

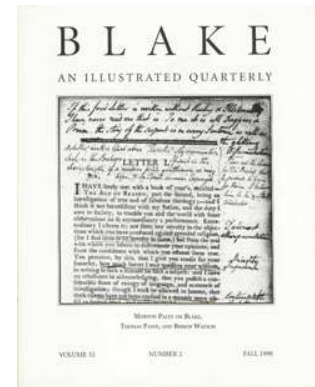
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A R T I C L E

“To Defend the Bible in This Year 1798 Would Cost a Man His Life”

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"To Defend the Bible in This Year 1798 Would Cost a Man His Life"

BY MORTON D. PALEY

[A plenary lecture at the joint meeting ("1798 and Its Implications") of the British Association for the Study of Romanticism and the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism at St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, on 6 July 1998.]

For most of us here 1798 was above all the year of the *Lyrical Ballads*. But it was also, as we all know, the year of Napoleon in Egypt, the uprising of the United Irishmen and its bloody aftermath, of Malthus's first *Essay on Population*, and the year of (as Ian McCalmon puts it) "the most draconian, anti-radical crackdown of the entire Pittite 'Terror'" ("New Jerusalem" 26). For William Blake, it was a seemingly unexceptional year, a year for which there are no known letters and no known published works other than some commercial engravings. But it was also the year in which he wrote on the verso of the title page of Bishop Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible*: "To defend the Bible in this year 1798 would cost a man his life" and then "The Beast and the Whore rule without controls."¹ The Bishop's *Apology* was an attack upon *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine, and Blake's notes were a vehement counter-attack upon Bishop Watson. Why should Blake want to defend Thomas Paine, with whom he had some important points of disagreement, so unequivocally? That is my subject today, along with the place these annotations have in the development of Blake's thought, including just what he meant by the two sentences quoted. Say first! what mov'd Blake?

History has not been kind to Richard Watson, D.D., Bishop of Landaff, sometime Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. His *Apology for the Bible* was celebrated in its day. It had first appeared in 1796, and the 1797 edition that Blake owned was its eighth at the time. It had also been published widely in America. Every

Harvard student was given a copy! In the *Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Watson*, published by his son in 1817, Watson included fan letters from a society for discountenancing vice in Dublin and from the Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. He also asserted that an employer had printed off 3000 copies for distribution to his workers, and declared that many thousands more were sold in Scotland and in England at a small price "without any profit or wish of profit to myself." (It was still going strong in 1817—a new edition is advertised in the end papers to the *Anecdotes*.)

Yet the only reason that Richard Watson is remembered today is he that he was attacked by two great poets, neither of whom even published his remarks. In 1793, William Wordsworth wrote but did not publish "A Letter to the Bishop of Landaff . . . By a Republican" (*Prose Works* 1: 32-49) in reply to Watson's defense of the British constitution in an appendix to an earlier sermon. Wordsworth wrote: "It is feared that you have at last fallen, through one of the numerous trap-doors, into the tide of contempt to be swept down to the ocean of oblivion" (*Prose Works* 1: 31); however, Wordsworth is decorum itself compared to Blake, who calls the Bishop "a State trickster" (E 612) and refers to his "cloven foot" (616). It isn't fair. Bishop Watson, as Florence Sandler has pointed out in an excellent essay, had opposed the American War, advocated the abolition of the slave trade, favored the enlargement of the franchise, and spoken for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. He was a proponent of Roman Catholic emancipation, and was long known as "the dissenters' bishop." The *Anecdotes* documents his broadmindedness. When the University of Cambridge proposed an address to the King in 1775 exhorting him to continue the American War, Bishop Watson actively engaged himself in opposition, but had to report "The Tories beat us by eight votes . . . they owe their victory to the ministerial troops, which were poured in from the Admiralty, Treasury, &c. beyond expectation" (57). Bishop Watson originally had high hopes for the French Revolution. "In 1792," he writes, "I published a Charge in which I had touched upon unpopular subjects—the advantages which would probably result to human society from the French Revolution. . . and the injustice and impolicy of our Test and Corporation Acts" (257). William Pitt, he tells us, rejected his arguments. He also prints a speech he made in the House of Lords on 15 January 1795, supporting the Duke of Bedford's motion for negotiations for peace with France (Burke's "Regicide Peace"). "Suppose, then," Bishop Watson asks, "the unfortunate Louis to be placed, by our efforts, on the throne of his ancestors, surrounded by his nobles in the plenitude of their ancient privilege; the bastille re-erected, and the people of France,—Heaven avert that part of the event!) once more crouching under the rod of despotic power, what advantage will Great Britain derive from this change?" (283). Asserting "I consider it as a Chris-

¹ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, rev. ed., 1982) 611. This edition will hereafter be cited as E, with page number(s) following. G. E. Bentley, Jr., in *William Blake's Writings*, reads the last word of the second line as "control." In his excellent edition of the *Annotations*, G. Ingli-James reads it as "control" with a deleted last letter, as do I.

