Chapter 4

The Nineteenth Century

The Early Romantics

I begin with Blake, even though he is partly situated in the eighteenth century. For that matter, so is Wordsworth, and my problem here has already been mooted. It is that centuries are not particularly useful for the purposes of periodization, even though such distinguished scholars as Basil Willey have written books on literature treated century by century. I also need to slow the pace of my argument very considerably, because we are now in a time often considered proto-modern in its special problems of faith and doubt, and its embrace of subjective apprehension, of the historical perspective, and of what Coleridge (with a proper sense of linguistic roots) called comprehension.

I turn first to the specific problems and opportunities for an alternative secularization narrative presented by William Blake (1757–1827) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850). These are, of course, pivotal figures in any account of the course of English poetry. Blake was little known in his own lifetime, and (like Smart and Cowper) considered mad, but he reaches back to the radical religious anarchist and antinomian wing of the seventeenth century revolution. And the reception of his protean writings reaches forward to the Beat generation of the nineteenth-sixties, and also to twentieth-century English composers—indeed the use of poetry by these composers, especially Britten, is worth consideration in its own right. On one reading of Blake, he is an eccentric radical Christian, opposed to church and state. At the same time, in poems like "The Everlasting Gospel," he brought out aspects of the New Testament all too frequently overlain with conventional morality and Pharisaic legalism. Jesus embodies the sheer humanity of God,

and he releases sinners from chains of suffocating moral condemnation that emanate from the Antichrist and Jehovah. On one reading, this is only a hair's breadth away from the classical Evangelical gospel. Blake expresses his understanding of the incarnation (perhaps without the definite article) in the lines "Thou art a Man, God is no more; thine own humanity learn to adore . . ."[1] On another reading, this is a radical humanism very close to the kenotic Christianity of God's self-emptying. Blake also showed the way to escape "warlike pomp," "The Miser's net and the Glutton's trap," and, in that way, revived sectarian social radicalism and anticipated the intellectual social critique furthered later by Ruskin. A major clue lies in Blake's aphorism, written on his engraving of *Laocoön*: "If Morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Saviour." In this, he identifies a first order category-mistake that vitiates rationalistic critiques of Christianity. For him, these critiques misunderstand faith as a set of falsifiable propositions. On the contrary, Christianity is a mode of interpreting lived experience. Blake fills this out in his negative attitude to all those kinds of understanding that rely on generalized abstractions, whether in the physics of Newton, the philosophy of Plato, or the paintings of Reynolds. Christianity is a work of the imagination and akin to the insights of art rather than the generalizations of science. The act of praise with which we daily greet the luminous marvel of the sun is a whole world different from any process of rational appraisal. The sun is not a "golden guinea" but a revelation of the whole angelic host.

This understanding of poetry and Christianity alike turns on the famous lines from "Auguries of Innocence" (1803), where Blake sees "a world in a grain of sand . . . and eternity in an hour."[2] Wordsworth expressed a similar viewpoint in 1798 in "The Tables Turned": "We murder to dissect."[3] For Blake and Wordsworth alike, whatever the vast differences between them, the organ of their understanding is imagination, so that both religion and poetry deal in wholeness, in particularity, in the projection of potential worlds lying in wait, and in the idea of visitation through what Blake called "the doors of perception."

Max Plowman, in his "Introduction" to the 1927 edition of Blake's *Poems and Prophecies*, claims that Blake's subject is the soul, an "unreasoning super-sensuous entity, divine in origin and destiny, whose perception and desire are infinite." "The god of the eighteenth century was Rational Behaviour,"[4] and the worship of that god radically reduced the emotional

1. "The Everlasting Gospel," in Blake, *Poems and Prophecies*, 350.
2. "Auguries of Innocence," in Blake, *Poems and Prophecies*, 333–37.
3. Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, 202.
4. Blake, *Poems and Prophecies*, xii–xiii.

range of poetry. Blake had to choose between Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and the Blatant Beast of Pope's *Essay on Man*. The *Songs of Innocence* concern the childlike and undivided unity of our early heaven while the *Songs of Experience* concern the hell that presages disillusion, the divided self, cruelty, and mortality. "Awake, we live in Eternity, asleep, we exist in Time."

