "A soul divine which we participate, / A deathless spirit."[666] The imagination realizes what it has in common with Nature, namely that it belongs to the "one Presence" and "Life." Hartman rightly identifies Wordsworthian imagination as a "special consciousness that brings a man home to himself."[667] However, he is wrong to sharply divide this type of consciousness from Nature. He writes, "Nature's only guidance is to intimate an imperishable consciousness which outlives even nature."[668] Even when Wordsworth feels himself bound to Nature, Hartman insists that "the poet continually displaces or interprets apocalypse as akedah" meaning that Wordsworth misinterprets his imagination's autonomy from Nature as his imagination's belonging to Nature. Often "the poet comes face to face with his Imagination yet calls it Nature."[669]

---

[666] *Prelude*, V.16-17.
[667] Hartman, 211.
[668] Ibid, 217.
[669] Hartman, 226.

Hartman writes that throughout the *Prelude* and culminating in the episode of the "halted Alpine traveler" Wordsworth "recognizes that his home is with infinity" and he becomes "absolutely sure of the imagination's autonomy. It has shown itself distinct from nature, as an unmediated apocalyptic force."[670] On the contrary, Imagination constitutes the space of disclosure for the infinite, not because it is "autonomous" from Nature, but because it participates in Nature. Nature is always already a term for transcendent reality—the "home"—to which the mind belongs, one which is intimated through the immanent and which the imagination alone is capable of intuiting (as opposed to the intellect). The growing sense of division between self and Nature in adulthood (what Hartman terms the autonomy of the imagination) I instead interpret as a kind of fall into self-consciousness or ego-awareness, which Wordsworth himself laments.

Of course, it's important to keep in mind that Wordsworth is less interested than Shelley is (and certainly much less interested than Coleridge is) in generating a theology or intellectualizing the divine in any way. In fact, he often portrays excessive intellectualism as corrosive of spirituality, as in "The Tables Turned":

> "Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
> Come, hear the woodland linnet,
> How sweet his music! on my life,
> There's more of wisdom in it."[671]

---

[670] Ibid, 216.
[671] William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," lines 10-2. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

To attempt to analyze "Spontaneous wisdom"[672] imparted when you "Let Nature be your teacher"[673] ultimately destroys it. An intuition cannot be translated into analytic terms:

> "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
> Our meddling intellect
> Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
> We murder to dissect."[674]

Wordsworth prefers to express the experience of non-duality in poetry rather than philosophize on it. In Book II of the *Prelude* Wordsworth seems content to describe the experience of self-dissolution or ego-dissolution as a 'holy' event of mysterious origin:

> "…among the hills I sate
> Alone, upon some jutting eminence
> At the first hour of the morning, when the Vale
> Lay quiet in utter solitude.
> How shall I trace the history, where seek
> The origin of what I then have felt?
> Oft in those moments such a holy calm
> Did overspread my soul, that I forgot
> That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw
> Appear'd like something in myself, a dream,
> A prospect in the mind."[675]

Wordsworth loses himself in a sudden, inexplicable absorptive moment. Even his choice of language ("overspread" and "dream") emphasizes the seamless dissolution of his ego into a non-dual state so powerful that the boundary of his body ("bodily eyes") vanishes. This is a phenomenology of receptive unawareness or perfect mindfulness. Wordsworth experiences seeing so intense that it is no longer seeing.

---

[672] Ibid, line 19.
[673] Ibid, line 16.
[674] Ibid, lines 25-8.
[675] *Prelude*, II.361-70.

Instead of a subject perceiving an object, there is only pure, unselfconscious is-ness. Mediation evaporates. The religious meaning of the experience is something Wordsworth seems to recognize himself, since he describes this mode of perception in all seriousness as a "*holy* calm" (my italics). He also emphasizes the mystery of its origin ("where seek / The origin of what I then have felt?") suggesting that his experience lies outside typical efficient causal explanation and he feels no urge to explain it. In other words, there is an arbitrariness to the disclosure, which is why it feels like a revelation. At the same time, that arbitrariness never feels absurd—the vivid moment pulses with infinite, hidden significance. To be sure, no recognizable dogma nor anthropomorphic Deity appears, but neither is needed for Wordsworth's poetry to qualify as an experience of God. A similar moment occurs in *Tintern Abbey*:

> "To them, I may have owed another gift,
> Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world,
> Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,—
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things." [676]

Wordsworth again describes mystical experience in Nature as a feeling of corporeal evaporation, but this time couches it in more general terms (his language

[676] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 37-50. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

moves from "I" to "we"). The intensity of his absorption is conveyed again by a sense of bodilessness. The sense of halting he feels also follows a common religious trope of being arrested by God/revelation (the "motion of our human blood" is "suspended"). Yet, this moment is not a depletion of energy or death of the body. Wordsworth's loss of embodiment in no way demonstrates contempt for the body or world. In fact, it is in giving over to the sensory world and in following the "affections" that one awakens to the spiritual dimension of life. The sleeping of corporeality is simultaneously the coming to life of soul: we "become a living soul" when gazing on the beautiful forms of nature and trusting feeling. The self/body is not defeated or overcome. Rather, it simply glides away in the serene joy of perfect absorption. Wordsworth's experience takes on an especially religious coloring by his repetition of the phrase "blessed mood," which echoes the "holy calm" passage in *The Prelude*. The emphasis on serenity in the above passage characterizes Wordsworth's experience of non-duality as meditative or contemplative, rather than ecstatic (e.g. Shelley). Wordsworth's description of the lightening of the self from the "heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world" also reveals a common theme throughout his poetry (which I will elaborate on later) of the mystical being at odds with the social. Being drawn into Nature is to be drawn away from the realm of suffering and the ethical mode of being-in-the-world which responds to and attempts to alleviate worldly suffering.

The strong non-duality he experienced in imaginative childhood gives way to an adult consciousness that divides him from Nature. The adult Wordsworth is simultaneously capable of noticing and lamenting the solipsism brought on by his self-

conscious ego and the dampening of imagination, at the same time the adult Wordsworth often misinterprets his alienation as an indicator of divinity's distance from the world. Thus, there are moments in the *Prelude* when it seems that Wordsworth dualistically insists on the transcendent's immanent presence (often when describing childhood experience), and others where he seems to dualistically oppose the transcendent to the immanent. While I believe the more dualistic moments are a symptom of the very kind of adult consciousness that Wordsworth elsewhere criticizes, Hartman seems to favor the dualistic moments as evidence of imagination's transcendence, that is, its autonomy from Nature. The *Prelude*, in his account, tracks "The progress of the poet's imagination toward self-consciousness."[677] He identifies the passage on the crossing of the alps in Book VI as an exemplary instance of this. Hartman writes, "The ultimate insight as to the independence of imagination from nature comes during the poet's reflections on Crossing the Alps. His memories are disrupted by a rising-up of imagination that deflects emphasis from the gloomy though sublime spectacle of the Ravine of Gondo, and bestows it on a less obvious, indeed trivial, event—a feeling of melancholy."[678] The passage is as follows:

[677] Hartman, 238.
[678] Hartman, 240.

" Imagination! lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my Song
Like an unfather'd vapor; here that Power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through,
And now recovering to my Soul I say
I recognize thy glory; in such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there;"[679]

In this passage, the mind, as Hartman puts it, "frees itself both from a particular moment and a particular kind of sense stimulus."[680] Indeed, Wordsworth seems to oppose spiritual intuition to the senses when he declares that it is only when "the light of sense / Goes out" that "the invisible world" can make its appearance. Wordsworth also emphasizes the sudden or uncaused nature of Imagination's visitation. It is like an "unfather'd vapor." By likening it to a vapor he further distances the notion of Imagination from materiality. This moment is the culmination, according to Hartman, of a gradual insight into the mind's "independence from nature."[681] It is a moment when "mind is released from a not unnecessary tyranny of the senses, and especially of the eye. He [Wordsworth] records a defeat of the eye which leads him from visible to less visible, from place to unbounded."[682] The "poet's mind is roused not by sight or by the idea of sight, but by the idea of a blindness (to nature) so powerful that even a

[679] *Prelude*, VI.525-539.
[680] Hartman, 240.
[681] Ibid.
[682] Ibid, 240-1.

supremely visual moment like VI.621 ff serves only, in the final account, to call it forth."[683] Even if we accept that in this instance Wordsworth does seem to separate the transcendent (the infinite) from sensuous nature, Wordsworth still uses the term "Power" to describe a transcendent real absolute. Even at his most dualistic, Wordsworth never falls into anthropomorphism. The invisible world (i.e. the transcendent/God) is always intuited as impersonal and abstract. Yet, one must ask, if the visible differs so radically from the invisible, then how could the poet's vision have prompted his revelation in the first place? Wordsworth's moments of spiritual insight are both elicited by and expressed in imagery.

Even though it appears that Wordsworth has rent the immanent from transcendent in the above passage, only a few lines later, Wordsworth returns to a sense of the oneness of all things and unity between mind and nature. He offers a sublime mystical monism with imagery reminiscent of *Mont Blanc*:

[683] Hartman, 241.

"The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And every where along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalyps,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end."[684]

The infinite thus returns to nature shortly after it has been divided from it; Wordsworth insists that the transcendent is felt in the pulse of eternal becoming. As in Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, an aesthetics of contradiction is used to convey the ineffable. The woods perpetually decay without annihilation, thus metaphorizing infinity become finite. The waterfalls are both motion and stillness embodied, and a sense of spirit runs through the most concrete of objects—rocks and crags speak, though not in a crude anthropomorphic sense. Their mutter or babble is more of a spiritual undercurrent flowing through sensory reality, not an articulable creed or divine command. As in *Mont Blanc*, opposites collapse and contending elements (e.g. chaotic winds) harmonize in the absolute. Even "darkness and light" turn out to be unified in the "workings of one mind." The emphasis in this passage is on a dissolution of multiplicity, not a dualism of God and Nature. Wordsworth realizes (at least in this instant) that all things participate

[684] *Prelude*, VI.556-572.

in the One and that the relationship between the spiritual and the sensuous is not dual, but symbolic. Not only are individual moments of beauty and life participants in a single reality (the "features / Of the same face" and "blossoms upon one tree") they are also "The types and *symbols* of Eternity" (my italics). Our home may lie with "infinitude" but that does not mean that infinitude is absent from present beauty. As Wordsworth puts it, sometimes Nature "Doth make one object so impress itself / Upon all others, and pervade them so / That even the grossest minds must see and hear / And cannot chuse but feel…"[685]

Perhaps it is because Coleridge and Shelley are more self-consciously philosophical than Wordsworth, that Wordsworth seems to teeter between dualistically displacing God (by treating the infinite as always over the horizon and not here) and insisting on the palpable immediacy of God. In short, Wordsworth is not as ontologically consistent or self-assured as Coleridge or Shelley. Yet, it is worthy of note that even in Wordsworth's ontological uncertainty, he is at least consistent in the pattern of his uncertainty. Though he hovers between dualism and monism, he usually ends in monism (and often begins in it). This is partly true because so many of Wordsworth poem's address the arc of life from childhood (imaginative unity with God) through crisis (division in maturity) toward final reconciliation or consolation. Wordsworth realizes that, even if the crisis of maturity has made him feel divided from infinitude, that does not mean that the transcendent does not have real presence in nature or the

[685] *Prelude*, XIII.81-4.

human heart. The problem lies, rather, in his ego's perception of God, not an actual division of God from world. Thus, he declares in *Tintern Abbey*:

> "My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
> Knowing that Nature never did betray
> The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
> Through all the years of this our life, to lead
> From joy to joy: for she can so inform
> The mind that is within us, so impress
> With quietness and beauty, and so feed
> With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
> Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
> Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
> The dreary intercourse of daily life,
> Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
> Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
> Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
> Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
> And let the misty mountain-winds be free
> To blow against thee: and, in after years,
> When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
> Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
> Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
> Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
> For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
> If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
> Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
> Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
> And these my exhortations! [686]

Wordsworth imagines telling his sister that Nature (that is, God) never leaves the world or the individual. Rather, the individual drifts away from divine unity through the inevitable encroach of adulthood, which includes not just the awakening of self-consciousness, but the burden of the knowledge of evil. The "wild ecstasies" of childhood give over to more "sober pleasures" (though the memories of childhood will provide a powerful consolation). The lifetime encounter with cruelty, indifference to

[686] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 122-147. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

suffering, banality, pettiness, triviality, and the dulling of the imagination by drudgery diminish, but not extinguish, the feeling of the divine. The divine itself remains in nature just the same, however, regardless of the speaker's relation to it.

