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Lake Methodism

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Lake Methodism” and the Lows of High Argument

I feel that I am all unfit
For such high argument.

—Wordsworth, *Peter Bell* (1798 version, lines 929–30)

The title of this book, *Lake Methodism*, is doubled, bearing an argument for the doublings of Romanticism. *Methodism* figures the first claim: although religion has been an underutilized concept in Romantic studies, recently it has been emerging as one of the most powerful lenses for focusing late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British literature. We are beginning to appreciate how, against intellectually privileged and socially restricted experiments in secularization, “the religious” retained, if not an absolute political and cultural hegemony, then something close to it throughout the period. The ironic consequence of the Historicist intervention was the dismissal of a major agent for historical meaning, as “religion” came to be understood as one of the most extreme “spiritual” resolutions that displaced or denied ideological contradictions re-emphasized by critical practice. *Lake Methodism* adopts historicist technique in order to unsettle this historicism, joining new scholarship that has explored the ways religious discourse—vitaly embedded in mate-

rial life as well as the afterlife—affected and constituted a variety of romanticisms.¹

Yet even within this invigorated conversation, there remain moments of striking isolation. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, for example, begins *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (2005) with surprise at his solitary interest in the most salable autobiographical genre of the Romantic period.² Moreover, if the classroom—or its metaphor, the anthology—is the final arbiter of which arguments have persuaded (or at least interested) the academy, “religion” still has achieved only a tenuous connection with “Romanticism.” The canonical landscape has shifted tectonically over the last decades, as many new anthologies have emerged with aggressively revisionist programs, yet the sermons, spiritual lessons, hymns, theological disquisitions, and at times sanctimoniously moralizing prose and verse that were some of the best-read texts of the Romantic period remain largely unrepresented.³

1. Especially Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Richard E. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984) and *Wordsworth's "Natural Methodism"* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1975); Mark Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Brian Goldberg, *The Lake Poets and Professional Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780–1820* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010); Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

2. Hindmarsh observes, “Although I could find dozens of studies of the Puritan conversion narrative in the seventeenth century, I could not point to a single book-length study of the genre as it reappeared and proliferated in England during the Evangelical Revival.” *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), vi. For a recent engagement with other versions of the genre, see *Romantic Autobiography in England*, ed. Eugene Stelzig (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

3. So, for example, Anne Mellor and Richard Matlak’s admirable *British Literature 1780–1830*, though “motivated by a desire to give a comprehensive sense of the range of writing produced in England between 1780 and 1830, including works by women as well as men, by lower-class as well as middle-class and aristocratic writers, by men and women of differing races and ethnicities, and spanning in genre productions in poetry, drama, fiction, nonfictional prose essays, journals, and letters,” does not include a category of “religion” within its generous scope (*British Literature 1780–1830*, ed. Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak [Harcourt Brace, 1996], 2). The stimulating *Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Anne McWhir (2010) constructs its

But even as *Lake Methodism* will argue for the critical ways in which religion structured many aspects of Romantic-era Britain—nearly everyone was some sort of Christian, and even after violent wrangling in the 1790s, the “constitution” was still usually taken to signify not a codification of rights, but the union of the state with the Church of England—ubiquity wasn’t unanimity. Religion was universal, but it was also universally fractured, a discourse in which disagreements began rather than ended. Religion was a primary mechanism for registering difference in the early nineteenth century. Though the nation was probably no longer a “confessional state,” in which every person was born an Anglican, “civil rights” in the Romantic period were consistently understood as religious in nature, as some of the largest Parliamentary contests were fought over the legal status of Catholics, Dissenters, and the Church of England itself, while many arguments for abolition, the Rights of Man and Woman, prison reform and animal rights appealed to the tenets of “Reasonable Christianity,” rather than the conclusions of secularized reason. Denomination was as significant a vehicle for identity as race, class, gender, or sexuality—and it was frequently the way these other categories were themselves signified.

This broad historical disposition sets the stage for my more local, and explicitly literary, turn to *Lake Methodism*: what I will call “the lows of high argument.” My claim is that Romanticism’s rhetorics of privilege trafficked in some of the most socially toxic religious forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was John Gibson Lockhart who, in the *Blackwood’s* of 1824, gleefully (and tellingly) pilloried the “Lake Methodists” for their war with the “Established Church of Poetry.”⁴ The Lake sect was proffering an arrestingly unstable compound of literary prestige and embarrassing enthusiasm—an awkward, anxious, and deeply productive suspension of cultural authority and risible disreputability. If Lockhart’s gibe has lost some of its precision for us today, restoring its edge reveals

welcome argument for an Anglophone culture through an “inclusive editorial practice” which “reclaims a broad canon that might have been more familiar to writers of the Revolutionary Period” (xxxiv), with, nevertheless, almost no representation from the religious texts that very often formed the most important cultural bonds within the English-speaking world. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*, ed. Jack Stillinger and Deidre Shauna Lynch (8th ed., 2006) is perhaps even more traditional in its choices; *The Longman Edition of British Literature: The Romantics and Their Contemporaries*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson, Peter J. Manning, and Amelia Klein (5th ed., 2012), provides an excellent collection of “Perspectives” on a variety of important cultural and political contexts, but no coverage of the denominational convulsions of Repeal, Relief, and Toleration which occupied Parliament and the public sphere for the whole of the Romantic period.

4. “Southey’s *Life of Wesley*,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 15 (February 1824): 208–19 (208).

its target, namely some of Romanticism's most enduring tropes. The Lake Poets—Robert Southey and William Wordsworth, Poets-Laureate regnant and future, along with the Sage of Highgate Samuel Taylor Coleridge—might have seemed to offer an exhilaratingly rarefied poetics of spontaneous inspiration and prophetic imagination, couched within lexicons of experimental simplicity and lyrical concision. But all these—as Lockhart and many diverse, even antagonistic referees of taste including Francis Jeffrey, William Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt would agree time and again—were the familiar vulgarities of popular Methodism, warmed over as an egregiously self-canonizing art.

In gauging the demographic and doctrinal specificity of the culture that provoked Lockhart's charge, *Lake Methodism* shows how an understanding of the contests between the Church of England and an increasingly organized and influential body of Methodists can transform the way we read key Romantic texts. Wesleyans and Anglicans debated the terms of "Romanticism" more ferociously than any poet, struggling over the character and even existence of inspiration, prophecy, the moral and Providential significance of the natural world, and the value of autobiographical and lyrical forms. *Lake Methodism* treats these spiritualizing figures not as obvious vehicles for an unproblematic cultural capital or a reactionary "Romantic Ideology," but as urgent political signifiers in a country still largely organized along religious lines: lines which the languages of high romanticism blurred, erased, and reinscribed in unpredictable plays upon the social ironies lurking within ostensibly elevated aesthetics. Ragged men and women earnestly claiming divine visitations and the Pentecostal overflow of powerful feelings posed a profound challenge to the Church and constitution of England in the early nineteenth century, and long after what is usually taken as the final resting point of an irreversible slide from youthful radicalisms into disenchantment, default, or apostasy, the Lakers remained acutely aware of (if not entirely comfortable with) the way their cherished rhetorical ecstasies identified with, and were sometimes wholly owned by, the threadbare subversions of the Methodists and a broader culture of religious enthusiasm.

My keywords play into my revisionary agenda. "Romantic" is no longer a stable or reliable category, and the "romanticisms" that have supplanted the unitary vision constellated by late nineteenth-century receptions, while indicting it as an ideologically motivated mirage, may ultimately operate only as self-conscious shorthand for a collection of decades.⁵ "High Argument" has undergone even more explicit critique—

5. David Simpson, for example, introduced readers to *The Cambridge Companion*

the postures of oracular transcendence which for M. H. Abrams had cast the poet as a heroic “philosopher-seer and poet-prophet, an elected spokesman for the Western tradition,” have been re-read as the specific and limited investments of a masculine, bourgeois or gentry power, mystified into specious universalism: in Jerome McGann’s influential revision, as “extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities.”⁶ But both New Critical and New Historical representations of high argument, while diverging in their ethical evaluation of Romantic privilege, agree that it has been privileged as a deep, almost unique reserve of cultural capital: what had seemed a genuinely admirable form of rhetorical authority might also sound like rhetoric comfortably in service to political authoritarianism. In rehearsing these arguments, I don’t mean to revisit a dispute that has already shifted our field of study, but rather to gather this cluster of discussion under the banner of “Lake Methodism.” To do so isn’t to accede to the satires of periodical reviewers, nor to limit the gathering to texts so targeted. It’s instead to resituate a Romanticism that has been cleansed of its low-cultural company, back into revealing proximity. Wordsworth and Coleridge receive sustained attention in my story, and few paragraphs go by without Southey, but further chapters discuss the Shelleys, the writings of Methodist preachers and Anglican clerics, and the cultural panic swirling around Romanticism’s most famous poet-prophet, Joanna Southcott.

