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# Apocalyptic Vision and Philosophical Optimism in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Philosophy

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APOCALYPTIC VISION AND PHILOSOPHICAL OPTIMISM IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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This study examines the problem of evil during the eighteenth-century, beginning with the philosophical optimism of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant and extending to the skeptical deism of Swift, Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire. In each case, literary genre plays a central role in shaping the argument of these writers, as form matches the style of argument. The study evaluates the apocalyptic prophecies of Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott, and Dorothy Gott as an extenuation of philosophical optimism fueled by religious enthusiasm. While reading and interpreting scripture, these writers produced their own versions of scripture, combining exegesis with personal narrative. The study closes with the satirical approaches of William Blake and Heinrich von Kleist, who eschew the problem of evil for an emphasis on the power of imagination and human potential for action. The study is grounded in the 1755 earthquake at Lisbon, the death and destruction of which influenced the arguments of many of these writers.

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*“Perhaps it is not-being that is the true state, and all our dream of life is inexistent; but, if so, we feel that these phrases of music, these conceptions which exist in relation to our dream, must be nothing either. We shall perish, but we have as hostages these divine captives who will follow and share our fate. And death in their company is somehow less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less probable.” –Marcel Proust, In Search of Lost Time*

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation follows the link between philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision throughout eighteenth-century literature and philosophy. Philosophical optimism is defined by Gottfried Leibniz in *Theodicy* as the belief that this world is “the best of all possible worlds” (128). The philosophical optimists believed that God has a masterplan for the world, and that events of natural and evil are part of this plan. Apocalyptic vision involves the belief that God plans to bring about a new world through an event of great destruction. Both philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision can be seen as responses to the problem of evil. The problem of evil can be formulated as a question: if God is perfectly good, why does he allow evil to exist in the world? As an ancient philosophical question, going back at least to the Book of Job, it found particular responses in a variety of unique literary forms throughout the eighteenth-century.

I argue that these two distinct philosophical and religious modes became intermingled in groups of writers from a variety of different educational and literary backgrounds after the 1755 earthquake at Lisbon changed the consciousness of eighteenth-century philosophical thought. After the earthquake, people questioned their most basic religious and philosophical beliefs (Molesky 19). As Susan Neiman explains, the Lisbon earthquake “shook the Enlightenment” and “affected the best minds in Europe” resulting in works that confronted philosophical optimism and explored justifications for it (1). Writers such as Voltaire could no longer embrace philosophical optimism as an acceptable worldview. But the earthquake didn’t just result in works of writing by the intellectual elite (1). “Sermons,” “eyewitness sketches,” and poetry all emerged as literary responses to the earthquake from a variety of sources (1). The earthquake brought the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope under scrutiny, but also provided the



possibility for writers to reimagine natural disasters as a sign of apocalypse and a part of a divine ultimate plan.

Philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision are aligned in their shared faith in an ultimate plan for the universe. However, the prophetic writers I discuss in chapter three emphasize personal agency in this ultimate plan, as they believe themselves to be intimately involved in the creation of a New Jerusalem through an event of apocalyptic destruction. This apocalyptic vision includes a range of possibilities outside of earthquakes such as storms and fires. In the first chapter, I examine works of philosophical optimism that defended God for the existence of evil in the world. Chapter two explores the antithesis of this view by studying works of skeptical Deism. In chapter three, I read works of eighteenth-century prophecy that predicted apocalypse, rejecting the Deist view of a distant God. The Romantic writers from chapter four similarly used apocalyptic vision and natural disasters in their writing to emphasize the power of human imagination and action as transcending the problem of evil, providing another critical turn in the dialectic.

Chapter one begins by discussing the 1755 earthquake at Lisbon, an event that would turn the tide of eighteenth-century philosophical thought, disrupting belief in philosophical optimism. The earthquake at Lisbon caused many eighteenth-century writers and philosophers to reconsider the problem of evil. I also discuss some of the philosophical influences on the discussion of the problem of evil such as Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in order to provide some background on the arguments that Leibniz and Pope make about the problem of evil. *Leviathan* carries forth from Biblical narratives the idea of a God who can use naturally evil events as a way to punish human beings for sin. Hobbes posits the idea that God has the right to allow or contribute to evil in the world because he is all powerful. While Hobbes

appeals to arguments that emphasize God's power, Pope and Leibniz appeal to God's infinite goodness. *Paradise Lost* influenced Leibniz and Pope through the concept of the *felix culpa*, or the optimistic belief that original sin and the evil, death, and suffering that come with it are part of God's greater plan because they bring about the possibility for Christ. The idea that a greater good can come from evil in many forms influenced Leibniz and Pope as they approached the problem of evil from distinct literary genres.