Ultimately, *Tintern Abbey* replicates the logic of the *Prelude* by insisting that the transcendent has immanent presence, no matter how much the feeling of the divine is diminished through accumulated suffering and mature self-consciousness:

> "A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
> A lover of the meadows and the woods
> And mountains; and of all that we behold…"[687]

It is "presence," not absence, that characterizes Wordsworth's God. This vague "sense" of God sinks not only deep into "the mind of man," but also the world, since the sublime is "far more deeply interfused" into all of nature. Wordsworth posits the infinite (God) as far off, that is, beyond the "light of setting suns," a phrase which associates darkness or the going out of the senses with the achievement of transcendence. Yet, he also insists that divinity is in all things. Not only is God in all things, but God "rolls through all things" (another phrase reminiscent of *Mont Blanc*) since God is precisely a kind of energy that grounds and motivates life. In other words, God is impersonal Power (absolute Life), namely, the drive or motiving force of becoming and a unity

[687] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 95-105.

subsuming both consciousness and nature. Like Shelley's "one mind" it collapses both subjectivity ("all thinking things") and objectivity ("all objects of all thought") into a single absolute.

The Snowdon passage constitutes another such instance in which a vivid scene impresses onto Wordsworth the notion of the transcendent's immanent presence. In this passage Wordsworth is not intent on opposing the invisible (the transcendent) to the visible (immanent). Instead, the vision of the moon, with the mist rising up below and the sea breaking in through a crevasse in the mist leads Wordsworth to a recognition that his Imagination participates in the same ultimate reality as the natural world. The aesthetic of Snowdon is of a non-violent sublime. Moonlight serenity, cool mist, inscrutable black shapes, and silence create an atmosphere of insubstantiality and spiritual seclusion:

> "The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
> Immense above my head, and on the shore
> I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
> Which meek and silent, rested at my feet:
> A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
> All over this still Ocean, and beyond,
> Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,
> In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes
> Into the Sea, the real Sea, that seem'd
> To dwindle and give up its majesty,
> Usurp'd upon as far as sight could reach.
> Meanwhile the Moon look'd down upon this shew
> In single glory, and we stood, the mist
> Touching our very feet: and the shore
> At distance not the third part of a mile
> Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
> A deep and gloomy breathing-place thro' which
> Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
> Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
> The universal spectacle throughout
> Was shaped for admiration and delight,

> Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
> Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
> That dark deep thorough-fare had Nature lodg'd
> The Soul, the Imagination of the whole."[688]

Wordsworth gives us a sense of infinity through expansive directionality. The moon and the depths of the ocean points to endless verticality while the spreading mist gives a sense of infinite horizontality. The glowing of the moon combined with the impenetrability of the mist creates a supernatural sensation through a collapse of opposites. There is simultaneous illumination (from moonlight) and obscurity (from mist). The seam in the vapor is the only clarity given, but it does not reveal anything of detail. Rather, the fracture in the vapor only hints at an unknown. The revelation given to Wordsworth is more of a glance at the existence of a profound and unfathomable reality. By describing it as a "deep and gloomy breathing-place," Wordsworth characterizes the supernatural dimension of Nature as a primitive, ultimate origin or foundation. It is depth, rather than height, that is the focus of the imagery here, suggesting that this immaterial reality is a ground sustaining and originating natural reality rather than surpassing it.

Wordsworth emphasizes his intuition of an underlying unity or oneness to seeming flux and division by insisting that out of the "breach / Through which the homeless voice of waters rose" came "the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with *one* voice" (my italics). The many sounds and currents resolve in the "one voice." The rift in the mist (itself a sort of rift in the veil between natural and

[688] *Prelude*, XIII.41-65.

supernatural) turns out to reveal the essence of existence: "That dark deep thorough-fare had Nature lodg'd / The Soul, the Imagination of the whole." Imagination turns out to be Soul itself, and not just the soul of the poet, but the Soul of the Universe. There are not many souls (as there would be in an animistic account of nature), but one great Soul of Nature Itself. Ultimately, what gives Wordsworth a sense of reconciliation with Nature is his understanding that Soul/Imagination is of the same substance with the transcendent. As he puts it, the imagination is "fit / To hold communion with the invisible world" only because it participates in the one mind.[689] We may recall that the concept of the "one mind" appeared in Book II of the *Prelude* to describe Wordsworth's childhood communion with Nature. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that Wordsworth invokes it once again in the ascent of Snowdon to suggest at the end of the *Prelude* that his youthful Imaginative insights still ring true and sustain him in adulthood:

> " A meditation rose in me that night
> Upon the lonely Mountain when the scene
> Had pass'd away, and it appear'd to me
> The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,
> That is exalted by an underpresence,
> The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
> Or vast in its own being…"[690]

By stating that he now realizes that what he saw was an image of a "mighty Mind" Wordsworth means both that what he saw metaphorized his own mind and that he sensed Mind in Nature—not a personal, self-conscious ego, but absolute consciousness. He also rather directly insists that what he has intuited is God. This

[689] *Prelude*, XIII.104-5.
[690] *Prelude*, XIII.66-73.

"sense of God" is not that of an entity walking or talking with him, but of an "underpresence," namely the realm of the deep, dark "breathing-place," that is, the window into "infinity" out of which arose the "homeless voice of waters." This "dim" and "vast" transcendent sublime resides "in its own being" because it is Being itself. It depends on nothing else and grounds all immanent nature (is its "underpresence"). Contra Hartman's claim that Snowdon "seems to naturalize the supernaturalistic imagination" I propose that we treat this moment as one that proclaims the natural to be always already supernatural.

Nonetheless, it's easy to understand why Hartman would interpret Wordsworth to be secularizing the supernatural imagination, since Hartman seems to associate the "supernatural" with the magical, rather than the spiritual/the transcendent itself. Thus, he writes, Wordsworth's "trust in Nature remains a trust in the human mind, which finds inexhaustible rewards in the world, and is renewed by natural rather than supernatural means. His poetry substitutes, therefore, the 'produce of the common day' for sensationalism and supernaturalism."[691] Yet, this introduces an unnecessary distinction between the "common day" and the supernatural that Wordsworthian religion resists. Wordsworth's great insight seems to be that the experience of God/the transcendent is the experience of absolute Being, Consciousness, Bliss, which are symbolically manifest in nature. Anything crudely sensationalist or magical would not be truly transcendent since it would simply be the occurrence of the seemingly

[691] Hartman, 259.

impossible within the realm of discrete objects (e.g. mythological narrative). In other words, it would just be an unexpected or exaggerated material occurrence (e.g. a voice suddenly speaking or a punishing bolt of lightning).

While Hartman leans towards celebrating Wordsworth's division of the transcendent from nature, R.H. Blyth interprets it as a spiritual failure. Their contrasting interpretations of what counts as spiritual achievement in Wordsworth reveal the importance of cultural tradition to a critic's evaluation of an author's religiosity/secularity. While Hartman's reference point is the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition, Blyth's is Japanese Zen Buddhism. Blyth comes closer to my reading of Wordsworth insofar as he tends towards a monistic rather than dualistic interpretation of Wordsworthian religion but differs from my reading insofar as he views any talk of transcendence in Wordsworth as affirming dualism. Due to his infatuation with Zen, Blyth favors extreme poetic simplicity and regards poetic effusiveness or any form of symbolism as spiritually unacceptable (I do not). For example, Wordsworth's assertion in Book VI that our being lies with infinity repulses Blyth since it reveals, in his opinion, an "intellectual separation of God and man and nature, a separation of man from Here and Now."[692] Wordsworth has, in his eyes, undermined the visionary non-dualism he experienced in childhood through reflection. By engaging in "introspection and self-analysis," as Blyth puts it, Wordsworth learns to divide the transcendent (the infinite) from the immanent and himself from Nature, thus exiting the Zen state in favor of a self-

[692] Blyth, 424.

conscious pantheistic theology. Blyth clarifies that by "pantheism" he means the "theoretical interpretation of his original insight" which "ultimately destroys him."[693] We must remember Blyth's earlier remark about pantheism: "What is wrong with pantheism? It is not that it is not true, it is rather that when expressed in words it becomes false…When we say 'This is God,' in our minds, the part is divided from the whole."[694] In Zen, according to Blyth, God-knowledge is a form of experience or a state of consciousness—not a theological proposition. By becoming self-conscious about an intuition, one betrays it. It is precisely the "thoughtless, almost senseless state" that Blyth celebrates as the pinnacle of Zen.[695]

Thus, Blyth insists, "the highest point in Wordsworth's youthful directness of insight into the life of Nature [is] celebrated in the boy of Winander passage from the *Prelude*."[696]

> "Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
> Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain-torrents, or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven receiv'd
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake."[697]

The boy's God-knowledge resembles Wordsworth's own from his visionary childhood (no wonder that it was originally autobiographical). The boy represents the

---

[693] Ibid, 419.
[694] Ibid, 422.
[695] Ibid, 413.
[696] Ibid, 416.
[697] *Prelude*, V.406-413.

sort of "thoughtless youth" that the adult Wordsworth claims to have left behind in *Tintern Abbey*. Importantly, this type of 'thoughtlessness' is not emptiness, but pure receptivity. The boy displays intuitive understanding without explicitly thinking. It is for this reason that Blyth describes the boy of Winander as an embodiment of pure Zen. The boy of Winander's unawareness, as he puts it, demonstrates Zen insofar as "Zen is essentially unconscious, unselfconscious, even unSelfconscious."[698] The boy is molded by Nature "unawares" because he is undivided from Nature. Geoffrey Hartman provides a useful reminder in another essay that "Unconsciousness remains an ambiguous term in Romantic and Victorian periods, referring to a state distinctly other than consciousness or simply to un*self*consciousness."[699]

It's helpful to contrast the boy with the Old Cumberland Beggar whose mind is unaware in the sense of being dead to the Nature. Though Wordsworth insists on the indigent's importance to the community's virtue, the poem does not portray the beggar as a priest of Nature. He may live outdoors but he is not *of* the outdoors. In fact, he is largely insensate and exists for the good of others around him. Not only does he keep his eyes to the ground, rather than look on the natural beauty around him, but he does not even notice what lies on the ground:

---

[698] Blyth, 9.
[699] Geoffrey Hartman, "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self Consciousness,'" in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), 55.

