The Book of God

Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era

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Contents

Preface ix

Introduction: Nature Is the Book of God 1

1. The Argument Against Design from Deism to Blake 41


3. Theory, Practice, and Anna Barbauld 73


5. Mansfield Park and the End of Natural Theology 124

6. Wordsworth: The Shape of Analogy 158

7. Reading with a Worthy Eye: Secularization and Evil 188

8. Religion Three Ways 201

Afterword: Intelligent Design and Religious Ignoramuses; or, the Difference Between Theory and Literature 216

Notes 229

Selected Bibliography 259

Index 265

Acknowledgments 273
Introduction
Nature Is the Book of God

This book argues that a religious form—design—is complexly entwined with romantic-era writing. If true, this claim complicates the longstanding association of romanticism with the narrative of secularization. According to that narrative, religion may have "influenced" the era's literature, but rather in the way that theories of Christian eschatology "influenced" the idea of historical progress. In each case religious content is transformed into something else (that is, secularized) by the forward march of history. M. H. Abrams's book *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), which describes romanticism as "the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking," is the most distinguished and important contribution to this understanding of the period. "The process," Abrams writes, "has not been the depletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises." Yet the account of secularization upon which Abrams relies is open to a series of objections. Empirically it is not the case that modernity equals secularization in any straightforward way. In addition, the historical change that the word "secularization" tries to capture does not reside solely or even primarily at the level of ideas and beliefs (where Abrams places it), but incorporates habits, dispositions, and postures that are themselves carried out and performed within changing institutional contexts. Thus if secularization is understood not as a loss of belief but rather as an example of the differentiation that characterizes modernity—a differentiation that necessarily entails neither religious decline nor the privatization of religion as a form of feeling or emotion—then we can start to analyze our own investment in secularization as that which underwrites and legitimates romanticism.

This book, then, has two aims, analytically distinct but necessarily related. The specific aim is to offer a detailed reading of the presence and power of design arguments during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, focusing particularly on design's relation to texts that anticipate and constitute early British romanticism. The larger aim is to argue from the fact of design's cultural importance toward a revised
understanding of secularization and the ideas of religion that secularization entails. Both of these aims require that the terms "design," "romanticism," and "secularization" acquire some analytic clarity. To that I turn first.

Design

Though various in application and detail, all design arguments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are inductive arguments for the existence of God. They begin empirically, with what can be seen or discovered in the natural world, and work their way upward to the creator of that world. They are literally arguments from design to God, and thus presuppose an individual's ability to perceive marks of design in the natural world. Technically speaking, design arguments are both teleological and analogical. They are teleological because they are interested in the seemingly purposive features of the natural world, in things—such as bird's wings or eyelids—that appear to have been designed with a specific function in mind. In the eighteenth century, therefore, design arguments depend upon practices of close observation and tend to describe the world in mechanistic or functionalist terms. In these ways design arguments mesh nicely with a basically "enlightenment" temperament. Design arguments are analogical, meanwhile, because they reason from known instances of design to unknown ones; indeed they often depend at least implicitly upon a ratio of the type $a:b:c:d$. Sometimes, in addition, we find a deductive tendency within design arguments, for the theologian may be inclined to deduce attributes of the deity from what he observes of the world. So beneficence follows from the smooth functioning of the creation, whereas eternal and self-sufficient existence follows from the fact that the designer must exist prior to the design, and so on. Cutting design into inductive and deductive halves, however, is a bit too neat for a theological tradition that tends to move back and forth between them as a matter of habit, and that frequently invokes the conclusions of the argument without bothering to delineate each of the steps. This, indeed, is the twofold difficulty of writing about design: first, that its intellectual ambition leads away from careful philosophical delineation and toward a certain capaciousness; and second, that many writers, most of them nontheologians, tended to invoke it outside the context of systematic exposition, as a kind of sensibility. These factors make design an elusive quarry.

Most eighteenth-century clergymen, as enlightened as they may have been, were not agnostic about God's existence. Indeed, the argument from design operates best in an atmosphere that assumes from the beginning that the firmament declares God's handiwork. The chief end of nature, in other words, is to showcase its creator's glory; the miraculous discoveries that science is making about the world are but further examples of its design. This is the teleological presupposition that underpins an apparently inductive procedure, and while such a union may be philosophically problematic, the intellectual labor that issues from it actually draws strength from this dual heritage. With one foot solidly in the older camp of Aristotelian teleology and the other firmly planted in the newer camp of inductive reasoning, design draws justification both from the ever-expanding ambitions of natural philosophy and from the venerable conventions of traditional theology. This means, in turn, that the impulse behind the avid collecting of empirical data is underwritten by both scientific progress and traditional Christian apologetics. Design's teleological framework offers a formal means of acknowledging diversity in both culture and nature, and a method for gathering that diversity into a whole posited as the natural and inevitable culmination of its various parts. Within this overarching frame, specific natural objects are both susceptible to analysis and part of a larger system that is itself available to analysis. Meanwhile individuals are placed within a rational institutional framework that both grants and regulates freedom: final causes belong to God, while immediate and efficient causes, both social and scientific, become the legitimate objects of human investigation and agency.

Natural theology is the set of ideas, practices, and intellectual habits that surround this argument from design. The phrase "natural theology" sometimes refers to the more general idea that humans can have direct knowledge of God apart from revelation, but in this book I use the term to refer to the teleological orientation exemplified by the argument from design. In this respect, the natural theology that characterizes the design argument should be distinguished from the neo-Platonism that so influenced English theology and philosophy in the seventeenth century. Although neo-Platonism also posited an orderly cosmos and linked such heavenly order to social hierarchies, it tended to emphasize the inherent form or structure of which such hierarchies were a part. The tradition of the Great Chain of Being is one manifestation of this Platonic tradition. Though the Great Chain may be "temporalized"—that is, seen to produce higher forms over time—it posits static relationships between the members of the Chain, and the Chain itself is conceived in an intrinsically hierarchical fashion. In contrast, eighteenth-century natural theology tends to justify hierarchy instrumentally, and indeed some versions abandoned the notion of hierarchy altogether. Order is not an end in itself; rather, the particular and unique purpose of every creature works together complementarily, each enabling the other to achieve the end that is already built into it. In this
respect design is integral to what Charles Taylor calls a “modern social imaginary.”

The point is worth emphasizing. Far from being old-fashioned or retrograde, natural theology is a characteristically modern phenomenon. It both shapes and reflects the slow transformation around the flourishing of autonomous individuals, what Taylor calls a “new... moral order of society” which eventually gave rise to the new social forms: the market economy, the public sphere, and the idea of a self-governing people. This does not mean, of course, that natural theologians saw themselves as participating in an intellectual or social vanguard; indeed, precisely because it was such an influential set of ideas among England’s formally educated, natural theology during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries accommodated a range of political and social opinions along a broad spectrum of intellectual elites. The premise that the intricate works of nature point to a divine and benevolent final cause helped to formalize and publicize a felt convergence of religious belief and scientific investigation that already existed in the minds of the educated classes. And it allowed orthodox clergy to pursue scientific interests that reaffirmed a stable and ordered universe, not a chaotic and implicitly revolutionary one. For the great majority of British intellectuals, science and theology were mutually informing means of investigating God’s world; design was not, consequently, invoked to suture a widening gap between “science” and “religion,” as some accounts suggest, because its practitioners did not in general recognize that gap to begin with. On the contrary, natural theology expresses what has been rightly termed an “intellectual consensus.” It simply confirmed at the level of reason what everybody already supposed to be true: that the natural world contained abundant evidence of its magnificent creator. If natural theology is “conservative,” then, such conservatism is to be found not in its religious content but in its characteristic intellectual posture, which is dedicated not to novelty but to multiple examples, to repetition and reiteration. It is science, but with an accent—for it is also a habit of mind, a way of intellectually addressing the materials of the world.

It may help at this juncture to consider an example. John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1691 to 1694, was famous throughout his career for sermons that combined piety with rational presentation. Here is Tillotson’s refutation of the claim that the world came about by chance, from “The Wisdom of Being Religious,” the first sermon in a volume of selected sermons published two years after his death:

For I appeal to any man of reason whether any thing can be more unreasonable, than obstinately to impute an effect to chance which carries in the very face of it all the arguments and characters of a wise design, and contrivance? Was ever any considerable work, in which there was required a great variety of parts and a regular and orderly disposition of those parts, done by chance? Will chance fit means to ends, and that in ten thousand instances, and not fail in any one? How often might a man after he had jumbled a set of letters in a bag, fling them out upon the ground before they would fall into an exact Poem, yea or so much as make a good discourse in Prose? And may not a little Book be as easily made by chance, as this great Volume of the world? How long might a man be in sprinkling colours upon Canvas with a careless hand, before they would happen to make the exact Picture of a man? And is a man easier made by chance than his Picture? How long might twenty thousand blind men, which should be sent out from the several remote parts of England, wander up and down before they would all meet upon Salisbury-plain and fall into rank and file in the exact order of an Army? And yet this is much more easy to be imagined, than how the innumerable blind parts of matter should rendezvous themselves into a world. A man that sees Henry the Seventh’s Chappel at Westminster might with as good reason maintain (yea with much better, considering the vast difference betwixt that little structure and the huge fabric of the world) that it was never contrived or built by any man, but that the stones did by chance grow into those curious figures into which they seem to have been cut and graven; and that upon a time (as tales usually begin) the materials of that building, the stone, mortar, timber, iron, lead, and glass, happily met together and very fortunately rang’d themselves into that delicate order in which we see them now so close compacted that it must be a very great chance that parts them again. What would the world think of a man that should advance such an opinion as this, and a Book for it? If they would do him right, they ought to look upon him as mad.

Several things stand out in this argument. Most notable, perhaps, is its proximity. Tillotson’s elegant Latinate phrasing allows him to spin out his analogies at great length yet with absolute clarity: the sentences uncurl themselves in a manner almost erotic, but their structure is rigorously focused. Equally important is the sense that Tillotson has stopped almost arbitrarily; once the form of the argument is in place, he might have gone on listing analogies forever. Finally, the power of the argument depends upon the way that it accumulates its examples, rather than upon the precise operations of logic. We could say that Tillotson in effect asks his hearers to do some of the work along with him: he provides the clever analogies, and the listener makes the application. Less sympathetically, we could say that this argument is a rhetorical one, depending for its effect upon the persuasiveness of its manner. Proxility, multiple examples with an arbitrary stopping point, and the related sense that the argument is carried more by the force of language than the power of logic: these three qualities make Tillotson’s sermon a paradigmatic instance of a design argument.