I discuss the similarities between Milton and Pope in their respective works in chapter one. Milton sought to "justify the ways of God to man" in *Paradise Lost* (Book I, lines 464-465). Pope sought to "vindicate the ways of God to man" in "Essay on Man" (line 16). The difference between justify and vindicate is relevant to the respective arguments that Milton and Pope make to defend God for the existence of evil and suffering in the world. While Milton justifies the problem of evil by telling the reader the story of the fall of man and the eventual coming of Christ, Pope vindicates the existence of evil as part of God's harmonious plan. Milton explains that the world is an infinitely better place than before the fall of man because of the joyous arrival of Christ, while Pope claims that we must accept our place in the hierarchy of the world without questioning God's higher purposes for allowing evil and suffering to exist. Pope claims that questioning these realities is prideful and hubristic, while this question is in some ways the basis for Milton's epic poem.

Chapter one focuses on the literary form that Gottfried Leibniz, Alexander Pope, and Immanuel Kant employed to match their optimistic arguments about the problem of evil. Gottfried Leibniz argues for philosophical optimism in *Theodicy*. Leibniz defends God for allowing evil to exist in the world. He sees everything that happens as in "perfectly connected" order (124). For Leibniz, evil is just a necessary part of an immutable mathematical equation

that could not be altered. There are also elements of Leibniz's argument that posit hope in a new world in which all of the infinite worlds of this universe combine in a vision of ultimate goodness. His belief in the "Empyrean heaven" is related to the apocalyptic beliefs of the writers I discuss in chapter three, although they have very different ideas about mankind's agency in shaping a new world (135).

In chapter one, I also explore Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" which heralds philosophical optimism through the ordered, self-contained form of heroic couplets. While Leibniz's defense of God in *Theodicy* appeals to universal and mathematical laws through the format of a treatise, Pope's "Essay on Man" focuses on the ways that human beings should not attempt to surpass the boundaries of human thought and accept their place in the great chain of being. Like the form of the heroic couplet, Pope's view of mankind's place in the universe is self-contained and ordered. His belief in the great chain of being is expressed through a great chain of couplets. Leibniz has a panoramic perspective of the universe in *Theodicy*, and Pope has a circumscribed view of the role that human beings play within a larger framework. Both, however, believe that this world is the best of all possible worlds. Both also express a longing for a new or better world. Like Leibniz's longing for the Empyrean heaven, Pope longs for "some happier island" free from suffering and evil (line 106).

Immanuel Kant explored the causes behind the earthquake at Lisbon and offered a solution characteristic of the Enlightenment faith in reason through a scientific treatise called *History and Physiography of the Most Remarkable Causes of the Earthquake*. Kant investigates the causes of the earthquake from a scientific perspective. He sees the disastrous earthquake as an opportunity to experience the sublime, and consider our finitude in the context of God's infinite power as expressed through nature. Although his hypothesis that the earthquake was

caused by a series of subterranean fires was ultimately proven wrong, it still shows the Enlightenment belief that everything, even the most unimaginable suffering, could be explained through scientific study. Like Leibniz and Pope, Kant sees this world as the best of all possible ones. He emphasizes scientific research and hypotheses as a solution to man's failure to exist harmoniously with nature in the world God has created through perfect universal laws.

In chapter two, I discuss the works of a group of writers whose skeptical Deism contrasts with and works against the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope. The skeptics from chapter two believe that this is not the best of all possible worlds, and that there is no better world to come. There is also no masterplan for human happiness or goodness. Natural evil events are the result of the laws an uninterested God used to put the universe into motion. This God has no interest in human affairs and plays no role in our daily lives. The skeptical Deism of the writers in chapter two represents an antithesis to philosophical optimism, and provides a very different perspective on the problem of evil to this century-long dialectic.

