

Chapter Title: Shelley After Atheism

Book Title: Unquiet Things

Book Subtitle: Secularism in the Romantic Age

Book Author(s): COLIN JAGER

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press . (2015)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qh45d.15>

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*University of Pennsylvania Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Unquiet Things*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## CHAPTER 9

---

# Shelley After Atheism

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

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

Of the major romantic writers, Percy Shelley is most readily associated with atheism. In the early nineteenth century the word was still an epithet, yet Shelley seems to have courted it. *The Necessity of Atheism*, the 1811 pamphlet that got Shelley and Thomas Jefferson Hogg kicked out of Oxford, may have recapitulated familiar arguments from Locke and Hume, but the title itself had the desired effect. Five years later, when Shelley signed himself in the hotel registers in Chamonix and Montanvert as “Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist,” it was again the final term that caused the uproar.<sup>1</sup> “Atheism” is an almost magical word.

This chapter is about *Mont Blanc*, the poem that Shelley largely wrote during his sojourn in Chamonix. I will have little to say about its content, for this is a poem that deliberately and provocatively resists any reading that focuses on content. The poem’s obscure meditations on power, necessity, and death have sent critics scurrying for source texts, but these are of less interest to me than the “event” of *Mont Blanc* itself: the history of tourism in the area, the writing of the poem, the signature in the guest book, the reaction to that signature in England. I propose to read this event as a composite meditation on the possibilities and limitations of the history of atheism.

“History,” Fredric Jameson famously writes in a Shelleyan idiom, “is not a type of content, but rather the inexorable *form* of events.” Jameson refers here to the idea of history as an “absent cause,” one “apprehended only

through its effects.”<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Jameson develops this thought from Spinoza, for *Mont Blanc* is in this sense a Spinozistic poem, a poem of effects without obvious antecedent causes. Thus the poem’s speaker describes the long-range effects of the glaciers as they slowly make their way down from the mountain’s peak:

A city of death, distinct with many a tower  
 And wall impregnable of beaming ice.  
 Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin  
 Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky  
 Rolls its perpetual stream.<sup>3</sup>

The “absent cause” in this case is the mountain itself, made visible in the poem only briefly and seemingly remote from the slow-moving, inexorable destruction at its base. Connecting the mountain to the poem’s “flood of ruin” requires that we read it by means of what it does *not* seem to be doing:

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,  
 The still and solemn power of many sights,  
 And many sounds, and much of life and death. (lines 127–29)

The mountain, as the speaker had earlier asserted, seems “far, far above” (line 60) the earthly ruin at its feet.

What I have sketched here is a treatment of the poem as an allegory for the Radical Enlightenment. A properly critical account of the mountain, Shelley seems to be saying, would begin with its godlike remoteness, its apparent transcendence of destruction, the way that it hides behind impressive locutions like “boundaries of the sky.” Nevertheless the heroic “human mind” (line 143), by dint of its critical capacities, can trace destruction back to its ultimate source. That is a fine reading of the poem, but my argument will be Shelley himself actually goes it one better—that the event of the poem, if not the poem itself, is actually superior to the Radical Enlightenment, for the events that surround *Mont Blanc* mark something like an exit from this heroic model of the human mind. Pursuing this interpretation will involve, as we shall see, leaving *Mont Blanc* behind as well. For in his own first “reading” of the poem in Chamonix’s hotel register and then more fully in *Prometheus Unbound*, written three years later, Shelley begins to undo atheism’s long-standing association with heroic freethought. As such, we can

read the history in the *Mont Blanc* event not as an absent cause but as something closer to Coleridge's "strange quiet": as a secular history that regulates the possibilities of embodied life.

### Atheism as Unbelief

Because this is a rather counterintuitive argument, it will be best to begin on familiar ground. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the heavily touristed Vale of Chamonix was thought to facilitate religious awe, even perhaps to cure atheists of unbelief. Such notions inspired Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni," which offered this thought as part of its lengthy headnote when it first appeared in 1802: "Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!"<sup>4</sup> Notoriously, Coleridge had never in fact been to Chamonix; even more notoriously, his poem partly plagiarizes Sophie Christiane Friederike Brun's much shorter poem on the same subject.<sup>5</sup> When Shelley signs the hotel register "Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist," then, he is not only resisting the conventional piety to which Coleridge had given voice; like the subtitle added for the poem's 1817 publication, "Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," Shelley's signature in the guest book marks the fact that he was *there*, and thinking for himself. Thus *Mont Blanc's* atheism betokens liberty: freedom from a past marked by complacency, sentimentality, and lack of originality.

