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Shelley After Atheism

But liberty, when men act in bodies, is *power*.

—Edmund Burke¹

OF THE MAJOR ROMANTIC WRITERS, PERCY SHELLEY IS MOST READILY associated with atheism. The word was still an epithet in the early nineteenth century, yet Shelley courted it. *The Necessity of Atheism*, the 1811 pamphlet that got Shelley and Thomas Jefferson Hogg kicked out of Oxford, recapitulated familiar arguments from Locke and Hume; the title itself, however, had the desired effect. Five years later, when Shelley signed himself in the hotel registers in Chamonix and Montanvert as “Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist,” it was the final word that caused the uproar.² For in the history of early modern thought in the West “atheism” is an almost magical word.

This essay is about Shelley’s poem *Mont Blanc*, though I will have little to say about the content of that poem. This is only in part because a great many intelligent things have already been said about it. It is also because in this poem content is not really the issue. Indeed, the best gloss on Shelley’s poem is an oft-quoted passage from Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*:

History is therefore the experience of Necessity, and it is this alone which can forestall its thematization or reification as a mere object of representation or as one master code among many others. Necessity is not . . . a type of content, but rather the inexorable *form* of events, . . .

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1. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 9.

2. On *The Necessity of Atheism*, see Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 42; on the hotel register, see Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 232; Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977) 141; and Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Harper Collins, 1974; 1995) 340, 342. Byron apparently tried to scratch out Shelley’s entry. News of the inscription reached England by way of Robert Southey. For good measure, Shelley entered “L’Enfer” (Hell) under “destination” in the register.

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the formal effects of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an “absent cause.” Conceived in this sense, History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis. . . . [T]his history can be apprehended only through its effects. . . . This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them.³

Mont Blanc's obscure meditations on power, necessity, and death have sent critics scurrying for source texts, but Jameson suggests that “necessity is not a type of content.” No content: only experience, which takes the form of history. To read history we look to its effects, what the poem calls the “flood of ruin” that spills down the mountain. Or, as Shelley puts it a few lines later, “the power is there, / The still and solemn power of many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death.”⁴

Atheism as Unbelief

With Shelley's poem as my inspiration, I want to work my way back to Jameson's distinction between content and experience, particularly its reference to Spinoza and the milieu of the radical enlightenment. My argument will be that Shelley is actually superior to the radical enlightenment on this score because he is able to leave its atheism behind. In Chamonix's hotel register and in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley hints at a radical embodiment that goes some way toward undoing atheism's longstanding association with heroic freethought.

Because this is a rather counter-intuitive argument, it will be best to begin on familiar ground. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the heavily-touristed Vale of Chamonix was thought to facilitate religious awe, even perhaps to cure atheists of unbelief. Such notions inspired Coleridge's “Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni,” which offered this thought as part of its lengthy headnote when it first appeared in 1802: “Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!”⁵ Notoriously, Coleridge had never in fact been to Chamonix; even more

3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 102.

4. Percy Shelley, “Mont Blanc; Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni,” lines 107, 127–29. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002). Hereafter *SPP*.

5. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997) 562. The poem first appeared in the *Morning Post* in September of 1802. On the popularity of Chamonix for religious pilgrimage, see Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 196;

notoriously, his poem partly plagiarizes Sophie Christiane Friedericke Brun's much shorter poem on the same subject.⁶ When Shelley signs the hotel register "Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist," then, he is not only resisting the conventional piety to which Coleridge had given voice; like the subtitle added for the poem's 1817 publication, "Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," Shelley's signature in the guest book marks the fact that he was *there*, and thinking for himself. Thus *Mont Blanc's* atheism betokens liberty: freedom from a past marked by complacency, sentimentality, and lack of originality.

Putting it like this slots Shelley's atheism into the tradition of freethought that Jonathan Israel has taught us to call the "radical enlightenment."⁷ Yet "Mont Blanc" is not a poem of the radical enlightenment in any simple sense. Indeed, critics have generally seen Shelley's poems of late 1815 and 1816 as supplementing Godwin and Voltaire with more "romantic" fare. Godwin thought that people must be talked into revolution reasonably and carefully. By contrast, Shelley is by this point in his career suggesting that people need to experience change imaginatively before they can learn its principles intellectually. Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Coleridge begin to appear more often in his writing.⁸ This inaugurates the strategy that he describes most clearly in the "Preface" to *Prometheus Unbound*: "The imagery which I have employed," he writes there, "will be found, in many instances, to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed" (*SPP* 207). According to the usual gloss, Shelley is here suggesting that revolutions do indeed happen mentally, but that Godwin was wrong to think that the contents of one mind could be simply transferred to another. The only way to grasp mental revolution is through the mediation of the outward scene.

In a general way this is what we mean by "Romanticism," if we mean anything at all: rather than saying that his mind is like nature, the poet says that nature is like his mind, and accordingly that the best way of understanding what is going on there is to look at the outer scene. This is how M. H. Abrams laid it out in *Natural Supernaturalism*, and if Abrams saw this as a humanizing and therefore secularizing technique, it was secularization of a particularly "spiritual" sort. Earl Wasserman, in a roughly parallel fash-

Holmes, *Shelley* 340; Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 87–90.

6. Ryan, *Romantic Reformation* 197; Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) 334–35.

7. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001). Hereafter RE.

8. Scrivener 7, 79. Also Gerald McNiece, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969) 7.

ion, influentially interprets Shelley's "turn" of 1815/1816 as a shift from materialism to idealism.⁹ For many years now, the political effects of this tendency to spiritualize or idealize the landscape have been a pressing critical question. Was the first generation's political apostasy a *necessary* result of an idealizing poetic theory, or merely a contingent one? That seems the crucial question for Shelley in Chamonix's Vale, invoking Coleridge in order to turn him upside down.