According to Marilyn Butler, the mystery of Blake is why he is only radical up to a point, "radical but not populist, apocalyptical but not revolutionary."[5] Though clearly opposed in principle to the church, property, war, the law, matrimony, and monarchy, he did not engage in active subversion, and his victims, foundlings, chimney-sweeps and prostitutes, belong as much to literary culture as real life. For Butler, his mature work begins with prophecies and creation myths in the Old Testament manner that are really about England as a tyrannical state warring against French and American revolutionaries. His manner was biblical, and, like Smart's, it followed on Lowth's analysis of the nature of Hebrew poetry. But his poem, *Jerusalem* (for which read London), is a British Bible, which, in the febrile atmosphere of the time, dangerously combined the language of religion with the idea of the popular nation. That part of the "Preface" to *Milton: A Poem*, set to music by Parry in 1917 under the title "Jerualem," has become the British national song, embraced alike by radicals and conservatives, is far from surprising. But, unlike writers in the mold of the Welsh radical Iolo, who appealed to an ancient people as a natural constituency and launched a bardic grassroots nationalism, Blake wrote as an isolated individualist. His was the kind of artistic genius, identifiable from the prophet Ezekiel to today, that can reinvent the sacred texts. As a result the radical Chartists ignored him in favor of Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy.* In a wider perspective, perhaps, one may see Blake as participating in a shift to a horizontal transcendence, based variously on the kingdom about to come on earth through the nation and on the radical political fraternity, or else, as in Wordsworth, through Nature. His enthusiastic reception on the British left after the Second World War had much to do with his idealistic utterances on "artistic autonomy and personal fulfilment" ("Damn Braces, Bless Relaxes").[6]

Here I introduce a reading of Blake by Stephen Prickett that provides a bridge to Wordsworth and Coleridge at the point where the major changes associated with Romanticism in Western Europe are also present in England. I spend time on the transitions brought about by Romanticism because they are of singular importance. Stephen Prickett again picks up on the influence of Robert Lowth regarding the superior quality of biblical poetry. Just at the

5. Butler, *Mapping Mythologies*, 162.
6. Butler, *Mapping Mythologies*, 190.

point where the position of Christianity was weaker than ever before, the prestige of the Bible as literature was higher than ever before, and effectively displaced the ancient classics in esteem. The context here is Tom Paine's attack on Christianity, in particular the unfortunate stories attributed to Moses, as defaming the Almighty God revealed by Nature. Blake responds as a Bible believer and professed Christian to confute natural religion, disown these stories, and celebrate a Christ murdered on a cross for revealing a loving heavenly Father. He defends the doctrine of the Fall and sees natural disasters like the famous Lisbon earthquake of 1756 as due to sin.

Stephen Prickett regards Blake as to this extent biblical and orthodox. The natural religion against which Blake rails is a symptom of the late eighteenth-century shift whereby nature and history become part of divinity. The Fall is rejected, and the gap between God and Creation eliminated, a move that makes possible the perfectibility of man and inaugurates the bloody history of earthly utopia. Art (including poetry and music) becomes caught up in biblical aesthetics. "Aesthetics" is a new word that morphs into the sublime character of biblical poetry and the idea that Christianity is Art, as in Blake's "Great Code of Art." Aesthetics is, in this way, a prime vehicle of religion rather than ethics. Rephrased by Wordsworth and Coleridge, we are cocreators of all we experience through the Imagination. This fits entirely with Schleiermacher's rephrasing of religion as direct personal experience rather than the acceptance of doctrines on the basis of authority and the church. To acquire faith on the basis of tradition is not to have understood what faith truly is.[7]

There is more to the influence of Lowth, and it bears directly on the advent of Romanticism in England, and for that matter in Germany. It relates to what was earlier said about sublimity. Lowth's approach to poetic expression in the psalms and the prophetic books stressed what the reader brought to the text rather than what was innately present in the text. That immediately undermined straight appeals to its authority, rather as the Reformation idea of its plain and perspicuous meaning had earlier given rise to many rival interpretations. Lowth also undermined the idea that the Bible was inelegant and crude compared to the classics, so that whereas the classics had defined the heights of appropriate expression in 1700, by 1800 that eminence was occupied by the Bible. The Bible spoke in the unadorned accents of the ordinary humanity to which it was addressed, and it did so with "enthusiasm," meaning the emotionality for which the Methodists were held in such contempt.