Putting it like this slots Shelley's atheism into the tradition of free-thought that Jonathan Israel has taught us to call the "Radical Enlightenment."<sup>6</sup> Yet *Mont Blanc* is not a poem of the Radical Enlightenment in any simple sense. Indeed, critics have generally seen in Shelley's poems of late 1815 and 1816 something of a turn away from the Radical Enlightenment, particularly as Shelley had inherited that tradition from William Godwin, his father-in-law and one of the major intellectual influences on his early thought. Godwin assumed that revolution was first a cognitive event, and thus that people could be convinced of its worth. By contrast, Shelley was by this point in his career suggesting that people needed to experience change imaginatively before they could learn its principles intellectually. Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Coleridge began to appear more often in his writing.<sup>7</sup> This inaugurated the political strategy that he described most famously in the "Preface" to *Prometheus Unbound*: "The imagery which I have employed," Shelley writes there, "will be found, in many instances, to have been drawn

from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed" (*SPP* 207). According to the usual gloss, Shelley is here suggesting that revolutions do indeed happen mentally, but that Godwin was wrong to think that the contents of one mind could be simply transferred to another. The only way to grasp mental revolution is through the mediation of the outward scene.

In a general way this is what we mean by "romanticism," if we mean anything at all: rather than saying that his mind is like nature, the poet says that nature is like his mind, and accordingly that the best way of understanding what is going on there is to look at the outer scene. This is how M. H. Abrams laid it out in *Natural Supernaturalism*, and if Abrams saw this as a humanizing and therefore secularizing technique, it was secularization of a particularly "spiritual" sort. Earl Wasserman, in a roughly parallel fashion, influentially interpreted Shelley's "turn" of 1815/1816 as a shift from materialism to idealism.<sup>8</sup> For some years now, the political effects of this tendency to spiritualize or idealize the landscape have been a pressing critical question. Was the first generation's political apostasy a *necessary* result of an idealizing poetic theory, or merely a contingent one? That seems the crucial question for Shelley in Chamonix's Vale, invoking Coleridge in order to turn him upside down.

Yet to approach the matter at this level is to find oneself entangled in the question of religion in ways that limit what a text like *Mont Blanc* can do. Wasserman's readings of the poem are an excellent case in point, for after his subtle meditation on the relationship between skepticism and idealism, he concludes that however we decide the outcome, and however we interpret the poem's final rhetorical question, the thing itself remains "implicitly religious" (238). I think that Wasserman is correct here, though not quite for the reasons he thinks. The poem is not "implicitly religious" because it preserves a posture of submission (to Necessity, rather than to God), nor because it is an example of the *via negativa*, but because any interpretation of the poem that concentrates on its various epistemological conundrums will eventually find itself running up against the question of our knowledge of divinity. A reading that aims to extract the poem's cognitive content—that is, a reading that sets itself the task of figuring out what beliefs or unbeliefs the poem expresses—tangles itself up in the question of religion, *even if the reading concludes that the poem "expresses" atheism.*

To see why this is so, consider a basic tension in the history of modern atheism. Long before there were acknowledged atheists there were numerous

refutations of atheism, and this curious fact can be explained in two different ways. Some intellectual historians infer atheism's presence in the early Enlightenment from the arguments of those writing *against* it.<sup>9</sup> From numerous seventeenth-century pamphlets declaring atheism to be impossible and incoherent, for example, Jonathan Israel and others conclude that there must have been atheists around then, even though there is no direct textual record. Why would authorities bother to critique, ridicule, and refute something that did not exist? By emphasizing the tradition of freethought, this story makes atheism external to religion. Atheists are the intellectual heroes of their age.

Alan Kors, by contrast, offers a different answer to the question of why there were so many early-modern refutations of atheism if there were no atheists. The educational method of early modern Europe, notes Kors, was scholastic *disputatio*, which rewarded speculative ingenuity. Theologians and other university-educated intellectuals “were taught, formally and informally, to generate ‘objections’ to all of their . . . cherished beliefs, indeed . . . to anticipate the strongest possible objections and to overcome these.”<sup>10</sup> In this world the “atheist” serves a number of crucial rhetorical functions: his arguments had to be rehearsed, examined, and entertained, even if only to be at last triumphantly refuted. Early modern theists, Kors concludes, were the source or even the creators of the atheism they refuted. At this discursive level, he demonstrates, atheism was “ubiquitous” (96) in the early modern world. Rather than lurking in the recesses of the mind, waiting for the moment when it could finally be confessed, atheism was created by its opponents.

