SECULARIST LITERATURE OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND: 1870-1880

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ABSTRACT

SECULARIST LITERATURE OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND:
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By

Michael Rhoads Steele

The dissertation studies the history of Secularism, its literature and criticism, and James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" as found in the National Reformer from 1870 until 1880. Whereas the "City" has always been seen as a criticism of the orthodox Christian values of Victorian England, this study examines the poem in relation to its Secularist context and finds that it is a severe criticism of the world view held by Secularists. The dissertation employs a historical survey of the Secularist movement, and a critical analysis of the themes, images, and critical assumptions of Secularist writers including James Thomson.

Chapter One employs George Jacob Holyoake's definition of Secularism as "those issues which can be tested by the experience of this life" as opposed to religious, supernatural experiences. The historical survey of the movement covers its Owenist and Chartist origins, short biographies of Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, the argument between them over the equation of atheism with Secularism, the social makeup of the movement, reasons for its ultimate failure

and its successes in certain areas. This chapter serves to define the Secularist context in which Thomson wrote the "City."

Chapter Two discusses the significant features of 138 poems by sixty-nine poets who appeared in the National Reformer from late 1869 until 1880. Secularist poetry is characterized by its didacticism regarding scientific, social and atheistic forms of "truth." It is revolutionary in tone, and optimistic and millenarian with regards to social evolution. Its common themes include a pantheistic conception of man's place in nature, the possibility of earth becoming a secular heaven, and the release afforded by modern, rational man's breaking the bonds of religion. Secularist poetry is also characterized by images of light and darkness which correspond to images of maturity--man's superstitious infancy in mental darkness, the breaking dawn of the rational present and the bright day of the glorious future which promises wisdom and intellectual freedom.

Chapter Three discusses Secularist criticism which claimed Shelley as its greatest poetic inspiration based on his Queen Mab and the "Declaration of Rights." Blake, however, assumes an almost equal status with Shelley due to his general iconoclasticism and radicalism. Secularist critics valued Swinburne over all other Victorian poets and often compared him to Shelley. Generally, the criticism found in the National Reformer showed that Secularists were not all hopelessly Philistine in their literary tastes. Bradlaugh, who was not entirely sympathetic to imaginative literature, had the wisdom to leave literary matters in capable hands.

Chapter Four asserts that the most noteworthy literary accomplishment of the publishing history of the National Reformer was its 1874 publication of Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night." The poem is examined at length in view of its Secularist context. Thomson's vision in the "City" departs radically from the general beliefs and values of Thomson's Secularist friends and audience. Thomson actually wrote against the values of Secularism. Although Thomson composed the poem's twenty-one sections during two periods (1870 and 1873) as proved by William Schaefer, Schaefer does not point out that the poem contains important elements common to "both Cities." Primarily, the theme of the "City" as a Blakean mental event runs through both periods of composition. Thomson saw man's consciousness--his reason--as the source of the pessimistic vision. Thomson did not place any faith in Secularist epistemology based, as it was, on rationalistic materialism. He saw that Secularists failed to account for mental reality--a function of their general distrust of the emotions and the imagination. Thomson did not believe that the ills which beset the Victorians were, as Bradlaugh charged, the result of external (religious) forces but were, instead, the result of each individual's existence. Ultimately, even life is an illusion for Thomson; death and nothingness are the only absolutes. Thomson uses images of light and dark in a manner totally antithetical to the accepted Secularist usage.

The Conclusion finds that although the Secularists saw themselves as superior to and existing outside the Victorian society that they despised, it is more accurate to see them as an integral

part of the philosophical, social and aesthetic fabric of the age. The most significant force that operated in the age was the phenomenon of the death of God. Secularists welcomed their experience of the loss of faith and replaced it with faith in science and man's perfectability. The Secularists did not, however, present a "whole" vision of life; they were too limited in their singular reliance on a purely rational mode of perception in a monistic framework. Thomson distrusted the rational faculty. The workings of the imagination reveal hidden realities lurking behind the pleasant facade of material reality. Life is not reducible to the scientifically revealed, "immutable" laws that Secularists worshipped. Thomson's "City" anticipates the twentieth-century's existential perception of nothingness. Secularists, however, never considered the "existence" of nothingness. Thomson's poem is the best criticism of Secularism that exists. It is far more than another diatribe against the religious values of orthodox Victorian Christians. The Secularists are creatures of the Victorian age. Thomson's poem, however, transcends its historical context. His imagination triumphed whereas the rationalism of Bradlaugh failed.

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FOR MY WIFE

AND MY PARENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We all build with the bricks made by other people. In the case of this dissertation, it would be more accurate to say that it would not exist without the many sacrifices made by my wife. My debt of gratitude cannot ever be repaid.

Dr. Richard Benvenuto provided much personal attention as Dissertation Director and offered many valuable insights during the process of writing this study. Our friendship and his respect for the work will always be important for me. Dr. Donald Lammers invariably offered valuable comments and much kindness regarding my forays into his field of history. Dr. Victor Paananen was especially valuable in the formative stages of the dissertation; his work with Blake was influential in the fourth chapter as well. I am indebted to Dr. James Pickering for his willingness to become involved in the process in spite of his extremely busy schedule.

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attention. Dr. John Bucknell of Drew University provided valuable scholarly assistance, as did Dr. David J. DeLaura of the University of Texas and Dr. Lee Grugel of Moorhead State College.

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INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot wrote in his essay, "Religion and Literature," that ". . . the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern."[1] Eliot defined three phases of a "gradual secularization" of literature during the last 300 years. In the first phase, the novel (he mentions Fielding, Dickens, and Thackeray), took the contemporary version of Faith for granted. In the second phase, authors such as George Eliot, George Meredith, and Thomas Hardy "doubted, worried about, or contested the Faith." The final present phase finds in modern authors, excepting Joyce, "those who have never heard of the Christian Faith spoken of as anything but an anachronism" (p. 347).

Eliot was concerned with a social, psychological, theological, and literary phenomenon which is properly known as secularization: the temporal, material concerns of earthly life have taken priority over the infinite, religious, supernatural concerns of the Christian world view. A small group of Radical Atheists in Victorian England called themselves "Secularists." While the famous "doubters" of the Victorian age (Clough, Arnold,

Huxley, Eliot, Meredith, Hardy, and others) have received much attention from modern literary scholars, the Secularist Movement itself has received almost no attention. Historians, sociologists, theologians, and economists have written about the Secularists. Now it is time that Secularist literature be examined.

The Secularists never rose above obscurity in their own age. Today, they are almost unknown to literary scholars. One example of Secularist literature, however, has achieved a measure of acclaim--James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night." Nevertheless, Thomson's poem has not been analyzed in its specific Secularist context. This study will present a brief survey of the history of the Secularist Movement, analyze its poetry and literary criticism over a ten-year period, and then analyze Thomson's "City" in its Secularist context. Furthermore, the specific decade to be considered is from 1870-1880. Although the Secularist Movement exists even today, its greatest impact on the Victorian Age was from 1860-1893 when its chief organ, the National Reformer, was published by Charles Bradlaugh. Thomson's "City" first appeared in the Reformer in four installments in 1874. This is the primary reason for selecting the 1870-1880 decade for study. Thomson wrote for the Reformer for the first half of the decade, and Bradlaugh was at his acrid best as a Secular polemicist. In 1877, the famous "Knowlton" affair took place which involved Bradlaugh as a central figure in the dissemination of birth control information--an episode which brought the Secularists to the forefront of popular attention. Bradlaugh tried throughout the decade to be elected to Parliament

and succeeded temporarily in 1880. After his election to Parliament in 1880, Bradlaugh's energies were siphoned off from his earlier sole concern with the Movement. Additionally, Secularism began to decline as a coherent movement (as opposed to secularism, a general trend), in the 1880's, chiefly because of the increasing popularity of Fabian Socialism. Thus, the decade from 1870-1880 found the Secularist Movement at its peak of vigor and presents the literary scholar an opportunity to study its literature at the time when its most famous writer was intimately related to the Movement as well as at the time of the Movement's greatest notoriety.

[1]T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), p. 352.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORY OF SECULARISM

It is somehow typical of the Secularist movement in Victorian England that George Jacob Holyoake, the founder of the movement, borrowed the term from a phrenologist of the mid-century, George Combe.[1] Phrenology was, of course, a "science" in its own right in the nineteenth century, but today it smacks of superstition--one of the obsolete elements of religion that Secularists found to be harmful in a modern, rational world. The precise date of the first use of the word, Secularism, by Holyoake is 10 December 1846, in his newspaper, the Reasoner.[2] Holyoake claimed that this was a "new form of Freethought":

> Some took this to be a new name for a new conception. Many had shown that morality resting on theology was not universally accepted. We maintained that morality resting on material and social facts was a force among all people. We were the first who taught that the secular was sacred . . . . This form of opinion accepted the ethical precepts of Christianity, so far as they were consonant with the welfare of society. The word secular was taken as George Combe defined it--as implying 'those issues which can be tested by the experiences of this life.'[3]

Thus, even in its infancy, Secularism manifested traits that were to remain constant throughout the period under consideration in this study: Holyoake's concern with the material and social origins of morality, his ready acceptance of Christian ethical principles that were beneficial to mankind (and the implicit rejection of all else) as well as the necessity of "testing" issues by means of the natural as opposed to the supernatural--all remained features of Secularism. In addition, the mildness of Holyoake's criticism of Christianity is apparent in the foregoing passage. This fact later separated Holyoake from the second generation leader of Secularism, Charles Bradlaugh, and the majority of Secularists who felt the necessity for unreserved "iconoclasticism." Finally, another trait found in later Secularist literature appears in Holyoake's declaration--that is, the use of religious language in viewing the "secular as sacred." The immediate progenitors of Secularism, with direct influence upon Holyoake, were Owenism and Chartism. Owenism (or "socialism" to the early Secularists, to be clearly distinguished from the later Fabian socialism) was the most direct influence on Secularism.[4]

Holyoake, like many Secularists, had been extremely devout as a young person. In his memoirs, Holyoake recalled reading prayers from an Anglican prayer book to his maternal grandfather, Richard Groves, who, as a beadle at St. Martin's Church in Birmingham, had achieved the status of a very religious but minor dignitary. Holyoake's mother, Catherine, was a "Puritan-minded" woman who doggedly kept the last horn-button shop in Birmingham. It is interesting to note that Holyoake's father, a whitesmith in a foundry,

"never said anything about religion," as if he had never heard of it. Holyoake remembers that his father possessed a "pagan mind"--leaving all the religious instruction to Catherine while his own "thoughts dwelled on the human side of life," (Holyoake, Sixty Years, pp. 8-10). In Holyoake's youthful search for the right religion he came to preach at various chapels in Birmingham, one of the hot-beds of Owenism. His various contacts led to his conversion to Owenism and eventual appointment as a "social missionary" with the Society of Rational Religionists. His activities in this capacity involved "aiming to raise the millenarian expectations of the working man and to spread the Owenite gospel of redemption through science, co-operation and 'community building,'" (Eros, p. 104). As a social missionary, Holyoake came into conflict with the civil authorities over teaching and the collection of money by lay persons on Sundays. Refusing to sign a declaration offered by the Central Board of the Society for Rational Religionists stating that he was a protestant Christian and a believer in the Gospel, Holyoake became embroiled in public agitation over the issue and was eventually jailed, in 1842, for blasphemy. The "blasphemy" uttered by Holyoake was mild, to say the least. In answering a question from an antagonist during a speech, Holyoake averred that, given the poverty of the masses in a Christian nation such as England, it would not be unreasonable to put God (the Church) on half pay in order to help the poor. While in jail, Holyoake's nine year old son, Maximilian, was killed through the negligence of a cabman who ran over him. At the inquest into the incident, Holyoake

was not allowed to offer evidence of the cabman's carelessness since he refused to take the oath (Holyoake, Sixty Years, p. 79). During his stay in jail, he also met Richard Carlile, a radical free-thinker and publisher, and William Ashurst, Robert Owen's solicitor (Eros, pp. 104-5). These men opened new intellectual and social vistas for the bright young Holyoake and strengthened his determination to resist the abuses of authority. His experiences during his term in jail increased his bitterness regarding religion; like many others who suffered imprisonment at the hands of the church and the state, he left incarceration with increased doubts about and animosity towards religion. While he remained on the fringes of Owenism until 1846, Holyoake was becoming an avowed atheist. His atheism combined with his hopes for social improvements via Owenite co-operation and Combe's sense of the secular to produce Holyoake's early version of Secularism in late 1846.

While Owenism was certainly the most important early formative influence on Holyoake, Chartism, based on Paine's republican beliefs, also played a role. After 1846, Holyoake moved away from the declining fortunes of Owenism. In 1848, the year of revolutions and the last high Chartist hopes, he became associated with W. J. Linton, the radical artisan, as a co-editor of the Cause of the People.[5] Chartism and early Secularism were strong in the same general areas of England: the industrial and coal-mining areas of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Northumberland, Durham, and Lanarkshire. As Owenism declined, its followers placed their faith in Holyoake who had accepted Linton's Chartist persuasion of "moral force" as the

best means of affecting social progress.[6] In resisting the radically violent extremism of the "physical force" wing of Chartism, Holyoake's metamorphosis from a position of orthodox Christianity to that of a Secularist was complete. For the remainder of his long career Holyoake insisted on the superiority of "moral force" as a propaganda device against religion--a position which ultimately cost him his leadership role within the Secularist movement which, under his successor, Charles Bradlaugh, practiced constant "Bible-bashing," (Royle, p. 54).

A debate concerning the issue of whether Secularism is Atheism, chaired by Austin Holyoake, was held between G. J. Holyoake and Bradlaugh at the New Hall of Science in London on the evenings of 10 and 11 March 1870.[7] A similar debate had been held between the two men in 1858, the year of Bradlaugh's accession to Holyoake's old office as President of the London Secular Society. The issues had not changed in the intervening twelve years; neither had the positions of the disputants. What had taken place was a tremendous increase in the numbers of those Secularists who supported Bradlaugh's militant iconoclasticism.

In the debate, Holyoake affirmed the necessity of what he called "positive Secularism." Basically, he feared the imputation of Secularist immorality by the public if the movement became identified with Atheism. Holyoake asserted that the public believed the definition of an Atheist to be "one who is not only without God, but without morality," (National Reformer, 20 March 1870, p. 178). In his opinion, Secularism must never become identified with this

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conception. Instead, it must remain separate and distinct, "to be affirmative instead of negative--to act upon what free inquiry had discovered . . . to set up principles of nature in the place of principles of theology, and found, if possible, a kingdom of reason, for those who found the kingdom of faith inadequate and unreliable." He believed that "Atheism still has its place . . . its unfinished work in hand. Anti-christianism has its hands full, leaving Secularism with duties which have long waited, and are still needed more than ever." Rather than the attack-oriented tactics of Bradlaugh, Holyoake recommended that against "folly and fatuity" of priests and religion "there is no defence except by entrenchment within the absolute and impassable barriers of Secular truth. . . . where all who think are free, and all who are true are sure; asserting its own principles, but not assailing others, needing neither to assail, nor condescending to assail, theological systems," (National Reformer, p. 177). To the cheers of the audience, Holyoake continued, saying that "the Secularist concerns himself with this world without denying or discussing any other world, either the origin of this, or the existence of that," (National Reformer, p. 178).

Bradlaugh, on the other hand, charged that Holyoake's position was illogical. He noted that "Theism, if it claims anything, claims to be everywhere. How you can take the ground outside everywhere, I do not know. The Theist claims that there is no thought, no phase of thought, that is not determined by Deity. You have to challenge this initial groundwork before you can make any

way with your Secularism at all," (National Reformer, p. 179). Bradlaugh consistently refused to acknowledge the validity of Holyoake's contention that Atheism was associated with immorality. To support his view on this matter, a view which certainly did not reflect the general public's belief, Bradlaugh was fond of quoting Coleridge whose words for many years adorned the masthead of the National Reformer: "There is not one in a thousand who has either strength of mind or goodness of heart enough to be an Atheist." He referred to Francis Bacon who had spoken of the Atheist as being more moral than many other men. Thus, feeling "obliged to destroy theism to make way for Secularism," Bradlaugh maintained these views on the morality of Atheism in the face of stern public attitudes to the contrary. Bradlaugh was never very sensitive to the implications of the image of Secularism projected in this manner by its leaders. Holyoake, from an older day when Atheism was not merely a dangerous belief to hold, but possibly a fatal belief, was extremely conscious of public reaction to the movement's public denial of God. For the movement to ever reach the status of a "party," Holyoake's position was certainly the proper one. Broad and open public support would be needed; Secularism never achieved this. Instead, it was more of an unnerving element in the view of the churches. The vehemence with which Bradlaugh made his Secular views known certainly kept the movement in the public's eye and delighted a dedicated core of Secularists, but never succeeded in rallying the masses to the Secularist banner.

Nevertheless, Bradlaugh was able to score impressive arguments against Holyoake's position. Pointing out that although Secularism does believe in laws which govern health, happiness, knowledge and material prosperity, it is still necessary that "you must challenge the theological doctrine that God regulates" these areas of life. In this instance, Bradlaugh probably overestimated the influence of religion in the lives of Victorians. Certainly, it is true that the churches perceived the "hand of God" operating in the affairs of the world. The more important question is whether the great majority of the Victorian masses so perceived reality. It is doubtful that such was the case. In truth, Bradlaugh was almost a God-consumed man. Holyoake was not unaware of the similarity of the fervor displayed by Bradlaugh and that of the clergy. He found that Bradlaugh possessed "that notion which I think attaches to nearly all theological reformers, that they must make a clean sweep in this world before they can bestow on it the illumination of their own special insight into truth," (National Reformer, p. 181). Bradlaugh, however, did not believe that he was a monomaniac. Instead, he cried that "the work you have to do is double work: the destruction of error, with the consciousness that no error is entirely destroyed until it is replaced by truth," (National Reformer, p. 184). He flatly denied "the opprobrium cast upon the word Atheism" and declared that he did "not care what kind of character religious men may put round the word Atheist. I would fight until men respect it," (National Reformer, p. 185).

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The second night of the debate found Holyoake and Bradlaugh arguing a subdivision of the main proposal, that is, whether Secularism involved skepticism. Bradlaugh, as expected, asserted that Secularism must necessarily involve skepticism with regards to theology and Christianity. He reserved two specific issues which could not be doubted: one's own existence and the "improvability of the human condition," (National Reformer, 27 March 1870, p. 193). Apparently, Holyoake agreed with this latter assertion. Instead, he chose not to engage Bradlaugh on the theological issue directly but to appeal to the sensibility of the audience regarding the Secularist platform, part of which Bradlaugh had quoted. Holyoake found that the impression Bradlaugh's brand of Secularism gave to the public was "that the association is more a theological than one for the maintenance of distinctive Secular principles." Other Secular principles should be made more clear to the public. He asserted that his early work in shaping the movement

> was to put in the hands of the working classes principles which should serve their purpose . . . and make them equally independent and equally proud, defiant, and unassailable. They should be masters of their own principles, and have a system which should satisfy the requirements of their mind, all the conditions of morality, and all the conditions of good government. To this end we took that material principle which related to the indefinite improvement of humanity by the

> improvement of material means. . . . These rules were laid down quite apart from Atheism. They owe nothing to Christianity. You can state them; you can prove them; you can enforce them . . . and make men fortunate and happy by their application, without condescending even to notice the priest or refer to the Bible on which he relies. (Cheers). Mr. Bradlaugh . . . is overwhelmed by these priests (Laughter). They dominate over his mind. He cannot attend to the affairs of this life in an independent manner; he must always be assaulting them and paying them the homage of his attention, and condescending to criticise them.

Holyoake concluded his statement by telling his audience that "I treat such of them as are vicious adversaries in a far more dangerous way. I propose to ignore them," (National Reformer, p. 196).

Regarding the general issue of theological skepticism, Holyoake may be termed an agnostic. He believed that "the Theist assumes an infinite knowledge when he says he knows there is a God. I think he who says that one is impossible betrays an equal capacity for knowing everything," (National Reformer, p. 196). On this issue Bradlaugh, claiming that he based his position on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, read from one of his pamphlets: "I do not deny God, because the word conveys to me no idea, and I cannot deny that which presents me no distinct affirmation. I cannot war with a nonentity. If, however, God is affirmed to represent an existence which is distinct from the existence of which I am the mode, and which it

is alleged is not that existence, then I deny God. . . . I affirm that there is one existence, and deny that there can be more than one," (National Reformer, 10 April 1870, p. 228).

Basically, though the two leaders of Secularism argued some fine points, their disagreement was one that involved very practical matters. Bradlaugh saw Christian opposition as an opportunity to trumpet Secularist opinions in a public forum. Holyoake, on the other hand, preferred simply to ignore orthodox opposition in order to concentrate Secularist attention on immediate problems of social reforms. It is no surprise that under Bradlaugh's leadership, in coming into head-to-head combat so often with the opposition, Secularism's popularity came to be stunted. In a very real sense, Bradlaugh played into the hands of the churches. Still, his was the more popular position among rank and file Secularists. His dynamic personality, oratorical and organizational gifts made him the natural leadership choice over the weaker personality of Holyoake. While the several programs espoused by Secularism were, in theory, comprehensive enough to have resulted in major social improvements were they ever realized, the public at large identified Secularism with Bradlaugh's vociferous attacks against religion. In retrospect, then, the basis for the eventual demise of Secularism is found in this key encounter between Bradlaugh and Holyoake in the spring of 1870. As will be discussed later, Secularism flourished during the decade that followed the debate, but its degree of success was misleading. The issues that it championed the loudest did not put bread on the

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table of the oppressed Victorian farmers and workers. It is ironic, indeed, that Bradlaugh would have been the first to disagree with the Biblical admonition that "man does not live by bread alone."

Practically speaking, Holyoake's importance in the early history of the movement lay in his own organizational abilities (though not in fiscal policy as all his publishing ventures failed) (Eros, p. 110).[8] Holyoake was the undisputed leader of the Secularist movement from its founding until 1858 (Budd, "Humanist Movement," p. 45). Not an ambitious man and singularly unblessed with the oratorical talents of Charles Bradlaugh, Holyoake's numerous attempts to institutionalize Secularism on a national basis always resulted in failure. In the 1850's a series of drives towards national union of the several local Secular Societies resulted in a Central Secular Society with Holyoake as Secretary, but this organization disappeared soon after its inception. Secularist conferences in 1852, 1855 and 1860 established a "preliminary" constitution and a "provisional" committee on further organization (McGee, p. 15). Susan Budd believes that the very concept of "freethinking" supported and practiced by Holyoake may have been an impediment to the successful national organization of Secular Societies in the 1850's. Noting that Holyoake was "adamant on the necessity for genuine discussion and search for truth on every issue," Mrs. Budd concludes that his "insistence on open-mindedness also meant that since he proposed no definite organization or ideology for the Secularist movement, none could grow up around him," (Budd, "Humanist Movement," p. 46). He was, thus, more of an early

prophet, a Moses figure destined to lead his people through the deserts of Victorian infidelity but unable to himself enjoy the role of recognized public leadership achieved by Charles Bradlaugh. Holyoake must be given the credit for providing the gravitational force that brought the aimless, fragmenting followers of Owenism and Chartism together under the Secular banner. In later years, he provided an alternative measure of level-headedness quite lacking in the vitriolic group that supported Bradlaugh's often uncouth methods. Still, in realistic terms, a movement that is self-avowedly outside the regular social context probably needs a charismatic leader; Bradlaugh supplied this where Holyoake could not.

Perhaps even more important for Secularism and the purposes of this study, Holyoake's tremendous interest in the educative function and value of a free press provided an early model for Bradlaugh to follow in the form of his weekly radical newspaper, the National Reformer. Holyoake edited and published more than a dozen radical and Secularist journals and newspapers in his long career. His pen was in constant use on a wide variety of topics which engaged Secular attention. Although no Secular journal or newspaper ever enjoyed any degree of financial success, including the long-lived, relatively stable National Reformer (1860-1893), Holyoake's solemn belief in the reforming power of the press led Bradlaugh to recognize the necessity of an organ that would resist government restraints on the press while also providing a platform for the public expression of Secular principles and interpretations

of news. If the Secularists had merely been content to hold their debates with the ever eager Christian clergy, or limit themselves to "Sunday school" lectures on Secular topics, the movement would have never reached the degree of cohesion and impact it attained under Bradlaugh. Certainly, the talents of a James Thomson would have never been brought to the public's attention.

Before ending this discussion of the first phase of the history of Secularism under Holyoake, a glance at the general Secularist principles he set forth will prove instructive. Holyoake wrote in 1859 that

> a person holding Secular principles as general rules of life, concerns himself with present time and materiality, neither ignoring nor denying the future and spiritual, which are independent questions. . . . Pure secular principles have for their object to fit men for time. Secularism purposes to regulate human affairs by considerations purely human. Its principles are founded upon nature, and its object is to render man as perfect as possible in this life.[9]

This passage evinces Holyoake's consistent insistence on the matter of attending to material claims. He, unlike Bradlaugh, preferred not to waste valuable time in endless debates over issues which could not be "tested by the experiences of this life."

More specifically, Holyoake asserted that "the word illuminating secular life is <u>self-help</u>. The Secularist vexes not

the ear of heaven. . . . His is the only religion that gives heaven no trouble."[10] Holyoake believed that atheism was "an Incentive to Self-help" because "theism is dependence; Atheism is self-reliance." While Secularism commits man to duty and work in this world with no thought for the hereafter, the "practical conclusion" against theism is that "spirit is no element with which men can work." A belief in the spirit runs counter to the principle of self-help because spirit

> is subtle, capricious, evasive, defiant. You cannot detect it, you cannot control it, you cannot use it. It has no known conditions and it obeys no known laws. It is the dream of night, while humanity requires the wakefulness of day to watch, and the certainty of science for its deliverance. . . .
>
> That which is material is calculable . . . . In fine, it is found to act under law . . . . The conquest of Nature is the discovery of its laws. . . . the spiritual is the unknown--the material is the known. . . . the Priest preaches consolation--the Professor teaches you deliverance.

Thus, self-help, a most crucial Secularist principle, was viewed as a function of materialism. Man can only aid himself in a world where the material does not play a second fiddle to the supernatural. Where there is no faith in the observable laws of nature, man becomes dependent on the superstitious folly of the priests.

As usual, Holyoake was careful to distinguish the propaganda practices he expounded from those of Bradlaugh by noting that he was replacing rejected tenets with better ones, rather than merely destroying the old and leaving a void:

> 1). For the study of the origin of the universe Secularism substitutes the study of the laws and uses of the universe. . . .
> 2). For a future state Secularism proposes the wise use of this, as he who fails in this 'duty nearest hand' has no moral fitness for any other.
> 3). For Revelation it offers the guidance of observation, investigation and experience. Instead of taking authority for truth, it takes truth for authority.
> 4). For the Providence of Scripture Secularism directs men to the Providence of Science, which provides against peril, or brings deliverance when peril comes.
> 5). For prayer it proposes self-help and the employment of all the resources of manliness and industry . . . .
> 6). For original depravity, which infuses hopelessness into all efforts for personal excellence, Secularism counsels the creation of these conditions, so far as human prevision can provide for them, in which it shall be 'impossible for a man to be depraved or poor.' The aim of Secularism is to promote the moralisation of this world, which Christianity has proved ineffectual to accomplish.

> 7). For eternal perdition, which appals every human heart, Secularism substitutes the warnings and penalties of causation attending the violation of the laws of nature, or the laws of truth. . . . though they extend to the individual no farther than this life, they are without the terrible element of divine vindictiveness, yet, being near and inevitable--following the offender close to the shadow of the offence--are more deterrent than future punishment which 'faith' may evade without merit (Holyoake, Origin, p. 45).

The basic concept underlying the principles outlined by Holyoake is that of mankind's inherent ability to make use of the material means of this life in order to initiate and insure the continued progress of the human race. With the religious scales removed from his eyes, Secular man was seen to stand independent of outside authority, proud and self-reliant. His primary task was to investigate and understand the laws of nature that operated on the smallest facet of the universe. Morality itself would derive from this study and its daily application in life. More importantly, progress through the providence of science would be insured, especially without the influence of superstitious religion. In short, Secular man was in control of his fate and fortune. To the degree that the individual and the race lived in accordance with the universal natural laws which governed all behavior, physical and moral, the individual and the race would prosper and progress. The future promised to be one of unceasing progress and triumph as man reached

both outward and inward to understand the universe and himself all the better.

Holyoake's Secular principles as outlined above held good for the history of Secularism under consideration. His influence on Secularism was an early and informative one. Bradlaugh, who was far more active in popularizing Secularism, seldom dealt with the definition of Secularist principles. Instead, he built on the foundation already laid by Holyoake. While Holyoake may have resisted the methods used and the directions taken in Bradlaugh's work, he can be credited with giving the younger man a certain focus based on the Secular principles he formulated. While Holyoake, particularly after Bradlaugh's rise to prominence, seldom ventured on to the field of combat on specific issues as did Bradlaugh, he provided the movement the progressive orientation that characterized it. He declared that "it is of no use to allege that it is a law of nature that the weak shall fall before the strong. . . . We believe . . . the absence of evil to be possible, and know it to be desirable," (Holyoake, Trial, pp. 42-43). The Owenite belief in co-operation is obvious in Holyoake's tacit rejection of the Social Darwinian principle of laissez-faire competition which was used later by Bradlaugh as a complement to the self-help principle. From a modern viewpoint, it can be asserted that Holyoake was consistently "more radical" in political and economic matters than was Bradlaugh, who supported the laissez-faire approach throughout his public career to the eventual detriment of Secularism. While both men, in fact, derived much of their thought from the radical Tom Paine, it was

Bradlaugh who was the political conservative of the two. Susan Budd notes that "far from being a revolutionary, he had an almost exaggerated respect for British institutions," (Budd, "Humanist Movement," p. 117). Even as Bradlaugh toned down his social criticism (most of his famous "iconoclasticism" was reserved for Bible-bashing and crude attacks on the House of Brunswick and the aristocracy), it was Holyoake who concentrated his wrath on the obvious malfunctions of the British social system:

> We no longer live in a state of society where the strong man knocks with impunity the weak man on the head; but we do live in a state where Capital can be despotic, and Knowledge a monopoly. . . . Wisdom is the perquisite of the rich. Education makes the few giants, and ignorance keeps the many dwarfs. . . . the instructed talk in tongues the people cannot communicate in; they live in realms of thought the people can never enter; they create and control influences the people can never counteract (Holyoake, Trial, p. 43).

Compared to these observations, Bradlaugh's hectic activism was rather myopic. While Bradlaugh's National Reformer carried dispatches on local co-operative efforts, he believed that population control was the ultimate answer for the solution of Victorian social problems. Although Bradlaugh's birth control agitation was successful in bringing about the first decline in Victorian England's birth rates (Nelson, p. 128), he failed to take into account the larger

complexities that created social ills. Holyoake's incisive criticism was certainly the more relevant and realistic viewpoint and one that was held by many respected figures of the day. Unfortunately, Holyoake lacked the leadership abilities to give his views a larger hearing and more influence within the Secularist community. Certainly, Bradlaugh was its most vociferous and visible public propagandist. He left few clearly defined principles concerning Secularism not clearly derivative from Holyoake's earlier work. A few memorable aphoristic comments, constantly repeated, are to be found in his numerous debates with men of the cloth but it is difficult to build a coherent system from these.[12] Such debates were nearly always limited in their scope as Bradlaugh loudly denounced religion as the source of all moral and social evils without really expanding on other relevant Secularist critical standpoints. Debates were Bradlaugh's forte. The public apparently enjoyed them as he often spoke to as many as 6,000 people at a time (Eros, p. 110). More often than not he encountered stiff resistance to his appearances from outraged Christians. In one instance Bradlaugh outwitted the alarmed citizenry of a town by telling them that he would speak to his loyal supporters "near the park." The park was adjacent to a body of water that was outside the city limit; Bradlaugh hired a boat and spoke from the water. But, generally speaking, the debate as a strategic method of expounding a platform proved to be an unwieldy weapon. Bradlaugh was quick to anger and possessed little of a sense of humor that could have been used to turn his audiences against his debating opponents. Instead, he was easily baited and

occasionally reduced to a shouting match over niggling theological points or procedural questions. In one famous instance, Bradlaugh and his learned opponent seized upon a minor point of Hebrew grammar and filled a blackboard with Hebraic characters--much to the amusement of the audience but certainly not to its edification. Given Bradlaugh's temperament and the debate as one of his favorite methods, it is not difficult to understand why he was not a seminal figure in defining Secular theories of politics, economics, and social matters. Strictly speaking, he was a popularizer.