Yet to approach the matter at this level is to find oneself entangled in the question of religion in ways that limit what a poem like *Mont Blanc* might do. Wasserman's readings of the poem are an excellent case in point, for after his subtle meditation on the relationship between skepticism and idealism, he concludes that however we decide the outcome, and however we read the poem's final rhetorical question, the thing itself remains "implicitly religious" (238). I think that Wasserman is correct here, though not quite for the reasons he thinks. The poem is not "implicitly religious" because it preserves a posture of submission (to Necessity, rather than to God), nor because it is an example of the *via negativa*, but because 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 aims to extract the poem's cognitive content—that is, 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*.

To see why this is so, consider a basic tension in the history of modern atheism. Long before there were acknowledged atheists there were numerous refutations of atheism, and this curious fact can be explained in two very different ways. Some intellectual historians infer atheism's presence in the early enlightenment from the arguments of those writing *against* it.¹⁰ And so from the numerous seventeenth-century pamphlets declaring atheism to be impossible and incoherent, Jonathan Israel and others conclude that there must have been atheists around then, even though none of them would confess to it. Why bother to critique, refute, and ridicule something that doesn't exist? Atheism must be there somewhere. By emphasizing the tradition of freethought, this story makes atheism external to religion, and

9. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971); Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971).

10. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*; and David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988). Particularly in the early-modern period, accusations of atheism tend to travel under other names: Epicurianism, Naturalism, Hobbsianism, Spinozism. Sometimes it was simply shorthand for heresy or heterodoxy.

also pushes its origin back to the late seventeenth century, and the milieu of Spinoza, Hobbes, and varieties of non-providential deism. Atheists, in this story, are the intellectual heroes of their age.

Alan Kors, by contrast, offers a different answer to the question of why there were so many refutations of atheism if there were no atheists. The educational method of early modern Europe, notes Kors, was scholastic *disputatio*, which rewarded speculative ingenuity. Theologians and other university-educated intellectuals “were taught, formally and informally, to generate ‘objections’ to all of their . . . cherished beliefs, indeed . . . to anticipate the strongest possible objections and to overcome these.”¹¹ In this world the “atheist” serves a number of crucial rhetorical functions; his arguments had to be rehearsed, examined, and entertained, even if only to be at last triumphantly refuted. Early-modern theists, then, were the source or even the creators of the atheism they refuted. At this discursive level, Kors demonstrates, atheism was “ubiquitous” (96) in the early modern world. Rather than lurking in the recesses of the mind, waiting for the moment when it can finally be confessed, atheism is created by the very act of looking for it.

Kors argues that a background shift then turns such discursive atheism from a rhetorical possibility into a possible identity. That shift is the Cartesian geometric method, designed and implemented to combat the very habit of scholastic *disputatio* that had constructed atheism as a rhetorical position. Distancing himself from quarrelsome students and their habit of contesting everything but not progressing toward firmer knowledge, Descartes complained that “one cannot imagine anything so strange or unbelievable . . . that it has not been said by some philosopher.”¹² Scholastic shouting matches seemed to matter even more during the Thirty Years War when *disputatio* moved out of the lecture hall and onto the battlefield. Returning in the midst of the war to his army post in Germany, Descartes famously paused and turned inward: “the onset of winter held me up,” he writes in the *Discourse on Method*, “[and] finding no conversation with which to be diverted and, fortunately, having no worries or passions which troubled me, I remained for a whole day by myself in a small stove-heated room, where I had complete leisure for communing with my thoughts” (11). Those thoughts famously yielded the command to reason only according to a method, since so many of our pre-reflective beliefs about the world turn out to be groundless. In the new world struggling to be born, one without the organizing structures of Christendom, peace requires that

11. Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 53.

12. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980) 16. Orig. pub. 1637.

human consensus be secured at a cognitive rather than institutional level. Descartes' project thus helped to insure the legitimacy of an increasingly mentalistic conception of religion in the early modern period. For the believer, salvation seemed more and more to hang on a method: on having the right beliefs, and on assenting to them in the right way. For the scholar, meanwhile, religion became an object of knowledge to be tabulated, compared, and understood along the lines being mapped out by the natural sciences.¹³ It thus becomes possible to speak of "religions," in the plural, as distinct but relatable "things" that people or cultures "have."

This early-modern transformation of religion *into* a set of cognitive beliefs makes atheism in our modern sense possible. Thus when David Berman argues in his authoritative *History of Atheism in Britain* that atheism was "repressed" and "covert" in early modern England, but could finally be "avowed" in the 1780s, he misses the historical change that really matters.¹⁴ If atheism becomes an expressible belief at a certain historical moment, this is not simply because restrictions have finally lifted but because an entire background picture is slowly changing so that it becomes possible to think in terms of beliefs and their avowal.

Consider the cognate term "infidelity," probably the most common synonym for "atheist" during the romantic era. As both Talal Asad and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have noted, *fides* (faith) carries with it the sense of trust in something or someone. For most of Christian history, therefore, an "infidel" was someone in a moral rather than epistemological predicament; he hasn't so much lost a "belief" as he has violated a relationship. Accordingly, *infidelis* had a wide range of meanings within Latin Christendom. One category included non-Christians, especially Muslims. Heretics and blasphemers made up other categories; since they refused to acknowledge the authority of the Pope in Rome, schismatics like Eastern Orthodox Christians might count as infidels; finally, there were the many lax and impious Latin Christians. This range of categories meant a correspondingly wide range of discourse about infidels. Non-Christians figure predominantly in law and poetry, while heretics, blasphemers, and schismatics appear in polemical and theological writings, including the Inquisition. Latin Christians assailed by doubts or laziness, meanwhile, are primarily the objects of pastoral discourse. The point to emphasize here is the wide spec-

13. Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990). Much of modern atheism conveniently forgets that "religion" is a cultural and historical construct; as a glance at the relevant anthropological literature suggests, it is not a natural kind. See Colin Jager, "Romanticism/Secularization/Secularism," *Blackwell Literature Compass* 5 (2008), and E. N. Anderson, "Attachment and Cooperation in Religious Groups," *Current Anthropology* 51.3 (June 2010): 421-23.