Of course design arguments have been around for a long time: they turn up in Cicero, in the Psalms, in the New Testament, in Aquinas. Though it functions in historically particular ways, the idea that nature
is another "Book of God," to be set beside the scriptural Book of God, is
evidently a compelling one. The most important sacred text for articu-
lating the relationship between these two books is Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his
handwork.
Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.
Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of
the world.11

Importantly, the remainder of the Psalm turns from this celebration of
nature to contemplate a more directly interventionist God:

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the
LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment
of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. (Psalm 19:7–8)

Natural theology is a place to begin, apparently, but not a place to end.
Saint Paul sounds a similar note in the New Testament book of Romans:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and
unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;
Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God
hath shewed it unto them.
For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly
seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal
power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18–20)

Like the psalmist, Paul assumes that evidence of a designer is obvious—
obsvious enough, even, to condemn those who ignore it by rendering
them "without excuse." But his intellectual interest clearly lies else-
where, for this passage initiates the set of arguments that culminates in
the famous conclusion in Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no con-
demnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the
flesh, but after the Spirit."

Despite these contextualizations of natural theology, the initial verses
of Psalm 19 could be easily extracted and made to stand alone as an ar-
gument for God’s existence instead of simply an expression of a religious
orientation. This process of disembedding is on display when Joseph Ad-
dison writes in The Spectator of means for strengthening religious faith:

The last Method which I shall mention . . . is frequent Retirement from the
World, accompanied with religious Meditation. . . . In Courts and Cities we are
entertained with the Works of Men, in the Country with those of God. One is
the Province of Art, the other of Nature. Faith and Devotion naturally grow in

the Mind of every reasonable Man, who sees the Impressions of Divine Power
and Wisdom in every Object on which he casts his Eye. The Supreme Being has
made the best Arguments for his own Existence, in the Formation of the Heav-
ens and the Earth, and these are Arguments which a Man of Sense cannot for-
bear attending to, who is out of the Noise and Hurry of Human Affairs.

After quoting the first three verses of Psalm 19, Addison then concludes:

As such a bold and sublime manner of Thinking furnishes very noble Matter for
an Ode, the Reader may see it wrought into the following one.

I.

The Spacious Firmament on high,
With all the blue Ethereal Sky,
And spangled Heav’ns, a Shining Frame,
Their great Original proclaims:
Th’ unweary’d Sun, from day to day,
Does his Creator’s Pow’r display,
And publishes to every Land
The Work of an Almighty Hand.

II.

Soon as the Evening Shades prevail,
The Moon takes up the wondrous Tale,
And nightly to the listening Earth
Repeats the Story of her Birth;
Whilst all the Stars that round her burn,
And all the Planets, in their turn,
Confirm the Tidings as they roll,
And spread the Truth from Pole to Pole.

III.

What though, in solemn Silence, all
Move round the dark terrestrial Ball?
What tho’ nor real Voice nor Sound
Amid their radiant Orbs be found?
In Reason’s Ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious Voice;
For ever singing, as they shine,
"The Hand that made us is Divine."12

Addison’s loose paraphrase of the first three verses of Psalm 19 turns an
expression of religious devotion into an argument about the origin of
that devotion’s object: where in the original psalm the heavens had de-
declared God’s glory, they now point to “their great Original.” Even more
strikingly, Addison takes the psalmist’s image of nature’s voice tran-
scending the limitations of local languages and turns it into a brief for
Reason’s universality. In both cases he shifts the emphasis toward the
capacities of human knowledge, a shift undertaken because he alters
the psalmist’s basic question. The question hovering in the background of the psalm itself could be rendered as “How are we to understand all of nature, even when silent, as declaring God’s glory?” Addison’s background question, by contrast, is more straightforwardly rational: “How can we know that God made the nature that we see?” The Spectator thus reflects the bivalent nature of design arguments. On the one hand, Addison implies that orthodoxy is vulnerable to skeptical attack, and so he wheels out the design argument for defensive purposes. On the other hand, that rational defense is embedded within a culture of habitual devotion, what Addison calls the “proper Means of strengthening and confirming [Faith] in the Mind of Man” (141), that seeks to transcend merely reasonable arguments and address itself to postures and disciplines of religious living organized teleologically, not inductively.

A revealing contrast to Addison’s rendering is Isaac Watts’s 1719 hymn “The Heavens Declare Thy Glory, Lord,” also inspired by Psalm 19. In Watts’s version, each verse turns on a firm distinction between Nature and Scripture:

The Heavens declare thy Glory, Lord,
In every Star thy Wisdom shines:
But when our Eyes behold thy Word
We read thy Name in fairer Lines.

Nor shall thy spreading Gospel rest
Till thro’ the World thy Truth has run;
Till Christ has all the Nations blest
That see the Light, or feel the Sun.13

For the nonconformist Watts, nature is decidedly not equal to scripture as a locus of God’s revelation; indeed, nature here does not even have the preparatory, subservient status that it does for the psalmist and for Saint Paul. Apparently Watts is not very interested in Addison’s implicit questions and the empirical philosophical background from which they derive. For Watts, knowledge comes through revelation, not through “Reason’s Ear,” a position that effectively short-circuits the epistemological question of how one comes to know something. Nature for Watts is a pleasant but largely irrelevant form of revelation, a potential distraction from a focus on the gospels, which replace the sun as the true source of light. Yet Watts, despite his influence—he wrote almost 600 hymns—was in this respect less a man of his times than was Addison. “The Spacious Firmament on High” expressed a sensibility that permeated the culture of eighteenth-century elites, a sensibility suspicious of arguments from revelation, and one that appealed simultaneously to a thin conception of rationality (“Reason’s Ear”) and to a thicker, more embedded culture of faith’s inculcation.

Certainly design is less vulnerable to skepticism when it is embedded in a larger apparatus of belief and practice. If one already thinks that God made the world, then the world will offer up evidence in support of that thought. In Paradise Lost, for instance, Raphael scolds Adam for wondering if the excess of stars suggests divine inefficiency, but his speech is a contextualization of natural theology, not a rejection of it:

This to attain, whether Heav’n move or Earth, Imports not, if thou reck’n right; the rest
From Man or Angel the great Architect
Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge
His secrets to be scann’d by them who ought
Rather admire.14

Admiration of the stars, not learning how they move, is the real meaning of reckoning right. But within the context of admiration, the search for answers is blameless, because it will be undertaken in the proper direction, namely from principle to observation and not the other way around.15 Thus before chastising Adam, Raphael reassures him:

To ask or search I blame thee not, for Heav’n
Is as the Book of God before thee set.
Wherein to read his wond’rous Works. (8.66–68)

Here Milton offers his readers a compact lesson in design arguments. Human curiosity, combined with limited knowledge, encourages us to reason in the wrong manner: we try to figure out something about God based on what we can see around us. This is natural. But it still needs to be corrected: we need to be reminded, as Raphael reminds Adam, to begin not with what we can observe but with what we know about God. If we’re “reck’n[ing] right,” questions about the behavior of the stars assume their proper place as signifiers of God’s creative power. Raphael’s reminder has the effect of recalling Adam to a better sense of himself, which for Milton is the same thing as reminding Adam that God made him—that God, not human power to reason and observe, is the condition of human autonomy. So Raphael’s reminder re-embeds Adam in a different (and for Milton, deeper) sort of natural state, one that paradoxically requires the artifice of a pedagogical situation. Design’s brief quest for autonomy, and its resubmergence into a larger apparatus of belief, thus stands for Milton as an allegory of human nature in general.

In the many natural theologies published in the latter half of the seventeenth century, design is likewise part of a larger texture of argument. In the neo-Platonic works of Edward Stillingeft and Ralph Cudworth, the power of the argument is assumed but not dwelt upon. In John Wilkins’s Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion (1675), possibly the
most influential example of natural theology for the first part of the eighteenth century, design is one of four arguments for the existence of God. But something happened to design arguments between 1700 and 1850—between, to speak schematically, the moment when Newton made uniformity the guarantor of modern science, and the moment when Darwin offered a naturalistic explanation for what had until then looked like divinely instituted order. In brief, Raphael’s dictum was reversed, and design began to stand more or less on its own.

Initially, the design argument gained in prominence and prestige as freethinking and deism began to play a larger role in the worries of the orthodox in the 1690s. John Ray’s *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691) is centrally devoted to it. The year 1691 also marks the first Boyle lecture, a series funded by Robert Boyle’s estate, whose declared aim was to defend orthodoxy against “notorious Infidels, viz. Atheists, Deists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans” in the service of which the design argument was crucial ammunition. The first of the Boyle lecturers, Richard Bentley, had been a tutor to Stillingfleet’s son; his final three lectures in the series deployed an argument from design that leaned heavily on Newton’s *Principia*. Where Bentley had ended with natural theology, Samuel Clarke’s 1704 and 1705 Boyle lectures began there, building a system of ethics and a theory of revelation upon a cosmological foundation. Clarke’s strategy would become paradigmatic for natural theologians. At the far end of the century, William Paley did in fact write his books on ethics (*Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 1785) and on revelation (*Evidences of Christianity*, 1794) before turning to the argument from design (*Natural Theology*, 1802). But he wrote in the Preface to this last book that his works had “been written in an order the very reverse of that in which they ought to be read.” This is a dramatic shift from the order commended in *Paradise Lost*. Raphael would have told Paley that his recommendation was exactly wrong.