Born on 26 September 1833, the eldest of seven children in a deeply religious family, Bradlaugh's childhood was apparently a very solemn, seriously lived affair. He was sent to a Quaker school but removed from it when his parents discovered ruler scars on his body; the scars were noted again ten years later when he joined the army.[13] The great turning point in his life involved a traumatic conflict with an Anglican minister, the Rev. John Graham Packer. The fifteen year old Bradlaugh, already initiated into Sunday school teaching, was asked by Packer to prepare for his upcoming confirmation by studying the Thirty-nine Articles. Diligently, Bradlaugh applied himself to the task, but he noted numerous discrepancies between the Articles and the Gospels. After asking the appalled Packer for "aid and explanation" regarding his findings, Bradlaugh was summarily suspended from the church for three months and severely reprimanded by his worried parents. With his Sundays relieved of the burden of teaching, Bradlaugh spent more time at Bonner's Field--an open forum of radicalism. In 1849, after a

debate with a Mr. J. Savage on the "Inspiration of the Bible," Bradlaugh realized that his own "views were getting very much tinged with Freethought." He sent Packer a copy of Robert Taylor's Diegesis, a skeptical history of Christianity, and Packer reacted in fury by consulting Bradlaugh's father who, in turn, threatened to have the youngster fired from his job as a wharf clerk. Enraged, Bradlaugh left home and work, never to return.[14] With regards to Bradlaugh's religious training, A. O. J. Cockshut's assertion that Bradlaugh "never experienced doubt, and may never have felt in his own heart the pressure of religious questioning"[15] must itself be called into doubt. While Bradlaugh in his later life never expressed public or private doubts about his Secularist beliefs, he most certainly had experienced a religious upbringing. In fact, he had been Packer's prize student when that minister asked the youth to prepare himself for the Bishop's confirmation exercises, thus leading directly to Bradlaugh's "religious questioning."

Bradlaugh's rejection of Christianity, stemming as it did from the experience of hypocritical brutality and a sense of moral outrage, is typical of the accounts of many Victorians who became Secularists.[16] The Daily Telegraph, quoted in the 25 September 1870, issue of the National Reformer believed that "it is quite possible . . . that if a meddlesome clergyman had not improperly interfered with [Bradlaugh] in his youth, he would not now be what he is--a thorn in the sides of the professional teachers of theology," ("Rough Notes on Last Week's Debate," p. 197). The extreme harshness of the situations that influenced the youthful Bradlaugh's

"conversion" goes a long way in explaining the difference between his anger, bitter iconoclasticism and Holyoake's withdrawn, more congenial methods of criticizing religion.

Soon after the final rupture of his family and home life, Bradlaugh threw himself fervently into the radical atheistic (and temperance) cause. He met Austin Holyoake, the younger brother of George, at the printshop of the radical printer, James Watson. Austin introduced Bradlaugh to his older brother--thus uniting the two personalities who were to dominate the Secularist movement for more than fifty years. Bradlaugh's first public success was a lecture delivered in October, 1850, with G. J. Holyoake presiding, concerning "The Past, Present, and Future of Theology," (Tribe, President, pp. 24-26). Although his new career was launched with a flourish, Bradlaugh could not find regular employment. Some admiring Freethinkers offered him the results of a secret subscription taken up for him which shocked him into a realistic appraisal of his poverty. On 17 December 1850, he "took the Queen's shilling" by joining the Seventh Dragoon Guards and was eventually sent to Ireland where he served as an orderly-room clerk (Bradlaugh, "Autobiography," p. 131). While serving in Ireland with this unit, Bradlaugh became a close friend of a shy, intellectual man serving as a teacher in the army, James Thomson (Tribe, President, p. 34). This was the beginning of a friendship that was to last for two decades as Bradlaugh came to shelter the alcoholic Thomson in his home in the early 1860's after Thomson was drummed out of the army for a trivial offense. In the summer of 1853, a small sum left to

him by a deceased aunt purchased Bradlaugh's release from his military obligation and he returned to England, finding jobs with a solicitor in the day (work which helped him considerably in his numerous later trials) and as a clerk at night. He returned to his atheistic writing, lecturing, and debating and in June, 1858, emerged as the dominant figure in the fledgling Secularist movement with his election as President of the London Secular Society, succeeding George Jacob Holyoake (Bradlaugh, "Autobiography," p. 131). The scene was then set for Bradlaugh to be in the public's eye as the single greatest antagonist to organized religion in Victorian England. For Secularists the new decade of the 1860's would begin with the appearance on the newsstands of Bradlaugh's new weekly journal, the National Reformer, on Saturday, 14 April 1860. Not all newsstands carried the Reformer; it was conspicuously absent at train stations because William Henry Smith, who was given to consulting the chained Bibles found in the stations,[17] would not have it sold by his agents.

Bradlaugh's first words in the first issue of the National Reformer set the tone for his particular brand of Secularism: "Let all unite during the year 1860 to compel the clergy to fight or fly. . . . the Bible is the great cord with which the people are bound; cut this, and the mass will be more free to appreciate facts instead of faiths."[18] Bradlaugh, interestingly enough, probably authored an article in this same issue on "Cleanliness" (signed "I"--probably for his pseudonym, "Iconoclast"). In this article, Bradlaugh solemnly supported the wider use of Turkish baths by the masses in

order to alleviate the ravages of disease that scourged the poverty-stricken condemned to live in London. These two articles, one that would come to be recognized as Bradlaugh's usual frontal attack on religion, and one that attempted to offer good counsel concerning a social evil, are typical of Bradlaugh's approach to Secular journalism.

As a popularizer, Bradlaugh was in a class by himself, surpassed only by the phenomenal Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll of America who, incidentally, supported the Holyoake ideal of Secularism. George Bernard Shaw knew Bradlaugh; based on his experience while presiding over a Bradlaugh debate concerning Secularism and Socialism, Shaw wrote that "he really did radiate terrific personal magnetism. You were conscious of it when you sat next to him. He was the most magnetic person I have ever known, and the greatest orator. Henry George and Mrs. Besant were splendid and most convincing orators, but Bradlaugh was the heavy-weight champion of the platform."[19] Another observer of Bradlaugh the orator admits that "he presented a formidable appearance, half-way between a coal-heaver and a pugilist. . . . it was his misfortune to appear perpetually angry." Unlike the suave, sophisticated Ingersoll, Bradlaugh's oratory was "like listening to a pair of very powerful cymbals in a very narrow drawing room."[20] Unfortunately for Secularism, the movement really required more than a heavy-weight propagandist. If Bradlaugh's public appeal to the suffering masses was at all wide, it was certainly not deep. Thus, the same person to whom Secularism was most indebted for its degree of success was

also a significant factor in the eventual failure of the movement, as will be discussed shortly.

On the other hand, Holyoake did not occupy himself with attacking religion. He recognized that other factors were operative in barring the progress of mankind. Holyoake wrote in 1877 that "Atheism . . . really appears to me a little thing compared with the mightier knowledge and secular uses of the universe," (Holyoake, Trial, p. iii). He felt that it was improper to destroy one system without having a ready replacement for it; a void should not be left. On the other hand, Bradlaugh asserted that religion was the source of all evil; the destruction of religion could not wait. He was consumed with the idea of constant warfare between orthodoxy and the Secularist position: "You must do battle with the priesthood until their power is destroyed. They seek to entirely monopolise the right of directing human thought. . . . you must confront it and contest its supremacy. . . . Though I may not claim to lead the great Freethought army, yet I work in the hope and trust that I may be written by-and-by as one of the foremost amongst its rough English skirmishers."[21] In Heresy: Its Utility and Morality, Bradlaugh proclaimed that "men are not good because of their orthodoxy, but in spite of it; their goodness is the outgrowth of their humanity, not their orthodoxy. Heresy is necessary to progress; heresy in religion always precedes an endeavour to political freedom."[22] As noted before, Holyoake and Bradlaugh debated the issue twice in their careers. By 1870, what had been a smoldering disagreement about definitions broke into open hostility. The

minority view was Holyoake's. Even Austin Holyoake, who chaired the 1870 debate, sided with Bradlaugh among numerous other Secularists in the pages of the National Reformer.[23] Regarding this crucial argument, David Tribe remarks that the "aspirations of the . . . contenders were virtually identical. . . . in Holyoake's case it is hard to escape the suspicion that he felt his baby had been kidnapped," (Tribe, 100 Years, p. 35). Bradlaugh, for once, remained publicly gracious to Holyoake while the latter spent years in spasmodic fits of vituperous reaction. He outlived Bradlaugh by fifteen years and, bitter to the end, used them to deride the memory and position of his prodigy and former opponent.

The eventual result of this disagreement was the British Secular Union, founded by Holyoake and G. W. Foote in 1877. They published a short-lived journal; the BSU failed altogether within a matter of a few years. The significance of Bradlaugh's "victory" in this disagreement lies in the fact that Bible-bashing became characteristic of Secularism in the 1870-1880 decade rather than a more moderate and, perhaps, more insightful criticism of the state of society.

A combination of factors in Bradlaugh's personality contributed to both his positive and negative influences on the Secularist movement. He outraged most Victorians by writing on the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the English Church: on Heresy: Its Utility and Morality; A Few Words About the Devil; A New Life of David; on the issue Has Man A Soul?; and on

Supernatural and Rational Morality. In his numerous debates, he invariably introduced the initial assertion found in the principles of the National Secular Society: religion is obstructive of, even hostile to, the achievement of human happiness. This declaration was almost always followed by the assertion that religion was immoral ("If God exists, sin is impossible; if sin exists, God is impossible,") and to prove this he brought forth numerous Biblical examples of the inhuman and unnecessary cruelty of God, or of God's favorite prophets and leaders such as David "who was a thief, a liar, a perjurer, an adulterer, a murderer . . . who was held up by God as an example for others to follow and copy."[24] He delighted in employing some of the more absurd Biblical statements accepted as fact by orthodox Christians. In one instance, he made reference to Moses speaking to amassed warriors from a tent only fifty feet wide--although the staggering number of warriors would have stretched for miles. Miracles were ridiculed from the Secularist platform and press. Austin Holyoake, Charles Watts, G. W. Foote and many others followed their leader in refinements of these tactics. But the key issue revolves around morality; theism is immoral and atheism is not. Although the Secularists who followed Bradlaugh's methods trumpeted this message the length and breadth of Great Britain for four decades, it is difficult to see how an acceptance of this position by the masses would have resulted in materially changing their downtrodden lives.

Bradlaugh's pamphlet, Why Do Men Starve?, is a good example of what can be termed the shallowness of Bradlaugh's approach to a truly agonizing issue.[25] Bradlaugh asked:

> Why is it that human beings are starved to death, in a wealthy country like England, with its palaces, its cathedrals, and its abbeys; with its grand mansions, and luxurious dwellings, with its fine enclosed parks and strictly guarded preserves; with its mills, mines, and factories; with its enormous profits to the capitalists; and with its broad acres and great rent roles to the land holder. . . . Why does it happen that Christian London, with its magnificent houses for God, has so many squalid holes for the poor?

Obviously, these are loaded questions and one that radicals have asked for centuries. They lead one to expect a radical answer and radical solutions. The answer offered by Bradlaugh is this: "Men starve because the great bulk of them are ignorant of the great law of population which controls their existence and determines its happiness or misery. . . . Men starve because the teachers have taught heaven instead of earth, the next world instead of this," (Bradlaugh, Why Do Men Starve?, pp. 203). Chanting the same litany of horrible facts as Marx, Bradlaugh specifically rejected class conflict. The only possible way to help the poor and starving is to teach them that "their welfare depends upon the exercise of a greater control over their passions. . . . It is not by mere struggle of class against class that the poor man's ills can be cured." Demonstrating his confidence in the efficacy of self-help and self-reliance, Bradlaugh continued, writing that "the working classes can alleviate their own sufferings" through co-operative efforts,

"systems of associated industry," which will result in developing "in each individual a sense of dignity and independence," (Bradlaugh, Why Do Men Starve?, p. 6).

Complementing his basically conservative belief in self-help was his distaste for outright revolution. Although he was aware that a revolution could take place (he warned the Lords of this in Reform or Revolution), Bradlaugh was content to use Parliamentary means to effect social reforms. In The Radical Programme he claimed that "Radicalism desires reform, not revolution. . . . Reforms embodied in law and voted after political agitation and serious discussion evidence the delivery of a public verdict in favor of the reform achieved. Revolution only decides who is strongest. . . . Law affirmed reform should decide who is wisest."[26] The radical program proposed by Bradlaugh in the mid-80's centered around sweeping land law reforms: the abolition of primogeniture and life estates, insuring the cheap and easy transfer of title to land, a revaluation of the land for the purpose of imposing a fairer land tax, the imposition of a graduated land tax to fall heaviest on large landowners, compulsory cultivation of all arable land not being used for "some public or reasonable private purpose of utility and enjoyment," help for eventual "peasant proprietorship" and insuring such tenants the benefits of improvements on the land by them, and the abolition of the preferential rights of the landlord over other creditors (Bradlaugh, Radical Programme, p. 10). In these proposals can be perceived Bradlaugh's faithful watchword: self-help. If the poor could only have access to the land now under

the profligate stewardship of the nobility and the great landowners, they would be able to lift themselves to new levels of productivity and attain the dignity that is rightfully theirs. Only fifteen years from the twentieth century and a long seventy-five years after the Industrial Revolution had forever changed the complexity of English life, Bradlaugh's "radical" program seems designed for a pastoral utopia and not a troubled industrial giant. Bradlaugh's pamphlet, The Radical Programme, concludes with a warning to his fellow radicals who should "check and avoid the tendency to look to Government to provide food and work for the people. . . . Radicals should leave as little as possible to Government in the way of internal interference with the ordinary affairs of life," (p. 14).

The year before he published the previous pamphlet, Bradlaugh had written Some Objections to Socialism.[27] Betraying a distinct sense of xenophobia, Bradlaugh remarked of German emigrants living in Great Britain who approached British problems as if they were those of their native country. These "Scientific Socialists--mostly middle class men--declare their intense hatred for the bourgeoisie, and affirm that the Social State they desire to create can only be established on the ruins of the present society, by a revolution which they say must come in any event, but which they strive to accelerate," (Bradlaugh, Some Objections, p. 100). He extolled the virtues of the existing co-operative societies, with annual sales of £750,000, £2,500,000 of stock-in-trade, £5,250,000 in working capital and annual profits to more than half a million members of £1,500,000 (roughly £3 "profit" annually for each member).

He charged that "we object that the organization of all industry under state control must paralyse industrial energy and discourage and neutralize individual effort." Furthermore, it would be necessary, after a successful socialist effort in a civil war, to effect a "mental revolution . . . to expunge the possessive pronoun 'my.'" In a Socialist state "there would be no inducement to thrift, no encouragement to individual saving, no protection for individual accumulation, no check upon, no discouragement to waste." Bradlaugh worried that under such a government the free expression of individual opinion and the free exercise of choice would suffer grievously. Would the State undertake to supply halls to its opponents and print the books of its adversaries? Who would determine "the selection of each individual for the pursuit, profession, or handicraft for which he is fittest," (Bradlaugh, Some Objections, p. 101). Running throughout Bradlaugh's numerous objections to Socialism is the theme that the self-reliant individual would become a thing of the past. The individual would become a mere ward of the State, powerless to improve his status and prospects in life through his own initiative. Bradlaugh appears to have accepted without serious objection the capitalistic ethic of the profit motive. While being cognizant of the pitiful human results of industrial capitalism which haunted the streets and alleys of late Victorian London (see Why Do Men Starve? and "The City of Dreadful Night"), like many liberal Victorians, he did not seem willing or capable of tracing the malaise to its true source: laissez-faire capitalism. If Bradlaugh reflected a concerned Victorian's arguments against

the collectivist ideals of Socialism, he was incapable of perceiving that capitalism could just as easily crush the individual worker and that a monopoly which existed solely for its accumulated profits likewise ignored its human components.

Thus, Bradlaugh's strident criticism that religion was the source of the obstacles to the happiness of Victorian Englishmen and his conservatism regarding social and political change produced a curious phenomenon. On the surface, Bradlaugh did truly speak to the apparent needs of his Secularist audiences; that is, their emotional need to lambast the Established Church, specifically, and all religion, in general, was admirably met by Bradlaugh's Secularist iconoclasticism. Delivering hundreds of lectures each year and making numerous appearances as a debater, writing scores of pamphlets and hundreds of articles for the National Reformer, no other free-thought figure in England could claim such wide exposure as Bradlaugh. In this respect, it cannot be denied that he was literally the champion of the liberty that Secularism sought. On the other hand, his basic conservatism (Victorian liberalism) in matters not related to the crusade against religion eventually isolated Bradlaugh from that deeper groundswell of popular discontent as the Victorian period reached its last decade. If Charles Bradlaugh had not become a fixture within the Secularist movement, if his admirably strong personality had not been so dominant in a group apparently so appreciative of self-reliance, the movement may have been able to keep in step with the times. But this was not to be. Even as its earlier hopes were realized with the repeal of blasphemy laws, provisions for secular

education, the assurance of a free press, and the declining influence of the churches, Secularism and Bradlaugh lost touch with the changing social and economic realities of late Victorian England. The movement ultimately proved to be no stronger than its leader and he proved to be, paradoxically, both its strongest and weakest member. While Bradlaugh's anti-religious diatribes were able to hold the attention of the sympathetic masses for a while, they simply did not suffice as an adequate main plank in a Secularist platform. With Holyoake pouting and licking his wounded ego for twenty-odd years, Secularism roared off on a tangent that led it to a dead end. Holyoake was left with the task of chronicling the history of the movement which had not heeded his good advice to attend to material improvements first.

Holyoake and Bradlaugh led a total membership of the various Secular Societies which probably never rose above the figure of 6,000 at any one period--a figure that was attained before the mid-1880's (Royle, p. 57). The weekly sales figures of the National Reformer fluctuated between 3,000-3,500 copies--curiously enough the same figures held true for Holyoake's old Reasoner in its heyday. There were very few women in the Secularist movement although leading Secularists strongly advocated the liberation of women as a goal of the movement. Women members were sought since Secularist leaders were very aware of the importance of the united family unit in the eyes of the public and as a preserving factor for Secularist beliefs (Budd, "Humanist Movement," pp. 84-85). Undoubtedly, more women speaking publicly in the behalf of the Secularist cause would have

been a genuine "public relations" coup for the movement, as noted in the National Reformer of 7 January 1872 (p. 10) and 23 May 1875 (p. 324). It was also believed that the membership of both parents in the movement would reduce the tensions in the home regarding the "method of training children" and that the presence of women at Secular meetings would "make the standards of speeches higher in ordinary discussions."[28] The most conspicuous women in the movement were Annie Besant, who was very active for a ten year period from 1875-1885, and Bradlaugh's daughters, Hypatia and Charlotte.

Among the various occupations the "labour aristocracy," small tradesmen, the "mechanical classes," artisans and skilled workmen and "intelligent mechanics" constituted the bulk of the movement's membership. Royle makes an estimate that includes the following occupations and their percentages: 10% were men of the higher social classes, 30% were newsagents, inn-keepers, managers of temperance hotels and shopkeepers, 25% were "artisans,"--cobblers, tailors, joiners, plumbers, hatters, hairdressers and so forth, and the semi-skilled and unskilled such as warehousemen and weavers made up the balance, 35% (Campbell, p. 52). What is lost in these raw figures is the fact that the great majority of those who were Secularists were relatively educated people who had, like Bradlaugh and Holyoake, pulled themselves up educationally and economically. They were people who readily accepted the conventional Victorian belief in the inherent nobility and dignity of hard work; the Secularist admonition to help oneself found a very receptive audience in this group. Furthermore, a certain independence of spirit must have

prevailed among people who accepted Secularism, for their beliefs were certainly not congruent with those of many of their contemporaries. While a Secularist may have easily fit into the economic life of a Victorian city or town, his dogmatic atheism still remained repugnant to the vast majority of orthodox Victorians. Still, the movement found its greatest support in this same working class, a class acknowledged by the famous 1851 Census Report to be "unconscious Secularists" because of its infidel laxity on Sundays. A distinction might be made here between the anti-theistic beliefs of the hard core of Secularist believers and the more selective anti-religious tendencies of sympathizers. Anti-religious attitudes and activities did not necessarily reflect a rejection of God but simply a reaction to the strictures of the churches on Sunday activities involving "pleasure." While Secularists also strongly reacted against this (it was one of their strong selling points, in fact), they generally rejected the object of religion's worship as well.

Further characteristics of the movement's membership include the fact that most Secularists usually did not become active members of the movement until middle age even though they may have experienced severe doubts about religious orthodoxy in their youth. Most Secularists had their origins in London, primarily the eastern end of the city; the second largest group originated in the Yorkshire industrial towns. Other fairly well-defined groups could be found in the small villages and towns of the Northumberland and Durham coalfields and a smaller group from the South Wales cornfields area. Two rather small but extremely active groups were based in Leicester

and Birmingham. Of the small shopkeepers mentioned earlier, it is important that a significant proportion of that group were printers or booksellers who specialized in radical literature (Budd, "Humanist Movement," pp. 168-71). Occupations related to the press have had a long history of radicalism; Secularism was not different in this respect. Furthermore, the largest number of people who became Secularists came from Catholic or other Nonconformist religions. The antipathy of their former religions to Anglicanism was a source of support for Secular criticism of the Established Church's power in Victorian society.[29] A striking number of influential Secularists had fathers who were clergymen or had clergymen in their immediate family, or had been clergymen themselves--a situation remarkably similar to that of the Newman brothers. John Watts, Charles Watts, and Dr. Aveling were all sons of clergymen. Secularists who were former clergymen included Joseph Barker, the erstwhile co-editor of the National Reformer, Joseph Symes, Joseph McCabe, the biographer of George Jacob Holyoake, and John Lloyd, secretary of the Leicester Secular Society. Annie Besant was once married to a clergyman, the brother of Walter Besant, the novelist. H. Percy Ward had prepared for the ministry. G. J. Holyoake had been a sort of itinerant preacher in his early Birmingham days and Charles Bradlaugh was once a Sunday school teacher. A historian of Secularism wrote that the movement's resemblance to a religion in this matter was "hardly an asset to it," (McGee, p. 92). The significance of the phenomenon is two-fold. Primarily it can be inferred that a complete rejection of one's past beliefs, education, and perhaps

family could not be based on trivial reasons. The examples of the personal problems encountered by such Victorians "heretics" as Arthur Clough, James Anthony Froude, and Francis Newman as well as numerous literary treatments of the experience of the loss of faith all lead to the conclusion that the process was a wrenching experience. Much meditation and self-questioning had to go into the process. Secondly, such infidels could be depended on to know their Scripture; a generally higher level of education than the public's norm can also be inferred. Secularists were thus well prepared to meet the arguments of their opponents although the clashes between infidels and the orthodox seldom reached substantive conclusions. In fact, Secularist familiarity with their opponent's field quite often led to the Secularist version of counting angels on the head of a pin--empty exercises which greatly amused the audiences but did little to help them materially. What is important, then, is that Secularists were very deeply involved in the psychologically stressful problem associated with the death of God and the loss of faith in the nineteenth century. Whereas the more sensitive Victorians, like Clough, lived anguished lives, Secularists overcame their personal and psychological compunctions about the loss of faith to a greater degree than their more illustrious contemporaries. Secularists lost their faith like their famous figures of the same day but a void did not remain. The social organization of the Secularist movement may have been the factor which provided its members with a degree of social security and acceptance that non-Secularist heretics lacked. There were the weekly lectures and

discussion groups as well as teas, reading groups, dances and other similar social functions. Individual Secularists were thus provided with the means to avoid the powerful social ostracism that many other infidels suffered. In addition to a fairly fast-paced social calendar, a Secularist could experience all the comforts of a "quasi-religion"--Sunday school lectures on the Providence of Science, Choral groups, and Secular rituals for namings of infants, marriages and funerals. A Secular Almanac which correlated the calendar to the birthdays or important dates of heretical martyrs and "saints" could take the Secularist through his year. Thus, it may be fairly said that Secularists devised a religion of their very own, and all the evidence points in that direction, but they nevertheless appeared to relish their heretical social position vis-a-vis orthodox society.

Although Secularism after the 1870 Bradlaugh-Holyoake debate was marked by their divergent views regarding the merits of atheism, it is possible to identify the numerous values, aims and beliefs that the members of the Secular movement held in common. Holyoake very early expressed the concern that the movement not become identified as immoral by the general British public. Even though the non-Secularist public viewed the movement as a purveyor of licentiousness, especially after the Bradlaugh-Besant "scandal" and trial involving birth control education, Holyoake and Bradlaugh were in themselves models of Victorian morality, that is, if the militantly atheistic posture of Bradlaugh is excepted. This general moral conventionality carried over into Secularist political theory

regarding Republicanism. While it is true that Bradlaugh never tired of calling for a Republican form of government to follow what he called the "impeachment of the House of Brunswick," it must be noted that this "radical" stance was "almost exclusively non-revolutionary," (Royle, p. 64). Bradlaugh really preferred to wait patiently for the death of Victoria and then, in effect, "pay off" her family to depart the British political scene. He pointed out that the British monarchy reigned only by the invitation of Parliament which could theoretically decide against having a monarch at all.[30] Always "excepting the present Monarch," Bradlaugh's criticisms of the House of Brunswick centered on the past misdeeds of the Hanoverian kings. With biting irony, he delighted to point out that the only material contributions made by George III in his long reign were several buttons made by the king in 1770. "His son, afterwards George IV, made a shoebuckle." Delicately avoiding an outright condemnation of Victoria (though Albert, when alive, was a prime target), Bradlaugh concluded that "no other useful product has resulted directly from the efforts of any male of the family," (Bradlaugh, Impeachment, p. 43). As the Secularists waited for Victoria to die, and were "constitutional and evolutionary when British political life was discussed, they became revolutionary and conspiratorial when they turned toward foreign policy," (Eros, p. 116). Bradlaugh and Holyoake both knew and admired Mazzini and supported his revolutionary efforts in Italy. The committee for recruiting Garibaldi's legion was headquartered in Holyoake's Freethought Institute in Fleet Street in 1860-61, and Bradlaugh was involved in some rather

shady gun-running speculative ventures. The movement reached a sort of moral low point, especially in Holyoake's opinion, when it was found that bombs which had passed through his hands had been instrumental in the deaths of innocent Parisians in the 1857 Orsini bomb outrage. Despite this horrible malfunction of Secularist aims, Holyoake apparently maintained his belief, in principle, in the justice of tyrannicide (Eros, pp. 115-16).

Secularist Republicanism stemmed from a general denial of the claims of authority, especially the ecclesiastical variety which supported the church-state marriage in Victorian England. The only "authority" that deserved trust in their opinion was that of the scientist or the scholar (Budd, "Humanist Movement," p. 5). Yet even this claim can be qualified as Secularists were selective in accepting scientific claims of truth and scholarship. If scientific claims or scholarship did not accord with atheistic principles, then, ipso facto, they were wrong and rejected. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Holyoake felt intellectually comfortable with the science of phrenology as expounded by George Combe. Annie Besant passed on to a belief in scientism and reincarnation, views which were in their embryonic pantheistic stages even in her Secularist years with the National Reformer. The pages of the newspaper were regularly filled with the squabbles of writers and readers who followed the careers of the popularizers of nineteenth century science.

In addition to their belief in science as providential, the Secularists held a deep and genuine belief that morality is instrumental in affecting behavior, which should be motivated by a

"generally pragmatic and utilitarian ethic," (Butt, "Humanist Movement," p. 5). Writing in the National Reformer, Charles Watts asserted that

> the relation of Secularism to morality is definite. Secularism regards that act moral which produces the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number, with the least injury to the few. This view of morality is justified by a knowledge of two important principles--namely, the doctrine of circumstances, and the doctrine that general utility should be the object of all our endeavors. . . . The doctrine of circumstances teaches us the mutual relations of man and society, indicating how they affect and are affected by each other. The doctrine of utility shows that those relations may be improved by the proper encouragement of beneficial influences. The scientific definition of any particular object of our contemplation is, that it is the sum of all the causes which produced it. If one of the causes . . . had been deducted, or if additional influence had been added, the result then would have differed . . . in precise proportion to the efficacy of the cause which had been added or withdrawn. Now Secularism regards human nature in this harmonious light. Man is as much the consequences of all the causes and circumstances which have affected him and his development, previous to, and since his birth, as any one tree or mountain. . . . Secularism may be designated the science of human cultivation.

> The problem that it sets to itself with regard to man is to bring him from the condition of the wild flower to that of the garden flower.[31]

The debt to Bentham and Mill is manifestly obvious in the foregoing. Consequently, Secularist social and moral theories, utilitarian as they were, did not stand in the way of that form of Victorian liberalism which unquestioningly accepted laissez-faire economics. While Social Darwinism was accepted, the masses were not enjoying "the greatest amount of happiness." Obviously a tension exists between Darwin's theories of survival and the utilitarian greatest happiness for the greatest number theory which the Secularists never recognized. The former implies a fierce, brutally competitive struggle for survival while the latter involves a cool, rational approach to a problem and the consequent application of an answer for the general good.

In acknowledging this "predominance of Reason" the Secularist admitted that "the passions, feelings, and instincts, all forms of consciousness other than the rational, are inferior, not to be trusted and ought to be controlled by the cognitive elements," (Nelson, p. 76). The literary implications of this bias are significant. Holyoake's first target--not unexpectedly, was the Bible--the single greatest influential source of Western literature. He demanded that reason be given preference over faith (Trial, p. 152). Of course, Holyoake was not writing with the literary merits and significance of the Bible in mind. As Secularists

admired and employed Utilitarian principles in their polemical writings, it should not be surprising that a man like Bradlaugh, as well read as he was, nevertheless thought disparagingly of literary pursuits. Generally, those who shared Utilitarian values felt that literature possessed no practical utility (Altick, p. 133). Speaking of the function of the poet, a nineteenth century "mechanic" asserted that the poet's "principal object . . . is to excite intense feeling, to interest his readers warmly; and to produce this effect, there is no degree of exaggeration that poets will not sometimes practice. Exaggeration, let it ever be so much disguised, is disregard of truth, and a disregard of truth is always mischievous."[32] It should be remembered that Holyoake took truth for authority rather than authority for truth. Eventually, however, a modification of strict Utilitarian views of literature did occur later in the Victorian period (Altick, p. 136). Such a modification is reflected in the pages of the National Reformer--technically crude poetry for the most part, often revolutionary in spirit (following the example of the Secularists' favorite poet, Shelley), poetry that was intended to enlighten and uplift the suffering masses. The Secularist acceptance of materialism (Holyoake's "naturalism") and their modified, scientific pantheism are reflected in those poems which regard the wonders of nature from the Secularist point of view. The primary aim of the poetry published in the National Reformer was certainly and unashamedly didactic; the poetry existed in order to create or assist the reader's desire for

self-improvement. But a more detailed discussion of the literature of Secularism must be reserved for later chapters.

Having discussed the origins and general beliefs of the Secularists, attention should now be given to Secularism after it reached its peak of public acceptance in the early 1880's and began its decline into obscurity. It is tempting to find a simplistic answer to the question of the failure of Secularism in the person of Charles Bradlaugh. That is, a thorough reading of his pubilc utterances and numerous pamphlets reveals that Bradlaugh was the sort of man who could attract and hold a hard core of Secularist believers but who would simultaneously infuriate and, more significantly, alienate a much larger number of Victorians who might have been inclined to be sympathetic to a good many of his social criticisms. One almost wants to say that Secularism lived and died with Bradlaugh, following his election to the presidency of the London Secular Society in 1858. Certainly, the sway he held over the largest portion of the movement from 1866, the year of his election as president of the National Secular Society, until his death in 1891 from Bright's disease was unmatched by any other individual. His ideas and methods became those of the NSS and the National Reformer. Opposition might on occasion arise, as it did in 1877 when Holyoake and Foote started the splinter British Secular Union, but Holyoake, a weak personality, simply could not command a following as could Charles Bradlaugh.

Undoubtedly the single greatest threat to the continued viability of Secularism was the rise of Fabian Socialism.

Edward Royle specifies 20 April 1884, as the decisive turning point in the destiny of Secularism for it was then that Bradlaugh first debated Henry M. Hyndman, the founder of the Social Democratic Federation, on "Will Socialism Benefit the English People?" (Royle, pp. 77-78). The result was that similar discussions were held in the several local Secular societies which thus disseminated socialist theories to a receptive audience. While, in theory, Secularism was not necessarily antagonistic to Socialism, before long Socialism was viewed as an alternative to and successor of Secularism by influential Secularists such as Annie Besant and Dr. Edward B. Aveling. Besant's defection was the single most damaging loss as she had served for ten years as Bradlaugh's sub-editor on the Reformer and was a fellow martyr in the birth control issue; her stature in the movement was surpassed only by that of Bradlaugh's at the time she took up the new cause of Socialism. Later, the once radical Bradlaugh supported the 1888 Employer's Liability Bill, opposed by important Trade Unionists, and he opposed the Eight Hour reform agitation, which was strongly supported by the Trade Unionists. Thus, "at the height of his powers, Bradlaugh . . . . had become out of date, and as much as Secularism was built around his leadership, it was too falling behind the times," (Royle, p. 78). These same years were marked by a severe depression and the cause of state socialism was rapidly becoming attractive to radical Victorians, including many Secularists (Budd, "Humanist Movement," pp. 119-20). The half-century old ideal of self-help, basic to Secularist thought, came to be questioned as the issue of the primacy of the individual's

needs came into open conflict with the needs of society at large. Secularists like Bradlaugh, on the whole self-taught and self-made people, were almost "temperamentally opposed to Socialism['s] large scale governmental intervention to improve the conditions of life," (Campbell, p. 80). The world was changing; Bradlaugh was not and his cherished beliefs came to appear even more conservative as time passed. From the standpoint of economics, Royle finds that the great division is found precisely at the point between "those who attacked the landlords but accepted the private enterprise capitalism of the middle classes, and those who did not bother to distinguish between industrial capitalism and landlordism." Thus, an entire generation of Secularists had matured in the depressed years as industrial capitalism expanded, "who were not so confident as the old leaders that individualism and self-help were quite the virtues that they may have been in mid-Victorian England," (Royle, p. 77). Secularist criticism of Victorian life centered almost exclusively around the pernicious influence of religion. Secularist suggestions to remedy social and economic inequities invariably referred to land reform. Religion and monarchy were equal partners, according to the Secularists, in making "pheasants more valuable than peasants." With this fixation on land reform and religion, a more comprehensive and sophisticated Secularist socio-economic criticism did not develop. Otherwise, Secularists desired the working classes to participate in the potential bounty that capitalism could offer. Theoretically, self-help, and not government interference, could lead the individual to the promised land of economic security and a measure of dignity

in a capitalist economy. Land was seen as a "fixed and limited" commodity while "capital was a variable and unlimited asset," (Tribe, 100 Years, p. 93). Socialists saw no essential difference between the two. Thus, the Secularist's program became petrified in the face of changing realities that the movement did not understand.

