The American Deists

Walters, Kerry S.

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Philip Freneau
The Reasoning Power, Celestial Guest,
the Stamp upon the Soul Impress’d

Philip Freneau (1752–1832) is popularly remembered as the “poet of the American Revolution” and the “founder of American poetry.” Both these titles could be debated: Joel Barlow, for example, might be equally in the running for the first, Anne Bradstreet for the second. But one unbestowed honorific Freneau indisputably deserves is “poet of American deism.” More than any other Early Republic bard, he captured and celebrated in his verse the themes of Enlightenment rational religion. It is arguable that his influence was more pervasive than even Paine’s or Palmer’s, especially since he was less controversial. Many Early Republic readers (like readers today) may have been reluctant to plow through lengthy and demanding philosophical defenses of deism, but few could resist glancing at short and pithy poems scattered throughout newspapers and journals.

Of all the American deists, Freneau’s beginnings were the most propitious. He was born in New York City, on 2 January 1752, into a prosperous and cultured family. Young Freneau grew up surrounded by books, art, and intelligent conversation. Privately educated by tutors, he entered the College of New Jersey (Princeton) at fifteen, where he enjoyed a distinguished career during his four-year stint.

Even as a student, Freneau’s interests clearly ran toward writing. When the American Revolution erupted shortly after his graduation, he supported the cause by penning no less than eight satirical pamphlets aimed at the British and Tories. But wanderlust soon overwhelmed revolutionary fervor, and in 1776 Freneau sailed to Santa Cruz, where he remained for almost three years. There he wrote some of his best poetry, including “The Jamaica Funeral” and “The House of Night,” each of which served as exemplars for the later romantic poets.

Freneau briefly returned to the United States in 1778 but quickly shipped out again for the West Indies. Luck was against him. The frigate on which he was a passenger was captured by a British man-of-war, and for a time Freneau was remanded to a prison ship in New York harbor. After nearly dying from ill treatment and privation, he was finally released. In 1781 he dramatically described his ordeal in the masterful British Prison-Ship; A Poem, in Four Cantoes.

During the next four years, Freneau was an employee of the Philadelphia
Post Office. Although he appears to have despised his job, it left him enough spare time to versify, and a steady stream of his poetry appeared in newspapers and journals. His passion for the ocean and adventure once more proved irresistible, however, and in 1784 he took to sea again, only returning to the United States five years later. In 1789, having finally exhausted his wanderlust (and, incidentally, having written some of his best seafaring poetry), he married and threw himself into journalism and governmental work. He edited several newspapers, including the anti-Federalist *Aurora*, served in the Department of State during Jefferson’s administration, and finally retired to a New Jersey farm to devote himself to poetry. In December 1832, while returning home from a country store, he was caught in a sudden blizzard, lost his way, and perished. It was an appropriately romantic end for a man who his entire life had relished the unexpected.

Although Freneau had briefly studied for the ministry following his graduation from Princeton, he was by temperament and intellectual conviction ill suited for the clerical life. In company with the other American deists, he had imbibed early on the New Learning of Locke and Newton, becoming convinced that the only worship worthy of humans was one based on a rational investigation of nature and morality. His deistic writings, prose as well as poetry, reflect that belief. Interestingly, Freneau did not tend to be as antclerical as his fellow deists, although he did lambast what he took to be priestly hypocrisy in several of his pieces. He was more concerned with lyrical celebrations of nature’s God than with vindictive diatribes against supernaturalist dogma. Nor did he militantly propagandize for deism. Although an acquaintance of Palmer’s, a correspondent of Paine’s, and a sometime member of the New York Deistical Society, Freneau by and large preferred the contemplative to the activist life, at least when it came to religious matters. Indeed, most of his deistic poetry, although written throughout his entire career, was only published late in life.

The selections from Freneau here include both prose and poetry. The verse generally centers on the key deistic concepts of God, nature, reason, and morality. “Reflections on the Constitution, or Frame of Nature,” argues, along lines reminiscent of Ethan Allen’s *Reason the Only Oracle*, that God’s revelation is nature and nature’s laws: “THOU, nature’s self art nature’s God / Through all expansion spread abroad, / Existing in the eternal scheme, / Vast, undivided, and supreme.” “On a Book Called Unitarian Theology,” “On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature,” and “On the Universality, and Other Attributes of the God of Nature” all echo the claim that God is revealed through the constant and immutable laws of nature. In addition, the first, with its reiteration of a sun metaphor, hints at an almost platonic relationship between the divine Mind and the created world. The second insists, in typical deistic fashion, that the doctrine of miracles, if taken seriously, demolishes the
integrity of nature as well as the dignity of God: “Could [Nature] descend from that great plan / To work unusual things for man, / To suit the insect of an hour— / This would betray a want of power.”

In “On the Powers of the Human Understanding,” “On Superstition,” and “Belief and Unbelief,” Freneau considers the nature of rationality. The first argues that human reason will continue to evolve, perhaps even after death, more and more closely approximating the divine Reason of which it is a reflection. The second claims that “true” religion is “on nature and reason built,” but that sectarian bigotry and ignorance reduces it to an irrational system that encourages error and anxiety. Only when humans “No more fictitious gods revere, / Nor worship what engenders fear,” will religious sensibility resume its original purity. “Belief and Unbelief” argues, a la Volney, for the relativity of sectarian doctrines and concludes by suggesting that faith, properly understood, is inductive rather than mysteriously supernatual: “Nor can conviction bind the heart / Till evidence has done its part: / And, when that evidence is clear, / Belief is just, and truth is near.”