This visibility of the design argument, while manifestly a sign of its cultural importance, is also a mark of its weakness. I noted previously that design arguments work best if one is already committed to their worldview: one is more likely to feel persuaded by Tillotson’s analogies, for instance, if one is already sympathetic to his general approach. It follows that the increasing autonomy of reason over the course of the eighteenth century represents a major liability for design. In directing their readers to begin with the argument from design, writers from Clarke to Addison to Paley count heavily upon a rhetoric of reasonableness; by prioritizing epistemology, they seem to ignore the predispositions, habits, and various visceral intensities their readers bring with them. In this, of course, they are typical of their age. And, for just that reason, they open themselves to critique. David Hume, in particular, was able to exploit design’s reliance upon reason and argument. Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* argued that, far from being an authentic inductive procedure, design arguments reasoned circularly, presupposing the very creator whose existence they claimed to demonstrate. Yet Hume also understood, as I argue in detail in the second chapter of this book, that the social field in which design operated, not the intellectual persuasiveness of the argument itself, accounted for its staying power. Demonstrating that natural theology depends upon something like circular reasoning does little to dislodge its hold, because that hold depends less on firm arguments than on a set of intellectual and emotional habits of which design is only a part. Intellectual historians have tended to emphasize Hume’s critique of design *arguments* while playing down his rueful acknowledgment that the customs and habits inculcated by a wider culture of design were largely impervious to purely intellectual demolition. Yet the importance of this second aspect can hardly be overemphasized. It is one of the things that accounts for the persistence, and even the growth, of design.

A second liability for design flows from this same source. Scholars have noted that the growing autonomy of reason during the eighteenth century also means that feeling, in its turn, becomes a more vexed phenomenon. While Hume thinks of the passions as social, Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, is a character whose depth of feeling arises from her asociality: she is silent and retiring, and she refuses to participate in the forms of sociability available to her. Design has a difficult time dealing with a discourse, like the one to which Fanny subscribes, that understands religion as a set of authentic feelings. Here we verge upon a more general eighteenth-century trend in which increased importance attached to proper feelings accompanies a lack of confidence in the most effective means of inculcating them and a vagueness in the language used to describe them. Edmund Burke’s entire career, from his early writings on aesthetics through his counterrevolutionary broadsides to his impeachment of Warren Hastings, could be regarded as an attempt to fix this problem and place proper feeling once again on a firm foundation.

Between “feeling” and “reason,” however, subsists another set of nonrational elements such as habit and custom. Burke’s defense of what he calls “prejudice” depends upon these elements, and design, too, operates most powerfully when it works upon this ground. As a largely repetitive and tradition-laden discourse, design aims not to produce new feelings but to produce old ones again, so that they become embedded more firmly within the mental and bodily lives of persons. Although natural theology presents itself as a strictly reasonable series of inferences, then, its strength resides in the largely unarticulated predispositions,
habs, and attitudes that live below the threshold of reason. In one sense, of course, these tacit assumptions cannot be articulated, for to do so would disembody them and dissipate their force. On the other hand, reiteration and repetition can serve as powerful methods of enculturation and personal discipline. As we shall see, design is best understood as a series of practices or habits that register the nascent anxieties of a developing modernity in which, paradoxically, tacit assumptions need to be stated so that they can become tacit again.

Design sits squarely in the middle of what would become familiar modern divisions between science and religion, reason and feeling. In this respect it expressed a tension for which there was not yet a name. In his 1667 *History of the Royal Society*, Thomas Sprat gives voice to that tension when he declares that the Society's Fellows, in revealing the orderliness of the world, will also be revealing the goodness of the creator: "[I]t lies in the *Natural Philosopher*’s hands," writes Sprat, "to advance that part of *Divinity* which, though it fills not the mind, with such tender, and powerful contemplations, as that which shows us Man’s Redemption by a Mediator; yea it is by no means to be pass’d by unregarded: but is an excellent ground to establish the other." Sprat’s language is an example of what sociologists call differentiation: we can see how theology in its modern disciplinary sense is separating out from what Sprat calls “natural philosophy." Science, indeed, will establish the "ground" for the theological concept of redemption. Along the way theology acquires an affective language (“tender and powerful contemplations”) foreign to the more dispassionate investigations of the Royal Society. In time, Sprat’s distinction would become a genuine opposition: between faith and reason, between religion and science. The increasing autonomy of these domains would eventually prove too much for design to handle.

Lest this sound too dramatic, however, let us remind ourselves that the differentiation that would eventually render science an autonomous domain happened gradually and over many years. Writing two hundred years after Sprat, having absorbed not only Newton but also Darwin, John Stuart Mill is still willing to allow design a seat at the scientific table—albeit a rather humble one. Design arguments, he notes, have a "really scientific character;" but he goes on to note that design’s analogical character makes it "impossible to estimate precisely": "It may be very strong, when the known points of agreement... are numerous and the known points of difference few; or very weak, when the reverse is the case: but it can never be equal in validity to real induction." Analogy is not science ("real induction") but it is not simply rhetoric either; and Mill’s ambivalence at this late date makes it less surprising that during the romantic period design’s powerful analogical language is still able to express a basically unified sensibility even amid the gradual differentiation of science and religion.

The “Theology” section of the liberal *Analytical Review* for November 1790 provides a revealing snapshot of the way design continued to be taken for granted around the turn of the century. That section opens with an enthusiastic review of the third volume of Hugh Blair’s *Sermons* and includes a lengthy excerpt from a sermon entitled “The Creation of the World considered, as displaying in the Great Creator, Supreme Power, Wisdom, and Goodness.” The world, writes Blair,

presents such an astonishing conjunction of power, wisdom, and goodness, as cannot be beheld without religious veneration. Accordingly, among all nations of the earth, it has given rise to religious belief and worship. The most ignorant and savage tribes, when they looked round on the earth and the heavens, could not avoid ascribing their origin to some invisible designing cause, and feeling a propensity to adore... 24

After this classic instance of the design argument, the *Review* offers a short and critical account of a sermon by Thomas Twining entitled “On the Abuse of Reason”: “though the general principles of this discourse be admitted in their full extent," says the reviewer, “it will still remain a question with many, whether Christianity does in fact teach any truths, which can properly be called mysteries, or require men to assent to any propositions, which reason cannot fully comprehend” (327). Having dispensed with Twining’s emphasis on mystery and revelation in a manner that seems deliberately to recall the language of the deist debates in the early part of the century, the *Review* offers, on the following page, a positive analysis of a sermon by Samuel Neely entitled “The Ocean; Displays of the Divine Perfections in it; and the Moral Instructions to be derived from it”: “The history of nature is so obviously connected with theology, and so easily applied to illustrate and confirm its principles," declares the *Review*, "that it is astonishing it is so seldom resorted to as a fund of interesting topics of discourse for the pulpit... The writer has enumerated many particulars respecting the ocean, which serve to illustrate the wisdom and goodness of God" (329). Taken together, these three reviews offer a picture of natural theology as both embedded and precarious. They tell us simultaneously that natural theology is barely alive and that it is prospering; that it figures importantly in the sermons of one of the eighteenth century’s most popular preachers and that it rarely appears in “discourse for the pulpit.”

The historical evidence does not really bear out the *Review’s* assertion that theology rarely resorts to nature, but this is less interesting than the
fact that the journal distinguishes nature from theology even as it declares the two discourses "obviously connected." This is similar to the distinction that Sprat had made back in 1667, and it is born out by the way in which the Review divides the relevant intellectual terrain. For despite the Review’s endorsement of the sentiments of Blair and Neely, it nevertheless sequesters them to the "Theology" section; a lengthy section on "Natural Philosophy" in the September issue, meanwhile, never mentions the possible theological implications of science’s discoveries. That section opens with an account of the transactions of the Royal Society: William Herschel on the discovery of two new moons orbiting Saturn, some papers on luminous arches and "heavy inflammable Air," and on volcanoes, each one summarized in great detail. Strikingly, the Review is clearly unsatisfied with the Society’s current transactions: "Can it be supposed that these great men have bid adieu to philosophical pursuits? can it be supposed that their researches are not worth communicating? or can they be imagined to be so little awake to the true interests of the society as to withhold them?" (44). Here the Review advocates for the process of intellectual differentiation that Sprat had identified many years earlier: it calls upon scientists to imagine for themselves a more public role. The implication is that science is, or could be, interesting for its own sake and not necessarily for what it can tell its audience about the divine creator.

Dominating the Review’s November issue, finally, are the events in France and the publication that very month of Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France. From this perspective, the Review’s endorsement of Blair and Neely, and its concomitant rejection of Twining on the grounds of unnecessary mysteriousness, resonates powerfully with the radical and liberal complaint that Burke fetishized monarchical power and mystery—a critique shortly to be made (in)famous by Mary Wollstonecraft, herself a frequent contributor to the Review. Here natural theology, particularly in the differentiated state in which the Review understands it (that is, as obviously connected to, but not the same as, natural philosophy), emerges as coordinate with a basically enlightenment political project of transparency and reason, to be set against all those who would cloak power, either divine or temporal, in mystery. In these guises and permutations, then, the Review gives us a snapshot of design toward the end of the eighteenth century as a full participant in the various intellectual currents that occupied the minds of England’s intellectual elites.

Romanticism

After a century and more of frequent iteration, design had achieved such cultural saturation by the late eighteenth century that it is little wonder romantic poetry was sometimes read according to its dictates. The British Critic’s lengthy review of Wordsworth’s Excursion, for instance, placed the poem in a tradition of spiritual meditation beginning with Joseph Hall and Robert Boyle. Where Hall and Boyle had devised a technique for transmuting everyday objects into occasions for praising God, the Critic pushes this technique in a teleological direction: “Moreover, by considering all things sensible with respect to some higher power, we are more likely to get an insight into final causes, and all the wonderful ways of Providence.”20 The inculcation of this sensibility is the chief end of all worthy poetry, the writer claims: “It would be a very engaging task to trace the progress of descriptive poetry with a view to this principle, to mark how the great hierophants of nature have instinctively used it as the true key to her high mysteries” (453). All poetry, in other words, offers a version of the design argument. The Critic then deploys this revised literary history in order to position Wordsworth as the inheritor of a tradition stretching back to ancient Greece, taking in “our own best and oldest bards” (454) and Milton, skipping over the “artificial manners” of the neoclassical period, and landing firmly in what used to be called preromanticism:

the shackles however were burst by Thomson and Collins and Akenside, and, since their day, the works of nature have not wanted observers able and willing to deduce from them lessons, which Providence, if we may speak it without presumption, intended them to convey. But none have ever entered so profoundly into this theory of their art as those commonly known by the name of the Lake Poets, particularly Mr. Wordsworth. (455)

This is a familiar romantic genealogy. Yet it aims to install The Excursion, not the as-yet unpublished Prelude, as the culmination of poetic history; those readers disappointed by the direction that Wordsworth’s politics and poetry had taken could therefore find in such teleological spiritualizing plenty of material for suspicion.