Related to the threat posed by Socialism was Bradlaugh's reputation as a Bible-basher and his continued practice of such acerbic polemics until his death. He was, in effect, an "eliminationist" as a radical atheist. He firmly believed that new social programs and beliefs could not become operative until previous evils (religious beliefs) had been entirely exterminated (Campbell, p. 38). The limitations of the Secularist position are manifestly obvious and the Fabians were quick to attack, charging that the Secularist approach obscured pressing social evils while diverting valuable time and energy into peripheral issues involving religion (Budd, "Loss," p. 125). Bradlaugh, by then a captive of his deepest beliefs, really had no adequate answer to the charge.

Over the years, Holyoake and Bradlaugh spent much energy insuring that Secularism could not be charged with the teaching or the practice of immorality. All of these efforts were inadvertently negated during the prolonged "scandal" in 1877 involving the publication of an early Malthusian pamphlet by an American physician, Dr. Charles Knowlton's Fruits of Philosophy. In December, 1876, a bookseller in Bristol named Cooke was arrested for selling "obscene literature," in fact, the Knowlton pamphlet which had been published originally in 1833. Cooke had indiscretely placed lewd pictures

between the harmless pages of the pamphlet in order to boost sales; the obscenity charge thus had a basis in fact. The Secularists became involved because Charles Watts, of the National Reformer staff, owned the plates to the pamphlet as well as the publications that Cooke had been selling even though he had never read the pamphlet. Watts had purchased the plates from the widow of the old radical Chartist printer, James Watson. After going to Bristol to see what could be done, Watts was arrested on 8 January 1877. He refused to defend "the vile purposes to which the pamphlet had been applied, and the indecent associations" connected with it. He did not feel that the issue of press freedom was involved. Watts could not afford the defense costs of £200 and appealed for help in an article in the National Reformer.[33] Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant immediately recognized the propaganda value of Watts' arrest and decided to make it a test case in the Secularist campaign for freedom of the press and birth control education. Watts' wife persuaded him to plead guilty, an action which infuriated Bradlaugh. Bradlaugh's opinion, which was ultimately justified, was that the inserted obscene prints were not the property of Watts and, as the publisher, he should not plead guilty. Bradlaugh and Annie Besant then formed the Freethought Publishing Company in order to initiate a full scale attack on the Establishment, selling more than 133,000 copies of the pamphlet. They were arrested for selling copies to plain clothes detectives and were tried in June, 1877. They were found guilty, appealed the verdict, and won the appeal on a technicality in February, 1878 (Nelson, pp. 126-28).

In reality, Bradlaugh perceived that population growth was, indeed, outpacing food supply and that "some checks must therefore exercise control over population."[34] Bradlaugh asserted that, in fact, "the checks now exercised are semi-starvation and preventible disease." The enormous infant mortality rate among the poor is one of the more obvious and painful "methods" of keeping down the population. Instead, "the checks that ought to control population are scientific, and it is these which we advocate. We think it more moral to prevent the conception of children, than, after they are born, to murder them by want of food, air, and clothing. . . . we consider it a crime to bring into the world human beings doomed to misery or to premature death," (Bradlaugh and Besant, "Publisher's Preface," National Reformer, 25 March 1877, p. 178). Bradlaugh's Secularist neo-Malthusianism was, appropriately, based on the use of science to control the "consequences" that influence life in a Darwinian world of competition for survival. While Bradlaugh was an intense partisan for the self-help ethic, he also firmly believed that the individual could be assisted scientifically in just such instances as the practice of birth control to help himself.

While Bradlaugh and Besant were successful in bringing both the issues of press freedom and the necessity of population control before the staid Victorian public, the secondary recriminations were drawn out and damaging to the public image of the Secularist movement. For the next decade, Bradlaugh's political enemies and even opponents within the movement attacked neo-Malthusianism as

"sexual utilitarianism" and labelled the movement the "Erotic School of Freethought." It was claimed that Bradlaugh believed that chastity was unnatural and contraception was "a program of scientific sterility."[35] Given the moral tightrope that Secularists balanced themselves on daily in the eyes of the public, these charges, while being patently absurd, did not fail to damage their target. Bradlaugh's inclination were basically the correct ones: freedom of the press and birth control education were important issues. For his strong stand in the Knowlton affair, he must be given all due credit. But in spite of the short and long term positive results of his trials in this matter, his own reputation as an iconoclast of the first order gave his reactionary, orthodox opponents the opportunity they badly needed to associate Bradlaugh and Secularism with the Victorian social taboo of sexual impropriety. A measure of the wrath that Bradlaugh and Annie Besant faced is found in the fact that, because of her public position on this most sensitive issue, Mrs. Besant lost her two children to her estranged husband, who was a minister, even though her earlier conversion to "infidelity" had not been considered by the courts sufficient grounds for such action. Thus, much of the effort to have Secularism dissociated from imputations of immorality were entirely negated by the Knowlton affair. While the scandal was not, in itself, the deciding factor in the eventual decline of Secularism, it was a contributing factor of considerable importance.

The Knowlton affair was not quite the last hurrah for Charles Bradlaugh, however. After 1868, he was a radical candidate

in every general election for Parliament, running for the position of Member for Northampton. He lost the early campaigns, though by decreasing margins each time. Finally, the voters of Northampton returned Bradlaugh as their Member in 1880. Although Bradlaugh was seated and voted for ninety-one days in the 1880 session of Parliament, five more elections and eight court cases were required before he was admitted permanently in 1886. The opposition to Bradlaugh's being admitted to Parliament was led by Randolph Churchill and A. J. Balfour, who argued that Bradlaugh must swear the oath as did other Members. Bradlaugh refused to do so but was willing to "affirm"--allowed for Quakers but not for atheists (McGee, p. 10). Eventually, Bradlaugh won his case but not before he was at one time physically carried from Westminster by ten policemen (this, incidentally, was the last time that Bradlaugh's estranged friend, James Thomson, saw him before Thomson's death; the sickly poet had to be restrained from charging the police to help his old friend who was really capable of handling himself) and later spent a night in the Clock Tower (Nelson, pp. 132-34). During the period of the late 1870's until his successful admittance to Parliament in 1886, Bradlaugh's activities in behalf of Secularism suffered due to his electioneering efforts. He did try to involve as few of his Secularist anti-religious principles in his campaigns as possible, though the oath question actually revolved around the point of whether a God existed for whom an oath would be eternally binding. After Bradlaugh's successful entry into Parliament the size of his Secularist following began to diminish as even more of his energies were

diverted from strict application to the Secularist cause (Budd, "Humanist Movement," p. 96). As an M.P., Bradlaugh eventually took up the cause of India's independence, becoming known as the "Member for India." At his funeral in 1891, a young Indian living and studying in London was in attendance; his name was Mohandas Ghandi.

During Bradlaugh's tenure in Parliament, his National Reformer changed from its status of being a rather obscure, generally freethought journal to that of a nationally recognized organ of the "ultra-radical" cause (Royle, p. 57). But this "ultra-radical" tag is not a proper evaluation of the entire movement in the 1880's. Its essentially conservative social program had been exposed completely; the real radicals were joining the cause of Socialism. Susan Budd points out that it is in the nature of minority movements such as Secularism to lose their momentum as the members become socially tolerated. The early bonds that unite such movements disintegrate as the central issues are changed through legislative action (Budd, "Humanist Movement," p. 93). With Bradlaugh in Parliament the leading figure of Secularism had achieved a degree of public acceptance unknown before among the personalities of the movement. While it was a personal triumph for Bradlaugh regarding the oath issue, Secularism's leading public figure naturally came to assume an aura of respectability that none of his followers could achieve. All of these external factors combined to be operative in the movement's eventual demise.

In addition, certain "internal" factors contributed to the decline of the movement. In the final analysis, the constant

emphasis on iconoclastic criticism came to fall on unresponsive ears outside the immediate core of the movement. It is not an accident that, ironically, Secularism and the power of the churches declined together. A public indifferent to religious claims in temporal affairs could as easily disregard the fanatical antagonists to those religious claims. Thus, whatever degree of success that can be attributed to Secularism in reducing the influences of the churches can also be viewed as a contributing factor in its own decline. Like Bradlaugh, the movement as a whole paradoxically suffered from its own success.

Bradlaugh's attacks on the Bible, theology and theism as obstacles to the achievement of human happiness were based on sincere appeals to public morality and one's conscience. But changes could be made in morality and consciences in a secular world without necessarily resulting in material changes. For instance, Bradlaugh asserted that the disestablishment and disendowment of the English Church was a "political necessity."[36] No distinctions should be made between the religious beliefs of men nor should any group of people enjoy exclusive privileges solely because of their membership in a particular church (Disestablishment, p. 5). The government should be concerned, instead, with providing the natural wisdom necessary to promote national happiness and should not be in the "business" of religion at all (Disestablishment, p. 7). Bradlaugh's assertions, which contain a measure of truth that some Victorians were sympathetic to, did not register clearly with a public that was generally indifferent to the abstraction of personal

religious freedom. In "A Few Words about the Devil," Bradlaugh came close to exploiting a potentially powerful social issue: the fantastic cost of maintaining religion. He wrote that "our Devil ought to be the best: it costs the most. No other religion besides our own can boast the array of Popes, Bishops, Conferences, Rectors, Incumbents, and paid preachers of various titles."[37] But Bradlaugh did not linger on the material deficiencies which result for the masses because of their financial support of a huge religious caste. Instead, he shifted his strongest attack to a criticism of the abstraction of the existence of an omniscient and omnipotent God "who puts us into this world without our volition, leaves us to struggle through it as we can, unequally pitted against an almost omnipotent and supersubtile Devil, and then, if we fail, finally drops us out of this world into Hell-fire . . . . our crime being that we have not succeeded where success was rendered impossible," ("A Few Words," pp. 12-13). In a debate with the Rev. A. J. Harrison over the issue of "Secularism as a System of Truth and Morality," Bradlaugh's main contention was that "human improvement and happiness cannot be effectively promoted without civil and religious liberty."[38] It is this very emphasis--that improvements in material prosperity and human well-being would result from the immediate destruction of religion--which was the weakest link in Bradlaugh's propaganda efforts. The masses were basically "areligious." Bradlaugh never succeeded in convincing them that their socio-economic conditions were the result of the theological milieu which existed in England. While the Established Church had its

problems with charges of practicing benevolent ignorance and of being spiritually bankrupt while materially prosperous, the Church was not perceived by most Victorians as a force overtly hostile to the well-being of the people. Thus, Bradlaugh's loudest objections fell on deaf ears.

Bradlaugh's most often iterated views dealt not with concrete social realities but had more to do with abstract issues. In addressing issues involving the existence of good and evil, Bradlaugh was attacking orthodoxy in the terms of that orthodoxy. Accordingly, valuable energy was wasted in too much abstract shadow boxing. Concrete, realistic, workable programs were needed; Socialism eventually came to supply the demand as Secularism could not.

It yet remains to evaluate the contributions that Secularism made in the life of Victorian England. Generally Holyoake and Bradlaugh succeeded in uniting the fragmented Owenites and Chartists and "leading them under the flag of freethought away from the sectarian and utopian socialism of Owen and the hopeless isolation of Chartism towards a co-operation with the middle-class radicals. Their aim was the democritization of English politics and their final goal was a republic. But on the way they worked for cooperation, suffrage and legislative reform alongside radicals like Bright and Mill," (Campbell, pp. 114-15). With Secularists in the forefront of the general hostility to religion, especially to the Established Church in England and Ireland, the churches found themselves in a weakened position after the deterioration of

their importance in politics, education, and the social sphere. As religious skepticism increased due to the inroads made by the Higher Criticism and the rationalistic materialism of Secularists and other Freethinkers many churches changed their creeds to become more "earth-centered and humanitarian." Secularists were successful in alleviating somewhat the horrors of Victorian poverty through benevolent aid missions and led the fight to have Sunday restrictions against open museums, libraries, art galleries, and music in parks changed to allow for the public's pleasure and enjoyment (McGee, pp. 94-95). The churches became less likely to throw their weight into legal proceedings involving blasphemy trials--even as such trials became more rare (Nelson, p. 139). In the midst of the decade under consideration, 1870-1880, freethinkers such as Leslie Stephen, John Morley and John Knowles, due partially to Secularist contributions to the intellectual mileau, were better able to discuss freely the merits of agnosticism and other popular but radical subjects in their journals which enjoyed great popularity--Fraser's Magazine, Cornhill Magazine, Fortnightly Review and the Nineteenth Century (Nelson, p. 236). Because of Bradlaugh's extended prominence in the public's eye due to numerous court battles, within one generation the following situations developed: the surety that newspapers had to pay in advance of possible blasphemy charges was abolished, the rights of atheists to equal protection under the law was recognized (prior to this, atheists could not, as in Holyoake's pitiful case, bring civil or criminal charges against a defendant; Bradlaugh often lost money to unscrupulous people because of this liability),

and atheists could sit in Parliament.[39] Earlier, Austin Holyoake had suffered the dubious distinction of being the last man to be served an Exchequer Writ for selling an unstamped newspaper, in 1855. These achievements should not be taken lightly. Freethinkers in Britain at the turn of the Eighteenth century, despite Paine's influence elsewhere, were simply not tolerated. Victorian orthodoxy, now recognized to have been more of a facade than a genuine belief, still had to be challenged on its own ground. It yielded grudgingly but could not stem the tide of advanced opinion that eventually engulfed the smugness that characterized it. Pippa's "God's in his heaven; all's right with the world" and similar platitudes could not withstand the withering criticism that Secularists fired. Along with the Secularists, men came to a new perception of self--one that was grounded in a belief for the potential for goodness and progress that existed for those who would try to make a better life for themselves here and now. The idea that the status quo must be maintained, impoverished as it might be, in order to lay up grace for a future life became an anachronism. Thus, the single most powerful weapon in the church's obsolete arsenal, fear of hell and eternal damnation, was considerably blunted.

The Secularists may not have been successful in producing a long catalogue of tangible alterations in the social fabric and legal codes of Victorian England. The real changes they produced were not so apparent, even though we of today have inherited these changes. These changes lay deeper than a social or intellectual history can delve, for they existed within the self of each

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"enlightened" Secularist and the masses of sympathizers. Victorian England was changed in this way and for this the Secularists must receive the recognition long unpaid to them. The debt to the Secularists owed by Victorian artists may never be fully understood. In order to investigate the inner selves of Secularists, it will be necessary to look at their literary production as found in the National Reformer during the 1870-1880 decade, a task reserved for the next chapter.

FOOTNOTES

[1]John Eros, "The Rise of Organized Freethought in Mid-Victorian England," The Sociological Review (July, 1954), p. 108. (After the first reference, following citations will be found inserted parenthetically in the text).

[2]"George Jacob Holyoake," Dictionary of National Biography (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1912), 2nd Supplement, II, p. 292.

[3]George Jacob Holyoake, Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906), pp. 254-55.

[4]Edward Royle, Radical Politics, 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief (London: Longman, 1971), p. 51.

[5]John Edwin McGee, A History of the British Secular Movement (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1948), p. 14. McGee's brief history of Secularism, a book extremely difficult to locate even in this country, was for many years the only book that dealt strictly with Secularism rather than the more inclusive fields of rationalism or Freethought. While McGee was a proselyte for Freethought, the book is a generally well balanced exposition of the history of the movement, the leading and minor figures, and the issues which concerned them. Although it is an important source for general information, like all other secondary sources cited in this

study, it makes no claim to deal with the literary aspects and implications of Secularism.

[6]Budd, "The British Humanist Movement: 1860-1966" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1968), pp. 43-45.

[7]"Is Secularism Atheism?" (verbatim report of a debate between George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh), National Reformer, 20 March 1870, pp. 177-85; 27 March 1870, pp. 193-98; 10 April 1870, pp. 227-32.

[8]Also Colin Campbell, Toward a Sociology of Irreligion (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1971), p. 48.

[9]George Jacob Holyoake, The Principles of Secularism Briefly Explained (London: Watts & Co., 1859), p. 7.

[10]Holyoake, The Origin and Nature of Secularism; Showing that Where Freethought Commonly Ends Secularism Begins (London: Watts & Co., 1896), p. 45.

[11]Holyoake, The Trial of Theism, Accused of Obstructing Secular Life (London: Trubner and Co., 1877), pp. 182-84.

[12]For instance, see "Secularism as a System of Truth and Morality," a debate between Bradlaugh and Rev. A. F. Harrison,

reported in the National Reformer 25 September 1870, p. 193, et passim. David Tribe includes similar debates in the bibliography of his President Charles Bradlaugh, M.P. (London: Elek Books, 1971), pp. 371-75: "Christianity and Secularism Contrasted," a debate with Rev. W. M. Hutchings; "Christianity vs. Secularism," a "discussion" with David King; the famous "Great South Place Debate" with the omnipresent Rev. Brewin Grant; "Secularism: Unphilosophical, Immoral and Anti-Social," a debate with Rev. Dr. James McCann.

[13]David Tribe, 100 Years of Freethought (London: Elek Books, 1967), pp. 13-15. Tribe's book falls into that category which deals with general features of Freethought, though it is concerned enough with Secularism, in the opinion of Royle, to have superseded McGee's History of Secularism as the standard work on the subject. Tribe is also the most recent biographer of Bradlaugh. He is personally involved in the organization of the present day National Secular Society; this adds an element of defensiveness concerning his subjects which borders on subjectivity.

[14]Charles Bradlaugh, "Autobiography of Mr. Charles Bradlaugh," National Reformer (August 31, 1873), pp. 129-30.

[15]A. O. J. Cockshut, The Unbelievers: English Agnostic Thought, 1840-1890 (London: Collins, 1964), p. 123.

[16]Susan Budd, "The Loss of Faith: Reasons for Unbelief among Members of the Secular Movement in England, 1850-1950," Past & Present (April, 1967), pp. 112-14.

[17]Richard D. Altick, The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 301.

[18]Bradlaugh, "First Words," National Reformer, 14 April 1860, p. 5.

[19]Budd, "The British Humanist Movement," p. 72, quoting Shaw in the Literary Guide for October, 1939, p. 182.

[20]Walter David Nelson, "British Rational Secularism: Unbelief from Bradlaugh to the mid-Twentieth Century" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1963), p. 89.

[21]"Secularism, Scepticism, and Atheism, Verbatim Report of the Proceeding of a Two Nights' Public Debate between Messrs. G. J. Holyoake & C. Bradlaugh," (London: Austin & Co., 1870), pp. vii-viii.

[22]Bradlaugh, Heresy: Its Utility and Morality, A Plea and a Justification (London: Austin & Co., 1870), p. 2.

[23]Austin Holyoake, "What We Learn From the Late Debate," National Reformer, 24 April 1870, pp. 257-58. See also the following articles, all in support of Bradlaugh's opinions: Charles Watts, "What is Secularism?" National Reformer, 27 March 1870, pp. 197-98; Henry G. Atkinson, "Holyoake v. Bradlaugh," National Reformer, 3 April 1870, p. 214; and Aliquis, "The Late Debate," National Reformer, 10 April 1870, p. 232.

[24]"Secularism as a System of Truth and Morality," report of a debate between Rev. A. J. Harrison and Charles Bradlaugh, National Reformer, 9 October 1870, p. 227.

[25]Bradlaugh, Why Do Men Starve? (London: Austin & Co., 1867).

[26]Bradlaugh, The Radical Programme (London: The Freethought Publishing Company, 1885), p. 5.

[27]Bradlaugh, Some Objections to Socialism (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1884).

[28]Bradlaugh, "Address to the Party for 1879," National Reformer, 5 January 1879, p. 3.

[29]Budd, "The British Humanist Movement," pp. 171-72. Mrs. Budd gives the following figures for ninety-one freethinkers

who mentioned their early religious affiliations; 35 Catholics, 21 Methodists, 8 Presbyterians, 6 Nonconformists or Fundamentalists, 4 Baptists, 2 from the Church of Christ, 2 from the Salvation Army, one Particular Baptist, one Bible Christian, one "White" Quaker, one Plymouth Brethren, and 9 former Anglicans.

[30]Bradlaugh, The Impeachment of the House of Brunswick (London: Austin and Co., 1871), p. iv.

[31]Charles Watts, "The Philosophy of Secularism," National Reformer, 18 July 1869, p. 34.

[32]Altick, p. 133, quoting Edmund K. Blyth, Life of William Ellis, pp. 45-46.

[33]Watts, "Mr. Watts on His prosecution," National Reformer, 21 January 1877, p. 34.

[34]Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, "Publisher's Preface to Dr. Knowlton's 'Fruits of Philosophy,'" National Reformer, 25 March 1877, p. 178.

[35]Nelson, p. 129, quoting Charles R. Mackay, Life of Charles Bradlaugh (London: D. J. Gunn, 1888), p. 29.

[36]Charles Bradlaugh, Disestablishment and Disendowment of the English Church (London: Charles Watts, 1876), p. 5.

[37]Charles Bradlaugh, "A Few Words About the Devil and Other Biographical Sketches and Essays," (New York: A. K. Butts, 1874), p. 2.

[38]"Secularism as a System of Truth and Morality," National Reformer, 25 September 1870, p. 195.

[39]J. M. Robertson, A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), p. 304.

"We have had to fight for so long for our right to freedom of thought and speech that we have become prosaic. Now we need to study or cultivate the poetry of Secularism. We are told that we have no hope, no ambition beyond this life; that our views are dull and lifeless, without beauty, without poetry, without any high or noble sentiment, without love. Perhaps we are to blame in not giving more expression to the feelings. We have had little time for this in the war which has been waging around us. But now cannot we try? Cannot some of our fluent speakers and writers give us the poetry of Secularism?"

--Justicia
"The Spread of Secularism"
National Reformer
August 16, 1874, p. 108.

CHAPTER II

THE POETRY OF SECULARISM

In the decade from 1870 until 1880 more than 150 poems were published in the National Reformer. James Thomson was the best known of the contributors, but even though Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" is recognized as a minor classic of the Victorian age, his reputation still suffers from a degree of oblivion. The scores of other poets who published their poetry in the Reformer are unknown even to most scholars less than a century after they wrote. Despite its obscurity their poetry expresses the doubts and fears and the hopes and concerns that this thoughtful and literate group of Secularists experienced. This chapter will discuss the significant features of the one hundred and thirty-eight poems written by sixty-nine Secularist poets other than James Thomson which appeared in the Reformer during the decade. Since the total number of people in the Secularist movement never exceeded 6,000, the poetical works of sixty-nine people from a single decade represents a significant sample of Secularist thought as it was manifested by rank and file members.

Generally, the single most pervasive element in Secularist poetry is its didacticism. Secularist poets were very concerned that their audience be made aware of and learn the "truths" of a

rationalistic, anti-theistic perception of existence. The titles of some of their poems reveal this didactic characteristic: "The Teaching of Truth," "Homily of Life," "Address to the Upper Classes," "The Awakening of the Workers," "Rhyming Queries on the Fall of Man and the Immortality of the Soul," "A Question for Protestants," "The Resolve of the Oppressed," and "Doubts and a Reply."

For example, William Elder's "impromptu" poem, "The Teaching of Truth," was written in reaction to Matthew Arnold's Literature and Dogma in which Arnold claimed that "to be convinced that our current theology is false, is not necessarily a reason for publishing that conviction. The theology may be false, and yet one may do more harm in attacking it than by keeping silence and waiting." In his poem, Elder exclaimed:

> What! Teach the false when we've perceived
> The truth; maintain base creeds that bind,
> Whilst millions pine to be relieved
> From chains that chaff and wound the mind--
> Chains which hireling priests did link
> And forge, in ages dark and drear,
> Ere mankind yet had dared to think,
> Or merged from superstitious fear?

Elder recalled three great teachers -- "the noble Socrates / Who for truth raised up his voice," as well as "the lowborn Nazarene" who

"Proclaimed the truth he thought and felt," and Tom Paine who "From duty's path was ne'er beguiled." Elder continued:

Let us from them example take,
The "Enigmas of Life" to solve,
As far as we can these o'ertake,
Let each one for himself resolve,
Each for himself, yet "each for all,"
For what we learn we'll spread abroad,
Till every mind we disenthral
From error, and make clear the road.

Yes! Clear the road till nothing bars
The march of mind, till all are free . . .
Till learning free for all shall flourish . . .
Till truth alone the mind shall nourish
And reigns triumphant 'neath the sky![1]

A poet who called himself "A Modern Athenian" found Nature and Science to be the great teachers:

For "shedding of blood" give us shedding of light;
The fountains of science fill up to their height;
Nor Nature's own gospel proclaims every day,
That salvation for man is by no other way.

God does not write on "tablets committed to priests," nor is he a "Being," for this is "revolting to Nature and sense." Instead, "God's book is yon firmament spangled with spheres, / Ever forming and formed through Eternity's years."[2] Thus, Secularist poets found their truth in the life of this world, not through what they believed to be the perverted supernatural revelations passed on by priests. The Secularists were intensely interested in the education of nineteenth-century man. As most of them were like Bradlaugh and Holyoake, who had overcome severe economic and social obstacles in order to educate themselves, it is an easy matter to understand their fierce sense of missionary zeal in the teaching of "truth." They believed that their own personal intellectual enlightenment was a necessity to be experienced by all of the people. In the truths revealed to them by scientific rationalism, the Secularists found a prophetic source for their messianic didacticism. In the words of a poem addressed to "Christian Men," a Secularist poet admonished:

> Mock not the poor with prayer;
> 'Tis knowledge they need and the joy that comes
> From fruits which the land can spare.[3]

An analysis of the nature of this truth as perceived by the Secularists will prove instructive. Although "truth" is quite often a vaguely cited platitude, Secularists could exercise their inspiration regarding three basic categories of truth: scientific truth, social truth and the truth that results from a rejection of religion

and faith. In an age which gloried in its scientific advancements, Secularists were not unusually addicted to the proclamations of science. They differed from their contemporaries, however, in placing science on the pedestal normally reserved for religion and its God. Not being able to predict the horrors wrought by twentieth-century science, Secularist poets were eager to "place Science on the throne of Faith" in order to replace a "pseudo-pious" faith in superstitious religion.[4] Andrew Vorner envisioned man's Mind, awakened from the drugged gloom of religious creeds, claiming the world for the brotherhood of man and a benevolent science "With power to cherish, power to scathe, / But will to bless, no will to ban," (Vorner, "Progress"). J. M. Peacock, the most prolific Secularist poet in the decade under consideration, in "Come, Lovers of Nature," wrote of a search for truth "Not in the grim temples men rear to their God, / But out in the light of earth's canopy broad."[5] Throughout this poem, Peacock makes reference to science which "will lend us its light in the dark" so that truthseekers "sermons will read from the rocks and the trees," (Peacock, "Come, Lovers of Nature"). Relying on a Darwinian-influenced concept of great geological spans of time, the nature lovers will observe "the wreck of an earlier world":

> Where time on the wing from its pinions hath cast
> Broad letters by which we can read of the past;
> From deep rocky glen to the high Alpine range,
> Great pages impressed with the chapters of change . . . .

Rocks, mountains, and rivers, and forests say more
Than moldy old tomes of the prophets of yore. . . .
With freedom we'll roam o'er the wild blooming health,
And speak of the world that lies buried beneath
Of forests decayed and of caverns hoar,
Where huntsmen once feasted on bisson [sic] and boar,
Of cities sepulchral, entombed in their gloom,
Where earthquakes are fostered far down in earth's tomb;
Of idols, and temples, and sanctuaries grey,
Once sacred to gods that have vanished away,
As if it were nature's great law to avenge
The follies of man, by eternal change.

Such oblique references to a Darwinian conception of the universe are relatively rare in Secularist poetry; more direct reference to Darwin's influence on the age are even more unusual. W. Ormond, in his poem "Man on Earth," recalled that as a child:

In our Sunday-school they told
Man was not so very old,
For God formed him from red mould
Years ago six thousand. . . .
Now, up grown, we scan more wide;
Nor can dogmas false abide;
Science bears us on her tide
Far from years six thousand. . . .

Thus we've come to clearly see,
As we ask, where first lived he?
That man's years, at least, must be
Full six hundred thousand.[6]

Generally, Secularist poets accepted the concept of eons of time having passed since man's appearance on earth. While they were eager to replace faith with science, there is no obvious reason why Darwin and Darwinian references appear no more than four times in the poetry found in the National Reformer during the 1870-1880 decade. Secularists were always eager to enlist scientific-rationalistic theories in their campaign against religion and its various doctrines. Darwin's fairly rigorous objectivity and unwillingness to become involved in religious controversy may have made it difficult for them to employ his name and reputation dogmatically or didactically. Furthermore, considering the degree to which scientific values had permeated Secularist thinking, it may not have been necessary for avowed Secularists to proclaim Darwin as a champion of "truth." They may have simply appropriated his theories along with other scientific "revelations" for their own convenient use in their freethought struggle.

Secularists, although they generally envisioned themselves being beseiged by the mighty forces of religious darkness, were really on the attack against the superstitions of religion more often than not. With a vision of the new dawn of scientific truth, Secularists believed that "science went forth a sad world to save,"[7] and

that out of the "want and woe, the waste of life, / The feast of death, the flow of tears,"

The world would rise from out of the shade
Of bondage, and its boons increase,
And greater grow the triumphs made
By science in the paths of peace.[8]

By replacing a God in heaven who is deaf to human entreaties with the responsive, hopeful light of science, Secularist poets felt that:

. . . the good ship "Commonweal"
Nor wreck need fear;
Seas rough or clear
She'll brave should Science guide the wheel.

Yes! Hope our beacon, and the light
Of science gleaming
On us streaming--
We shall gain the port of right.[9]

Thus, Secularists made the scientific search for truth a significant part of their secular religion. Science was not wrathful and capricious; man could exercise a degree of control over its uses. Science was beneficent, protective, and infallible. In Secularist poetry, science was almost always associated with light or dawn. The

superstition which it replaced was, not unexpectedly, always portrayed in a context of gloom, darkness, savagery and "mental babyhood." Nineteenth-century scientific man, for the Secularists as well as for many other Victorians, was a vigorous young adult--wise before his time but eager for even more knowledge. The Secularists quite deliberately made a god of him, even as Bradlaugh was destroying the icons of the past.

Another category of truth that the Secularist poets were eager to proselytize can be termed "social truth." This truth was invariably defined from a "populist" viewpoint and expressed deep sympathy for the plight of the masses who suffered beneath the autocratic heel of the Victorian class structure. J. M. Peacock portrayed the condition of "Unhappy England" where:

> A million paupers, like the great swamp creepers,
> Have crawled from out of thy depths of bubbling slime,
> A million outcasts, sowers of death, and reapers . . .
> To whom life is a mockery . . . .

Like Bradlaugh, Peacock asked the terrible question, "Why should men starve?" The "solemn, serious" question has its answer in the language spoken by "truth and reason":

> Yet comes a change o'er creeds and old opinions,
> And powers imperious tremble where they tread,

Truth speaks, proud England, o'er thy wide dominions--
  Take heed, ye filchers of the poor man's bread--
The people trained to bow to lords, most humble,
Will dare to do more manly things than grumble.

Peacock, sensing the potential for great social changes resulting from truth, then cried:

. . . for a voice with might of Alpine thunder,
  Or power to speak with inspiration's pen,
Impassion'd thoughts, like lightning shafts to sunder,
  The chains that bind and burn the souls of men,
Each link degrading, I would burst and sever,
And crush the germs of poverty for ever.[10]

Thus, Secularist poetry was often revolutionary in tone, almost always based on optimism and a progressive view of social evolution. As with scientific truth, the social truth that Secularist poets praised was often associated with a rejection of religion, specifically religious teaching regarding the inequities of life on earth and the promise and hope of heavenly afterlife. By breaking out of the mold of "mute subserviency," those who "heap up wealth" through their physical labor in the fields or factories, but which they may "ne'er hope to share with those who rule / Their fate" will be able to end "such vile laws, and nobly aim"

To legislate for human nature, and to sweep
From the path of progress, those who'd keep
Mankind still sunk in misery and want.[11]

The poet would ever use prayer, if it would work, to

Call God to purge the world of priestly preachers,
And send the people other truer teachers,
Who'd aid and teach them how to raise the life
We know, show how to put down social strife;
Make class distinctions cease, and end the cruel
Divisions, raised and blessed by priestly rule;
Teach Labour's sons to cease to bow
To those who rob them, (W. E., "The Poor").