“Science, Favourable to Virtue,” “On False Systems of Government,” “The New Age,” “On the Abuse of Human Power,” “On the Religion of Nature,” “On the Evils of Human Life,” “On Happiness,” and “The Millennium” each reveal Freneau’s deistic conviction that morality is the supreme goal of natural religion, that it is properly based on reason’s control of the passions, and that it enhances social utility as well as individual felicity. Rational religion, then, encourages the progress of the natural sciences, because they are the vehicles best suited to cultivate human reason and promote morality. Moreover, freedom of conscience and release from political oppression and social inequality are requisite conditions for the flourishing of human reason. Finally, in lines that recall Pope’s “All that is, is right,” Freneau argues that evil does not arise from natural law, which necessarily reflects divine goodness and providence, but rather from human error and prejudice. If humans but regulate their behavior to conform to the lessons of nature, evil can be extirpated. This is because “That moral track to man assign’d” is “A transcript from the all-perfect mind.”

The prose pieces reprinted here are delightful illustrations of Freneau at his satirical best. They also contain two of his infrequent assaults on institutionalized Christianity and the clergy. As mentioned, Freneau rarely employed his pen directly against revealed religion but instead concerned himself with highlighting the positive attributes of deism. Occasionally, however, exasperated by what he interpreted as egregious abuses or absurdities on the part of the Christian establishment, he entered the fray—although even then he usually dressed his criticisms in humor rather than invective. His prods were indirect stabs rather than frontal attacks. As such, they were probably more effective than the angry recriminations of a Paine or Palmer. They encouraged readers to laugh
at supernaturalist doctrine, sectarian rituals, and stuffy clergy. And humor, after all, is a sure antidote to authoritarianism: One cannot take seriously what one finds laughable.

The first selection is part of a series entitled "Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects," which Freneau ran in his *Aurora*. It is both a defense of the ideals of the French Revolution and a slap at the perceived hypocrisy of American religionists. The protagonist in the little vignette is Robert Slender, a homespun philosopher whom Freneau frequently used as his mouthpiece. Robert is everyman, a seemingly naive, nonbookish character who disingenuously trusts common sense and experience and is consequently always finding himself on the wrong side of his more "learned" clerical neighbors. His ability to cut through the sophistries of theological nonsense calls to mind the disarmingly acute innocence of two of Franklin's "commonplace" philosophers: Poor Richard and Silence Dogood.

In this piece, Robert finds himself perplexed about the correct definitions of "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy." Before the French Revolution (which Freneau always fervently admired), the Calvinist clergy had never missed a chance to blast from the pulpit Catholicism and papacy. Such denunciations, Robert had been led to believe, were "orthodox." But now that France has overthrown the monarchy, established democracy, and broken the hegemony of the church, Robert is puzzled to discover that the American clergy praises Catholicism, defends the pope, and adulates such non-Protestant enemies of liberalism as "Suwarrow" (a reference to the Russian field marshal Suvarov, who was instrumental in savagely breaking the back of the democratic Polish insurrection in 1794). This reversal is now likewise "orthodox." How?

The cleric to whom Robert addresses his question proceeds to explain away the "merely apparent" discrepancy by leading Slender through a hilarious maze of sophisms. But the real explanation for the about-face is obvious: Whenever established Christianity feels itself threatened by either political liberalism or rational religion, it expeditiously aligns itself with what was previously condemned as heretical. When Slender mildly suggests that such a move is less than consistent, the clergyman who is instructing him sternly thunders, "I hope... you don't pretend to argue religion with me!" and declares poor Robert anathema.

The second prose selection is from "The Voyage of Timberee-Taho-Eede, an Otaheite Indian." In it, Freneau pokes fun at both Christian ritual and values. The story is a report from an Otaheite sent as an emissary to New England. He tells his curious chief that the religion of the foreigners he visited is bizarre, holding as it does that the deity is both one and three persons and that God, though eternal, was murdered. The adherents of this religion indulge in every species of wickedness, including slavery; they are "intolerably proud, selfish, vain, malevolent, and lazy"; and they appear to worship "little
plates of metal” which they hoard. The emissary concludes his report by assuring his chief that the Otaheite priest attempted to instruct the foreigners in the one true Otaheite religion but barely escaped being soundly drubbed for his pains. This leads him to surmise that “these people seem to be under some indissoluble obligation to believe only what has previously been believed for them by their progenitors”—a subtle jab at religious bigotry that reminds one of the eloquent opening stanza of Freneau’s “On the Abuse of Human Power”: “Must man at that tribunal bow / Which will no range to thought allow, / But his best powers would sway or sink, / And idly tells him what to THINK.”

On the Powers of the Human Understanding

This human mind! how grand a theme:
Paint image of the Great Supreme,
    The universal soul,
That lives, that thinks, compares, contrives;
From its vast self all power derives
    To manage or control.

What energy, O soul, is thine:
How you reflect, resolve, combine;
    Invention all your own!
Material bodies changed by you
New modes assume, or natures new,
    From death or chaos won.