In chapter two, I analyze various entries from the *Encyclopedia* to demonstrate Denis Diderot's views on the problem of evil and his acknowledgement of it as a philosophical problem. I argue that Diderot's *Jacques The Fatalist* provides a critique of philosophical optimism by satirizing the idea of a masterplan and the best of all possible worlds as a form of determinism. By weaving together elements of satire, travel narrative, and various diversions from the narration, Diderot's text shows how untenable philosophical optimism is as a solution to the problem of evil. Interestingly, one of the things that prevents Jacques from finding happiness is the death of his brother during the Lisbon earthquake, an event which he regards as having been already written in a scroll in the sky. Throughout his text, Diderot shows the failure

of philosophical optimism to give us a livable philosophy. We are definitively not part of a cosmic plan of perfection, governed by divinely inspired mathematical laws.

Diderot criticizes religious enthusiasm as an inept way of approaching life and suffering in his mock-epic, *The Skeptic's Walk*, another work that I discuss as playing an important part in the dialectic between philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision. Diderot's two characters Aristos and Cleobulus wander through various alleys that are simultaneously representative of differing worldviews and reminiscent of the journey of Dante and Virgil in *Inferno*. Diderot satirizes religious enthusiasm and fundamental Christian beliefs such as original sin in his alley of thorns, a place where priests and zealots argue over trivial theological issues and hurt one another needlessly. By utilizing the mock-epic, Diderot mocks the idea of human life as an epic story that has a telos or divinely inspired purpose. For Diderot, there is no possibility of a new world rendered through apocalypse, and those who believe so are deluded and dangerous.

Perhaps the dialectic concerning the problem of evil downplays the role that moral agency plays in the world. In *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* Diderot provides a commentary on imperialism and the problem of evil through his character Orou, a sage from Tahiti. Orou criticizes the French explorer Bougainville for imposing Western practices and religious beliefs on his people. Orou condemns the God of Bougainville, who fails to prevent evil and destroys peaceful communities through dogmatic moral practices. Diderot's approach to the problem of evil as secondary to human agency and human evil is a prelude to William Blake's and Heinrich von Kleist's satires of religious and political leaders who use natural evil to bring about events of great human evil, which I discuss in chapter four.

David Hume replaces the philosophical optimists' belief in the great chain of being with a more unsettling metaphor. For Hume, we are actors in a play about which we have no

knowledge. We have no idea who wrote the play, and are acting out various roles without hope of higher meaning or any sense of how the play might end. We don't even know who wrote the play. We blindly act out our little roles in the dark. Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* affirms Pope's emphasis on the limits of human knowledge, but without hope in a divine master plan. Hume skeptically interrogates Leibniz's faith in the perfect laws that govern the universe. For Hume, the God we believe is responsible for the problem of evil is a projection of our worst qualities. Just as Kant investigates the causes of the earthquake at Lisbon from a scientific perspective, Hume skeptically investigates the reasons why we hold religious beliefs, arriving at a bleak worldview compared to the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope. Hume refuses to downplay the amount of suffering in the world or justify evil and suffering in terms of a grander scheme.

David Hume utilizes dialogue as a vehicle for satire of philosophical optimism. For example, David Hume's characters in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* come up with a litany of reasons why this world is not the best of all possible worlds, listing the many hardships, difficulties, and events of needless suffering that human beings face. Their dialogue overwhelms rational appeals to universal or mathematical laws. For skeptical writers like Diderot, Hume, and Voltaire, religious enthusiasm is dangerous, and can cause human evil that surpasses natural evil. Recognizing the role that moral agency ought to play in a discussion of the problem of evil, Hume points out that the greatest danger to mankind is mankind itself. While Pope encourages us to study mankind's role in a greater hierarchy, Hume claims, "Man is the greatest enemy of man" (178).

Voltaire's poetry could also be used to contradict philosophical optimism and provide a very different view on the problem of evil. Voltaire's "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" directly

addresses the philosophical problems that emerged after the Lisbon earthquake, and is also a direct response to Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man". Voltaire meditates on the amount of suffering and death that occurred during the earthquake. Using a rational approach similar to Leibniz and Pope, he points to all this destruction and suffering and asks how this could possibly be the work of a loving God. Voltaire's rhymed couplets add up like an equation that does not fit together, much like his view of Leibniz's and Pope's philosophical optimism. Instead of providing a rational view of mankind's role in the great chain of being, his poem is a lament for the suffering and death that occurred at Lisbon.