“Lake,” then, has a considerable range beyond the Lake District. But “Methodism” too is an unsteady signifier, and historically and geographically plural “Methodisms” have taken up residence in work over the past several decades.⁷ This is a modern reclamation of an old formation, since

to *British Romanticism* (1993) with a strategic skepticism of the title’s nominal coherence: “By *Romanticism* I mean, very roughly, the writings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sharing a general historical situation but not necessarily held together by any essential or prescriptive characteristics.” “Romanticism, Criticism and Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

6. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 12. Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1. Anne Mellor argues that prophecy and apocalyptic millenarianism were gender-bound discourses, “antithetical to . . . the ‘feminine mode of thought’ in the Romantic period”; see “Blake, the Apocalypse, and Romantic Women Writers,” in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 139–52 (140). I will address Mellor’s arguments more fully in the fifth chapter.

7. See, for example (and in spite of the apparent unity of the title), David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750–1850* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 11.

“Methodism” operated with little social or theological clarity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sometimes joining Arminian Wesleyans with Calvinist Evangelicals inside and outside the Church of England, self-identified members of the “Society” with unrelated and unregulated enthusiasts, priggish moralizers of no particular sect with drunkards and scoundrels, “Methodist” was very often only a strategically indistinct slur. As the lay preacher John Pawson granted in 1806, the most predictable meaning of “Methodist” was someone held “in supreme contempt, as that name implied everything that was low, mean, and despicable in the opinion of the world.”⁸ The semantic vagrancy of “Methodism” is an important social fact, reflected throughout this book in rhetorical, bodily, and generic practices, rather than through confessions of faith or habits of worship. Language and performance were often how Methodism and its expressive “enthusiasm” were identified, smearing together the irregularities of tramping ministers and perambulating poets.⁹

Unlike a traditional historian of religion, I’m most interested in the firm persuasions—rather than firm facts—that characterized polite treatments of Methodism. To dismiss, for example, Southey’s lifetime of writing on the Wesleyans because it’s often falsified by evidence recovered from parish records two centuries later seems to me to miss the atmospherics of Romantic culture, what went without saying, and what was always being said: those ideological pressures shaping lived experience as surely as empirical truths often recognized only after all concerned were long dead. If fictive history shapes a different base from positive scholarship, it also captures the heated tempers and temperatures of Methodism and its critics. “Methodism” often suggested an affective and spiritual mode that might vertiginously leap across social divides, while defying any historical specificity—it was at times the only abbreviation for the “denial

8. *Wesley’s Veterans: Lives of Early Methodist Preachers Told by Themselves*, [ed. Thomas Jackson], with additions and annotations by Rev. John Telford (London: Robert Culley, 1909–14), 4:4. Cited hereafter as *WV*.

9. While “Methodism” was never entirely equivalent with “enthusiasm,” both discourses, especially when handled critically, superimposed a cognitive and political order upon experiences and practices connected distantly, if at all. Jon Mee suggests that “enthusiasm” especially was recast across the eighteenth century as a descriptor for “any kind of socially disruptive mania” (*Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 30). John Downes argued in 1759 that “a Suspicion” of Methodism was frequently charged upon the “weak and slender Ground” of affect and appearance, rather than doctrine or discipline: “Sometimes a preacher unhappily incurs it by his Voice, Manner, Gestures, Pronunciation, nay, even by his very Countenance.” John Downes, *Methodism Examined and Exposed: or, the Clergy’s Duty of Guarding their Flocks against False Teachers* (London: J. Rivington, 1759), 94.

of history” available to Romantic culture. The “Methodism” of *Lake Methodism* is as much a fiction of the Romantic imaginary as a collection of archival evidences, configuring the sort of eternal formation that Hazlitt suggested in the defamiliarizing gambit opening his savage essay “On the Causes of Methodism”: “The first Methodist on record was David.”¹⁰ Infecting ancient Israel as well as modern England, Hazlitt’s “Methodism” was a timeless capability for material and discursive disability, a mode of politicking, feeling, and writing independent of theology, shared by “the maudling sentimentalist, the religious prostitute, the disinterested poet-laureate”: “the same reason makes a man a religious enthusiast that makes a man an enthusiast in any other way, an uncomfortable mind in an uncomfortable body.”¹¹ Leigh Hunt, whose bitter disgust at the Methodists surpassed even Hazlitt’s, was only slightly more precise in his terms: “by the followers of this sect,” he understood “not only the immediate followers of WHITFIELD and WESLEY, but all that enthusiast multitude who in the spirit of Christian modesty call themselves the *Godly*.”¹²

The incoherence of “Methodism” is a signal ambiguity of Romantic religion, unfolding in convenient misrepresentations and weird intimacies, often more striking than clear doctrines. Reliable desynonymizations—between “enthusiasm,” “fanaticism,” and “superstition”; “Methodism” and “enthusiasm”; or even, at times, “Methodism” and “Anglicanism”—privilege the Coleridgean epistemological hygiene found more readily in academic writings on Romantic culture, than in that culture. “Methodist,” like “Papist” before it, was a category readily unmoored and sometimes adrift; fixing it in place lets go of some of its weight. But it’s still important not to lose sight of Methodism’s specific histories, as it emerged in Oxford in the 1730s, grew into a defining formation for the Anglophone world, and resonated across Britain and America even as other connections unraveled.¹³ In England, it had magnetized the poorest members of

10. William Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” *The Round Table* [1817], in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 4:57.

11. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 4:60, 58.

12. [Leigh Hunt], *An Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism in a Series of Essays*, Essay I: “On the Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists,” in *Examiner* 19 (May 8, 1808): 301.

13. For trans-Atlantic Methodisms, see David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas*, ed. Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr (New York: St.

the country into unnerving articulation and organization: its unexpected marriage of rapturous excess to steely-eyed discipline was a serious corrosive to existing political and literary orthodoxy, but the complicated ideological commitments of Methodism have proven enduringly difficult to parse. Providing much of the political muscle for the dissolution of the constitution across the nineteenth century, mainstream Methodists represented themselves as sedulously loyalist. Coleridge deplored the Methodists' "equivocal state, as Dissenters & pretended non-Dissenters,"¹⁴ an equivocation inherited by many influential twentieth-century critics, as Bernard Semmel celebrated "The Methodist Revolution," while E. P. Thompson assaulted the "chiliasm of despair" utterly complicit with Old Corruption and New Capital.¹⁵

Yet if its politics are susceptible to divergent narratives, Methodism's cultural presence was unarguably pervasive. Methodist sermons, songs, autobiographies, and periodicals spectacularly outsold the productions of many "respectable" authors during the Romantic period, and they solidified an emergent popular readership in advance of the better known, and ostensibly secular and politically radical, reorganizations of the public sphere in the 1790s. To orthodox monitors, these literary innovations were the dark corollary of Methodism's political project, irritating *Blackwood's* into a huffed declaration in 1819 (shortly after its very positive review of Wordsworth's pseudo-Methodist conversion poem, *Peter Bell*) for "the aversion of men of cultivated taste to evangelical religion," "hateful" to "all men of right feeling." Methodism, warned *Blackwood's*, was a shocking aesthetic insurgency:

the most dread ideas are associated with those of the most familiar sort—a rude eagerness takes the place of a lofty enthusiasm—and words, that the soul fears to hear unless in hours of high and solemn preparation, are impiously vollied out by ignorant and uneducated men, among all the hideousness or meanness of their own sectarian jargon.¹⁶

Martin's, 1995), provides valuably annotated texts, as well as an important argument for the "appearance" of George Whitefield as an organizing "motif of black autobiography" (9).

14. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957–2002), 3:3901.

15. Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 350–400.

16. "Chalmers's Sermons," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 5.28 (July 1819): 462–68 (464). Adam Potkay reads *Peter Bell* against its adjacent Methodisms, in *Wordsworth's Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

Lake Methodism locates the sociolect of high romanticism in this “rude eagerness” mixed with “lofty enthusiasm,” the collision of sublime “dread” with the homely “familiar,” the decorum of a highly managed “solemn preparation” with the raucous vulgarity of the “ignorant and uneducated.”