Notes on the Bishop's Apology for the Bible
by William Blake
To defend the Bible in this year 1798
would cost a man his life
The Beast & the Whore rule without controlld
It is an easy matter for a Bishop to triumph
over Paines attack but is it not so easy
for one who loves the Bible
The Perversions of Christs words & acts
are attacks by Paine & also the perversions
of the Bible; Who dare defend ~~the~~ ^{the} culture the
Acts of Christ or the Bible Unperverted?
But to him who sees this mortal pilgrimage in
the light that I see it. Duty to ^{his} ~~my~~ country
is the first consideration & safety the last
Read patiently take not up this Book in an idle
hour the consideration of these things is the ~~most~~
whole duty of man & the affairs of life &
death trifles sports of time ^{But} ~~then~~ ^{then} consideration
because of Eternity
I have been commanded from Hell not to print
as it is what our enemies wish

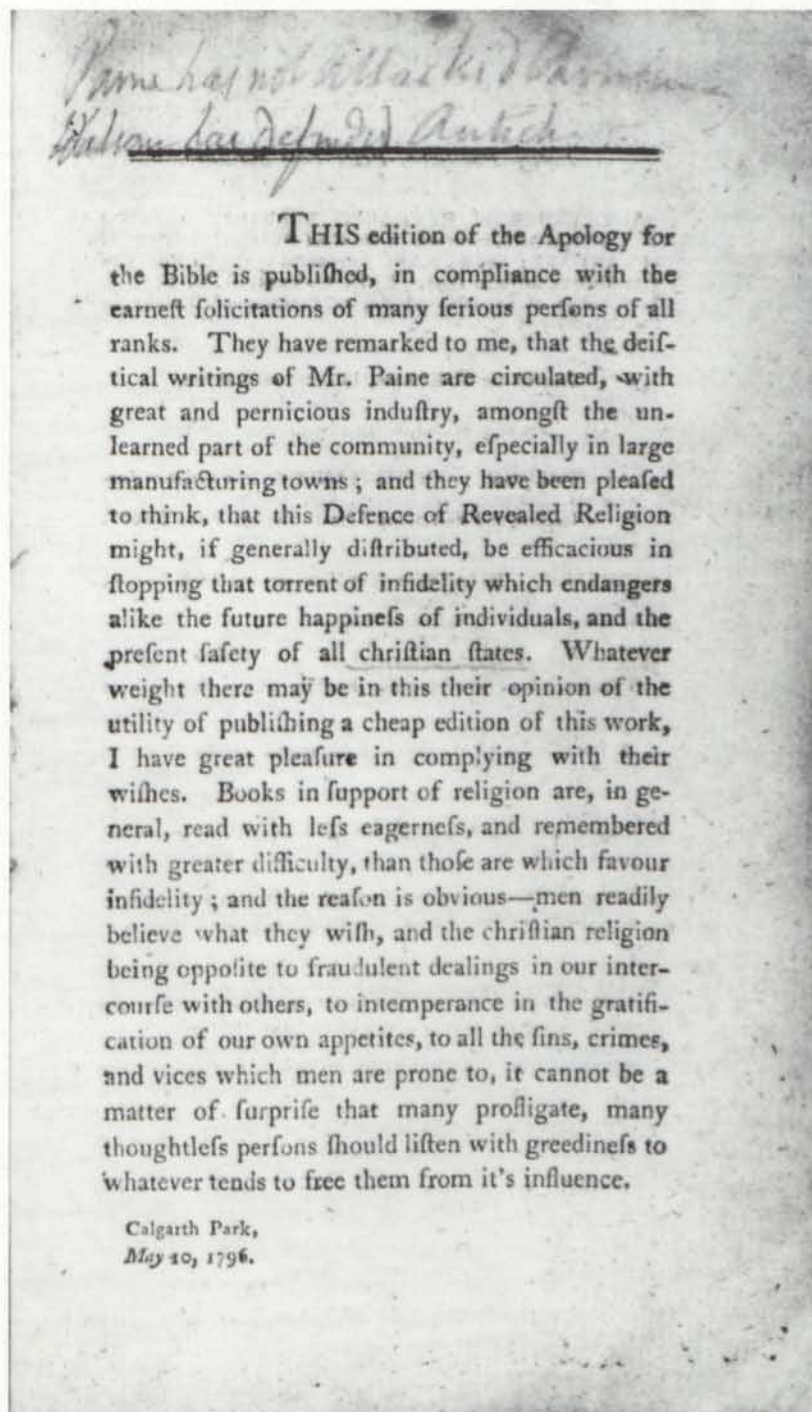
1 Back of title page. "The Beast & the Whore rule without controlx" has been lightly lined through. At the end of the last word in that sentence a letter has been heavily inked out. Note that the sense of "Read patiently" and what follows is that Blake has finished reading Watson's book and is advising an implied reader of these annotations as to how to approach it. Courtesy of the Huntington Library and Art Gallery.

tian effort of a humane people to put a stop to the effusion of blood" (281), he was the only Bishop to vote for the Duke of Bedford's motion. Could Bishop Watson appear to us today, hovering in the darksome air like a Blakean apparition, he might cry out the words W. H. Auden gives to Herod in the "Christmas Oratorio" *For the Time Being*: "I'm

a liberal. I want everyone to be happy. I wish I had never been born." (125).

Perhaps there just is no justice for a man who in 1793 could publish sermons under the title *The Wisdom and Goodness of God in Having Made Both Rich and Poor*. (Incidentally, Blake's note next to the title of this book—"God

2 Untitled preface facing the verso of the title page. Blake's note in the top margin is written in pencil. Courtesy of the Huntington Library and Art Gallery.



made Man happy & rich but the Subtil made the innocent Poor" (E 612)—is in line with Paine's own reply to Watson, *Agrarian Justice*. "It is wrong to say God made *Rich* and *Poor*," Paine wrote, alluding to Watson's title; "he only made *Male* and *Female*; and he gave them the earth for their inheritance."² In any event, my purpose here is not to do justice

² Page 5. Paine says he wrote the pamphlet in 1795-96 and decided to publish it after seeing the pamphlet listed (as did Blake) in Watson's *Apology*.

to Bishop Watson, which I must leave to some other realm. It is, rather, to consider Blake's annotations to Watson's book. And we should note that Blake didn't annotate his copy of Watson's *Apology* all at once or with equal attention to every part. An examination of the original in the Huntington Library shows that, although most of Blake's notes are in ink, the notes on at least four pages were written in pencil; and on page 1, two of the notes were written with a much finer nib than the rest. Furthermore, as E. B.