Voltaire satirizes philosophical optimism through the character of Pangloss in *Candide*. Pangloss insists that "everything is for the best" even after enduring unimaginable suffering and countless disasters (17). Pangloss serves as a satirical portrait of philosophical optimism, and he is depicted as a stubborn fool who refuses to acknowledge that God is not personally involved in his affairs and has no higher purpose for his suffering. For many of the skeptical Deist writers from chapter three, there is no better world to hope for, as philosophical optimists and religious enthusiasts alike would have us believe.

Although his works were written earlier in the century, the satire of Jonathan Swift plays a special role in satirizing the ways that human beings misinterpret scripture for their own advantage. In chapter two, I analyze Swift's Merlin prophecy and *A Tale of a Tub* which criticize the ways that we read and interpret religious texts, and provide an important critique, seeing apocalyptic vision as a dangerous form of religious enthusiasm. Swift criticizes the confidence of those who would lay claim to any kind of absolute knowledge about the divine, including the philosophical optimists.

In chapter three, I discuss various definitions of religious enthusiasm provided by a variety of eighteenth-century writers to provide background on how prophetic works would have been viewed by leading philosophers and writers during the eighteenth-century. I analyze definitions of religious enthusiasm by John Locke, Samuel Johnson, Joseph Addison, John Dryden, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Mary Astell in an effort to read these definitions in the context of works of radical eighteenth-century prophecy. Samuel Johnson, for example, defines religious enthusiasm in his *Dictionary* as “heat of imagination” (120). Mary Astell, on the other hand, defends religious enthusiasm as an integral part of the spirit of poets and philosophers in *Bart’lemy Fair* (172). The dialogue on religious enthusiasm veered between skepticism and belief throughout the eighteenth-century. This characteristic tension between condemnation and affirmation of religious enthusiasm is part of what makes works of eighteenth-century prophecy an invaluable addition to the eighteenth-century dialectic on the problem of evil.

The religious enthusiasts from chapter three believe in an apocalyptic form of philosophical optimism. Like Leibniz and Pope, writers such as Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott believed that God has a masterplan and that this is the best of all possible worlds. They also shared the optimistic belief that natural disasters and other examples of natural evil are a part of God’s masterplan. They expressed this belief through works that combined radical interpretive practices with personal stories about their everyday lives. These quotidian experiences stand beside proclamations of apocalypse based on personal readings of scripture, making their works both relatable and flummoxing to contemporary readers. They saw events of natural destruction as evidence of God’s judgment upon sinners. The religious enthusiasm of the writers from chapter three changed the sense of agency we have in God’s ultimate plan from passive acceptance to an active bringing about of the new Jerusalem predicted



in the Book of Revelation. These writers were exploring the same philosophical issues as the leading philosophers of the eighteenth century, but without the universities, education and intellectual support that writers like Leibniz, Pope, or Kant had.

Reading scripture is a crucial aspect of the apocalyptic vision experienced by the writers in chapter three since special revelation enables them to see the particular role that they are meant to play in bringing about apocalypse. For example, in *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* Richard Brothers uncovers God's plan to "destroy the English Parliament" through a great earthquake by reading the Book of Revelation (20). While sharing with Leibniz and Pope the belief that earthquakes and natural disasters are part of God's plan, Richard Brothers' apocalyptic vision invites a radical participation in this plan.

While Richard Brothers prays to God in *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* to delay the destruction of England, Joanna Southcott claims the power to personally bring about apocalypse as God's harbinger of judgment. In the documents recording her trial, Southcott claims that those who do not believe her to be God's prophet will be met with violence and death through an earthquake that she brings about. Southcott interprets the Book of Isaiah as predicting that a great earthquake will shatter England soon unless they repent. She will "destroy and devour at once" if they refuse to acknowledge her as God's prophet (23). Whereas in the works of Pope and Leibniz, human beings have little or no agency in bringing about a new world, Southcott claims the power to do so with the utmost confidence. Despite being condemned as a religious enthusiast, Southcott's faith in personal agency in bringing about apocalypse constitutes a crucial change in the century-long dialectic about the problem of evil.