Using one of his favorite images--that of the worker bees and the useless, aristocratic drones--J. M. Peacock's poem, "The Awakening of the Workers," reflects Secularist perceptions of possible revolt and optimism. "There's a stir o'er the world . . . / Prophetic of change a deep murmur is borne." It is the workers who

. . . now dare be unfettered in thought,
They know what their long earnest labours have brought,
Great wealth to the few and the glory of States
While nought on their toils but adversity waits;
Tho' plain be their say, and but simple their song,

They feel they are crushed by corruption and wrong.
The battle of castes hath in earnest begun . . . .[12]

Of the inhuman lot of the masses, Peacock believed that

Not long can it last--Revolution rolls one,
From dark social depths to the altar and throne;
It rolls like some great tidal wave of the sea,
By the force of Freethought and of truth it must be,
(J. M. Peacock, "The Awakening of
the Workers").

Most Secularist poetry which preached such visions of social truth only raised the spectre of revolution as a remote possibility. Peacock was no different; the revolution's aims could be easily realized if those in authority would only yield to the people. Like their leader, Charles Bradlaugh, Secularist poets shied away from overt revolutionary rhetoric. While the aristocracy was castigated, the dignity of manual labor was praised and even romanticized:

We need no loafing, living blanks,
To filch the bread from labour's hands,
Nor laggards shirking labour's ranks,
To live at ease on plundered lands.
We've had enough of feudal lords,
And kings, and all their costly set;

Their barb'rous baubles, crowns, and swords,
The might of mind must shatter yet.[13]

The aristocracy was perceived as "unnatural" in its superstitious origin of "divine right." Aristocratic land privileges were especially selected for Secularist abuse. In George Sexton's "Address to the Upper Classes," Charles Bradlaugh's ideas of land reform were expounded in miniature:

We bow not to your acres broad,
Your mansions and your grounds,
For these are held by direst fraud
While poverty abounds.
The land that you so fondly prize,
To all, by right belongs;
Hereafter will the people rise
And banish human wrongs.[14]

Another "human wrong" to which Secularist poets addressed themselves involved the position of women in Victorian England. Peacock longed "for the power to crush the wrong inhuman, / That makes a vassal of our sister, woman."[15] He found a superstitious source for the second-class status of women, for:

As priests have preached, so have mankind believed,
And so have lived deceiving and deceived. . . .
That woman brought the world to shame.

The "great light of reason" will force such bigotry to sink into the past as

> The pride of sex, man's weakness, nursed so long,
> Departs as Truth unmasks the monster Wrong;
> Man feels and reasons it is woman's right,
> To walk with him in paths of mental light,
> To share with him that freedom he alone
> Has held by force exclusively his own, (Peacock, "Woman").

Nevertheless, the Secularist rhetoric concerning the liberation of women reached a Victorian limit which was essentially supportive of the nineteenth century belief regarding the proper role of women in the home--an educative moral model for the young. Instead of incubating orthodox Christian beliefs, Secularist woman would simply substitute Freethought principles. Nothing truly radical was proposed; standard male and female roles were not reversed or altered in the Secularist vision:

> 'Tis woman's more than rougher man's to make
> And mold the mind with wisdom and awake
> Bright aspirations in the breast of youth,
> Her strong incentives love, and love of truth,
> (Peacock, "Woman").

But woman suffrage was championed by Secularist poets. Reacting to Mr. Leatham's speech in Parliament on 7 April 1875, in which he declared, "if you value the manliness of our institutions, let us keep all the springs and sources of them manly," a poet who signed himself as "P" wrote in the Reformer:

> The spirit of our fathers
> Will rustle in their grave,
> If women who pay rates like men
> An equal vote should crave . . .
> [the] manly House of Parliament
> Need never be dismayed . . .
> Though the ladies plead both loud and long
> We'll strike a "manly" blow.[16]

Generally, then, the "social truth" that Secularist poets envisioned involved a redistribution of the wealth and privileges that were enjoyed by the aristocratic Victorians. The poets saw this class as wasteful, useless, immoral, and an archaic remnant of the dark, irrational religious past. Just as the power and influence of the altar receded before the progressive forces of rational enlightenment, so would its temporal counterpart, the throne, cease to be a social reality. Secularist poets felt that they had a finger on the pulse of the times. The heart and will of the masses were growing stronger in their demands for more meaningful reforms. Revolution was not imminent nor even necessary. The Secularists' faith in the

ability of right to convince might of its wrongs and effect significant social changes without bloodshed was not totally naive. The poets perceived in the masses an awakening to a realistic appraisal of their earthly plight. In this, the Secularists were right, for the secularization of the twentieth century was well under way in the nineteenth century. In short, the social truth that Secularist poets moralized about was simply a vision that "Through the mist of future ages / Comes a time of fuller worth," when "we will have our heaven on earth."[17]

The Secularist conviction that imbued the poets' beliefs concerning scientific and social truths was, quite simply, that religion was no longer a necessary crutch for modern man. Secular truth was quickly replacing religious "truth." In man's intellectual and moral infancy, the superstitions of religion were intimidating. However, modern man had no need of supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. Enlightened modern man would no longer passively follow the lead of priests in their occult mysticism. The immorality and illogicality of the Bible were superceded by rational, utilitarian morality and faith in the reason of man. Nineteenth-century Secularist man no longer heeded the empty threat of eternal damnation in hell. Concomitantly, the postponement of rewards in heaven was rejected since universal material prosperity and well-being were believed to be distinctly within the grasp of mankind. There was no reason for one to be content with one's lot

in life. Self-help, not intercessory prayer, could raise a person to achieve the promise of his natural endowment.

The basic point in the Secularists' rejection of religion was their belief in the immorality of religion. Rejecting any explanation of the ways of God to man, Secularist poets sought to explain how man's ways were morally superior to those of a supposed God's. A Secularist poet who called himself "Sharagapas" wrote that the "theologic seeds":

> . . . rear in youthful minds perplexing creeds--
> Instead of mentors, acting like tormentors;
> Growing disputes as crops of choking weeds,
> Whose fruits have ever been "to plague the inventors,
> Lies, superstitions, cruelties and mournings,
> Hates, inquisitions, massacres, and burnings."[18]

J. M. Peacock, in his poem "To Superstition," addressed the Gods who had:

> . . . made of crowned and titled knaves,
> Who rose to glory through the blood of slaves;
> Gods thou hast fashioned in the brains of men,
> In shapes uncouth beyond all human ken;
> Grim phantoms all, creations rank and rude
> Of thine, in man in mental babyhood. . . .
> Priests are thy subtle instruments and tools

By which are men made dupes and foes and fools.
Thous't blasted freedom's love-flowers in the bud,
And raised your altars on the people's blood;
In guise of grace, religion, hope and faith,
Thy reign has been one reign of woe and death;
Love on your lips, thou has all love betrayed,
And lovely lands in desolation laid.[19]

Similarly, the moral outrage of "E. W." was based on the seeming paradox of God's supposed benevolence and omnipotence in the face of the cruel harshness of life:

You speak to me of God, and say
"In him we move and live . . . ."
Yet tell me why this God so kind,
Whose goodness knows no bound,
Shall leave his creatures here on earth
In chains of sorrow bound?

Why should pale sickness, racking pain,
Hard toil, be still our lot;
You say that God can cure it all--
Tell me, why does he not?
Think you, if I my little ones
Could shield from every harm,

Could save from pain, from toil, from care,
I would withhold my arm. . . .

I know what I would seek to do
Were power equal to will:
No misery, no care, no pain,
My little world should fill.[20]

W. W., in a poem that addressed the problems of the fall of man and the immorality of the soul, concluded that, indeed, "God's ways are not the ways of men."[21] Referring to the "grand propitiation" of God's demanding the sacrifice of His Son, the poet asked, "Oh! Where's the wretch, since e'er man fell, / Would like to be a God?" (W. W., "Rhyming Queries"). A later poet's reference to Christ was not so sympathetic:

The human agonies that Jesus bore,
The sons of men have ever bore and bear;
Lone, painful paths, woe's waste despairing o'er,
With wounded feet and worn, all mortals wear;
And every side is riven with the spear
Of Death's malignant minister--disease;
And every brow is crowned with thorns of care;
And every hour, transfixed with agonies,
On Death's despairing cross a man of sorrows dies.

Oh, fatuous mourners! Why should sufferers grieve
Because the ills which to all flesh is heir
The Nazarene encountered? Leave--oh leave
The dead, and tend the dying; from the bier
Turn to the bed of anguish . . . .[22]

A Secularist poet named Philalethes found the story of Christ's death itself to be a blasphemy and that:

Faith is the offspring of conceit
That would with God so equal treat
A bargain struck to yield up thought
And with precious blood be bought.[23]

The Christian doctrines of the existence of heaven and hell fared little better with Secularist poets than the idea of Christ's atonement for the sins of men. The National Reformer published a poem by a D'Alembert, written in 1823, which noted that:

. . . heaven belong'd to those
Who served the king, and massacred his foes . . . .
But he who dared to ridicule their plan,
And sought to assert the majesty of man,
Who wished to subjugate to reason's sway
His every sense and give it to the day,
Was doomed to hell outright . . . .[24]

The hopes and fears aroused by the doctrines of heaven and hell showed that it was the priests' "intention / To profit largely by their curst invention," (D'Alembert, "The Immorality of the Soul"). Another Secularist poet, Philos, having broken free from his chains of superstition, admitted that he had "feared a God offended" and "dreaded fire of hell." But:

> Now such childish fears are ended,
> Now I've shaken off the spell . . . .
> Now I find that pure enjoyment
> Is the world's best gift to share.
>
> Priests and clergy, you who tell us
> We are lost without your aid,
> Preach aloud so stern and zealous
> Man was for damnation made.
> Say, why should your God of Heaven
> Doom a man to endless pain,
> Blast the life himself hath given,
> Making his creation vain?[25]

Secularist poets saw in the Christian Bible a written record of the theological folly and the superstitions that had plagued man for thousands of years. Philalethes asserted that:

That Book that works on hopes and fears,
Too narrow in its view appears,
Wars against reason in every page
And stops the progress of the age
("Rhyme and Reason").

Charles P. O'Conor, who the Reformer editors claimed was "The Irish Peasant Poet," found the Biblical account of the Fall of Man to be "a myth, a legendary nothingness."[26] Preaching the Gospel's "dim religious light" will only serve to:

. . . scare weak minds as children fear the night
And to the lowest motives then appeal;
Their selfish hopes and slavish fears excite.[27]

Secularist poets took special care to villify the priests who they believed had hoodwinked, purged and robbed the ignorant masses throughout man's history. Comfortable with the riches extorted from the cringing people, the poets charged that it is an easy thing for priests to believe in a God. John Baldwin Fosbroke's poem, "The Bells of Lingen," tells the tale of an old priest whose church's ancient bells could no longer ring their music. Suddenly, a "silver bird" appeared from out of the sunset and alighted on the bells. Miraculously, they began to peal again, but just as they do the old priest falls to the ground, dead. The humble people of the village,

awed by this event, gather around his body. Fosbroke ends his poem with the message that:

> At the old man's regret,
> Liberty's spirit thus
> On them descended.[28]

William Elder, on the other hand, in "A Question for Protestants," did not place the blame for an abject people squarely on the priests. He wondered:

> . . . how to end it--how to stop their praying,
> Their canting, preaching--how to stop their flaying
> Of fleecy flocks, who, meekly to their rule,
> Bend abject, trembling, rend'ring them their wool.

His answer was that

> . . . the people have themselves to blame;
> If they'd dare to think, would exercise their reason,
> They'd soon rule priests and parsons out of season.[29]

The poets who wrote for the Reformer's Secularist audience often portrayed an illicit league between priests and kings--a relationship based on the twin fears of temporal and spiritual punishment. Kings and priests existed in a symbiotic relationship in order to

maintain themselves in their accustomed prosperity and throw fear into the hearts of the masses. Peacock, whose score of poems during the decade make up an eloquent plea for pacifism, chastized the priests of the Prince of Peace, asking them:

> How can ye breathe of love and faith,
> Ye priests who fawn unto a King,
> Whose warriors, armed with fires of death,
> Gaunt misery on nations bring?
> Oh, shame! that ye should fan the fires
> That lust of power has madly lit,
> Or nurse ambition's base desires
> With rude old texts of Holy Writ ("Oh! Give Us Peace").

The "truth" that the Secularist poets envisioned in their anti-religious poetry was one of a world awakening to a realization of its necessary rejection of all things theological. Mankind existed on the brink of its final victorious release from the intellectual chains and moral dungeons of its cruel religious past. A bright dawn of freedom awaited those who were willing to open their eyes and step forth from their intellectual incarceration. The empty promises of a glorious afterlife in heaven could, instead, be exchanged for living realities. Secularist poets perceived the forces of institutional religion to be in the disarray of shattered retreat, having suffered a rout at the hands of science and rationalistic skepticism concerning Biblical revelation. The man-made superstitions of

religion would be replaced by modern man's capacity to stand independent of his old intellectual crutches and live in rational harmony in a godless universe.

Of this capacity, the Secularist poets were absolutely convinced. In addition to its didactic preaching of the three categories of truth, Secularist poetry was characterized by an almost unwavering optimism. Although one can find significant examples of a depressed pessimism, James Thomson himself being the best example of this, the overriding tone of Secularist poetry remains that of bright optimism. Andrew Vorner's "Progress" is an excellent example of this trait of Secularist poetry. Vorner noted "how slow [rose] the dawn of Nature's morn!" but continued:

> When morning's twilight is so long,
> How long will be the day!
> How grand the blaze of mid-day's sun,
> How vast the world from darkness won,
> To mind's Promethean ray!
>
> Shaped in the matrix of events,
> A grander world is coming on,
> Made from the True in all past things,
> With thoughts all giants, men all kings,
> And every chair a throne. . . .

Yes, your brave weapons strike the flint,
My brothers in the Freethought van,
While you are battling in the right,
And from your sword-dints flash the light
That yet shall be the day to man.

And that fierce light shall scorch the creeds--
The battle ground on which ye fell,
And burn old superstitions down,
And scorch the mitre and the crown,
Ay, fiercer than the fabled hell!

Vorner's concept of progress is a standard Secularist one which included the belief that his present generation was not totally free--that even his generation would probably not live to witness the fruits of the great rationalistic victory. They could, however, see the light at the end of the tunnel. Although they would probably never reach its source, Secularist poets of the 1870-1880 decade often congratulated themselves for being among the first soldiers of Freethought to storm the fortress of orthodoxy. In this regard, they often expressed the wish in their poetry that their efforts not be forgotten by future generations able to enjoy freely a truly secular life.

J. M. Peacock was an optimistic Secularist through and through. In his "Phases of Progress," he recalled that he often dreamed of the "bright signs of the coming of changes vast; / Oh,

what unto man will the future be?" In a very typical Secularist prophecy, Peacock saw that:

Now through the gloom of our doubts and fears
Breaketh a ray of redeeming light,
Beaming with hope, and the faith that cheers,
Faith in the triumph of truth and right.
Faith that is in the good that is in our kind,
Growing in strength as our thoughts grow free,
Beautiful things in the world we find,
With flowers of the heart and gems of the mind,
That speak what the future of man must be.

Lights now are seen on the sands of time,
Beacons of hope o'er a sea of strife,
Guiding the millions of every clime
On to the goal of a brighter life.[30]

James Thomson's pessimism as expressed in the 1874 "City of Dreadful Night" garnered a mild rebuff from William Maccall, a frequent contributor to the National Reformer. In a short poem dedicated to "B. V." (one of Thomson's acronyms and the one under which he published "The City"), Maccall admonished Thomson to:

Say not that genius is disease;
Genius supreme is Health robust:

Say not the noblest grandest trees
 Rot soonest--soonest fall to dust;
Their soaring beauty, gorgeous fruit
Reveal the deeper, stronger root. . . .

We weep for Leopardi's fate,
 Have pity, wrath for Dante's gloom;
Yet still believe that to be great
 We must abhor the Creed of Gloom:
Genius has martyrs, but its kings
Have stalwart arms and mighty wings.[31]

But Thomson was not the only poet appearing in the National Reformer who expressed a sense of the "Creed of Gloom." In fact, Peacock himself anticipated Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" by four years with his own poem, "Night Scenes in the City." The difference is that Peacock's "City" is not an unrelieved cry of hopeless anguish. Alternating stanzas depict the street scenes of the "homeless and friendless . . . / a starving brother, death stricken and gaunt" and the breath of the moralistic wind; "oh shame, said the wind, as it murmured by, / That one that is human for want should die." Contrasted to the horror of the starving, oppressed street people are the "great ones of wealth" who are "pampered, and pompous, and fat" and who have "force on their side to support their pride, / No matter who dies for want."[32] But the wind is the redeeming promise of the fury that will surely alter the situation. In Thomson's "City," on

the other hand, the wretches cannot even escape into a Dantesque inferno, for they have no hope at all to abandon at the gates of the Inferno and are doomed to return to a death-in-life in the horrible City.

"Justicia's" comment, quoted as the epigraph to this chapter, can be examined in the light of the Secularist poets' handling of the theme of death. Bronte Ros, whose poem "Fiat Lux" is one of the most psychologically revealing of the Secularists' poems, did ask the question:

> . . . is there God above me?
> Is there higher truth untaught?
> Shall my life for aye continue,
> After Death his doom has brought?
>
> Or is life but some wondrous
> Fruit of Nature's soulless laws . . . .
> Death no awakening to a new life,
> But a great eternal pause?

The poet wonders if these questions about life after death are the "words of God's own graving, / Or the scars of former strife?"

> Has he left some poison in me,
> To pollute me till my death?

Are these thoughts, like inspiration,
But the venoms of his breath?

These doubts are never fully resolved by the poet. Although he admitted that these powerful scars do sear his consciousness, he bravely asserted that, as a rational thinker, he would conquer the adverse effects of this divine poison. Unlike many other adamantly positive statements by Secularists concerning the finality of death and the materialistic conception of a return to the bosom of Nature, Bronte Ros's poem leaves the reader with the distinct impression that this was one Secularist poet who was whistling past the graveyard. William Elder, whose poems appeared in the National Reformer nine times in the course of the decade, also exhibited an honest sense of doubt concerning his own feelings regarding the possibility of an afterlife. In his 1873 poem, "On My Mother's Grave," Elder, standing by his mother's "lonesome grave," recalled those moments of parental love as well as later differences between his Secularist beliefs and his mother's "cherished hopes in which I did not share."[33] He relates how he never tried to bring grief to her by attempting to alter her orthodox faith, and that "From war of words with her I ever quailed":

For who can tell what mortal here can say
What lies beyond the confines of the tomb?
Mysterious darkness, unrelieved by ray
Of Light, enveils its silent, lonely gloom;

And through its portals one and all must pass,
The rich, the humble, mighty, bound and free,
Death lords it over ev'ry grade and class,
All, all must bow to iron destiny!

Then why repine since nature so ordains,
Why shrink from sinking to our final death?
Life for many years, alas! has more pains
Than favours here, the few alone seem bless'd.

Bronte Ros's reference to the "soulless laws" of Nature and Elder's to "iron destiny" are examples of the more brutally frank Secularist views of death. More often than not, Secularist poets expressed a firm conviction regarding death rather than any measure of doubt about it. "Pharos," in his only contribution to the Reformer, wrote about "The History of Man: The Alpha and the Omega."[34] Concerning "this pilgrimage to the tomb," the poet states that from this

. . . final doom,
The tomb, the grave, the ever-teeming earth,
Thence got we our first being--there return;
Eating and eaten, parent of our birth,
Sustaining life from her unceasing urn.

In the poet's "own plain reasoning view of it," Pharos disposed of the body,

Life-reft, committed to the earth,
Or 'neath the wave, dismembered, discomposed
But not annihilate--successive birth.

Recalling Hamlet's remarks about worms and the end of Polonius, Pharos admits:

I've no belief in any after state,
Except the after state of being eaten,
And so renewed to life, or resurrected
The only resurrection I've thought about.
"Hatched, Matched, Dispatched," such is the game of life.
So sure and systematically brought about.

Pharos's reference to a materialistic, pantheistic return to Nature is the prevailing view of death found in Secularist poetry. It is echoed in Austin Holyoake's "Burial Service," in which the deceased is mentioned as having "derived his being from the bountiful mother of all; he returns to her capacious bosom, to again mingle with the elements."[35] "Philalethes" asked if the "earthy of the earth" should regret joining the dead. No, he answered, for

. . . when with work and care opprest
Exhausted nature seeks its rest,
The deepest slumbers are desired--
So death's a friend to us when tired,

("Rhyme and Reason").

W. S. Ross, who wrote under the pen-name of "Saladin" and who was the most literate and gifted successor to James Thomson as a contributor to the National Reformer, wrote what is probably the best example of Secular thinking regarding the universal finality of death. Of a recently deceased person, Ross's poem, "Dirge," remarked:

> Another phase in Nature's modes
> In never-ending range,
> Heralds to him, through aeons all,
> Eternity of change.
> He was, a thousand years ago--
> He was--but how, and where!--
> Where was he long ere he was born?
> For now again he's there.
>
> The sand, the air, the growing grass,
> Are parents of our race . . . .[36]

William Maccall, nearing the end of his life, wrote in "Seasons of Death" that any season of the year would be acceptable as a time to die. A Secularist, it would seem, is particularly capable of perceiving the death of the individual in the larger context of the ongoing life of Nature. Spring, for example, would be a naturally receptive season "To be with Nature's youngest forces blent, / And change from element to element."[37] Maccall made a case for each

season's appropriateness, but his thoughts regarding death in Autumn reveal what must be taken as an admirable "Secularist spirit":

> . . . then I would die:
> To fall, a fruit of life, on Life's warm breast,
> A germ of action be when seeking rest ("Seasons of Death").

From the poems quoted earlier in this discussion of death, it is possible to see that some Secularist views concerning death did tend to lend credence to their critics' charge of a lack of hope. But the Secularist poets whose works did lend themselves to this charge are in accord with the general trend of Secularist thinking in that they accept the temporal, material and, hence, natural limitations of life. Their "lack of hope" was reserved only for the supernatural and eternal beliefs held by the orthodox. Certainly, they retained no "hope" for an afterlife in a heaven and, like agnostics, felt unqualified to hypothesize concerning the source of life. Saladin claimed that:

> . . . 'tis not in our human ken
> The mystery to trace
> By which the sculptor, Nature, hews
> A living heart from stone . . . .
>
> And this we know alone
> Nor dare to tread in blasphemy
> The shores of the Unknown, ("Dirge").

In being committed to a materialistic perception of life and death, Secularist acceptance of a pantheistic return to the "bountiful mother, " Nature, was a function of the scientific "law" of the conservation of energy--nothing is created and nothing is destroyed. Instead of the relief of a promised heaven, Secularist poets accepted the "eternity" of the universe's natural cycle. This belief resulted in a commitment to the improvement of that which is known, the conditions of this life, and a realistic resignation to the inevitability and finality of death. The Secularist poets viewed orthodox beliefs in an afterlife as, at best, an untestable hypothesis, and, at worst, as a morbid preoccupation in rejecting this life.[38] Their efforts to preach the gospel of a pantheistic return to a natural, elemental source can be viewed as another function of the movement's general tendency to fill the intellectual and "spiritual" vacuum left by their rejection of orthodoxy. Rather than being bereft of hope, Secularist poets vowed to improve the life of man and accept the conditions and limitations of the Life principle.

The Secularist poets' views of death are closely matched by their perception of Nature. As in the case of death, Nature manifested for the Secularists both awesome and terrible aspects as well as a measure of consolation. The potential for consolation in Nature is important and is a function of the general optimism held by Secularists:

The sun, great source of life and light,
 Revives the bounteous earth;
And death comes only like the night
 Before the day's new birth.

All nature dies and lives again,
 That's the unbending law,
Nor can a thing exist in vain--
 The work's without a flaw, (W. W. "Rhyming Queries").

Not surprisingly, the single most characteristic feature of Secularist poetry regarding Nature is that Nature is a great teacher. Nature was often contrasted to the "unnatural" vices that religious belief created, such as the artificial, arbitrary system of the nobility and the priesthood, neither of which have counterparts in the great natural system of life. Nature is wise, kind and harmonious. If respected properly, nature contributes to utilitarian happiness. Without a belief in a supernatural heaven, Secularist poets found in Nature an earthly heaven. A condition of its heavenliness is that Nature is eternal. In its eternal form, of course, the life cycle is constantly undergoing the process of change:

> Yet nothing is destroy'd, I do believe
> But what great nature wisely dooms to die,
> Nature, the everlasting![39]

Man is an integral part of nature. But the cruel tragedies of existence are man-made since the "priestly drones" had demanded riches by "debasing human reason" and have succeeded in keeping the starving masses from even a meager existence. The passions which were aroused by "superstitious error" led to warfare, but had "Freethought's glory . . . unveiled its sun, / The need were past for cannon or for gun."[40] The poet, looking at such terrible, man-made weapons, asked:

> Is it, O man! for this thou tak'st from earth
> Her great, immeasurable wealth?
> Are not her kindly gifts to thee more worth
> Than blasting Nature with herself?
> When wilt thou live on earth, thy common mother,
> In peace, nor butcher every man his brother?
>
> (Walter Reynolds, "The Cannon").

Thus, Walter Reynold's poem described the potential for mankind's cruel misuse of nature. Such tragedy could be avoided if men would only heed the lessons taught by Nature. The orthodox preacher "teaches" that man "is sunk in sin and shame." Rejecting this view, another poet sought an "out-door teacher / In a temple of leaves," where Nature, who "told me another story," said:

. . . O man! if directed by love,
Care not for churches, spurn creeds though you should,
You yet shall surely discover the good."[41]

J. Crichley Prince found that,

There's a harvest of knowledge in all that I see
For a stone or a leaf is a treasure to me . . . .
And my hopes are that men who are toiling and grieving
Will make this fair earth like heaven they believe in.[42]

Prince's notion that earth could be like heaven is found in numerous Secularist poems. This temporal, material heaven would manifest distinct utilitarian features, as envisioned by "Signum" who longed for the time,

When honour freely shall unfold her flower,
And truth breathe her pure programme through the world;
When self shall be restrained, and all shall learn
To check their feelings for the general good . . . .
When aspirations find their heaven in Nature
And sweet contentment with this lovely Earth
Has cured that feverish criminal disease--
The morbid craving for a second life,
("The Fairy's Prophecy").

Thus, for the Secularist poets, nature existed as a macrocosmic unit, whole and eternal, and not subject to the miraculous whims of a deity. From nature man could learn immortal truths. Man could also achieve a harmonious existence with his brothers if he could but reject the false teachings of the orthodox religions--teachings based on a belief in the supernatural. Nature needed no outside force to give it life. Indeed, it is the very source of life--a universal, eternal life force into which man is born as a conscious entity but with only a temporal existence. In serving the purpose of filling the vacuum created by the rejection of God, nature came to take on some of the same characteristics that Secularists perceived in man. Freed from his religious shackles, man is innately free and noble; nature is the same. Man is rational and capable of delving to the source of all apparent mysteries. Accordingly, nature is rationally harmonious and harbors no secrets from those who are willing to investigate her marvels properly. As men should work together for the happiness of the greatest number, nature also operates in a manner so that individual suffering becomes a necessary means to an end which insures the continued existence of the life principle itself. And, finally, men have turned from supernatural revelation of "truth" to a trust in their own verifiable findings. Thus, Secularist man recognized his proper place in nature and studied that rather than an unproveable, mystical set of truths.

The Secularist poets asserted that to make of earth a heaven it would be necessary to employ self-help and follow a rigorous

course of duty. In The Victorian Frame of Mind, Walter Houghton noted that with the exception of the word "God," the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary was "work."[43] The Secularist poets were certainly not atypical of the Victorian trend in this matter. As often as they rejected a supernatural God in their poetry, the Secularists asserted the necessity of self-help and the duty of work. Secularist poets believed that men who placed their trust and faith in a God were, in effect, turning their backs on their fellow men and diminishing the possibility of creating a just and prosperous earthly society. In order to create a heaven on earth it was, first of all, necessary for each individual to trust in himself. Orthodox religion perceived man as essentially weak, a fallen creature alienated from the eternal source of goodness. Conversely, the Secularist poets felt that:

> Each one can help the great work on,
> Beginning with himself;
> He is his own great Rubicon . . . .
> Conquered or crossed, beyond there lies
> A fairer world to win . . . .[44]

J. M. Peacock's "Old Reformer" preached that but for:

> . . . this dire want of faith in one another,
> Wrong's temples soon might crumble into dust,
> And earth become to all one genial mother,
> ("The Old Reformer").

Peacock's Secularist poetry is representative of the Victorian commandment to perform one's duty and work. "By work I worship," he claimed in "The Sceptic's Communings."[45] In rejecting the aristocratic values and mode of life, where a minority of the population lived off the toil of the majority, Peacock spoke for the working class Secularists: "he who would live and refuses to toil, / Is the rankest of weeds that encumber the soil," ("The Awakening of the Workers"). Cairn Tierna, or Charles P. O'Conor, the Irish peasant poet, expressed the crucial difference between the Secularist call to work as opposed to that command heeded by orthodox Victorians:

> Come, brothers, come, we've work to do!
> Up, let that work begin!
> We'll show we are the Deity--
> We've power to make us men![46]

Thus, while the motivating factor behind the orthodox Victorian impulse to work was to please God and prepare for the coming eternal judgement by developing one's God-given talents,[47] the Secularists saw the duty of work as a means to the end of becoming like a god. This is in line with the Secularist perception of the almost unlimited potential of man to effect a just society and material prosperity through the rational application of the powers of science. Having divested themselves of their old faith in a God, Secularists were free to turn their energies to the immediate improvement of the earthly human condition. Philip Bourke Marston, the blind poet and

a close friend of James Thomson, weighed the evidence for "false rest" (an afterlife) and "true rest" (the Secularist return to nature in death). After convincing himself of the reality of "true rest," Marston confessed that he felt

> . . . an ardor never felt till now--
> A stimulus to work, to keep the vow
> I take to help each weary woman and man.
> There was no room before in my life's plan
> For this--my dreams and visions filled it so;
> But now I know the way my soul shall go,
> Shall I not use it here as best I can?[48]

Apart from the strictly thematic features of Secularist poetry, one must be impressed by its widespread use of a poetic diction based on religious vocabulary. Fully one quarter of all the non-Thomson poetry that appeared in the Reformer between 1870 and 1880 contained significant proportions of such diction. The institutions of the Secularist movement, as noted in chapter one, bore an unmistakable similarity to certain elements of orthodox religious institutions. While Bradlaugh and other leaders of the movement traveled throughout Britain to spread the Secularist message against religion, the daily organization of the social institutions of the main Secularist branches in London, Birmingham, and Leicester was designed on a religious model. Thus, it should be no surprise that

the Secularist poets used certain lexical items from religion in their poetry.

They used religious terms for two basic purposes. Their poems either condemned religious belief and practices through ridicule, irony or satire, or certain religious terms were appropriated for secular use as in the example, "Science is the only Providence." Secularist poets used certain religious terms far more often than others. These composed a small group of words that appeared in scores of instances during the decade: heaven, soul, God, priests and divine. Other items which appeared in Secularist poetry quite frequently were creed, spirit, hell, gospel, angel, faith, sacred and pray. Almost all of these words could lend themselves to either a use which was critical or negative in its view of religion or a use which was in praise of the emerging secular consciousness of nineteenth-century man.

A "Modern Athenian's" poem, "Homily of Life," represents an excellent example of the simultaneous use of these two approaches in Secularist poetry. The poet hopes:

> . . . to bury the dogmas bedabbled with blood
> That have falsified God since the days of the flood!
>
> For shedding of blood give us <u>shedding of light</u>;
> The fountains of science fill up to their height;
> Nor Nature's own gospel proclaims every day,
> That salvation for man is by no other way, (original italics).

Thus, the Secularist Athenian rejects the bloody history of the religious past to place his "faith" in the salvation of mankind by science. Concerning "The Lot of the Poor," William Elder wrote of the "bishops and priests," in league with the monarchs, and that the

> . . . Gospel they preach is a message for slaves,
> To be spurned by all who would be free . . . .
> The ploughman must drive with his team over the plain,
> For alas! though he labours and sows in the field,
> 'Tis another who reaps, called the "lord of the soil",
> Whilst Gospel and law the iniquity shield
> His stealing the fruits of the husbandman's toil. . . .
> Let us strive for our rights, for our claim is divine . . . .[49]

Elder's purpose was a polemical one--to associate the social system's evil inequities with religious teaching. At the same time, his cry that "our claim is divine" serves to emphasize the Secularist belief in rational man's new found divinity. Thus, while a "Modern Athenian" relegated the bloody horrors of orthodoxy to the past, Elder conceived an ongoing conspiracy between temporal and spiritual authority to keep the masses in a subservient state.