A background shift then turned such discursive atheism from a rhetorical possibility into a possible identity. That shift is the Cartesian geometric method, designed and implemented to combat the very habit of scholastic *disputatio* that had constructed atheism as a rhetorical position. The most well-known example is Descartes himself, complaining of quarrelsome students and their habit of contesting everything but not progressing toward firmer knowledge: “one cannot imagine anything so strange or unbelievable,” Descartes wrote, “that it has not been said by some philosopher.”<sup>11</sup> Scholastic shouting matches seemed to matter even more during the Thirty Years’ War, when *disputatio* moved out of the lecture hall and onto the battlefield. Returning in the midst of the war to his army post in Germany, Descartes famously paused and turned inward: “the onset of winter held me up,” he wrote in the *Discourse on Method*, “[and] finding no conversation with which to be diverted and, fortunately, having no worries or passions which troubled

me, I remained for a whole day by myself in a small stove-heated room, where I had complete leisure for communing with my thoughts” (11). Those thoughts famously yielded the command to reason only according to a method, since so many of our prereflective beliefs about the world were groundless. In the new world struggling to be born, and where the conflict raging outside was dramatic demonstration that the organizing structures of Christendom could no longer provide a common ground, human consensus must be secured at a cognitive rather than institutional level. Descartes’s project thus helped to insure the legitimacy of an increasingly mentalistic conception of religion in the early modern period. Salvation in the early modern period came more and more to hang on a method: on having the right beliefs, and on assenting to them in the right way. For the scholar, meanwhile, religion became an object of knowledge to be tabulated, compared, and understood along the lines being mapped out by the natural sciences.<sup>12</sup> It thus becomes possible to speak of “religions,” in the plural, as distinct but relatable “things” that people or cultures “have.”

This early modern transformation of religion *into* a set of cognitive beliefs makes atheism in our modern sense possible. Thus when David Berman argues in his authoritative *History of Atheism in Britain* that atheism was “repressed” and “covert” in early modern England, but could finally be “avowed” in the 1780s, he misses the historical change that really matters.<sup>13</sup> If atheism becomes an expressible belief at a certain historical moment, this is not simply because restrictions have finally lifted but because an entire background picture is slowly changing so that it becomes possible to think in terms of beliefs and their (dis)avowal.

Once “religion” has narrowed and deepened like this, and once its chief philosophical questions are epistemological (questions of knowledge) rather than ontological (questions of virtue, holiness, and right living), then atheism in the sense of unbelief becomes not only possible but intellectually appealing. For if God is needed mostly as a supernatural object of belief—rather than as a sustaining presence within the Creation, as God is for example in Aquinas—then God still has to be fitted somehow into a world that apparently works without him. The foremost answer to this challenge was to reconceive God as a benevolent designer of a mechanistic universe. But whatever the precise solution, intellectual culture had crossed a conceptual Rubicon: if it was once important to fit the things of this world into a theory of the divine, it now seemed necessary to fit divinity into the things of this world. At best God was now superfluous; at worst, pernicious.<sup>14</sup>

The final turn to this argument is the one we have been following throughout this book: that Christianity is in large part responsible for the secular sense of religious “options” in which modern atheism is embedded. This is the point that Kors makes in relation to atheism specifically, and that Charles Taylor makes in a more general way when he argues that in the early modern period, beliefs came to be understood as accompanied by their construal, so that even the most devout took up a third-person relation to them. People began to understand themselves as agents who *have* beliefs. Taylor calls this a shift toward the disenchanted world: a world of “buffered selves,” where religious belief is an increasingly cognitive faculty. Initially undertaken with the aim of strengthening Christianity by clarifying areas of doctrinal and moral disagreement, the focus on belief eventually rendered Christianity irrelevant to large swaths of human experience. Concerned with policing thoughts and boundaries, doctrinal belief gradually disinvested in the social whole and withdrew from the network of activity, practice, community, and routine where religious thoughts had been embedded. Largely the product of a zealously reform-minded Christianity, this process of disenchantment ushers us into the modern secular age.<sup>15</sup>

This argument, if it is right, raises problems for any triumphant story of atheism as an example of heroic freethought. For it turns out that atheism, far from opposing Christianity, is a very Christian concept, a part of the tale of a secular age that arises in the early modern period because of a series of shifts within Western Christendom. It follows that the role of the Radical Enlightenment as a midwife to modernity has been overstated, its intellectualism leading to an inflated sense of its own importance. For if atheism is part of the fabric of Christian culture rather than its inveterate opponent, it cannot matter very much if a couple of freethinking Epicureans insist that atoms swerve in the void or that motion adheres in matter. Finally, this line of reasoning suggests that atheism may be a belief—a negative one, in this case—as thin as its epistemologized rival. As William Blake might say, a certain history has been adopted by both parties.<sup>16</sup>