Murray (146) points out, Blake wrote some of his comments, such as the two paragraphs about public records, in a hasty scrawl. All this suggests more than one attack upon Watson's text, though they could be made at short intervals. Furthermore, Blake's attention was not sustained. The pages of front matter and the first 17 numbered pages all bear notes, then Blake's interest begins to lag and only four of the next 12 are annotated. From page 37 through 47 and again from 50 through 94, from 96 through 107, and from 110-16 there are no notes at all, suggesting that Blake skimmed through or over what adds up to about half the book. At page 117 he returned to the fray, writing notes on the last four pages of the book, concluding that "Tom Paine is a better Christian than the Bishop" and that "the Bishop has only hurt Paine's heel, while Paine has broken his head" (E 620). I begin, then, with Thomas Paine.

That Blake knew Thomas Paine is not in doubt, although the myth that Blake saved Paine's life, transmitted from Frederick Tatham to Alexander Gilchrist for Gilchrist's life of Blake, has long been exploded. Tatham was also the source of the claim that "in their conversations, Paine said that religion was a law and a tie to all able minds," while "Blake . . . said what he was always asserting, that the religion of Jesus, was a perfect law of Liberty . . ." (*Blake Records* 41n). This doesn't sound right. Paine typically used "law" not for restraint—that is the "Blakean" meaning—but for freedom; time and again he contrasts the government of law in a republic with the government of kings. Similarly unconvincing is Samuel Palmer's statement to Gilchrist that "Blake rebuked the profanity of Paine" (*Blake Records* 41n); in an age when language was ridden with profanity, no one else has remarked that Blake objected to it. Of course this doesn't mean that no conversations with Paine took place. Blake had probably spoken of them to his two much younger friends, but some thirty years later they recollected them according to the current state of their own memories and beliefs—Tatham had become a member of Irving's Catholic Apostolic Church, Palmer a conservative Anglican. (John Linnell, a reliable reporter, wrote "Paine" in a list of subjects he prepared for discussion with Gilchrist [*Blake Records* 319n]). Blake probably met Paine at one or more of the publisher Joseph Johnson's weekly gatherings. Paine of course was already famous for his *Common Sense* when he returned to England, and he became even more celebrated for *The Rights of Man*, published in 1791, said to have sold approximately 200,000 copies in a population of about six million.³ The publication of its second part in 1792 caused Paine to be charged with seditious libel. More must be said in a moment about these books, which caused Blake to write Paine into his *America* and to give him an

especially prominent place among the "fierce Americans" who rise to defend their continent against Albion's Angel.

Paine first appears in *America* as one of a carefully selected group of seven: "Washington, Franklin, Paine & Warren, Gates, Hancock, & Green" (3: 4, E 52). The list is balanced between men known primarily as soldiers and as civilians, although some were of course both. In a second list of seven, there are two substitutions, but Paine remains; and in two other contexts the seven are distilled to three: "Washington / And Paine and Warren with their foreheads toward the east" (9: 10-11; see also 12: 7). Washington's presence is of course inevitable. Warren's importance lies in his being a heroic martyr. (A doctor by profession, he was killed at Bunker Hill and portrayed in John Trumbull's *Death of General Warren* as a dying Christ being bayoneted by an English soldier.⁴) Paine's special prominence lies of course in his being a writer, specifically, as far as *America* is concerned, the author of *Common Sense*, in which Paine wrote "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind." Some of his other statements there would have struck a particular resonance in Blake. "Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise" (67). Paine appeals to scripture to prove that "the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of the government of kings" (72). Like Blake, Paine uses biblical typology to convey some of his meanings. The rights of kings are made parallel in *Common Sense* to the doctrine of original sin, which of course Paine rejects:

For as in Adam all sinned, and as in the first electors all men obeyed; as in the one all mankind were subjected to Satan, and in the other to Sovereignty; as our innocence was lost in the first, and our authority in the last; and as both disable us from re-assuming some former state and privilege, it unanswerably follows that original sin and hereditary succession are parallels. (77)