"…On the ground
His eyes are turned, and, as he moves along,
They move along the ground; and, evermore,
Instead of common and habitual sight
Of fields with rural works, of hill and dale,
And the blue sky, one little span of earth
Is all his prospect. Thus, from day to day,
Bowbent, his eyes for ever on the ground,
He plies his weary journey; seeing still,
And never knowing that he sees, some straw,
Some scattered leaf, or marks which, in one track,
The nails of cart or chariot wheel have left
Impressed on the white road…"[700]

The author of the poem is more mindful than the man he describes; it is Wordsworth who points out a scattered bit of straw and a deteriorating leaf pressed into the earth by the patterned marks of wheels. This is not the beggar's perspective. In fact, we are never given anything from his perspective because he has none. He is more of an object than a person. While unawareness in the boy of Winander was a signal of spiritual attunement (un*self*consciousness), unawareness in the Old Cumberland Beggar is simply unconsciousness. One is closed, the other open; one mindless, the other mindful; one sensitive, the other benumbed. The birds surround the beggar "whether heard or not"[701] but the boy hangs on "listening" for the owls even when they do not call back. Instead, the sound of the mountain torrents enter into the boy when the owls don't call back. The beggar, on the other hand, seeks nothing out (except that which perpetuates his subsistence) and he fails to respond to even painful stimuli.

---

[700] William Wordsworth, "The Old Cumberland Beggar," lines 45-57. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).
[701] Ibid, line 177.

The experience of the boy echoes Wordsworth's own from the first book of the *Prelude*: "even then, / A Child, I held unconscious intercourse / With eternal Beauty."[702] The word "unconscious" signifies an ego-less attunement and intuitive knowledge of the divine, not a lack of mental activity. Far from being a 'secular,' the boy's nature religion is far holier than the trite, self-serving religiosity of the "Neighbor" who gives the Cumberland beggar a handout and then "Sits by her fire and builds her hope in heav'n."[703] As Nancy Yousef points out, none of the handouts are ever enough to alleviate the beggar's indigence. The poem demonstrates the "sense of the futility, the uselessness, of sympathetic feelings and acts of charity."[704] The purpose of the acts of charity is not so much to help the beggar as it is to alleviate the conscience of the giver of handouts.

The boy is much more of a spiritual figure than the beggar or those who purportedly give him succor. In fact, the boy, much like the Lucy figures (including Lucy Gray, though she is not officially a Lucy), represents imagination so thoroughly at one with Nature that he has to die. As J. Robert Barth writes, "The death of the boy is perhaps, poetically, inevitable—like the death of the little girl in Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray.' His intimacy with nature, like hers, is so deep, that it can be fulfilled only by death. But this death is not a cause for sadness alone; there is in it beauty, order, harmony."[705] Hartman writes, the death of the boy and Lucy "is not free of ambivalence.

---

[702] *Prelude*, I.590-1.
[703] "The Old Cumberland Beggar," line 154.
[704] Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 96.
[705] Barth, *Romanticism and Transcendence*, 35.

It is an easy thought in the sense that if she were not to die life would betray her."[706] The boy of Winander too perfectly communes with Nature (God); he cannot enter the joyless daylight of adulthood. For this reason, his death, like that of the Lucy figures appears only half-tragic. Their deaths feel like a culmination of a relationship with Nature/God, which is partly why the details of these deaths are elided over:

> "This boy was taken from his Mates, and died
> In childhood, ere he was full ten years old.
> —Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
> The Vale where he was born: the Church-yard hangs
> Upon a Slope above the Village School,
> And there, along that bank, when I have pass'd
> At evening, I believe that oftentimes
> A full half-hour together I have stood
> Mute—looking at the Grave in which he lies."[707]

His death happens suddenly without slow decline or detail. It is more like a vanishment, as if he has suddenly sunk into Nature. Rather than growing mournful, Wordsworth immediately describes the beauty of the vale which the boy now belongs to forever. There is no atmosphere of gloom or decay surrounding him and the narrator does not so much mourn his grave as stand in awe of it. Blythe celebrates the boy of Winander passage over the infinity passage from *The Prelude*, not because this passage presents an 'immanent' philosophy instead of a 'transcendent philosophy' but because the boy represents an 'unaware' non-dualism that contrasts with a self-aware, alienated adult consciousness that posits God as over there, not here. The boy Wordsworth is at one with the "inarticulate language of animate and inanimate things," Blyth writes, but

[706] Hartman, 237.
[707] *Prelude*, V.414-422.

the man Wordsworth separates himself from Nature by over-reflecting.[708] He insists that Wordsworth's language creates a "fatal division between man and outer world, and later, between God and Nature."[709]

Blyth writes, "When we say 'This is God,' in our minds, the part is divided from the whole. Becoming aware of this, we assert with dogged mysticism, 'The part is the whole,' but in the very assertion of identity, the fatal separation is irrevocably there."[710] Self-consciousness about non-dual experience is no longer non-dual experience. Hartman actually advances a similar argument in his essay "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness": "The Romantic poets do not exalt consciousness per se. They have recognized it as a kind of death-in-life, as the product of a division in the self. The mind which acknowledges the existence or past existence of immediate life knows that its present strength is based on a separation from that life."[711] He adds, "childhood, or certain irrevocable moments, confront the poet sharply, and give him the sense of having purchased with death the life of the mind."[712] Wordsworth, like so many other Romantics, does not just rest with his loss but "seeks a return to 'Unity of Being.'"[713]

For like reasons, memory is a double-edged sword in the *Prelude*. Remembering the visionary state in childhood divides Wordsworth's consciousness. To remember childhood's imaginative joy is always to partially feel it again, just as remembering a

---

[708] Blyth, 418.
[709] Ibid, 421.
[710] Ibid, 422.
[711] Hartman, "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness," 50.
[712] Ibid, 50-1.
[713] Ibid, 51.

face is to see the image of it in the mind's eye. At the same time, remembering the past reminds one of its absence from the present, which is painful. Thus, the escapism of memory proves both restorative and alienating. Wordsworth describes the alienating power of memory (one type of self-conscious division) in the following lines from Book II of the *Prelude*:

> "A tranquilizing spirit presses now
> On my corporeal frame: so wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days,
> Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
> That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem
> Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
> And of some other Being. A grey stone
> Of native rock, left midway in the Square
> Of our small market Village, was the home
> And centre of these joys…"[714]

Interestingly, Wordsworth refers to his childhood, not as an earlier phase of himself, but as "some other Being," a phrase which emphasizes the strangeness of his past phenomenology by assigning it the widest, most vague ontological term possible—Being. His past was not just a different set of events, but another way of being. We get a further hint as to what the difference constitutes when Wordsworth contrasts his adult perception of the sun with his childhood perception:

[714] *Prelude*, II.27-36.

" Thus daily were my sympathies enlarged,
And thus the common range of visible things
Grew dear to me: already I began
To love the sun, a Boy I lov'd the sun.
Not as I since have lov'd him, as a pledge
And surety of our earthly life, a light
Which while we view, we feel alive;
But, for this cause, that I had seen him lay
His beauty on the morning hills, had seen
The western mountains touch his setting orb,
In many a thoughtless hour, when, from excess
Of happiness, my blood appear'd to flow
With its own pleasure, and I breath'd with joy."[715]

As always for Wordsworth, the child's mode of being is "thoughtless" and the mark of divine presence is the experience of "joy." J.R. Watson describes quite well the difference between the child's way of being and the adult's: "Here the poet distinguishes between a conscious, mature love of the sun as evidence of his own life and existence—I see the sun, therefore I am—and a more sensuous love of sunrise and sunset which makes him feel more physically alive."[716] The sensuous, affective relation to the sun is portrayed as more spiritual than the adult's self-aware, intellectual, and instrumental relation to the sun. What Watson calls the child's "physical" relationship to Nature is actually what draws him closer to the transcendent. In other words, the child's affectivity and physicality as he bounds through the natural world testify to his superior spiritual state. Watson's phrase "I see the sun, therefore I am" is extremely insightful, since he identifies the nature of adult consciousness, which is to divide ego from objects and to calculate the usefulness of the objects it identifies in relation to worldly projects.

[715] *Prelude*, II.181-195.
[716] Watson, 30.

For the child, there is only joyfully being with the sun, not the sun seen as an object of use or study. Consequently, the child is better able to experience Beauty (and unity with God) than the adult precisely because the child's vision is not limited by a highly conscious objectifying, instrumental, or intellectual gaze. Wonder becomes possible for the child only because he is in a state of pure mindful receptivity and because he experiences aesthetic pleasure as an end in and of itself. For Wordsworth, aesthetic pleasure can be regarded as an end in and of itself only because Beauty is an irradiation of the transcendent Good, not because the realm of the aesthetic constitutes an isolated immanent/secular replacement for God or refuge for listless self-indulgence. While Wordsworth prefers mature perception to "thoughtless" youth in *Tintern Abbey*, passages like the one above from the *Prelude* champion the "thoughtless" state of joyful, imaginative, childhood over the sober, self-conscious, prudential adult mind. The appeal of Zen to Blyth is that it celebrates this Wordsworthian "thoughtless" absorption in the present. It is moments such as the following in which Blyth finds the perfect expression of Zen:

> "A Child, I held unconscious intercourse
> With the eternal Beauty, drinking in
> A pure organic pleasure from the lines
> Of curling mist, or from the level plain
> Of water colour'd by the steady clouds."[717]

This is the unselfconscious meditative state par excellence. The Wordsworthian child does not reflect on the transcendent's immanent presence since his ego is lost through total absorption in the "eternal Beauty" of organic Nature. As Blyth puts it,

[717] *Prelude*, I.590-94.

"Zen is above all things direct; no intermediaries, no mediators between God and man, no symbolism."[718] While not an immanentist or materialist philosophy, Zen rejects the linguistic differentiation of the finite and infinite. As Blyth puts it, "Zen does not like this talk of Finite and Infinite, visible and invisible, Symbol and Reality…"[719] This is not because Zen rejects the invisible but because it realizes "symbol is reality and reality is the symbol."[720] To put it another way, Zen is symbolism without thinking about symbolism. The Zen state is akin to what Hartman calls Wordsworth's "early unself-conscious relations to nature," that is, the "visionary" mode of his "childhood and youth."[721]

While Blyth believes that Wordsworth's movement out of visionary childhood towards what he calls a self-conscious 'pantheism' or mysticism constitutes a spiritual failure, Hartman sees it as a spiritual triumph. Hartman acknowledges, "Wordsworth falls back on memories of how the soul and nature did fertilize each other in childhood" but he insists "Only at the depth of his crisis does Wordsworth adequately recognize the imagination as a power satisfied by neither nature nor man."[722] For Hartman, imagination must be that which separates the soul from nature and humanity, and this requires self-consciousness and crisis. For Hartman, imagination is different from nature because it is transcendent. For Blyth, any acknowledgement of the transcendent is a rejection of the immediacy of God in the immanent. Blyth comes closer to my position

---

[718] Blyth, 59.
[719] Ibid, 70.
[720] Ibid.
[721] Hartman, 210.
[722] Ibid, 234.

by insisting that non-dual consciousness in Wordsworth conveys the non-difference between God and Nature and soul in Wordsworth. Yet, Blyth goes too far by insisting that Wordsworth's poetry loses its spiritual value and falls into dualism by thematizing transcendence at all.