To intellectual powers, though strong,
To moral powers a use belong
    More noble and refined;
These lift us to the power who made,
Illume what seems to us all shade,
    The part to man assigned.

Both nurtured in the heart of man
Serve to advance his social plan,
    And happier make his race;
Hence Reason takes her potent sway,
And prouelling passions bids obey
    That harm us and debase.
O ye, who long have walked obscure;
Forever must those clouds endure
Which darken human bliss?
Though for some better state designed,
Is there not rigour in the mind
To make a heaven of this—

Eternal must that progress be
Which Nature through futurity
Decrees the human soul;
Capacious still, it still improves
As through the abyss of time it moves,
Or endless ages roll.

Its knowledge grows by every change;
Through science vast we see it range
That none may here acquire;
The pause of death must come between
And Nature gives another scene
More brilliant, to admire.

Thus decomposed, or recombined,
To slow perfection moves the mind
And may at last attain
A nearer rank with that first cause
Which distant, though it ever draws,
Unequalled must remain.

Its moral beauty thus displayed
In moral excellence arrayed
Perpetually it shines:
Its heaven of happiness complete
The mass of souls united meet
In orbs that heaven assigns.

**Reflections on the Constitution, or Frame of Nature**

From what high source of being came
This system, Nature's awful frame;
This sun, that motion gives to all,
The planets, and this earthy ball:
This sun, who life and heat conveys,
And comforts with his cheering rays;
This image of the God, whose beam
Enlivens like the GREAT SUPREME.

We see, with most exact design,
The WORLD revolve, the planets shine,
In nicest order all things meet,
A structure in itself complete.

Beyond our proper solar sphere
Unnumbered orbs again appear,
Which, sunk into the depths of space,
Unvarying keep their destined place.

Great Frame! what wonders we survey,
In part alone, from day to day!
And hence the reasoning, human soul
Infers an author of the whole:

A power, that every blessing gives,
Who through eternal ages lives,
All space inhabits, space his throne,
Spreads through all worlds, confined to none;

Infers, through skies, o'er seas, o'er lands
A power throughout the whole commands;
In all extent its dwelling place,
Whose mansion is unbounded space.

Where ends this world, or when began
This spheric point displayed to man?—
No limit has the work divine,
Nor owns a circumscribing line.

Beyond what mind or thought conceives,
Our efforts it in darkness leaves;
And Nature we, by Reason's aid,
Find boundless as the power that made.
THOU, nature's self art nature's God
Through all expansion spread abroad,
Existing in the eternal scheme,
Vast, undivided, and supreme.

Here beauty, order, power, behold
Exact, all perfect, uncontrouled;
All in its proper place arranged,
Immortal, endless, and unchanged.

Its powers, still active, never rest,
From motions, by THAT GOD impressed,
Who life through all creation spread,
Nor left the meanest atom dead.

Science, Favourable to Virtue

The mind, in this uncertain state,
Is anxious to investigate
All knowledge through creation sown,
And would no atom leave unknown.

So warm, so ardent in research,
To wisdom's source she fain would march;
And find by study, toil, and care
The secrets of all nature there.

Vain wish, to fathom all we see,
For nature is all mystery;
The mind, though perched on eagle's wings,
With pain surmounts the scum of things.

Her knowledge on the surface floats,
Of things supreme she dreams or dotes;
Fluttering awhile, she soon descends,
And all in disappointment ends.

And yet this proud, this strong desire,
Such ardent longings to aspire,
Prove that this weakness in the mind
For some wise purpose was designed.
From efforts and attempts, like these,
Virtue is gained by slow degrees;
And science, which from truth she draws,
Stands firm to Reason and her cause.

However small, its use we find
To tame and civilize mankind,
To throw this brutal instinct by,
To honour Reason, ere we die.

The lovely philanthropic scheme
(Great image of the power supreme,)  
On growth of science must depend;
With this all human duties end.

**On a Book Called Unitarian Theology**

In this choice work, with wisdom penned, we find
The noblest system to reform mankind,
Bold truths confirmed, that bigots have denied,
By most perverted, and which some deride.

Here, truths divine in easy language flow,
Truths long concealed, that now all climes shall know:
Here, like the blaze of our material sun,
Enlightened *Reason* proves, that *God is One*—
As that, concentered in itself, a sphere,
Illumines all Nature with its radiance here,
Bids towards itself all trees and plants aspire,
Awakes the winds, impels the seeds of fire,
And still subservient to the Almighty plan,
Warms into life the changeful race of man;
So—like the sun—in heaven’s bright realms we trace
One power of love, that fills unbounded space,
Existing always by no borrowed aid,
Before all worlds—eternal, and not made—
To that indebted, stars and comets burn,
Owe their swift movements, and to *that* return!
Prime source of wisdom, all-contriving mind,
First spring of *reason*, that this globe designed;
Parent of order, whose unweary hand
Upholds the fabric that his wisdom planned,
And, its due course assigned to every sphere,
The Reasoning Power, Celestial Guest

Resolves the seasons, and sustains the year!—

Pure light of truth! where'er thy splendours shine,
Thou art the image of the power divine;
Nought else, in life, that full resemblance bears,
No sun, that lights us through our circling years,
No stars, that through yon' charming azure stray,
No moon, that glads us with her evening ray,
No seas, that o'er their gloomy caverns flow,
No forms beyond us, and no shapes below!