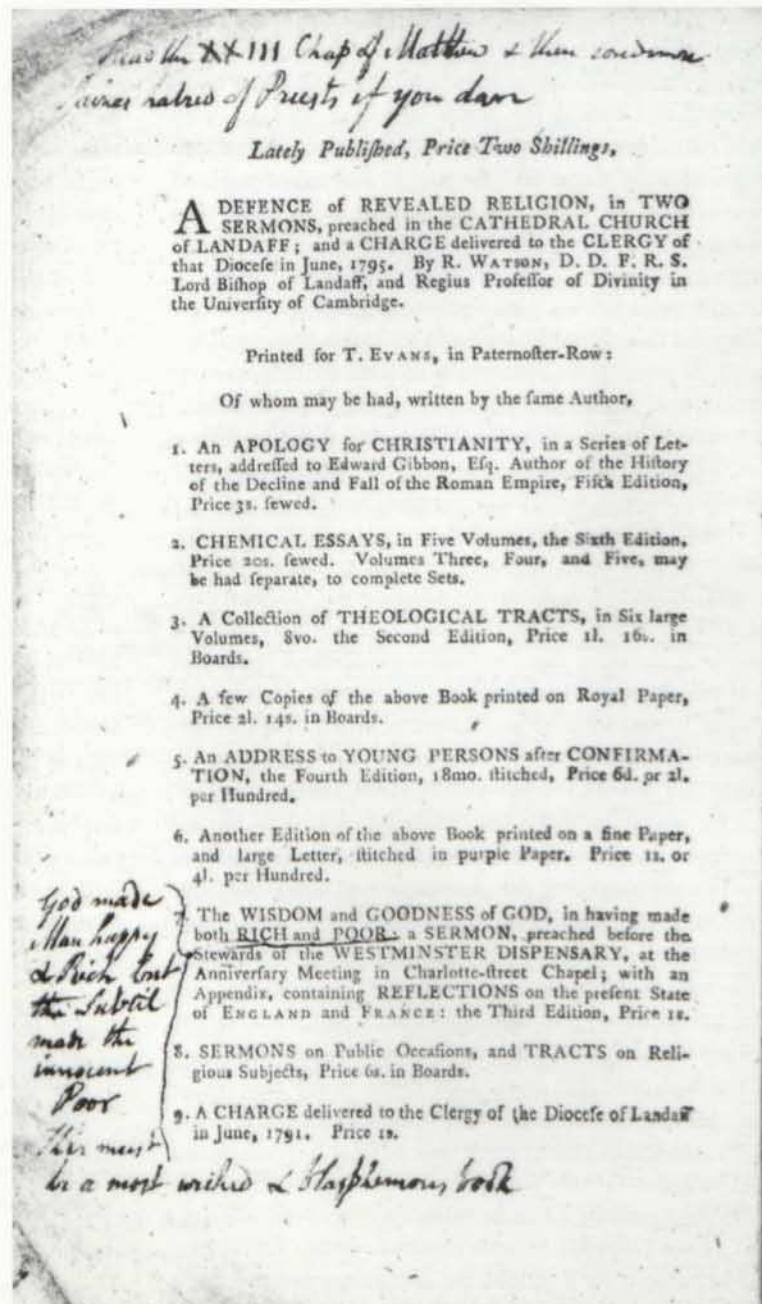
George III is "the hardened, sullen, Pharaoh of —," and he sounds a lot like Blake's Noboddaddy when Paine calls him "the wretch, that with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood on his soul" (87).

I love hanging & drawing & quartering [says
Noboddaddy]
Every bit as well as war & slaughtering
...

³ See Michael Phillips, "Blake and the Terror," *The Library*, 6th ser., 6 (1994): 276, citing an anonymous *Impartial Memoirs of the Life of Thomas Paine* (London, 1793).

⁴ D. W. Dörrebecker observes that Warren wrote for the *Boston Gazette* under the name "True Patriot" (*Continental Prophecies* 129). The *Trumble Death of Warren* was part of a series of eight paintings begun in 1784. See Ronald Paulson, "John Trumbull and the Representation of the American Revolution," *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982): 341-56.

3 Verso of preface, facing page 1. Blake carefully links his marginal note to three words of text. Courtesy of the Huntington Library and Art Gallery.



... If they rebel they must go to hell
They shall have a Priest & a passing bell
(E 499)

In a population of a little over three million, *Common Sense* sold over 100,000 copies. Blake's comment appears in the Annotations to Watson, in which Paine is daringly paralleled with Jesus: "Is it a greater miracle to feed five thousand men with five loaves than to overthrow all the armies of Europe with a small pamphlet" (E 617).

But wasn't Paine a deist and wasn't Blake opposed to everything that deism represented? The answer to the first question is certainly yes. "Adam, if there ever was such a man, was created a deist," Paine asserts in *The Age of Reason* (55). But the answer to the second must give us pause. A glance at the *Concordance* shows that Blake did not even use the word "deist" or its cognates before writing the Annotations to Watson.

The first instance is, in fact, in those annotations, but it was revised out by Blake as follows: "The Deists say that

nus—that is beyond nature. With one exception, the words “Natural Religion” do not appear again in Blake’s writings until the *Vala* passage just quoted (or in *Milton*, whichever was earlier). That exception is in the Annotations to Watson, where in a riposte to the Bishop Blake writes: “Natural Religion is the voice of God & not the result of reasoning on the powers of Satan” (E 614).⁵ In the case of Paine, Blake at this time could well take the attitude expressed by the Unitarian minister Gilbert Wakefield, whose *The Spirit of Christianity, Compared with the Spirit of the Times in Great Britain*, with its denunciation of “the Moloch Priest” and “worshippers of Baal” in the Anglican Church, was a strong influence on Coleridge’s *Religious Musings*. Writing of the Master and fellows of Queens College, Wakefield said “I would give with rapture to a French *Deist*, as purity and perfection, compared with such apostates to the liberty and sanctity of the gospel . . .” (16). The truth is that many of the attitudes that we think of as characteristic of Blake were not yet his in 1798. In Blake’s account of the founders of religions in *The Song of Los* (1795), Jesus is treated no better than the rest: “(a man of sorrows) he reciev’d / A Gospel from wretched Theotormon” (3: 23-24, E 67)—Theotormon being, of course, the God-tormented and self-tormented man of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Note that this negative reference is not merely to the Christian church but to Christianity itself. Of course there are also positive references—the Jesus of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* who “was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules” (E 43). But how far is this from Paine’s view of Jesus as “a virtuous reformer and revolutionist” in *The Age of Reason*?