For example, Blyth insists that Wordsworth illustrates divinity better when describing daffodils in "I wandered lonely as a cloud" than in *Tintern Abbey* or the *Prelude*. In his account, it is when Wordsworth attends fully to the daffodils themselves, rather than self-consciously analyzing their significance, that Wordsworth best understands God. While *Tintern Abbey* "shows us the universe as perceived by the man in union with it…*Daffodils*, shows us something very different, apparently, from either. We see, not the mind of man, nor the universe, but the daffodils…"[723] In other words, even if the daffodils do have a theological or psychological significance, neither is the subject of the poem. The sheer presence of the daffodils absorbs the poem's attention entirely. There is no "post-mortem of thought" and "dissection of the intellect," as Blyth says, alluding to the line "we murder to dissect" from "The Tables Turned."[724]Blyth also refers to "The Tables Turned" as "pure Zen."[725]

Blyth is right that Wordsworth sometimes offers Zen and other times offers symbolic nature mysticism. However, I don't share Blyth's negative attitude towards the language of transcendence. To mention the transcendent/infinite is not necessarily to reject the here and now, nor is it necessarily to engage in analytic dissection.

---

[723] Blyth, 216.
[724] Blyth, 412.
[725] Ibid, 418.

Wordsworth's joyful perception of the one life in the previously mentioned passages from *The Prelude* does neither. Too much emphasis on the 'just-there-ness' of an object can have the effect of evacuating the transcendent entirely. If Zen poetry is to be more than a bland itemization of objects, it must hint at a significance to its object of focus (i.e. its spiritual meaning). The transcendent remains present in the daffodils even if this remains unsaid. It is the reason for their being absorbing, for their capacity to alert the attention and to dissolve the ego into themselves. Blyth does have a point that too much emphasis on the transcendent may lead us to psychologically slip into dualism or divide self from Nature/God as Hartman does. However, he seems to err in believing that one has rejected the immanent by mentioning the transcendent at all. Even if Hartman is wrong to characterize the imagination as autonomous (in the sense of being transcendent to Nature), he at least recognizes that the Wordsworthian crisis of alienated adult consciousness is not wholly worthless. In Blyth's reading, the divine Zen state of the child simply falls into a mature consciousness of no value and the only hope for the adult is a fantasized return to what he has lost. Wordsworth himself, while never failing to idealize childhood consciousness as the pinnacle of unity with Nature, acknowledges that one of the gifts of alienated adulthood is the birth of the ethical. Yet, it is precisely the experience of the 'fall' into adulthood that enables the Wordsworthian capacity to empathize with others.

3.3 The Adult as Philosopher: The Ethical Consolations of Mature Vision

Being with Nature/God perfectly in childhood in Wordsworth's account is to be in a sort of divine womb (in the case of the boy of Winander, his entombment is more of a perpetual enwombment in Nature). Consistently, in both childhood and adulthood, Wordsworth's mystical moments occur in isolation, not social intercourse. The experience of God, for Wordsworth, seems to require that he turn away from human society:

> " how oft,
> In darkness and amid the many shapes
> Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
> Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
> Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
> How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
> O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
> How often has my spirit turned to thee!"[726]

Here Nature provides consolation and escape. Wordsworth's transcendent Power does not guide him in how to live with others. While Shelley's confrontation with the absolute has a revolutionary force—it compels him to shatter codes of fraud and woe in human culture—Wordsworth's Spirit of the Universe tempts him away like one of Yeats's fairies tempting away children. Though the business of the world is filled with energy, Wordsworth describes it as a kind of feverish ("fretful") energy quite different from the bounding, roe-like joy of the child (what Wordsworth calls the "glad animal movements" of his childhood). As in the *Intimations Ode*, Wordsworth uses daylight as a

[726] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 52-8. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

metaphor for an un-visionary mode of sight. Daylight, unliked twilight or moonlight (as in the ascent of Snowdown) casts a plain clarity on everything that leaves no room for mystery and wonder. The "light of common day,"[727] as he calls it in the *Intimations Ode*, and "joyless daylight," as he calls it in the above quotation from *Tintern Abbey,* represent a mode of unimaginative seeing such as the adult has when (s)he views the world as a set of objects to be interacted with to achieve practical, worldly ends. The word "joyless" is, of course, crucial, since "joy" is one of Wordsworth's most frequent spiritual terms, indicating not just an emotion, but the essential nature of the transcendent Itself. Joy is the divine essence for Wordsworth in the same way *Eros* was the divine essence for Shelley. It is the reason for anything existing or being animated at all.

Often, Wordsworth has to retreat from others to obtain this joy. Even when people are present or nearby, they are mentioned in passing and are not essential to Wordsworth's mystical experience (consider the crossing of the alps and the ascent of Snowdon). In these moments, it feels as if there is only Wordsworth and the Soul of the Universe. Notably, Wordsworth's nature-spirit characters, such as the boy of Winander or Lucy Gray, are always alone at their play in Nature and they die before adolescence. Childhood consciousness fully ensconced in God does not yet know tragedy and, therefore, cannot care about the tribulations and sufferings of the world full of "sneers of selfish men, / Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all / The dreary intercourse of daily life."[728] The space of the ethical opens up in Wordsworth only when the space of

---

[727] William Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," line 76. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).
[728] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 130-2.

the mystical recedes. In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth affirms the pagan monistic insights given to him in his mystical, joyful moments, but ultimately sides with mature consciousness:

> "I cannot paint
> What then I was. The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite; a feeling and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, nor any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,
> And all its aching joys are now no more,
> And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
> Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
> Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
> Abundant recompense. For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
> The still sad music of humanity,
> Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue."[729]

The "thoughtless" nature of youth enabled the cataract to haunt Wordsworth's mind "like a passion," just as the boy of Winander's unawareness made him so receptive as to be indistinct from Nature. Unlike in the boy of Winander passage, however, the emphasis on thoughtlessness or unawareness in *Tintern Abbey* takes on a negative connotation. "Thoughtless" in the passage above does not just mean mindful; it also means that the child is careless of worldly suffering. His joy depends on his being removed from the sphere of ethical awareness and obligation (contrast this with Shelley's sense that the transcendent Good compels political action or with Coleridge's

[729] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 76-94.

account of conscience as prior to consciousness). Wordsworth acknowledges that he will never again experience boyhood's visceral or appetitive delight in Nature's "colours and their forms" (he declares "that time is past"), yet the attitude he displays is one of sober acceptance. He will not "mourn" since one of the "other gifts" acquired in adult consciousness, is the ability to hear the "still sad music of humanity." Empathy (the basis for the ethical in Wordsworth) requires tragic knowledge and this requires losing the state of Zen-like absorption in Beauty that Wordsworth possessed in imaginative childhood when he roamed through Nature feeling no need for "a remoter charm, / By thought supplied, nor any interest / Unborrowed from the eye."

The *Intimations Ode* addresses the paradoxical gift of alienated adult consciousness even more so than *Tintern Abbey*. *Tintern Abbey* ultimately seems less troubled by the loss of childhood imaginative joy than does the *Ode*. While the *Ode* dwells with pain on the loss of visionary unity with Nature and pines for an impossible return, *Tintern Abbey* more stoically accepts the transformations of maturity:

> " —That time is past,
> And all its aching joys are now no more,
> And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
> Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur;"[730]

Perhaps it is for that reason that the *Ode* must work harder to discern the gifts unique to the adult's manner of being-in-the-world. While *Tintern Abbey* acknowledges, like the *Ode*, the impossibility of a return to childhood ("I cannot paint / What then I was") it also dismisses "thoughtless youth" in favor of adult wisdom without mourning.

---

[730] William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 84-87. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

The *Ode*, on the other hand, begins with intense mourning and wholeheartedly idealizes visionary childhood:

> "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
> Turn wheresoe'er I may,
> By night or day.
> The things which I have seen I now can see no more."[731]

Wordsworth makes it clear that in childhood he was not just carefree and more spirited, which is how *Tintern Abbey* at times treats his past self, but more capable of intuiting the presence of the divine in immanent nature. In other words, for the child, the world is aglow with God. The fact that this God is not a person or agent is obvious; It's presented as a transcendent meaning revealed in things without being Itself a thing. Its reality is intimated or intuited, not proven by miracle or inference. Interestingly, the feeling of the transcendent's presence (the "celestial light") is so compelling that Wordsworth continues to believe in It even when he has no other evidence for it but his own intuition/intimations, which themselves are limited to brief moments of insight in childhood. After all, the amount of time spent as a child is minimal next to the duration of adulthood. The divine is clearly not identical to material reality, but something that saturates the immanent, which is apparent from the fact that nothing materially changes from childhood to adulthood, even though Wordsworth experiences a loss of the divine.

---

[731] William Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," lines 171-189. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).

Nonetheless, Wordsworth does not imply that God has departed. Rather, it is Wordsworth's capacity to feel the transcendent's immanent presence that he knows he has lost.[732] Since God is not a discrete object and cannot be empirically verified by a miracle or inferred from design, Wordsworth cannot look for It ("Turn whereso'er I may"). Wordsworth does not regard his change in perception as merely subjective; he treats his own adult consciousness as occluding Truth from him in the same way that a person made blind does not doubt what (s)he saw before being blinded. The final line of the stanza is funereal, but it does not express the death of God. Instead, it depicts the death of Wordsworth's special relationship with Nature. The fact that the divine is still present, despite his alienation from it is evident in Wordsworth's treatment of beauty in the following stanza:

> "The Rainbow comes and goes,
> And lovely is the Rose,
> The Moon doth with delight
> Look round her when the heavens are bare,
> Waters on a starry night
> Are beautiful and fair;
> The sunshine is a glorious birth;
> But yet I know, where'er I go,
> That there hath past away a glory from the earth."[733]

Wordsworth's alienation is made especially clear in the fact that he can see but not feel Beauty. Thus, Wordsworth realizes the difference between vision and the

[732] To interpret this poem theologically is not to deny it any political or historical meaning. One can assert, as Marjorie Levinson does, that the *Ode* expresses Wordsworth's disillusionment in the wake of the French revolution. However, this does not entail that the poem's meaning is political *rather than* spiritual, but that the French revolution constitutes just one of the moments of disappointment and suffering that engenders spiritual crisis. See Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[733] Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," lines 10-18.

visionary. Wordsworth discovers that Truth isn't just a matter of registering something analytically or intellectually. There is an experiential level at which higher Truths are known. Wordsworth's adult consciousness still identifies Beauty (and, by implication, that the divine has not left the scene) since he says that the Rose is—and not just was—lovely. The world does not appear drab or void-like. It is still overflowing with symbols of God: "waters on a starry night / *Are* beautiful and fair" and "The sunshine *is* a glorious birth" (my italics). However, his ability to know this is parasitic on an earlier intuition (it's because he remembers how he felt that he knows what he should feel). He can only now assert intellectually and self-consciously what his relationship to Nature ought to be, but the very fact that he is thinking about it so testifies to his own division from Nature. Thus, he can assert the glory of the sun and yet declare two lines later "there hath past away a glory from the earth." So long as Wordsworth's consciousness is torn from Nature, there both is and isn't a glory to the universe. The very fact that he can still recognize what confers divine insight without re-experiencing divine insight is, in a sense, more painful to him than if he realized that his former intuitions were subjective delusions or that God is dead.