### Shelley’s Radical Enlightenment

This is a controversial proposal. And though readers of this book will have realized that I am largely sympathetic to it, I am less interested here in whether it is entirely right than in the undeniable fact that Shelley finds it



more and more congenial as his thinking develops. This is due in large part to his own reading of the historical situation. To be sure, he does not begin there: between the *Necessity of Atheism* and the signature in the hotel registry, Shelley's borrowings, references, and allusions offer a crash course in free-thinking radicalism completely in line with the narrative of atheism as intellectual heroism. Some of his criticisms of Christian monotheism come from Gibbon, and he adapts his arguments against proofs of God from Hume. Godwin, Paine, and Wollstonecraft turn up consistently. Shelley's reading during this period also taps into two long-standing traditions of radical Continental thought. The first is the tradition of religious syncretism, especially as redacted in Volney's *Ruins*, which Shelley read in 1812. The first English translation of Volney had appeared in 1792 (published by Joseph Johnson), and the book had a direct influence on Tom Paine, Thomas Spence, Blake, and the various members of what Iain McCalman has called London's "radical underworld."<sup>17</sup> The second tradition is that of Epicurianism, transmitted through the several Lucretius revivals and then through d'Holbach's *Système de la nature* (1770).<sup>18</sup> All of this material, and much more besides, found its way into the clandestinely circulated *Queen Mab* (1812), whose notes reprinted a modified version of the *Necessity of Atheism* and one of whose triumphal lines declares, "There is no God!"<sup>19</sup> *Queen Mab* "must not be published under pain of death, because it is too much against every existing establishment," wrote Harriet Shelley to her Dublin friend Catherine Nugent. "Do you [know] any one that would wish for so dangerous a gift?"<sup>20</sup>

Yet Shelley came late to the "New Philosophy" that had roiled elite European cultural circles for over 150 years. Reading through this material, and reading the accounts of it in such books as Michael Scrivener's *Radical Shelley* and Martin Priestman's *Romantic Atheism*, one is struck by how little has changed from the mid- and late seventeenth century, when thoroughgoing materialism first began to seep into Europe's intellectual life. Jonathan Israel brilliantly traces the secret networks, coteries, and groupings of the Radical Enlightenment, the clandestine circulation of its ideas, its characteristic modes of diversion, denial, and prevarication in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But after reading Israel, perusing accounts of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century radicals feels rather familiar; here are the same sorts of pseudonymous and anonymous references, the same clandestine circulation, the same confusion that had characterized the Radical Enlightenment's first flowering. John Gibson Lockhart, in his hostile review in 1819, is ironically enough correct when he notes wearily that Shelley's

notions recur “[i]n every age.”<sup>21</sup> Whatever Lockhart’s motivations, his judgment is historically accurate. In terms of philosophical sophistication or new arguments, d’Holbach and Volney, Paine and Godwin, are for the most part offering ideas already available to Continental initiates by 1680 or thereabouts. The period after 1750, as Israel writes, was “basically just one of consolidating, popularizing, and annotating revolutionary concepts introduced earlier” (*RE* 7).

This was also Shelley’s view of the matter. In *A Philosophical View of Reform* he praises the “new epoch” of the mid- and late seventeenth century, “marked by the commencement of deeper enquiries into the point of human nature than are compatible with an unreserved belief in any of those popular mistakes upon which . . . systems of faith . . . with all their superstructure of political and religious tyranny, are built.” Locke, Hume, and Hartley are, by contrast, “exact . . . but superficial,” while the French *philosophes* developed only “those particular portions of the new philosophy” that were “most popular.” “[T]hey told the truth, but not the whole truth,” Shelley concludes.<sup>22</sup>

If the “New Philosophy” that Shelley channels is no longer very new, however, there has now been a revolution enacted in its name. The Radical Enlightenment had arrived in France by means of Huguenots in the Netherlands, according to Israel; by 1719 Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* had been published clandestinely in French. This is Spinoza as the theorist of radical republicanism, his philosophy “a veritable engine of war,” targeting the ancien régime and leading “in direct line of descent to the revolutionary rhetoric of Robespierre and the French Jacobins” (*RE* 306, 22). While Hobbes and Locke regarded the state of nature as brutal and viewed private property as the foundation of liberty, Spinoza held that appropriation of the land was a denial of natural liberty. Rousseau may have rejected Spinoza’s metaphysics, but he adopted his political theory, and the notion that equality is basic to the state of nature makes its way into the *Discourse on Inequality* and thence to the Jacobins. From this perspective the Revolution is really an outworking of a radical intellectual tradition of the late seventeenth century.

