



## What role does religion play in Romantic period writing?

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Religion was a topic of considerable dispute in the Romantic period, with several perspectives vying for ascendancy and credibility. The Church of England held the status of establishment church, and as such Protestantism enjoyed the privileges of this position; for instance, MPs were required to be Anglican. The nature of this religious influence was fundamentally connected with the political context. The French Revolution advocated rebellion against all forms of social authority, with British propaganda labelling this attitude paradoxically as Catholic as well as atheist, attempting to discredit the ideological perspective and maintain the institutions of the monarchy and church.<sup>1</sup> In some ways, however, there was a growing extent of tolerance of other religions, for instance indicated by the Doctrine of the Trinity Act 1813, which legalised non-trinitarianism.<sup>2</sup> The limitations of this relative tolerance, though, were tested by the increasing prominence of divergent religious beliefs. Pantheism, for instance, flourished particularly in the Romantic period and arguably became one of its defining characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Atheism was also increasingly defended, adhering to the empirical principles of the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> This religious diversity is reflected in the literature produced by the period; Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* and Shelley's *The Necessity of Atheism*, for example, both portray a representation of their authors' religious identities, exemplifying the complexity of reactions to the religious status quo of the Romantic period in a variety of ways.

In *Necessity*, Shelley argues that there is no empirical evidence for the existence of God, finding 'no proofs' in 'the three sources of conviction'.<sup>5</sup> His subsequent line of argument indicates the influence of the Enlightenment philosophers on his perspective. As Ellen Wilson explains, they, like Shelley, 'promoted science and intellectual interchange and opposed superstition';<sup>6</sup> this approach was particularly hostile to organised religion, with Hume, for instance, advancing 'a systematic, sceptical critique of the philosophical foundations of various theological systems'.<sup>7</sup> Shelley develops and refines these anti-theist principles in *Necessity*; however, that is not to say that the text actively promotes atheism, instead merely pursuing the hypothetical limits of theological rationality, as indicated by his conclusion that there is 'no proof of the existence of a Deity' (p. 16, my emphasis) rather than denying the existence of God outright. Despite its title, *Necessity* does not even indicate that Shelley himself is an atheist. He begins with the caveat that 'the hypothesis of a pervading

1 Marilyn Morris, *The British Monarchy and the French Revolution* (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 101-16

2 Dudley Medley, *A Student's Manual of English Constitutional History*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1925), p. 653

3 Bernard Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 5

4 Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. vii-viii

5 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Necessity of Atheism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (1813)

<[http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/percy\\_shelley/necessity\\_of\\_atheism.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/percy_shelley/necessity_of_atheism.html)> [Accessed 5 May 2012]

All further quotations from this text are taken from this edition.

6 Ellen Wilson, *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2004), p. 577

7 Paul Russell, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/hume-religion/>> [Accessed 5 May 2012]

Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken' (p. 1), which he only later recognises as pantheism. This recognition implies that Shelley's complaints in *Necessity* are directed at organised religion and its political ties rather than the concept of theism itself. This is supported by a consideration of his other works; S.F. Gingerich describes *Queen Mab* as 'an outspoken and unblushing attack upon Christianity',<sup>8</sup> while *England in 1819* refers to 'Religion Christless, Godless'.<sup>9</sup> Shelley's argument in *Necessity*, then, is that theoretically speaking the existence of God (in the sense that Christianity conceives it) cannot be proven, thereby directly opposing the dominant religious system.