Some Secularists, however, were cognizant of the brutal past, the improving conditions of the present and the bright promise of the future. Andrew Vorner's poem, "Progress," tells how the Freethought army is doing battle with "God and gods" and will be remembered by posterity as its

. . . crusade of light
Waved o'er a world of mental blight
The glorious flag they bore . . . .
And, washed from ethical disease,
The new-born world shall roll along,
Immortal in her endless change,
Omniscient in her boundless range,
Almighty in her hate of wrong. . . .
And that fierce light shall scorch the creeds--
The battle-ground on which ye fell,
And burn old superstition down,
And scorch the mitre and the crown,
Ay, fiercer than the fabled hell!

The foregoing examples of Secularist poetry all exhibited the general tendency to use religious terms both negatively (against religion) and positively (for Secularism) depending on the context. A good example of a poem which was singularly negative in its extensive use of religious diction concerned "The Moody and Sankey Revivals" by a poet who signed his work "F. B." In this relentless attack against the revival meetings held in Britain by two American preachers during the mid-decade, the Secularist poet condemns the "dim religious light" and "faith's distorted eye." Hell is a "future state [with] poor sinners broiling" because "a serpent once succeeded spoiling / A masterpiece its maker has created." The results of the revival, from the Secularist viewpoint, are conversions of "minds

demented" because they "wake not reason, but excite the feeling." F. B. concluded that:

> These flickering revivals are the dying
> Spasmodic motions of the faith outgrown,
> And like religions which have gone on before,
> Will leave its wrecks on Time's eternal shore.[50]

Conversely, J. M. Peacock's "Phases of Progress" uses a religious vocabulary that is exclusively in praise of Secularism. Through the darkness of modern man's doubts and fears breaks a "ray of redeeming light":

> Beaming with hope, and the faith that cheers,
> Faith in the triumph of truth and right,
> Faith in the good that is in our kind. . . .

The poet beholds "friends of humanity" who are "self-sacrificing martyrs to good, / Men who would barter not truth for gold." Love is "enshrined" on the brow of woman; love is a "balm" for all modern woes. "Truth's light" is the "light of true glory." In the other numerous examples of this Secular attempt to employ a poetic diction derived from the object of their protests, the poets' purposes are quite clear. The brutal realities of the dark side of religion could be exposed and banished from human experience. Still, a residue of powerful emotional experience remained attached to certain religious

concepts and the Secularists had to deal with these in some manner. Rather than completely deny their usefulness, the Secularist poets chose to adapt them to their Secular purposes. Earth could become a heaven. Individuals possess a "soul" that emerges uniquely for the flickering moment that is life but in death the soul becomes again a part of the great "God," nature. Mankind itself is divine as it realizes its inherent potential for creativity and the ability to become an active, powerful agent in the universal life cycle. In thus employing religious terms in their poetry, the Secularist poets hoped to remove the superstitious husk in order to encourage the secular growth of the emotional seed to which all people responded.

When Secularist poets addressed their poetry to the past history of mankind, they almost invariably portrayed the past in images of darkness. Andrew Vorner's "Progress" referred to the classical image of the unwinding of the thread of man's fate, in first the black of the past, then the grey of the present and, finally, the hoped for "golden thread" of the future. The religious world view of God and gods caused men to grope in gloom, "mid the mist of creeds, / and dark in blood . . . ." Peacock, addressing the supposedly enlightened "Watchers of the Night," asked if they see "truth's glorious light" breaking through the night of the present, or is it merely "meteor-like, a fitful gleam" that, dream-like, disturbs the darkness? Love waits for the light of truth "To cast from earth life's darkest ban." The poet is apprehensive lest "falsehood still should draw / A darkness o'er the light that's true."[51] William Elder's "The Teaching of Truth" employs other imagistic

features that often accompany references to darkness to express the poet's refusal to believe

> . . . base creeds that bind,
> Whilst millions pine to be relieved
> From chains that chafe and wound the mind--
> Chains which hireling priests did link
> And forge, in ages dark and drear,
> Ere mankind yet had dared to think
> Or merged from superstitious fear . . . .

Elder's poem succeeds in calling upon fears based on the experience of the historical Inquisition with its torture chambers and dark dungeons. Thus, the numerous images of darkness are often part of a larger context that also includes the terror and fear of the religious past, the "holy" and unholy wars that the masses fought at the bidding of their temporal and spiritual leaders, the chains of serfdom and slavery that bound the ignorant, trembling people to the land that they diligently worked but could not own. The dark, destructive storms of night that lash the sea into raging violence are either the promise of the storms of revolution that will sweep mankind into the bright future, or they are the storms of ignorance that will abate as the rational dawn of modern mankind breaks over a calming sea. The rational mind, to Vorner the mind's "Promethean ray," ("Progress"), casts light which pierces the darkness and promises a luminous earthly heaven. Men in the past, however, who were unable to exercise this

Promethean gift because of the superstitious intellectual milieu, were described by Secularist poets as victims of blindness. The Secularist poets reserved for modern times, when man's rational faculties could be freely exercised, the images of clearsightedness and the full, gleaming light of the mature, rational, secular order. Occasionally, however, a more realistic, somber appraisal was made concerning Secular man's intellectual potential. "The Ode to Existence," by a poet who signed himself as "Germ," noted that the mind is relatively feeble in comparison to the mystery that is existence:

> As a lit candle, in the hand of Night,
> Sheds on our planet its faint-flickering ray,
> When dark winds, groping for some kind of light,
> On sable pennons wing their trackless way;
> So plays the highest grasp of human thought,
> Profound, uncaus'd, omnipotent on thee,
> Feebly perceiving, yet scarce knowing aught
> Of that which is, was, and ever shall be,
> One, all existence, infinite, divinest mystery.[52]

Conversely, Secularist poets also employed many images of light to express their hopes for mankind's present and future. J. M. Peacock's poem, "Old Phantoms," speaks of the "ages dark and rude" of mankind's "mental babyhood" when the "mystery-men" invented their fables which doomed the world to suffer ages of wrong. Blending darkness and

mystery, the "priestly knaves" made men fools and slaves and created tyrants. At last, "science went forth a sad world to save" and

> By the light of the truth, now pass away
> Old phantoms of death and terror,
> And the world awakes to a brighter day,
> From out of the shades of error.

The "phases of progress" perceived by Peacock in his poem of the same title tells of lights that

> . . . now are seen on the sands of time
> Beacons of hope o'er a sea of strife,
> Guiding the millions of every clime
> On to the goal of a brighter life.

In the context of a Republican triumph over the evils of Victorian monarchy, "Till the Daybreak" employs almost all of the standard images associated with darkness as well as those of light which tell of the future's promise. It is instructive to include a lengthy portion of this poem in order to see the Secularist rhetoric at work:

> The night is dark; the heavy clouds close o'er us,
> And we stand watching till the dawn shall be;
> Behind us is the darkness, and before us
> Thunders unseen the tempest-troubled sea.

Yea, dark it is, and waiting-time is weary;
 Yet have we faith that it shall end e'er long,
And, sudden rising through the darkness dreary,
 Ring in our ears the joyous morning song.

Aye, very dark, and full of rain and thunder,
 The clank of chains, and cries of tortured slaves;
Yet do we know the clouds shall roll asunder,
 And the pure sun bring peace upon the waves.

Upon the shore we stand with eastward faces:
 The night is long; we doubt not, neither fear;
Though from the blackness of the earth's dark places
 Comes not a word of courage or cheer.

As on the earth night giveth place to morning,
 As after storms the gentle calm doth come,
So after this dark night of shame and scorning,
 The morn shall rise, and the loud storm be dumb. . . .

So wait we on the shore, and gaze before us,
 Until the dawn comes that shall come ere long;
Till from the world shall rise the mighty chorus,
 And glorious thunder of the morning song:

Till on the sea the golden light shall glitter,
Dispelling these foul phantoms of the night--
Each cankering wrong, and all the bondage bitter,
And the Republic dawn upon our sight.[53]

The remarkable poem by Bronte Ros, "Fiat Lux," one of the few examples of Secularist poetry to express the deep inner doubts of an infidel, also uses light as a reassuring symbol of the rightness of the poet's Secularist decision. After several stanzas which describe the results on his conscience of the "marks of the mighty monster / Whom I fought with long ago," the poet cries,

Courage, thinker. Thou shalt conquer;
That thou seekest thou shall find.
Through the clouds the sun is peering--
Light is coming from behind . . . .

Through the mist of future ages
Comes a time of fuller worth
When . . . we will have our heaven on earth.

A final image cluster which parallels the use of references to the dawn, day, the sun and other images of light, is the Secularists' repeated use of "maturity" images. Peacock's poetry makes numerous references to the "mental babyhood" of man's early history. Perhaps he set an example that other Secularist poets emulated for we find

Saladin (W. S. Ross), in his first appearance in the Reformer, chastizing his Secularist brethren for allowing the "Man of Galilee" to remain "England's virtual king." "Shame," he wrote,

> If tales that pleased the infant world
> When at its infant play
> Shall wither with their blight and curse
> The manhood of today![54]

W. Ormond's poem, "Man on Earth," narrates his own intellectual growth from belief in the Biblical account of creation to belief in the much longer existence of man based on archeological and geological discoveries. The entire poem is constructed so that Ormond's personal maturity reflects the macrocosmic development of maturity in the human race, from a naive, childish belief in the Genesis account of creation to manhood's clear perception of a scientific reality. In a similar manner, a score of Secularist poets praised the rejection of infancy's fears and the slavish mimicry of mankind's early childishness. With the breaking of the inspirational dawn, modern Secular man sunders his intellectual chains and steps forth to meet the challenge of a new age--self-confident, fearless, clearsighted and materially prosperous in his new found harmony with the life of the universe.

The poetry of the Secularists represents very well the restless stirrings of many Victorians who experienced anxious doubts about the religious and social framework which they had inherited from

previous centuries. The Secularist poets were not so optimistic as to be unrealistic. They seldom expressed a blatant self-satisfaction. Rather, the tone of the decade's Secularist poetry was tentative hopefulness. The forces of intellectual and social repression, while still dominant, were in the descendant. The ascending forces, as the Secularist poets perceived the situation, were the combined forces of science, rational skepticism, and republicanism. The social and intellectual realities of the day, however, kept the optimism of the Secularist poets from being other than guarded.

The Secularist poetry examined in this chapter demonstrated certain Victorian attitudes which Walter Houghton discusses in The Victorian Frame of Mind. Since his work mentions only the acknowledged leaders of Secularism, Secularist poetry reveals much concerning Victorian belief, the pain caused by the retreat of religion, and the Victorian "sense of cosmic isolation." Secularist poetry stands as an interesting testament to the phenomenon of what Houghton discusses as the "end to the discomforts of belief."[55] The poets' unabashed acceptance of the secular is marked by their often remarked sense of release from the chains of the past. While many Victorians perched painfully on the horns of the secular-religious dilemma--that is, lived in a modern age but held certain anachronistic beliefs--the Secularists anesthetized the prolonged pain of the situation through their wholehearted conversion to Secularism. They were not breast-beaters. The spectre of a scientific, mechanistic universe of chilling cause and effect did not in the least disturb the Secularists, although Houghton properly points out that their contemporaries were deeply bothered

by its implications.[56] Instead, the Secularists very sanely infused a secular joi de vivre into the mechanistic world view. Their pantheistic love of Nature and the cyclic process of the universe as revealed by the "laws" of science gave them no cause for troubled doubts and fears. Finally, it is obvious from a reading of Secularist poetry that for these poets there existed no "sense of cosmic isolation" caused by "the sudden destruction of a divine spirit uniting man to the universe."[57] In losing God, the Secularists found man. The tremendous energy that can be expended in a religious life of worship was transferred to creating a true brotherhood of humanity. Without having to worry about the ultimate state of his soul, a Secularist could work towards the creation of a heaven on earth.

In this group of Secularist poets we find examples of what Alasdair Mac Intyre has called our fathers.[58] We are the secularized, twentieth-century children of the famous doubters and a few atheistic nineteenth-century fathers. Reading the poetry of the Secularists is not an experience that leads to intellectual surprises. We do not ask the same questions that the Secularists asked. They were truly smitten with the first flush of their apparent victory over theism. Today, we no longer give much thought to the battles they fought. The Secularist poets' hopes that they would be remembered for the sacrifices have gone unfulfilled. Yet we have inherited a world view which the Secularists helped form. Thus, Secularist poetry appears to deal with relatively shallow concerns--but only to secular readers

of this century. It is impossible to recreate in ourselves the sense of release and relief that their poetry expresses because twentieth-century man does not face the same "foe." We have not inherited our problems so much as created them.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William Elder, "The Teaching of Truth," National Reformer, 15 June 1873, p. 375.

[2]A Modern Athenian, "Homily of Life," National Reformer, 5 October 1873, p. 215. The italics are in the original.

[3]J. M. Peacock, "To Christian Men," National Reformer, 28 December 1869, p. 348.

[4]Andrew Vorner, "Progress," National Reformer, 3 January 1875, p. 15.

[5]J. M. Peacock, "Come, Lovers of Nature," National Reformer, 3 September 1871, p. 158.

[6]W. Ormond, "Man on Earth," National Reformer, 31 December 1876, p. 424.

[7]J. M. Peacock, "Old Phantoms," National Reformer, 7 August 1870, p. 91.

[8]J. M. Peacock, "Oh! Give Us Peace," National Reformer, 16 January 1876, p. 39.

[9]William Elder, "The Lost Ship," National Reformer, 12 December 1875, p. 375.

[10]J. M. Peacock, "Unhappy England," National Reformer, 18 July 1869, p. 39.

[11]W. E., "The Poor," National Reformer, 10 July 1870, p. 30.

[12]J. M. Peacock, "The Awakening of the Workers," National Reformer, 4 January 1874, p. 15.

[13]J. M. Peacock, "Republican Song," National Reformer, 23 July 1871, p. 60.

[14]George Sexton, "Address to the Upper Classes," National Reformer, 27 September 1870, p. 343.

[15]J. M. Peacock, "Woman," National Reformer, 7 February 1875, p. 95.

[16]P., "Association to Protect the Constitution From the Encroachments of Women," National Reformer, 1 August 1875, p. 72.

[17]Bronte Ros, "Fiat Lux," National Reformer, 30 December 1877, p. 878.

[18]Sharagapas, "Educational Conflicts," National Reformer, 16 April 1871, p. 247.

[19]J. M. Peacock, "To Superstition," National Reformer, 6 July 1873, p. 15.

[20]E. W., "God," National Reformer, 15 May 1870, pp. 318-19. The italics are in the original.

[21]W. W., "Rhyming Queries on the Fall of Man and the Immortality of the Soul," National Reformer, 14 August 1870, p. 103.

[22]D. Waudby, "Free Thoughts," National Reformer, 4 March 1877, p. 140.

[23]Philalethes, "Rhyme and Reason," National Reformer, 11 January 1872, p. 23.

[24]D'Alembert, "The Immorality of the Soul," National Reformer, 27 July 1873, p. 58.

[25]Philos, "Deliverance," National Reformer, 23 February 1873, p. 119.

[26]Charles P. O'Conor, "A Poem for the Day," National Reformer, 30 December 1877, p. 869.

[27]F. B., "The Moody and Sankey Revivals," National Reformer, 1 August 1875, p. 79.

[28]John Baldwin Fosbroke, "The Bells of Lingen," National Reformer, 5 August 1877, p. 540.

[29]W. Elder, "A Question for Protestants," National Reformer, 18 February 1877, p. 111.

[30]J. M. Peacock, "Phases of Progress," National Reformer, 31 December 1871, p. 430.

[31]William Maccall, "Genius and Health," National Reformer, 6 September 1874, p. 157.

[32]J. M. Peacock, "Night Scenes in the City," National Reformer, 8 May 1870, p. 295.

[33]William Elder, "On My Mother's Grave," National Reformer, 7 September 1873, p. 159.

[34]Pharos, "The History of Man: The Alpha and the Omega," National Reformer, 17 December 1871, p. 395.

[35]Austin Holyoake, Secular Ceremonies: A Burial Service (London: Austin and Company, 1870), p. 3.

[36]Saladin, "Dirge," National Reformer, 2 January 1876, p. 11.

[37]William Maccall, "Seasons of Death," National Reformer, 12 June 1870, p. 383.

[38]Signum, "The Fairy's Prophecy," National Reformer, 2 May 1875, p. 283.

[39]B. T. W. R., "Sonnet," National Reformer, 11 July 1869, p. 23.

[40]Walter Reynolds, "The Cannon," National Reformer, 14 December 1873, p. 383.

[41]J. M. Wheeler, "A Sonnet: Two Sermons," National Reformer, 13 October 1872, p. 234.

[42]J. Crichley Prince, "Love of Nature," National Reformer, 23 February 1873, pp. 126-27.

[43]Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 243.

[44]Histrion, "Past and Present," National Reformer, 26 December 1875, p. 407.

[45]J. M. Peacock, "The Sceptic's Communings," National Reformer, 9 August 1874, p. 87.

[46]Cairn Tierna, "Our Charter Song," National Reformer, 20 January 1878, p. 917. The italics are Tierna's.

[47]Houghton, pp. 242-46.

[48]Philip Bourke Marston, The Collected Poems of Philip Bourke Marston (London: Ward, Locke, Bowden & Co., 1892), p. 255. Although Marston's poetry never appeared in the Reformer, he was an intimate associate of James Thomson's and they shared many Secularist values. Thomson suffered his fatal hemmorhage in Marston's apartment and the panic-stricken Marston could find no help for agonizing hours. Blind though he was, he apparently never forgave himself for not being of more help to the dying Thomson.

[49]W. Elder, "The Lot of the Poor," National Reformer, 27 December 1874, p. 407.

[50]F. B., "The Moody and Sankey Revivals," National Reformer, 1 August 1875, p. 79.

[51]J. M. Peacock, "Oh! Tell Me, Watchers of the Night," National Reformer, 25 June 1871, p. 414.

[52]Germ, "Ode to Existence," National Reformer, 13 February 1876, p. 108.

[53]C., "Till the Daybreak," National Reformer, 9 June 1872, p. 363.

[54]Saladin, "Hymn," National Reformer, 5 September 1875, p. 151.

[55]Houghton, pp. 48-49. Houghton's italics.

[56]Houghton, p. 68.

[57]Houghton, p. 85.

[58]Alasdair Mac Intyre and Paul Ricoeur, The Religious Significance of Atheism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 15.

O Poets, yours the mission be,
  The heart to touch and truth to breathe,
Till men of every clime shall see
  The sword lie rusted in its sheath.
With soul-ennobling, truthful strains
  The world awake to nature's voice,
That nations writhing in their chains,
  May rise to freedom and rejoice . . . .

J. M. Peacock
"The Bitter and the Better Time"
National Reformer
February 19, 1871, p. 119.

"Whether in the present state of health we are quite just to poetry is more than we can say; several poems have gone into the waste basket unread and unregretted."

Charles Bradlaugh
"Our Crowded Table"
National Reformer
March 19, 1876, p. 181.

CHAPTER III

THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF THE SECULARISTS

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the National Reformer managed to publish a quantity of poetry during the 1870-1880 decade. It also published numerous critical pieces as well. It may be said that poetry offered the aesthetic medium that best met Secularist critical expectations. Its history was much longer than that of prose narrative and included ample precedent for a wide choice of themes, the inclusion of moral teaching, and a greater degree of emotional release (if channeled properly). Furthermore, a very practical consideration may also have made poetry a popular subject for Secularist critics and readers. A poem is generally shorter than a novel and Secularists were very busy people. To read a stirring poem by Shelley or J. M. Peacock by the fireside was an activity that almost any Secularist could afford. On the other hand, the time demanded of a Secularist to read a long, serialized novel or a weighty three-volume novel could be better applied to the reading of Biblical criticism or popular science or to attending a Secularist lecture.

Secularist critics were generally eager to enlist the literary fame of great writers in their Secularist cause. Whereas contributors to the Reformer were divided on the merits of such

contemporary figures as John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin, they were in complete agreement about the genius of William Shakespeare. Thus, they included him, along with Sydney, Jonson, and Spenser and the prose writers Burton, Browne and Bacon as members of the "pagan renaissance which in England is the new birth of the Saxon genius."[1] Albert Johnson believed that Shakespeare, the "most sympathetic of all students of poor humanity . . . has suffered severely for his sublime eclecticism."[2] Noting that almost every type of polemicist had sought Shakespeare's testimonial (including Anti-vaccinators), Johnson believed that no group was so eager to reap the benefits of his authority as were the Christians. Scores of books had been written to prove Shakespeare's wide knowledge of Scripture "and this, too, in the face of many Liberal, even Radical, utterances to be found in his works," (p. 347). Specifically, Johnson wrote to refute Stewart Headlam's notion that Shakespeare believed in life on this earth as an "Ideal hell" made up of the "pangs of conscience, or remorse," (p. 347). Other references to Shakespeare exist in the Reformer; they are uniformly laudatory of his recognized genius.

In a review of Hippolyte Taine's History of English Literature, his chapter on the "Christian Renaissance," a period which was apparently almost coterminous with that known to the Secularists as the "Pagan Renaissance," is quoted at some length. Taine claimed that this era's distinguishing features were "the complete development of all faculties and all the lusts of man; the complete destruction of all the restraints and all the shame of man."[3] The reviewer continued to quote from the translation of Taine,

recounting the evils of the Christianity of the Renaissance, all of which were very familiar to Secularists: the Inquisition, unchecked despotism, ignorance, the harsh ecclesiastical tribunals. This fostered the "Puritan reaction" and its "fever and fanaticism," (p. 951). After these long passages from Taine which listed the horrors of the Italian and Christian Renaissances, the reviewer worked his way back to English literature through the great Puritan figure of John Milton. The reviewer believed that the seventeenth century gave to English literature this "mighty and superb mind, prepared by logic and enthusiasm for eloquence and the epic style," (p. 951). The reviewer quotes Taine again regarding the personality of Milton. What is interesting in this review after this point is that the reviewer stopped quoting from Taine to intrude his personal evaluation of Milton. He found him to be "a very iconoclast in his prose attacks . . . . harsh, bitter and terrible in his denunciations; a grand Puritan champion wielding his pen like a battle-axe," (p. 951). The key word here is "iconoclast" which every Secularist reader would have recognized as Bradlaugh's youthful nom de plume. The reference to Milton as a "champion" wielding his pen like a battle-axe" echoes the Secularist conception of Bradlaugh as their champion in the bitter war with the orthodox enemy. Another Secularist writer, A. B. F. H., writing about the English press, referred to Milton's "Essay on the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing" in a laudatory manner.[4] What should be noted here is that the reviewers followed the pattern of "appropriating" the great literary figures for the Secularist cause. The first (anonymous) reviewer, especially, who ignored the vast bulk of

Milton's great poetry and prose based on his fairly orthodox Christian world view, sought to associate Milton with certain aspects of the Secularist movement--an association which certainly would have shocked the poet.

Moving chronologically to more recent poets, it is almost impossible to overstate the importance of Shelley for the Secularists. Thomson, among many others in the movement, idolized him and even used the poet's middle name as part of his well-known acronym, "B.V." (for "Bysshe Vanolis," the latter word deriving from the name of the German poet, Novalis). In 1877, the Freethought Publishing Company published its own four volume edition of Shelley's works, "prettily bound in cloth, each volume being complete in itself at 2s."[5] Shelley's Queen Mab was the poem which Secularist critics referred to most often. Aveling found it to be "much abused" but "unequal."[6] Writing about "The Spread of Secularism," Justicia quoted sections from Queen Mab three times and the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" once.[7] His selections all bear distinct relation to themes that concerned Secularist poets. For instance, the apparent injustices of life on earth were related to Nature's "plan" by Shelley:

> There needeth not the hell that bigots frame
> To punish those who err; earth in itself
> Contains at once the evil and the cure;
> And all-sufficing nature can chastise
> Those who transgress her law; she only knows

How justly to proportion to the fault
the punishment it merits.[8]

The Secularist conception of Pantheism is found in another section from Queen Mab which Justicia referred to:

There's not one atom of your earth
But once was living man
Nor the minutest drop of rain
That hangeth in the thinnest cloud
But flowed in human veins . . . .
(Rogers, II, ll. 211-215, p. 245)

The latent romanticism of the Secularist's pantheistic conception of Nature is reflected in Shelley's lines:

How strange is human pride!
I tell thee that those living things,
To whom the fragile blade of grass,
That springeth in the morn
And perishes ere noon,
Is an unbounded world;
I tell thee that those viewless beings
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
Of the impassive atmosphere,
Think, feel and live like man;

That their affections and antipathies,
Like his, produce the laws
Ruling their moral state;
And the minutest throb
That through their frame diffuses
The slightest, faintest motion,
Is fixed and indispensable
As the majestic laws
That rule yon rolling orbs.
(Rogers, II, ll. 225-243, p. 246)

The comfort that Secularists took from their perception of the importance of Godwinian "necessity" was previewed by Shelley as he addressed

The Spirit of Nature! all sufficing power
Necessity! thou mother of the world!
Unlike the god of human error, thou
Requirest no prayers or praises. . . .
(Rogers, VI, ll. 197-200, p. 273)

Justicia was aware that some might ask, "What has this to do with Secularism?" His answer to this was that "as we journey on, let us all pluck the flowers by the way; let us search for the beautiful in nature, in art, in science; let us have 'music everywhere;' let us not leave to the churches and chapels the best tunes; let us have

sacred music sacred to the cause of nature and truth; good words can be found" (p. 109; original italics).

The four volumes of Shelley's works published by the Freethought Publishing Company contained the interesting editorial decision to publish the original version of "The Revolt of Islam" entitled "Laon and Cythna." Shelley's bookseller had refused to sell this poem in its original form; Shelley then re-wrote several parts of it. Mrs. Besant pointed out that "the atheism in it disappears in the emended text; the hatred for Christianity is softened down; the attacks on God are veiled under the title of 'power,' and 'it' takes the place of 'he,'" (p. 826). The original version said:

> Men say they have seen God, and heard from God,
> Or known for others who have known such things,
> And that his will is all our law, a rod
> To scourge us into slaves . . . .

But the re-written text reads thus:

> Men say that they themselves have heard and seen,
> Or known from others who have known such things,
> A shade, a form which, earth and heaven between,
> Wields an invisible rod . . . .

The original reference to "Oromaze, Christ, and Mahomet" becomes "Oromaze, Joshua, and Mahomet." Reference to "A Christian priest" becomes an "Iberian priest" and an "Atheist" was changed to "unbeliever." The suicide of a radical in the original poem had ended with "therefore shall ye behold / How Atheists and Republicans can die," but the later text said that "Therefore ye shall behold / How those who love, yet fear not, dare to die." Mrs. Besant noted that the original poem portrayed Laon and Cythna as brother and sister as well as lovers, "an idea which is, it appears to us, most revolting." However, since Shelley wrote it that way, "it is better to have his poem as he deemed to write it, and to let us know what the great poet thought, whether we agree or disagree with his views," (p. 827).

The fourth volume of the set contained Shelley's "prose tales," not particularly admired by Mrs. Besant, but she noted that "the impassioned lover of liberty" is evident in an "Address to the Irish People," the "Proposal for an Association of Philanthropists," and a "Declaration of Rights"--the last named alone being worth the price of the volume in the opinion of Mrs. Besant. This last work was originally designed as a broadside to be distributed in Ireland. This plan never succeeded and its later dissemination in England was also stopped by the authorities. The "Declaration" never appeared in print until W. M. Rossetti included it in an article on "Shelley in 1812-1813" printed in the Fortnightly Review.[9] Shelley's "Declaration" contains numerous concepts that the Secularists later espoused. The eighteenth-century continental and rationalistic

roots of Shelley's beliefs are very evident and can stand as valuable indices to the development of the Secularist form of Radicalism. Some of the key points of the "Declaration" explain the Secularist enthusiasm for Shelley:

> I. Government has no rights; it is a delegation from several individuals for the purpose of securing their own. It is therefore just only so far as it exists by their consent, useful only so far as it operates to their well being.
>
> XII. A man has the right to the unrestricted liberty of discussion. Falsehood is a scorpion that will sting itself to death.
>
> XIII. A man has not only a right to express his thoughts, but it is his duty to do so.
>
> XXVI. Those who believe that Heaven is, what earth has been, a monopoly in the hands of a favored few, would do well to reconsider their opinion; if they find that it came from their priest or grandmother, they could do no better than reject it.

> XXVIII. No man has a right to monopolize more
> than he can enjoy; what the rich gave to the poor,
> whilst millions are starving, is not perfect favor,
> but an imperfect right. (Clark, pp. 70-71)

Similarly, and in addition to the sections already quoted from Justicia's article, Queen Mab offers more ample evidence why Shelley reigned as the "Laureate of Secularism." For instance, kings are

> Those gilded flies
> That, basking in the sunshine of a court,
> Fatten on its corruption!--what are they?
> --The drones of the community; they feed
> On the mechanic's labour:
> . . . and yon squalid form
> Leaner than fleshless misery, that wastes
> A sunless life in the unwholesome mine,
> Drags out in labour a protracted death.
> To glut their grandeur (Rogers, III, ll. 108-116, p. 250).

Such lines are certainly the poetic source for much of the imagery of such Secularist poets as J. M. Peacock who was, for instance, particularly fond of referring to the social organization of bees--especially the worthless, aristocratic drones.

Shelley's views of the priesthood in Queen Mab certainly reinforced Secularist enthusiasm for his work. He wrote that

> Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower
> Even in its tender bud; their influence darts
> Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins
> Of desolate society . . . .
> Let priest-led slaves cease to proclaim that man
> Inherits vice and misery, when Force
> And Falsehood hang o'er the cradled babe,
> Stifling with rudest grasp all natural good.
>
> (Rogers, IV, ll. 104-120, pp. 256-257)

Shelley's anti-religious sentiments in Queen Mab were certainly as strong as those of his Secularist admirers. Of the three words "torn from a bleeding world! God, Hell, and Heaven," Shelley wrote that the first was

> A vengeful, pitiless, and almighty fiend
> Whose mercy is a nickname for the rage
> Of tameless tigers hungering for blood.
> Hell, a red gulf of everlasting fire,
> Where poisonous and undying worms prolong
> Eternal misery to those hapless slaves
> Whose life has been a penance for its crimes.
> And Heaven, a meed for those who dare belie
> Their human nature, quake, believe, and cringe
> Before the mockeries of earthly power.
>
> (Rogers, IV, ll. 210-220, p. 259)

Thus, of all the Romantic poets as well as those who followed, Shelley was for the Secularists the one poet whose "lustre is sui generis, unapproached, and unapproachable."[10]

It is now possible to define the nature of the relationship between the Romantics and the Secularists more clearly. The Romantic conception of the immanence of spirit operating in the material universe replaced the Newtonian concept of God's relationship to Nature being one of transcendence.[11] While Secularists would not accept a "supernatural immanence" operating in the material composing Nature, they did assert the concept of a "Life force" which animated all of Nature. Man, recognized as a deity of sorts by the Secularists, consciously acknowledged the existence of this "spirit" and, according to the Secularists, participated in it joyfully. Thus the Secularists borrowed from and altered the earlier Romantic notion of pantheism. Shelley's deep-seated antipathy toward priestcraft and religion thus made him a more attractive Romantic for the Secularists than the more orthodox Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Related to this type of pantheism shared by the Secularists and Shelley is the concept of Necessity. Writing about The Political Ideas of the English Romantics, Crane Brinton noted that "an alliance with Necessity presents all the advantages, and demands none of the sacrifices, attendant upon submission to a supernatural power. Necessity leaves a man his essential freedom, since it binds him to no law but that of his own being . . . . Self alone can restrain self. And Necessity is the original self."[12] Not only can "self alone

restrain self" but Secularists would be quick to add that self alone can help self. Man is not a passive, helpless cog in the vast machinery of a totally deterministic universe. Man can operate within a certain sphere beginning with himself, through self-help, in order to achieve the desired goal of heaven on earth. Both Shelley and the Secularists accepted the doctrine of Necessity. Shelley hoped that the masses would become self-assertive but it may be said that in viewing poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world he actually believed that the influence of the lone self on the world was limited to that produced by a very select group. Secularist poetry and criticism also reflects this view to a certain extent. Secularist poets, as noted in the previous chapter, sought to arouse the masses to action and self-improvement. Secularist critics consistently favored the poets, such as Shelley, who were firebrands and optimists. The masses who submitted to the oppression of the church and state had to be stimulated by the cries of the advance guard of poets.

Brinton went on to assert that Shelley "carried out rigorously the common romantic philosophy to its logical political conclusion. He is a prophet of pure faith in nature and in reason . . . . his central principle is simply revolution by miracle, the conquest of the promised land by a mere sounding of the trumpets of desire" (p. 235). The Secularists were not quite so naive. They recognized the immense strength of their foe; the stridency of their polemical writing is a good measure of this. However, it is possible to say that Secularists felt that they were the Victorian agents of

the "revolution of miracle." That is to say that Secularist convictions depended on the belief that the strength of the foe was in reality the fevered burst of dying energy that a nearly moribund social system might be expected to manifest. Despite its approaching death, it was an immense weight to be moved by such a small band. Shelley, the "ineffectual angel," had died too soon to witness the triumph of his prophecy. In a sense, he was to the Secularists as John the Baptist was to Christ. They needed a prophet to foresee the truth of a later age. As self-declared "gods," the Secularists were in a position to make the prophecy of Shelley become a living reality.