Most obviously, that suspicion can originate in a skeptical or secular sensibility: this is the position of Percy Shelley, William Hazlitt, and the critical tradition that contrasts Wordsworth’s so-called “Great Decade” with the long slow twilight of his career. But suspicion of romanticism’s teleological impulse can also come from those more, not less, devout than Wordsworth. Thus Coleridge’s Aids to Reflection (1825), for example, contains a running attack on William Paley, and we find Coleridge worrying in his marginalia over the typical Cambridge undergraduate reared on the “Grotto-Paleyian Scheme of Christian Evidence.”219 Coleridge’s increasing orthodoxy makes him suspicious of the way that Wordsworth’s verse lends itself to the very same natural pieties that the Critic celebrates. And it is here that the devout Coleridge finds common
ground with the skeptical Percy Shelley, who declared in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) that “[f]or my part I had rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon, than go to Heaven with Paley and Malthus.” It was reading *The Excursion*, we might recall, that finally convinced Shelley of Wordsworth’s apostasy. As Mary Shelley records in her journal, Percy “brings home Wordsworth’s Excursion of which we read a part—much disappointed [sic]—He is a slave.” The figure of slavery here contrasts intriguingly with the analogous figure in the *British Critic*, where Wordsworth appears as the inheritor of those poets who have “burst the shackles” of convention and liberated poetry to become a vehicle for design arguments.

The literary genealogy proposed by the *British Critic* identifies a persistent strain within Wordsworthian romanticism that can be easily joined to a sensibility attracted to design—and it thus defines the terms of a debate about the religious affinities of romanticism that still continues. In the specific case of Percy Shelley, on whom we may dwell for a moment longer, the conceptual orientation of the design argument, with an intellectual heritage that is Aristotelian, naturalist, and empirical, will seem like an anathema, for Shelley’s intellectual heritage is Platonic, mystical, and idealist. Shelley’s hostility toward Paley springs from his belief that Paley was an apologist for the status quo who offered spiritual justification for things as they are. As such, he represented direct competition for the reformist Shelley, who wished to imagine the world differently. Still, the broadside directed at Paley in the “Preface” to *Prometheus Unbound* is a bit surprising, even if we adjust for irony. Grouping Paley with Thomas Malthus may be a familiar romantic reaction against enlightened reason and utilitarian calculus, but in framing his criticism in the theological terms of heaven and hell, Shelley’s rhetoric exposes a certain tension between the language of religion and that of reason. If Paley is an example of what Shelley does not want to be, is this because, as the rhetoric of heaven and hell suggests, he advocates a religious worldview that seems anachronistic and retrograde? Or is it because, as the link to Malthus suggests, he represents enlightenment’s endgame, the kindly face of a world-destroying Reason in which freedom is really submission? Is Paley, that is to say, too unmodern, or is he too much the representative of a kind of modernity that Shelley abhors? The answer matters in part because many of us have learned to view religion as the residue of a prior age, a doomed holdout against the process of modernization. If Paley is in fact real competition for Shelley’s kind of romanticism—if Shelley’s argument, that is to say, recognizes Paley’s religious and moral vision as a possible way of imagining what it means to be modern—then he cannot simultaneously be dismissed as retrograde. Thus Shelley’s ambivalence: he wants to relegate religion to the past and to articulate a different future from the one that religion lays out.

Scholars have long recognized design as an informing, if vague, background presence in the romantic era. Asserted relationships between the harmony and unity of a natural scene and the moral or devotional disposition of its human observers draw upon the tradition of design—but also, potentially, upon neo-Platonism and Spinozism. Most writers did not respect the neat divisions of intellectual history, but rather used whatever arguments and insights served their purposes. In “A Refutation of Deism,” Percy Shelley attacks a version of the design argument derived from Paley, but this is far from his only target. Book Five of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, meanwhile, turns on the notion that nature is God’s Book:

> Hitherto
> In progress through this verse my mind hath looked
> Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven
> As her prime teacher; intercourse with man
> Established by the Sovereign Intellect. (5.10–14)

The speaker goes on to propose an analogy between God’s Book and human books: “Thou also, man, hast wrought,” he says (5.17), though he must immediately face the fact that human books decay. The “Dream of the Arab” passage that shortly follows is a complicated rewriting of Rene Descartes’s dream of the “two books” of science and poetry, itself a revision of the two books of Nature and Scripture. If the *British Critic* thought that design was the key to literary history, the truth is that, precisely because of its ubiquity, design is hard to isolate from the general swell of late eighteenth-century political, philosophical, and religious thinking and writing.

Rather than provide an exhaustive catalog of design references, then, I have focused in this book on places where discussions or acknowledgments of design converge upon the larger matter of secularization—secularization instantiated, registered, or resisted both at the level of the text itself and in later critical interpretations and appropriations. Thus romanticism is an important part of the story I wish to tell in part because of its reception in the twentieth century. Consequently, we must keep two sorts of romanticism in play: on the one hand, various texts that exemplify (without exhausting) what is now often termed “romantic-period writing”; on the other, a more abstract conception of romanticism, heavily influenced by the critical tradition, that through its powerful and frequently normative operations has influenced our understanding of secularization and religion. At the most basic level, that
normativity is captured in the vague sense that after the romantics it was possible to be “spiritual” without being “religious.” Consider, then, how Shelley’s dismissal of Paley functions to consolidate such a reading by embodying the dual conceptions of romanticism as period-specific writing and as normative worldview. Here we see the rejection, by a “romantic” writer, of a “romantic-period” writer, a rejection moreover that hinges on defining the latter as in thrall to orthodoxy while the former is free of it. This is sometimes called “romantic exceptionalism,” and Shelley’s example registers not only the link between romantic exceptionalism and secularization but also the manner in which that link constructs a persuasive intellectual genealogy for modern critics. M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, and Paul de Man, despite important methodological differences, share a reading of romanticism that turns upon extracting its exceptional figures from their cultural milieu by interpreting them as powerfully anticipating and addressing modern concerns—where modernity itself is understood as alienated (Abrams), iconoclastic (Bloom), or potentially demystified (de Man).

One powerful way in which romanticism has been tied to modernity through the auspices of secularization is the “two cultures” hypothesis, so-called after C. P. Snow’s famous lecture of that name. According to this hypothesis, the industrial revolution split intellectual culture in two, with the physical sciences on one side and the literary intellectuals on the other. Henceforth, science dedicated itself to progress and to the future, while literary culture became increasingly backward looking and conservative. Romantic-era writers of all political persuasions contributed to this sensibility, sometimes by conceiving of literary culture as distinct from that of science, more importantly by producing the sort of writing in which later generations could locate the idea of literary culture. Although Snow does not speak much of religion, we need only turn to the work of Max Weber to find a powerful account of the way in which science gradually demystifies the universe. Against Weber’s “iron cage,” mystery and enchantment come increasingly to reside in versions of the literary, and so two faces of secularization emerge. The first is the rational scientific one, whose operations push a religious sensibility increasingly over to the literary side of the ledger. Yet writers, too, must live in the modern world, in which religious belief is increasingly pressured. So in accounts such as those of Matthew Arnold or John Ruskin, a religious sensibility, conceived now as the property of literature, of feeling, or of art, eventually becomes indistinguishable from that of spirit or culture more generally. This sensibility carries over into the twentieth century and the full institutionalization of literary study, when figures as various as T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and the American New Critics demote romanticism but retain the idea of a literary culture distinct from the workaday world. This conception, in which literature enables human beings to hold on to a spiritual sensibility without having to commit themselves to a particular metaphysic, helps elucidate why, for a postwar generation of literary critics, romanticism appeared as an attempt to rescue “spirit”—that is, a secularized religion—from the anomic and fragmentation of a modern life increasingly dominated by science and instrumental rationality.

Progressive critics from Marx and Weber onward, meanwhile, depend upon the same basic opposition between humanistic and scientific cultures in order to launch their critiques of capital and rationalization—a tradition taken up most famously in the twentieth century by Adorno and the Frankfurt School. By locating critical agency within the text itself, such progressive criticism instills cultural conflict within its own object of study. In effect, the literary object exposes its own impulses toward retrenchment, mystification, and religion. Thus particular critics might, like Abrams, celebrate a romanticism understood as the carrier of spiritual truths, or they might, like de Man, criticize those truths as mystifications and seek to uncover romanticism’s counterspirit—but the difference in these critical approaches is itself enabled by the shared premise that literature had taken upon itself the role of cultural consolidation formerly reserved for religion. That shared premise itself is one reason that romanticism seems so inevitably entangled with the narrative of secularization.

Let me here give two examples of that entanglement. The first is from a passage I noted previously: the discussion of books in Wordsworth’s Prelude. When the speaker says that hitherto he has looked at nature as his “prime teacher” (5.13) he inaugurates the first in a series of attempts to create some distance between himself and nature—and in this instance the analogy between the Book of God and human books becomes the means for such separation. Yet there are two important respects in which the analogy of the Book of God to human books does not fully succeed. First, human books “must perish” (5.21), whereas Nature decays only to live again, a process famously described a bit later as “woods decaying, never to be decayed” (6.557). Second, while “the speaking face of earth and heaven” is designed as a way for God to communicate with humanity, books are a way for humanity to communicate with itself: “Thou also, man, hast wrought,/ For commerce of thy nature with itself” (5.17–18). In other words, human productions are self-conscious in a way that divine productions are not. In his influential essay “Romanticism and ‘Anti-Self-Consciousness,’” Geoffrey Hartman notes that the “disease” of self-analysis in The Prelude will lead eventually to the famous crisis of Books 9 and 10, but goes on to argue that it is Wordsworth’s strength to overcome such paralyzing self-analysis by winning through to
a mature theory of Imagination: "[a] way is to be found not to escape from or limit knowledge but to convert it into an energy finer than intellectual," he writes. Hartman’s dialectical apparatus comes from Hegel’s interpretation of the Fall as a fall into self-consciousness. According to this strategy, the way back to a second innocence must come not through a reversion to an Edenic state, but rather, as Hartman quoting Hegel says: “the hand that inflicts the wound is also the hand that heals it.” In other words, the making of human artifacts, including books of poetry, both initiates a separation from a pre-lapsarian and apparently un-self-conscious world and heals the wound such separation entails by discovering the compensating power of the imagination. Hartman is consequently quite explicit about the secularization inherent in the romantic agon of self-consciousness: “There clearly comes a time when art frees itself from its subordination to religion or religious inspired myth, and continues or even replaces these. This time seems to coincide with what is generally called the Romantic period.” If human books are to be understood analogously to the Book of God, then, it is an analogy pitched, we might say, toward an increasingly demystified (which is to say, for Hartman, self-conscious) future.