14. Berman 3, 110. Also Priestman, *Romantic Atheism* 7.

trum of attitudes, habits, dispositions, and cultural locations ranged under the category of infidelity. *Infideles* does not describe an internal, cognitive state of unbelief, or atheism. Asad concludes that to approach infidelity through the lens of belief is simply to miss that it was not an “epistemological concept describing an object of choice” but rather an “emotional disposition [] embedded in social and political relationships.”¹⁵

Once “religion” has narrowed and deepened, however, and once its chief philosophical questions are epistemological (questions of knowledge) rather than ontological (questions of virtue, holiness, and right living), then atheism in our modern sense of unbelief becomes not only possible but intellectually appealing. For if God is needed mostly as a supernatural object of belief—rather than as a sustaining presence within the creation, as he is for example in Aquinas—he still has to be fitted somehow into a world that apparently works without him. The foremost answer to this challenge was to reconceive God as a benevolent designer of a mechanistic universe. But whatever the precise solution, we have crossed a conceptual Rubicon: if it was once important to fit the things of this world into a theory of the divine, it now seems necessary to fit divinity into the things of this world. At his best God is now superfluous; at his worst, pernicious.¹⁶

Charles Taylor puts this point in a slightly different way. In the early modern period, he proposes, beliefs came to be understood as accompanied by their construal, so that even the most devout took up a third-person relation to them. People began to understand themselves as agents who *have* beliefs. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor calls this a shift toward the disenchanted world: a world of “buffered selves,” where religious belief is an increasingly cognitive faculty. Initially undertaken with the aim of strengthening Christianity by clarifying areas of doctrinal and moral disagreement, such cognitively-construed belief eventually renders Christianity irrelevant to large swaths of human experience. Militant about policing thoughts and boundaries, doctrinal belief gradually disinvests in the social whole and withdraws from the network of activity, practice, community, and routine where religious thoughts had been embedded. Largely the product of a zealously reform-minded Christianity, this process of disenchantment ushers us into the modern secular age.¹⁷ Taylor makes this argument with great nuance over the course of a very long book, but if he is right then it turns out that atheism, far from opposing Christianity, is a very Christian con-

15. Talal Asad, “Thinking about Religious Belief and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, forthcoming. See also Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987).

16. See Gavin Hyman, “Atheism in Modern History,” in Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 27–46 (42).

17. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).

cept. It arises in the early modern period because of a series of shifts within Western Christendom. As a corollary, this line of reasoning reveals atheism as a belief—a negative one—as thin as its thoroughly epistemologized rival. Not only is atheism a Christian concept, then: it is brittle and shallow in the very same way that epistemologically-driven Christianity is brittle and shallow. As Blake might say, this history has been adopted by both parties.¹⁸

If Kors and Taylor are right, and modern atheism is part of the tale of a secular age that is itself the result of shifts *within* Christianity, then the role of the radical enlightenment in fostering atheism must be a very minor one. If atheism is part of the fabric of Christian culture rather than its inveterate opponent, it cannot matter very much if a couple of freethinking Epicureans insist that atoms swerve in the void or that motion adheres in matter. And thus the tension noted above: either atheism is a heroic resistance to the reactionary forces of Christendom, or atheism is simply one of the ways that Christianity ushers in the modern age.

Shelley's Radical Enlightenment

Between the *Necessity of Atheism* and the signature in the hotel registry, Shelley's readings, references, and allusions offer a crash course in free-thinking radicalism. Some of his criticisms of Christian monotheism come from Gibbon, and he adapts his arguments against proofs of God from Hume. Godwin, Paine and Wollstonecraft turn up consistently. But Shelley's reading during this period also taps into two longstanding traditions of radical continental thought. The first is the tradition of religious syncretism, especially as redacted in Volney's *Ruins*, which Shelley read in 1812. The first English translation of Volney had appeared in 1792 (published by Joseph Johnson), and the book had a direct influence on Tom Paine, Thomas Spence, Blake, and on the various members of what Iain McCalman has called London's "radical underworld."¹⁹ The second tradition is that of Epicurianism, transmitted through the several Lucretius revivals and then through d'Holbach's *Système de la nature* (1770).²⁰ All of this material,

18. One reason, perhaps, why the "debate" initiated by the so-called "New Atheists" (Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, et. al.) is so boring.

19. Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988). On Godwin's influence see Priestman 29–34 and Scrivener, chapters 1 and 2.

20. England experienced its first "Lucretius revival" in the 1680s; the first full translation of *De Rerum Naturae* (by Thomas Creech) appeared in 1682. The years 1796 to 1813 witnessed a new wave of translations and editions of Lucretius, beginning with Gilbert Wakefield's edition of 1796. D'Holbach's *Système* arrived between these two revivals, and had its own influence on the English scene; a pamphlet entitled *An Answer to Dr. Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1782), which David Berman identifies as the first work of "avowed" atheism in Britain, quotes long passages of d'Holbach's *Système*.

and much more besides, found its way into the clandestinely-circulated *Queen Mab* (1812), whose notes reprinted a modified version of the *Necessity of Atheism* and one of whose triumphal lines declares: "There is no God!"²¹ *Queen Mab* "must not be published under pain of death, because it is too much against every existing establishment," wrote Harriet Shelley to her Dublin friend Catherine Nugent. "Do you [know] any one that would wish for so dangerous a gift?"²²

Yet Shelley comes late to the "New Philosophy" that had roiled elite European cultural circles for over 150 years. Reading through this material, and reading the accounts of it in such books as Michael Scrivener's *Radical Shelley* and Martin Priestman's *Romantic Atheism*, one is struck by how little has changed from the mid- and late-seventeenth century, when the radical enlightenment first began to seep into Europe's intellectual life. Jonathan Israel brilliantly traces the secret networks, coteries, and groupings of the radical enlightenment, the clandestine circulation of its ideas, its characteristic modes of diversion, denial, and prevarication in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. After reading Israel, perusing accounts of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century radicals feels rather familiar; here are the same pseudonyms, the same anonymity, the same clandestine circulation, the same confusion that had characterized the radical enlightenment's first flowering. Ironically enough, the hostile reviewers in the British periodical press are correct when they admit Shelley's "genius" while repudiating his "philosophy." John Gibson Lockhart, for example, notes wearily that Shelley's notions recur "[i]n every age."²³ Whatever Lockhart's motivations, his judgment is historically accurate. In terms of philosophical sophistication or new arguments, d'Holbach and Volney, Paine and Godwin, are for the most part offering ideas already available to continental initiates by 1680 or thereabouts. The period after 1750, as Israel writes, was "basically just one of consolidating, popularizing, and annotating revolutionary concepts introduced earlier" (RE 7).