The Lows of High Argument

The volatility of this meeting appears in the give-and-take in *Blackwood's* own pages. The year 1819 witnessed the ferocity with which the gentry could respond to popular speech and politics, but *Blackwood's* dogged commitment to a habituated recoil in “men of cultivated taste” from evangelical excesses would be complicated by Lockhart's (well-hedged) appreciation for “Lake Methodism” merely five years later. This unresolved tension, of a high culture volubly contemptuous of and surreptitiously attracted to disreputable Christianities, is an animating spirit of Romanticism. Many of the most establishmentarian, even authoritarian gestures of early nineteenth-century English culture were built knowingly on a fault line of equivocation between the vatic prestige of pristinely classical or Miltonic traditions, and the coarse enthusiasms of an underclass that produced highly visible, widely read, and problematically normative constructions of prophecy and inspiration. But contaminating pollinations between popular and polite enthusiasms, properly and improperly regulated spiritualisms—and most typically, obsessive discriminations between different social groups engaged in similarly transcendentalizing practices—had been a recurring anxiety in England at least since the Reformation. Recently, Jon Mee has taught us to read the “striking and important continuities in the attitudes expressed towards enthusiasm” across the centuries; Leigh Hunt's 1808 smear campaign, *An Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism*, isn't unlike the hysterical outrages of earlier centuries.¹⁷

17. Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 4. Some accounts of enthusiasm in literature outside the Romantic period that I've found particularly helpful, especially in their explorations of the complex class positions of religious excitement, are Clement Hawes, *Mania and Literary Style: The Rhetoric of Enthusiasm from the Ranters to Christopher Smart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1978) and *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1972]); Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); and John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

Yet Romanticism was a peculiar moment when experiments in self-consciously high culture resynonymized within themselves the rhetorical and social formations from which they had been scrupulously distinguished. If the authority of the respectable imagination had long relied on a distinction from the “enthusiasm” which J. G. A. Pocock defines as “the delusion or imposture of those who falsely believe or profess that they are or have been possessed by the Spirit,”¹⁸ Lockhart’s “Lake Methodism” signaled the unsettling relay of polite privilege back into these vanities. The Oxbridge poet could be heard harping the same tune as the ranting prophet—with the unexpected addendum that the poet was promising, rather than compromising, the truth of the imagination. “High romantic argument,” I’ll demonstrate, was a risky innovation in cultural capital, never entirely able to disavow—and never entirely interested in disavowing—the social lives its tropes led beyond the respectable text, in the surrounding world of devoted sectarians who claimed the disruptive credentials of flashing eyes and floating hair against the rigid hierarchies of the Established Church. “Inspiration” may have been uniquely prized in the Romantic period, but it was also frantically pathologized by a squirearchy and clergy besieged by the Inspired. In the hazy confusion of distinction and disgust that resulted, the precise elevation of high argument could be very hard to measure.

My argument pushes against the critical genealogy running from Matthew Arnold, through Raymond Williams, and into recent scholarship that ties Romanticism, especially in its masculine and politically conservative forms, to a larger (and largely problematic) pattern of the sacralization of “Culture” against the atomizing pressures of “History” or “Society.” I’ll be measuring the complications to this masculine tradition, and especially those arguments that Romanticism fabricated an enduring (and enduringly mystified) “prestige of literature” founded upon “extravagant claims for the imagination.”¹⁹ Extravagance within the sacred imaginary might vulgarize as well as dignify, depending on its specific doctrinal and demographic resonances: the “sacred” wasn’t a homogenous discourse of transcendental value, but a space for profound ideological conflicts, and spiritual exuberance was hardly an automatic guarantee of social privilege. While Shaun Irlam investigates the “legitimate . . . varieties of suprarational or Enthusiastic experiences,” in which the poet, “however

18. J. G. A. Pocock, “Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60 (1998): 7–28 (10).

19. David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 2, ix.

dithyrambic or corybantic his demeanor becomes, is always conceived as a figure of knowledge, virtue, truth, and moral authority,” the Hellenic nuance of his lexicon of “demeanor” is also an argument.²⁰ It was only insofar as enthusiasm was performed within safely classical grammars and histories, and the politics of the ruling class they encoded, that it might, as John Lawson granted in 1758, be admitted as “the Essence of Poetry.”²¹ This ethereal essence, which attached modern poets to an illustriously ancient pedigree, could be appreciated only by complacently overlooking the contemporary enthusiasts who stalked the country’s parishes and filled its printing presses, and many Englishmen viewed an insistence on the universal “moral authority” of the spiritually aroused subject as a transparent, even disingenuous ploy. Isaac Taylor, an eminent Patristic scholar writing in the 1830s, a time when Dissenting “enthusiasm” and Catholic “superstition” were dealing savage wounds to the National Church, was furious at the “preposterous . . . pedantry of [any] writer, who in discoursing, for example, of Superstition, or Enthusiasm, should confine himself to such a definition of those terms as might comport with the senses they bore, centuries ago, in the minds of Lucan, Plutarch, Epictetus, or Aristotle.”²²

Taylor’s agitation wasn’t entirely outside the mainstream. Across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Anglican pulpit relentlessly preached against an “enthusiasm” uniformly diagnosed as poisonous. Even in 1767, the notion that “enthusiasm” signified merely a particularly intense form of poetic insight already looked like a willful blindness to the reality of English religious politics. William Duff, carefully distinguishing between classically moribund and vitally Methodistical meanings of the

20. Shaun Irlam, *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 6–7. Likewise, Lori Branch argues for the orthodox religiosity of Wordsworth’s most authoritative imaginative positions, tracing his “engagement with the long moral tradition that sought to ground morality in spontaneous emotional responses” (*Rituals of Spontaneity*, 182). For an account of secularized, and intensely nationalized, forms of spontaneous enthusiasm in the Romantic period, see Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

21. John Lawson, *Lectures Concerning Oratory* (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1758), 77. For a survey of this use of “enthusiasm,” see Susie I. Tucker, *Enthusiasm: A Study in Semantic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 77–92.

22. [Isaac Taylor], *Fanaticism, By the Author of Natural History of Enthusiasm*, [London, 1833]; (New York: J. Leavitt, 1834), 19. Wordsworth seems to have owned this book, as well as the *Natural History of Enthusiasm*; see Brantley, *Wordsworth’s “Natural Methodism,”* 67n1. Coleridge published his marginalia on *Natural History of Enthusiasm* as the awkward conclusion to *On the Constitution of Church and State*, which Taylor repaid by giving Coleridge’s work one of its only notices, in the *Eclectic Review* 6 (July 1831): 1–28.

term, argued that in this “modern sense, [it] is in no respect a qualification of a Poet,” only “an overheated and distempered imagination” that had incubated a damaging social instinct.²³ Watching the Establishment crumble in 1829, Taylor was less circumspect, casting enthusiasm as an expansive species of Prometheanism that was mad, bad, and dangerous to know: “Opportunity may be wanting, and habit may be wanting, but intrinsic qualification for the perpetration of the worst crimes is not wanting to those whose bosom heaves with enthusiasm”; enthusiastic “ambition” was “to rival the achievements, not of heroes, but of fiends.”²⁴

If not everyone shared Taylor’s lurid nightmare of “enthusiasm” as a gateway drug to homicide, a broad consensus nonetheless identified it as an acute aesthetic and moral deficiency, which denigrated holy impulses into scabrous parodies.²⁵ Archbishops and arch-radicals coupled in opposition. Even the champion of avant-garde poetics and liberal politics, Leigh Hunt, was exercised into mounting an extensive campaign in *The Examiner* of 1808 against Methodism, and for years to come his paper ran articles attacking enthusiastic oratory, reviling the “indecencies and Profane Raptures of Methodists.”²⁶ Rapture, rather than revolution, was Hunt’s worry. His critique of “Methodism” was keyed to its deformation of sensibility: “the vulgar admire Methodism just as they do violent colours, violent noise, and violent swearing.”²⁷ Likewise, when Hazlitt chewed over “The Causes of Methodism” at *The Round Table*, he choked on “the history of Methodism,” which was “religion with its slabbering-bib and go-cart,” “a bastard kind of Popery, stripped of its painted-

23. William Duff, *Essay on Original Genius, and its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts* [1767], ed. John L. Mahoney (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reproductions, 1964), 170.

24. Isaac Taylor, *Natural History of Enthusiasm* [London, 1829]; 4th ed. (New York: J. Leavitt, 1834), 17.

25. Clement Hawes argues that the “manic rhetorical style” of enthusiasm in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was inherently political, “constituted, above all, by its rebellious stance toward traditional hierarchies of socio-economic privilege and their related hierarchies of discourse” (*Mania and Literary Style*, 2). Irlam critiques this argument as “a romantic fantasy,” since “[t]here is no reason to suppose that the proletariat or (since this term is an anachronism in the eighteenth century) any underclass (serf, peasant, plebeian) possesses a monopoly on rebellion. . . . This seems to me to map a rather commonplace as well as dubious romance of the *pensée sauvage* onto the social body, as if one could tabulate a demography of sentiment according to class, race, or gender” (*Elations*, 237). While it’s certainly true that the radical vulgarity of “enthusiasm” is an essentializing construct, it was one roundly authorized in the long eighteenth century. The “dubious romance” isn’t a fiction of recent critics, but an important social fact of post-Restoration English culture.

26. [Hunt], “An Attempt VI,” *Examiner* 33 (August 14, 1808): 524.

27. [Hunt], “An Attempt II, concluded,” *Examiner* 21 (May 22, 1808): 335.

pomp and outward ornaments, and reduced to a state of pauperism.”²⁸ The hostility to enthusiasm—and to Methodist tastes, even more than to Methodist doctrines—blended many otherwise dissonant ideological positions: such unexpected continuities suggest its importance in Romantic-period distinctions of high and low culture, bourgeois and plebeian. John Guillory identifies in the “distinction between a credentialed and a non-credentialed speech” the function of polite letters,²⁹ and many others have suggested that Romanticism, despite its incoherences, united in what William Keach calls a “resistance to the vulgar,”³⁰ an entire “sociology of culture” (in Jon Klancher’s terms) that brooded on the vast “abyss between serious and mass culture.”³¹ But against this deep current of division tugged a sense that “enthusiasm,” and Methodism especially, also charted a drifting course on which privileged and popular forms collided, and with alarming frequency at the most distinguished aesthetic coordinates—precisely the spaces that might have mapped the widest cultural separations.