Interestingly, it is possible to contest Hartman’s emphasis on consciousness but retain his constitutive link between romanticism and secularization. Andrzej Warminski does just this when he begins his reading of Book 5 by responding to Hartman: “what happens,” he writes, “when ... the second term of the triad Nature / Self-consciousness / Imagination is understood, is read, as a linguistic self-reflection ... a linguistic turn of language upon language?” This question disputes Hartman’s basic presupposition that Wordsworthian romanticism is fundamentally about the relationship of nature and imagination. For Warminski (following de Man), the basic Wordsworthian problematic is rather the relationship of imagination and temporality. Thus, in his reading, the turn in Book 5 from God’s Book to human books does not inaugurate secularization along the lines of a Hegelian fall into self-consciousness and consequent imaginative reparation, but emerges instead as an allegory for the barely glimpsed possibility that secularization need not be undertaken because it has always already happened in the anticipated death of the subject, a death that figures the death of divinity itself: “just as man’s face may ‘cover’ or ‘manifest’ or figure no spirit or a dead spirit, so the ‘speaking face’ of Nature may ‘cover’ or ‘manifest’ or ‘figure’ nothing but a deathful spirit or a dead God,” writes Warminski. From this perspective, the hermeneutic tradition stretching from Hegel to Hartman stabilizes the very spiritual content whose sublation it takes itself to be narrating; Hartman’s emphasis on self-consciousness keeps him nostalgically attached to the idea of Nature as God’s Book, and he thereby comes uncomfortably close to a mystified reading of Wordsworth and, by extension, romanticism itself.

The debate between Warminski and Hartman, which can stand in for a debate between phenomenological and deconstructive criticism, is more interesting now for its shared premises than for its methodological disagreements. Both critics read in such a way as to make it romanticism’s distinct achievement to initiate a break with religion. Though they construe that break in different ways, they concur about what romanticism is breaking from: what eighteenth-century writers called “natural religion” or, somewhat more technically, “natural theology,” represented in The Prelude by the idea of Nature as the “speaking face” of the divine. Whether the romantic achievement takes the form of imaginative anti-self-consciousness or the tropological anticipation of death—whether, that is, it involves a redefined relationship to Nature or a definitive turn away from Nature—the object of critique is the same. For both critics, what is at stake is the legacy of romanticism itself, a legacy whose secularity must be established or preserved by rescuing it from the mistaken idea that Nature is the Book of God—an idea whose mistakenness both critics understand Wordsworth’s poetry to implicitly register.

My second example of the way that romanticism has come to seem inevitably entangled with the narrative of secularization: Josef Haydn’s oratorio The Creation, which premiered in 1798. Haydn was a quintessentially enlightened figure; his friends and acquaintances were largely well-educated and progressive elites, many of them Freemasons like himself. His optimistic and technically superb music is grounded by a dignified humanity; what one scholar calls his “sincere and cheerful piety” strikes a balance between God’s majesty and human capacities. The libretto for The Creation expresses a similar philosophy. It was probably written for Handel (who never set it) several decades earlier by someone variously referred to as Lidley or Liddel, about whom nothing else is known. As befits the time of its writing, it is optimistic, evincing a wonder in God’s creation and confidence about humanity’s place within it. Although it makes a few Platonic references to celestial harmony, its basic energies are decidedly those of natural theology: inductive, reasonable, and confident. The libretto is an amalgam of Paradise Lost and the early chapters of Genesis, but it contains very little of Milton’s actual theology; the Fall is alluded to only briefly, and persistent thematic concerns of Paradise Lost such as free will and God’s foreknowledge are entirely absent. Theologically, then, the libretto could have been written by an Arminian Anglican, a deist, or a Freemason; “[t]he broader message,” writes Nicholas Temperley, “seems distinctly ‘ecumenical’ in its appeal.” The libretto was in the possession of the London-based musical
impressario Johann Peter Salomon, who was responsible for bringing Haydn to London in 1791 and again in 1794. It was adapted and translated into German by Haydn’s friend Baron Gottfried van Swieten, and subsequently retranslated into English.

The German version of The Creation was premiered privately in Vienna in 1798, then publicly at the National Theatre in Vienna in March of 1799. The score was published in both English and German in February 1800 and the oratorio itself premiered at Covent Garden in March of 1800. The Creation rapidly entered the standard repertory of choral societies. In the early years of the nineteenth century it became a European and eventually transatlantic phenomenon, with more than forty performances in Vienna before 1810; numerous performances throughout the German-speaking and Scandinavian countries; four performances in London in 1800; in Worcester, Hull, Hereford, Norwich, Stamford, and Gloucester during 1801–3; in Paris in 1800, Moscow in 1801, Spain in 1805, Italy in 1809, and Boston in 1819. The publication of a piano-vocal score and the independent publication of extracts ensured further dissemination.

The Creation opens with a depiction of chaos in the key of C minor. These passages are unsettled and chromatic, with shifting harmonies and sparse orchestral accompaniment, more raw the materials of music than music itself. “[A]nd the earth was without form, and void,” reads the libretto, “and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” The subsequent depiction of God’s creation of light is one of the most famous moments in all of Haydn’s music. The libretto reads: “And God said; Let there be Light, and there was Light” (53). At this moment the orchestra bursts into a fortissimo C major chord, resolving the broken and unfinished character of the depiction of chaos. Haydn had apparently kept this moment a secret until the first performance in Vienna. As one contemporary observer wrote, “in that moment when light broke out for the first time, one would have said that rays darted from the composer’s burning eyes. The enchantment of the electrified Viennese was so general that the orchestra could not proceed for several minutes.” This famous strike-of-light passage also establishes the fundamentally optimistic tone of the oratorio as a whole; in bringing order out of chaos and light out of darkness, it reveals Haydn’s confidence in the natural world’s accessibility to human understanding. Like God, the composer brings light to his creation—this time, appropriately enough, by electrifying it.

That confidence gets picked up at the end of day four, when Haydn returns to C major with the well-known choral passage “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” a paraphrase of the opening verses of Psalm 19. With this chorus we can complete a story that began with our earlier discussion of this Psalm, for Haydn’s setting of “The heavens are telling” became a familiar nineteenth-century hymn. There was one important change, however: the music was Haydn’s, but the hymn’s words are not those of Haydn’s libretto but rather “The spacious firmament on high,” Addison’s well-known paraphrase of Psalm 19. Addison’s confidence in “Reason’s Ear,” which can hear the hymn of praise that creation sings even when creation is literally silent, proves to be an apt revision of the libretto of The Creation, which at this juncture seems to carry a Christological implication: “In all the land resounds the word, / never unperceived, / Ever understood” (56). Especially within a Miltonic context, the resounding word could be taken to echo the “Word” (that is, Christ) from the gospel of John, suggesting a complex relationship between the revelation available to all and the revelation contained specifically within Scripture. But Addison’s paraphrase strips this ambiguity away, ironically bringing the passage closer to its original, non-Christological meaning, though with a decidedly enlightened spin:

What though, in solemn Silence, all
Move round the dark terrestrial Ball?
What tho’ nor real Voice nor Sound
Amid their radiant Orbs be found?
In Reason’s Ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious Voice,
For ever singing, as they shine,
“The Hand that made us is Divine.”

Here creation’s silence, which for Saint Paul and Isaac Watts, we recall, provides an opening for more direct kinds of divine revelation, is rendered completely accessible to Reason, delivering a clear message that rests content with an account of origins (“The Hand that made us is Divine”) and thereby foreclosing upon any further doctrinal complications.

The ecumenical energy of the composite Addison / Haydn hymn suggests the manner in which a design sensibility permeated eighteenth-century intellectual culture. By contrast, when Haydn’s oratorio appears in a pivotal passage in Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel The Last Man, the effect is to darken, ironize, and secularize the optimistic and pious cultural milieu in which Addison and Haydn both participated. After a plague has wiped out most of the earth’s inhabitants, the few straggling survivors make their way toward Switzerland, when they hear organ music coming from a rural church. The narrator, Lionel Verney, offers a rapturous and Platonic apostrophe to music as the “language of the immortals.” He then continues:

We all stood mute; many knelt. In a few minutes however, we were recalled to human wonder and sympathy by a familiar strain. The air was Haydn’s “New-Created World,” and, old and drooping as humanity had become, the world yet
fresh as at creation's day, might still be worthily celebrated by such an hymn of praise. Adrian and I entered the church; the nave was empty, though the smoke of incense rose from the altar, bringing with it the recollection of vast congregations, in once thronged cathedrals; we went into the loft. A blind old man sat at the belfry; his whole soul was ear; and as he sat in the attitude of attentive listening, a bright glow of pleasure was diffused over his countenance; for, though his lack-lustre eye could not reflect the beam, yet his parted lips, and every line of his face and venerable brow spoke delight. A young woman sat at the keys, perhaps twenty years of age. Her auburn hair hung on her neck, and her fair brow shone in its own beauty; but her drooping eyes let fall fast-flowing tears, while the constraint she exercised to suppress her sobs, and still her trembling, flushed her pale cheek; she was thin; languor, and alas! sickness, bent her form.39

Shelley's reference here is probably to Haydn's depiction of the close of the first day of creation, in which the libretto repeats the phrase "[a] new created world / springs up at God's command" (53). This section of the oratorio had been transcribed for piano and voice as a separate piece, which Shelley knew. Interestingly, this passage is one of the few places in *The Creation* that strikes a darker tone.40 Coming immediately after the dramatic "and there was Light" passage, it pairs the fall of the rebel angels "with despairing cursing rage" (rendered in A minor) with the creation rising "at God's command" (rendered in A major).