Then slight—oh slight not, this instructive page,
For the mean follies of a dreaming age;
Here to the truth, by reason's aid aspire,
Nor some dull preacher of romance admire;
See one, sole God, in these convincing lines,
Beneath whose view perpetual day-light shines;
At whose command all worlds their circuits run,
And night, retiring, dies before the sun!

Here, man no more disgraced by time appears,
Lost in dull slumbers through ten thousand years;
Plunged in that gulf, whose dark unfathomed wave
Men of all ages to perdition gave;
An empty dream, or still more empty shade,
The substance vanished, and the form decayed!—

Here reason proves, that when this life decays,
Instant, new life in the warm bosom plays,
As that expiring, still its course repairs
Through endless ages, and unceasing years.

Where parted souls with kindred spirits meet,
Wrapt to the bloom of beauty all complete;
In that celestial, vast, unclouded sphere,
Nought there exists but has its image here!
All there is mind!—that intellectual flame,
From whose vast stores all human genius came,
In which all nature forms or reason's plan—
Flows to this abject world, and beams on man!

On False Systems of Government, and the Generally
Debased Condition of Mankind

Does there exist, or will there come
An age with wisdom to assume,
The rights by heaven designed;
The Rights which man was born to claim,
From Nature's God which freely came,
To aid and bless mankind.—

No monarch lives, nor do I deem
There will exist one crown supreme
The world in peace to sway;
Whose first great view will be to place
On their true scale the human race,
And discord's rage allay.

REPUBLICS! must the task be your's
To frame the code which life secures,
And RIGHT from man to man—
Are you, in Time's declining age,
Found only fit to tread the stage
When tyranny began?

How can we call those systems just
Which bid the few, the proud, the first
Possess all earthly good;
While millions robbed of all that's dear
In silence shed the ceaseless tear,
And leeches suck their blood.

Great orb, that on our planet shines,
Whose power both light and heat combines
You should the model be;
To man, the pattern how to reign
With equal sway, and how maintain
True human dignity.

Impartially to all below
The solar beams unstinted flow,
On all is poured the RAY,
Which cheers, which warms, which clothes the ground
In robes of green, or breathes around
Life;—to enjoy the day.

But crowns not so;—with selfish views
They partially their bliss diffuse
Their minions feel them kind;—
And, still opposed to human right,
Their plans, their views in this unite,
To embroil and curse mankind.

Ye tyrants, false to Him, who gave
Life, and the virtues of the brave,
All worth we own, or know:—
Who made you great, the lords of man,
To waste with wars, with blood to stain
The Maker's works below?

You have no iron race to sway—
Illume them well with Reason's ray;
Inform our active race;
True honour, to the mind impart,
With virtue's precepts tame the heart,
Not urge it to be base;

Let laws revive, by heaven designed,
To tame the tiger in the mind
And drive from human hearts
That love of wealth, that love of sway,
Which leads the world too much astray,
Which points envenomed darts:

And men will rise from what they are;
Sublimer, and superior, far,
'Than Solon guessed, or Plato saw;
All will be just, all will be good—
That harmony, "not understood,"
Will reign the general law.

For, in our race, deranged, bereft,
The parting god some vestige left
Of worth before possessed;
Which full, which fair, which perfect shone,
When love and peace, in concord sown,
Ruled, and inspired each breast.

Hence, the small good which yet we find,
Is shades of that prevailing mind
Which sways the worlds around:
Let these depart, once disappear,
And earth would all the horrors wear
In hell's dominions found.

Just, as yon' tree, which, bending, grows
To chance, not fate, its fortunes owes;
So man from some rude shock,
Some slighted power, some hostile hand,
Has missed the state by Nature planned,
Has split on passion's rock.

Yet shall that tree, when hewed away
(As human woes have had their day)
A new creation find:
The infant shoot in time will swell,
(Sublime and great from that which fell,)  
To all that heaven designed.

What is this earth, that sun, these skies;
If all we see, on man must rise,
Forsaken and oppressed—
Why blazes round the eternal beam,
Why, Reason, art thou called supreme,
Where nations find no rest.—

What are the splendours of this ball—
When life is closed, what are they all?
When dust to dust returns
Does power, or wealth, attend the dead;
Are captives from the contest led—
Is homage paid to urns?

What are the ends of Nature's laws;
What folly prompts, what madness draws
Mankind in chains, too strong:—
Nature, to us, confused appears,
On little things she wastes her cares,
The great seem sometimes wrong.
The New Age: Or, Truth Triumphant

In reason's view the times advance
    That other scenes to man disclose,
When nature to her children grants
    A smiling season of repose;
    And better laws the wise will trace,
    To curb the wicked of our race.

Those happy ages, years of bliss,
    Had many an ancient sage foretold,
Who, if they err'd or aught amiss,
    Predicted of this age of gold,
    It was, that crowns and courts and kings
    Would still attend this charge of things.

Strange thought, that they whose god is gain,
    Who live by war, who thrive on blood,
Of half that live the curse the bane,
    Could ever rule among the good:
    These did some hateful fiend engage
    To banish peace and vex the age.

Man to be happy, as he may
    As far as nature meant him here,
Should yield to no despotic sway
    Or systems of degrading fear;
    And sovereign man, new modell'd now,
    To sovereign man alone should bow.