Whether or not Israel overstates Spinoza’s actual influence, his book reveals the degree to which the Radical Enlightenment’s robust concept of liberty, formulated most powerfully in the *Tractatus*, would shape the French Revolution. Freedom is the “freedom to philosophize,” the “freedom to think and to say what one thinks,” writes Spinoza.<sup>23</sup> He argues that because religion, like private property, curtails such freedom, it must be regulated *in*

*the name of freedom.* If for Locke religious freedom was the example of freedom par excellence, for Spinoza “religious freedom” is virtually an oxymoron. In short, there is at work in Spinoza a specific anthropology—a picture of the human as “naturally” unfettered by religion and by property—and a theory of state power as something that may be legitimately employed to promote that anthropology and to sideline alternatives to it. This is why Spinoza can write that “we have established it as absolutely certain that theology should not be subordinate to reason, nor reason to theology, but rather that each has its own domain” (*TTP* 190), but assert almost immediately that since theology “determine[s] only what is necessary for obedience” (*TTP* 190) it is antithetical to the freedom that the ideal state will promote: “if no one were obliged by law to obey the sovereign power in matters that he thinks belongs to religion . . . on this pretext everyone would be able to claim license to do anything. Since by this means the law of the state is wholly violated, it follows that the supreme right of deciding about religion, belongs to the sovereign power” (*TTP* 206–7). In this formulation religion always potentially conflicts with state power. This is a crucial intellectual source of the militant secularism of the French Revolution, which became official policy with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790: a generous acknowledgment of separate domains on the one hand, and on the other a patrolling of that boundary so vigilant as to create the conditions of its violation. The Radical Enlightenment bequeaths to the Revolution an image of an activist secular state; it proposes to police religion in the effort to secure a space free from it.

In a widely cited essay, Charles Taylor describes a similar contrast between two dominant models of secularism that emerged in early modern Europe. The first is the Lockean “common ground” model, with a minimalist state adjudicating among a variety of metaphysical orientations. Locke begins by assuming that most Europeans are naturally religious, in accord with the moderate Enlightenment’s desire to modify the confessional state without overturning the social order. This is a basically theological conception of secularism, forged in order to bring peace to warring Protestant sects; famously, Locke would not extend toleration to atheists. Taylor’s second model, which he terms the “independent ethic,” begins with a nonreligious anthropology; it assumes, as Spinoza would put it, that “the state of nature is not to be confused with the state of religion” (*TTP* 205), and therefore holds it best to construct a society “as if” there were no God. Taylor traces

this idea to Hugo Grotius, but Spinoza is an even more plausible candidate; indeed, orthodox commentators often lumped both Dutchmen together as “atheistic” biblical scholars.<sup>24</sup>

According to the secularism of the moderate Enlightenment, then, citizens possess religious beliefs the way they possess property, namely by right, and the state agrees to leave religion alone as long as religion leaves politics alone. According to the secularism of the Radical Enlightenment, by contrast, property and religious belief limit freedom. If secularism *just is* the principle of neutrality among competing metaphysical notions, then the state’s role is limited to abstention and even-handedness; but if secularism describes a certain formation of the citizen, then more intrusive measures may be required, and the state is justified in influencing the choices that people make.<sup>25</sup> Just as in Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, the first of these tends in practice to slide into the second. When in 2003 the French government outlawed the wearing of “religious symbols” in French schools, the language of the Stasi report insisted that the state had no power over spiritual choices. But as in the Civil Constitution of 1790, it is the state that decides if its principles are threatened.

As we know, for Shelley the French Revolution was the “master-theme of the epoch in which we live,” “involving pictures of all that is best qualified to interest and to instruct mankind,” as he wrote to Byron just after returning from France and a few months after visiting Mont Blanc.<sup>26</sup> What “instruction” might he have in mind? In the famous dream vision of Volney’s *Ruins*, the Genius requires all the religions of the world to justify themselves before a tribunal of free people recently liberated from superstition. But perhaps Volney’s reasonable council takes the problem up at the wrong end. For if Jonathan Israel is right that the Revolution instantiates the political theories of the Radical Enlightenment, then the issue is not religious sectarianism but rather the *power of the state to name religious sectarianism as such*: a power that professes neutrality but also actively protects its own interests. On this reading, revolutionary paranoia produces “religion” as an enemy of the revolution, which can thus be eliminated by force. The manufactured possibility of religious violence justifies the actuality of secular violence. Thus the Revolution’s degeneration into violence, recrimination, paranoia, and renewed political absolutism is an imminent development of the Radical Enlightenment itself. From this perspective, furthering the critique of religion aids the secular violence it claims to combat. This would be an appropriately Shelleyan turn of the screw.

A *truly* revolutionary argument, then, would disarticulate the critique of political tyranny from the critique of Christianity. This would demand a critical reading of the radical tradition itself. Shelley may very well have wished to see the last king strangled with the entrails of the last priest (a remark variously attributed to Voltaire, Diderot, and Meslier), but as a strategy this misses the point rather badly—and moreover the particular *way* that it misses the point helps explain why the French Revolution came undone in the way that it did: not only the Terror but Napoleon, years of war, and finally the restoration of thrones across post-Napoleonic Europe.<sup>27</sup> What if the “instruction” Shelley imagines in his letter to Byron is precisely the making visible of the violence, real and potential, that shadows the presumptively neutral operations of the state *whenever* it intervenes in the formation of its citizens, even when it intervenes to uphold a position—atheism, egalitarian property rights—that one supports? In this case Shelley’s point would be his poem’s point: that the content of beliefs is not the issue.