Wordsworth's arguments and religious perspective in *Ode* are by no means universally agreed. Some critics view the occasional instances of Christian vocabulary as central to understanding the poem, with references to 'Heaven'<sup>10</sup> and 'God, who is our home' (l. 65), in Thomas Raysor's eyes, constituting sufficient evidence that 'Wordsworth's "philosophic mind" is that of the Christian philosopher'.<sup>11</sup> The majority of critics, though, follow Lionel Trilling in viewing the poem naturalistically, and assuming that religious references are figurative, not to be considered as contributing to meaning.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this interpretation does seem more substantiated by the evidence, particularly when considering Wordsworth's other works; in *Tintern Abbey*, he describes nature as 'the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / of all my moral being'.<sup>13</sup> In *Ode* itself, this pantheistic perspective is indicated by a number of features. The poem expresses a semantic field of nature, depicting 'birds' (l. 19) and 'young lambs' (l. 20), significantly referring to such sights as 'apparelled in celestial light' (l. 4). More specifically, the earth is anthropomorphised as a 'homely nurse' (l. 81) to the 'foster-child, her inmate man' (l. 82). Despite this guardianship, Wordsworth considers life to be an inevitably corrupting experience, with children closer to this pure relationship with nature, being 'blessed' (l. 114) in this sense, before this relationship fades in adults, for whom 'there hath passed away a glory from this earth' (l. 18). (Shelley echoes this sentiment in *Necessity*, stating that 'as men grow up this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents' (p. 38)). Wordsworth questions how this quality can be regained, concluding that this process of loss does not have to be negative, since recollection of youth can facilitate a closer philosophical relationship with nature, contemplating 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears' (l. 206) through a pantheist perspective. Despite following entirely different lines of reasoning, then, Wordsworth and Shelley arrive at a very similar personal religious belief, with the opposition posed by pantheism to the establishment church of central importance to the religious discord of the period.

One of the most prominent differences between the texts is the form used to convey their arguments. Shelley originally distributed *Necessity* in a pamphlet containing an essay, using a thoroughly academic register. The text is self-consciously intellectual, frequently employing French and Latin to assist its arguments (thereby limiting the readership to those with formal education), as well as citing a variety of reputable sources, such as 'the enlightened and benevolent Pliny' (p. 28) and 'Sir W. Drummond's Academical Questions' (p. 29). Newton is another notable reference, quoting him (again, in Latin) before asserting that 'the consistent Newtonian is necessarily an atheist'(p.29). This is particularly significant

8 S. F. Gingerich, 'Shelley's Doctrine of Necessity versus Christianity', *PMLA*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (1918), pp. 444-73 (p. 446)

9 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *England in 1819* (1839), l. 11, in Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 1180-81

10 William Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1804), l. 66, in Wu, pp. 538-42  
All further quotations from this text are taken from this edition.

11 Thomas Raysor, 'The Themes of Immortality and Natural Piety in Wordsworth's Immortality Ode', *PMLA*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Sep. 1954), pp. 861-75 (p. 865)

12 Lionel Trilling, 'The Immortality Ode', *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1950), pp. 130-58

13 William Wordsworth, *Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, 13 July 1798* (1798) ll. 112-4, in Wu, p. 410

as Newtonian physics played a crucial role in the development of the Age of Enlightenment by, as John Gribbin explains, ‘providing a mathematical description of an ordered world’,<sup>14</sup> constituting further evidence of Shelley’s influences. This academic register serves to create connotations of objectivity, with Shelley claiming to strive for ‘impartiality’ (p. 2) throughout. This is supplemented by a semantic field of scientific investigation, for instance insisting on ‘a close examination of the validity of the proofs’ (p. 2). This clearly reflects the Enlightenment tendency to apply rationality to every problem,<sup>15</sup> with this principle explicitly guiding Shelley when he states that ‘testimony should not be contrary to reason’ (p. 15). The purpose of this register, then, is an attempt to validate the arguments being made. Indeed, Shelley expresses his disappointment in a letter to his father that despite his ‘fair, open, candid conduct [...], no argument was publicly brought forward to disprove [his] reasoning’.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Shelley (perhaps somewhat naively) hoped for a fair and balanced discussion of the issue is indicative of the radicalism of the period in general; however, the fact that he did not achieve this indicates the staunch opposition which conservatism continued to pose.