Why Blake should wish to defend Paine requires little explanation. There is a considerable overlap between Blakean discourse in the 1790s and Paine’s in *Rights of Man*. One aspect of this, on the subject of charters, was remarked by the late E. P. Thompson, in his excellent essay on Blake’s “London,” and on this subject I will only point further to the proximity in Blake’s poem of two key words that occur in one of Paine’s discussions of “chartered monopolies” (75) “Every chartered town,” writes Paine, “is an aristocratical monopoly in itself, and the qualification of electors proceeds out of these chartered monopolies.” Shortly after this, Paine says: “Conquest and tyranny transplanted themselves with William the Conqueror from Normandy into England, and the country is yet disfigured with the marks.” Are these disfiguring “marks” not the “marks of weakness, marks of woe,” Blake discerned in every face he met in the “chartered streets” of “London”? Both can use figures from Bunyan similarly, as when Paine writes that the “compounded image” of the downfall(s) of the Bastille and Despotism become “as figuratively united as Bunyan’s Doubting Castle and Giant Despair” (52). Blake and Paine share with other

radicals of the 1790s the association of revolution with fire, but a sentence from part 2 of *The Rights of Man* comes particularly close to Blake’s statement that “France reciev’d the Demons light” (E 57) from America. “From a small spark kindled in America,” wrote Paine, “a flame has arisen, not to be extinguished. Without consuming, like the *ultima Ratio Regum*, it winds its progress from nation to nation and conquers by a silent operation” (210). When we come to *The Age of Reason*, we find that this overlap continues. Paine refers to the establishment as “the adulterous connection of church and state” (87), bringing to mind passages in Blake like the one in *Vala* in which Rahab is “the deluded harlot of the kings of the earth” (E 363). When Paine characterizes the biblical account of the creation, it sounds much like much like a summary of the early chapters of *The [First] Book of Urizen*: “It is nobody that speaks. It is nobody that hears. It is addressed to nobody. It has neither first, second, not third person” (12). Paine can also apply biblical typology after his own fashion, casting himself as the doubting Thomas of scripture. Observing that this apostle did not believe in the resurrection, Paine remarks “So neither will I; and the reason is equally as good for me and for every other person as for Thomas” (6).⁶ Paine denies that biblical prophets predicted the future, condemns “humility,” and attacks “Mystery.” I don’t want to exaggerate the convergence: the differences, too are important. Paine’s universe is an “immense machine,” which is compared to a mill, to which Blake could well have replied in the words of *THERE is NO Natural Religion*: “The same dull round even of a univer[s]e would soon become a mill with complicated wheels” (E 2). Blake acknowledges a difference with Paine as well as with Watson when he writes “The Bishop never saw the Everlasting Gospel any more than Tom Paine” (E 619). What Blake concentrates on in these annotations, however, is the common ground he shares with Paine, not the differences between them.

Blake’s note on the back of Watson’s title page continues: “The Beast & the Whore rule without control[x]” (E 611)—a sentence lightly crossed out, probably by the timorous hand of Samuel Palmer, who later owned the book. As we see, Blake was at this point beginning to develop his symbolism of the conjunction of the state with its established church. Blake could have said as did Coleridge, in a note to the edition of his *Religious Musings* in 1797: “I am convinced that the Babylon of the Apocalypse does not apply to Rome exclusively; but to the union of Religion with Power and Wealth, wherever it is found” (*Poems* 89n). Blake’s most striking visual conceptualization of this to date was the astonishing title page for *Night the Eighth of Young’s Night Thoughts*, showing the scarlet woman with her cup

⁵ As pointed out by Essick 210.

⁶ It’s true that Blake makes even larger claims for Paine, seeing in him “the Holy Ghost who in Paine strives with Christendom as in Christ he strove with the Jews” (E 614).

of abominations mounted on a great red dragon whose seven grotesque heads embody the institutions of church and state. Blake would later go on to elaborate this conception in pictures like *The Whore of Babylon* and the Dante illustrations of Philip the Fair embracing Beatrice, and he would introduce it near the end of *Night the Eighth of The Four Zoas*, where John of Patmos "saw the Harlot of the Kings of Earth & saw her Cup / Of fornication food of Orc & Satan pressd from the fruit of Mystery" (111: 6-7, E 386). But when Blake annotated Watson's *Apology*, this symbolism was relatively fresh; as in so many other areas, we see it crystallizing in the later 1790s. At the same time, Blake was expressing in his art some of the positive religious feeling that we do not find in the Lambeth books. Once more we see this especially in the illustrations to *Night Thoughts*, with its images of Jesus crucified, Jesus resurrected, and Jesus the True Vine. These are far from the more spiritually charged images of Jesus Blake later produced—for example plate 76 of *Jerusalem*—but they do suggest the direction in which he was tending more than anything he wrote at the time.

The argument between the Bishop and Paine is, as Blake perceives, deeply political, having to do with "the English Crusade against France," but it is cast in a theological form. Blake had probably learned enough about what would come to be known as the Higher Criticism of the Bible, both from the writings of Alexander Geddes, as Jerome McGann has argued,⁷ and from the presence of Geddes in the Johnson circle, to see that the Regius Professor of Divinity's historical arguments were hopelessly out of touch. Paine attacks the evidence for the authorship of the Pentateuch by Moses and for the witnessing of miracles by Jesus in the Gospels as a means of denying the truth of the events that are recounted. Bishop Watson, as one would expect, defends the received accounts, but he says that even if Moses, Joshua, and Samuel did not write the books attributed to them, they could still be true, as they would have been assembled from "public records." Blake at this point rejoins "Nothing can be more contemptible than to suppose Public RECORDS to be true" (E 617), anticipating Byron's satire on the Gazettes in *Don Juan*. Blake refers to Deuteronomy 31:24, which begins "And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book . . ." If Moses didn't write it, whoever did was a liar. This confutes the Bishop, but it actually isn't very important to Blake, for he adds "it ceases to be history & becomes a Poem of probable impossibilities fabricated for pleasure as moderns say but I say by Inspiration" (E 616). It sounds as if Blake were about to claim a different source for the authenticity of these books, especially when he writes shortly afterwards "If historical facts can be written by inspiration Miltons *Paradise Lost* is as true as Genesis. or Exodus" (E 617). We