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

### Atheism as an Occupation

“Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist.” These words are Shelley’s own first “reading” of his poem. And these three words are of course the Radical Enlightenment in a nutshell, especially if we render “philanthropist” more literally as “lover of mankind” and hear in that phrase a certain libertinism. Already in *Queen Mab* Shelley had connected libertinism firmly to political and religious radicalism. Certainly by 1816 the charge of libertinism was in the air wherever he went.<sup>28</sup> And so we might read the signature in the hotel

register less as an adolescent attempt to shock than an effort to reinvigorate a collection of philosophical positions that had become, on Shelley's own analysis, superficial. The Radical Enlightenment, I have suggested, was not by Shelley's estimation radical enough: it shared with the moderate Enlightenment, that is to say, the habit of viewing religion as a belief in a divine superagent, and it created thereby the possibility of modern atheism as the rejection of that belief.

Both modern religion and modern atheism are from this perspective secular, in the specific sense that there is a great deal of human life over which they no longer have authority. In post-Westphalian Europe it was generally the state that took over the management of embodied life: through various media, through networks of officials and spies, through medical innovations and humanitarian organizations it observed, measured, distributed, and supervised its subjects.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the reformation of the mind demands the reformation of the body. Martin Luther, who sometimes pictured the body as merely a place of appetites and drives, famously compared it to a wild animal that must be chained, and humanity's natural, bodily condition to a state of continual warfare: "If there were no law and government, then seeing that all the world is evil and that scarcely one human being in a thousand is a true Christian, people would devour each other and no one would be able to support his wife and children, feed himself and serve God."<sup>30</sup> Luther developed this picture in the context of what he called the "two kingdoms": the realm of law and compulsion that characterized the earthly kingdom, the realm of freedom and grace that characterized the heavenly one. The result was a radical idea of Christian freedom (subsequently made available for Anabaptist theories of perfectionism and revolutionary anarchy and eventually, in modified form, for modern democracy) within a divinely sanctioned but institutionally secular state, where freedom was a cognitive rather than bodily property and the state held a monopoly on violence.<sup>31</sup> As Erasmus and More recognized, this tended to distance Christian commitment from civil society by mapping a body-mind distinction onto the earthly-heavenly one. With those divisions in place, it was not difficult for Hobbes to simply invert their values: his "Kingdome of Darknesse" replaced Luther's sphere of radical Christian freedom, but the picture of earthly life as a violent struggle against passions and desires remained the same.

In this sense early modern Europe witnessed what we can term a "secularization of the body." Driven largely by the Reforming impulse internal to

Western Christendom, such secularization organized corporeal life. It furthered the process through which the body itself—its positioning, habituation, and sensory organization—came to reside outside the boundaries of “religion.” This is not to say, of course, that early modern Christianity remained uninterested in the body. The point is, rather, that it is precisely this “secularization” of the body, the sense that its appetites were worldly or carnal and therefore that its energies were to be contained and productively redirected, that contributed to the sense that there was little about the body that aided a religious life now understood largely in mentalistic terms. Bodies learn to apprehend the world they inhabit: institutions may deliberately cultivate certain attitudes and sense perceptions, but those perceptions are also the unintended consequences of social and cultural change. The set of historical and cultural transformations known as secularism, then, has the potential to alter the body’s sensory capacities, its ability to feel in certain ways, to access certain kinds of experiences.<sup>32</sup>

The Radical Enlightenment was officially dedicated to opening up possibilities heretofore beyond the pale. My argument is that its degeneration into state-sponsored violence by the close of the eighteenth century is the logical development of its conceptual commitment to the power of the state to remake the affective lives of its subjects. Shelley’s inscription in the hotel register wonderfully encapsulates just this dialectical relation. For because hotel registers do not usually offer a separate category for “beliefs,” Shelley placed his “atheism” under the category of “occupation.” Simple good fortune, perhaps. But it allows us to ask a serious question: what would it mean to understand “atheism” as an occupation—as something that one *does* rather than something that one *is*? What if atheism were not about cognitively held beliefs or nonbeliefs but about postures, arrangements, dispositions, embodied techniques, or disciplined actions?