The civil despot, once destroy'd,
    With all his base, tyrannic laws,
The mind of man will be employ'd
    In aiding virtue and her cause:
    Enlighten'd once, inform'd and free,
    The mind admits no tyranny.

I saw the blest benignant hour
    When the worst plague of human race,
Dread superstition, lost her power,
    And, with her patrons, black and base,
Fled to the darkest shades of hell,
And bade at least one world farewell.

Fanatic flames extinguish'd all
The energy of thought will rise:
I see imposture's fabric fall,
Each wicked imp of falsehood dies;
And sovereign truth prevails at last
To triumph o'er the errors past.

The moral beauties of the mind
If man would to a blessing turn,
And the great powers to him assign'd
Would cultivate, improve, adorn:
The sun of happiness, and peace
Would shine on earth and never cease.

On Superstition

Implanted in the human breast,
Religion means to make us blest;
On reason built, she lends her aid
To help us through life's sickening shade.

But man, to endless error prone
And fearing most what's most unknown,
To phantoms bows that round him rise,
To angry gods, and vengeful skies.

Mistaken race, in error lost,
And foes to them who love you most,
No more fictitious gods revere,
Nor worship what engenders fear.

O Superstition! to thy sway
If man has bow'd and will obey,
Misfortune still must be his doom
And sorrow through the days to come.

Hence, ills on ills successive grow
To cloud our day of bliss below;
Hence wars and feuds, and deadly hate,  
And all the woes that on them wait.

Here moral virtue finds its bane,  
Hence, ignorance with her slavish train.  
Hence, half the vigor of the mind  
Relax'd, or lost in human kind.

The social tie by this is broke  
When we some tyrant god invoke:  
The bitter curse from man to man  
From this infernal fiend began.

The reasoning power, celestial guest,  
The stamp upon the soul impress'd;  
When Superstition's awe degrades,  
Its beauty fails, its splendor fades.

O! turn from her detested ways,  
Unhappy man! her fatal maze;  
The reason which he gave, improve,  
And venerate the power above.

On the Abuse of Human Power, As  
Exercised over Opinion

What human power shall dare to bind  
The mere opinions of the mind?  
Must man at that tribunal bow  
Which will no range to thought allow,  
But his best powers would sway or sink,  
And idly tells him what to THINK.

Yes! there are such, and such are taught  
To fetter every power of thought;  
To chain the mind, or bend it down  
To some mean system of their own,  
And make religion's sacred cause  
Amenable to human laws.

Has human power the simplest claim  
Our hearts to sway, our thoughts to tame;
Shall she the rights of heaven assert,
Can she to falsehood truth convert,
Or truth again to falsehood turn,
And at the test of reason spurn?

All human sense, all craft must fail
And all its strength will nought avail,
When it attempts with efforts blind
To sway the independent mind,
Its spring to break, its pride to awe,
Or give to private judgment, law.

Oh impotent! and vile as vain,
They, who would native thought restrain!
As soon might they arrest the storm
Or take from fire the power to warm,
As man compel, by dint of might,
Old darkness to prefer to light.

No! leave the mind unchain'd and free,
And what they ought, mankind will be,
No hypocrite, no lurking fiend,
No artist to some evil end,
But good and great, benign and just,
As God and nature made them first.

On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature

On one fix'd point all nature moves,
Nor deviates from the track she loves;
Her system, drawn from reason's source,
She scorns to change her wonted course.

Could she descend from that great plan
To work unusual things for man,
To suit the insect of an hour—
This would betray a want of power.

Unsettled in its first design
And erring, when it did combine
The parts that form the vast machine,
The figures sketch'd on nature's scene.
Perfections of the great first cause
Submit to no contracted laws,
But all-sufficient, all-supreme,
Include no trivial views in them.

Who looks through nature with an eye
That would the scheme of heaven descry,
Observes her constant, still the same,
In all her laws, through all her frame.

No imperfection can be found
In all that is, above, around,—
All, nature made, in reason's sight
Is order all, and all is right.

On the Universality, and Other Attributes
of the God of Nature

All that we see, about, abroad,
What is it all, but nature's God?
In meaner works discover'd here
No less than in the starry sphere.

In seas, on earth, this God is seen;
All that exist, upon him lean;
He lives in all, and never stray'd
A moment from the works he made:

His system fix'd on general laws
Bespeaks a wise creating cause;
Impartially he rules mankind,
And all that on this globe we find.

Unchanged in all that seems to change,
Unbounded space is his great range;
To one vast purpose always true,
No time, with him, is old or new.

In all the attributes divine
Unlimited perfections shine;
In these enwapt, in these complete,
All virtues in that centre meet.
This power who doth all powers transcend,
To all intelligence a friend,
Exists, the greatest and the best
Throughout all worlds, to make them blest.

All that he did he first approved
He all things into being loved;
O'er all he made he still presides,
For them in life, or death provides.

On the Religion of Nature

The power, that gives with liberal hand
The blessings man enjoys, while here,
And scatters through a smiling land
The abundant products of the year;
That power of nature, ever bless'd,
Bestow'd religion with the rest.

Born with ourselves, her early sway
Inclines the tender mind to take
The path of right, fair virtue's way
Its own felicity to make.
This universally extends
And leads to no mysterious ends.