This was also Shelley's view of the matter. In *A Philosophical View of Reform* he praises the "new epoch" of the mid- and late seventeenth century, "marked by the commencement of deeper enquiries into the point of human nature than are compatible with an unreserved belief in any of those popular mistakes upon which . . . systems of faith . . . with all their super-

21. *Queen Mab* 7, line 13, *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, 2 vols. (Harlow, UK: Pearson/Longman, 2000) 1: 331.

22. Holmes, *Shelley* 200–201; for the general discourse of atheism in England around the turn of the century, see Priestman's *Romantic Atheism*.

23. John Gibson Lockhart, unsigned review, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (January 1819) iv: 475–82; *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James E. Barcus (London and Boston: Routledge, 1975) 115–16.

structure of political and religious tyranny, are built." Locke, Hume and Hartley are, by contrast, "exact . . . but superficial," while the French *philosophes* developed only "those particular portions of the new philosophy" that were "most popular." "[T]hey told the truth, but not the whole truth," Shelley concludes.²⁴

If the "New Philosophy" that Shelley channels is no longer very new, however, there has now been a revolution enacted in its name. Israel demonstrates that the radical enlightenment arrived in France by means of a "coterie of radical-minded Huguenots in the Netherlands" (*RE* 306). By 1719 Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* had been published clandestinely in French, together with a biography of the philosopher and a popularization of his system wherein, writes Israel, "philosophy becomes a veritable engine of war, a battering-ram with which to smash down the theological foundations of *ancien regime* culture and society."²⁵ Here Spinoza emerges as the theorist of radical republicanism, "with its uncompromising anti-monarchism and egalitarian tendency, a tradition which sprang up on the continent and leads in direct line of descent to the revolutionary rhetoric of Robespierre and the French Jacobins" (*RE* 22). While Hobbes and Locke regard the state of nature as brutal and unequal and view private property as the foundation of liberty rather than its undoing, Spinoza held that appropriation of the land was a denial of natural liberty. Rousseau may have rejected Spinoza's metaphysics but he adopted his political theory, and the notion that equality is basic to the state of nature makes its way into the *Discourse on Inequality* and thence to Robespierre. From this perspective the Revolution is really an outworking of a radical intellectual tradition of the late seventeenth century.

Whether or not Israel overstates Spinoza's actual influence, his book reveals the degree to which the radical enlightenment's robust concept of liberty, formulated most powerfully in the *Tractatus*, would shape the French Revolution. Freedom is the "freedom to philosophize," the "freedom to think and to say what one thinks," writes Spinoza.²⁶ Because, like private property, religion curtails such freedom, it must be regulated *in the name of freedom*. If for Locke religious freedom is the example of freedom *par excellence*, for Spinoza "religious freedom" is virtually an oxymoron. In short, there is at work in Spinoza a specific anthropology—a picture of the human as "naturally" unfettered by religion and by property—and a theory of State power as something that may be legitimately employed to promote that anthropology and to sideline alternatives to it. This is why Spinoza can

24. Percy Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, ed. Thomas William Rolleston (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1920) 7–8; 8; 9.

25. *RE* 306; the work in question is "L'Esprit de Mr Benoit de Spinoza."

26. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 195. Hereafter *TTP*.

write that “we have established it as absolutely certain that theology should not be subordinate to reason, nor reason to theology, but rather that each has its own domain” (*TTP* 190), but assert almost immediately that since theology “determine[s] only what is necessary for obedience” (*TTP* 190) it has nothing to do with the freedom that the ideal state will promote: “if no one were obliged by law to obey the sovereign power in matters that he thinks belongs to religion . . . on this pretext everyone would be able to claim license to do anything. Since by this means the law of the state is wholly violated, it follows that the supreme right of deciding about religion, belongs to the sovereign power” (*TPP* 206–7). In this formulation, religion always potentially conflicts with state power. Here is a crucial intellectual source of the militant secularism of the French Revolution, which became official policy with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790: a generous acknowledgement of separate domains on the one hand, and on the other a patrolling of that boundary so vigilant as to create the conditions of its violation. The radical enlightenment bequeaths to the Revolution an image of an activist secular state; it proposes to police religion in the effort to secure a space free from it.