The poetry of Dorothy Gott provides images of living in close community with God after apocalypse. In *The Midnight Cry* she uses earthquakes to symbolize a spiritual apocalypse that

will bring about a better world. In stark contrast to the destruction and suffering emphasized in Voltaire's "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" Gott pictures God's people sitting together enjoying a communal meal with God himself. The masterplan or commingling of worlds into a vision of ultimate goodness that Leibniz has faith in is made manifest in Gott's poetry, where everyone lives together in a utopian spiritual community. Rather than accept our place in the great chain of being, Gott envisions herself as living with God. Her vision rejects the distant relationship to God of Leibniz and Pope as well as the skeptical Deism of the writers from chapter two. *The Midnight Cry* mixes personal narrative, biblical interpretation, and poetry to provide this vision of living with God in a post-apocalyptic world.

The romantic writers from chapter four reimagine the problem of evil as a manifestation of poor ways of thinking about the world. Through an amalgamation of the literary forms that writers from earlier in the century used, William Blake and Heinrich von Kleist each see the danger of man-made evil occurring as a response to natural evil, providing a critique on the religious dialectic that blamed events of natural destruction such as the earthquake at Lisbon on sin, and saw them as an expression of God's judgment. For example, in *Tiriel*, the crazed father Tiriel blames the death of his wife on his innocent children. He summons an earthquake to punish them, and personifies the cruelty and hypocrisy of religious leaders who saw the earthquake at Lisbon as an expression of God's judgment. Similarly, the character Michael Kohlhaas in Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* self-righteously pursues a campaign of incredible cruelty and destruction in response to having two of his horses stolen. Blake and Kleist both emphasize man-made evil over natural evil, and see man-made evil as a product of self-centered, overly rational modes of interpretation.

Both Blake and Kleist wrestled with the philosophical modes of thought of the writers discussed in the first three chapters of this dissertation. Blake railed against the idea of the impersonal God of the Deists, as well as the God of the religious enthusiasts who would engender natural disasters to punish human beings for sin. Similarly, Kleist's novellas explore Kantian questions of human agency in relation to the problem of evil, and satirize religious leaders who interpret events of natural destruction as an expression of God's wrath. Characters like Michael Kohlhaas and Piachi from *The Foundling* attempt to right the wrongs done to them, but their pursuit of justice ultimately fails. The dogmatic religious leaders of *Earthquake in Chile* use the destruction of the 1647 earthquake in Santiago to commit acts of terrible violence. Blake and Kleist satirized both the philosophical optimists of chapter one and the apocalyptic visionaries of chapter three through distinct literary genres of visionary poetry and the novella.

The problem of evil influenced many groups of writers throughout the eighteenth-century. The earthquake at Lisbon drastically altered the way eighteenth-century writers approached the problem of evil. For many writers, the arguments and literary genres of Pope and Leibniz no longer provided a reasonable worldview, as the earthquake dismantled faith in philosophical optimism. Different literary genres emerged as an evolution of previous forms of thinking about the problem of evil. Skeptical Deism emerged as an antithesis to philosophical optimism, as writers such as Diderot, Hume, and Voltaire utilized satire to mock and interrogate the belief that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision come together through their shared hope in a new world created in the wake of disaster. The prophetic writers from chapter three took the hope of the philosophical optimists that events of natural evil and destruction are part of God's plan, and posited agency in that plan through reading scripture and interpreting it as predicting

impending apocalypse. The prophetic works of Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott show the persistence of belief in apocalyptic vision and special revelation throughout the eighteenth-century. As unique as their literary forms are, combining personal narrative and Biblical exegesis, they also are unique in their belief in the personal role one can play in bringing about apocalypse. Finally, the works of William Blake and Heinrich von Kleist conceptualized the century-long dialectic on the problem of evil as failing to take into account the power of human imagination and human action. For them, poetic genius and personal agency can combat the problem of evil as a mental construct. Their works and literary styles, along with those of other writers of the Romantic movement, would contribute to new dialogues about the problem of evil that persisted throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE APOCALYPTIC BELIEFS AND APPROACHES OF LEIBNIZ, POPE, AND KANT

In 1755, a terrible earthquake rocked Lisbon. So many were killed, and the destruction was so vast, that it was difficult for historians to precisely calculate the death-toll (Molesky 294). Thousands were killed by the initial destruction, as buildings collapsed on the morning of All Saint's Day. Next, the earthquake spawned a great tsunami that killed two or three thousand people who escaped the falling buildings by heading towards the shore (132). After this, the destruction sparked a great many fires throughout Lisbon, killing thousands more (294). An estimated 40,000 people were killed in total, making the earthquake one of the most devastating natural disasters the world had ever seen (298).