Picking up on this darker tone, Shelley's account accomplishes a brilliant reversal of everything that *The Creation* had come to stand for. Depicting the oratorio as a carrier of enlightened values, she begins by contrasting the Aristotelian "human sympathy" of Haydn's "familiar strain" with the Platonicizing, harmonious, and reverential attitude evoked by the (unnamed) musical selection that had preceded it. Though Lionel and Adrian continue to cling to the enlightened idea of human sympathy, the plague has revealed that idea as empty; any attempt to link sympathy and compassion to a religious vision by means of natural theology would ring hollow in the contrast between the novel's "old and drooping . . . humanity" and what the music describes as the fresh creation springing up at God's command, for God is clearly nowhere to be found in the world of accelerating destruction that Lionel inhabits. In this respect we may say that Shelley is deliberately secularizing the familiar discourse of natural theology, not by contesting its inductive form of reasoning but by casting the entire tradition as an exercise in nostalgia: the world may have once sprung up at God's command, but that was a long time ago, and that story can now provide only the solace of a mystified backward glance for its few remaining inhabitants, who remember "vast congregations in once thronged cathedrals." Importantly, Shelley accomplishes this revision in part by restoring the Miltonic ethos that *The Creation* libretto had stripped away. The "blind old man" listening intently to the playing of his frail daughter recalls the blind Milton dictating *Paradise Lost* to his daughters. More dramatically yet, the reader of *The Last Man* knows, from the very outset of the novel, that Lionel, Adrian, and the few remaining inhabitants of the earth have embarked on a downward population spiral, one that in effect un-writes Milton's story by reducing the population all the way down to one, turning Lionel Verney into an Adam without an Eve.

Shelley's strategic use of *The Creation* thus stands for one possible fate of design within romanticism. The tradition of natural theology had dominated the 150 years between *Paradise Lost* and *The Last Man*, but Shelley's text works to revise Milton in such a way as to render natural theology an historical relic. If the Book of God had once been easy to read, it is now both obscure and obsolete. Human books, to pick up on the Wordsworthian thread that attracted both Hartman and Warminski, are all that remain legible in this world; as Lionel notes when he chooses a "few books" for his solitary journey around the globe, "the libraries of the world are thrown open to me" (367). In like manner, we recall, human books replaced the Book of God in *The Prelude*, becoming (for Hartman) a vehicle for consciousness as the carrier and redeemer of the Fall or (for Warminski) the experience of temporality and thus the tropological anticipation of death. Shelley's conclusion manages to combine these two differently secular readings of human books, for they become both a vehicle for Hartmanian anti-self-consciousness—a means by which Lionel tries to "conceal me from myself" (363)—and, with the book that Lionel himself writes, a nonredeemptive anticipation of death. For unlike Wordsworth, Lionel has no audience for his autobiography: "I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?—to whom dedicated?" (364). To write, in this context, is to write for its own sake, to produce a literature not beholden to its audience. This undertaking is possible, Shelley suggests, only once the writer has gone beyond Wordsworth, with his penchant for teleological "slavery" as revealed in *The Excursion*, and achieved the difficult knowledge that his own death will bring an end to all meaning. To imagine a literature at the end of the world means giving up on the idea that books reference, however obliquely, the Book of God.

In this "death of the author" guise, romanticism spoke powerfully to critical movements such as deconstruction. I remark upon this affinity in order to draw out two distinct ways of understanding romanticism in the broader sense alluded to earlier—not, that is, as merely a period-specific designation but as a concept that continues to variously inform our modernity. The first, linked most obviously to Abrams, is to plot romanticism as the secularization of inherited theological ideas, and then to read backward from a seemingly achieved modern seularity in order
to validate the romantic secularizing project. This method turns historical change over to the relatively impersonal forces of development, particularly the set of developments that sociologists call "modernization.

The second way of understanding romanticism’s relation to modernity, linked both to deconstructive and to historicist methodologies, relies on a more explicitly interventionist model, wherein particular writers and readers—Shelley, Warminski—help us recognize that the old certainties no longer hold. This model sometimes positions these writers and readers in agonistic opposition to the tendencies of the literature they read. For this group, romanticism finds its proper home in modernity not inevitably but contingently, because through the blindness and insight of critical activity we have made a home for it here.

In turning now to address secularization directly, I wish to keep both the modernizing and the interventionist versions of romantic modernity in mind. I shall propose that the humanist technique of linking secularization to modernization, evident in the approaches of Abrams and Hartman, wrongly supposes that modernity is a singular and historically inevitable event rather than a multiple and contingent one. Meanwhile, the posthumanist interventionist model characteristic of Warminski and a variety of poststructuralist critics, while admirably alert to contingency, tends to misread its own secularity as neutral and autonomous rather than as determined by the intellectual stance itself. Both humanist and posthumanist renderings of romanticism, that is to say, rely upon aspects of the secularization thesis that have been subjected to increasing scrutiny by nonliterary scholars.

Secularization

What do we mean when we invoke "secularization"? In common use, the term is often shorthand for a loss of belief or a decline in the authority of religious institutions. Many secularization stories, moreover, assume a causal relationship between these two, for it seems logical to assume that people will abandon their personal religious commitments as religion itself loses cultural power. Yet that assumption mixes individual and institutional foci, and it leads to some conceptual confusion. For one thing, it supposes that religion is a set of beliefs that can be lost. Abrams makes this assumption in Natural Supernaturalism, for it is only in personal terms—that is, in the language of "belief" and "ideas" and their "reinterpretation"—that he can claim romanticism as a revolution in subjectivity. In accounts such as this, institutional decline morphs into the loss of religious content at the level of the individual. Empirically, however, there is a problem with this account in at least some parts of the world, individual participation is inversely linked to religion’s institutional power. Indeed, institutional decline sometimes leads to the intensification of religious content as it becomes more thoroughly internalized.

A second problem with the familiar account of secularization is that the narrative of religious decline itself is empirically suspect. With the important exception of Western Europe, the world is not more secular than it was before modernization; it is, if anything, more religious. Some of its most rapidly modernizing societies are also its most intensely religious. Even in the West, the relationship between modernization and secularization is hard to pin down, for the process has played itself out differently in northern Europe, in southern Europe, and in former Eastern Bloc countries. The religious vibrancy of the United States, meanwhile, further complicates the relation of secularization to modernization. Current data suggest little change in religious participation during the past fifty years in the United States, while evidence for earlier eras indicates that modernization does not equal secularization in any straightforward way. Meanwhile the most reliable data show that religious participation in England rose between 1800 and 1850 (the period of most intense modernization and industrialization) and then held steady or rose gradually until 1900; the period between 1890 and 1914 was probably the key turning point.

The secularization thesis predicts that religion declines as societies modernize, and yet the empirical data seem not to support the thesis or to support it only partially. The secularization thesis itself has been so persuasive, however, because of the way that it is embedded in modernization theory. In this theory Western modernity provides a model for all industrialized societies, which can be evaluated according to how far they lag behind the Western template. The idea that industrialized societies develop according to a single, culture-neutral model in which complexity and reflexivity replace simplicity and tradition has exerted considerable power within sociology through most of the twentieth century. Yet the supposedly inevitable convergence posited by modernization theory has not materialized, and as a variety of sociologists and cultural theorists working under the rubric of "multiple modernities" or "alternative modernities" have recognized, modernity is not a single entity but a multiply refracted one. These scholars argue that European forms of modernity are not necessarily templates for other societies; although modernization may be largely inevitable, that process is dialectically shaped by the cultural traditions it encounters, so that modernity itself must be understood, in the words of one scholar, as a "continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs."

In a working paper originating in the Center for Transcultural Studies, Charles Taylor and Benjamin Lee note that convergence theories of modernity tend to conceive of "tradition" as a homogenous resistance to
modernization: "by holding people within a sacred horizon, a fixed community, and unchallengable custom," they write, "[tradition] ... hold[s] us back from 'development,' conceived as the unfolding of our potentiality to grasp our real predicament and apply instrumental reason to it."62 Taylor and Lee argue that pitting tradition against modernity in this way distorts the actual historical changes that are underway, which are inevitably more complex and variable. If modernity is imagined as a variety of cultural programs, however, and not simply as whatever remains after tradition has been removed, then tradition and modernity can be understood as mutually informing entities.

If modernization is a myth, perhaps secularization is, too? To be sure, secularization as a theory of religious decline is deeply embedded in modernization theory. That is one reason for its uncontested status: secularization was taken for granted because it legitimated modernity. To the tension between tradition and modernity, between simple and complex societies, secularization offered both a persuasive theory of historical transformation and a legitimization of that transformation. There is of course a negative, Weberian, reading of this transformation, in which we are delivered from tradition only to find ourselves in the iron cage of instrumental rationality. But there is also the positive reading, in which the story of modernization is the story of the human capacity to shake itself free from the past, to maximize autonomy and grasp its freedom as an objective truth.63

It would be an overreaction, however, to dispense altogether with secularization, however tempting that may be.64 In his book Public Religions in the Modern World, José Casanova very usefully distinguishes among the variety of meanings attached to secularization, notes their imbrication with a now-discredited modernization theory, and concludes that what must be salvaged from secularization theory is the concept of "differentiation"—that is, the emancipation of a variety of forms of cultural authority from religious control. One indisputable characteristic of modernity is that autonomous secular institutions now handle a huge variety of social tasks that were once the concern of religion; but though this change is massive and irreversible, Casanova insists that such differentiation does not necessarily entail either religious decline or religious privatization and marginalization. Only once we disarticulate differentiation from these other processes, he argues, can we understand why religion has returned so forcefully to the world stage in the past quarter century. Now, privatization and decline may follow in the wake of differentiation, and they sometimes have; but it is part of Casanova's nicely counterintuitive thesis that those religious cultures that embrace modern differentiation, such as the United States, actually resist or reverse religious privatization and decline. To be both modern and religious is not a contradiction in terms.

Etymologically, "secularization" in fact suggests differentiation: one of the word's original meanings was the movement of individuals and property from the realm of the church or monastery to the realm of the world. Most discussions of secularization, however, tend to refer not to a changed relationship within this world, but rather to a changed relationship between this world and the next, and thereby focus not on differentiated spheres but rather on such things as the privatization or loss of belief. Casanova argues that we must return to the earlier and more precise definition of secularization.65 The consequences of this recommendation become immediately clear when we consider the very title of Abrams's book: Natural Supernaturalism. Abrams is interested in a changed relationship between "this world" and "the other world," a definition that entails a personalistic approach to religion and commits him to the hypothesis that modernization brings about a measurable loss in religious belief. By contrast, Casanova's version of secularization focuses on transformations within "this world," particularly what he calls "the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms." "If before," he continues, "it was the religious realm which appeared to be the all-encompassing reality within which the secular realm found its proper place, now the secular sphere will be the all-encompassing reality, to which the religious sphere will have to adapt."66 It is worth repeating that this reordering of the relations between religious and secular realms entails no necessary reordering of the relations either between the natural and supernatural worlds or between institutions and private beliefs.