In a widely-cited essay, Charles Taylor describes a similar contrast between the two models of secularism that emerged in early modern Europe. The first is a Lockean “common ground” model, which begins by assuming that most people are naturally religious and consequently strives for evenhandedness among this variety. The picture here is of a minimalist state adjudicating among a variety of metaphysical orientations, and it finds its intellectual home in the moderate enlightenment’s desire to modify the confessional state without overturning the social order. This is a basically theological conception of secularism, forged in order to bring peace to warring Protestant sects; famously, Locke wouldn’t extend toleration to atheists. Taylor’s second model, which he terms the “independent ethic,” begins with a non-religious anthropology; it assumes that “the state of nature is not to be confused with the state of religion” (*TTP* 205) and holds it best to construct a society “as if” there were no God. Taylor traces this idea to Hugo Grotius, but Spinoza is an even more plausible candidate; indeed, orthodox commentators often lumped both Dutchmen together as “atheistic” Biblical scholars.²⁷

According to the secularism of the moderate enlightenment, then, citi-

27. *Radical Enlightenment* 447, 454. Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998) 31–53. For Israel’s comments on the Lockean model, see *RE* 108, 116, 117. Despite modifications over the years, the Lockean and Grotian/Spinozist models remain the models for how we think about secularism today. Their most familiar forms in contemporary Europe are, respectively, the multicultural model common in Great Britain and the Netherlands, and the assimilationist model that has characterized French secularism since the Revolution, generally referred to as *laïcité*.

zens possess religious beliefs the way they possess property, namely by right, and the state agrees to leave religion alone as long as religion leaves politics alone. According to the secularism of the radical enlightenment, by contrast, property and religious belief limit freedom, and consequently the state gets actively involved in the organization of both by trying to influence the choices people make.²⁸ If secularism *just is* the principle of neutrality among competing metaphysical notions, then the state's role is limited to abstention and even-handedness; but if secularism describes a certain formation of the citizen, then more intrusive measures may be required. Just as in Spinoza's *Tractatus*, the first of these tends in practice to slide into the second. When in 2003 the French government outlawed the wearing of "religious symbols" in French schools, the language of the Stasi report insisted that the state had no power over spiritual choices. But, just as in the Civil Constitution of 1790, the state retains the right to say where and how its principles are threatened.

As we know, for Shelley the French Revolution was the "master theme" of the epoch in which we live," "involving pictures of all that is best qualified to interest and to instruct mankind," as he wrote to Byron just after returning from France and a few months after visiting Mont Blanc.²⁹ What "instruction" might he have in mind? In the famous dream vision of Volney's *Ruins*, the Genius requires all the religions of the world to justify themselves before a tribunal of free people recently liberated from superstition. But perhaps Volney's reasonable council takes the problem up at the wrong end. For if Jonathan Israel is right that the Revolution instantiates the political theories of the radical enlightenment, then the issue is not religious sectarianism but rather the *power of the state to name religious sectarianism as such*: a power that professes neutrality but reserves for itself the right to decide when its interests are threatened. On this reading, revolutionary paranoia produces "religion" as an enemy of the revolution, and thus feels justified in deploying state-sponsored force to eliminate its enemies. The manufactured possibility of religious violence justifies the actuality of secular violence. This would be an appropriately Shelleyan turn of the screw: the Revolution's degeneration into violence, recrimination, paranoia, and renewed political absolutism is an imminent critique of the radical enlightenment itself. From this perspective, furthering the critique of religion aids the secular violence it claims to combat.

28. Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007) 26. See also Talal Asad, "Trying to Understand French Secularism," in Hent deVries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham UP, 2006) 494–526 (504).

29. Shelley to Byron, September 8, 1816, and September 29, 1816. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. Volume 9: *Letters 1812–1818*, ed. Roger Ingpen (New York: Gordian P, 1965) 195, 199.

A truly revolutionary argument, by contrast, would disarticulate the critique of political tyranny from the critique of Christianity. This demands a critical reading of the radical tradition itself. Shelley may very well have wished to see the last king strangled with the entrails of the last priest (a remark variously attributed to Voltaire, Diderot, and Meslier), but as a strategy this misses the point rather badly—and moreover the particular *way* that it misses the point helps explain why the French Revolution came undone in the way that it did: not only the Terror but Napoleon, years of war, and finally the “restoration” of thrones across post-Napoleonic Europe.³⁰ What if the “instruction” Shelley imagines is precisely to make visible the violence, real and potential, that shadows the presumptively neutral operations of the state *whenever* it intervenes in the formation of its citizens, even when it intervenes to uphold a position—atheism, egalitarian property rights—which one supports? As if Shelley’s point is to remind us, once again, that the content of beliefs is not the issue.

Here we return to *Mont Blanc* and the “atheism” that it may or may not “express.” And in doing so we can take Israel’s Spinozism more seriously than he himself does. Necessity is not a type of content, and beliefs are not causes: what matters are *effects*. When it comes to both atheism and religion the temptation is always to talk about beliefs, and this is a temptation that *Mont Blanc*’s many voices, and its textual and literary history, continually stage. Is Shelley a Platonist? an idealist? a skeptic? What are his ideas? Who was he reading? At a very basic level the poem insists that none of this matters; Power, “Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (line 97), is always there, distributing, withholding, and dispensing “life and death” (line 129). In such a world, “atheism,” no matter how uncompromising, is pseudo-radicalism.

Atheism as an Occupation

So the radical enlightenment was not radical enough: it shared with the moderate enlightenment the habit of viewing religion as a belief in a divine super-agent, and created thereby the possibility of modern atheism as the rejection of that super-agent. Once Christianity becomes the collection of its doctrines, and its function becomes the policing of belief, then there is a great deal of human life over which the church no longer has authority. It may police the beliefs of its members, and to a limited extent what they do

30. A restoration that is one key theme of *Prometheus Unbound*. Obviously this does not mean that Shelley is any more pleased by English “restraint” during the years of the Revolution. England had its own terror, or rather “war on terror” in the 1790s, which, if not as bloody as the one in France, had its own profound effect on what Kenneth Johnston has called the “lost generation of the 1790s.” See Kenneth R. Johnston, “The Unromantic Lives of Others: the Lost Generation of the 1790s,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 40 (2009): 67–72.

with their bodies. But in the West it is generally the state that takes over the management of embodied life: through various media, through networks of officials and spies, through medical innovations and humanitarian organizations it observes, measures, distributes, and supervises its subjects.³¹

In this sense early modern Europe witnesses what we can term a “secularization of the body.” Driven largely by a reforming impulse internal to Western Christendom, such secularization organizes and polices corporeal life. It furthers the process through which the body itself—its positioning, habituation, and sensory organization—comes to reside outside the boundaries of “religion.” Such bodily management cuts off potential alternatives to a secular order: a religious life now understood largely in mentalistic terms can find little use for bodily energies other than to contain and “productively” redirect them. *Dualism* is our shorthand for this social process, but dualism goes far beyond Cartesian epistemology; it sinks deeply enough into our sense of identity that certain kinds of experiences become literally impossible because the body techniques that were their precondition are no longer operational. The secularized body is in this sense an inexperienced body; some avenues are simply closed to it.³² Could the radical enlightenment be rethought so as to escape such an end?

“Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist.” These words are Shelley’s own first “reading” of his poem. And these three words are of course the radical enlightenment in a nutshell, especially if we render “philanthropist” more literally as “lover of mankind” and hear in that phrase a certain libertinism. Already in *Queen Mab* Shelley had connected libertinism firmly to political and religious radicalism. Certainly by 1816 the charge of libertinism was in the air wherever he went.³³ And so we might read the signature in the hotel register less as an adolescent attempt to shock than an effort to reinvigorate a collection of philosophical positions that had become, in Shelley’s own analysis, superficial.

Much depends, though, on how the radical enlightenment gets taken up. Because hotel registers don’t usually offer a separate category for “beliefs,” Shelley placed his “atheism” under the category of “occupation.” Simple good fortune, perhaps. But it allows us to ask a serious question:

31. See Wolfgang Reinhard, “Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State,” *Catholic Historical Review* 75 (July 1989): 404, 402; and William T. Cavanaugh, “Does Religion Cause Violence?” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35.2–3 (Spring/Summer 2007): 22–35.

32. For the argument that Reform drives secularization, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*; for the inexperienced body, see Asad, “Thinking about Religious Belief and Politics.”

33. “[I]f we might withdraw the veil of private life, and tell what we *now* know about him, it would be indeed a disgusting picture that we should exhibit.” John Taylor Coleridge, rev. of *The Revolt of Islam*, *The Quarterly Review* (April 1819): 460–71; reprinted in *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* 135.

what would it mean to understand “atheism” as an occupation—as something that one *does* rather than something that one *is*? What if atheism were not about cognitively-held beliefs or non-beliefs but about postures, arrangements, dispositions, embodied techniques, or disciplined actions?

“Occupation” can mean “the action of taking or maintaining possession or control of a country, building, land, etc., esp. by (military) force,” as the *OED* puts it. It can also mean “the state of having one’s time or attention occupied; what a person is engaged in; employment, business; work, toil.” The first meaning is largely spatial, the second largely temporal. In the hotel register, “occupation” means time—and yet the very presence of the mountain as an occupant of space, registered so consistently in Shelley’s poem, as well as in Mary Shelley’s contributions to the *History of A Six Weeks’ Tour*, where *Mont Blanc* was first published, hints at the first meaning as well. How can anyone or anything else occupy space when *Mont Blanc*’s mass is so insistently *there*, and when the various military occupations of the region are so fresh in the memory? Even atheism, faced with such dominant spaces, would retreat to the mind. Indeed, this is exactly how the *Quarterly Review*, interrupting its 1818 review of Leigh Hunt’s “Foliage” in order to pounce on Shelley, pictured what had happened. “If we were told,” writes the *Quarterly*, “of a man who, thus witnessing the sublimest assemblage of natural objects, should retire to a cabin near and write aetheos after his name in the album, we hope our own feelings would be pity rather than disgust.”³⁴ In the *Quarterly*’s imagination, there *was* a place in the hotel register for “beliefs,” and Shelley, incapable of responding to sublime objects properly, writes “atheist” there—as if his mind is the “blank” space of nothingness and non-belief still so often taken to be the poem’s own deepest aspiration.³⁵ This picture maps easily onto a secular distinction in which the mountain forcefully occupies all available space while doctrines and beliefs are located in the mind and “expressed.”

But if the “occupation” of atheism exchanges space for time, a different set of concepts comes into focus. For occupations, understood temporally, involve the entire self in the organization of experience. And they centrally concern what one does with one’s body—how it is trained, organized, and adjusted, what experiences it pursues and cultivates, and what experiences it forecloses upon.

A passage in *Prometheus Unbound*, written around the time of the *Quarterly*’s attack, significantly animates the static alpine scenery of *Mont Blanc*.

34. *Poems of Shelley* 2: 550; see also Timothy Webb, “‘The Avalanche of Ages’: Shelley’s Defense of Atheism and *Prometheus Unbound*” *KSMB* 35 (1984): 1–39.

35. See most recently, Geoffrey Hartman, “Gods, Ghosts, and Shelley’s ‘Aetheos,’” *Literature and Theology* 24.1 (March 2010): 4–18.

In it, Asia describes a remote Power familiar from the earlier poem, but she ends with an avalanche

whose mass,
 Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there
 Flake after flake: in Heaven-defying minds
 As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth
 Is loosened, and the nations echo round,
 Shaken to their roots: as do the mountains now.³⁶

This looks, at first, like a strictly cognitive revolution—a particularly spectacular example of the technique of drawing imagery from the mind's operations that Shelley had defended in the drama's "Preface": thoughts pile up in minds until they yield a revolutionary truth. Yet by delaying the analogical "as" so long that snow flakes rather than thoughts seem to be accumulating in the mind, Shelley's syntax manages what William Keach calls a "disorienting effect." The physical world seems for a moment to penetrate the mind, suggesting not a simple reversal of priority but an experiential undoing of any effort to draw lines between the mind and everything outside of it. Shelley's "rejection of dualism," writes Keach, "forms part of the conceptual basis for a range of practices that are about remaking the world of human experience by releasing its full potential as a dynamic and differentiated totality."³⁷ The unsettling effect of a language that refuses to distinguish between mental life and bodily life might offer a foretaste of the kind of revolution that would *really* alter the organization of space. "Liberty, when men act in bodies, is *power*," wrote Burke about the French Revolution, glimpsing from the negative side the kinds of discomfiting potentials that adhere to an embodied life. For while power may be frozen and spatialized "on high," as in *Mont Blanc* (line 127), it might also be put into motion through the accretion of bodies that like snowflakes eventually become more than the sum of their parts. By "bodies," of course, Burke meant collections of individuals. But Shelley's syntactical disorientation takes full advantage of the pun: to act as a body, we must act *in* a body.