For all of Hazlitt’s insistence on Methodism’s bastardy, and a “[place] of worship that combines the noise and turbulence of a drunken brawl at an ale-house, with the indecencies of a bagnio,” he traced the lineage of its agitations back to poetic inspiration. Both Methodists and poets, he snorted, “strive to gain a vertigo by abandoning their reason, and give themselves up to the intoxications of a distempered zeal, that

‘Dissolves them into ecstasies,
And brings all heaven before their eyes.’”³²

Quoting *Il Penseroso*, Hazlitt deflated Milton’s space of ecstasy (“the studious Cloysters pale” and “the high embowed Roof” echoing with the “full voic’d Quire below, / In Service High”) into a parodic whorehouse,

28. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 4:60–61.

29. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 62.

30. William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 72.

31. Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 135. Philip Connell and Nigel Leask introduce their recent volume, *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*, arguing that “the emergence of the English literary canon is historically dependent upon an objectifying distinction between high and low, ‘the people’ and ‘the public’ (a distinction which Romantic theory itself did much to entrench)” (“What Is the People?” in Connell and Leask, *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 3–48 [7]).

32. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 60–61.

where “Service High” descended to others less sacerdotal, cheered on by “the noise and turbulence of a drunken brawl.” But though the ironies were waged at Methodism’s expense, they cut into canonical poetics. As Hazlitt mordantly underscored, it was Milton himself who joined poetical to religious enthusiasm in order to claim a language of visionary transfiguration and political subversion, an “ecstasy” that “dissolves” any distinction of discourse, since the Methodists followed their own Heavn’ly Muse, and “plunge without remorse into hell-flames, soar on the wings of divine love, are carried away with the motions of the spirit, are lost in the abyss of unfathomable mysteries,—election, reprobation, predestination,—and revel in a sea of boundless nonsense.”³³ Nor was Hazlitt alone. Romantic-era culture was nervously alive to the way poets and preachers, enthusiasts and gentlemen, could complicate each other’s roles in an aesthetic stratosphere compounded out of abjection and exaltation.³⁴ “The sublime,” Martin Shee complained in 1809, marked no separation between polite and plebeian cultures, but absorbed “credentialed” speech and enthusiastic rant equally. The “vague, irregular, and undefined” nature of sublimity, Shee argued, was an “intoxicating spirit” for everyone, not just the “disreputable examples” of “Methodists.” The “sublime,” he concluded, was “the insane point of the critical compass; for those who talk rationally on other subjects, no sooner touch on this, than they go off in a literary delirium; fancy themselves, like Longinus, ‘the great sublime they draw,’ and rave like Methodists, of inward lights, and enthusiastic emotions, which, if you cannot comprehend, you are set down as un-illuminated by the grace of criticism, and excluded from the elect of Taste.”³⁵

This uneven ground, upon which high art and bourgeois respectability clashed with popular enthusiasm and plebeian culture, is the terrain of *Lake Methodism*, and its first and most formidable surveyor, Francis Jeffrey. Some of the vitriol in Jeffrey’s campaign against the Lakers may be qualified as the bad-faith histrionics of a witty reviewer building his own reputation by sabotaging others; the heat of the inaugural salvo of 1802 against Southey’s *Thalaba* and Wordsworth’s “Preface” was in part meant to launch the *Edinburgh Review* with hot copy. But Jeffrey caught the spirit of the age, a Romantic climate evaporated not only from the consolatory narratives of Arnold and J. S. Mill, but also from New Histori-

33. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 61.

34. In Jon Mee’s pithy formulation, “enthusiasm” straddled a social divide, signifying “both the fleshly seeing of the crowd and the highest flights of poetic inspiration” (*Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 2).

35. Martin Archer Shee, *Elements of Art, A Poem* (London: W. Bulmer, 1809), 193.

cist arguments about spiritual displacement. For Jeffrey, this poetry wasn't apolitical literature, blissfully removed from the anxieties of the material world, but a poetics dangerously (even if ridiculously) flirting with energies that subverted the regime of polite taste governing staid churchmen and rational Dissenters alike.

The “splenetic and idle discontent” of the Lakers was a tripled perversion of theology, politics, and language. Jeffrey girded himself for an inquisition to preserve “the catholic poetical church” against “a *sect* of poets, . . . *dissenters* from the established systems”: “Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call into question.” This was no casual metaphor system—the rhetorical and political disobediences of the Lakers were second-order defects, organized by primal devotional errors. Though the Lakers claimed “a creed and a revelation of their own,” Jeffrey had little doubt that “their doctrines are of German *origin* . . . derived from some of the great modern reformers of that country,” while “their leading principles . . . seem to have been borrowed from the great apostle of Geneva.” The result was a nasty palimpsest of sedition and heresy, in which programs of secular and aesthetic revolution were haunted by the ghosts of spiritual Reformation, and poets eagerly prostituted themselves to any and every form of resentment in a strained reach at rhetorical novelty. “The great apostle of Geneva” invoked “the antisocial principles, and distempered sensibility of Rousseau” along with those of John Calvin, whose predestinarian determinism made his disciples bywords for brooding insularity after the Restoration, while “doctrines of German *origin*” signaled not only “the simplicity and energy (*horresco referens*) of Kotzebue and Schiller,” but the aggressively styled “plain truth for plain people” of Luther, the infamous Moravian pursuit of a childlike mentality in adults, and the Wesleyan heirs of both.³⁶ The result was an incoherent miasma of bad English and foreign dogma, in which, as Daniel White argues, Jeffrey found “the doctrine of a zealous reforming sect” confounded with “Jacobin infidelity.”³⁷

What Bishop Lavington had deplored in 1749 as the iconic paradoxes of Methodism, “*sanctify'd singularities, low fooleries, and high pretensions,*” still signified in the Regency.³⁸ The more grandly mystical

36. [Francis Jeffrey], “Southey's Thalaba,” *Edinburgh Review* 1 (October 1802): 63–83 (71; 63–65).

37. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent*, 156. See also Robert Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, 31–32.

38. [George Lavington], *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists, Compar'd* (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1749), “Preface,” unpagged.

language became, the more thoroughly disreputable it might seem, indicative of a politically inflected lunacy that was recognizably current. Jeffrey's initial contempt was for the "absolute meanness and insipidity" of the *Lyrical Ballad's* system for poetical diction rooted in a studied "neglect of the establishments of language," which, with double intent, indicted Wordsworth's joint revolts against grammatical and ecclesiastical Establishments. Yet Jeffrey reserved his heaviest fire, not for theories of verse built on a nostalgically pastoral "real language of men," but for Wordsworth's clearest attempt at self-styled "high argument" in *The Excursion*, and the accompanying "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*. The grand quarto of 1814 seemed to deflect many of the *Edinburgh Review's* characteristic complaints: demotic experimentation was given over for Miltonic blank verse, and the potential radicalism of *Lyrical Ballad's* catalogue of men and women freshly shattered by foreign war, sexual betrayal, and economic collapse was largely, if not entirely, replaced by establishmentarian fantasies of reconciliation within the Church of England.

But for Jeffrey, the prospect of a man promising to "breathe in worlds, / To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil," while calling upon "thou Prophetic Spirit, Soul of Man" to "vouchsafe thy guidance" along the way, showed not that Wordsworth was finally singing of higher things, but that he had given way to his slumming instincts ("Prospectus," 29–30; 83). The high argument of the "Prospectus," Jeffrey insisted, was a climax of vulgarized poetics, confusing the cardinal directions of cultural capital, and crashing to earth when it thought it soared. Wordsworth seemed inexplicably determined to erode himself by tarding up an almost comically worthless "tissue of moral and devotional ravings" into specious profundity: "all sorts of commonplace notions and expressions are sanctified in his eyes, by the sublime ends for which they are employed; and the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit is repeated, till the speaker entertains no doubt that he is the elected organ of divine truth and persuasion."³⁹ Jeffrey's assault evidences what will be one of my major arguments in *Lake Methodism*: had anyone in the early nineteenth century cared to enact the denial of history, or to partition polite from popular cultures, a grandiosely transcendent subjectivity preaching imaginative displacement would have been a fatally compromised vehicle. If such discourses signified material abstraction and intellectualized serenity, they also encoded emphatically disreputable doctrines and demographics, and high "romanticism"

39. [Jeffrey], "Wordsworth's *Excursion*," *Edinburgh Review* 47 (November 1814): 1–30 (4).

emerged out of a sometimes agonizing, and sometimes thrilling, conflation of what had seemed durable opposites.