“Occupation” can mean “the action of taking or maintaining possession or control of a country, building, land, etc., esp. by (military) force,” as the *OED* puts it. It can also mean “the state of having one’s time or attention occupied; what a person is engaged in; employment, business; work, toil.” The first meaning is largely spatial, the second largely temporal. In the hotel register, “occupation” means time—and yet the very presence of the mountain as an occupant of space, registered so consistently in Shelley’s poem, as well as in Mary Shelley’s contributions to the *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, where *Mont Blanc* was first published, hints at the first meaning as well. How

can anyone or anything else occupy space when Mont Blanc's mass is so insistently *there*, and when the various military occupations of the region are so fresh in the memory? Even atheism, faced with such dominant spaces, would retreat to the mind. Indeed, this is exactly how the *Quarterly Review*, interrupting its 1818 review of Leigh Hunt's "Foliage" in order to pounce on Shelley, pictured what had happened. "If we were told," writes the *Quarterly*, "of a man who, thus witnessing the sublimest assemblage of natural objects, should retire to a cabin near and write aethos after his name in the album, we hope our own feelings would be pity rather than disgust."<sup>33</sup> In the *Quarterly's* imagination, there apparently *was* a place in the hotel register for "beliefs," and Shelley, incapable of responding to sublime objects properly, writes "atheist" there—as if his mind is the "blank" space of nothingness and nonbelief still so often taken to be the poem's own deepest aspiration.<sup>34</sup> This picture maps easily onto a secular distinction in which the mountain forcefully occupies all available space while doctrines and beliefs are located in the mind and "expressed."

But if the "occupation" of atheism is instead about how one organizes one's time, then a different set of concepts comes into focus. For occupations, understood temporally, involve the entire self in the organization of experience. And they centrally concern what one does with one's body—how it is trained, organized, and adjusted, what experiences it pursues and cultivates, what experiences it forecloses on—and what potentials it activates.

An incident in *Prometheus Unbound*, written around the time of the *Quarterly's* attack, makes this point clearly. The passage, which significantly animates the static alpine scenery of *Mont Blanc*, depicts Asia describing a remote Power familiar from the earlier poem. But this time, the episode ends with an avalanche

whose mass,  
Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there  
Flake after flake: in Heaven-defying minds  
As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth  
Is loosened, and the nations echo round,  
Shaken to their roots: as do the mountains now.<sup>35</sup>

This looks, at first, like a mental revolution—a particularly spectacular example of the technique of drawing imagery from the mind's operations that Shelley had defended in the drama's "Preface": thoughts pile up in minds



until they yield a revolutionary truth. Yet by delaying the analogical “as” so long that snowflakes rather than thoughts seem to be accumulating in the mind, Shelley’s syntax manages what William Keach calls a “disorienting effect.” The physical world, in the form of snowflakes, seems to penetrate the mind itself, suggesting not a simple reversal of priority but an experiential undoing of any effort to draw lines between the mind and the things outside it. Shelley’s “rejection of dualism,” writes Keach, “forms part of the conceptual basis for a range of practices that are about remaking the world of human experience by releasing its full potential as a dynamic and differentiated totality.”<sup>36</sup> The unsettling effect of a language that refuses to distinguish between mental life and bodily life might offer a foretaste of the kind of revolution that would *really* alter the organization of space. “Liberty, when men act in bodies, is *power*,” wrote Burke about the French Revolution, glimpsing from the negative side the kinds of discomfiting potentials that adhere to an embodied life. For while power may be frozen and spatialized “on high,” as in *Mont Blanc* (line 127), it might also be put into motion through the accretion of bodies that like snowflakes eventually become more than the sum of their parts, and that can learn to occupy space in a new and dynamic way. By “bodies,” of course, Burke meant collections of individuals. But Shelley’s syntactical disorientation allows us to take full advantage of the pun: to act as a body, we must act *in* a body.

The notorious difficulty of Shelley’s writing has its source in the expanded sensory capacities toward which it points—matters of the body as much as the mind, of sensing and feeling as much as thinking.<sup>37</sup> This quality of Shelley’s verse has bothered critics from the *Monthly Review*’s prescient description of Shelley’s “licentiousness of rhythm” to F. R. Leavis’s worry that with Shelley “one accepts the immediate feeling and doesn’t slow down to think.”<sup>38</sup> Often those hostile to Shelley can see this more clearly than can those who profess to admire him. In its 1819 review of *The Revolt of Islam*, for example, the *Quarterly Review* cogently recognized that Shelley’s danger lay not in the content of his ideas but in what the reviewer termed his “manner.” “We despair,” wrote the *Quarterly*, “of convincing him directly that he has taken up false and pernicious notions; but if he pays any deference to the common laws of reasoning, we hope to show him that, let the goodness of his cause be what it may, his manner of advocating it is false and unsound.”<sup>39</sup>

Shelley, still at work on *Prometheus Unbound*, had already described his technique of drawing the poem’s images from the operations of the human mind. But after reading this review he added to the “Preface,” defending

his “manner” by focusing on its political potential. Although the “mass of capabilities remains at every period materially the same,” he wrote, and the “power” of imagery general, changing circumstances bring images into new alignments, awakening nascent capabilities “to action” (*SPP* 208). Thus “the peculiar style of intense and comprehensive imagery which distinguishes the modern literature of England” (*SPP* 207).