Although Shelley was certainly the favorite of the Secularist literati, only William Blake was accorded the singular honor of twice being the subject of four-part articles published in the National Reformer.[13] Gilchrist's biography had been published in 1863 and Swinburne's "Critical Essay on William Blake" followed in 1868. Readers of the National Reformer, however, had been treated to an even earlier critical essay by James Thomson in 1866. Thomson's essay on Blake is an important work of criticism because of what it reveals of Thomson's literary values as expressed in the Reformer and thus needs to be discussed here even though it falls outside the purview of this study.

In this essay, written in 1864 not long after Gilchrist's Life of William Blake,[14] Thomson welcomes the additional recognition and knowledge of the poet and his work enthusiastically. Thomson's admiration for Blake waned considerably, however, in the ten years

that followed the writing of his essay. In section XVIII of "The City of Dreadful Night" we find that Thomson included a Blakean figure who is vainly searching for an irretrievable golden past of childhood innocence. This futile search is in stark contrast to Thomson's view in the essay that Blake's "Songs of Innocence" show "that he who was mature in childhood and youth became in his manhood a little child. A little child, pure in soul as the serenest light of the morning, happy and innocent as the lamb leaping in meadows, singing all its joy in the sweetest voice with that exquisite infantine lisp which thrills the adult heart with yearning tenderness" (p. 222). Thomson believed in 1864 that "the essence of [Blake's] poetry is mysticism, and the essence of this mysticism is simplicity . . . . Its supreme tendency is to remain or to become again childlike" (pp. 229-230). Thomson felt that Wordsworth "ever aspired toward this simplicity" but that the ponderous pedantry" of his personality ultimately negated it. Coleridge, too, "had much of this simplicity" but it became befogged in German metaphysics. "Byron had it not at all" although he overflowed "with the energy of daemonic possession--an energy most mysterious, but in itself most impatient of mysticism." No one can "dare to judge" Keats though, had he lived, "all analogies . . . point to this end" of simplicity. Finally, we should not be surprised to find that, of the Romantics, Thomson asserted that "Shelley possessed, or was possessed by, this simplicity to the uttermost." Of later poets, Tennyson is like Byron--totally lacking in this gift. Browning, on the other hand, "has this simplicity in abundant measure." But it is Emerson who

"stands closest of all in relation to Blake" since both his poetry and essays are "little else than the expression of this mystical simplicity" (pp. 230-233). Ultimately, however, this impressive lineage of fellow poets will be abandoned by Thomson for the "Fellowship" of the initiates who inhabit the City of Dreadful Night.

By 1865, he had finally come to believe that the "diseased" Blake "never grasps or cares for the common world of reality."[15] Furthermore, Thomson never again attempted to create a comprehensive, systematic criticism. While Schaefer maintains that Thomson's conversion from "Romantic" to "realist" was complete by 1865, an interesting note from the Blake essay lingers with the observant reader of "The City of Dreadful Night." In a long footnote in the Blake essay, Thomson wrote that those who felt that "a dozen strong syllogisms seal up the perennial fountain of our deepest questionings, will affirm that Blake's belief was an illusion." Thomson then noted that "an illusion constant and self-consistent and harmonious with the world throughout the whole of a man's life, wherein does this differ from reality?" In words that must have disturbed some Secularists, Thomson declared that "metaphysically we are absolutely unable to prove any existence: we believe that those things really exist which we find pretty constant and consistent in their relation to us--a very sound practical but very unsound philosophical belief" (p. 223). These are important points to understand in order to recognize that Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" is nothing less than a Blakean mental event--unperceived by most, but vividly "seen" and lived by those with the proper "vision." Thus, although Thomson

may have rejected Blakean particulars such as innocence and "simplicity" (see section XVIII of the poem) we see that Thomson's encounter with Blake in 1864 still resonated in his poem published ten years later.

Obviously, Blake was a topic of considerable interest in the quarter-century which includes the decade discussed in this study. Retrieved from the depths of obscurity by the Gilchrists, the unheralded visionary poet's radicalism and iconoclasticism were very appealing features to Secularist critics and readers. The author of the 1875 Reformer article (based on W. M. Rossetti's edition of Blake's Poetical Works), G. W. Foote, was fairly sophisticated in literary matters. His importance in the movement and his rigorous lecturing schedule gave him the opportunity to know his Secularist audience better than Bradlaugh in literary matters. As a rationalist writing for a Secularist audience, it was imperative that Foote deal with the "problem" of Blake's visions. The first part of his article concludes with an account of the death of Robert Blake, the poet's younger brother, when William witnessed his brother's "soul ascend through the ceiling 'clapping its hands for joy.'" Later, Foote noted, St. Joseph revealed to Blake the (unfortunate) process of mixing his colors with diluted glue. "Let not the good reader laugh," Foote cautioned, for "all this is susceptible of explanation and will be duly considered," (p. 101). In the third installment, Foote asserted that although Blake possessed a visionary faculty "in an extraordinary degree . . . there is no necessity to transcend the natural in explanation of it, and confuse

internal and external, subjective and objective, together," (p. 131). Foote accurately noted that for the great Romantic, the faculty of imagination did not merely predominate, but "by the development of circumstances [was] exalted into a positive usurpation [and] came at length to dictate on matters properly amenable to reason." Ever the rationalist, Foote found that Blake's isolated career "wrought in him an intense interior life, so that at last he lost even his original slight hold on reality," (p. 131). Blake's imagination was "to him all in all, and what his mental eye perceived he believed in even more implicitly than he believed in the perceptions of his bodily eye." To Foote, it was "perfectly clear that his 'visions' were but developed subjectivities objectively extruded." Even Blake seemed to have been occasionally conscious of this for when asked by a lady just where he had perceived a certain pastoral vision, Blake solemnly tapped his forehead, saying "Here." (p. 131). Foote's rationalism did not prevent him from being sympathetic or understanding of Blake's visionary abilities. Foote correctly noted that Blake saw "not <u>with</u> but <u>through</u> the eye; the literal things of other men were to him symbolic, and their symbolic things literal." Such "master minds of all times are divisible into two great classes, logical and intuitive. Blake belongs to the latter class, and is one of its supreme types," (p. 131; Foote's italics).

Foote could not avoid involvement in the contested issue of Blake's sanity. "Was Blake mad?" Gilchrist said no; Swinburne said yes, and Rossetti hedged by saying yes, to some degree. Foote believed that "to call Blake simply a madman would, of course, be

absurd, but surely it is quite as absurd to suppose that the genius which produced some poems of almost matchless perfection and beauty, could, without being somewhere slightly touched, have been guilty of emitting such mere wind and splutter as occasionally disfigure Blake's work, or liable to such utter collapse of pinion after such noble and triumphant lyric flight," (p. 131; Foote's italics).

Regarding Blake's poetry, Foote wrote that even Blake's juvenalia was "a generation ahead of all his contemporaries in the essentials of his art"--a statement which reflects Thomson's judgement of Blake's early maturity. The lyric power of Blake's early verses was simply not manifested by any other poet of the age. In the Poetical Sketches, Foote detected "the delicate aroma and colour of the great Elizabethan" lyricists (p. 132). This lyrical faculty was Blake's "supreme glory" and reached its apotheosis in the poems "To Night" and "Spring," (pp. 181-182).

As mentioned earlier, Blake's political opinions were almost designed to enrapture a Secularist. Unlike other radicals of his day such as Priestley, Miss Wolstonecraft, Godwin, Paine and others, "Blake was an ardent Republican, not from reason, but from impulse and sympathy; peace he loved, and kings he hated." In fact, his "Republicanism was more pronounced and defiant than that of the practical unvisionary politicians," (p. 115; Foote's italics). He was a "fiery idealist" possessed of "simplicity and power, of habitual gentleness allied with infinite capacity to dare and resist, of exquisite tenderness blended with an inexhaustible possibility of withering scorn for everything mean and base." Furthermore, "he

utterly hated the conventional restraints of society which imposed a wretched obligation of silence and suppression on all passions and thoughts likely to ruffle its sweet complacency," (p. 116). In short, Foote might well have been describing the ideal Secularist poet. There can be no doubt that Foote's concluding comment on the importance of Blake represents the general opinion of Secularists. Though composed of some flabby, saccharine phrases, Foote's conclusion is enthusiastically laudatory:

> He is a star of the first magnitude in the constellations of poetry and art, shining with quenchless lustre amid the astral glories of their lucid firmament, companioned now in mid-heaven by the sacred band of great ones who have passed through the gloomy portal of death to emerge transfigured and deathless evermore (p. 182).

Foote did not make reference to the Christian and Biblical subjects found in Blake's poetry. Thomson, on the other hand, did attempt to deal with this issue in the Reformer. He wrote that

> Blake was always poor in world's wealth, always rich in spiritual wealth, happy and contented and assured, living with God. As to his soul's salvation, I do not believe that he ever gave it a thought, any more than a child thinks of

the question whether its loving parents will continue to feed and clothe and cherish it. He had none of the feverish raptures and hypochondriac remorses which even in the best of those who are commonly called saints excite a certain contemptuous pity in the midst of love and admiration: he was a thoroughly healthy and happy religious soul, whose happiness was thoroughly unselfish and noble. As to the "Christian Evidences," as they are termed, of which the mass of good people are so enamoured, in trying to argue themselves and others into a belief in a sort (and such a sort!) of deity, he would have no more dreamed of appealing to them than he would have tried elaborately to argue himself into belief in the existence of the sun . . . . As, however, Blake was supremely a mystic, it is but fair to add that he (and the same may be affirmed of Jesus) was unlike common Christians as thoroughly as he was unlike common atheists; he lived in a sphere far removed from both. In the clash of the creeds, it is always a comfort to remember that sects with their sectaries, orthodox and heterodox, could not intersect at all, if they were not in the same plane. Blake's esteem for argumentation may be read in one [of Blake's] couplet[s]:--

> If the sun and moon should doubt
> They'd immediately go out.

(Thomson, Speedy Extinction, p. 223)

In following his general observation of Blake's simplicity and childlikeness, Thomson surely struck a very sane note in this evaluation of Blake's religion. Thomson accepted Blake on Blake's own terms and, in doing this, certainly reached bedrock truth. It is true that Blake never had any faith in the orthodox notions of sin and hell because his concept of "forgiveness" between God and man and man and man obviated the necessity of such ideas. Thus, Thomson managed to reach an understanding of the "healthy" religion that Blake practiced--and he did it within a Secularist framework. Despite his later rejection of Blake, this is a good measure of the soundness of Thomson's original critical inclinations. It is important to note that Thomson basically accepted those elements of theistic belief in Blake which other Secularists would have found least harmful to the individual and society.

Other English Romantic poets did not fare so well at the hands of other Secularist critics. Aveling found that Wordsworth was the "most didactic of English versifiers," ("Darwin," p. 806). B. T. W. R. wrote of "the bitter sneer of capricious Byron" who "with the wild wail of Shelley" could plunge men into a "Slough of Despond."[16] Henry G. Atkinson, in a rare moment of kindness, allowed that Byron was of a "passionate, deep-feeling nature," who possessed a "frank, free spirit" which "left such an inheritance to the world for all time."[17] B. T. W. R. believed that Coleridge "who had an enormous opinion of himself . . . was hardly the greatest man of our century in England . . . . as a psychologist he may rank high; as a metaphysician he is an echo of Kant, Hegel, Schilling, and

Spinoza . . . ."[18] Regarding Coleridge's metaphysical speculations, B. T. W. R. acknowledged that "Coleridge perceived what every thinking mind has perceived, the difficulty of believing in two self-determining powers--viz., God and nature; as also the consequences of regarding them as identical." The result of such a perception is that "if nature be one power, and God another, and if God be not responsible for what nature does, then nature is a self-subsisting God," (p. 356; original italics). We should note the strange phenomenon of the appearance of Pantheism once again in Secularist writing. How are we to account for the eccentric mixture of the values of Romantic pantheism and strict rationalism? On the surface, they do not seem to be at all complementary. It may be said that Secularists attempted to unify the two through a thoroughly rational perception of the universal laws governing material existence combined with a Romantic perception of the god that is nature. The interesting result is that man himself becomes a god as the prime agent of science. Science is the ultimately rational "perceiver," yet it necessarily operates within the universe which it perceives and is not independent of it. Man is the active, motivating force behind science. Thus, man's rational faculty becomes that very immanence (or takes the place of spiritual immanence) which the Romantic poets perceived in nature. In this manner, we can account for the Secularist admixture of a Romantic pantheism and scientific rationalism. This explanation also succeeds in finding the origin of the deity of mankind which Secularists "worshipped."

Scattered references to the other poets living at the beginning of the nineteenth century indicate that Secularists were aware of their existence, but the references suggest little in themselves of Secularist literary values. The absence of commentary on John Keats is nothing short of striking. Perhaps the poetry of Keats simply did not lend itself to Secularist commentary as he was not a "systems-builder" as were Shelley, Blake and Coleridge.

In essence, the Secularists found in the Romantic poets the "free spirits" that they really longed to be. The revolutionary ardor of Blake, Byron and Shelley was immensely meaningful to the Secularists. These English Romantics had witnessed either the reality of the French Revolution or its emotional aftermath. Most importantly, they were Englishmen who accepted the basic premises of the French Revolution, if not the emotional bloodbath that followed. Their poetry is filled with the fervor aroused by the revolutionary zeitgeist. Shelley and Byron did not live to a possibly reactionary old age as had Wordsworth, that "most didactic" of English poets. Blake remained staunchly true to his own idiosyncratic revolutionary vision. His refusal to be imprisoned in the systems devised by other men certainly spoke immediately to the freethinking Secularists who were, just possibly, ironically "imprisoned" in the Newtonian satanic mills of the modern "scientific-quantitative" world order that Blake had so unhesitatingly rejected. Whereas Blake had valued the operation of the imagination as a manifestation of Christ's immanence in man's history, Secularists changed the emphasis. Thus, for Secularists the operation of scientific

rationalism made possible by man's creativeness became the god-like immanence that infused material existence. Secularists may not have been as "trapped" in Blake's mills as a casual glance might reveal. Newton's science was distinctly quantitative and, as Piper noted, "transcendent." Nineteenth-century science, on the other hand, was not so mathematically oriented but had, instead, branched into the organic sciences--biology, botany and geology, for instance. These sciences are more directly related to the dynamic, organic characteristics of Nature than the science of Newton's era and more easily lend themselves to a perception of pantheistic immanence.

Furthermore, the Romantics communed with Nature in a way that Secularists admired and wished desperately to practice. We must not doubt the reality of the interrelated divinity of man and nature for the Secularists. But their very anti-theistic rhetoric and coldly analytical approach to reality and the wonders of the universe militated against a more overt manifestation of nature worship as seen in Romantic poetry. Instead, their emotions were driven into sublimated forms of expression. Thus, modern secular man came to be the object of Secularist worship in that he was the "creator" of the science which had discovered the immutable laws of nature. The American Secularist, Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, captured the idea very well in his oration entitled "What is Religion?": "Man has deceived himself. Nature is a mirror in which man sees his own image, and all supernatural religions rest on the pretence that the image, which appears to be behind the mirror, has been caught."[19] Instead of worshipping the illusory supernatural "source" behind the

mirror, Secularists worshipped the reflected image (nature) and its "real" source (man). The Secularists, however, could not have rekindled the spirit of Romanticism. The decades intervening between the passing of the great Romantics and the period of time being discussed in this study witnessed a drastic alteration in man's conception of nature and God. Thus, while the Secularists placed great value on the creeds of the Romantics, they could not break the bonds of time in order to "see" the world as their "spiritual fathers" had. But it may be said that the Secularists borrowed from their Romantic predecessors and thus adapted pantheism to meet their own unique needs.

Of their contemporaries, Secularist critics favored Algernon Swinburne over all other poets. Annie Besant, in reviewing E. C. Stedman's edition of Victorian Poets, expressed gratitude that the American critic had praised Swinburne's verse. She found "the essay on Swinburne very good; foremost he notes Swinburne's marvelous power of word-painting, his unrivalled melody of rhythmic measures." After a lengthy quotation from Stedman regarding Swinburne's mastery of "word-painting," Mrs. Besant concluded that "true praise is this of Swinburne, our mightiest master in song, whose chants to Liberty inspire as do none others save those of Shelley . . . ."[20] E. H. G., reviewing Swinburne's 1871 publication of Songs Before Sunrise, also struck the note of comparing Swinburne and Shelley. Of Swinburne, E. H. G. wrote that "since Shelley, no poet has been more fearless in his utterances, more true to the inspiration within him," (p. 194). The critic recognized that Swinburne's reputation had been blackened

by "a certain class of critics" but he "is now safely enshrined in the imperishable literature of our country." E. H. G.'s review manifests some Secularist discomfort with Swinburne's earlier tendency to write of "the 'rapture of roses' of love, and the sphere of amorous poetry . . . ." Having turned more recently to a "nobler and loftier theme," the critic concluded of Swinburne that "it is fitting that the noble offering he has now made to the cause of Liberty and Republicanism should receive some acknowledgement," (p. 194). E. H. G.'s selection of lines from the Prologue to the poems in the volume indicates typical Secularist interest in man's natural, material values, noting that man's

> . . . soul communes and takes cheer
> With the actual earth's equalities . . . .
>
> His soul is even with the sun,
> Whose spirit and whose eye are one . . . .
> Him can no God cast down, whom none
> Can lift in hope beyond the height
> Of fate and nature . . . .

Special mention is made of "Before a Crucifix" and "Hymn to Man," "which the reviewers have been too cowardly to quote." E. H. G. noted that the former poem "is a noble outburst of indignation against the helplessness of Cristianity to ameliorate the condition

of the people." The reviewer quotes from "Before a Crucifix" as the paupers kneel before the crucifix:

> It creaks and rocks from left to right
> Consumed of rotteness and rust,
> Worm-eaten of the worms of night,
> Dead as their spirits who put trust
> (Round its base muttering as they sit)
> In the time-cankered name of it.

The latter poem, the "Hymn of Man," was written during the 1870 Ecumenical Council at Rome and is a strong protest against theism. E. H. G. quoted lines from the "Hymn" which demonstrated "the decay of the belief in a personal God":

> By the spirit he ruled as his slave is he slain who
> who was mighty to slay,
> And the stone that is sealed on his grave he shall
> rise not and roll not away,
> Kingdom and will hath he none in him left him, nor
> warmth in his breath,
> Till his corpse be cast out of the sun will ye know
> not the truth of his death?

Appropriately, the review of Songs Before Sunrise concludes with Swinburne's sonnet on Shelley, "Cor Cordium." While this

re-emphasizes the Secularist yoking of Swinburne and Shelley, an earlier comment in the review underlines Secularist critical values which both poets shared. E. H. G. praised Swinburne for being "no respecter of outworn creeds and hypocritical conventionalities." "If he were, he would lack, to our mind, the mood and genius of a true poet. There is in him none of that anxious desire to fit his thought into the moulds of 'orthodoxy,' of which our century affords more than one conspicuous and lamentable instance," (p. 194). Thus the reviewer cites Swinburne's matter as his distinguishing feature rather than his command of metrical variations. Furthermore, a true poet is one who frees himself from the bonds of thought imposed by social convention. This is not a surprising position for the Secularists to have taken since they placed such great emphasis on the individual's duty or practice of freethinking.

Other Victorian poets were also the subjects of Secularist commentary. Ascidian believed that Tennyson and Browning were both "professed Atheists." He found that "both write from a quite neutral standpoint when they get on theological ground. It is difficult, perhaps, to clearly determine when the poet is speaking, and when he is dramatically impersonating another, and merely representing alien emotion and belief."[21] Tennyson's artistic genius allows him to portray with equal beauty "the knights that fight for their fair father Christ" and those sections of In Memoriam where as "openly as he dares . . . for a world bound by superstition," he expresses his "despairing longing for light and truth," (p. 75). Ultimately, Ascidian rejected both Tennyson and Browning as truly representative

poets of the age because "Tennyson deals more with nature then emotion, and is eminently an objective poet" (apparently, Tennyson should have paid more attention to man than nature), while Browning, who "is very dramatic, avoids for the most part depicting the anxious search for religious truth in which so many are engaged," (p. 76).

Ascidian's critical task in selecting poets representative of the age was closely tied to his attempt "to find out what part of their work is dramatic and what represents the writer's own mind," (p. 93). His problem originated in the often employed convention of the dramatic monologue where a speaker's voice may not be that of the poet. Secularist critics, of course, valued content over form. Thus, it becomes problematical for the Secularist critic to assign meaning and intention very specifically so that readers will be able to judge the true values of the poets. As poets truly representative of the Victorians, Ascidian selected Arnold, Dante Rossetti and Swinburne. His evidence in support of Rossetti's candidacy is rather flimsy based as it was on references to "The Burden of Ninevah" and three sonnets (XXXV, XXXVI and XXXVII). He makes reference to Arnold's fragment, "Mycerinus," and "Empedocles on Etna." For Swinburne, Ascidian chose "the general tone of 'Atalanta in Calydon,'" Poems and Ballads, and the usual pertinent quotations from "Hymn to Proserpine" exemplifying Swinburne's "defiant yells of triumph over the religion he hates," (p. 93). From Songs Before Sunrise, Ascidian selected "A Watch in the Night," "Hertha," "Hymn of Man," and "Before a Crucifix."

Contrary to Ascidian, another critic, B. T. W. R., found Browning to be the "greatest living imaginative writer among us, worthy to be ranked with Goethe, and a little below Shelley." Indeed, Browning is an excellent representative of the age since he is a Pantheist and has "transcended the vulgar creeds [and] ignored the popular theology," (p. 149). Speaking in general terms, B. T. W. R. asserted that "Pantheism is at work in the hearts and souls of earnest Infidels. The doctrine of the divinity of man . . . animates the finest poetry of this century." Taking a rather generous swipe at the Bradlaugh wing of the movement, he concluded by noting that "Negative Freethought" is not enough; what is needed to counter the skeptical tendency is "inspiration," (p. 149). In an earlier review, B. T. W. R. had similarly noted that "it is a higher religion, instead of a negation, that we want."[22] These and similar remarks expose a stirring in the ranks of the Secularist movement--a reaction against Bradlaugh's militancy and a desire to affirm the existence of a pantheistic god which, as we have noted, was actually Secularist man himself. It is highly significant that the vehicle for this reaction was poetry. Bradlaugh had little patience regarding aesthetic matters and was, perhaps, out of touch with this undercurrent of dissension within his movement.

A final review of an important volume of poetry is Henry G. Atkinson's commentary on Edward Fitzgerald's translation of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. For the most part, Atkinson was content to quote extracts from H. Schutz Wilson's article in the Contemporary as well as certain quatrains from the poem itself.

Wilson is quoted as saying of Khayyam that "he could not have held priestcraft in any reverence or respect . . . . In all times the greatest enemy of religion is the 'religious world.'"[23] The selections from the poem not unexpectedly demonstrate the carpe diem attitudes that Secularists shared with Fitzgerald:

> Oh! threats of hell and hopes of paradise!
> One thing at least is certain--this life flies;
> One thing is certain, and the rest is lies,
> The flower that once has blown for ever dies.
>
> Drink! for you know not whence you came nor why.
> Drink! for you know not why you go, nor where.

Finally, at the end of his article, Atkinson points out that Khayyam was well known for being an astronomer as well as a poet; thus, he was "like Lucretius, a profound philosopher as well as poet," (p. 204).

Atkinson's final words may serve to characterize much of Secularist criticism regarding poets and poetry. The Secularists demanded much of the poet. He must ever be an optimist in the vanguard of social change, be a Republican (or have revolutionary Republican sentiments), be anti-theistic (but also pantheistic), demonstrate a knowledge of and interest in science, and be willing to subordinate manner to matter in his poetry. Of all English poets,

Shelley most closely approximated the Secularist ideal--and Shelley was their unanimous choice as the Laureate of Secularism.

Probably the single most disturbing characteristic of Secularist criticism is its tendency to recruit the "famous names" for their Infidel army. This was seen in the instances of Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, and to a certain extent, Tennyson and Browning. Milton and Blake would certainly have had mixed feelings about their nominations to the Secularist circle. Of course, there are isolated works and passages in the canons of such artists that would recommend their authors to the Secularists. The humanistic values of these artists would often be sufficient grounds as the Secularists were also humanists. But the "selective perception" indulged in by Secularist critics reveals that they recognized that their own work was not up to the standards of the masters. Hence, they were as guilty of enlisting support from strange quarters as any Christian critics.

Generally, however, this chapter has so far demonstrated that Secularists were not all hopeless Philistines. Bradlaugh may have been impatient with and even ignorant of aesthetic matters. But he had the wisdom to leave such details in the very capable hands of James Thomson (when he was sober), Annie Besant and Foote, among others. The National Reformer was not the aesthetic desert that it might have been.

These remarks hold true only for poetry and the criticism of poetry; there exists no uniquely Secularist fiction of any merit. Only Winwood Reade produced a work of fiction that bears even a

remote resemblance to Secularist values. While Reade's Martyrdom of Man was popular with Secularists and other freethinkers for over half a century, his last work, a novel entitled The Outcast, published in 1875, was doomed to failure. It is a feebly written book which employs epistolary conventions and succeeds through its lack of clarity in confusing and confounding the reader. It recalls, however, Froude's Nemesis of Faith in portraying the tortured existence of a clergyman who has lost his faith. In The Outcast, Arthur Elliott loses his faith, his sanity and, ultimately, his life as a result of reading Malthus' Essay on Population and Darwin's Origin of Species, called by Reade the books of "Doubt" and "Despair" respectively. Though the novel apparently never reached any popularity even among Secularists, its concern with population as the key to both evolution and the accompanying cruelties of existence preceded by two years the 1877 Knowlton litigation involving Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant. Reade's fictional account of the demise of Elliott also sheds light on the way in which a freethinker who extricated himself from religious belief could be thrown into the deepest despair and pessimism. In Elliott's "vision" of existence, called "A New Thing Under the Moon," life on earth is viewed as "marred by the fearful tragedies which I saw everywhere enacted. It was nearly always blood and tears."[24] God as creator

> so designed the forces of nature that more animated beings were born than could possibly obtain subsistence on the earth. This caused a struggle for existence, a desperate and universal

> war . . . . Evolution was produced. We shall not deny that there is a kind of perverted ingenuity in the composition of this law; but the waste of life is not less clumsy than it is cruel . . . . At first, every step in the human progress was won by conflict, and every invention resulted from calamity . . . . war, tyranny, and superstition assisted the development of man . . . . The law of evolution is the law of death. Massacre is incessant . . . . the earth is a vast slaughter-house, and the ocean reddened with blood (pp. 3638).

The novel continues in this manner, at one point even referring to a strange anatomist who kept a menagerie of skeletons--including two of a chimpanzee and a man "standing side-by-side, their arms affectionately interlocked," (p. 112). While the novel possesses almost no literary merit (it was probably written while Reade was in the final throes of the fever, contracted in Africa, which killed him) it serves to demonstrate the depth of pessimism to which an "enlightened" freethinker could be plunged, much in the same manner as James Thomson. Most of the optimistic Secularists simply substituted a millenarian belief in the eventual triumph of the human race as a worshipful ideal. Those few who rejected the orthodox God but lacked optimism without an anthropomorphic replacement accordingly dwelt on the horrors of the moment, as graphically portrayed in The City of Dreadful Night. But The Outcast's concern with the conflict between religion and science, especially the issue of the validity of Darwin's theories and their implications concerning the credibility

of Old Testament revelation, probably magnified the tension between religion and science that existed in reality. By 1875, the year of the novel's publication, much of the earlier furor aroused by Darwin and his supporters in 1859 had subsided and organized religion was beginning to reach an accomodation of sorts with Darwinian principles. Bradlaugh and Holyoake, and other lesser Secularists, did not go to any extreme lengths to involve Darwinian principles in their attacks on religion. More important, in this regard, was their use of the scientific method in general in destroying orthodox shibboleths based on supernatural revelation. Furthermore, Secularists in general did not rely to any great degree on Darwin, very few of them, in fact, mentioning Darwin as an influencing factor in their "conversion" from theism to Secularism.[25] The Outcast, which probably deserves the state of oblivion in which it rests, is one of the few examples of fiction with clear Secularist overtones written by a freethinker in the 1870-1880 decade. Undoubtedly this isolation springs from the utilitarian residue to be found lingering among Secularists who often distrusted literature as frivolous. As mentioned before, self-help and self-improvement were properly achieved through meticulous and concentrated reading in "serious" areas of study: Bible criticism and Secularist polemics, scientific tracts and so forth. The result was that Secularists produced very little fiction and certainly nothing of note. The conflict between the aesthetic demands of an artist and the utilitarian, pragmatic, socially useful and uplifting reading is clearly delineated in the great success and dismal failure of Reade's last two books, The Martyrdom of Man and The Outcast. For

many Secularists, the issue of moment was the immediate improvement of man's life on earth based on the immediate destruction of religion. This aim, they thought, was best achieved by writing and reading books other than fiction. It is significant, therefore, that no works of fiction were ever advertised by booksellers in the Reformer nor were any novels ever reprinted by the Freethought Publishing Company. In the guise of rationalistic history, such as Reade's Martyrdom, Secular principles and theories are more effectively demonstrated than when dogmatically applied in a melodrama such as The Outcast. Secularists never developed a theory of realism for fiction, although Thomson abandoned Blake's vision in 1865 for a poetic form of "realism." Even this, in turn, was abandoned by the poet by 1870, the year that he first applied himself to "The City of Dreadful Night."

FOOTNOTES

[1]Anonymous, "Reviews," National Reformer, 27 January 1878, p. 933. Later references to this and others will be in the text.

[2]Albert Johnson, letter in "Open Column," National Reformer, 26 November 1876, p. 347.

[3]Anonymous, "Reviews," National Reformer, (second notice), 3 February 1878, p. 951.

[4]A. B. F. H., "The English Press," National Reformer, 26 November, 1876, p. 338.

[5]Annie Besant, "Secondhand Bookshelf," National Reformer, 9 December 1877, p. 826.

[6]Edward B. Aveling, "Darwin and His Work," National Reformer, 23 November 1879, p. 753.

[7]Justicia, "The Spread of Secularism," National Reformer, 16 August 1874, p. 108.

[8]Neville Rogers, The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), ll. 79-85, p. 249.

[9]David Lee Clark, ed., Shelley's Prose or the Trumpet of a Prophecy (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 70.

[10]E. H. G., "Songs Before Sunrise," National Reformer, 26 March 1871, p. 194.

[11]H. W. Piper, The Active Universe (London: The Athlone Press, 1962), p. 11.

[12]Crane Brinton, The Political Ideas of the English Romantics (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 166.

[13]James Thomson, "The Poems of William Blake," The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery, William David Schaefer, ed. (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1967), p. 214; and G. W. Foote, "William Blake," National Reformer, 14 February 1875, pp. 100-101; 21 February 1875, pp. 115-116; 28 February 1875, pp. 131-132; 21 March 1875, pp. 181-182.

[14]Thomson, Speedy Extinction, p. 214.

[15]William D. Schaefer, James Thomson (B.V.): Beyond "The City" (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1965), pp. 135-136.

[16]B. T. W. R., "Scepticism and Pantheism in Poetry," National Reformer, 5 September 1869, p. 149.

[17]Henry G. Atkinson, "Byron and His Religious Opinions," National Reformer, 3 October 1869, p. 211.

[18]B. T. W. R., "Spinoza, Coleridge, and J. E. Smith," National Reformer, 5 June 1870, p. 356.

[19]Robert G. Ingersoll, "What is Religion?" Dresden Memorial Edition (New York: C. P. Farrell, 1929), IV, p. 490.

[20]Annie Besant, "Reviews," National Reformer, 2 April 1876, p. 215.

[21]Ascidian, "Are the Poets With Us?" National Reformer, 30 July 1871, p. 75.

[22]B. T. W. R., "Analogy, Poetry, and Progress," National Reformer, 9 January 1870, p. 21.

[23]Henry G. Atkinson, "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the Astronomer-Poet of Persia," National Reformer, 24 September 1876, p. 204.

[24]Winwood Reade, The Outcast (New York: Peter Eckler, n.d.), p. 23.

[25]Susan Budd, "The Loss of Faith," p. 109. Mrs. Budd notes that in 48 or 58 cases where influential books were specifically mentioned, one was either the Bible itself or Paine's Age of Reason.

I.

BROTHER, and fellow-citizen with me
  Of this great city whose tremendous gloom
  Weighted on thee with the heaviness of doom,--
I walk its ways to-day, and seem to see
Thy saddest eyes; again with thee to be
  As on that day when, in this very room,
  Thine eyes and ours who watched thee saw Death
      loom,
A mighty monarch, strong to set thee free.

Still, still the same, this "City of Dreadful Night."--
  Still does it hear a sound of lamentation,
  As of a conquered broken-hearted nation;
Still glowers the Sphinx, and breaks us with her might
Of unresponsive front. There is no light;
  There is no hope; God, there is no salvation.

II.

No tears of mine shall fall upon thy face;
  Whatever City thou hast gained, at last,
  Better it is than that where thy feet passed
So many times, such weary nights and days.
Those journeying feet knew all its inmost ways;
  Where shapes and shadows of dread things were cast,
  There moved thy soul, profoundly dark and vast,
There did thy voice its hymn of anguish raise.