These numbers of course fail to communicate the amount of destruction and suffering that occurred due to the earthquake. Whole families were killed, and countless children were crushed by the falling buildings. When discussing the earthquake at Lisbon on a philosophical or theological level, it is important to never forget the unimaginable suffering that thousands of innocent people experienced on that day. As Jeffrey Burton Russell explains, evil is "real and tangible" and is experienced through "direct perception" (1). For the person who is experiencing great, unexplained pain, whether or emotional or physical, it is all consuming. For that person, in that moment, it is the only thing that exists.

Russell claims that to exclude natural disasters from being categorized as evil is an "evasion" of the true nature of evil (1). He provides the example of a young girl who suffers alone and without hope or explanation for her suffering, not unlike the many children who suffered and died during the earthquake at Lisbon. He writes, "If any world view, theist or atheist, minimizes her suffering, declares it nonexistent, gives it elaborate philosophical

justification, or explains it in terms of a greater good, whether the name assigned that good be God or the People, that world view renders her life, and yours, empty and vain” (260). It is easy to justify evil when one is not directly experiencing it, and in doing so, forget the very nature of evil.

The earthquake at Lisbon had very serious philosophical and intellectual consequences in addition to the physical suffering, death, and destruction that occurred. Susan Neiman describes the earthquake at Lisbon as causing “the collapse of the most basic trust in the world, the grounds that make civilization possible” (1). The earthquake also had a devastating effect on eighteenth-century religious beliefs. The Citizens of Lisbon looked to God to find an explanation for the death and destruction, and often failed to find a suitable one. The earthquake at Lisbon catapulted the joint problems of evil and suffering into the forefront of eighteenth-century philosophical discussion.

In some ways, the earthquake had a polarizing effect. While writers such as Voltaire posited that the earthquake was proof that we live in a Deistic universe where God is not personally involved in human affairs, other prominent figures such as the Jesuit leader and “former favorite of the King” (Joseph I of Portugal) Gabriel Malagrida believed the earthquake provided proof of God’s judgment on the people of Lisbon for their sins (Molesky 3). Not everyone looked at the devastation of the earthquake at Lisbon and lost their faith in a benevolent God. Indeed, some thinkers were strengthened in their faith in the wake of this devastating act of God. As Neiman points out, orthodox theologians believed the earthquake could “punish particular transgressions” and “show those who thought God’s works exhausted by the abstract and distant Creation that He still played a role in the world” (243). These theologians saw the

earthquake as having the potential to re-awaken faith in those who had lost it. For them, natural evil is God's response to moral evil in the world (Neiman 243).

The problem of evil is one that has puzzled not just philosophers, but anyone who has ever noticed injustice in the world, for centuries. As such a long-standing and recurring problem, most major systems of thought attempt to offer a solution or at least an explanation for evil in some way. As David Scott writes in his defense of Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil in *Theodicy*, "perhaps any philosophy that does not attempt to come to terms with this fundamental reality is, in just that measure, a failure" (311). Jeffrey Burton Russel agrees: "any world view that ignores or denies the existential horror of evil is an illusion" (260). After the earthquake at Lisbon, the need for a solution to the problem of evil became especially prominent.

The Lisbon earthquake served as a gateway for many different kinds of writers to discuss the problem of evil as suffering in the eighteenth-century. Before the earthquake, Enlightenment thinkers such as Gottfried Leibniz and Alexander Pope wrote to rationalize their view of a loving, beneficent God in the context of terrible, unexplained suffering. Leibniz saw evil as a necessary part of the perfect world God created, as if the destruction and death that occurred at Lisbon were part of an immutable mathematical equation. From Leibniz's panoramic perspective, evil events are misunderstood necessities that lead only towards God's perfect commingling of all worlds into ultimate goodness. Although his major philosophical work *Theodicy* (1710) was published over forty years before the Lisbon earthquake occurred, it articulated an optimistic solution in the century's dialogue on the problem of evil that writers such as Voltaire would decry during the aftermath of the earthquake.