appear to be nearing the position of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which Isaiah and Ezekiel say they derive their prophecies from the Poetic Genius and Isaiah speaks of "all poets" as if they were members of one fraternity. Yet Blake is not actually prepared to give this authority to the five books of Moses, because he objects to them on ethical grounds. "The Wickedness of the Israelites in murdering so many thousands under pretence of a command from God is altogether Abominable & Blasphemous" (E 614). So the divinity of the Bible depends as little on "inspiration" as it does on historical facts. Blake goes on to say that it consists "in the Sentiments & Examples which whether true or Parabolic are Equally useful as Examples given to us of the perverseness of some & its consequent evil & the honesty of others & its consequent good" (E 618). What it comes down to is a matter of conscience. When the Bishop rhetorically asks of conscience "Or is it merely our own judgment of the moral rectitude and turpitude of our actions?" Blake underlined "Or is it merely" and wrote: "Conscience in those that have it is unequivocal, it is the voice of God Our judgment of right and wrong is reason" (E 613).

On the subject of miracles: the Bishop believed in them, Paine did not. Did Blake? Yes and no. Blake points out that the Gospels were written after the fact, and he asserts "Jesus could not do miracles where unbelief hinderd" (E 616). We seem to be back in the territory of *The Marriage* once again, and of Ezekiel's statement that all poets believe that a firm persuasion that a thing is so makes it so, and that "in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains." Indeed, after comparing the miracle of the loaves and fishes with the effects of Paine's *Common Sense*, Blake writes:

... look over the events of your own life & if you do not find that you have done such miracles and lived by such you do not see as I do True I cannot do a miracle thro experiment & to domineer over & prove to others my superior power as neither could Christ But I can & do work such as both astonish & comfort me & mine. How can Paine the worker of miracles ever doubt Christs in the above sense of the word miracle[.]

(E 617)

But what is "the above sense"? In the comparison with *Common Sense* the *miracle* is a metaphor. In Blake's reference to himself as a miracle worker, it is another kind of metaphor, much the same as he used in a letter to George Cumberland on 26 August 1799: "As to Myself about whom you are so kindly Interested. I live by Miracle" (E 704). That doesn't tell us whether Blake thought Jesus fed a multitude with loaves and fishes. Of course I am not trying to subject Blake (or even Bishop Watson) to a theological cross-examination here. I just want to point out that when Blake asks how Paine can ever doubt Christ's miracles he is prac-

⁷ McGann, "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text."

ting a beautiful form of equivocation, and that this indicates something further about Blake's position in 1798.

In response to Bishop Watson's comparison of Moses to "the judge of the land in [carrying out the law] condemning criminals to death," Blake wrote: "All Penal Laws court Transgression & therefore are cruelty & Murder" (E 618). This is not a Paineite position; it is a Godwinian one, and it is at the same time profoundly antinomian in spirit. In his excellent discussion of antinomianism and Blake, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, John Mee has rightly stressed how important a component of Blake's beliefs antinomianism was in the 1790s, and the Annotations to Watson certainly bear him out. Seeing *all* civil (and religious) institutions as evil is the negative pole of antinomianism; the positive pole is seeing the divine within. We see a strong emphasis on this element in Blake's writings of the earlier 1790s, like *The Marriage and Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.—"Life delights in life," "every thing that lives is holy."—In the Annotations we see very little of that positive pole. Thomas Paine is an "Inspired Man" who gives himself to his "Energetic Genius," but nevertheless "the Beast & the Whore rule without control[s]." There is a sense of desperation in this vision of things; as Sandler puts it, "the last years of the 1790s apparently constituted for Blake a crisis of faith and interpretation" ("Defending the Bible," 44). After moving to Felpham, of course, Blake would have a series of visionary experiences that profoundly affected the content of his poetry and art. His later attitude is exemplified by the only written reference he would ever make to Paine after these Annotations, written in the Notebook essay known under the editorial title "A Vision of the Last Judgment": "Many persons such as Paine & Voltaire, with some of the Ancient Greeks, say: 'We will not converse concerning Good & Evil we will live in Paradise & Liberty You may do so in Spirit but not in the <Mortal> Body as you pretend till after the Last Judgment . . .'" (E 564). The ground Blake had shared with Thomas Paine had disappeared, or to be more precise, had become irrelevant to him.

I wish to close with a suggestion as to why Blake so stressed "this year 1798." It brings us back to Bishop Watson, who at the end of 1797 or very early in 1798, published an *Address to the British People* in which, in addition to defending war taxes, he asserted that political reformers and dissenters were loyal subjects and that they would resist a French invasion. This was an old theme of Watson's. The book became another bestseller thanks to government sponsorship, although Watson claimed in the *Anecdotes* that he was not consulted on the government's decision to print and give it away gratis. Fourteen editions appeared in London alone. Not all reformers and dissenters were grateful to the Bishop for his defense of their loyalty, however. In January 1798 Watson wrote: "On this and on other occasions some violent men, whose views of political and eccle-

siastical reform extended far beyond mine, were filled with resentment against me, reproaching me with having changed my principles, and deserted the cause. This accusation was wholly without foundation; for my principles were not republican principles, nor was my cause their cause." One of these dissenting dissenters was Gilbert Wakefield. In Watson's words, "These publications of mine had excited the displeasure of Mr. Gilbert Wakefield (one of the first scholars of the age), and, unfortunately for himself, he published a pamphlet against them. The administration prosecuted him for some of the expressions in his pamphlet, which they thought were seditious, and he was fined and imprisoned. I took some pains to prevent this prosecution, thinking the liberty of the press to be the palladium of the constitution; but I did not succeed in my endeavours" (*Anecdotes* 305). On 29 January 1799 Wakefield wrote to Watson asking the Bishop to be a character witness for him, but Watson replied that as he had never met Wakefield, he could not be a witness as to his character, although he admired Wakefield's talents and would rejoice "at your being extricated from your present difficulty" (306). Wakefield was not extricated—he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in May 1799—but I want to return to the beginning of 1798, and Wakefield's *A Reply to the Bishop of Landaff's Address to the People of England*.