Jeffrey's double-vision of high argument—at once imaginatively provocative and socially unsound—wasn't just a misprision sparked by a critic grinding his axe. The Lakers themselves played up and upon their equivocal sympathies with Methodism, vexing the transferences between reputable rhetoric and visceral literalism into an energetic sociopolitical uncertainty: in effect, the historical propulsion for the formal and metaphysical "Irony" we've come to identify as uniquely "Romantic." Such connections could be telegraphed with cheerfully resigned wit; Wordsworth jovially shrugged that, like it or not, the rollicking enthusiasm of his best-selling poem would always keep him "as much Peter Bell as ever" for the reading public.⁴⁰ Other times, the lines could be darkly tangled, as in Robert Southey's lifelong obsession with spiritual derangement, which challenged and reconstructed its scholars as well as its zealots. But the abiding alertness of Romantic-era culture to the twinned authority and vulgarity of the enthusiastic imagination had to do with the difficulty of policing the boundaries between polite literature and popular religion. My attention to this difficulty tells a different story from Jon Mee's, that Romanticism disciplined and regulated enthusiasm in a Foucauldian play—different, too, from Robert Miles's elaboration of a "marginalize[d] and finally discard[ed]" enthusiasm.⁴¹

In Chapter Two, "'Elocution to the Mute': Anglican Authority and the Cultural Revolt of Methodism," I show how enthusiasm, particularly in its Methodistical forms, posed an intractable puzzle to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglican disciplinary order. Stories of the secularization of politics and culture, I argue, make poor sense of Romantic England, which was still governed by the Church of England. The civil service hadn't yet been invented, and the Anglican hierarchy reserved for itself the legal and bureaucratic functions that would be dispersed among various institutions later in the nineteenth century. But while hegemonic, Anglican authority was surprisingly diffuse in self-conception, identified by habits of thought, speech, and affect, rather than clear confessions of faith. Methodism reversed this status quo, figuring a revolution in language and feeling more dangerous than any explicitly theological or political program. Unlike Paineite radicalism or intellectualized Dissent, answered by

40. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978–79), 2:439.

41. Robert Miles, *Romantic Misfits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 173.

the State, Law, and Church, Methodism disrupted the nebulous cloud of the Anglican constitution, while professing a loyalism that insulated it from prosecution, and even successful opposition. The ensuing cultural panic, I argue, turns the story of Romanticism upside down, as Parliament debated the threat of Methodistical “Inspiration” one year after the *Lyrical Ballads* were published, bishops anathematized spiritual excitement, and Methodist songs, periodicals, and autobiographies reshaped the public sphere.

The rest of the book reads a set of situations—iconic and unsuspected—that cast the shadow of “Lake Methodism” across Romanticism. Chapter Three, “Wordsworth and the Ragged Legion: Poets, Priests, and Preachers,” considers the effect of the tensions between Methodist preachers and Anglican priests on *The Prelude*, and especially its revisions and long-delayed publication. I historicize the mystically transcendental accreditations informing Wordsworth’s spiritual autobiography in ways not evident in received “high Romanticism”: the poet as “chosen son,” the telling of “prophecy” to “the open fields,” the attentions of a providential power shaping the subject through “ministry more palpable.” Such figures, I argue, were more legible as the rhetoric of Wesleyan itinerants, whose “holy” powers defied the professional forms of Anglican priests, and their ground of social respectability and political orthodoxy. Sensitive to this resonance, Wordsworth revised, across several decades, Methodistical extravagance into normative Anglicanism. This revisionary process wasn’t, as we usually hear, a youthfully vigorous pantheism tempered into the piety of old age: it was a shift between the sociopolitical significances of two determinate Christianities. Wordsworth never abandoned his enthusiasm entirely, and the trouble it entailed was much of its attraction. *The Prelude* often harnessed “high argument”—rhetorically sublime, spiritually potent, socially ridiculous, and politically subversive—into some of its deepest thinking on the work of the poet, and the ironies of cultural production.

What Wordsworth kept quiet, Coleridge noisily announced. Chapter Four, “Sage or Sibyl? A Lay Sermon,” takes the titles of Coleridge’s middle-aged philosophizing as its subject. The *Lay Sermons* were some of his densest, most reactionary work, turning in disgust from the emerging “READING PUBLIC,” while struggling to give sinecures, place-men, and passive obedience the aura of categorical imperatives. Yet the generic history of “lay sermons” was at odds with Coleridge’s politics. Expressly forbidden within the Anglican communion and marginalized by most respectable Dissenters, “lay preaching” was the proprietary business of the

Methodist upstarts I treat in chapter three. No wonder that form trumped content in the reception of the *Lay Sermons*, and Coleridge's budding reputation as a gentleman-Sage was blasted by a diagnosis of religious enthusiasm and demotic argument. Coleridge's malady found its only parallel in the pathetic writings and false pregnancy of Joanna Southcott, the "Woman to Deliver Her People" and "Second Eve" raised in Coleridge's home parish, who had alarmed the nation with her prophecies until her death two years earlier. Worse, the Sage was seen courting the acquaintance of the Southcottian Sibyl with his perversely named *Sibylline Leaves*. Most contemporaries washed their hands of this public self-mortification—but Hazlitt, in some of his most sustained and intense reviewing, suggested that this unlikely amalgamation was a covert petition for rhetorical authority, Coleridge's willful vulgarity the cover for his most extreme authoritarian tendencies.

Chapter Five, "Joanna Southcott's Body, and the Posthumous Life of Romantic Prophecy," turns to the real focus of the jokes considered in the preceding chapter, the servant-*cum*-prophetess who was one of the best read, and most gossiped about, figures of the Romantic period. Southcott's fame died with her, and she has largely disappeared from recent critical accounts, her brief notices usually confined to footnotes or dismissive concessionary clauses. I don't mean to contest this absence, but rather to write its history: the vanishing of Joanna Southcott was one of the great mystifications of the Regency, the endurance of this evaporation one of the fullest examples of the "Romantic Ideology," criticism's reproduction of the period's own self-representations. Much contemporary coverage painted Southcott as anachronistic, a clown of female mysticism from before the Reformation, who proclaimed enthusiastic prophecies impossible since the birth of Christ or the foundation of his Church. But it was Southcott's *modernity* that worried polite England: her meteorically successful books and celebrity were carried by print culture and mass marketing no less than Byron's or Scott's, suggesting that literacy, print, and publicity might be the organs of Enthusiasm rather than Enlightenment. The fascination with her suggested that the norms of politeness and popularity were being rewritten without the consultation of culturally privileged tastemakers, and that marginal Methodisms were now strong enough to crowd out reputable competitors. The mistaken "pregnancy" that closed her life also solved the conundrum she posed, transforming an ideological offense into a physical one, recasting a crisis in Englishness as the personal excrescence of the body of a solitary old woman—a body in which it could be buried forever.

But as Chapter Six, “Resurrection, the New Birth, and Vital Christianity: The Methodism to Frankenstein’s Madness,” argues, enthusiasm had a way of reanimating its corpses. My *Frankenstein* isn’t a grim parable of technology gone awry at the hands of a secular Prometheanism, but an account of spiritual warfare, with a cast of saints, sinners, martyrs, and prophets—all enacted by the star, Victor Frankenstein. My study produces Victor as the climax of “Lake Methodism,” marrying his privileges of class, gender, and education to the doctrinal heart of Methodism, the raw enthusiasms of life-in-death, “new creatures,” and the figural, and often literal, promise of Resurrection. A university-trained prophet, Victor is the ironic mirror of Percy Shelley’s attempts to uncouple the energies of poetic inspiration from plebeian agitation, distinctions that refuse difference. The discourses of creation in *Frankenstein* have a specific history in the popular Christianities of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, even as the Creature himself plangently voices an Enlightened rationalism which had supposedly triumphed over such spiritualisms by 1818. In the novel’s critique, Reason has its own delusions, and the Creature is haplessly rewritten as the “Devil,” a broken antagonist without the rhetorical sublimity, social distinction, or skeptical credentials of Milton’s Satan: the abject confirmation of the power of enthusiasm to re-determine the figures which would contain it.

Against Secularization

If “Lake Methodism” is a diffuse collection, its unifying argument is the homology of the foundational rhetorics of high romanticism: inspiration, visionary election, prophetic transcendence were themselves diffuse, though not defused. The most patently imaginary and magical conceits, such as giving new birth to dead flesh, were live wires rather than dead metaphors for many people in the early nineteenth century. The age of Saints, Apostles, and Prophets hadn’t ended in the 1640s, and the vibrant spiritualisms of Britain during the French Wars weren’t confined to peripheral cranks and subalterns, but flourished in commercially sophisticated editions that were major agents in the public sphere. If anything, a common (and respectable) concern was that the large (and surprisingly profitable) demand for religious enthusiasm revealed that print culture was powered by irrational and uncontainable desire, rather than politely scripted sociability. “Enthusiasm,” and especially “Methodism,” bundled together old practices with modern insecurities. In a marketplace overrun,

high argument was overdetermined: former figures of cultural authority could turn into powerful tokens of the socially unacceptable, while nominally exclusive, exclusionary gestures of oracular retreat and clouded mystification could become the currency of clamoring materialisms.