The notorious difficulty of Shelley's writing has its source in the expanded sensory capacities toward which it points—matters of the body as much as the mind, of sensing and feeling as much as thinking.³⁸ This quality of Shelley's verse has bothered critics from the *Monthly Review's* pre-

36. *Prometheus Unbound* n.iii.37–42; *SPP* 244.

37. William Keach, "The Political Poet," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 123–42 (137, 123).

38. See Rob Mitchell, "The Transcendental: Deleuze, P. B. Shelley, and the Freedom of Immobility," *Romantic Circles Praxis* (January 2008). <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/deleuze/mitchell/mitchell.html> [accessed May 7, 2010]>

scient description of Shelley's "licentiousness of rhythm" to F. R. Leavis' worry that with Shelley "one accepts the immediate feeling and doesn't slow down to think."³⁹ Often those hostile to Shelley can see this more clearly than can those who profess to admire him. In its 1819 review of *The Revolt of Islam*, for example, the *Quarterly Review* cogently recognized that Shelley's danger lay not in the content of his ideas but in what the reviewer termed his "manner." "We despair," wrote the *Quarterly*,

of convincing him directly that he has taken up false and pernicious notions; but if he pays any deference to the common laws of reasoning, we hope to show him that, let the goodness of his cause be what it may, his manner of advocating it is false and unsound.⁴⁰

Shelley, still at work on *Prometheus Unbound*, had already described his method of drawing the poem's images from the operations of the human mind. But after reading this review he added to the "Preface," defending his "manner" by focusing on its political potential. Aligning himself with "[t]he peculiar style of intense and comprehensive imagery which distinguishes the modern literature of England" (*SPP* 207), he writes that the "power" of such imagery is "general," and the "mass of capabilities remains at every period materially the same." Changing circumstances, however, bring images into new alignments, awakening nascent capabilities "to action" (*SPP* 208).

Mass, power, body, action. We are back at the moving mass of *Prometheus Unbound's* avalanche—a reading of *Mont Blanc* that extends Shelley's own first "reading" of the poem in the hotel register. It completes the turn toward a collective model of revolutionary activity—of people and arguments, of attitudes and habits involving the body as well as the mind. *Mont Blanc's* own dense intertextuality sketches the beginnings of that collective activity, and though allusion-hunting is one of the great games of *Mont Blanc* criticism, the point of Shelley's "occupation" is to avoid the temptation of wondering how certain books, authors, and ideas influenced the poem's ideas; the point, rather, is to picture what it might be like to be a part of an embodied collective.

"[U]ntil the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and en-

39. Unsigned review of *The Revolt of Islam*, *The Monthly Review* (March 1819): 323–24; reprinted in *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* 123. F. R. Leavis, "Shelley," in *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1998; orig. pub. 1947) 203–32 (207). Leavis grasps from the negative side the power of Shelley's anti-dualism when he writes of *Mont Blanc*: "[t]he metaphorical and the actual, the real and the imagined, the inner and the outer, could hardly be more unsortably and indistinguishably confused" (212).

40. John Taylor Coleridge, *The Quarterly Review* (April 1819): 460–71; *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* 126.

ture," Shelley writes in the "Preface," "reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life, which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness" (*SPP* 209). He calls love, admiration, trust, hope, and endurance "beautiful idealisms of moral excellence," and it is easy to be misled by that phrase into cognitive speculations. But in the context of the power of embodied masses to which Shelley links his use of imagery, these "idealisms" look less like what the *Quarterly* called his "notions" and more like what it called his "manner": that project of educating the body, increasing its sensory capacities so that anger and hatred and revenge will be recognized as modes that characterize bodies lacking other, better experiences. To teach the mind to love, admire, trust, hope, and endure, then, also requires a certain education of the body, and makes possible a reordered sensorium in which such adventures of human flourishing have their way.

Vacancy

What would an alternative sensorium look like? What kinds of experiences would differently organized bodies have? These are the questions asked by *Mont Blanc*.

Asked, but perhaps not quite answered. Famously, the poem ends with an enigmatic rhetorical question:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

(141-43)

Sometimes read as an expression of its author's philosophical idealism, the question might also be taken as rueful acknowledgment of how hard it is to "let Mont Blanc be merely a blank," in Frances Ferguson's words. On her reading, materialism turns out to be impossible: "One can see the mountain as an example of materiality but cannot see it even as a mountain without seeing it as involving more than matter."⁴¹ To be sure, the poem might strive to return the mountain to a primal blankness beneath the various pious voices that have been attached to it, but as the speaker himself acknowledges early on, the valley is "many-voicèd" (line 13), and there is little guarantee that by the end we have stripped away those voices and uncovered the scene's material "truth."

In "On Life" (1819), the prose fragment inscribed in the back of the

41. Frances Ferguson, "Shelley's *Mont Blanc*: What the Mountain Said," *Romanticism and Language*, ed. Arden Reed (London: Methuen, 1984) 202-14 (203, 211).

notebook that also contains the *Philosophical View of Reform*, Shelley notes that his discontent with materialism led him to the opposite extreme, and the conviction that “nothing exists but as it is perceived” (*SPP* 506). Such a doctrine “establishes no new truth,” he declares, but only “destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation” (*SPP* 507). Christopher Hitt, in an intelligent essay, proposes that the “vacancy” this passage celebrates is the vacancy with which *Mont Blanc* concludes.⁴² Accordingly, the poem insists that error, like the many voices that encircle the mountain and the “large codes of fraud and woe” (line 81) that emanate from them, can be “repealed” (line 80) by a philosophy that demolishes the old truths without establishing new ones in their stead.