Joseph Johnson had previously published at least one of Wakefield's pamphlets, *Thoughts on Public Worship* in 1792, but *A Reply* was published by J. Cuthell. In it Wakefield asserted of "our corrupt and guilty ministries":

They have occasioned a destruction of the human species infinitely tremendous beyond the most merciless tyrants of ancient and modern times. . . . Land and sea is covered with the carcasses of their slain: — they have engendered sham plots, false alarms, and visionary assassinations, for the purpose of deluding the unwary, and to establish their own power by a military despotism, in due time, over England, like that, which now tramples bleeding Ireland to the earth. (21-23)

In contradiction to the Bishop's view, Wakefield argued that the poor had nothing to lose by a French victory, and that if the French landed sixty or seventy thousand men in England, the kingdom would fall to them. He also projected a millennial vision of the sort more frequently encountered at the beginning of the decade than in 1798: "We, *sons of peace*, or see, or think we see, a gleam of glory through the mist, which now envelopes our horizon. Great revolutions are accomplishing: a general fermentation is working for the purpose of general refinement throughout the universe." Cuthell was arrested immediately after publication. Copies of the pamphlet were found in Johnson's shop, and he was indicted on 11 January 1798. The charge was that "Joseph Johnson . . . being a malicious seditious and ill disposed person and being greatly disaffected to our said sov-

ereign Lord the King . . . wickedly and seditiously did publish and cause to be published a certain scandalous malicious and seditious libel . . .”⁸ Although Johnson would not be tried until July and his sentence was put off even further, the seriousness of his position must have been evident from the start. Johnson had ever been a risk-taker, but never an imprudent one. He had been the original publisher of part 1 of Paine’s *Rights of Man* but after only a few copies had been sold, he transferred the book to J. S. Jordan. (Jordan was not prosecuted for this but he too was arrested for selling Wakefield’s *Reply*.) Johnson certainly realized his danger. He engaged as his lawyer the celebrated Thomas Erskine, the successful counsel for the defense in the State Trials of 1794; and it has been suggested by Paul Magnusson (“The Politics of ‘Frost At Midnight’”) that he published Coleridge’s *Fears in Solitude* volume in April 1798 as his part of a joint effort to show that neither poet nor publisher was pro-French. Probably in the political atmosphere of 1798 nothing would have helped. He was eventually sentenced to six months’ in the King’s Bench Prison, although as it turned out he served his sentence under the milder regimen of the Marshalsea, where he was already incarcerated. Sometimes much is made of the comparative lightness of the sentence—to which one might rejoin with Gulliver’s comment on the lenity of the King of Lilliput: “I could not discover the lenity and favour of this sentence, but conceived it (perhaps erroneously) rather to be rigorous than gentle.” It is true that, like other economically privileged prisoners, Johnson was able to entertain while in jail and that he continued to hold his weekly dinners there. But the loss of personal freedom is in itself an acute punishment—why else would it be inflicted?—and Johnson was well known to be physically frail and suffering from asthma. Although he continued to be a publisher and bookseller after his release, his activities were much reduced. It would have required no prophetic powers on Blake’s part to sense that this (or worse) would be the outcome of Johnson’s arrest and prosecution.

The practical implications cannot, of course, be ignored—Blake could not ignore them. The year 1798 is a case in point. In that year only eight engravings by William Blake, all executed (probably after Fuseli) in 1797, are known to have been published. All were in books published by Joseph Johnson: four engravings for Charles Allen’s *New and Improved History of England* and four more for Allen’s *New and Improved Roman History*. At some point such practical considerations merge with Blake’s highest aspirations as artist and poet. Although Johnson and Blake were not close friends, Johnson had nevertheless played a