A renewed sensitivity to religion—in all its enthusiasms, but also in the quieter forms that were broadly normative—can challenge our understanding of the “public sphere” in the Romantic period, often read in the perspective of secularizing practices and localities that emerged over the long eighteenth century. Jürgen Habermas, to take an exemplary instance, contends that “people’s public use of their reason” marked the emergence of a transformative political technology in Europe well before the French Revolution, as a gradually cohering “citizenry” (or a bourgeois fraction mystified as a universal citizenry) leveraged rational discourse into an unofficial court of appeals against older forms of power.⁴² This influential argument has focused much attention on how the authority of the *ancien régime*, built on spectacles of pomp and punishment at Court, military assemblies, and executions, was contested by what Paul Goring calls “the proliferation of new meeting places—clubs, salons, coffee-houses, assemblies, gardens—in which individuals could congregate and discuss the important issues of the day, and by a massive expansion in the production of printed matter.”⁴³ In Habermas’s story, this bourgeois public sphere is secular, in both situation and goal. As public “Reason” confronted the monarchical state and its client Church (especially in its Protestant forms), Enlightenment practices developed in various urbanities (such as the coffee-house) emancipated from religious management; print culture followed

42. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 26. For Habermas, the politicization of the “public use of Reason” is legible in a semantic doubling lost in English, as “*Räsonnement* unmistakably preserves the polemical nuances of both sides: simultaneously the invocation of reason and its disdainful disparagement as merely malcontent griping” (26).

43. Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21. See also Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832*; Anne Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780–1830*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Robert Miles, *Romantic Misfits*; Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Mark Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity: The “Literary Lower Empire”* (New York: Palgrave, 2009); and William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; paperback, 2007).

suit, producing a “public sphere of rational-critical debate in the world of letters” for a national market of readers.⁴⁴ As for “other institutions of the public reflecting critically on political issues,” Habermas contends that these “counter-spheres” and “counter-publics” are still “oriented towards the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere” and its secularizing project.⁴⁵ Habermas’s chief examples—Wilksite “public meetings” and “political associations,” the fleeting “*plebeian* public sphere” of Revolutionary atheism under Robespierre, or its “continued but submerged existence manifested . . . in the Chartist Movement and especially in the anarchist traditions of the workers’ movement on the continent”—are all read as forms of class association and political agency without religious dimension.⁴⁶

This model has been complicated, with increased attention to its limits: the prospect of men coming together for a rational political discussion may tilt toward utopian fantasy, and its binding to locations that gate-keep class and gender reproduces the exclusions otherwise contested.⁴⁷ These limits and exclusions may be as useful as assuming a “pure” form of the rational public sphere, since the Romantic period’s discursive and material shifts—changes in the publishing industry and transformations in copyright, the institutionalization of periodicals and novels as objects of cultural consumption, and the influence of new demographics on the market and the political arena—may mark the collapse (or, in Habermas’s forecast, the structural transformation) of eighteenth-century consensus, and inaugurate the recognizable gaps of “modern” culture. By the 1790s, Paul Keen argues, the “ideal of literature as a public sphere had run aground on political anxieties about the sector of the populace which could reliably be included within the reading public, and on a deep suspicion that theoretical abstractions were politically dangerous rather than liberating”;⁴⁸ a totalizing public sphere dissolved into paranoid segmentation of powerfully differentiated subjects and objects. The result, in

44. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 51.

45. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 65.

46. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, xviii. Robert Hole argues that most parts of the political spectrum abandoned self-consciously “religious” arguments between 1790 and 1830: “[i]t could easily be made to appear, both to radical and conservative, that the removal of religious faith was a prerequisite of social change.” *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 98.

47. Robert Miles surveys challenges to the “public sphere,” and Habermas’s responses, in *Romantic Misfits*, 13–18. Anne Mellor, shifting the model’s attention to gender, critiques that “Habermas’s conceptual limitation of the public sphere in England between 1780 and 1830 to men of property is historically incorrect” (*Mothers of the Nation*, 2).

48. Keen, *Crisis of Literature in the 1790s*, 75.

Jon Klancher's measure, was essentially hierarchical: "battle lines" erupted between "high culture and mass culture, bourgeoisie and working class."⁴⁹ For other critics, such as Mark Schoenfield, it was a guerilla campaign without uniforms, "a cultural war" of "clashing and allied voices across different discourses," with literary (and especially periodical) culture parrying and thrusting through perpetually shifting arrangements of cultural and economic capital.⁵⁰

Yet these incisive critiques tend to take secularization for granted, and reinforce the grant by privileging non- and antireligious writing. At most, Romanticism often seems, as in M. H. Abrams's account, "the secularization of inherited theological ideas." Abrams presents this as "a historical commonplace," but the deepest power of his argument isn't its emphasis on "secularization," or its twin, the "naturalization of the supernatural," but the innocently adjectival "inherited."⁵¹ The effect is to cast all religious discourse as the historical other of Romanticism—sources of inspiration alien to "The Spirit of the Age," which seems to be recognized in shrugging off this bequest. This critical formation is distinctly retrospective: the last breath of a Christian world-body, wheezing into poetical metaphor and cerebral Deism, or even the skepticism of a secularly minded academy, which sometimes internalizes the project of "Enlightenment" as its own.⁵² The neglect of "religion" has been forcefully challenged by Robert Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation* (1997), which recovers "the national religious consciousness" as a structuring presence, and much later work owes a debt to Ryan's correction.⁵³ One may dispute the definite article in Ryan's title, but still welcome his argument that religion, like any other social form or classification, was a charged signifier ranging from the doctrinally grounded radicalism of Unitarians to the conservative tendencies of

49. Klancher, *Making of English Reading Audiences*, 13.

50. Schoenfield, *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity*, 1–2.

51. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 12–13.

52. Colin Jager mounts a spectacular critique of some forms of contemporary "secularism," while arguing for a Romanticism already thinking beyond the axis of secular/spiritual, in "Shelley after Atheism," *Studies in Romanticism* 49 (Winter 2010): 611–31.

53. Ryan, *Romantic Reformation*, 1. Daniel E. White provides an excellent account of the ways in which rational Dissent comprised a "dissident middle-class language that suggests an influential and distinct fragment of the bourgeois public sphere" (*Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent*, 11). The Dissenting Gathered Churches, in which congregations not uncommonly had control over their own pulpits, may suggest a comfortable extension of the Habermasian public sphere out of a secularizing space, as the chapel could be home to much greater intellectual and political equality and philosophical freedom than the Established Church. See also Colin Jager for a challenge to the inevitability of secularization narratives, in *The Book of God*, especially 26–36.

the Established Church, and Ryan has inspired other scholars to parse the dense web of religious culture that mattered intensely for the discourses of Dissent, toleration, and enthusiasm.⁵⁴

Joining these new approaches, *Lake Methodism* is skeptical of Romantic skepticism, and of the impact of a “secularization” more familiar to the period’s modern students than its inhabitants. It’s worth remembering not only that church and chapel were much more common communities than the coffee-house or the circulating library, but also that the “public sphere of ideas” was never obviously secular. A glance at the table of contents of any issue of *Blackwood’s* or the *Edinburgh* or the *Quarterly* (let alone the widely circulating denominational periodicals) shows essays on religious books and issues alongside political, philosophical, or literary writing, and usually in ways that don’t recognize any distinction between the various categories.⁵⁵ J. C. D. Clark warns against a nominalism which makes John Locke’s work evidence of a “contractarian consensus,” David Hume’s (sometimes repressed and unpublished) philosophy for a widespread “secular pragmatism,” or Adam Smith’s writing for the emergence of the “acquisitive individual.” This methodology is prone to finding “the inevitable political enfranchisement of the autonomous, and secular, individual” in an Enlightened public sphere: a serious misrepresentation of an English society that was, at least until the 1830s, a “confessional state dominated by providential status rather than contract, and structured vertically rather than horizontally.”⁵⁶ While Habermas argues the Reformation transformed “the status of the church,” making “religion . . . a private matter” and so securing “the first sphere of private autonomy,” this elides the organizational force of denominational allegiances, formally and informally, across other groupings of identity.⁵⁷

54. Especially White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent*; Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing*; and Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*.

55. Cf. Stephen Prickett’s suggestion that Coleridge “belongs essentially to an undifferentiated world where literary criticism is *neither* a secular *nor* a religious activity, but one that unquestioningly partakes of both worlds.” “The Ache in the Missing Limb: Coleridge and the Amputation of Meaning,” in *Coleridge’s Visionary Language*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 123–35 (132).

56. J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125. Clark argues that the influence of Locke, especially, has been overstated—his political and economic thought was “briefly relevant” during the American Revolution, but “throughout the century, he was largely irrelevant to English political disputes,” ignored by the enfranchised authorities of Parliament and the judiciary, and familiar mostly to Dissenters, who used him to critique genuinely hegemonic political thought (139–42).

57. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 11.