In this book I will follow Casanova's definition of secularization as differentiation, and I will strive to distinguish it from theories of secularization that posit or predict religious decline. Theories of secularization embedded in modernization theory tend to take the industrial revolution as an implicit or even explicit touchstone; they thus foreshorten the historical time line and limit the range of meanings that "modernity" itself can have. Using differentiation rather than modernization as the key to secularization allows us to expand the time line and lift a teleological and normative burden from the concept of modernity. Differentiation is part of the experience of modernity, but its descriptive capacities allow for a sense of modernity itself as multiple, as an ongoing process of creating and reforming a plethora of cultural programs. Once modernization is rendered a more parochial and local affair, secularization can be freed from the linear and teleological assumptions that hover in the background whenever it is invoked.

Indeed, the argument from design registers and responds to a form of differentiation that precedes industrialization. We already saw this process at work in Sprat's History of the Royal Society in which he distinguishes
dispute over jurisdiction rather than over content we can see how analogy itself becomes a figure for secularization as differentiation rather than secularization as transformation. The design argument enters, meanwhile, when another analogy, between divine and human contrivance, supplements that initial differentiating analogy—something that happens within the context of the more comprehensive analogy by which nature becomes the Book of God. Thus, to anticipate a later stage of my argument: the romantic affection for metaphor and symbol inspires a progressive reading of romantic secularization as that which reorders the relationship of this world to the next world by transforming divine into human content. By contrast, if we restore the design argument to its place in the romantic era, then we can counterpose analogy to symbol and metaphor and thus understand romantic secularization as a form of differentiation, a reordering of categories within this world, just as Bacon understood analogy as a figure for the emancipation of science from theological control.

One social group whose differentiated autonomy is particularly apposite to this discussion is the group that Alvin W. Gouldner calls the “new class” of intellectuals. In his introduction to The Secularization of the World, Peter Berger notes the following exception to his “desecularization thesis”:

There exists an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is indeed secularized. This subculture is the principle “carrier” of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values. While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the “official” definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communication, and the higher reaches of the legal system. They are remarkably similar all over the world today. . . . [R]egrettably, I cannot speculate here as to why people with this type of education should be so prone to secularization. I can only point out that what we have here is a globalized elite culture.

Berger answers his own question, at least in part: the reason that these global elites are so prone to secularization is precisely that they are global elites. Tied together by a “Western-type” education grounded in “Enlightened beliefs and values,” they understand their autonomy as inversely related to the power of religion. In other words, they adhere to modernization theory of the sort criticized by Taylor and Lee, for they imagine tradition as intrinsically opposed to such modern intellectual values as reflexivity. In fact, The Secularization of the World describes an astonishingly multiple variety of modernities across the globe. In their inability to recognize this, the global elites remarked by Berger reveal the degree to which secularization as a theory of religious decline and marginalization operates as an ideology. It both offers a meaningful
that the global South, for instance, is currently experiencing a massive surge in religious activity. That objection loses some of its force, however, when we recall that to take up a topic such as romanticism is also to take up its interpretation by later readers. Like the intellectual actors analyzed by Berger and Smith, the influential readers of romanticism have been elites who occupy relatively prominent positions within the cultural landscape. 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. One cannot discuss secularization simply as an empirical matter, even within the context of Britain or Western Europe, for it is always also bound up in the values, desires, and self-understandings of those who wield it as a concept—and who wield it most powerfully when they assume a certain definition of secularization itself. To return to the two senses of romanticism I distinguished earlier, the question of secularization’s relation to romanticism cannot be understood as delimited by the historical period 1780–1830; it must also be analyzed with regard to those modern interpreters of romanticism who seek, for a variety of institutional and personal reasons, to make it speak to their contemporary moment.

Here an illustration from Jane Austen’s novel Mansfield Park (1814) is apposite. When Mary Crawford, upon hearing that prayers are no longer said in the family chapel at Sotherton, smilingly notes that “[e]very generation has its improvements,” she should understand her words as an attempt to link the waning of religion to the inevitability of generational change. In this way Mary tries to naturalize religious decline, but in fact her claim is invested in influencing a debate about whether religious decline is natural or whether the case at Sotherton is an aberration. And because Mary is talking to a prospective clergyman with whom she will, much to her surprise, fall in love, the narrator is having a little joke at her expense: Mary thinks she is stating the obvious, but the narrator unmasks the “obvious” as an interested position within an active debate, a position, moreover, that masks its partiality and claims objectivity by means of the aura of generational inevitability.

Mary Crawford, with her progressive transformation of religious into secular content, is an apt figure for those scholars who ushered romanticism into the academic mainstream between 1950 and 1960. These scholars were writing during the heyday of modernization theory, and linking romanticism to secularization supplemented this theory at the level of ideas, for it seemed axiomatic that newer secular ideas would defeat older religious ideas; if romanticism was a “revolution in ideas,” then, it was a revolution that pointed directly to the sensibilities of the middle of the twentieth century. Spiritually speaking, it was an optimistic and ecumenical age. On the Protestant side, the World Council
of Churches was founded in 1948, while the reforms of Vatican II (1962–65) promised a more generous and inclusive Catholicism. Meanwhile, under the influence especially of Mircea Eliade, the professional study of religion in midcentury was moving away from a Durkheimian emphasis on ritual and practice and toward a broader syncretistic emphasis on myth, symbol, and idea, aspects of religion that were in principle sharable across cultural divides. Finally, secularization theory was sweeping all before it. As a recent article on the history of secularization within sociology notes, “by the early 1970s, secularization was the reigning dogma in the field.” Abrams himself does not reference sociological material, but perhaps he could refer so casually in 1971 to the “historical commonplace” of “progressive secularization” because it seemed possible to find in romanticism (that is, at the level of subjectivity and “ideas”) what his colleagues on the other side of campus were finding in the organization of cultural space. Reading romanticism as a manifestation of secularization, then, meant that one avoided the Weberian nightmare of modernity as soulless rationalization and mechanism; romanticism could be a carrier of cultural modernity rather than societal modernization, a technique for preserving spiritual truths while overcoming both modern bourgeois anomic and the exclusive doctrinal content that had led historically to religious conflict.

So interpreted, romanticism seemed to fit into midcentury cultural movements like a hand in a glove. “In their various ways,” writes Gene W. Ruoff, “many critics who flourished from the fifties through the seventies attempted to accommodate romantic texts to a sense of capacious spirituality, consistently undervaluing polemical dissonances in search of higher spiritual harmonies.” From this perspective, literature offers its readers a way to contextualize absolute religious claims within a more inclusive, if vaguer, spirituality. In Cleanth Brooks’s famous formulation, for instance, literature is paradoxical, standing beside and gesturing toward the doxa that it does not name; such criticism demands of the reader only the willingness to check his or her preconceptions at the door. Despite important methodological differences, romantic humanists such as Abrams and Earl Wasserman and mythological critics such as Northrop Frye subscribed to Brooks’s belief that literature, properly understood, transcended doctrine. Accordingly, to elevate romanticism to a privileged status within the academy meant freeing it from doctrine; not coincidently, this newly fashioned romanticism consolidated the position of the critic by establishing the importance of his or her profession and its ability to speak to the spiritual concerns of the age.

The cultural era to which these critical postures gave expression came to a startling end in 1979—the year of the Iranian Revolution and the year in which Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in the United States. In the 1980s, religion reassumed a public role on the world stage; as I write these words in 2005, religion’s public reemergence seems, if anything, to be intensifying. The part of the secularization thesis that links modernization to religious decline and privatization—that is, the aspect of the secularization thesis that the ecumenical intellectual culture of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s took for granted—has been empirically refuted by the events of the past quarter century. From this perspective, Jerome J. McGann’s critique of romantic humanist idealism in The Romantic Ideology (1983) expressed at the critical level a cultural and historical trend just getting underway. In tune with this new era, McGann and the new historicists who followed in his immediate wake overturned a romanticism of spiritual harmonies, freeing romantic texts to become sites of contested value within venues inflected by power. As Ruoff summed up the situation in 1990, “[t]he age of ecumenism, which had followed a solid Wordsworthian program in accentuating . . . spiritual affinities while diminishing creedal differences, is dead. Ecumenism itself, which had seemed a turning point in the history of religions . . . now appears to have been a narrowly based cultural detour.” That a cultural detour might appear to a small group of Western intellectuals as a turning point in the history of religions is itself eloquent testimony to the manner in which a parochial set of analytic procedures can, under the right conditions, assume the mantle of universality.

And yet, if the historicist turn opened the way for a reconsideration of romanticism’s relation to secularization, that path remained largely unexplored. The worldwide movements of desecularization and the reemergence of public religion seemed either irrelevant or aberrant to the materialist romantic historicism that followed McGann’s intervention. For that historicism, the urgent critical task was to strip romanticism of whatever vestiges of religion or spirit still remained (a task already being undertaken, from another direction, by de Manian deconstruction). McGann quite explicitly aimed to advance secularization by finding in romantic texts the very ideological conflicts structuring literary criticism in the last quarter of the twentieth century—and in this goal his project was ironically continuous with Abrams’s: “From our present vantage,” McGann wrote in a 1981 essay about Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, “what we must do is inaugurate our disbelief in Coleridge’s ‘poetic faith.’” This Romantic ideology must be seen for what it is, a historical phenomenon of European culture, generated to save the ‘traditional’ concepts, schemes, and values’ of the Christian heritage. The results of such critical disbelief have been consistently informative and sometimes stunning, not least in McGann’s discussion of the Ancient Mariner in this same essay. A quarter century into a historicist and religious revival that have run roughly in tandem, however, we can measure
what has been lost as well as gained by historicism’s methodological commitment to a materialism that from the outset has regarded religion as its privileged, even exemplary, object of critique. Thus, to update McGann: from our present vantage, it does not really seem that the “traditional concepts, schemes, and values of the Christian heritage” need salvaging; from Seoul to Sao Paulo, those concepts, schemes, and values are doing pretty well on their own. What may need salvaging, rather, is a critical method that can account nonreductively for such persistance. That method would disarticulate secularization and religious decline and require a nuanced sense of religion’s relationship to historical change.