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

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

## Vacancy

“Our age,” Immanuel Kant famously wrote in the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), “is the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must

submit. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.”<sup>40</sup> Kant’s is a familiar picture of enlightenment as the slow victory of rationality over reactionary forces, the gradual winning of freedom and dignity presided over by reason. Yet for at least some who lived during the age of enlightenment, the relationships among law, religion, and reason were less simple. For them, indeed, a more accurate picture of the era might be found in a passage from Kant’s second preface, published with a new edition of the *Critique* in 1787. Responding to the charge that “critique” was an entirely negative exercise in establishing boundaries, Kant writes: “To deny that the service which the Critique renders is positive in character, would thus be like saying that the police are of no positive benefit, inasmuch as their main business is merely to prevent the violence of which citizens stand in mutual fear, in order that each may pursue his vocation in peace and security.”<sup>41</sup> Characteristically, Kantian peace reduces to security and the prevention of violence. And instructively, too, Kant’s image of the police as the enforcers of this peace suggests that the state has a rather different relationship to criticism than does religion. Indeed, far from trying to “exempt itself” from critique, the state serves as its administrator.

I have been arguing in this chapter that it is exactly this—enlightenment making common cause with secular power in the name of peace—that Shelley finds so “instructive” about the French Revolution. That the Revolution failed to establish even the negative peace of which Kant spoke might be regarded, from Shelley’s perspective, as inevitable. In response to this lesson, I have proposed, *Mont Blanc* asks questions that are ontological rather than overtly political: What would an alternative sensorium look like? What kinds of experiences would differently organized bodies have?

And yet the poem ends with a rhetorical question that seems more like Kant’s police:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind’s imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (lines 141–43)

Sometimes read as an expression of its author’s philosophical idealism, the poem’s final question might also be interpreted as negative liberty, whose aim

is to clear a space in which freedom can thrive. Shelley's "On Life" (1819), a prose fragment inscribed in the back of the notebook that also contains the *Philosophical View of Reform*, seems to make exactly this point. Here Shelley defended the idealist conviction that "nothing exists but as it is perceived." That doctrine "establishes no new truth," he declared, but only "destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation."<sup>42</sup> Christopher Hitt, in an intelligent essay, argues that the "vacancy" this passage celebrates is the vacancy with which *Mont Blanc* concludes.<sup>43</sup> On this reading, error, like the many voices that encircle the mountain and the "large codes of fraud and woe" (line 81) that emanate from them, can be "repealed" (80) only by a philosophy that demolishes the old truths without establishing new ones in their stead.

However appealing such a negative liberty might be, the Revolution demonstrates that vacancy is not strictly negative.<sup>44</sup> Power will always defend its normative vision of things, stepping in with force or the promise of force whenever alternatives threaten. From this perspective, the "freedom in which [the mind] would have acted but for the mis-use of words and signs" is a chimera, a myth of reason that licenses destruction in the name of liberty. And the vacancy that it leaves behind is the vacancy into which power steps. The critical consensus that Shelley's poems of late 1815 and 1816 represent a romantic turn away from Godwinian rationalism has from this perspective not been taken far enough. Shelley's romantic turn, registered at the level of syntax and sensory organization as much as of mind and idea, interprets the tradition stretching from Descartes in his stove-heated room to the contemporary war on terror as a red herring, a way to distract the mass from the consolidation of power into fewer and fewer hands by inventing something called the problem of religion. In so doing it has blocked the kind of rethinking so obviously needed in the aftermath of the French Revolution and prevented the kind of historical analysis that would reveal how caught up secular power is in the creation of its religious opponent.

Could the Radical Enlightenment get over its obsession with religion and focus its critical energies on the process that has justified that obsession? That process is what I have called *secularism*: not simple neutrality but the peculiarly modern intervention in ordinary forms of life by state, civic, and cultural actors. Secularism validates a particular organization of the human

sensorium, remaking religion as a primarily epistemological concern, a matter of minds rather than of bodies. This remaking has a politics, for at some point assimilation fails, or becomes too volatile and unpredictable, and then someone is sure to be prodded out of error a little more forcefully. Beneath that prodding, as Shelley recognizes all too well, is fear—the fear of the multitude that was present even in Spinoza himself.<sup>45</sup> There is of course plenty to be afraid of, and it is perhaps inevitable that dread of what might happen when, in Burke’s words, “men act in bodies” would cause even the most fearless of thinkers to reassert the state’s juridical power over the power of the multitude. That is the long history of which the French Revolution forms a particularly instructive chapter. To imagine a Shelley “after atheism,” then, is to imagine a Shelley after secularism. And to imagine a Shelley after secularism is to imagine the noncoercive peace to which *Prometheus Unbound* gives voice in its final act: a collection of myriad embodied motions on the far side of fear, “Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea.”<sup>46</sup>