Thou wouldst have left that City of great Night,
  Yet travelled its dark mazes, all in vain;
But one way leads from it, which found aright,
  Who goes by it may not return again.
  There didst thou grope thy way, through thy long pain;
Hast thou, outside, found any world of light?

"To James Thomson, Author of 'The
City of Dreadful Night.'"
from Philip Bourke Marston's The
Collected Poems, p. 332.

CHAPTER IV

SECULARISM AND "THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT"

The single most noteworthy literary accomplishment of the publishing history of the National Reformer was its 1874 publication of James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night." Thomson's poem has, in the past, been called "the Victorian's deepest confession of despair,"[1] a poem which succeeds in rendering the anguish of the soul bereft of hope, struggling with "the loss of absolutes and the encounter with nothingness."[2] Thomson's own reputation is, in good part, closely associated with the reputation of his most famous work. It has been claimed that "'The City of Dreadful Night' . . . . is not the utterance of a sane mind,"[3] and that "there is something in this poem that borders on the geometry of delirium."[4] E. C. Stedman thought that Thomson was "the English Poe."[5] Because of Thomson's admiration for the Italian poet, others claimed that he was "the English Leopardi."[6] Paul Elmer More quoted Thomson, speaking of himself, as an "Ishmael in the desert" from his childhood ("James Thomson ('B. V.')," p. 583). The poem stands as a remarkable document in an age noted for both its optimism and certainty and pessimism and doubt.

This chapter will analyze Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" from the viewpoint of the Secularist context in which it was

originally published as well as from the biographical and psychological framework which necessarily surrounds any work. Any work of literature must be examined from a standpoint which is as inclusive of all critical approaches as possible. Prior to this study, the work of the Secularists had been almost completely ignored. Critics had paid scant attention to the Secularists and their possible influence on Thomson. No critic had ever sought to view Thomson's major poem within the total framework of Secularist beliefs and art.

Thomson's "vision" in "The City of Dreadful Night" departed radically from the general beliefs and values of Thomson's Secularist friends and audience. Of course, no artist must follow a "party line" even if he belongs to the party. The artistic integrity of the artist and his relationship to his work must be based on an uncompromising honesty. Thomson was not prostituting his art by publishing in the National Reformer, though he realized the consequences of publishing in a radical journal with very limited appeal. To be sure, Thomson's despair was due in good part to his lack of success in finding a "more respectable" publishing outlet for his work. In the last eighteen months of his life this outlet was found in the person of Bertram Dobell who arranged for the publication of "The City" under separate cover. Thomson certainly deserved the small recognition that he received and could feel deep inside that the praises of George Meredith and George Eliot were not empty. But the essential fact is that Charles Bradlaugh first published "The City of Dreadful Night" more than half a decade before Dobell's admiration for Thomson led him to help the stricken poet.

Thomson lived with Bradlaugh until 1866 and wrote for the Reformer from 1860 until 1875. His best friends came from the ranks of the Secularists; Austin Holyoake was his closest friend. Thus, Thomson lived and worked in an atmosphere that was highly charged with the radical beliefs of the Secularists. He first met Bradlaugh in Ireland in the army in 1852. By the time that he finished writing "The City" in 1873, his relationship with freethinkers had existed for more than a generation. Independently of them, Thomson had reached his own position of atheism and he maintained a position of independence regarding their reforming zeal. If the world of the daylight is illusory, as charged in "The City," then the Secularists were living an illusion along with all others who were not counted among the initiated citizens of the City. It may be said that Thomson, instead of writing from the Secularist point of view which surrounded his literary efforts, actually wrote against that view. This is not to say that Thomson tried to antagonize the Secularists (he did that anyway with Bradlaugh). Nor is this to say that Thomson wrote exclusively for a Secularist audience. It is to say, however, that Thomson's effort to awaken men to the "real night" from their daydreams was directed to even those few people who were the source of the literary milieu in which Thomson lived and wrote.

The depth of Thomson's sadness over the human condition cannot be adequately defined in our time. George Foote, a close friend of Thomson, is quoted by Salt concerning a recollection of the poet. "I vividly remember being with him once on a popular holiday at the Alexandra Palace . . . I observed my companion's gaze fixed

on a youth who limped with a pleasant smile on his face, but too obviously beyond hope of ever sharing the full enjoyment of life. Thomson's eyes followed him until he passed out of sight, and the next moment our eyes met. I shall never forget the gentle sadness of that look, its beautiful sympathy that transcended speech and made all words poor."[7] Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" also expresses the "beautiful sympathy" for men that the poet possessed. The poem is Thomson's attempt to leave "poor words" as a final testament to his perception of a mankind lamed like the youth in Foote's remembrance. With his sad eyes turned on mankind, Thomson saw Melencolia and the subjects who gazed on her

> The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
> The weak new terrors; all, renewed assurance
> And confirmation of the old despair.[8]

As this study has demonstrated, the Secularists were generally members of the "Party of Hope." While not altogether the only pessimistic voice that spoke in the Reformer, Thomson was certainly the major figure who stood in stark contrast to the millenarian Secularists. Although it is true that Thomson was entirely capable of writing very pleasing and light poetry, such as his 1866 "Sunday at Hampstead," and the fact is that an enumeration of his poems reveals that there are more "joyful" poems than pessimistic ones, his most lasting and forceful work portrays an extremely dark vision of life.[9] In the fifteen years during which Thomson's various prose

and poetic works appeared in Bradlaugh's Reformer, we find more than forty poems, fifteen critical and review articles, a score of satires, twenty-eight translations (mostly of Heine and Leopardi), a half-dozen biographical studies, and more than sixty articles on general topics and "Jottings." Because of his work, within the Secularist movement, he was acknowledged to be the living "Laureate of Secularism" (Shelley being the dead laureate). Thus, an examination of "The City of Dreadful Night" in the context of the Secularist Movement will reveal valuable insights into both the Movement and its most famous literary figure because of the poem's special darkness of vision.

On Sunday, 6 March 1881, Mrs. Theodore Wright delivered Thomson's "Address on the Opening of the New Hall of the Leicester Secular Society." In little more than a year, James Thomson would be dead of intestinal hemorrhaging suffered after a long bout of drinking. On 8 June 1882, Mr. Wright would read the "Secular Burial Service" over Thomson's casket as it was lowered into the grave that Thomson would share with his dead friend, Austin Holyoake. At the time of the Leicester "Address," it had been almost six years since Thomson and Bradlaugh had severed their personal relationship and ended Thomson's fairly regular employment with the National Reformer. The year after Thomson's death, his friends in Leicester, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Barrs, began a subscription for the purpose of erecting a memorial in the New Hall to "B. V." Of non-Secularists, George Meredith, William Morris, Algernon Swinburne and W. M. Rossetti contributed to the memorial. Of Secularists who contributed to the

fund, the name of Charles Bradlaugh was conspicuously absent. He had, however, contributed £1 "In Memory of Bysshe Vanolis and Ballincollig" (where they were stationed together in the army in 1852). But Bradlaugh did not wish to be otherwise associated with the project. In a letter to the Barrs, he stated that "if you are honoring a fine poet and prose writer you do well. If you are honouring a free-thinker for his devotion to a cause, you are utterly wrong."[10] Bradlaugh was not being vindictive. Thomson had consistently denied the usefulness of reform movements, refused to join the National Secular Society, was suspicious of self-styled "liberals," and, for the last quarter of his life, thought that the potential for progress was not viable.[11] On the other hand, he was sincerely convinced that the evidence against God's existence was undeniable, and he agreed with Shelley and Bradlaugh that the influence of religion on mankind was vicious. He was not a full-fledged Republican, although he did participate in the anti-monarchical sentiments of 1870-1873. In short, Thomson was rather generally committed to Secularist principles on an intellectual level, but "emotionally he was convinced that the Secularist movement would accomplish nothing."[12]

"The City of Dreadful Night" was published in four installments in the National Reformer from 22 March 1874, to 17 May 1874. Less than two months following its publication, the Reformer published Thomson's article entitled "A National Reformer in the Dog-Days" in two parts, 12 July and 19 July 1874. This sardonic piece is the lament of an overworked contributor who complains of the editor's harsh demands for material made even in the "dog-days" of summer.

Written in 1869, the year before Thomson began working on "The City," (Schaefer, Beyond, p. 181), this article clearly demonstrates Thomson's early recognition of the distance that separated him from his fellow Reformers. The article's humorous tone does not betray the depth of the real gulf that existed between them:

> Beloved comrades and brothers of the army of progress, how gallant you look as you march farther and farther from my resting-place! While I toiled among you it required vigorous reflection on the grandeur of our enterprise to make the march endurable. I was panting and sweating, you were panting and sweating, some were treading on others' heels; we were jostling, straggling, drooping, limping, grumbling, cursing; mouths full of gritty dust uttered hoarse sighs for beer: the army was always heroic and noble, yet the units seemed weak and ignoble. But now, O beloved brothers, getting more and more remote ye show more and more magnificent; all the petty and ignominious details are lost, the sweating and panting personalities are merged in the integral grandeur of the column, a long, dark line of valiant manhood marching on to fight and to conquer all that is evil, a serried band of sacred brotherhood, the Forlorn Hope un-forlorn of Humanity; and when a trumpet-swell circles faintly to my ear, with its utmost audible circlings, it is chivalric as that fabled blast of Roland at Roncesvalles, it stirs my heart to indomitable resolution, my pulse leaps with valour

and enthusiasm, and I cry with rapture: March on, march on, O beloved comrades and brothers, charge the ranks of the foe, storm his fortresses, shrink not from heat and fatigue, reek not for hunger and thirst; while I repose here admiring and applauding you, in the cool blue shadow, upon the bladed glass, (sic) under the rustling branch-borne foliage: my heart is with you, O my brothers, my soul is plumed with swift love to pursue you when vision falls short; I will rest here that I may the better meditate and realise and acclaim your daring and devotion.

So I dreamingly rest by the seashore while our army winds out of sight. Were it not well to plunge in the green wash of the bay, and get the black dust out of one's throat and eyes and nostrils, the plaster of sweat and dust off one's face? Surely it were well. Sweet is the sharp brine; cool, strong, and buoyant the earth-embracing sea. I will shout unto the waves with Walt Whitman, the hearty sea-bather,

'Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse;
Dash me with amorous wet.'

. . . So I rest and dream, and imagine my leal (sic) and valiant comrades marching and fighting far ahead, and wait placidly until they show themselves here again; and in the meanwhile the dog-days, the vast slow sultry and burning hours, flow over me; and I get what refreshment and shadow I can from the sea and in the sea, and on green grass under green leafage, and in the unperturbed depths of coolest contemplation.[13]

Thus, as the hardy band of radicals continues its march to glory leaving the world-weary Thomson in its wake, its columns become "more and more remote [and] more and more magnificent; all the petty and ignominious details are lost . . . ." Thomson will be a casual observer of his radical comrades' "Forlorn Hope" as they charge "the ranks of the foe [and] storm his fortresses . . . ." And "so I dreamingly rest by the seashore while our army winds out of sight." This short article captures Thomson's note of despair over the "Forlorn Hope" of his Secularist associates. The dream that will result from his rest by the seashore will become the "City of Dreadful Night" in which Thomson very clearly challenges many of the basic rationalistic values held by the Secularists.

William Schaefer has pointed out that James Thomson wrote "The City of Dreadful Night" during two periods, the first being from 16 January 1870, until 23 October 1870. During that period Thomson composed what later became sections II, XVIII, XX, I, V, XI, VII, IV, X, VI, and III of "The City." From may 1873, until 29 October 1873, Thomson composed sections VII, XIX, IX, the proem, XII, XIV, XVII, XV, XIII, XVI, and XXI (Schaefer, Beyond, p. 192). Schaefer proves that in the "first City," the 1870 poem, Thomson wrote all the narrative sections of the poem consisting of six-line stanzas as well as three of the "most famous" sections--II (in which the narrator follows a person on his pilgrimage to the "ruined shrines" where Faith, Love, and Hope had died), XVIII (the account of the Blakean Nebuchadnezzar figure in search of lost youth and innocence), and XX (the angel and the sphinx).[14]

Before writing the 1870 sections of the poem, Thomson spent five hours destroying all his old papers, manuscripts and letters. This act of literary sacrifice, done on 4 November 1869, was accomplished at the same time that Thomson wrote his article about "A National Reformer in the Dog-Days." It is obvious that Thomson had come to a point in his life when he felt the necessity of severing all ties with the past. He wrote in his diary that "I felt myself like one who, having climbed half-way up a long rope (35 on the 23rd inst.), cuts off all beneath his feet; he must climb on, and can never touch the old earth again without a fatal fall . . . . But after this terrible year, I could do no less than consume the past. I can now better face the future, come in what guise it may" (Salt, p. 46). Schaefer believes that it was not "mere coincidence" that led Thomson to perform this literary immolation soon after his thirty-fifth birthday ("half-way up a long rope"), (Schaefer, "Two Cities," p. 610). Less than two months after Thomson's diary entry, the poet began the composition of "The City."

Schaefer believes that the two Cities are actually different poems. The "first City" does not hold forth the possibility of suicide as does the "second City." There is no mention of God or the absence of God. The six narrative sections are all fantastic, nightmarish, supernatural and allegorical in a Dantesque mode. The "second City" is more rational, less fantastic; its inhabitants are able to converse sanely. It is no longer a city "symbolic of a state of mind, a realm of personal belief, [but] now deals with a universal situation that concerns all mankind . . . ." Suicide is a weapon to be used

against God or Fate (p. 613). Schaefer believes that the differences between these two versions of the City account for the lack of "intelligibility of intellectual intent" in the poem which had caused Theodore Watts-Dunton to complain that Thomson "succeeded in producing the worst constructed allegory of the time."[15] While Schaefer successfully answers objections about the poem's apparently haphazard construction in its final form, he does not point out that the poem does contain important elements which are common to both of the "two Cities."

These elements center primarily on the concept of the poem's vision being a Blakean "mental event." Schaefer views the first of the two Cities as a "nightmare city of the mind, a personal hell suffered by the isolated individual, by Thomson in particular, and, in general, by any man who has realized similar misfortune and whose mind has become equally saturated with gloom and melancholy." The 1870 "city itself is not a 'real' city" (Schaefer, "Two Cities," p. 611). The 1873 City, on the other hand, is, in Schaefer's view, "no longer a city symbolic of a state of mind; it is a real city, a real London complete with the sights and sounds of a city at night . . . ." (Schaefer, "Two Cities," p. 613). Schaefer's essay contains certain valid points, but he has not taken into consideration Thomson's use of Blakean elements throughout both the 1870 and 1873 compositions.

In Thomson's 1866 publication in the National Reformer concerning Blake's poetry, we should recall his long footnote about Blake's "illusions." Thomson asked in 1866 about "an illusion

constant and self-consistent and harmonious with the world throughout the whole of a man's life, wherein does this differ from reality? Metaphysically we are absolutely unable to prove any existence: we believe that those things really exist which we find pretty constant and consistent in their relation to us--a very sound practical but very unsound philosophical belief."[16] The mental landscape of the poem is not as clearly disjoined between the 1870 and 1873 dates of composition as Schaefer believes. In fact, the first section which Thomson composed when he returned to the manuscript in May, 1873, bears out this point. This is section VIII of the finished poem and is the narrator's account of a second set of voices heard near the river (the first set of voices is found in section VI, one of the 1870 sections). The two speakers who are heard in section VIII "represent the two reactions which Thomson himself felt toward the world: the one, emotional, bitterly resentful; the other, cold, resigned, unflinchingly logical."[17] The first speaker, who feels extremely sorry for himself, believes that every person on earth has "had some joy and solace in this life, / Some chance of triumph" but "My doom has been unmitigated dearth" (ll. 15-21, p. 139). The second voice follows this lament with an important general observation as he looks upon the "stream profound":

> "We gaze upon the river, and we note
> The various vessels large and small that float,
> Ignoring every wrecked and sunken boat."
>
> (VIII, ll. 426, 431-433, p. 155)

This "stream profound," which Thomson soon envisioned as the "river of Suicides" in the next section that he composed (section XIX in the final version), is profound precisely because of its symbolic relationship to the crucial theme that runs throughout the completed poem--the difference between appearances and reality. In Blakean terms, Thomson's speaker in section VIII is looking at the "stream profound" not <u>with</u> but <u>through</u> his eyes. This is to be the key-note to a complete understanding of the finalized "City of Dreadful Night." In Thomson's words from the 1866 Blake essay, it is important to remember that

> Every man living in seclusion and developing an intense interior life, gradually comes to give a quite peculiar significance to certain words and phrases and emblems. Metaphors which to the common bookwrights and journalists are mere handy counters, symbols almost as abstract and unrelated in thought to the things they represent as are the <u>x</u> and <u>y</u> and <u>z</u> used in solving an algebraic problem, are for <u>him</u> burdened with rich and various freights of spiritual experience; they are ships in which he has sailed over uncharted seas to unmapped shores, with which he has struggled through wild tempests and been tranced in Divine calms, in which he has returned with treasures from all the zones; and he loves them as the sailor loves his ship. His writings must thus appear, to any one reading them for the first time, very obscure, and often very ludicrous; the strange reader

> sees a battered old hull, where the writer sees a marvelous circumnavigation. (Thomson, "Blake," Speedy Extinction, p. 227)

For Thomson, however, his "ship" has returned to the port of the City of Dreadful Night after its two-and-a-half year voyage following the initial burst of inspiration in 1870. But the ship has returned only to become one of the wrecked and sunken hulks in the River of Suicides. Blake's influence is seen again in this section of the 1873 poem, the first section composed then, in which the more rational voice notes that

> "The world rolls round forever like a mill;
> It grinds out death and life and good and ill;
> It has no purpose, heart or mind or will.
> . . . . . .
> The mill must blindly whirl unresting so;
> . . . . . .
> Man might know . . .
> That it whirls not to suit his petty whim,
> That it is quite indifferent to him.
> . . . . . .
> It grinds him some slow years of bitter breath,
> Then grinds him back into eternal death."
>
> (VIII, ll. 456-458, 460, 462-464, 466-467, p. 156)

This mill is even more damning, in Thomson's view, than the Newtonian Satanic Mills of Blake. Both mills, however, derive from similar sources. For Blake, the Satanic mills are a function of man's Urizenic reasoning. For Thomson, without a God, man's distinguishing characteristic--his consciousness of his condition--is the source for this dismal world view. The indifference of the universe is a given condition. Man's awareness of the condition introduces the element of horror. This interpretation also supports the idea of a latent Blakean influence on Thomson as he returned to the composition of "The City of Dreadful Night." (Section XIV, another of the 1873 sections, contains an even more obvious reference to Blake's poetry: "If tigers burn with beauty and with might, / Is it by favor or by wrath of fate?" (XIV, ll. 750-751, p. 168). This is further evidence of the continuity between the 1870 and 1873 compositions.) Furthermore, the eighth section of the poem stands as an important link between the "two Cities" because of its emphasis on the deceptiveness of appearances and the role of man's consciousness in the creation of a City of Dreadful Night.

That Thomson was concerned with Blake in 1870 as well is evident from the fact that the second section which he wrote in that year portrayed the ghastly figure which derived from Blake's Nebuchadnezzar.[18] On a lonely sojourn through a northern suburb of the City, the narrator encounters "a wounded creature prostrate," with "A haggard filthy face with bloodshot eyes, / An infamy for manhood to behold" (XVIII, ll. 893, 903-904, p. 174). The crawling wretch has been traversing over and over the path which might lead

him to his "prize." First, he threatens the narrator with death if the narrator would attempt to steal the prize. But then the figure pleads for pity when it realizes that the object of his search would not avail a stranger, "For who of mortal or immortal race / The life track of another can retrace?" (XVIII, ll. 919-920, p. 175). The creature then reveals that in crawling continually over its own bloody track it is "in the very way at last / To find the long lost golden thread" which would reunite his present with his past (XVIII, ll. 927-929, p. 175). It leads him back

> From this accursed night without a morn,
> And through the deserts which have else no track,
> And through vast wastes of horror-haunted time,
> To Eden innocence in Eden's clime.
>
> (XVIII, ll. 935-938, p. 175)

In this Edenic innocence, the wretch hopes to find its mother's knee and security. We should recall from Thomson's essay on Blake that Blake was a child as a man and that his poetry manifested the innocent simplicity of a childhood not lost to the adult poet. For the Blakean figure in section XVIII, it is important to note that in its Edenic innocence it would be without a past; the horrors that it has known would be blotted from its consciousness. As the foul figure turns from the narrator to continue its dismal journey, the narrator wonders that

> He should to antenatal night retrace,
> And hide his elements in that large womb
> Beyond the reach of man-evolving Doom.
>
> (XVIII, ll. 948-950, p. 176)

For the narrator, the solution to the problem of the wretched figure's search is readily available. It is the solution proposed by the pulpit speaker in the cathedral of section XIV. The narrator wonders at the sort of citizen of the City who would "seek oblivion through the far-off gate / Of birth, when that of death is close at hand!" (XVIII, ll. 952-953, p. 176). Schaefer asserts that suicide is not mentioned in the sections of "The City" composed in 1870. While it is true that Thomson's narrator does not counsel an act of suicide in section XVIII, it is quite apparent that death is a truly "viable" alternative. Keeping in mind that in late 1869, only a matter of weeks before composing this eighteenth section of the finished poem, Thomson had symbolically cut himself off from his own past, we should be able to recognize the power of Thomson's latent death-wish as he looked to the future.

I have gone into these few details in some depth because it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of Schaefer's essay for its tracing the periods of the composition of "The City" just as it is important to point out that an absolute disjunction of theme and meaning between the "two Cities" does not in fact exist. Instead, the poem must be read as a piece. In doing this, we will be better able to recognize the relationship that exists between the

poem and its Secularist context. Recalling Thomson's essay on "A National Reformer in the Dog-Days," we should remember that Thomson was content to be an "apathist" rather than an "activist" as he lingered near the sea while the Reforming army marched on to glory. That 1869 essay and the same year's literary sacrifice of his papers may be viewed as Thomson's public and private notices of his impending withdrawal into himself--into a "dream state." The result, begun in 1870, finished in 1873 and published in 1874, is the "City of Dreadful Night." This poem, then, is Thomson's mental vision of the life that he observed as it passed before him "in review." It is also a clear indication of the important areas of disagreement between the pessimistic, apathetic, visionary poet--the Laureate of Secularism--and the optimistic, activist, rationalistic Secularists.

"The City of Dreadful Night" departs from the standard Secularist Weltanschaung in several significant ways. Most importantly, Thomson calls into doubt the very definition of reality accepted by the Secularists. Reality for them consisted of the material composition of the universe and those physical laws which are immediately perceivable to the "conclusive proof" of the senses and the workings of the scientific method. William Elder wrote in "The Lost Ship" that with Science guiding the wheel of man's ship and with "the light / Of Science gleaming . . . We shall gain the port of right." But science can be a misleading guide. Tom Stoppard's modern English play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are

Dead, contains a passage which demonstrates the epistemological point that Thomson's poem makes. In Act one, Guildenstern says:

> A man breaking his journey between one place and another at a third place of no name, character, population or significance, sees a unicorn cross his path and disappear. That in itself is startling, but there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds, or to be less extreme, a choice of persuasions to put it down to fancy; until--"My God," says a second man, "I must be dreaming, I thought I saw a unicorn." At which point, a dimension is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we have given to common experience . . . . "Look, look!" recites the crowd. "A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer."[19]

If we apply Stoppard's point to the Secularists, it could be said that their "reality" was becoming "thinner and thinner" and also "more reasonable" with the addition of each scientific verification of the "truth" of materialism. In their tightly-knit group, Secularists perceived the recurring unicorns that crossed their path. They became immured in their prison of reality without acknowledging

the "mental reality" of their condition. Guildenstern notes that "the scientific approach to examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear" (Stoppard, p. 17). Thomson's vision cuts through the buffering agent of this defense to the psychological reality of the Victorian mind that was not ultimately satisfied by the mere "scientific approach to the examination of phenomena." Thomson offers an alternative vision to the "thinness of reality" as it was viewed in the clear light of rationalism--an alternate vision that exists only for the sad Fraternity of initiates for whom the City of Dreadful Night is an overriding truth.

Thomson's concern with vision is continually emphasized throughout the poem. He refers to the normal concept of reality (the thinness of reality) very early in the poem where he states that we "learn" from the returning shapes of our waking dreams "In their recurrence with recurrent changes / A certain <u>seeming</u> order" (I, ll. 60-61, p. 140; my italics). Thomson calls this sort of knowledge into doubt for

> . . . when a dream night after night is brought
> Throughout a week, and such weeks few or many
> Recur each year for several years, can any
> Discern that dream from real life is aught?
>
> (I, ll. 52-56, p. 140)

In section II, Thomson's use of the watch stripped of its purposeful symbols is another instance of the deceptiveness of mere appearances. Beneath the outward facade of the watch which was created by man to impose an arbitrary, rational order on a facet of existence lurks the truth of existence where the bare mechanical "works proceed until run down; although / Bereft of purpose, void of use," (II, ll. 161-162, p. 144). The purposeless mechanical intestines of the watch are similar to the implications of Thomson's views of reality concerning the "stream profound" of section VIII where most people, Secularists included, note "the various vessels large and small that float, / Ignoring every wrecked and sunken boat" (VIII, ll. 432-433, p. 155). In both cases, there is on the surface an appearance of rational order and purposefulness. In the reality of "The City of Dreadful Night," however, truth is that which is "Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles, / False dreams, false hopes, false masks and modes of youth" (Proem, II. 10-11, p. 138). The commonly accepted value of the joys of a loving home with "sweet babes and loving wife, / A home of peace by loyal friendships cheered," will not avail because there is another reality that is not temporary where "the poor wretch" must "renounce all blessings" in order to "Steal forth and haunt that builded desolation, / Of woe and terrors and thick darkness reared" (V, ll. 330-331, 334-336, p. 151). From this passage it is possible to see that Thomson's vision of the City's reality was comprehensive enough to include human relationships as well as the symbolic aspects of existence such as a watch. Furthermore, the reality of the mercantile aspects of a city such

as London is transformed in section IX. Here, the common sight and sounds of a wagon loaded with merchandise become a funereal nightmare in which "The hugeness of an overburthened wain" becomes

> Perchance . . . a Fate-appointed hearse,
> Bearing away to some mysterious tomb
> Or Limbo of the scornful universe
> The joy, the peace, the life-hope, the abortions
> Of all things good which should have been our portions
> But have been strangled by that City's curse.
> (IX, ll. 483-488, p. 157)

Section IX points out that even the utilitarian economic realities of life in Victorian England accepted by the Secularists could be perceived as a causative factor in creating a City of Dreadful Night. Laissez-faire capitalism, which should ideally result in the greatest good for the greatest number, could just as easily result in precisely the opposite--the greatest ill for the greatest number. Thomson had no solution to the problem but "The City" points out that even commonly accepted economic realities can manifest false but pleasing appearances which cover brutally painful realities.

The eleventh section of the poem is crucial to an understanding of Thomson's views, which differ from those of the Secularists on the role of rationality. Thomson asks "What men are they who haunt these fatal glooms" and who have pierced "life's pleasant veil of various error / To reach that void of darkness and old

terror" (XI, ll. 558, 562-563, p. 160). The poet notes that such men possess wisdom, goodness, strength, patience, valor and reason, but all of these valuable characteristics are negated by the doom of the City. Most important of these attributes is the fact that they are "rational and yet insane . . . ." Thomson addresses this particular point for several lines whereas each of the other attributes is quickly dismissed.

> They are most rational and yet insane--
> An outward madness, not to be controlled;
> A perfect reason in the central brain,
> Which has no power, but sitteth wan and cold,
> And sees the madness, and foresees as plainly
> The ruin in its path, and trieth vainly
> To cheat itself refusing to behold.
>
> (XI, ll. 572-578, p. 161)

It is hard to escape interpreting these lines as Thomson's personal testament in which he describes his rationalist existence among the Secularists in 1870. Despite possessing "perfect reason in the central brain," Thomson's pessimistic view notes the madness of the world before which the powers of reason, which were worshipped by the Secularists, necessarily become impotent. That Thomson certainly had his Secularist friends in mind in both the 1870 and 1873 periods of composition may be seen in the purposeful inclusion of the revolutionary figure at the end of the line of people who enter

the great cathedral in section XII (written in 1873). This revolutionary is another who woke "from daydreams to this real night" but his daydream was that of

> " . . . desperate fighting with a little band
> Against the powerful tyrants of our land,
> To free our brethren in their own despite--"
> (XII, ll. 634-636, p. 164).

This figure's references to "desperate fighting" and "little band" are especially revealing since Secularists often used such language in their own propaganda about their struggles. As noted earlier in this study, Bradlaugh and most of his followers imagined themselves to be in a very real state of war, locked in a life and death struggle with the forces of religious darkness. For Thomson, however, the "enlightened" Reformers were themselves "in the dark" because they did not know that the true darkness of the City of Dreadful Night lurked in their own minds. They had but to wake up.

The fifteenth section of "The City" contains only three stanzas but Thomson's concept of the deceptiveness of a normal perception of existence, as opposed to the reality of the City, comprises the section's theme. Considering the world in general, Thomson asserts a fairly standard poetic "truth": each person affects all his neighbors and is in turn affected by all of them.

Wherever men are gathered, all the air
  Is charged with human feeling, human thought;
Each shout and cry and laugh, each curse and prayer,
. . . . . .
Are breathed into it with our respiration;
  It is with our life fraught and overfraught.
(XV, ll. 776-778, 781-782, p. 169)

But Thomson also tells us that the

. . . City's atmosphere is dark and dense,
  Although not many exiles wander there,
With many a potent evil influence
  Each adding poison to the poisoned air;
Infections of unutterable sadness,
Infections of incalculable madness,
  Infections of incurable despair.
(XV, ll. 790-796, p. 170)

The rather simple, innocent observation of the fifteenth section's first stanza concerning the web of interrelationships that define human society as perceived by Secularists becomes transmogrified in the third stanza to depict the real nature of human existence as a pestilential plague to which all people contribute.

Soon after returning to the manuscript of the poem in May, 1873, Thomson composed what came to be section XIX, which

portrays the "River of Suicides." This section, written immediately after what came to be section VIII (an important link between the 1870 and 1873 compositions), expands on the eighth section's portrayal of the "stream profound." The association of the river with death by suicide continues the thematic relationship of death and water that was established in section IV, written in 1870, where the "level rushing flow" of the tide sweeps up the strand to engulf the woman (Matilda Weller, Thomson's lost love) and "that corpse-like me, and they were borne / Away, and this vile me was left forlorn" (IV, ll. 296, 302, 303, pp. 149-150). Just as in section IV, where the "other half" (the conscious half) of Thomson's remaining self asks in anquish "But I, what do I here?" (IV, l. 308, p. 150), Thomson asks in section XIX,

> When this poor tragic-farce has palled us long,
> Why actors and spectators do we stay?
> To fill our so-short rôles out right or wrong;
> To see what shifts are yet in the dull play
> For our illusion . . . .
> Yet it is but for one night after all;
> What matters one brief night of dreary pain?
> . . . . . .
> . . . all sad scenes and thoughts and feelings vanish
> In that sweet sleep no power can ever banish
> That one best sleep which never wakes again.
>
> (XIX, ll. 978-982, 985-986, 989-991, p. 177)

Life itself becomes the ultimate illusion--a proposition that no Secularist could have accepted. The true reality for Thomson, Death, is revealed along with its capacity to cause the "sad scenes and thoughts and feelings" of life to vanish.

The section of the poem that was written last and stands in the final position at the poem's conclusion, XXI, is a fitting conclusion to the numerous references that Thomson makes throughout the poem regarding the perception of reality. All "oracles are dumb or cheat / Because they have no secret to express" and

> . . . none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
> Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
> That all is vanity and nothingness.
> (XXI, ll. 1105-1109, p. 182).

This is a sweeping rejection of all oracles; neither religious nor secular oracles possess secret wisdom since there "is no light beyond the curtain" of the stage on which man acts his little part--only the darkness of the dreadful night awaits man. Both the actors and the spectators of section XIX who have not seen beyond the illusions to the darkness behind the curtain exist in an amphitheater glowing with an illusory light.