Religion, such as nature taught,
With all divine perfection suits;
Had all mankind this system sought
Sophists would cease their vain disputes,
And from this source would nations know
All that can make their heaven below.

This deals not curses to mankind,
Or dooms them to perpetual grief,
If from its aid no joys they find,
It dams them not for unbelief;
Upon a more exalted plan
Creation's nature dealt with man—
Joy to the day, when all agree
On such grand systems to proceed,
From fraud, design, and error free,
And which to truth and goodness lead:
Then persecution will retreat
And man's religion be complete.

On the Evils of Human Life

To him who rules the starry spheres,
No evil in his works appears:
Man with a different eye, surveys,
The incidents in nature's maze:
And all that brings him care or pain
He ranks among misfortune's train.

The ills that God, or nature, deal,
The ills we hourly see, or feel,
The sense of wretchedness and woe
To man may be sincerely so;
And yet these springs of tears and sighs
Be heaven's best blessings in disguise.

Some favorite late, in anguish lay
And agonized his life away:
You grieved—to be consoled, refused,
And heaven itself almost accused
Of cruelty, that could dispense
Such tortures to such innocence.

Could you but lift the dreary veil,
And see with eyes or mind less frail
The secrets of the world to come,
You would not thus bewail his doom,
To find on some more happy coast
More blessings, far, than all he lost.

The seeming ills on life that wait
And mingle with our best estate,
Misfortune on misfortune grown,
And heaviest most, when most alone;
   Calamities, and heart oppres'sd—
   These all attend us, for the best.

Learn hence, ye mournful, tearful race,
On a sure ground your hopes to place;
Immutable are nature's laws;
And hence the soul her comfort draws
   That all the God allots to man
   Proceeds on one unerring plan.

Hold to the moral system, true,
And heaven will always be in view;
O man! by heaven this law was taught
To reconcile you to your lot,
   To be your friend, when friendship fails,
   And nature a new being hails.

Belief and Unbelief: Humbly Recommended
to the Serious Consideration of Creed Makers

What some believe, and would enforce
Without reluctance or remorse,
Perhaps another may decry,
Or call a fraud, or deem a lie.

Must he for that be doom'd to bleed,
And fall a martyr to some creed,
By hypocrites or tyrants framed,
By reason damn'd, by truth disclaim'd?

On mere belief no merit rests,
As unbelief no guilt attests:
Belief, if not absurd and blind,
Is but conviction of the mind,

Nor can conviction bind the heart
Till evidence has done its part:
And, when that evidence is clear,
Belief is just, and truth is near.
In evidence, belief is found;
Without it, none are fairly bound
To yield assent, or homage pay
To what confederate worlds might say.

They who extort belief from man
Should, in the out-set of their plan,
Exhibit, like the mid-day sun
An evidence denied by none.

From this great point, o'erlook'd or miss'd,
Still unbelievers will exist;
And just their plea; for how absurd
For evidence, to take your word!

Not to believe, I therefore-hold
The right of man, all uncontrol'd
By all the powers of human wit,
What kings have done, or sages writ;

Not criminal in any view,
Nor—man!—to be avenged by you,
Till evidence of strongest kind
Constrains assent, and clears the mind.

On Happiness, as Proceeding from
the Practice of Virtue

This truth, upon the soul impress'd,
Has been by every age confess'd,
That in the course of human things
Felicity from virtue springs.

Where vice prevails, or baseness sways,
Remorse and pain the fault repays,
The man of vice has no resource,
But even in pleasure finds a curse.

If happiness can be sincere
A virtuous conduct makes it here,
That moral track to man assign'd
A transcript from the all-perfect mind.
Should virtue sometimes fail of bliss,
Plung'd in misfortune's dark abyss,
Still, in the event she would not fall,
But rise, triumphant o'er it all.

Should life's whole course replete with ill,
To virtue prove a bitter pill;
Another life has heaven design'd
Where she her due rewards will find.

Nay, though through life perplex'd and pain'd
And though no other life remain'd;
A life well spent itself would prove
A due reward from Him above.

And to be conscious we have done
The worthy part, though frown'd upon,
Can every seeming ill destroy
And grief and sadness change to joy.

The Millennium—To a Ranting Field Orator

With aspect wild, in ranting strain
You bring the brilliant period near,
When monarchy will close her reign
And wars and warriors disappear;
   The lion and the lamb will stray,
   And, social, walk the woodland way.

I fear, with superficial view
You contemplate dame nature's plan:—
She various forms of being drew,
And made the common tyrant—man:
   She form'd them all with wise design,
   Distinguish'd each, and drew the line.

Observe the lion's visage bold
His iron tooth, his murderous claw,
His aspect cast in anger's mould;
   The strength of steel is in his paw:
   Could he be meant with lambs to stray
   Or feed along the woodland way?
Since first his race on earth began
War was his trade and war will be:
And when he quits that ancient plan
With milder natures to agree,
   He will be changed to something new
   And have some other part to do.

One system see through all this frame,
   Apparent discord still prevails;
The forest yields to active flame,
   The ocean swells with stormy gales;
   No season did the God decree
   When leagued in friendship these should be.

And do you think that human kind
   Can shun the all-pervading law—
   That passion's slave we ever find—
   Who discord from their nature draw;
   Ere discord can from man depart
   He must assume a different heart.