This focus on establishing the validity of the arguments being made is further understood when considering the context within which Shelley was writing. The first published avowal of speculative atheism appeared as late as 1782 in Britain,<sup>17</sup> while just 45 years previously, one commentator remarked that ‘there is room to doubt, whether there have ever been thinking men, who have actually reasoned themselves into a disbelief of a Deity’.<sup>18</sup> Not only was the philosophical context primarily theistic, but atheism had more serious connotations than merely the lack of belief in God, being associated with the radical and politically dangerous actions of the French Revolution. Atheism presented a convenient enemy for British conservatives to rally behind in the interests of preserving the authority of the monarchy, depicting this lack of traditional religious beliefs as responsible for ‘the total destruction of social order’.<sup>19</sup> Shelley, then, wanted to validate his arguments against this critical backdrop by presenting them in a manner which could not be easily dismissed under the pretence of heresy. Indeed, *Necessity* is well aware of this relationship between politics and religion, complaining of the ‘degree of criminality attachable to disbelief’ (p. 16). Shelley is not alone in this complaint, with Blake also describing God’s priest and king ‘mak[ing] up a heaven of our misery’,<sup>20</sup> implying the marginalisation of underlying Christian principles through the institutionalisation of the church. The increasing prominence of this discourse in texts such as *Necessity* contributed to some extent to a relative relaxation of the legal authority of Protestantism, for example through the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829 which permitted members of the Catholic Church to sit at parliament.<sup>21</sup> Shelley’s essay, then, while not directly responsible for changes such as these, constitutes a significant contribution to the discussion of religious beliefs which were previously considered transgressive, a discussion which arguably constitutes one of the defining characteristics of radical change in the Romantic period.

The methods by which Wordsworth communicates his religious perspective are very different from those of Shelley; he employs the form of an ode, the eleven stanzas of which

14 John Gribbin, *Science: A History 1543-2001* (Michigan: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 241

15 Lorraine Landry, *Marx and the Postmodern Debates: An Agenda for Critical Theory* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2000), p. 7

16 Roger Ingpen, *Shelley in England: New Facts and Letters from the Shelley Whitton Papers* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne Publishing, 1917), p. 215

17 William Hammon, *An Answer to Dr. Priestley’s Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (London, 1782), qtd. in David Berman, ‘The Repressive Denials of Atheism in Britain in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, Vol. 82C (1982), p. 21

18 Thomas Broughton, *Biblioteca Historico-sacra* (London: Reily, 1737)

19 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (Digireads Publishing, 2009), p. 375

20 William Blake, *The Chimney Sweeper* (1794), l. 195, in Wu, p. 195

21 Tomás O’Riordan, *The Emancipation Bill* (1829) <[http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/The\\_Emanicipation\\_Bill](http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/The_Emanicipation_Bill)> [Accessed 5 May 2012]

are divided by their content. The first four stanzas explain the problem of the inevitable decline of the relationship with nature, culminating in the lamentation ‘whither is fled the visionary gleam? / where is it now, the glory and the dream?’ (ll. 56-7). The middle four stanzas reflect upon this problem negatively, acknowledging the superior philosophical position of children but complaining that ‘full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight’ (l. 129). The final three stanzas, though, respond positively, recognising the aforementioned distance but addressing it through recollection (looking back to ‘see the children sporting on the shore’ (l. 169)) to facilitate philosophising informed by pantheism. These arguments are also conveyed by the form of the poem itself. The structure of the stanzas, for instance, grows increasingly erratic as the poem develops. The first two stanzas are both nine lines long, with an iambic metre and relatively consistent ABAB rhyme scheme; the ninth, meanwhile, is thirty-nine lines long, with variations in metre such as the trochaic ‘Blank misgivings of a creature’ (l. 147). The rhyme scheme also becomes less predictable, switching to AAA, for instance, when describing ‘...those obstinate questionings / of sense and outward things, / fallings from us, vanishings’ (ll. 144-6), reflecting the disturbing effect of such questions. These irregularities reflect the gradual loss of ‘new-born blisses’ (l. 85), occurring in tandem with the poem’s descriptions of the increasingly disjointed connection with nature. As well as mirroring the message of the poem, these structural features have implications of how Wordsworth’s religious views relate to his political perspective. During the poem’s composition Wordsworth was sympathetic to the cause of the French Revolution,<sup>22</sup> which the fluctuating structure of *Ode* arguably implies. He asserts that ‘[he] does not think that great poems can be cast in a mould’,<sup>23</sup> with the lack of adherence to poetic convention to an extent betraying a wider radical perspective; the rules of society, politics and religion are as malleable as those of poetry.