7. Prickett, *Words and the Word*, 197 ff.

From enthusiasm and the common people, it was a short step to the engaged and active Imagination of the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and everyday language. As already suggested, there is a line running from John and Charles Wesley, first from "experimental" (or "experiential") religion to Wordsworth, and second from Methodism to Romanticism. But there are other mutations that lead to Shelley and Coleridge. In his "Defence of Poetry" (1821) against the skeptical animadversions of Thomas Love Peacock, Shelley revised the relation between Revelation and poetry to become the revelation brought by poetry understood as a vehicle of the divine. It lifted the veil lying over creation, and lent wonder to what had been merely familiar. Coleridge argued that the translucence of poetry in expressing revelation was realized in the psychological resonances of potent symbolism.[8] The Scriptures, as Stephen Prickett argues in *Romanticism and Religion*, are for Coleridge the channels of the imagination.[9] They convey universal truths in the special and particular, simultaneously ideals and pictograms. An imaginative symbol is stereoscopic in focusing science and art, the outward revelation and inward assent, the world of things and our intuitive selfhood with its moral awareness and judgment, the realm of necessity and the realm of vision. We do not live in a divided world, but one in which the parts are to be read in the context of the whole. This transcendent whole is realized and comprehended not in spite of language but through language and its living powers.

Marilyn Butler links Wordsworth's poetic doctrine back to the "country poets" discussed earlier. Hazlitt might regard Wordsworth's high estimate of the wisdom and speech of the poor, rustic, and humble, in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), as uniquely egalitarian. But its source, alongside Percy's rediscovery of the ballad and Blake's primitivism, was above all Ritson's work on the songs of the common people. It is worth recalling in parenthesis that the extraordinary achievement of John Clare (1793–1864), only properly recognized in the second half of the twentieth century, was not only rooted in those songs, and in acute observation of a local natural world and its vanishing way of life, but presented to the literary world as the poetry of one who really was of "the poor."

Wordsworth's high estimate of the wisdom of the humble poor can easily be seen in his "Resolution and Independence," oddly included in Davie's *Oxford Book,* since the Christian element is at best tangential. The sophisticated poet, suddenly subject to inexplicable melancholy, even

8. Prickett, "Robert Lowth's Biblical Poetics and Romantic Theory," in Cohen and Berlin, *Interpreting Scripture*, 309–25.

9. Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion*.

though absorbed by impressions of uplifting natural phenomena, meets a sick old man, a leech-gatherer. On being accosted by Wordsworth he replies in words of such "lofty utterance" (like "religious men," says Wordsworth) that the poet felt in touch with a source of "stately" security and thereby rebuked. Wordsworth's complementary belief in the wisdom of Nature is most famously expressed in the lines from "The Tables Turned" (1802 and after) in the *Lyrical Ballads*:

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> Will teach you more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good
> Than all the sages can.[10]

Whatever the singular dubiety of this sentiment, Wordsworth, in common with Coleridge, is taking from Nature what he as an active organizing mind (rather than a bundle of passive impressions) puts into it.[11] Wordsworth's difference from Coleridge is that Coleridge very directly invokes the spontaneous activity of the Creator as the model of human creativity as well as rejecting the preference for the language of the common man. For Wordsworth the imagination rejects the generalized and urbane in favor of non-conceptual knowledge, and to that extent he resembles Blake. This knowledge is (in the famous phrase from the "Preface" to *The Lyrical Ballads*) the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." It is found in intimations of the sublime distilled in tranquillity and in a "wise passiveness." But there is a constant oscillation between the "philosophic mind" keeping watch over man's mortality, and the renewal of childlike apprehensions of immortality that can be traced in the "Lines Written above Tintern Abbey" and in the Immortality Ode. There is a melancholy of loss and there is a return of perpetual benediction; there is a sad perplexity and there is a tranquil restoration.

The Immortality Ode raises the question as to whether Wordsworth is Christian, and does so in a way that contrasts sharply with the same question raised concerning Blake. The New Testament frequently contrasts mortality and immortality, for example in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians chapter 15, but the governing concept is that of resurrection. Wordsworth rarely turns to the core vocabulary of Christianity, and is credited with a statement made on his deathbed that he had no need of a redeemer. There is neither reference to resurrection nor to salvation from sin, atonement, or

10. Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, 201.