The dissolution of the confessional state was a slow process. For hundreds of years after the “Reformation,” autonomously private religious identities could be extracted only through the renunciation of public identities; even after the back-and-forth ejections and reinstatements of priests within the Church of England in the seventeenth century, nonconforming Christians were officially barred from public office, and non-Trinitarians suffered more onerous disabilities. As we’ll see in the next chapter, “politics” inevitably meant an engagement to some degree with the Church of England. “Establishment” signified not just a network of entrenched interests, but their concentration in the Anglican Church as a system for the maintenance of order and the redistribution of wealth through gentry patronage. Nor did the collapse of the confessional structure across the nineteenth century necessarily signal the rise, let alone triumph, of an emergent secular politics. The decades up to 1830, Clark argues, “saw no objective, quantifiable phenomenon which can be called ‘the rise of the middle class’ or ‘the making of the working class.’” Rather, “the quantifiable phenomenon was the rise of Dissent and the spread of religious disengagement” from the Church of England. This was a transformation in religious organization and experience, not a transition from the primacy of religious ideologies into a differentiated secularism.⁵⁸ The dismantling of the Anglican constitution was brought about not by freethinking skeptics or secular radicals, but by denominational antagonists such as Catholics and Dissenters who understood their agenda as the necessary extension of their spiritual commitments.

Cultural as well as political preferences still evinced a broadly religious consensus. Certainly, the reading public was largely unaware of a secularizing “public” sphere, as William St. Clair’s report of sales and circulation demonstrates. Even after copyright lapsed, William Godwin, Hume, and Smith were absent from the period’s anthologies (an otherwise enormously popular textual form), and Edward Gibbon appeared only with the entirety of his thoughts on Christianity cut. Publishers “not only ignored the discoveries of the Enlightenment, but offered a Counter-Enlightenment to readers who knew nothing of the Enlightenment.”⁵⁹ Now-canonical texts often had small print runs and very limited influence: Beilby Porteus, Bishop of London, Privy Councilor, and official organizer of the intellectual program for counterrevolution, had no idea who Godwin was and had never heard of *Political Justice* a year after its publication.⁶⁰

58. Clark, *English Society 1660–1832*, 192.

59. St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 134.

60. Hole, *Pulpits, Politics, and Public Order*, 102n12. See also St. Clair’s account of

More typically, secularizing and spiritualizing practices cohabited in the “public sphere,” and sometimes inhabited the same people. If the theater was a powerful site for the dissemination of standardized English, and the politics of region, race, and nation encoded in grammar,⁶¹ the Anglican pulpit remained the only mouthpiece for polite elocution with which most people, particularly the rural and poor, would have had much experience. Notwithstanding salon or pub conversations, the rituals of worship punctuated the weekly rhythms of most people; the hierarchy of speaking clergyman and silent congregation, and the distinction between free chairs and gentry-owned pews in the church itself, wasn’t necessarily challenged by Sunday afternoons with the hybridities of print culture. Organizing Romantic culture into dramatic binaries also imagines tensions not experienced in the eagerness of nearly every Christian to characterize his or her religion as “reasonable.” Even the most conspicuous “enthusiasts” were called “Methodists” for the disciplinary rigor and “Experimental” empiricism they brought to their writings and subjectivities.

Christianity hadn’t withered into a historical archive or a mythological registry by the turn of the nineteenth century. It only seems so in the histories that are attracted to disruptive intellectual practices, tracing vectors of secularization, such as skeptical freethought, scientific materialism, or the innovations in Biblical scholarship that Jerome Christensen suggests “vitiating scriptural authority and boded the metamorphosis of the Bible into just another popular text circulating in the promiscuous relations of writers, publishers, and readers.”⁶² Vitiating for whom? This “boding” is at odds with the late eighteenth century, where it was anticipated by very few people. True, Southey thought a “club of Atheists” were gathering in a Keswick tavern for weekly meetings in 1815, but local paranoia doesn’t confirm a revolution.⁶³ “In the period up to 1870 there was little effec-

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications*, in *Reading Nation*, 277–80.

61. See Andrew Elfenbein, *Romanticism and the Rise of English* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 75–77.

62. Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge’s Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 24. Later chapters will more fully address Elinor Shaffer’s seminal account of the Higher Criticism, “*Kubla Khan*” and “*The Fall of Jerusalem*”: *The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

63. See Geoffrey Carnall, *Robert Southey and His Age: The Development of a Conservative Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 152–53. Philip Connell and Nigel Leask cite Hannah More’s panic at what she called “speculative infidelity, brought down to the pockets and capacities of the poor, [which] forms a new aera in our history” as evidence for their own argument on “the rapid spread of radicalism and irreligion through the lower orders.” This seems to me better evidence for the rapid spread of More’s inexhaustible panic (“What Is the People?” 24).

tive challenge to a popular world-view that was recognizably Christian,” argues historian Frances Knight:

Most people continued to believe that their prayers, if uttered with sufficient conviction, could change the way in which the world worked, that all their deeds were being recorded in a great book that would be opened on the last day, and that their dead children were sleeping in the arms of Jesus. When it came to making choices between belief systems, the decision was between Anglicanism or Nonconformity or Roman Catholicism, rather than between Christianity and unbelief.⁶⁴

Even scholarship that has studied a bookshelf of allusions to the Bible, Augustine, the church fathers, and doctrinally neutralized versions of Dante, Spenser, and Milton misses the pervasive culture of “Christianity” in Romantic England—as well as the bookshelf of James Lackington. A revolutionary bookseller unprecedentedly successful at marketing books to underserved readers, in 1791 Lackington provided a catalogue to his first library, astonishing (and exhausting) in its difference from our own sense of what “literature” looked like at the end of the eighteenth century:

We all worked very hard, particularly Mr. John Jones and me, in order to get money to purchase books; and for some months every shilling we could spare was laid out at old book-shops, stalls, &c. insomuch that in a short time we had what *we* called a very good library. This choice collection consisted of Polhil on precious Faith; Polhil on the Decrees; Shepherd’s sound believer; Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress; Bunyan’s Good News for the vilest of Sinners; Bunyan’s Heavenly Footman; his Grace abounding to the chief of Sinners; his Life and Death of Mr. *Badman*; his Holy War in the town of *Mansoul*; Hervey’s Meditations; Hervey’s Dialogues; Roger’s Seven Helps to Heaven; Hall’s Jacob’s Ladder; Divine Breathings of a Devout Soul; Adams on the second epistle of Peter; Adams’s Sermon on the *black* Devil, the *white* Devil, &c. &c. Colling’s Divine Cordial for the Soul; Pearse’s Soul’s Espousal to Christ; Erskine’s Gospel Sonnets; The Death of Abel; The Faith of God’s Elect; Manton on the epistle of St.

64. Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24. Knight also suggests that the pressures of Paley, Malthus, Darwin, and the doctrinal disputes between dons and bishops didn’t much affect everyday Anglican clerics, let alone their congregations: “The party conflicts that undoubtedly raged at a higher level in the Church generally passed them by . . . with the exception of a relatively few urban areas, the Tractarian parish priest was rare indeed” before 1860 (19).

James; Pamble's Works; Baxter's Shove for a *heavy-arsed* Christian; his Call to the Unconverted; Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears; Mrs. Moore's Evidences for Heaven; Mead's Almost a Christian; The Three Steps to Heaven; Brooks on Assurance; God's Revenge against Murder; Heaven upon Earth; The Pathway to Heaven; Wilcox's Guide to eternal Glory; Derham's Unsearchable Riches of Christ; his Exposition of Revelations; Alleine's Sure guide to Heaven; The Sincere Convert; Watson's Heaven taken by Storm; Heaven's Vengeance; Wall's None but Christ; Aristotle's Masterpiece; Coles on God's Sovereignty; Charnock on Providence; Young's Short and sure Guide to Salvation; Wesley's Sermons, Journals, Tracts, &c. and others of the same description. . . . We had indeed a few of a better sort, as Gay's Fables; Pomfret's Poems; Milton's Paradise Lost; besides Hobbes's Homer, and Walker's Epictetus, mentioned in my former letter.⁶⁵

Perhaps because so many current romanticisms are so heavily occupied, or preoccupied with varieties of exceptionalism—sexual, bodily, national, racial, scientific, political, philosophical, imaginative—the common ground of religion can slip from notice. But to cede this terrain is also to retreat from the battleground Romanticism, the rough-and-tumble of sectarian strife and passionate religiosity that characterized the national culture, in which doctrinal differences were fighting words, waged by men and women with few vocabularies for identity not inflected by denomination.

The “Reading Nation” wasn't yet the nation; neither would recognize themselves easily in some modern representations. There were probably still more readers of Bunyan than of Byron.⁶⁶ Linda Colley argues that the glue of an “intolerant,” even “thuggish” Protestantism—taught by the antediluvian *Book of Martyrs*, ubiquitous in households of few books—bound together the diversities of the three kingdoms.⁶⁷ We've been so charmed by the “Romantic Revolution” in literature, and the Rise of the Novel, that we haven't recognized that the period's other great genre was the sermon. Hugh Blair's *Sermons* sold a quarter of a million copies

65. James Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (London: Lackington, 1791), 91–93.

66. For the almost unique place of Bunyan in British publishing history, see St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 73n28 and 131.

67. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 23–27. Colley also argues that “religious works formed easily the bulk of what every British printing press was producing in this period” (41).

between 1774 and 1815, and Thomas Chalmers's *Astronomical Discourses* (a set of sermons) rivaled Byron's *Corsair*, selling 6,000 copies in their first two months, and 20,000 in their first year.⁶⁸ Religious texts, moreover, enjoyed a privilege unmatched in universities without departments of modern literature. William Paley's *Moral Philosophy*, with fifteen editions during his lifetime, had a long influence over many intellectual (or at least well-bred) men; his works were required examination texts for all Cambridge students until the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ Only by gauging the "religious" in Romantic culture can we appreciate Southey's report, none too happy, in the *Quarterly* of 1810: "No works in this country are so widely circulated, and studied by so many thousand readers, as the Evangelical and Methodist Magazines."⁷⁰

Southey screeched, "Of these publications we have no hesitation in saying that they produce evil—great evil, nothing but evil."⁷¹ But if there's hyperbole here, it's not off the charts. The *Journal* of John Wesley, published serially from 1738 to 1789, and collected thereafter, was one of the most visible of English autobiographies, eventually reaching more than a million words, with a total number of copies somewhere between 80,000 and 180,000.⁷² In the 1790s, Wesley's *Arminian Magazine* had twice the circulation of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and, under many names, would become the longest-running religious periodical in the world.⁷³ These works emerged from and sustained a strictly managed autocracy, governed first by Wesley (an ordained clergyman, and onetime fellow of Lincoln College), then by his hand-picked successors, all of whom controlled what, where, and how texts were printed, edited or anthologized, priced, and marketed within and beyond the Methodist Connexion. As the next chapter argues, Methodism was a particularly savvy brand in a country already

68. St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 581, 591

69. Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991–2000), 2:336. See also Jager, *Book of God*, 102–23. Aileen Fyfe reminds us that while Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* and *Moral Philosophy* were required texts, the *Natural Theology* wasn't, contrary to long-standing misconception; Fyfe, "The Reception of William Paley's *Natural Theology* in the University of Cambridge," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 30.3 (October 1997): 321–35.

70. Robert Southey, "On the Evangelical Sects," *Quarterly Review* 4 (November 1810): 480–514 (507–8). Southey's report is also his lament that "the bigotry, fanaticism, and uncharitableness of these publications are melancholy proofs of human weakness."

71. Southey, "On the Evangelical Sects," 508.

72. For estimates on publication figures, see Wesley, *Journal and Diaries I* (1735–38), ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 41.

73. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism*, 118.

heavily invested in religious culture. Methodism offered novel intensities—the ecstatic spontaneity of its sermons against the rote recitations of the Establishment, the soaring melodies of its new hymns against an Anglican service almost entirely devoid of music, along with an entire library of cleverly segmented and accessibly edited texts—to previously neglected, even invisible publics. Methodist success surprised everyone, even its manager: in spite of a business model of marketing cheaply in order to maximize circulation, John Wesley realized a lifetime profit of £30,000, all of which he gave away.⁷⁴

This print enterprise, coupled with an army of itinerant preachers crisscrossing the country and colonies, brought Methodism to the frontiers of England and the empire. As Southey and a host of establishment writers observed, this adventure complicated the geography of center and periphery, reorienting even supposedly secularizing practices in middle-class and gentry culture. Those who wanted nothing to do with Methodism or any other form of enthusiasm found themselves somewhat awkwardly connected to it: as historian Boyd Hilton argues, religious evangelicalism in the postrevolutionary era was an “amorphous set of ideas and attitudes, capable of seeping into minds that were sometimes formally hostile” to its ostensible positions.⁷⁵ In 1821, the *Quarterly’s* review of Southey’s *Life of Wesley* said much the same thing. While the “two or three hundred thousand” Methodists in the country were “no very appalling amount in a population of sixteen millions,” the much wider influence was compelling:

[I]t is not . . . by the numbers of the professed Methodists alone that we must estimate the moral effect which they have produced. . . . The religious ferment first excited by their preaching has extended far beyond the visible bounds of their society. It has stimulated the clergy to greater seriousness and activity in the discharge of their functions; it has set the laity on thinking for themselves; it has, as an incidental consequence of the rivalry of hostile sects, (roused by the new phenomenon to practice a new means of popularity) forwarded, to a degree never previously contemplated, the education and religious instruction of the lower classes; it has opposed, among these classes a mighty and countervailing principle to the poisonous flood of modern philosophy. It is obvious, even to a careless observer, that religion is more in the minds and mouths of men than formerly; that a greater curiosity is excited by its discussion . . . the major-

74. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 350.

75. Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon, 1991 [1988]), 30.

ity are, on the whole, less ashamed of, and more attentive to the outward appearances of piety than they seem to have been during the preceding century.⁷⁶

The *Quarterly* had profound reservations not only about Methodism, but also about Southey's dignifying it with a sustained two-volume treatment. The small comfort was the irrefutable evidence that these were emphatically religious days, in which what it would call "a great excitation of the public mind" had decisively curbed "the poisonous flood" of "modern philosophy," preserving the clarity of a pure Protestantism across denominational divisions.⁷⁷

The disciplined enterprises of Methodism were the leading edge of a much broader, and not always disciplined, enthusiastic literature descending from the 1640s, as the seventeenth-century prophecies of Christopher Love experienced a dramatic revival in the 1790s, the moment of their supposed culmination.⁷⁸ "The awful subject of public enquiry and curiosity," announced Richard Brothers in 1795, was "the wonderful effects of inspiration and prescience in prophecy, waking and sleeping visions, and other forms of communication of the divine will and knowledge."⁷⁹ If these "wonderful effects" were loudly trumpeted, the tune didn't please a liberal "Clergyman" who in the same year conceded having "lately heard much respecting Prophets and prophecies"—but lamented the "confident, I had almost said blasphemous manner, many lay claim to inspiration."⁸⁰ Nevertheless, a broad spectrum of polite culture, from rational Dissenters to orthodox churchmen, recognized itself as living in a moment of "inspired" writing, though this had little to do with the productions of largely unread Oxbridge poets. Lackington read its more suitable fashion in an "inspired prophet": a "taylor," "elevated above an assembly of old women . . . stript in his shirt, with his wig off, sweating, foaming at the mouth, and bellowing like a baited bull. In the above manner it seems he would often amuse himself and his congregation for near two hours."⁸¹

76. "Southey's Life of Wesley," *Quarterly Review*, 24 (October 1821): 1–55 (3).

77. "Southey's Life of Wesley," 3.

78. Iain McCalman, "New Jerusalem: Prophecy, Dissent, and Radical Culture in England, 1786–1830," in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 312–35 (323–24).

79. Richard Brothers, *Wonderful Prophecies, Being a Dissertation on the Existence, Nature, and Extent of the Prophetic Powers in the Human Mind*, 3rd ed. (London: B. Crosby, 1795), iii.

80. *Memoirs of Pretended Prophets. By a Clergyman* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), i, iv.

81. Lackington, *Memoirs*, 173.

The enthusiastic “underworld” so brilliantly excavated by Iain McCalman also poured into the daylight in the Romantic period,⁸² and led Coleridge to doubt the framing “so complacently affixed to it by the contemporaries of ‘this *enlightened age*.’”⁸³ The wake of the French and Methodist Revolutions pulled Cambridge intellectuals as well as rural chambermaids into communion with *The Destiny of Nations*. *A Vision*: “By types, shadows, dreams and visions, I have been led on . . . whereby . . . the future destinies of nations have been revealed to me.”⁸⁴ This is Southcott, not Coleridge, both sharing the mode of apocalyptic vision. Prophetic imagination, historian James Hopkins argues, constituted an extraordinarily widespread belief that the “existing system of social, economic, and political relationships will be recast in the image and likeness of a vision sufficiently compelling to draw its adherents away from their daily routines and into a life of hyperbole, one in which they and all their endeavors take on an outsized, heroic quality.”⁸⁵ Hazlitt said as much in 1817 of both poets and prophets, without the heroic gloss: “to speak of them as they deserve, they are not well in the flesh, therefore they take refuge in the spirit; they are not comfortable in the here, and they seek for life to come.”⁸⁶

The refuge Hazlitt configured is consistent with what Jerome McGann has marked out as a project of cultural transcendence. *Lake Methodism* argues that this is Romantic culture itself. Escapes into a mental interiority were heard more frequently in Methodist field-preaching than in the library of Rydal Mount. Imaginative transcendence was an elite gesture, but also the hope of the poor Methodist: if it effected displacement and “false consciousness,” it was also a source and reflex of considerable unease. No small project of this book is to reverse some of the polarities—secular and sacred, polite and popular—that have taken hold in Romantic studies. This can be done only by recognizing the extent to which “Romantic” culture was an emphatically “religious” culture. It is to this culture, in all its exuberance and orthodoxy, we now turn.

82. Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

83. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 14.

84. Joanna Southcott, *The Strange Effects of Faith: Being a Continuation of Joanna Southcott's Prophecies*, 3rd ed. (London: Galabin and Marchant, 1806), 17. Excerpts from Coleridge's poem were published in Southey's *Joan of Arc* (1796); *The Destiny of Nations* first appeared in full in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817).

85. James Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), xi.

86. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 58.