Despite the clues conveyed by the structure of the poem, the conclusion to which Wordsworth aspires is by no means clear. The final stanza exhibits a strong rhythm, consisting almost entirely of iambic pentameter, with this one of the structurally strictest passages of the poem; this, along with *Ode*’s position at the end of *Poems, in Two Volumes* (the compilation in which it was originally published), implies a function of conclusion. However, this expectation is frustrated by the actual content. Throughout the poem there is an emphasis on uncertainty, with references to ‘questionings’ (l. 144), ‘vanishings’ (l. 146), ‘misgivings’ (l. 147) and ‘shadowy recollections’ (l. 151); however, these are not satisfactorily resolved, with the final image of ‘clouds that gather round the setting sun’ (l. 199) contrasting against the ‘innocent brightness of a new-born day’ (l. 197). This choice of metaphor, though, suggests another reading of the poem. The rising and setting of the sun is simultaneously finite yet cyclical; human life, too, is finite in an individual sense, but can be considered as cyclical if viewed collectively as part of nature in a pantheistic sense. A recognition of mortality, then, can assist remembering the lack of any notion of mortality in youth, with children symbolising immortality by representing the cyclical nature of human life, facilitating a more complete relationship with nature by way of acknowledging its limitations. This reading is supported by the terms in which Wordsworth describes his doubts, dismissing them with the aside ‘be they what they may’ (l. 153) before referring to them as ‘a master-light of all our seeing’ (l. 155). It is not the exact nature of these doubts that is important to Wordsworth, rather the value and comfort to be found in a consciousness of the gap which they reveal between his perspective and the ‘soul’s immensity’ (l. 109) of childhood. In this way, the poem is emphasising the virtues of pantheism, with reflection of this gap while engaged with nature proving an adequate substitute for the innocent

22 Duncan Wu, ‘William Wordsworth’ in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 411-17 (p. 412)

23 William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, Vol. 5, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 352

perspective of childhood itself. This conclusion could have been considered to some extent transgressive merely by virtue of championing an individual spiritual solution other than that ratified by the Church of England. Wordsworth, then, is not just promoting pantheism, but indirectly criticising Protestantism by its absence due to their mutual exclusivity.

Just as Wordsworth does not openly denounce the religious status quo, Shelley's objective tone ensures his arguments appear impartial; however, *Necessity* also contains frequent indications of a more subjective function. This underlying persuasive intention seems to be supported by the rhetoric features of the text. Shelley occasionally employs metaphors to make his points, referring to a 'veil woven by philosophical conceit, to hide the ignorance of philosophers even from themselves' (p. 17). This tangible representation of ignorance serves as a culmination of his more logically verifiable arguments, thereby bestowing the arguments of his opponents with negative connotations without compromising the logical content of his own points. The text also manipulates pronoun use to similar effect. Shelley implicitly places the reader in agreement with him and distinguishes those who do not agree; he refers, for example, to 'arguments *we* receive from each of *them*, which should convince *us* of the existence of a Deity' (p. 11, my emphasis). By using the first person plural 'we' in contrast with the third person plural 'they', Shelley creates a dichotomy between the people and organised religion, with the reader endeared towards his perspective by virtue of their inclusion. This implicit manipulation of positioning is exploited by the frequent inclusion of rhetorical questions. *Necessity* asks of God:

If he is infinitely good, what reason should we have to fear him? If he is infinitely wise, why should we have doubts concerning our future? If he knows all, why warn him of our needs and fatigue him with our prayers? If he is everywhere, why erect temples to him? If he is just, why fear that he will punish the creatures that he has, filled with weaknesses? If grace does everything for them, what reason would he have for recompensing them? If he is all-powerful, how offend him, how resist him? If he is reasonable, how can he be angry at the blind, to whom he has given the liberty of being unreasonable? If he is immovable, by what right do we pretend to make him change his decrees? If he is inconceivable, why occupy ourselves with him? IF HE HAS SPOKEN, WHY IS THE UNIVERSE NOT CONVINCED? (p. 27)