11. For Wordsworth's approach, especially in *The Prelude*, it is important to consult Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*; see also Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion*, especially chapter 3.

incarnation. In *The Prelude* (1805, 1850) where Wordsworth reflects on the French Revolution, men are not only born equal but they naturally aspire to fraternity, apart from the machinations of regressive tyrannies. At the same time there is a respect for the monastic impulse threatened by revolution, and (in a visit to the Grande Chartreuse) a respect for the cross as a sign of the dedicated, self-giving life. The cross exists in a sacred landscape rather as it does in the painting of Caspar David Friedrich, except that in Friedrich there is a more direct reference to the efficacy of salvation. There is also, in later Wordsworth, a sense of the importance of the ecclesiastical institution as a material representation of the sacred. The poem "Inside of King's College Chapel" (1820) precisely expresses this sense, and it also expresses an ethical desire (earlier expressed by Wordsworth in his sonnet, "The World is Too Much with Us; Late and Soon") to go beyond "nicely calculated less or more."[12] This ethic chimes closely with the generosity recommended in the gospel.

One poem in particular expresses Wordsworth's particular and partial mutation of Christianity into generic religion. In his "Devotional Incitements" (1832–1835) he first invokes the aspirations pleaded by the cathedral spire before regretting that "the sanctities combined / By art to unsensualise the mind" decay and languish like creeds in the storms of secular fanaticism.[13] He then recollects with relief that kindly Nature still keeps open "a heavenly door" with "mute harmonies," and "every day should leave some part / Free for a Sabbath of the heart." There is also in Wordsworth, for example in *The Prelude*, a desire to offer praise to the almighty giver in terms that parallel the *Benedicite*. It would be worth comparing the passages hymning the Creator in *The Prelude* with similar passages in Christopher Smart. The object is the same, and the source is biblical, but the tonality is very different.

Perhaps Wordsworth is generically religious while rather rarely being specifically Christian. By contrast, among his fellow Romantic poets, Coleridge is specifically Christian in subjective mode, though maybe more obviously so in prose than in verse, where he often focuses on extraordinary states of mind. Key exceptions might be "A Christmas Carol" (1799) and "My Baptismal Birthday" (1833), a poem in which he speaks of gaining true life by being Christ's child "by adoption," in a clear echo of Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 15.

Keats embraces a fragmentary spirituality beyond the restrictive protocols of consecutive rationality, where the poet is himself an imaginative

12. Wordsworth, *Collected Poems*, 307.
13. Wordsworth, *Collected Poems*, 269.

seer celebrating a visionary power of insight into the holiness of love. Except in the despair of his final illness, there is also in Keats a belief that this life, understood as "a vale of soul-making," comes to fruition in an afterlife. Shelley is famous for his early essay on "The Necessity of Atheism" and for his early poem "Queen Mab," where he assaults the clergy, Christianity, and Christ as unique sources of violence, persecution, and oppression. But in "Adonais," his threnody for the death of Keats, he expresses a faith that wavers between theism and pantheism. It concludes with

> The soul of Adonais, like a star,
> Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.[14]

Byron might seem the most insistent of the early Romantics in his rejection of Christianity and religion, especially the Anglican Church, which he despised as the (Whig) establishment at prayer. Yet the reality is more ambiguous. Though he doubted the historicity of the Bible and could make no sense of the atonement or the damnation of those who had never, or could never have heard the saving message, he remained haunted by the demons of the Calvinist upbringing he vehemently rejected. Shelley despaired of persuading him to make a clean break. If we take into account Byron's explorations in other religions, in orientalism, in paganism, and dualism, we have in these poets of early English Romanticism (as in German Romanticism) a strong reinforcement of the idea that religion or rather "spirituality" is individually appropriated and constructed. We also have a conspicuous reinforcement of the related idea of religion as individually chosen *or rejected*, a development built into the very idea of Protestant conversion *or its absence* since the Reformation. The way is also prepared for shifts to more Catholic ideas that begin in the 1820s.These reinforcements of personal choice represent a long-term trend, not a late modern development as has often been argued, because the seeds of late modernity have been flowering, often luxuriantly, over centuries.

14. Shelley, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, 505.