Though Wordsworth will eventually use the phenomenology of childhood to justify his Nature religion more explicitly, he first attempts consolation by insisting that, even if he is alienated from the joy around him, he can live through it vicariously or at least intellectually validate it by asserting "No more shall grief of mine the season

wrong;"[734] Yet, the third person intellectual and detached perspective on divine joy proves ultimately not enough for consolation:

> " Oh evil day! if I were sullen
> While Earth herself is adorning,
> This sweet May-morning,
> And the Children are culling
> On every side,
> In a thousand valleys far and wide,
> Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
> And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:—
> I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
> —But there's a Tree, of many, one,
> A single field which I have looked upon,
> Both of them speak of something that is gone;
> The Pansy at my feet
> Doth the same tale repeat:
> Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"[735]

Even in the third person, Wordsworth's focus is on childhood ("the Children are culling"). Not only is Wordsworth alienated from his own childhood consciousness, he is alienated from a Nature that is itself youthful—"young Lambs bound / As to the tabor's sound"[736] in a May-time over-abundant with new life. As is almost always the case in Wordsworth, divine love is metaphorized by the parental relation (whereas Wordsworth has a Babe leap "up on his Mother's arm" we might imagine Shelley placing two lovers in the field picking flowers). Yet this artless union with Nature that he sees in children and animals does not belong to him. For every present joy and beauty recognized, he feels an absence. The faded "visionary gleam" becomes most apparent when Wordsworth shifts his attention from Nature in general to specific spots

[734] William Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," line 26.
[735] Ibid, lines 42-57.
[736] Ibid, line 20-1.

of personal significance. It is "a Tree" and a "single field" that return him back to a state of mournfulness. It is because Wordsworth has specific memories attached to spots that individual things can affect him greatly. Paradoxically, the spots of time convey the universal more acutely by being so particular. Vivid particulars best reveal the transcendent by functioning as symbols. By encountering what once was palpably enchanted, Wordsworth's sense of alienation intensifies. While he may be able to appreciate others' joy vicariously, this still cannot overcome the extreme contrast between the remembered affective and spiritual significance of particulars and their current failure to signify. Wordsworth actually feels and sees nothing in the same way Sartre says in *Being and Nothingness* that one who waits for a friend sees nothing, that is, the absence of the friend. Wordsworth's mind finds brief distraction in affirming joy in the third person, but he is just as soon returned to a sense of his alienation. Though he declares "The fullness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all"[737] he already acknowledges that he cannot feel it for himself. It is "*your*" bliss that he sees. The consolatory statement already contains division within itself. Vicarious joy turns out not to be sufficient consolation and Wordsworth finds himself unable to break out of the cycle of grief, so "The Pansy at my feet / Doth the same tale repeat." Wordsworth only begins to make philosophical progress when he recruits his lost phenomenology of childhood to speculate on immortality:

[737] William Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," lines 41.

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day."[738]

This passage puts Wordsworth's Nature religion on display perhaps more explicitly than anywhere else in his writing. Not only does he directly declare unity of the Soul with God ("we come / from God who is our home") but he also clarifies that this God is Nature by terming the youth with spiritual vision "Nature's priest." It's fairly clear that this religion is pagan and not Christian from the fact that it asserts the pre-existence of the soul: "Wordsworth knows that "The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar." The setting of the soul, that is, its falling away from Nature, is its rising in the form of the birthed individual. The passage shows Wordsworth at his most Platonic, though it is important to emphasize that, unlike Shelley or Coleridge, Wordsworth is not self-consciously invoking Platonic philosophy. Even J. Robert Barth calls him only "quasi-Platonic."[739]

---

[738] Ibid, lines 58-76.
[739] Barth, *Romanticism and Transcendence*, 33.

Whereas Shelley and Coleridge like to explicitly name and interrogate philosophers and schools of thought, Wordsworth relies more on his own intuitions and personal experiences, which just happen to be reminiscent of Plato's theory of recollection and some of the concerns of the *Phaedo*.[740] Wordsworth's thinking recalls that of Socrates in the *Phaedo* insofar as Wordsworth infers the pre-existence of the soul based on a theory of recollection. As Keith Thomas notes, Wordsworth demonstrates a "more Platonic interest in the possibility of an a priori content. It also leads to speculation about another transcendent realm and more openly theological issues such as God and the immortality of the soul (as the Immortality Ode and the later poetry will show)."[741] For both Socrates and Wordsworth, traces of the former spiritual world are left on the soul so that it can infer its pre-existence. As Wordsworth puts it: "trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our infancy!"

Nonetheless, there are differences between Socrates's thinking in the *Phaedo* and Wordsworth's. For one, Socrates's demonstration is discursive, whereas the kind of

---

[740] For a detailed consideration of specific philosophers and schools of thought that could have shaped Wordsworth's thought see Mark J. Bruhn, *Wordsworth Before Coleridge* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Bruhn considers the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth to be a great influence on Wordsworth, though he acknowledges that he cannot prove that Wordsworth read Cudworth (thus, Cudworth's influence may have only been indirect). Bruhn writes, "From Cudworth Wordsworth adapts not only the ontological argument for a simultaneously transcendent and immanent divine intelligence (dwelling apart in a realm of 'unimaginable things' but revealing itself in the 'visible' or imaginable 'imagery of all the worlds' of universal creation) but also the specific figure with which he translates this dualistic ontology into his own verse," 116. I would prefer to describe Wordsworth's ontological sensibility as an ontology of participation rather than dualism. See also Melvin Rader, *Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); Alan Grob, *The Philosophic Mind: A Study of Wordsworth's Poetry and Thought*, 1797-1805 (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1973). For an account of Wordsworth's library and reading (which included Plato) see Chester L. Shaver and Alice C. Shaver, *Wordsworth's Library: A Catalogue* (New York: Garland, 1979); Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 569-77.

[741] Keith Thomas, *Wordsworth and Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 18.

knowledge Wordsworth considers is non-discursive (intuitive). For Wordsworth, divine knowledge is an imaginative insight into the essence of God. The boy recognizes the transcendent and its manifestation in the material world by turning inward. The boy's own experience of bliss is his knowledge of the transcendent: "he beholds the light, and whence it flows, / He sees it in his joy." He is not merely joyful about the light. God appears in his joy because his joy is of the essence of God. His feeling God is his partaking in and knowing God. Socrates argues that learning is a matter of recollection and, given that we can be made to recollect what we forgot upon birth through discursive questioning, the soul is therefore pre-existent. Otherwise, how would it be able to learn, that is, recall former knowledge? For Wordsworth, the operation of imagination is an act of recollecting divine knowledge. Wordsworth's line of reasoning seems to be that imagination can only have intimations of the divine (non-discursive knowledge) in virtue of its having once known God fully, even if "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting." Nature is, for Wordsworth, the Socratic questioner. By encountering it, we remember the reality of the transcendent and our unity with it. It is only because we once pre-existed with the divine that this can take place at all.

Another line of reasoning in Wordsworth's argument seems to be that since there is a linear decline in imagination (the capacity to experience the divine) from childhood to adulthood, we can extrapolate this backwards to assume a pre-existence of the soul in which there was a perfect experience of God (i.e. unity). Even though "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" the process of forgetting isn't total, since we arrive in the world "Not in entire forgetfulness / And not in utter nakedness." Whereas in the *Phaedo*

knowledge seems to be entirely lost at birth and can be recovered at any time, in Wordsworth's account divine knowledge is only severely diminished in birth and then gradually worn away further through the lifespan. In summary, Wordsworth seems to have two reasons for believing in the pre-existence of the soul: 1) the soul could only fall away from the divine (evinced by gradual disenchantment) if there were a time before birth when the soul was one with the divine 2) the soul's intimations of divinity in childhood through the imaginative faculty are acts of recollection that are possible only in virtue of its pre-existence (the Socratic argument). The imaginative faculty diminishes in adulthood in the way that memory falters in old age ("At length the Man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day"). Nonetheless, the recollection of divinity, which is most acute in childhood consciousness, is real and true, even if ultimately lost through maturation.

Wordsworth's *Ode* also recalls the *Phadeo* in that it does not simply assume that the soul's pre-existence entails its existence after death. While Socrates ultimately concludes that the soul pre-exists for the same reason it exists after death (the soul is essentially alive, or, to put it another way, alive-ness is an essential property of the soul), Plato's dialogue does not assume that recollection entails immortality forwards in time. In other words, the continued existence of the soul is problematized, that is, not taken for granted, as it might be for post-Christian Western audiences used to dealing with a concept of soul as essentially immortal and personal (I say 'personal' to differentiate the Christian idea of soul from that of reincarnational theologies in which soul is conceived as existing through multiple lives spanning human and non-human species including

plants and insects).[742] In other words, the *Ode* thinks in a pagan manner in the very fact that the *Ode*, like the *Phaedo*, considers the issue of pre-existence separately from the issue of immortality. While Socrates is confident in declaring both the soul's pre-existence and its immortality, Wordsworth seems more confident in pre-existence than immortality. Immortality is rather, for him, a hope derived from the certainty of pre-existence. He does not consider the idea of reincarnation. Wordsworth believes immortality to be possible, even likely (though not given) only because pre-existence suggests that the soul's nature is such that it can exist outside of earthly life as he knows it. Likewise, a return to the One/Nature seems possible to him only because the soul originally belonged to the One/Nature.

In the *Ode*, Wordsworth also insists on the theme from the boy of Winander passage, "The Tables Turned" and "Expostulation and Reply" that childhood's imaginative consciousness sees the divine insofar as it constitutes a state of unawareness or Zen-like non-duality with Nature. In the *Ode*, Wordsworth turns the tables on our conception of philosophy, by characterizing the child as wiser than the adult. Speaking to the child, he writes:

---

[742] The idea of reincarnation is not particular to the East. Cebes, one of Socrates's interlocutors in the *Phaedo*, proposes the idea that the same soul could exist across different lives. He also claims that the soul's capacity to live across lifespans does not entail the soul's immortality. To make a contemporary metaphor, we might imagine Cebes's sort of soul to be a battery that can be transferred across multiple devices until it runs out. Another interlocutor, Simmias, proposes that the soul could be immaterial though dependent on material activity in the manner that music exists only while an instrument is being played. Simmias proposes that the soul, like music, can cease when the body ceases without, thereby, being identical to the body. Socrates leverages the theory of recollection against Simmias and leverages his definition of the soul as essentially alive against both Cebes and Simmias. Socrates does not address an idea of eternal reincarnation.

"Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
To whom the grave
Is but a lonely bed without the sense or sight
Of day or the warm light,
A place of thought where we in waiting lie;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of untam'd pleasures, on thy Being's height,"[743]

The child is the "best Philosopher" precisely because (s)he does not philosophize. To put it another way, the child's joyful absorption in Nature constitutes a truer sort of philosophy than all the book-writing and analytic reasoning of adults. The adult's very act of "toiling" after meaning and higher "truths" testifies to failure, since to "toil" is to self-consciously interrogate, define, and articulate that which cannot be defined, articulated, or systematized because it is known only experientially. To academically toil will always fail in Wordsworth's account since the knowledge the child has is non-discursive. It is felt (not thought), intuited (not theorized), and lived (not studied). Another mistake of the adult seems to be that the adult does not see the presence of the divine in the simple and immediate. The child experiences wonder at what the adult passes over. Wordsworth conveys this difference in knowledge by describing the child as an "Eye among the blind" at the same time the child is "deaf and silent." It is

[743] Ibid, lines 109-125.

precisely through being ignorant of adult knowledge that the child can "read'st the eternal deep, / Haunted for ever by the eternal mind" (note Wordsworth's invocation of the concept of the one mind).

The fact that the child's type of philosophical knowledge differs so much from that of the adult is evident in their mutually exclusive views of death. Like the girl in "We Are Seven" the child philosopher in the *Ode* is a kind of holy fool. To him "the grave / Is but a lonely bed." Likewise, the little girl insists "we are seven" even when the adult narrator insists repeatedly that two of the siblings are dead and there should be only five:

> "Then did the little Maid reply,
> 'Seven boys and girls are we;
> Two of us in the church-yard lie,
> Beneath the church-yard tree.'
>
> 'You run about, my little maid,
> Your limbs they are alive;
> If two are in the church-yard laid,
> Then ye are only five.'
>
> 'Their graves are green, they may be seen,'
> The little Maid replied,
> 'Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,
> And they are side by side…"[744]

For the child, death is withdrawing from the scene of life. For the adult, death is annihilation. As Susan Wolfson observes, "The adult perceives death as division and subtraction; the Maid sees it as (at worst) displacement."[745] Her sister Jane simply "went

[744] William Wordsworth, "We Are Seven," lines 29-36. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2014).
[745] Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 45.

away"[746] and her "brother John was forced to go, / And he lies by her side."[747] It is as though they have turned a corner and gone out of sight. Nonetheless, the little Maid continues to assert that, though buried, her siblings are with her. Her description of their graves is simple and cheerful; they are green—the color of growth and life. Importantly, the girl never asserts that they are alive—only that they still exist. By insisting that there are seven of them, not five, the girl illustrates her implicit rejection of any notion that death annihilates. The adult's mistake is to assume that the girl still believes her siblings are alive because she refuses to subtract their number. Yet, the girl is clear that she believes they have died and are not just underground, since she says, "The first that died was little Jane."[748] Still, her attitude is not mournful, since she next says, "Together round her grave we played, / My brother John and I."[749] The speaker cannot correct her because she does not disagree with him that her siblings are dead. The problem is not as simple as an error of fact. As Wolfson puts it, Wordsworth's "adult questioners…attempt to impose logic on children who live under different, often 'silent laws.'"[750] Thus, adult and child are fated to repeat the misunderstanding indefinitely:

> "'How many are you then,' said I,
> 'If they two are in Heaven?'
> The little Maiden did reply,
> 'O Master! we are seven.'

---

[746] Ibid, line 52.
[747] Ibid, line 59.
[748] William Wordsworth, "We Are Seven," line 49.
[749] Ibid, line 56.
[750] Ibid, 44.

'But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!'
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, 'Nay, we are seven!'"[751]

Put in the context of Wordsworth's declaration in the *Ode* that the child is the best philosopher, this poem does more than "provoke his reader to wonder at the mysteries of the child's sensibility and its complete insulation from one kind of adult intelligence."[752] If we try to read "We Are Seven" through the *Ode*, then the girl's apparent ignorance turns out to be a special kind of knowledge that the adult lacks. As David Ferry observes, the poem "make[es] us read it two ways at once, either to show the obstinate naïveté of the child, who refuses to understand that her brother and sister are really dead, or to emphasize the obstinate sophistication of the speaker, who refuses to recognize the superiority of the child's wisdom."[753] Since the child does declare that her siblings are dead, Ferry's second proposed reading rings most true. The wisdom of the little girl is that she understands implicitly that time and consciousness are unified in God. She exists in a state of Unity of Being. Even if her siblings are not alive, they are still with her insofar as she and they belong to transcendent Nature, which encompasses spiritual and material alike. In the One there is no division, though the girl does not know this propositionally.

---

[751] Ibid, lines 61-9.
[752] Wolfson, 46.
[753] David Ferry, *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), 84.

On the other hand, the child's intuitive understanding of ontological unity demonstrates that she is ignorant of what the adult speaker knows in his self-conscious and alienated state: that death divides. However, the adult speaker cannot look beyond his own division to re-unification. By the end of "We are Seven" there is no reconciliation between adult and child. The two views are simply incommensurable. As Wolfson puts it, "The dialogues between adults and children in the *Lyrical Ballads* display two consciousnesses" and "*We are Seven* and *Anecdote for Fathers* show the world of adult and child to be qualitatively and mutually exclusive."[754] Furthermore, Wordsworth's own "affinity with the adults suggests that these encounters…betray disturbing evidence of a reduced, and reducing, imagination. Yet, it is precisely such limitations that keep Wordsworth's own imagination tuned to the child's mysteries."[755] Wordsworth sees a little bit of his past self in his child characters even if he views them from his current alienated adult perspective. The *Ode* holds onto the notion that, even if it cannot be re-experienced, the adult did once possess the consciousness of the child. The narrator of "We Are Seven," on the other hand, seems to have utterly forgotten his prior way of being. Thus, we find the second consolation of the *Ode*. Recalling his own past childhood consciousness proves better solace to Wordsworth than his earlier vicarious appreciation of others' joy:

[754] Wolfson, 49.
[755] Ibid, 50.

"O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That Nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood…"[756]

In keeping with Wordsworth's tendency to anti-intellectualism, the simple creed of childhood turns out to be no creed at all, but rather an unselfconscious mode of seeing and being. Memory ("that in our embers…which doth live") becomes the altar at which Wordsworth can worship, even if the original relation to Nature cannot be recovered. It's important to keep in mind that, even if adult vision appears as an extreme diminution of the child's original vision of the divine, Wordsworth describes even the child's vision as murky:

"But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!

[756] Ibid, lines

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore."[757]

Even the child's vision of the divine is only "shadowy recollections," not clear and distinct revelations. The intimations of immortality ("the fountain-light of all our day" and "master-light of all our seeing") turn out to be quite dim and transient, yet obviously so profound and powerful, that Wordsworth leans his entire faith on them. The precious visionary gleams of childhood overwhelm the rest of life in significance even if they are chronologically dwarfed by adulthood, since they "have power to make / Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence." The sound metaphor contrasts flux/noise (becoming) with stability and simplicity (Being). Moments of visionary insight reveal the underlying stasis and permanence of the transcendent despite the reality of change. Truth apprehended once is enough to sustain Wordsworth's faith even through the trials of life: "truths that wake, / To perish never" can never be abolished or destroyed.

Wordsworth's final metaphor translates temporality into geography. The Children sport along the shore since they are, chronologically, closer to birth and, therefore, proximal to the One ("the immortal sea / Which brought us hither"). The adult though "inland far," may lose sight of the shore—her/his life experiences close in and surround her/him like trees so that the shoreline is occluded. Nonetheless, (s)he returns

[757] Ibid, lines.

to ocean's edge through memory. The Soul may "have sight of that immortal sea" and "Can in a moment travel thither" but not in the sense that it can return to an earlier phenomenology of consciousness. The line "see the Children sport upon the shore" metaphorizes Wordsworth's experience of retrospection in *The Prelude* when he wrote that sometimes "I seem / Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being."[758] The children are an externalization of Wordsworth's previous self. They are both alienating and reassuring. They are alienating in that the adult cannot join them in their play, yet by symbolizing a mode of consciousness that the adult previously possessed, the children remind the adult of the insights (s)he then had, which provide the intimations of immortality that sustain Wordsworth's faith in his Nature religion—they are what let him "hear the mighty waters rolling evermore," at least when he is mindful and hopeful ("in a season of calm weather").

In addition to memory there is one final consolation offered by Wordsworth in the *Ode*. It is a gift available only to the divided and disenchanted adult consciousness, namely, the gift of ethical consciousness made possibly only by an awareness of suffering and alienation from the Good:

[758] *Prelude*, II.30-2.

"Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind."[759]

As an adult, Wordsworth can still perceive the divine in Nature enough to celebrate it, despite his disillusionment. Again, the problem is rather that he cannot feel it. The "gladness of the May" that appears before him can only be appreciated in "thought," that is cognized, but not experienced. Wordsworth's mode of perception has shifted from one of affective non-duality (being-with-Nature or even being-Nature) in childhood to thinking self-consciously about Nature and his relation to it. Though he does not have an instrumental or scientific gaze, he is still distant from Beauty in the way an adult is alienated from the lived experience of a child as (s)he watches a child engage in imaginative play. The adult cannot live the activity (s)he observes, at the same time (s)he knows it to be good and joyful. Wordsworth is clear that alienation is irremediable (at least in life) since the immediacy of the transcendent's immanent

[759] William Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," lines 171-189.

presence ("the radiance which was once so bright") is "now for ever taken from my sight." Absolutely "nothing / can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower." If there is hope for a reunification with Nature it is only in death. Nonetheless, Wordsworth suggests that, since he has experienced intimations of a prior unity with Nature, there is reason to hope for a return to a One. This "faith that looks through death" derives its "strength" from the undeniability of the original or "primal sympathy" with Nature. That "which having been must ever be" means both that the power of memory can sustain the past and that visionary moments testify to a transcendent Truth that abides even if one's vision is eventually clouded over.

For all these reasons, Wordsworth calls the child the "best Philosopher." Why then does he also call adult vision philosophical? In the above passage Wordsworth adds another definition of philosophy to deduce a gift unique to maturation (the "years that bring the philosophic mind"). There are, therefore, two definitions of the philosophical mind offered in the *Ode*. There is the child's visionary imagination, but also the adult's tragic knowledge.

Feeling for other's pain is a privilege of adulthood since it emerges from an awareness of evil and suffering. Only the mature mind can experience "The soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering," that is, the ethical consciousness. The child's play-acting of adulthood earlier in the poem demonstrates his ethical ineptitude. In imitating "A wedding or a festival, / A mourning or a funeral"[760] the child reveals

[760] Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality]," lines 93-4.

that he does not truly understand these things. They are alike fanciful and amusing, even interchangeable to him. He can engage in exaggerated forms of mimicry of adult life in the same way that he can imitate animal life. All gestures are drawn from his "dream of human life"[761] not his real experience of it. The realm of mature life, that is, "business, love, or strife"[762] are postures or costumes to the ignorant child without any sense of real tragedy, desire, or pain. When "The little Actor cons another part"[763] and imitates "all the Persons, down to palsied Age"[764] it is not only ironic (since the child will one day be old and does not know it), but it also demonstrates the child's incapacity for empathy. This is no King Lear performance to be sure, but something silly, possibly even mocking. There will be no sense of bodily pain or regret of life decisions or anticipation of death in the child's imitation of old age.