The passage echoes and extends the infamous Epicurean Paradox: 'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?'<sup>24</sup> with the key structural amendment that the implicit answers to the questions in Shelley's case remain unspoken, indicating his relative restraint; he hypothesises, rather than asserts, that God does not exist. The structural similarity, though, indicates that Shelley is well informed with regard to the historical context of the debate in which he is engaging. The unrelenting momentum of these questions, culminating in dramatic capitalisation, serves to identify God as a comprehensible, finite hypothesis susceptible to imperfections, rather than an unknowable and therefore unassailable abstraction. This objective is also present in Shelley's other work. *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, for example, refers to 'the name of God, and ghosts, and Heaven',<sup>25</sup> with this explicit nominalisation creating connotations of vulnerability if God is considered as a word and symbol rather than deity. *Necessity* goes on to make this point more directly, referring to 'the word God' (p. 21). Again, this indicates Shelley's intentions of discussing religion in the same discourse as other contemporary issues, stripping it of its exemption from criticism.

24 Epicurus, *Epicurean Paradox* (BC 341 – 270), qtd. in David Hume, 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion', Project Gutenberg (2008) <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm>> [Accessed 5 May 2012]  
25 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1816), l. 27, in Wu, pp. 1071-73

While *Necessity* contains these rhetorical features which convey an implicit purpose of wider persuasion, the impression created by *Ode* is one of individual significance. Indeed, Wordsworth concedes that the content of the poem inherently limits its readership, since ‘a reader who has not a vivid recollection of [specific] feelings having existed in his mind in childhood cannot understand the poem’.<sup>26</sup> Several features of the poem support this argument. Rather than including descriptions relevant to many, Wordsworth repeatedly focuses on his own individual perspective, in particular employing verbs which convey his own sensory experience; for example, ‘I feel, I feel it all’ (l. 41), and ‘I hear, I hear, with joy I hear’ (l. 50). This approach is inherently exclusive, making the experiences he describes profoundly oblique, with the use of first person pronoun ‘I’ in particular contrasting with Shelley’s preference for the first person plural ‘we’. This is reinforced by Wordsworth’s paradoxically private address to Hartley Coleridge, with five pronouns referring to him individually in the space of four lines (ll. 108-11). However, at odds with this personal style, the poem discusses issues which are relevant to all, such as ‘human suffering’ (l. 187) and ‘the human heart’ (l. 203). This reflects Wordsworth’s opinion that the position of poet has a special significance and is uniquely equipped to interpret their experiences with introspection and compassion, and communicate them for the benefit of others; as he explains, the poet ‘has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind’.<sup>27</sup> His role as he sees it is to convey his ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’,<sup>28</sup> since others lack the insight to reach similar conclusions and levels of understanding. Children share this insight, with Hartley a ‘Mighty prophet! Seer blessed!’ (l. 114), but it takes the skills of a poet to recall this philosophical ability. This is quite the opposite of Shelley’s approach, with Nicholas Szenczi describing it as ‘a transition from the sensualist empiricism of Locke and Hume, [... to] the dethronement of reason, the exaltation of feeling’.<sup>29</sup> Again, though, this personal perspective serves to endorse a similarly personal communication with nature, which Shelley condones, meaning both texts implicitly excluding the Anglican Church from this relationship.

The ways in which Shelley and Wordsworth’s discussions of religion both fit into the Romantic cannon, then, are in some ways similar and in others very different. Shelley, having been influenced by the empirical principals of Locke and Hume in the Age of Enlightenment, presents a logical and objective argument for the lack of proof of God; his success, though, is limited by the hostile contemporary context. Wordsworth, on the other hand, takes a more introverted approach, with his lyrical verse form dwelling on the strengths and limitations of pantheism. His argument, while less direct than Shelley’s, echoes the reaction against the authority of the establishment church, contributing to a wider discussion which was eliciting increasing religious tolerance, as the changing legal climate indicates. While both authors convey similarly radical religious beliefs, this element of their texts is noteworthy due to the resistance posed by the conservatism of the dominant religious and political perspective; religion in the Romantic period is not merely defined by these radical ideas, then, but by its role in the complex and dynamic relationship between radicalism and conservatism.

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26 Wordsworth, *Letters*, p. 189

27 William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)

<<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/Spring2001/040/preface1802.html>> [Accessed 5 May 2012]

28 *Ibid.*

29 Nicholas Szenczi, ‘Reality and the English Romantics’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Feb. 1968), pp. 179-198 (p.180)

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