Yet in the slow advance of things
   A time may come our race may rise,
By reason's aid to stretch their wings,
   And see the light with other eyes;
   And when the ancient mist is pass'd;
   To find their nature changed at last.

The sun himself, the powers ordain,
   Should in no perfect circle stray;
He shuns the equatorial plane,
   Prefers an odd serpentine way,
   And lessens yearly, sophists prove,
   His angle in the voids above.

When moving in his ancient line,
   And no oblique ecliptic near,
With some new influence he may shine
But you and I will not be here
   To see the lion shed his teeth
   Or kings forget the trade of death—
Letters on Various Interesting and Important Subjects: Letter 13

Some time ago, I thought that I had gained such an entire mastery over my fears that the whole troop, so remarkable for printer-flogging here or elsewhere, could not make me tremble—and so I walked about in open day, ventured even to talk in favour of the Aurora in the little beerhouse at the corner, and indeed was so fool-hardy as to assert that the clergy were now behaving in the most inconsistent manner by praying for the success of Suwarrow, the pope, and the re-establishment of the Romish religion, for the downfall of which they, and their fathers before them in the church, have prayed heartily for at least these two hundred years—But this conduct raised such a buzz about my ears that I have been forced to run away in good earnest. What chiefly led to this was the following—One day, having gained a little time, I took my stick in my hand, adjusted my wig, and walked out to see an acquaintance. Who happened to be there, as ill luck would have had it, but his reverence—So after some chit chat about dry weather, water works, sickness, and some thoughts on death, which I thought made the parson’s face longer than ordinary, though it is not short at any time, he thus addressed me—So Robert, I am informed that the reason why you no longer attend to hear God’s word preached on the Sabbath is because you neither like our prayers nor our preaching. I confess, Mr. Editor, I knew not what to say—I looked on the one side, and then on the other, rose from my chair, spit in the sand box, and threw a segar I had but just lighted into the fire. —I had never contradicted the clergy because my good father had often said to me, “Robert, never meddle with the clergy—they are edge-tools”; but father’s advice had slipped out of my memory at that time—so, giving three pretty loud hems, by way of practice, I answered—And pray your reverence, said I, can I have a better reason? If, Robert, answered he, our preaching or praying were not orthodox, then you would have a right to quit us and go elsewhere; but what fault have you?—Why sir, said I, as to what is orthodox, and what do you call it, the other dox—Heterodox, replied he—Aye, aye, says I, that’s it; I never clearly knew what they meant—I have but a poor head at best, and these are hard words—I would be much obliged to your reverence to tell me what they mean, and then I will try to answer your question. The parson, putting on one of his airs, went on thus: I am astonished, Robert, to hear you talk thus—You have appeared in public, censured men and measures in that democratical sheet called the Aurora, and your name is familiar in every company. Some say you’re a man of sense; others, that you are a fool; yet both laugh at your productions; and you ask what is the meaning of two plain English words.—They may be English or Spanish for me, said I, much ashamed of my own ignorance; but if you please to tell me, I’ll thank you kindly sir, and if I can I won’t forget what you say.— Why, said he, with a smile of superior wisdom, orthodoxy is the whole body of
principles taught in our church—and every opinion contrary thereto is heterodox—So, said I, this is indeed to me very strange—but I'll remember it—But, added I, can a principle be heterodox one year and orthodox another year?—No sir, answered his reverence, with much authority; orthodoxy is ever the same; the principles I have the honour to preach were taught by Christ, his apostles, and so on to the present day, without the smallest alteration.—It may be so, answered I; I have but a poor brain—but I confess I think it otherwise. And pray, sir, said the parson, what is this great fault that we have been guilty of, and of which your wise head is so full?—Sir, says I, before you came to preach at our church, the reverend Dr. **** never went into the pulpit but he prayed for the fall of Antichrist, that man of sin, and this I think was orthodox praying—He preached very often against the errors of the church of Rome, and from the prophecies proved that the Pope was Antichrist; and this, because you know it was taught in our church, was orthodox preaching.—Now sir, you pray for the re-establishment of the Romish religion, and preach that the French have committed a damning sin in pulling Antichrist from his chair, converting images into money, consecrated bells into democratic cannon, shutting up the nunneries, and sending the poor girls into the world to answer the end of their creation—Now sir, is this also orthodoxy? Undoubtedly sir, answered he, for you know it is taught in our church. But, says I, how sir can this be? You told me but just now that orthodoxy did not change, but was always the same—I acknowledge, said his reverence, that you have, Robert, stumbled on something like a contradiction, and it deserves a reply. We prayed for the downfall of the Pope because we thought religion would be benefitted by it—we now see that religion is much hurt by it, and therefore we wish it restored—if indeed God had brought down Antichrist in some other way, and established the true Calvinistic Presbyterian religion in its room, then we would not have desired its restoration—and this is orthodox. It may be orthodox, said I, for ought I know to the contrary, but one thing I'll venture to say, that it is neither agreeable to Judaism or Christianity—I hope, Robert, said his reverence, you don't pretend to argue religion with me!—God forbid sir, says I; excuse me for speaking rashly; but if you please sir, I'll tell you a story—Let's hear it, says he; but I tell you beforehand, there must be nothing about the French in it, for I hate them heartily—Indeed, said I, there is not one word about the French in it, for I believe it is somewhere in the Bible or Testament—Once upon a time, there was a very great man, but he was not a Jew, who had the bad fortune to be afflicted with the leprosy—all the doctors in his own country were consulted in vain, and he was pronounced incurable. At length he was informed that in the land of Jewry there lived a very good man who could cure him in an instant. The great man set forward immediately on his journey. His equipage was splendid—his retinue numerous. He arrived—the man of God paid no respect to him, although he was very great—but sent him
word to go and wash himself a number of times in the river Jordan. The great man was enraged. Are not, said he, the rivers of my own country much better than the rivers of Israel? I thought he would have come out to me—put his hand on the place, called on God, and so healed me. However, being a man of some sense, and having some wise men about him, he was induced to obey the prophet. He did so, and was cured. You have my story. I can make nothing of it, said the parson. Well, said I, I’ll apply it. God had his way (like the prophet) of bringing down Antichrist; but you, like the great man, say his way was not a good way, and if he had taken counsel with the very wise Christians of the day, they would have taught him that it would have been much better to have left him standing than to have made use of such instruments; and now you would instruct him to govern his providential dispensations by your advice, and once more erect spiritual Babylon, bring back the images, catch the poor nuns, and shut them once more in their cells. As I said this, his reverence leaped to his feet. I declare, Robert, said he, you are unfit to live in society; ’tis such men as you who are bringing the curse of God on our city. I pronounce you an infidel, a despiser of the clergy, constituted authorities, holy customs, and a dangerous man in society, and I hope we shall shortly have it in our power to lay such fault-finding, ignorant fellows by the heels, that so they may learn to reverence the most useful and honourable of all men, the clergy. Having said this, he stalked out of the house with great consequence. Shortly after I took my leave. The story ran like lightning—Robert Slender is an infidel, said one—Why, he argued with the Reverend ______, and the parson told him he ought to be imprisoned for the good of society. Mrs. Slender went to visit her neighbour—I am very sorry, says Goody Rattle, that it is so bad. What’s the matter, said she? Why, I need not hide it—Mr. Slender is an infidel—a speaker against the clergy—a puller down of religion—and his reverence says so!—In short, I had once more to shut myself up in the house; and I have moved into the country among my friends till the story blows over.