Secularization, much like romanticism, is both an historical description and an object located within a contemporary interpretive environment. In the task of grasping this double valence, Casanova’s discussion of differentiation and Smith’s study of individual secularizing actors are both helpful. For Casanova, secularization means the process of differentiation attendant upon modernization—in short, a transformed relationship within this world. Smith reminds us, however, that the theory of secularization is deployed by agents with their own commitments and values. Like Mary Crawford and her happy thought that “every generation has its improvements,” these agents may treat secularization not as a theory of differentiation but as a theory of religious decline, thereby positing their own intellectual values as the inevitable outcome of an objective historical process and installing those values in institutionally influential positions. Once again, this should not be interpreted to mean that critics who find secularization are wrong. My argument, rather, is that claims and assumptions about secularization must be subjected to the same sort of critical reflexivity that literary critics now habitually bring to discussions of race, class, and sexuality; we need to be alert, in other words, for the process by which norms get smuggled in as value-neutral descriptors. It turns out that those who believe in secularization’s inevitability are a relatively small group of professional readers and interpreters. Because that belief contributes mightily to the cultural entitlement of this small group, it seems a worthwhile task to make it an object of analysis whenever we read the poetry and prose that gave birth both to it and to us.

Designs and Aims of This Book

Together with later chapters of the book, this Introduction addresses its largest claims: the definition of secularization as differentiation and the importance of reflexivity in treating the historical process that “secularization” names. Chapter 7 takes up these issues with reference to the transformation of evil from a metaphysical to a moral category, with Wordsworth’s 

Nature Is the Book of God

Ruined Cottage serving as the basis for the investigation; Chapter 8 considers the difficulties of bringing criticism together with the study of religion. The Afterword meditates upon the reemergence of design in the twenty-first century in the form of “intelligent design.” I hope that these broader discussions will prove particularly interesting to those readers who are not professional literary critics, and to those literary critics who are not romanticists.

Chapters 1 through 6, meanwhile, contain the heart of the book’s historical and literary argument. I begin with deism, one important interpretation of natural theology during the eighteenth century. Because deism, like natural theology, staked its claims on enlightened reason, it proved easy for romantic-era writers such as William Godwin and William Blake to fold their critiques of natural theology into a larger critique of the enlightenment project; at the same time, both writers register the power and appeal of the enlightenment critique of religion, thereby bequeathing to modern critics an either/or dynamic. Either natural theology is continuous with the enlightened project, in which case it is to be rejected on romantic grounds; or it is continuous with a religious project, in which case it is to be rejected on enlightened grounds. Chapter 2 then proposes a way out of this bind by focusing not on the epistemological truth of natural theology but rather on modes of practicing it. I argue that the primary contribution of David Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion is not its powerful critique of design’s philosophical worthiness but rather its acknowledgment that the habits of mind and the structures of sociability associated with design can triumph over intellectual critique. By shifting analytic attention from argument to practice, Hume short-circuits the romantic/enlightenment opposition, and the models of critical reason that depend upon that opposition, thereby enabling a reading of the tradition of natural theology as substantially continuous over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the past decade a variety of critics have succeeded in troubling the perceived opposition between enlightened and romantic culture; these early chapters build upon that work by arguing that our standard definition of secularization as religious decline, premised as it is upon the enlightenment critique of religion, in fact works to secure that opposition.

The Humean emphasis on practice also accounts for my principle of selection throughout the book. This does not mean that all the writers studied here agree with one another, even implicitly; rather, I treat Hume’s response to the design argument as a point of departure for a number of entwined but nevertheless analytically distinct responses to the issues that his skepticism raises. After a detailed discussion of Hume
in Chapter 2, then, I proceed to considerations of Anna Barbauld (Chapter 3), William Paley (Chapter 4), Jane Austen (Chapter 5), and William Wordsworth (Chapter 6). Although these chapters can stand on their own, each brings design together with Casanova’s definition of secularization as functional differentiation, for we witness such differentiation in each of these writers. Hume works to expose design as non-rational, thus widening the breach between faith and science. Barbauld, a participant in Britain’s dissenting culture, accepts this breach in order to explore modes of practicing design linked decisively to the gendered body. Paley, though committed to scientific discourse, rewrites design as an “argument from perception” that attempts to short-circuit Hume’s Sundering of reason and religion. Meanwhile, Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park demonstrates design’s increasingly precarious hold on the differentiated realm of internal feeling, and Wordsworth’s early career shows how the differentiated domain of literature takes over from design the task of consolidating a unified sensibility.

Insofar, then, as secularization is a form of functional differentiation, a transformed relationship within this world, each of these writers may be taken to exemplify it. Casanova’s second claim is equally important, however: differentiation does not necessarily entail either religious decline or religious privatization. Accordingly, for some of the writers considered here differentiation leads to decline; for others it does not. We observe decline, for instance, in the set of linked concerns running from Hume through Paley to Austen. Beginning with Hume’s Sundering of feeling and reason, this trajectory interprets religious emotion as a private matter that does not lend itself to public ordering. Mansfield Park runs this increasingly privatized religion up against the demand that private feelings remain hooked up with establishment forms of Christianity. That demand can register only as coercion, for what has gone missing is a mechanism for mediating between official form and internal feeling; the result is the social chaos that Paley himself had intimated, and the consequent random assertions of authority practiced by Sir Thomas Bertram and by the narrator of Mansfield Park herself. In contrast to this trajectory, the set of concerns running from Hume (again) through Barbauld to Wordsworth exemplifies ways in which differentiation does not lead to religious decline. Transforming design into the experience of fancy (in the case of Barbauld) and analogy (in the case of Wordsworth), this trajectory takes the very fact of differentiation, in the form of the increasing autonomy of both literature and religious feeling, as an opportunity for celebrating varieties of expressive practice that supersede intellectual critiques of design’s conceptual worthiness. Though I argue in the book’s Afterword that it cannot finally be sustained, this distinction between practice and theory runs with varying degrees of explicitness throughout the book. Thus fancy and analogy appear as practices distinct from such “theoretical” categories as imagination and metaphor precisely because, while the latter try to take on and transform the traditional functions of religion, the former are distinguished by their noninstrumentality, the way in which they figure and embody a kind of formal contentment with the multiple opportunities opened up by differentiation.

Since these trajectories exist more or less side by side during the period, one logical conclusion is that despite its establishment credentials, it is easier for design to remain vibrant outside the boundaries of the official church. Thus the first trajectory, which links differentiation to religious decline, identifies what is conventional about Paley (his worry about social stability) and manifests that conventionality in the dying world of Mansfield Park. The second trajectory, in which differentiation does not lead to decline, finds poetic expression in the dissenting Barbauld and the religiously vague early Wordsworth. The conclusion that disestablishment actually fosters religious creativity may surprise those who wish to read religion in terms of ideology; in fact, however, it supports Casanova’s thesis that cultures which embrace modernity remain religiously vibrant, and it accords with the empirical evidence throughout much of the world that modernization leads to increased religious diversity.

With Casanova’s claim in mind, let me finally reemphasize that this book does not simply argue that romantic-era writers are more “religious” than we had thought, or that religion held out longer that we had thought against the tides of skepticism and materialism before eventually succumbing to them. That would be an oversimplification as bad as the oversimplification that sees in every romantic writer a precursor of the secular modern reader. Rather, I am seeking to use design and its cognates as a way to define secularization’s analytic relationship to romanticism. That definition entails understanding secularization itself as differentiation rather than the transformation of religious content, so that we can see how religion finds ways to creatively appropriate the institutional transformations that characterize modernity. And it entails understanding at least some aspects of romanticism as complexly interwoven with the fabric of modernity. Romanticism has long been coordinated with modernity, of course, but if modernity is a multiple rather than single object in which secularization plays an imprecise and frequently vexed role, then deciding on the ways and means by which romanticism anticipates and legitimates modernity becomes a more complex and nuanced business.

Although those scholars working on “multiple modernities” are especially concerned with its relevance to analyzing non-Western societies,
the concept is helpful for understanding historical change within the West as well. The experience of differentiation varies even within cultures bound together by nation, race, and religion; studying particular writers over a delimited historical range enables us to register how what Taylor and Lee call "modernity as lived from the inside" modulates all the way down to the level of the individual. Of course, at one level modernity is irresistible: the nation-state and the market economy have penetrated and transformed virtually all social institutions, and resistance to those changes has proved worse than useless. But those transformations can feel very different from the inside, as individual writers search, with varying kinds of success, for resources with which to speak to the ever-changing culture in which they live and move.

Chapter 1
The Argument Against Design from Deism to Blake

Sometimes the apparent order of the universe seems like a "proof" of God's existence all by itself. Such apparent self-sufficiency is a temptation for the argument from design; it might tempt a writer to showcase natural order without giving sufficient attention to the way that order translates into an emotional and personal response. Eighteenth-century natural theologians themselves, writing within a framework that largely took Anglican Christianity for granted, often simply assumed the presence of the more personal, visceral, and habitual aspects of religious devotion, concentrating on apologetic and intellectual factors to the relative exclusion of all else.

The possibility that the Book of God may speak on its own, without intervention or interpretation from person or institution, was a bewitching idea even for the devout. In Paradise Lost, Raphael reminds Adam to place his rational questions within a proper devotional perspective, but many eighteenth-century thinkers seemed not to heed their own inner Raphael. Sir Richard Blackmore's 1712 epic poem Creation offers a case in point. Here is how his poem begins:

No more of Courts, of Triumphs, or of Arms,
No more of Valour's Force, or Beauty's Charms;
The Themes of Vulgar Lays, with just Disdain,
I leave unsung, the Flocks, the am'rous Swain,
The Pleasures of the Land, and Terrors of the Main.
How Abject, how Inglorious 'tis to lye
Groveling in Dust and Darkness, when on high Empires immense and rolling Worlds of Light To range their Heav'nly Scenes the Muse invite?
I meditate to Soar above the Skies,
To Heights unknown, thro' Ways untry'd, to rise:
I would th' Eternal from his Works assert,
And sing the Wonders of Creating Art.

This opening, though clearly indebted to the beginning of Paradise Lost, also departs sharply from Milton's program. Though Milton's invocation