Like the girl in "We Are Seven" the child's lack of empathy for adult experience is not selfish or cruel. His naivety simply cannot be helped. The strength that is left behind for Wordsworth, therefore, is not only memory of intimations and hope for unity with the divine, but also an ethical awakening. This ethical awakening introduces a separation from Nature insofar as the knowledge of human suffering interferes with Wordsworth's relationship with Nature, preventing him from fusing with Nature in perfect joy as he did in childhood: "The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality."[765] Yet,

---

[761] Ibid, line 91.
[762] Ibid, 98.
[763] Ibid, 102.
[764] Ibid, 104.
[765] Ibid, lines 200-1.

instead of simply lamenting this, Wordsworth poeticizes it, treating tragic knowledge as a different kind of philosophic insight:

> "Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
> Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."[766]

It's not surprising that a reader like Blyth does not address the question of the ethical in Wordsworth, since the ethical in Wordsworth occurs when the Zen-like communion with Nature is lost. Nonetheless, Blyth's Zen reading refreshingly removes us from the conceptual narrowness of the secularization thesis by introducing a new theoretical toolkit by which to analyze Wordsworth's phenomenology of spiritual experience. Much as I do, he defines 'religion' differently from how the term normally functions in a Christianity vs. secularism binary. Instead of reserving the term "religious" for poetry that signals allegiance to a particular institutional religion or that which affirms a personal God, Blyth uses the term 'religious' to signify a non-dual poetic-mystical sensibility which he believes is true religion. It is, of course, possible to be 'religious' in this sense while also being religious in a more traditional sense. In such a definition of religiosity (which I share with Blyth) persons typically assumed to be secular could be and ought to be recognized as religious. Likewise, some persons assumed to be religious on account of their identification with an institution or creed may turn out to not be so religious under this new meaning. In any case, we really ought to take Wordsworth seriously when he declares that there was a "spirit of religious love

[766] Ibid, lines 203-5.

in which / I walked with Nature."[767] Truly, Blyth echoes my own thoughts when he writes, "Once you understand that religion is poetry and poetry is religion, you can never talk about 'religious' poetry, you can never take religion and poetry to be two different things..."[768] As Wordsworth says, poetry is "holy services."[769] The *Prelude*, *Tintern Abbey* and the *Intimations Ode* turn out to be far more religious than *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*.

[767] *Prelude*, II.376.
[768] Blyth, 244.
[769] *Prelude*, I.54.

Conclusion

As I have argued in this dissertation, Romanticism has been traditionally interpreted as a 'secular' movement by literary scholars and intellectual historians, either because they believe Romanticism secularizes Christianity into some naturalistic humanist alternative (M.H. Abrams) or because they believe Romanticism negates Christianity (Charles Taylor). I argued, on the contrary, that the Romantics are not only more religious than we have thought, but that to understand this we must abandon hardwired conceptual assumptions that have occluded their religiosity, including the conceptual limitations of the very word "secular." The term "secularism" obtains its meaning only by opposing itself to Christianity or, more broadly, organized religion, and, thus, becomes problematic for the following reasons: 1) the term "secular" tends to erase or obscure a wide variety of unusual or idiosyncratic theological positions, such as those of Shelley or Wordsworth, by blending together such beliefs under one category when they do not belong to Christianity or another recognizable institutional religion. 2) The term "secular" groups together religious beliefs with irreligious beliefs, such that a non-church-going Neoplatonist or Vedanist might be called "secular" along with a hard going proponent of philosophical naturalism. 3) The term "secular," as Charles Taylor notes, refers to political structures (e.g. the separation of Church and State under

liberalism) as well as personal beliefs.[770] For this reason, the term "secularism" sometimes describes unbelief and other times describes a government in which religion is not imposed upon citizens. Yet, it is possible to hold theological beliefs while living within and/or endorsing such a political formation.

By foregrounding Christianity against a vague non-Christian background called 'secularism,' the Christianity vs. secularism binary implicitly affirms Christianity as normative theological standard, measuring and defining non-Christian beliefs and practices in terms of their difference from Christianity. This binary invisibilizes idiosyncratic theologies by terming them "unbelief" or by mischaracterizing them as secularized or liberalized Christianity. While "secularism" and "atheism" are obviously not synonyms, there is a risk that they become synonymized in a Christianity vs. secularism binary since the problematic vastness of the term "secularism" means that it subsumes "atheism" along with non-Christian theological beliefs. This was most obvious in the case of Shelley, who readers continually mistake for a genuine atheist (i.e. one who promotes an anti-transcendent or materialist ontology) because he rejects personalist monotheism. Using the term "secularism" to mean "unbelief" in Christianity

---

[770] Charles, Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9-10. Charles Taylor offers three different definitions of "secular": 1) the evacuation of God from public space evinced by the differentiation of various spheres (e.g. economics) from religion. 2) loss of belief, that is, fewer people professing religious belief or attending Church. 3) A structure of government, such as we find in the United States, in which there are many believers, but Church and State are separated, indicating that belief in God is optional. While I entirely support Taylor's desire to nuance the term "secular" by separating the matter of belief from the matter of political/social structure, he nonetheless frequently invokes the Christianity vs. secularism binary whether intentionally or not. Often when Taylor says "religion" he means Christianity (or some other major organized religion) and he often measures degree of religiosity (commitment to the transcendent) in terms of conformity to Christian orthodoxy, which is partly why he mistakes Romanticism as a movement in which "the sources of power are not transcendent" with "views which intend to remain immanent, and are often as hostile, if not more so, to religion than disengaged ones," 9-10. His use of the term "Church" also assumes Christianity as normative.

(or organized religion broadly speaking), will cultivate a habit of mind in which "secularism" and "atheism" blur together, or are closely associated, since a Neoplatonist and an atheist equally demonstrate "unbelief" in the Judeo-Christian God. The term "secularism" also allows for the separation of Church and State (or differentiation) to be confused with unbelief, which is Colin Jager's chief complaint in *The Book of God*.[771]

Though Jager has resisted the secularization narrative by claiming that secularism (understood as unbelief) has not actually taken place in Western modernity, Jager's criticism still affirms a Christianity vs. secularism conceptual binary insofar as it assumes that issues of belief and religion are issues of Christianity. Furthermore, Jagerian critique of the secularization narrative still operates within a historicist (rather than philosophical-theological) methodology, even as it critiques historicism's typical indifference to or hostility to religion. My account of Romanticism differs from Jager's, even though we both critique the progressive secularization narrative, insofar as I presume to comment on the philosophical and theological content of Romanticism and insofar as I resist the Christianity vs. secularism binary, in part by drawing on non-Christian religious concepts to approach Romantic texts, including ancient Greek Neoplatonism (in the Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth chapters), Indian Vedic philosophy (in the Shelley chapter), and Japanese Zen Buddhism (in the Wordsworth chapter). Nevertheless, I also argue that the case of Coleridge illustrates that Christianity

[771] Colin Jager, *The Book of God* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Colin Jager challenges the progressive secularization narrative by disentangling concepts, arguing in favor of what José Casanova terms "differentiation"—the "emancipation of a variety of forms of cultural authority from religious control" over "secularization" understood as religious decline imbricated in 'modernization,' 29.

is not mutually exclusive with a Romantic sensibility since Coleridge incorporates his Romanticism into his orthodox Anglicanism. So long as we read Romanticism through the Christianity vs. secularism binary, however, we will not do justice to it. If we merely evaluate Romanticism in terms of its difference from Christianity, we lose the richness, variety, and inventiveness of poetic-theological vision in this era. A reader does not even have to agree with any Romantic author to recognize the obvious religiosity of these authors.

As I have shown in this dissertation, the most common problem in readings of Romanticism is that readers synonymize a transcendent ontology with Christianity and/or synonymize an immanent ontology with secularism. The next move, very often, is for them to treat "Christianity vs. secularism" as indistinguishable from "transcendence vs. immanence" or even "immaterialism vs. materialism." Frequently, such readers also view the quest for transcendence as mutually exclusive with political engagement or as a form of escapism from history (Liu).

Thus, we very often see the following move in our culture today: a person believes that her/his concept of social justice is opposed to religion. (S)he concludes that to be committed to social justice or politics or ideology critique is to be secular and anti-transcendent. This line of thinking produces a sort of doublethink exemplified by postmodern literary critics (and aspects of our culture that have been intellectually shaped by them) in which the conditions for the possibility of moral value are denied (e.g. by reductive materialism, relativism, or radical social constructionism that reduces ideas to behavior or ideological power plays), at the same time proponents of these

positions religiously defend an agreed upon orthodoxy of 'secular' social justice. In other words, we are offered a new religion—call it 'Wokeism' if you wish—that does not recognize itself as a religion, even as it replicates the behavioral and conceptual patterns of traditional religions.[772]

The Christianity vs. secularism binary thrives not in spite of its conceptual narrowness, but because of its conceptual narrowness. This polarity serves a function for authors by rhetorically limiting one's choices to one side of the trench or the other. In other words, it functions similarly to George Orwell's concept of Newspeak in *1984*. Are you with Patrick Deneen in denouncing the fall of the West away from Christian

[772] The idea of "getting woke" or "being woke" invokes the trope of awakening from a slumber or darkness of vision in which Truth has been obscured. Awakening from a slumber of ignorance metaphorizes religious epiphany.

righteousness into the moral bankruptcy of secular liberalism[773] with its legitimation of feminism and homosexuality, or are you with Jerrold Hogle in championing the liberation that follows from the destruction of transcendent tyrannizing centers of which religion is the prime example? What I am proposing—and what I believe Romantic religion helps us to realize—is that we may reject this manner of framing things. We don't have to play out this drama. We can, in fact, reject the stage as its set. Romantic religion bears relevance to Western culture today insofar as it provides us with a way out of viewing this culture as a holy war between Christianity and 'secular' modernity.