considerable role in Blake’s life. As I’ve mentioned, it must be through Johnson that Blake met Paine, and it is likely that Blake at least occasionally attended Johnson’s Tuesday dinners, giving him entree to a group of writers and other intellectuals with whom Blake had at least some common interests. Johnson evidently encouraged Blake not only as an engraver but also as a poet and as an artist. The first book of Blake’s poem *The French Revolution* was printed for Johnson in 1791, although the existence of this work is limited to a single set of proofs. (The reason for its nonpublication remains unexplained.) Blake’s *The Gates of Paradise* when originally offered in 1793 bore Johnson’s name as well as Blake’s as publisher. As Keri Davies has shown in a paper at a previous Strawberry Hill conference, Johnson exhibited books by Blake, which must surely mean illuminated books, at his place of business. And in the 1790s Johnson was, of course, Blake’s major employer. Blake’s professional life as an engraver had become intertwined with Johnson as early as 1779. In 1783 Blake contributed at least nine plates after other artists (including Thomas Stothard) to Johnson’s publication of Joseph Ritson’s important *Select Collection of English Songs*. Blake’s work for Johnson in the 1790s includes some of his most important engravings. Blake engraved six plates after his own designs for Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), and Johnson was also the publisher of John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, to which Blake contributed approximately 16 engravings executed between 1791 and 1794. Johnson ran against fashionable opinion in preferring Blake’s engraving to that of the more fashionable Bartolozzi’s. Writing to Erasmus Darwin in connection with a projected engraving of the Portland Vase in 1791, Johnson said: “Blake is certainly capable of making an exact copy of the vase, I believe more so than Mr. B[artolozzi]” (*Blake Records* 43). This would have cheered Blake, who despised what he called the “soft” quality of his rival’s work. *The Botanic Garden*, in which Blake’s engravings of the Portland Vase appeared in 1791, also featured his powerful engraving after Fuseli’s *Fertilization of Egypt*, and Blake later added an engraving, after Fuseli’s *Tornado*, published in the third edition of 1795. Johnson also employed Blake on some purely commercial tasks, but it is clear that he was one of the very few publishers in London who had a true appreciation of Blake’s abilities as a designer and engraver of book illustrations. It’s possible to regret that Johnson did not make Blake a protégé as he had Mary Wollstonecraft or that (as far as we know) he did not value Blake’s painting as he did Henry Fuseli’s. It remains that no other employer played even a remotely similar role in Blake’s life.

In addition to his employment of Blake, Johnson had published some of the most important liberal and radical works of the 1790s. To take but one of many examples, Unitarian literature was one of Johnson’s specialties, and

⁸ See Gerald Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979) 159. I am indebted to Tyson’s excellent book for the account of Johnson’s arrest and trial.

Johnson remained Joseph Priestley's publisher to the end of Priestley's life. Rational dissent was no doubt too rational for Blake, but Blake need not have completely agreed with the Unitarians to see that theirs was one way of defending the Bible. (Johnson's business would go on, but Priestley's later letters are full of complaints about his publisher's dilatoriness.) And in addition to the public effect of Johnson's arrest, Blake may well have seen a more specific application to himself. I suggested a long time ago that the arrest of Richard Brothers in 1795 and his consequent confinement in an insane asylum had a cautionary effect on Blake. Brothers was charged with "unlawfully, maliciously, and wickedly writing, publishing, and printing various fantastical prophecies, with intent to cause dissension and other disturbances within the realm."⁹ Blake must have realized how easily this law could have been applied to him, and the case of Brothers is likely to explain at least in part why Blake stopped issuing illuminated books for over a decade after 1795. (The information provided in John Barrell's important essay "Imagining the King's Death" could provide further material for this argument.) Johnson was no prophet in the modern or any other sense of the word—he had ever tried to keep to the windy side of the law—but his arrest for selling a book demonstrated the dangers of opposition all the more. It could cost a man his life, or part of it. "I have been commanded from Hell not to print this," wrote Blake in his copy of Watson's book, "as it is what our Enemies wish." The poem *Vala*, on which Blake was already working, was written out in a format that would have made it virtually impossible to publish. In 1798 Blake had printed no poetry or prose of his own for over three years (and with some very minor exceptions it would be at least a decade more until he did so).

In 1798 Blake realized that one period of his life had ended. It had been a period of enormous activity during which Blake produced some of the works by which he is still best known. It had been a period of exciting personal associations. And it had been a period of shared revolutionary hope, hope typified by the author whom Blake defended in his Annotations. The optimism, expectation, and joy of that period are typified in part of a letter that I would like to make the final words of this lecture. Upon getting news of the publication of *The Rights of Man* in the spring of 1791, Thomas Holcroft wrote jubilantly to William Godwin: "Hey for the New Jerusalem! The millennium! And peace and beatitude be unto the soul of Thomas Paine."¹⁰

⁹ See Paley, "William Blake, the Prince of the Hebrews, and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, year?) 260-93.

¹⁰ C. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin, His Friends and Contemporaries* 1: 69.

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R E V I E W S

Robert M. Ryan. *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 24. Cambridge: University Press, 1997. Pp. ix + 202. \$59.95.

Reviewed by SHEILA A. SPECTOR

In his 1972 review of M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, J. Hillis Miller argued: "Abrams' clinging metaphysical presuppositions obscure a clear vision of what is most problematical in the historical sequence he describes." Giving rise to the critical attitudes that would dominate the academy for the next quarter century, Miller complained that by relying on "the grand tradition of modern humanistic scholarship," Abrams overlooked "[t]his alternative scheme, with its various aspects or motifs, [that have] always been present as a shadow or reversed mirror image within the Western tradition, even in the texts Abrams discusses." Consequently, he concluded, Abrams's "failure to recognize its pervasive presence in texts both traditional and modern is perhaps the chief limitation of *Natural Supernaturalism*."

Apparently responding to Miller's suggestion, during the past 25 years or so, subsequent critics have explored any number of "alternative schemes," subjecting literature of the romantic period to every manner of analysis—excluding the metaphysical, that is. For in the years since 1972, there have been few, if any, book-length studies of romantic "metaphysics," at least not until Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824*. Picking up where *Natural Supernaturalism* left off, Ryan has inverted Abrams's assertion that "in the Romantic consciousness revolutionary optimism gave way to 'revolutionary disillusionment or despair,'" arguing that "[i]nstead of lamenting Romanticism as a political retreat, then, one may more usefully see it as a creative and effective engagement in the contemporary religious crisis, an engagement that was perceived as having far-reaching consequences in the political order" (5). In this study of Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Mary Shelley, and Percy Shelley, Ryan

examine[s] the literature of the Romantic period as a conscious attempt by a group of writers to influence the religious transformation that was taking place in