The Voyage of Timberoo-Taho-Eede, an Otaheite Indian

... Their places of worship are far superior in point of size to any thing of the same sort in your majesty’s island of Otaheite. But we gained, while amongst them, a very imperfect idea of their religion, owing to our not staying long enough to acquire a perfect knowledge of their language. We found out, however, with some difficulty, that they worship three Gods, first, second, and third, whom they yet hold to be only one and the same. If we comprehended them aright, they asserted that the second one formerly came down from the clouds, and was put to death for the offences of the island. This, may it please your majesty, appeared to us a very strange conceit; but, if the matter has been really so, your slave is inclined to think, that it is high time for some benevolent divinity to descend upon the island a second time, as it is at present overrun
The white people are intolerably proud, selfish, vain, malevolent, and lazy; and are supported by a miserable race of black slaves, whom they steal away from a distant country, and force them to undergo the severest labours. The slightest punishments inflicted for the slightest offences upon these wretched men, are infinitely more severe than your majesty would think due to the crime of high treason itself.

But, we must do the white men the justice to say, that they did not seem at all urgent that we should be acquainted with the particulars of their religion; nor did the priests themselves take much notice of us. The reason given us for this conduct was very odd. A man in red told us, that the high priest of the island and his deputies never took any notice of those, who had not in their possession considerable quantities of small circular plates of yellow metal. There was some superstition in this matter, which we never could unravel. Possibly, sir, these little plates of metal may be the image or sign of their god, as Tieraboo, my first lieutenant, has more than once told me, that he saw the representation of a man’s head on one of them. Be the matter as it may, the islanders are so amazingly tenacious of these trinkets, that we never could lay our fingers on a single one of them to bring away only for your majesty’s inspection.

. . . The worship in their churches consists principally in gazing upon each others faces. We went to these places several times, but gained very little instruction. A man in black had a good deal to say from an elevated station, but we could make nothing of his discourse. Another sat a few steps below him, who at certain intervals opened his mouth very wide, uttering strange and dismal noises, in which the greatest part of the assembly joined him. Towards the conclusion of the service we saw several old men coming towards us with long black sticks, polished very nicely, which we supposed were to chastise those who had been inattentive to the words of the man in black. From one end of each of these sticks was suspended a small black cap. —As far as we could perceive, the inattentive persons had no other way to avoid being beaten than by throwing a piece of metal into one of these caps, which in an instant pacified the chastiser. As we had nothing wherewith to make atonement, we fled with precipitation before the black stick had reached us. Our own priest, after he had gained some little knowledge of the barbarian language, did his endeavour not only to convince the citizens and islanders in general of their being under the influence of a false religion, but also offered to instruct them in the true faith and enlightened theology of our own country. We are sorry to inform your sublime majesty, that his success was by no means answerable to his labours, and it was with some difficulty he escaped three or four sound drubbings from the priests of the infidels, for even attempting to make converts. —These people seem to be under some indissoluble obligation to believe only what has previously been believed for them by their progenitors. . . .