By disrupting the dichotomy of Christianity vs. secularism, Romantic religion (especially Shelley's rebellious Romantic religion) offers us a new way to endorse

---

[773] See Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). The following quotation is sufficient to get a sense of the author's agenda: "Liberty…requires liberation from all forms of associations and relationships, from family to church, from schools to village and community, that exerted control over behavior through informal and habituated expectations and norms," 38-9. One can easily imagine what is meant by "norms." Deneen synonymizes "liberty" with moral anarchy (i.e. radical freedom from normativity as such). His invocation of the term "church" shows us that "religion" means Christianity. By creating a false choice between normativity (defined as Christianity), and liberalism (defined as moral anarchy) he aims to make conservative Christianity appear the only moral option. The subtext of the book is that the West (possibly the world?) will become better by granting Christianity political and social dominance. A good counterargument to the book might be the history of Ireland (especially the history of women in Ireland) after the Irish Free State granted the Catholic Church political and social supremacy—power which the Church has recently lost to liberalism and which it continues to lose, partly due to the ongoing exposure of atrocities perpetrated against women and children in Catholic run Magdalen laundries and Mother and Baby Homes, facilities in which women were incarcerated and tortured (sometimes for the duration of their entire lives) for the sin of alleged or prospective extramarital sex. Even when they were not incarcerated, women's behavior was controlled through "informal and habituated expectations and norms" such as the social ostracism and shaming rituals identified by Shelley in his attack on 'fallen' woman ideology. Ireland is a particularly acute example, though it should be mentioned that such facilities existed the world over including, but not limited to, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, the United States, England, Scotland, and Wales. For further information see Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and June Goulding, *The Light in the Window* (London: Ebury Press, 2005). One may also access interviews of women online through oral history archives of the Irish Research Council. I recommend this interview: Katherine O'Donnell, S. Pembroke and C. McGettrick. (2013) "Oral History of Mary Smith." Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History. Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, pp.1-76.35. http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MAGOHP31_Mary-Smith.pdf.

transcendence, including an idea of a transcendent Good, True, and Beautiful, without thereby endorsing any institutional religions or 'secular' regimes that have justified oppression in the name of transcendent value such as religious patriarchy and misogyny. In short, what Romantic religion can teach us today is that spirituality is neither foolhardy nor hegemonic, but a vital current that gives meaning to life and art.

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971.

Augustine. *The City of God*. New York: Random House, 1950.

——. *Marriage and Virginity*. Translated by Edmund Hill. New York: New City Press, 1990.

Baker, Carlos. *Shelley's Major Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948.

Barfield, Owen. *What Coleridge Thought*. Barfield Press, 2014.

Barnard, Ellsworth. *Shelley's Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1937.

Barth, Robert J. *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

——. *Romanticism and Transcendence*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

The Bhagavad Gita. Translated by Juan Mascaró. London: Penguin Books, 1962.

Blyth, R.H. *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*. Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016.

Brown, Nathaniel. *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Bruhn, Mark J. *Wordsworth Before Coleridge*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Butter, Peter. *Shelley's Idols of the Cave*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1954.

Cameron, Kenneth Neill. *Shelley: The Golden Years*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974.

Clarke, J.J. *Oriental Enlightenment*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Shorter Works & Fragments.* Edited by H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Aids to Reflection*. Edited by Johnathan Beer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

——. *Biographia Literaria*. Edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

——. *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Nicholas Halmi and Paul Magnuson. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002.

——. *Lay Sermons.* Edited by R.J. White, Princeton University Press, 1972.

——. *Opus Maximum*. Edited by Thomas MacFarland and Nick Halmi. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Curran, Stuart. *Annus Mirabilis*. San Marino: Huntington Library, 1975.

Dawson, P.M.S. *The Unacknowledged Legislator*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

De Man, Paul. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Duffy, Cian. *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Easterlin, Nancy. *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion."* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996.

Ferguson, Frances. "Shelley's Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said." In *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism*, edited by Karl Kroeber and Gene W. Ruoff, 335-44. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Ferry, David. *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959.

Fogle, Richard Harter. *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949.

Fry, Paul. *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Frye, Northrop. *A Study of English Romanticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Gillespie, Michael. "The Inevitable Entanglement of Religion and Politics." In *Politics, Religion, and Political Theology*, edited by C. Allen Speight and Michael Zank. Boston University Studies in Philosophy, Religion, and Public Life. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2017.

——. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Goslee, Nancy Moore. *Shelley's Visual Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Grabo, Carl. *The Magic Plant*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936.

Greensfield, John. "Transforming the Stereotype: Exotic Women in Shelley's Alastor and The Witch of Atlas." In *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, edited by Marilyn Demarest Button and Toni Reed. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Hadot, Pierre. *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Halmi, Nicholas. *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hampton, Alexander. *Romanticism and the Re-invention of Modern Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Hart, David Bentley. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Hartman, Geoffrey. "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self Consciousness.'" In *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*. Edited by Harold Bloom. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970.

Hartman, Geoffrey. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

Hedley, Douglas. *Coleridge, Philosophy, and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Hogle, Jerrold. *Shelley's Process*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Holmes, Richard. *Shelley: The Pursuit*. New York: New York Review of Books, 1974.

Howard, Claud. *Coleridge's Idealism: A Study of its Relationship to Kant and the Cambridge Idealists*. Gorham Press, 1924.

Jager, Colin. *The Book of God*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

——. "Shelley After Atheism." *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 611-31.

——. *Unquiet Things*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

James Notopoulous. *The Platonism of Shelley*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1949.

Jaspers, David. *Coleridge as Poet and Religious Thinker*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 1985.

——. *The Sacred and the Secular Canon in Romanticism*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Leask, Nigel. *British Romantic Writers and the East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Levinson, Marjorie. *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Lewis, Franklin. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalâl al-Din Rumi*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2001.

Liu, Alan. *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.

Lockridge, Laurence. *Coleridge the Moralist*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

——. *The Ethics of Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

McDayter, Ghislaine. "O'er Leaping the Bounds: The Sexing of the Creating Soul in Shelley's *Epipsychidion*." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 52 (2003): 21-49.

McFarland, Thomas. *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Mellor, Anne. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Milbank, John. "The New Divide: Romantic Versus Classical Orthodoxy." *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (January 2010): 26-38.

Müller, Max. *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1860.

Murdoch, Iris. "The Idea of Perfection." *Existentialists and Mystics*. New York: Penguin, 1950.

Newman, John Henry. "The Philosopher." *The Genius of John Henry Newman: Selections from His Writings*. Edited by Ian Ker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Nicholas of Cusa. "On the Vision of God." In *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, translated by H. Lawrence Bond. Paulist Press, 1997.

Nilchian, Elham. "Shelley's Quest for Persian Love." *The Comparatist* 40 (2016): 222-44.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Orwell, George. "The Principles of Newspeak." In *1984*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1949.

Perry, Seamus. *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Pfau, Thomas. *Minding the Modern*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015.

Plotinus. *Enneads*. Translated by A.H. Armstrong. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Prickett, Stephen. *Romanticism and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Priestman, Martin. *Romantic Atheism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Pseudo-Dionysius, "Divine Names." In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Pulos, C.E. *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology. Edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.

Rawlinson, H.G. "India in European Literature and Thought." In *The Legacy of India*. Edited by G.T. Garrat. New Delhi: Black & White, 2005.

Reiman, Donald. *Percy Bysshe Shelley, Updated Edition*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.

Robert Ryan. *The Romantic Reformation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Schroeder, Frederic M. *Form and Transformation: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus.* McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.

Schwab, Raymond. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*. Translated by Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Scrivener, Michael. *Radical Shelley.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Sen, Amiyakumar. *Studies in Shelley*. Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1936.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Laon and Cythna*. Edited by Anahid Nersessian. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2016.

——. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. 1, *Shelley in England*. Edited by Frederick L. Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

——. "Love's Philosophy." *Poetry Foundation.* 2020. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50262/loves-philosophy

——. "Notes. [Shelley's Notes to Queen Mab]." *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol.1. Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

——. *A Philosophical View of Reform*. London: Oxford University Press, 1920.

——. "Rosalind and Helen." In *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*. Edited by Stuart Curran. Pennsylvania Electronic Edition. http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/rosalind.html.

——. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Donald Reiman and Neil Freistat. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002.

——. *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Edited by E.B. Murray. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

——. *Prose Works*, vol. 2. Edited by Richard Herne Shepherd. London: Chatto & Windus, 1897.

Simpson, David. *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Stallknecht, Newton P. *Strange Seas of Thought: Studies in William Wordsworth's Philosophy of Man and Nature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

——. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Thomas, Keith. *Wordsworth and Philosophy*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989.

Tomko, Michael. "Shelley's Unknown Eros: Post-secular Love in Epipsychidion." *Religions* 7, no. 9 (2016): 118.

Ulmer, William. *The Shelleyan Eros*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

The Upanishads. Translated by Juan Mascaró. London: Penguin Books, 1965.

Vivian, Charles. "The One 'Mont Blanc.'" *Keats-Shelley* 4 (Winter 1955): 55-65.

Ware, Tracy. "Shelley's Platonism in A Defence of Poetry." *SEL* 23 (1983): 549-66.

Wasserman, Earl. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971.

——. *The Subtler Language*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959.

Watson, J.R. *Wordsworth's Vital Soul: The Sacred and Profane in Wordsworth's Poetry*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1982.

Webb, Timothy. *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1977.

Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Welburn, Andrew. *Power and Self-Consciousness in the Poetry of Shelley*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Wilson, Milton. *Shelley's Later Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

Wolfson, Susan. *The Questioning Presence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Woodman, Ross. *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

Wordsworth, William. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Nicholas Halmi. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014.

——. *Prelude* XIII.151-55, vol. 1, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*. Edited by Mark Reed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Yousef, Nancy. *Romantic Intimacy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Biography

Before embarking on a career in the academic humanities, Devin Buckley's intellectual curiosity first drove her to the sciences. While attending New York City's most prestigious public high school, Stuyvesant High School of Math and Science, Devin worked as a research assistant in a microbiology lab at Columbia University where she studied interfering ribonucleic acid in *legionella pneumophila* and then at Albert Einstein College of Medicine where she assisted with collecting and analyzing biophages from soil samples for the purpose of generating an effective luminescent biophage with firefly luciferase gene code insertions in order to treat and track the efficacy of medical treatment of tuberculosis in human subjects. She went on to attend Boston University where she double majored in neuroscience and philosophy. Devin continued her interest in lab work by using her work-study grant, and eventually a grant from Howard Hughes Medical Institute, to work first at a neurobiology lab at Boston University, where she analyzed rodent hippocampal models for learning and memory, and later at a cognitive neuroscience lab where she ran functional magnetic resonance imaging at Harvard University and performed data analysis at Boston University to study the effect of mindfulness meditation on attentional task performance and correlated hemodynamic changes in the temporoparietal junction of human subjects. Devin was also privately funded to live and work at a neuroscience lab at Ruhr University in Germany on the basis of a letter of recommendation from her lab director at Boston University. Devin's neuroscience work culminated in a senior thesis project for which she was awarded highest honors in neuroscience by Boston University.

Alongside this thesis project, Devin completed an independent study project in philosophy that examined the character of Lucifer from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as Albert Camus's existentialist philosophy. Devin's achievements in her philosophy major led her to receive the prestigious Alice M. Brennan Humanities award from Boston University's Center for the Humanities, admittance into Phi Beta Kappa (the nation's most prestigious academic honors society), and a nomination for the college writing award. After graduating from Boston University in 2013, Devin received her master's degree in humanities from the University of Chicago in 2014 with a thesis on the Victorian novelist George Eliot's philosophy of sympathy in *Middlemarch*. At Duke University she was awarded the James B. Duke Fellowship and published her first paper, "T.S. Eliot's Aesthetics of Solipsism," in Stanford University's *Republics of Letters* journal and a review in the *Keats-Shelley* journal of Alexander Hampton's book *Romanticism and the Re-Invention of Modern Religion: The Reconciliation of German Idealism and Platonic Realism*.