In concluding his poem in this manner, Thomson managed to intertwine another leading component of the poem with his general theme of the deceptiveness of the reality accepted by Secularists and other Victorians. Thomson employed very carefully images of

light and darkness to sustain his thematic concern with the nature of reality. Specifically, Thomson used images of and references to light and darkness that are completely antithetical to the accepted Secularist use of such imagery. In Thomson's City of Dreadful Night "never there / Can come the lucid morning's fragrant breath . . ." (I, ll. 44-45, p. 140). The most important word in this passage is "lucid" which derives from the Latin "lucidus," to shine. In depicting the lack of brightness in the City, Thomson is establishing his primary emphasis on the City's darkness. More importantly, however, Thomson is excluding the rational "lucidity" that Secularists employed in their efforts to "see through" the mists of superstition and religious fallacies to the truth of natural, material reality. The lucid dawn of the Secularists' rationalism never rises in Thomson's City. Only the "street-lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms," (I, l. 85, p. 141). The only reference to the sun in the poem is found in section IV in which the solitary speaker describes his journey through the desert:

> . . . On the left
> The sun arose and crowned a broad crag-cleft;
> There stopped and burned out black, except a rim,
> A bleeding, eyeless socket, red and dim . . . .
> (IV, ll. 255-258, p. 148)

The most light that is ever shed in the City is the light of the moon that shines on the cathedral in section XX, but even this light can

do no more than make "the temple front a mystic-dream" (XX, l. 1035, p. 179). Section XVII refers to the moon's "triumphs through the endless nights" of the City (XVII, l. 851, p. 172). However, Thomson changes the light of "these eyes of sightless heaven" into the ghoulish "living light" that shines from "dead eyes" (XVII, ll. 865-866, p. 173)--a light similar to the ghastly light of the decay which grips the necropolis of the earth. Even if man could reach these sources of light "with the flight unflown" he would find only "suns all self-consuming like our own" which

> . . . wax and wane through fusion and confusion;
> The spheres eternal are a grand illusion;
> The empyrean is a void abyss.
>
> (XVII, ll. 874, 876-878, p. 173)

That rationalistic light of almost any sort is illusory is confirmed again in the twelfth section of the poem. In this section, Thomson describes the ten figures who are in line to enter the great cathedral. Each individual is challenged by a shrouded figure with the question "Whence come you in the world of life and light / To this our City of Tremendous Night?" (XII, ll. 596-597, p. 162). Each of the ten answers according to his own experiences in the world of life and light but all of them use the refrain which claims that "I wake from my daydreams to this <u>real</u> night" (my italics). The question and the refrains remind us that Thomson is specifically contrasting his necropolis to the Secularist "world of life and light" which is

actually nothing but a "daydream"--an illusion that pales in comparison to the true nightmare of the City. Within section XII another reference to a specific "light-shedding" activity can be found. One of the ten figures who enters the cathedral is an artist, a painter, who is fresh

> "From picturing with all beauty and grace
> First Eden and the parents of our race,
> A luminous rapture unto all men's sight--"
> (XII, ll. 626-628, p. 163).

The reference to the "luminous" quality of the rapture induced by the work of art is yet another exclusion of light from the City of Tremendous Night. The luminous beauty of the artist's work in the eyes of men is an additional illusion, another daydream that fades in the reality of Dreadful Night. Numerous other images of and references to light and darkness exist in the poem and operate as "specters of black night [which] blot the sunshine" of Secularist optimism (Proem, ll. 3-4, p. 138). One simply cannot fail to see the physical gloominess of the poem based, as it is, on the almost total exclusion of light. The poem stands in utter, stark contrast to typical Secularist poems such as Andrew Vorner's "Progress" which asserted that

> When morning's twilight is so long
> How long will be the day!

How grand the blaze of mid-day's sun,
How vast the world from darkness won,
To mind's Promethean ray!

A similar example is J. M. Peacock's "Phases of Progress" which refers to his own Secularist dreams of the "bright signs of the coming of changes vast" when

. . . through the gloom of our doubts and fears
Breaketh a ray of redeeming light
Beaming with hope and the faith that cheers,
Faith in the triumph of truth and right.
. . . . . .
Lights are now seen on the sands of time,
Beacons of hope o'er a sea of strife,
Guiding the millions of every clime
On to the good of a brighter life.

From the selections taken from "The City" it is possible to see how Thomson uses images and references to light and dark which are entirely at odds with the use that other Secularist poets made of them. Thomson succeeded in making his use of light and darkness support the crucial epistemological theme that also differs radically from the beliefs of the Secularist reformers.

A result of the epistemological theme and the use of light and darkness is the "reality of the City" that emerges from Thomson's

poem. The City's reality can be seen as an extension of Thomson's 1866 statement in the essay on Blake's poetry that "metaphysically we are absolutely unable to prove any existence . . . ." Section III, the last section of the poem composed during Thomson's 1870 efforts, reflects both Thomson's continuing concern with the nature of reality and the influence of his encounter with Blake. The 1866 essay pointed out that "reality" can be "an illusion constant and self-consistent and harmonious with the world throughout the whole of a man's life . . . ." The first stanza of section III tells that though lamps burn in the silent streets there is darkness still in "countless lanes and close retreats" even when "moonlight silvers" the City's empty squares (III, ll. 175-177, p. 145):

> The open spaces yawn with gloom abysmal,
> The somber mansions loom immense and dismal,
> The lanes are black as subterranean lairs.
>
> And soon the eye a strange new vision learns:
> The night remains for it as dark and dense,
> Yet clearly in this darkness it discerns
> As in the daylight with its natural sense;
> Perceives a shade in shadow not obscurely,
> Pursues a stir of black in blackness surely,
> Sees spectres also in the gloom intense.

The ear, too, with the silence vast and deep
  Becomes familiar though unreconciled
. . . . . .
  But wonder ceases soon; the weirdest thing
Is felt least strange beneath the lawless law
  Where Death-in-Life is the eternal king.
Crushed impotent beneath this reign of terror.
Dazed with such mysteries of woe and error,
  The soul is too outworn for wondering.

(III, ll. 178-190, 197-202, pp. 145-146)

Without light, the senses paradoxically become more acute--better able to detect the hidden, strange and horrible reality lurking in the darkness of the City. Divested of "normal" illumination, the senses nevertheless manage to attain new degrees of perception. Thomson's remarks in the 1866 Blake essay about reality can be construed as a description of paranoia--the act of a mind literally creating a reality to suit itself. However, any phenomenon is, for the solitary mind, the "thickness of reality." There is no comfort in knowing that the perception has been shared with another perceiver. "But," as Guildenstern says, "there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds, or to be less extreme, a choice of persuasions to put it down to fancy . . . ." (Stoppard, p. 21). It is important to note that section III makes no mention of the mind. Section I, also written in 1870 sometime before section III,

does establish the concept of the City as a mental event based on the memory of recurring dreams from which we learn "a certain seeming order" (I, ll. 57-63, p. 140). Section III, in emphasizing the physical senses to the exclusion of mental impressions, makes the phantasmagorical phenomena of the City "totally" real. Taken together, these two sections show that all the faculties of the human being are involved in establishing the City's reality, not just the mind.

The seventh section of "The City of Dreadful Night," also written in 1870 in between the composition of sections I and III, sustains the necessity of an "experiential" encounter with the City's reality. The narrator states that "Some say that phantoms haunt these shadowy streets" but "I have seen phantoms there that were as men / And men that were as phantoms" (VII, ll. 400, 414-415, p. 154). Thomson rejects the idea that these are illusions. In a world of normal appearances, "the nudity of flesh will blush though tameless" but in the City "The extreme nudity of bone grins shameless, / The unsexed skeleton mocks shroud and pall" (VII, ll. 411-413, p. 154). This is bedrock truth; there is no possibility of beguilement. This truth can only be experienced, not "known" in the normal sense. The truth of the skeleton which is hidden beneath the facade of flesh is similar to the truth of sunken wrecks which rest below the surface of the busy River of Suicides, the "stream profound" of section VIII, written in 1873. Given normal modes of perception, this truth is unknowable but it is even "more real" because, when perceived, it cannot mislead. Secularists were content with their optimistic

perceptions of a surface reality. They paid no heed to the substratum of reality. The ninth section, also written in 1873, is another indication of the City's reality of which Secularists were not aware. As discussed earlier, this section describes the sights and sounds of a loaded wagon on its ponderous journey through the streets of the City. Thomson emphasizes the realistic sounds of the wagon which he "hears and feels":

> The booming and the jar of ponderous wheels,
>
> The trampling clash of heavy ironshod feet:
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The rolling thunder seems to fill the sky
>
> As it comes on; the horses snort and strain,
>
> The harness jingles, as it passes by . . . ."
>
> (IX, ll. 468, 470-471, 475-477, p. 157)

The auditory realism is subsumed into Thomson's wondering whether the wagon is in fact a "Fate-appointed hearse, / Bearing away to some mysterious tomb" all the good things of life that properly belong to mankind (IX, ll. 483-484, p. 157). The intent of section IX is similar to that of the sections discussed just previously as it also combines the perceptions of the senses with the mental hypothesis concerning its true reality.

The ultimate reality for Thomson is, of course, Death. It is the blush of the flesh which is misleading, not the skeleton which the flesh covers. The City of "real night" is a necropolis. The

river which conceals the dead wreckage of ships is the River of Suicides. The Blakean figure's quest for a lost past is sadly absurd since Death is really so near. It is Death which causes "all sad scenes and thoughts and feelings" to vanish (XIX, l. 989, p. 177). For Secularists, however, death was a phenomenon beyond the control of reason. They were not particularly afraid of death; indeed, they made a point of dying bravely to spite the orthodox faithful who eagerly awaited the expected death-bed recantations of chastened infidels. For Thomson, though, Death is a "friend-foe" who ends the "bitter war" of existence with his saber (XXI, l. 1094, p. 181). It is the weapon that man can use to achieve final release. It is not beyond control; it is to be sought after and employed. It can be controlled. Secularists would never countenance suicide. They were not certain of what lay behind the curtain--they could not know. But Thomson knew: "there is no light beyond the curtain . . . all is vanity and nothingness" (XXI, ll. 1108-1109, p. 182). In "Good Country People," Flannery O'Connor quotes from one of Hulga Hopewell's philosophy textbooks: "Science . . . is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing--how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing."[20] Secularists, as confirmed rationalists, cared not at all for metaphysical speculations which involved phenomena beyond the ken of their immediate physical, natural mode of existence. Thomson's poem not only challenges this limited perspective in purposely interweaving mental and physical phenomena but it makes the logical extension implicit in its

epistemological theme--the ultimate reality is nothingness. Nothing could be further removed from the standard Secularist position than this.

As thoroughgoing rationalists, Secularists necessarily placed their hopes for man's progress in his capacity to reason, to encounter and to overcome the problems of existence through the application of the single human characteristic which separates man from beast. Secularists proclaimed that Science was their Providence. Their poetry often manifested their belief that modern rational man is or could become a god. Science cannot exist except through the agency of man's reason. Secularist veneration for man's reason must not be underestimated nor separated from their millenarian dreams of progress. Thomson, on the other hand, saw in man's reasoning capacity the direct source of the woe of the inhabitants of the City. There is no sleep in this City where

> A night seems termless hell. This dreadful strain
> Of thought and consciousness, which never ceases,
> Or which some moment's stupor but increases;
> This, worse than woe, makes wretches there insane.
>
> (I, 11. 116-119, p. 142)

One of the major symbols of "The City" is the sphinx of section XX, one of the first three sections written in 1870. Like human beings, it possesses a dual nature--part beastly, part human.

Of course, the human likeness in the sphinx is the head, the seat of reason. The angel of this section, an angel certainly symbolic of the old "church militant" that was disintegrating during the Victorian age, crumbles before the sagacious sphinx partially as the result of the use of man's reason (perhaps the rationalism of the Higher Criticism) and partially as a result of the Darwinian onslaught. The rationality of humanity is represented by the head of the sphinx; the lion's body represents the truths about man's animal characteristics revealed by the scientific rationality of Darwin. The sphinx is thus a remarkable union of the twin forces that had risen during the age to challenge the consolation of man's hope for heaven extended by religion. Man demands to know; religion is protective of its mysteries. The sphinx is, then, the psychological objective correlative of two of the major influences which contributed to Thomson's bitter pessimism. Man's reason and the scientific use of reasoning, two of the important concepts which help to define Secularism, led to optimism for the Secularists and pessimism for Thomson. It is significant that, as the angel is destroyed before the impassive sphinx, "the sphinx unchanged looked forthright as aware / Of <u>nothing</u> in the vast abyss of air" (XX, ll. 1019-1020, p. 179; my italics). The Secularists did not lose hope when they abandoned religion; they simply transformed a hope for a supernatural heaven into the hope for a more immediate, material heaven on earth (this transformation is seen in the great amount of religious diction in their poetry to describe the secular earth). For Thomson, a heaven on earth was an absurdity (and very little <u>positive</u> religious diction is found in

his poetry). Dante's Inferno is preferable to life in the City. But the wretched escapees from the City need hope to enter the Inferno (VI). They have no hope and are doomed to remain in the City. Thomson, because an earthly heaven was impossible, also had no hope. Like the sphinx, he knew that there is really "nothing in the vast abyss of air," that "there is no light beyond the curtain; that all is vanity and nothingness" (XXI, ll. 1108-1109, p. 182). Death becomes Thomson's Providence.

The description of the statue of Melencolia in section XXI, a part of the poem composed in 1873, maintains the sense of hopelessness that marks the rest of the poem. The statue holds or is surrounded by numerous objects which are associated with the labor of man's existence: a book, compasses, carpenter's tools, scientific instruments, scales, an hour-glass, household keys. A significant detail is the "keen wolf-hound sleeping undistraught" at her feet (XXI, l. 1060, p. 180). While there is no sleep for the human inhabitants of the City (who apparently shared Thomson's own insomnia), the wolf-hound can sleep "undistraught" because it is not <u>conscious</u> of its condition in a universe of "teen and threne." It can be contrasted to all the initiates of the City who have been damned by their honest and profound thoughtfulness--their very capacity to come to conscious grips with the reality of the City rather than settle for a scientific, anesthetized "thinness."

Secularist poets generally saw mankind's history as the gradual process of breaking away from the dark "mental childhood" of ignorance and religious superstition as the "lucid dawn" of

rationalism spread light across the horizon of man's new hopes. Man is maturing; he is eager for new knowledge. Thomson also saw man as "maturing"; however, the growth is not towards a greater comprehension of the laws of the universe and man's role in it, but it is a growth into a mature vision of the reality of the City. The same mature intellectual capabilities that Secularists prized explain why the City is "not for the hopeful young" nor for "sages who foresee a heaven on earth" (Proem, ll. 15, 21, p. 139). Instead, the mature, incisive use of reason limits the inhabitants of the City to "mature men chiefly" who "desolately ponder" existence "through sleepless hours" (I, ll. 97-99, pp. 141-142). These men will be crushed by the world which "rolls round forever like a mill." Furthermore,

> Man might know one thing were his sight less dim,
> That it whirls not to suit his petty whim,
> That it is quite indifferent to him.
>
> (VII, ll. 456, 462-464, p. 156; my italics)

For Secularists, however, man's sight is not less dim. In Thomson's opinion, on the other hand, the rational light that guides the Secularists created their illusions about a grand destiny. The knowledge of the mill's indifference to man is attained only in the darkness of the City. Reasoning leads to <u>both</u> kinds of knowledge: the Secularist illusion about a heaven on earth, and "that void of darkness and old terror / Wherein expire the lamps of hope and faith" (XI, ll. 563-564, p. 160).

There exists a final example of the result of man's consciousness.

> Of all things human which are strange and wild
> This is perchance the wildest and most strange,
> And showeth man most utterly beguiled,
> To those who haunt that sunken City's range--
> That he bemoans himself for aye, repeating
> How Time is deadly swift; how life is fleeting,
> How naught is constant on earth but change.
>
> (XIII, ll. 644-650, p. 164)

This is not so much a difference between Thomson and the Secularists. Secularists never claimed that an orthodox eternity existed. However, it is man's consciousness of the passage of time which Thomson is concerned with. The initiates who know the reality of the City see that for other men "the hours are heavy" and "the burdens of the months" are too much to bear so that they often pray "To sleep through barren periods unaware" (XIII, ll. 641-654, p. 164; my italics). Those who are beguiled in this manner compound the absurdity of existence by seeking more time; they naturally claim "to inherit / The everlasting Future" so that their "merit / May have full scope . . . ." (XIII, ll. 669-671, p. 165). The human quality of consciousness reveals that time hangs heavy on all men, that time is never used properly. Yet man, in all his foolishness, wants more time, even an eternity of time. The inhabitants of the City, though,

> . . . do not ask a longer term of strife
>
> . . . . . .
>
> We do not claim renewed and endless life
>
> When this which is our torment here shall close,
>
> An everlasting conscious inanation!
>
> (XIII, ll. 679, 681-683, p. 165; the last italics are mine)

While Thomson and the Secularists agreed that the Eternity espoused by orthodox Christianity was not necessary for man, the reasons for their respective views are quite different. Secularists saw that man must make the most of the time allotted to him. It is all he will ever have to use; it must not be wasted in frivolous undertakings. Thomson, on the other hand, only wanted the burden of time to pass from his hands. Consciousness, the awareness of time, serves merely to compound the misery of existence. In the final analysis, Thomson and his fellow inhabitants of the City "yearn only for speedy death in full fruition" (XIII, l. 684, p. 165).

This is the final item in the poem which demonstrates this particular important difference between Thomson and his Secularist associates. As members of the "Party of Hope," committed entirely to gaining a material heaven on earth through the Providence of Science, the Secularists necessarily relied on man's consciousness and rationality. Thomson believed that the very fact of man's thinking nature, his awareness of the conditions of existence, insured the existence of a City of Dreadful Night. Rationalism

led both Thomson and the Secularists to an atheistic position. After that point their paths diverged--one leading to the secular heavenly city, the other to the necropolis of the poem.

There is this much agreement in the poem between Thomson and the Secularists: God does not exist. Thomson wrote that

> There is no God; no Fiend with names divine
> Made us and tortures us; if we must pine,
> It is to satiate no Being's gall.
>
> (XIV, ll. 725-727, p. 167)

Secularists could not deny God's existence and then attribute "all woe and sin" to him. Their usual tactic was to deny God's existence and then assert that the evils were the result of an ill-founded faith in a God. When the priests are exposed completely for what they are, the world's poverty and misery will begin to disappear. Thomson diverges from the Secularists on this point. It is not merely a particular class of men that is the source of the evil and misery that afflicts the human race--it derives from all men. The fifteenth section of the poem, written in 1873, points out that all men influence each other and that "wherever men are gathered, all the air / Is charged with human feeling, human <u>thought</u>" (XV, ll. 776-777, p. 169; my italics). Although not many exiles wander in the City's "dark and dense" atmosphere, each adds

> . . . poison to the poisoned air;
> Infections of unutterable sadness,
> Infections of incalculable madness,
> Infections of incurable despair.
>
> (XV, 11. 793-796, p. 170)

Thomson saw that the afflictions of evil and misery are produced by all men as naturally as they breathe. This supports the theme that runs throughout the poem of man's innate consciousness of existence being a primary factor in man's doom. All the problems of existence are inherent in man's very existence. They are not imposed by an outside source. Yet, if man is the source of his own problems, in Thomson's atheistic view he can also provide the solution--a pessimistic variety of "self-help" espoused by the Secularists. If life is too much of a burden, there is at least no need to worry about the vengeance of a wrathful God for the act of killing oneself: "Lo, you are free to end it when you will, / Without the fear of waking after death" (XIV, 11. 768-769, p. 169). As in the case of man's rationality, we see that Thomson agreed with the Secularists up to a certain point. In this instance regarding the non-existence of God, Thomson recognized an opportunity for suicide without eternal recriminations. The Secularists also saw that man's fate was in his own hands. Their optimism, however, led them to assert the necessity of improving this life rather than escaping it.

This chapter has discussed the significant features of "The City of Dreadful Night" as reflected in the Secularist context in which it was written. The Secularist value-system that frames the poem is unmistakable as Thomson and the Secularists shared many beliefs. But Thomson's unique sense of pessimism led to the creation of a poem which must be seen as a simultaneous outgrowth of the optimistic Secularist vision as well as a rejection of that vision. That both tendencies could exist so intimately in such a small group of radical freethinkers is certainly an interesting comment on the Victorian Age.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Morton Dauwen Zabel, "James Thomson," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, XXXII (July, 1928), p. 232. Additional references to an article or book already cited will be found in the text.

[2]Kenneth Hugh Byron, The Pessimism of James Thomson (B.V.) In Relation to His Times (London: Mouton and Co., 1965), p. 142.

[3]A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, The Cambridge History of English Literature, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916), XIII, p. 108.

[4]Paul Elmer More, "James Thomson ('B.V.')," The Nation, LXXV (26 December 1907), p. 584.

[5]E. C. Stedman, "James Thomson," Century Magazine, XXXIV (October, 1887), p. 909.

[6]Lyman A. Cotten, "Leopardi and The City of Dreadful Night," Studies in Philology, XLII (1945), p. 675.

[7]Henry S. Salt, The Life of James Thomson ("B.V.") (London: Watts and Co., 1914), p. 109.

[8]James Thomson, "The City of Dreadful Night," Poems of James Thomson "B.V.", Gordon Hall Gerould, ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927), XXI, ll. 1121-1123, p. 182. Later references to this work and others will be found in the text.

[9]Jeanette Marks, "Disaster and Poetry, a Study of James Thomson (B.V.)," North American Review, CCXII (July, 1920), p. 95.

[10]Quoted by William David Schaefer, James Thomson (B.V.): Beyond "The City", (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 82. See also footnote one, p. 163.

[11]Schaefer, Beyond, p. 82.

[12]Gaylord C. LeRoy, Perplexed Prophets (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), pp. 116-117.

[13]James Thomson, "A National Reformer in the Dog-Days," National Reformer, 12 July 1874, p. 22; 19 July 1874, p. 39.

[14]Schaefer, "The Two Cities of Dreadful Night," PMLA, December, 1962, p. 609.

[15]Schaefer, "Two Cities," p. 615, quoting Watts-Dunton's essay in the Athenaeum of 1 May 1880.

[16]James Thomson, "The Poems of William Blake," The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery, Schaefer, ed., (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1967), p. 223.

[17]Imogene B. Walker, James Thomson (B.V.), A Critical Study (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), repr. Greenwood Press, p. 101.

[18]George M. Harper, "Blake's Nebuchadnezzar in 'The City of Dreadful Night,'" Studies in Philology, L (January, 1953), pp. 68-80.

[19]Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), p. 21.

[20]Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 277.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Secularists often felt the wrath of the religiously orthodox society that they opposed. Indeed, they welcomed whatever encounter with their foes they could elicit. Basically, Secularists saw themselves as superior to, and existing outside of, the Victorian society that they despised. Even today, scholars tend to view Thomson's "City" as a striking but minor eccentricity in the Victorian canon. While the Secularists had a right to their opinion of themselves, it is more accurate for us to perceive them as an integral part of the philosophical, social and aesthetic fabric of Victorian society. It is true that many of the views held by Secularists were antithetical to the views held by the majority of Victorians, but it may be said that all of these views were the direct result of numerous forces that were operating on and within the Victorian age as a whole. The Secularists reacted to these forces in ways atypical of the reactions of most Victorians.

For the purposes of this study, the most significant force that operated in the Victorian age was the phenomenon of the death of God. The Secularists did not initiate this force nor did they contribute significant intellectual depth to the discussion of the problem. They did, however, amplify greatly the clamor raised

in the age regarding the claims of atheism. Secularists generally did not exhibit in their lives the anxiety of, for instance, a Clough. They welcomed the loss of their religious faith and immediately set about to replace this lost faith with faith in science and man's perfectibility. Like many other Victorians, the Secularists were unabashed optimists. They gloried in the technological and material triumphs of their time. For the Secularists, however, optimism and pride in the achievements of the age were another function of the loss of religious faith. Each advancement served to demonstrate to them, as strict materialists, the truth of their monistic perception of existence.

It may be said that, as latter-day "logic-choppers," the Secularists did not present a "whole" vision of the complexities that are involved in life. They were too limited in their reliance on a purely rational mode of perception in a monistic framework. They did not recognize the contradiction inherent in their beliefs in the sanctity of man, the Providence of science and their purely rational values. In demoting or denying the importance of an emotional (or other than rational) mode of perception, a distinct difference between the Secularists and their Romantic predecessors emerges. But by placing less emphasis on the emotional reactions to existence, the Secularists avoided the emotional despondency of a James Thomson. He had taken the same atheistic journey that most Secularists took. While other Secularist poets were content to write rather pedestrian poetry which glorified and overemphasized the role of the intellect in life, Thomson's basic mistrust of the

purely rational left him more vulnerable to the crushing doubts that plagued the last years of his tragic life. Nevertheless, Thomson adhered to a dualistic perception of existence. Material existence was certainly "real," but the workings of the imagination revealed hidden realities lurking behind the pleasant facade of material reality. Secularists were generally unconcerned with this duality. In the important debate between Bradlaugh and Holyoake in the spring of 1870 (which took place at precisely the same time that Thomson was composing the 1870 sections of "The City of Dreadful Night"), Holyoake foresaw on earth "a kingdom of reason, for those who found the kingdom of faith inadequate and unreliable."[1] It may be said that the validity of an emotional response to life is similar to the religious faith that Holyoake rejected. Emotions are, in a sense, a matter of faith; they do not lend themselves very readily to a quantitative, ratiocinative analysis.

Bradlaugh also made a statement during the debate that clearly demonstrates the crucial difference between the Secularists and James Thomson. Bradlaugh affirmed "that there is one existence, and I deny that there can be more than one."[2] All Secularists agreed with Bradlaugh on this point. One wonders just how the readers of the National Reformer understood the phantasmagorical sections of "The City" if they were constitutionally opposed to the simultaneous existence of a mental (emotional) and physical (scientific) reality. We know that William Maccall chided Thomson for his pessimism. But there is no evidence that the Secularists realized the extent to which Thomson's poem diverged from the accepted party

line. It is entirely possible that the average Secularist reader simply misread the poem as another example of the standard polemical attack on the socio-economic malaise that gripped Victorian London.

It is highly significant that "The City" contains no reference to science (with the single exception of some of the objects which surround the statue of Melencolia in section XXI). No scientist stands in the line to enter the cathedral of the real night. Poems by other Secularist writers, however, literally abound with references to science. G. J. Holyoake, in The Trial of Theism, asserted that "humanity requires the wakefulness of day to watch, and the certainty of science for its deliverance."[3] The spirit-like human/phantoms which haunt the City in Thomson's poem can help themselves in one way only--through suicide. Holyoake correctly noted in The Trial that belief in a spirit runs counter to the Secularist principle of self-help, for spirit "is the dream of night" (p. 182). While it is true that Holyoake and Bradlaugh could not have been speaking and writing with direct or even indirect reference to Thomson's poem, their general philosophical stance may be taken as another indication of the gulf that separated the laureate from the leaders.

Thomson would say that the monistic framework of Secularism created an illusion of harmony. Life was, in reality, far more complex than the Secularists perceived it to be. Life is not easily reducible to the "universal laws" which Secularists thought governed the universe and mankind. The science that was Providence for the Secularists and a harbinger of a hope-filled future for many other

Victorians could wield a vicious weapon against civilization as the generation which followed Victoria's death sadly learned. Individual man, likewise, is far more complex than the Secularists thought him to be. Freud soon opened the Pandora's box of man's inner psyche that the Secularists, among others, had kept closed. This is not to criticize the Secularists for lacking the foresight to predict the discoveries of future generations. Indeed, as an integral part of a century that witnessed the rapid secularization of life, the Secularists played as much of a role in giving birth to the twentieth century as any other interest group. In fact, the Secularists may have been closer to the philosophical and intellectual core of the last half of the nineteenth century than they have been given credit for. The weaknesses and faults which exist in the Secularist world view serve to demonstrate that the members of the movement were, like all Victorians, "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born."

This study has investigated the relationship between the Secularists and that "dead" world of Christianity which they attempted to shed like an old skin. Thomson's "City," written within the context of a Secularist (secular) life, does much to explain why the bright world of the optimistic Secularists was "powerless to be born." Thomson's poem anticipates the twentieth-century's existential perception of nothingness. Again, the Secularists cannot be faulted for their inability to see the long range implications of the death of God. As strict materialists, they were almost consistent in filling the void left by the death of God with their

optimistic "religion" of ongoing, increasing material prosperity guided by the advance of Science. Their refusal to consider the possible "existence" of nothingness is the single major fact which separates the Secularists of Victorian England from their grandchildren, the secularized masses of the existentialist twentieth century.

Holyoake felt that it was improper to destroy one system of values without having a ready replacement for it; a void (nothingness) should not be left. Bradlaugh, on the other hand, demanded the complete destruction of religion before creating a full-scale replacement. For Bradlaugh and his followers, the ongoing battle with religion was in itself an expression of values. Thomson, however, had neither the volatile spirit of a Bradlaugh which could maintain a constant attack on religion, nor had he transferred his mother's millenarian hopes from his religious childhood into the optimism that the other Secularists displayed. The void of nothingness was truly all that was left for Thomson. Bradlaugh believed that the prevailing socio-economic conditions of the Victorian age were the direct result of the petrified theological system that still existed. Ultimately, the Victorian public did not accept this view, nor did James Thomson. Instead, Thomson saw that each individual of the society contributes to the hellish conditions of modern life. His vision anticipates Pogo's famous line, "we have met the enemy and they are us," and Sartre's "Hell is other people."

More importantly, Thomson's poem is in the tradition of literature which recognizes the validity of an interior reality

created by the act of the imagination operating on the raw data of a physical, external reality. Secularists were not concerned with the possibility of the existence of a private, inner reality. Since they valued the scientific method so highly, they were primarily concerned with that experience which is shared experience common to all. It was this shared experience to which the Secularists thought the recently revealed universal laws of science could best be applied. Man's existence could thus be rationally ordered to meet best the utilitarian goals of the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

However, this Secularist dream of a rational world order--a dream shared by many prominent Victorian thinkers--was not to become a living reality. Secularists never acknowledged the irrational, an action which was a function of their rejection of supernatural religion. In literary matters this fact was manifested in a general distrust of the function and importance of the imagination. The literary result for the Secularists, with the exception of Thomson, was a body of poetry and criticism which was severed from the traditionally important source of literature--man's imagination. The Secularists paradoxically saw themselves as the literary heirs of the Romantics. Yet the Romantic period was the age which saw an eruption of the imagination as an important artistic value and source of art. It is more accurate to say that the Secularists applauded and appropriated the content of revolutionary Romanticism without having an affinity with its imaginative basis. Thomson, however, having that affinity plus a Secularist philosophy of

literary values, and caring little for the sound and the fury of millenarian optimism, was able to offer a more comprehensive art. "The City of Dreadful Night" is clearly superior to the other poetry of the Secularist movement because Thomson properly understood and employed a more comprehensive conception of man's complex nature and the art which springs from that nature.

Perhaps it is possible to say that Thomson's poem is the best criticism of the Secularist movement that exists. In previous chapters, other reasons for the failure of the Secularist movement were suggested: Bradlaugh's basically conservative and simplistic position regarding industrial, agricultural and economic matters; the emergence of Fabian Socialism; the refusal of the Victorian public to accept Bradlaugh's attacks on religion as the best solution to the problems of the day; the failure of the second generation of Secularist leaders to provide the leadership lost by Bradlaugh's death. Certainly, these were cumulative factors which played an important part in the failure of the movement. It is somehow appropriate, however, that James Thomson, the erstwhile "laureate" of Secularism, wrote a poem which was published by Bradlaugh in the National Reformer, which offers an exclusive insight into the self-destruction of the movement. "The City" is usually read as a bitter commentary on the nightmare of life in Victorian London. But it can also be read as Thomson's testament of the emptiness of the Secularists' optimism and as a commentary on the primary fault of the movement--its incomplete understanding of human nature.

Thomson's poem is also more than this. It is a poem which speaks to the realities of the twentieth century. The Secularists are definitely creatures of the Victorian era. Thomson, however, transcends the limitations of his place in history. Bradlaugh's Secularist movement could not, phoenix-like, be born from the ashes of the dead orthodox past. Thomson prophesied the future from the perspective of his nightmare City. His imagination triumphed where the rationalism of Bradlaugh failed.

FOOTNOTES

[1]George Jacob Holyoake, "Is Secularism Atheism?" National Reformer, 20 March 1870, p. 177.

[2]Charles Bradlaugh, "Is Secularism Atheism?" National Reformer, 10 April 1870, p. 228.

[3]Holyoake, The Trial of Theism (London: Trubner and Co., 1877), p. 182.

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Many of the writers for the National Reformer used either a nom de plume or initials to sign their work. In some instances it has been possible to correlate the nom de plume with the actual name of the writer; "Ajax" was Annie Besant and, of course, "B.V." and "X" were the signatures of James Thomson. Articles and poems will be listed under the actual name of the author; the signature will follow in parantheses.

I have listed "B.Ware" (Beware) in the "B" section of the poetry bibliography rather than in the "W" section. Similarly, "F.Rolic" (Frolic) will be found in the "F" section rather than the "R" section. At the end of the poetry section the names "Andrew Vorner" and Andrew Vomer" will be found. I have listed these separately because Vorner and Vomer were surely the same person; the Reformer's printers made a typesetting error with Vorner's name. Unfortunately, Vorner/Vomer published nothing else. Healthy skepticism demands that they be listed separately.

In the prose section, the final "X" entry is not listed with Thomson because he left the Reformer in 1875; "X's" article appeared in 1878. It is possible, however, that Bradlaugh held an old Thomson piece for later use at an appropriate time. This was done, for instance, with "A National Reformer in the Dog-days" which Thomson wrote in 1869; Bradlaugh published it in 1874.

Certain other identifications can be made. "H.G.A." was Henry G. Atkinson; "F.W.D." was F. W. Dyer; "W.E." was William Elder; "E.H.G." was Edward H. Guillaume; "H.V.M." was Henry V. Mayer and "M.M." and "Dialektikos" were the same person (according to a marginal note in a National Reformer). With the exception of the last, these identifications can be made with a high degree of certainty based on internal evidence of style, theme and the chronological order of appearance.

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