However appealing such a negative liberty might appear, my argument has been that when it comes to religion vacancy is *not* strictly negative. The state reserves the right to defend its normative vision of things, stepping in with force or the promise of force whenever “religion” threatens to leave the domain of private belief. The “freedom in which [the mind] would have acted but for the misuse of words and signs” is a chimera, a myth of reason that, as Shelley’s own phrasing indicates, licenses destruction in the name of liberty. And the vacancy that it leaves behind is the vacancy into which power steps. The critical consensus that Shelley’s poems of late 1815 and 1816 represent a romantic turn away from Godwinian rationalism has from this perspective not been taken far enough. For Shelley’s romantic turn, registered at the level of syntax and sensory organization as much as of mind and idea, suggests that the so-called “problem of religion” is itself a red herring. It has blocked the kind of rethinking so obviously needed in the aftermath of the French Revolution and prevented the kind of historical analysis that would reveal how caught up secular power is in the creation of its religious opponent. Over and over again, from the so-called “Wars of Religion” from which Descartes took refuge in his stove-heated room to the contemporary meddling of Western liberal democracies in the formation of ideal “Islamic citizens,” religion becomes the primary concern of secular power—almost as if “religion” had been created for just such a role, for just such a concern.⁴³ Far from resisting such power, atheism’s fixation on religion furthers its consolidation.

Could the radical enlightenment get over its obsession with religion and

42. Christopher Hitt, “Unwriting Mount Blanc,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 47.2 (2005): 139–66.

43. On the ideal Islamic citizen, see Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 323–47. Western

focus its critical energies on the process that has justified that obsession? That process is what I have called *secularism*: not simple neutrality but the active intervention in religious life by state, civic, and cultural actors. As a way of life, I have argued, secularism validates a particular organization of the human sensorium; by remaking religion as a primarily epistemological concern, a matter of minds rather than of bodies, it reorders the hierarchy of the senses in accord with its own goals. And this remaking has a politics, for at some point assimilation inevitably fails, or becomes too volatile and unpredictable, and then someone is sure to be prodded out of error a little more forcefully. Underneath that prodding is fear—the fear of the multitude that Warren Montag diagnoses even in Spinoza himself.⁴⁴ There is of course plenty to be afraid of, and it is perhaps inevitable that dread of what might happen when, in Burke’s words, “men act in bodies,” would cause even the most fearless of thinkers to reassert the state’s juridical power over the power of the multitude. That is the long history of which the French Revolution forms a particularly instructive chapter. To imagine a Shelley “after atheism,” by contrast, is to imagine a Shelley after secularism. And to imagine a Shelley after secularism is to imagine the non-coercive peace to which *Prometheus Unbound* gives voice in its final act, with its myriad embodied motions on the far side of fear. — — — — —

In our age of globalized public religion it has become fashionable in some quarters to plead for a return of the enlightenment. We need another Hobbes, or another Voltaire. Conjoined to that thought is generally another one: that what came after the enlightenment—that is, romanticism—is in some indirect way responsible for what currently ails us: our reflexive obeisance to identity, difference, and cultural autonomy, and our collective failure of nerve when it comes time to stand up for universal values. Mark Lilla’s 2007 book *The Stillborn God* makes this case directly and compellingly. In Lilla’s account, the broad romantic tradition stretching from Rousseau through Schleiermacher to nineteenth-century German

meddling has helped to create the climate in which radical Islam can flourish: Iran in 1953, Indonesia in 1965, Afghanistan in the 1980s, Algeria and Egypt and Saudi Arabia and of course Israel/Palestine throughout the second half of the twentieth century. For variations on this notion see Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2009) 102–6. See also William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).

44. Warren Montag, “Who’s Afraid of the Multitude? Between the Individual and the State,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 104.4 (Fall, 2005): 655–73 (670). For a compelling and original analysis of the “counter-power” of the crowd in the romantic era, see David Collings, *Monstrous Society: Reciprocity, Discipline, and the Political Uncanny, c. 1780–1848* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2009).

liberal theology discovered the power of individual consciousness and wedded it to notions of cultural and national difference, thereby unleashing a series of political messianisms—nationalism, communism, fascism, and fundamentalism—that it was unequipped to handle.⁴⁵ An influential source for this kind of analysis is Isaiah Berlin, whose various accounts of what he termed the “Counter-Enlightenment” came close to pinning National Socialism on Hamann and Herder.⁴⁶ From here it is but a short step to the work of liberal hawks like Christopher Hitchens, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Paul Berman, for whom 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. For them, the line from Romanticism to Fascism to “Islamofascism” is apparently easy to see.⁴⁷

These analyses are wrong on both counts. To think of religion as something from which secularism will save us is to misunderstand how secularism helped to create religion in the first place, and to forget how political and military intervention continues to shape the forms that “religion” assumes. And to think of romanticism as simply theorizing the return of public religion is to underestimate romanticism’s critical capacities. Shelley’s romanticism, I have argued, amounts to a critical reading of its own enlightenment sources, and an intimation of what might lie on their far shore.

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45. Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

46. Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Viking P, 1980) 1–24; Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1993).

47. See for example Hirsi Ali’s description of the “enemies of reason in the West: religion and the Romantic movement,” in “Blind Faiths,” *New York Times* review of Lee Harris, *The Suicide of Reason: Radical Islam’s Threat to the West* (January 6, 2008): 14–15. Berman argues that Islamism is a form of fascism derived in part from a romantic reading of the Qu’ran “influenced by Coleridge.” See Paul Berman, “Who’s Afraid Of Tariq Ramadan?” *The New Republic*, June 4, 2007. <<http://www.tnr.com/article/who%E2%80%99s-afraid-tariq-ramadan> [accessed May 17, 2010]> This essay forms the core of Berman’s new book, *The Flight of the Intellectuals* (New York: Melville House, 2010).

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