Alexander Pope posed a solution to the problem of evil similar in tone to Leibniz, however Pope departs by adding the power of aesthetics and poetic form. Throughout his long

poem, *Essay on Man* (1734) he points to humankind's limited perspective and knowledge as examples of why we should not "act or think beyond mankind" and accept our assigned place in the "gen'ral order" (190, 171). Pope proposes that human beings should accept their place in the great chain of being as limited, fallible agents governed by a perfectly wise and good God, however, it was just this kind of philosophical optimism that came under attack by critics and found special criticism in Voltaire's *Candide*.

Yet, even after the earthquake, a type of philosophical optimism persisted in the work of Immanuel Kant who wrote about the earthquake in order to investigate, and thus explicate the environmental causes of the earthquake, thereby stripping them of any evil connotation. His theories about subterranean fires that set off a chain reaction causing the earthquake, while later proved to be incorrect, exhibit the Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge and the belief that everything, even the most unimaginable, needless suffering and destruction, could be understood through scientific study. Even the problem of evil itself is secondary to understanding the scientific causes behind the earthquake, which Kant regarded with awe and wonder rather than terror and despair.

The writings of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant each reveal a spiritual component to their views on the earthquake that works alongside their emphasis on reason and logic. Rather than an accessory to their philosophies, the spirituality of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant is a fundamental part of their views on the problem of evil. Each writer uses spiritual language and mystical ideas to form the crux of their argument about the problem of evil.

In this chapter, I argue that Leibniz, Pope, and Kant each articulate a solution to the problem of evil based on an Exodus narrative that formulates terrible events as part of God's plan to deliver us to a better world free from oppression and hypocrisy. Each of these writers



approaches the problem of human suffering as an allegorical plotting of Exodus that portrays terrible events as leading ultimately to liberation and a new world of blessings and goodness. Leibniz, Pope, and Kant each exhibit a prophetic arc that moves from disaster to a peaceful community. Emphasis on the rational philosophical structures of these arguments has overlooked the prophetic structure of their arguments, one that moves from perceived disaster to a peaceful reconciliation.

While I will argue that these three writers participate in a prophetic as well as rationalist tradition, to understand their prophetic distinction it is necessary to first examine the major seventeenth-century thinker, Thomas Hobbes, who was both their inspiration and their object of critique. In his seminal work of philosophy and politics, *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes articulates a view of evil and good as arbitrary categories based on individual human preferences. Good and evil are terms we use to describe the way we feel about certain events, and do not have any existence of their own in the world. For example, in Hobbes' view earthquakes would not be considered inherently evil, but only good or evil based on human preferences.

Leibniz, Pope, and Kant challenge this view, trying to align the existence of terrible events with their understanding of a perfectly wise God. Unlike Hobbes, Leibniz, Pope, and Kant identified evil as a real presence in the world that exists outside of the conventions of human preference. They were willing to admit that disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon do not indicate an evil God, but they argued that human understanding fails to grasp the finitude of God's plan. While they emphasize logic, their arguments also take recourse into the spiritual. Their views on the problem of evil demonstrate a productive relationship between philosophical logic and literary prophetic form.

## THOMAS HOBBS: GOOD AND EVIL AS NAMES THAT SIGNIFY APPETITES

Thomas Hobbes approaches the difficult, perennial problem of evil as one of relativity and adversity. He writes, “This question, *why evil men often prosper, and good men suffer adversity*, has been much disputed by the ancient, and is the same with this of ours, *by what right God dispenseth the prosperities and adversities of this life*” (237). Hobbes questions what gives God the right to deal out blessings and pain seemingly at random amongst human beings, without regard to their character or righteousness. He acknowledges that this problem “hath shaken the faith, not only of the vulgar, but of philosophers, and which is more, of the Saints, concerning the Divine Providence” (237). Nearly everyone, regardless of intelligence, character, or position in life, has wondered why bad things happen to good people.

For Hobbes, good and evil have more to do with preferences rather than divine judgment or any kind of universal forces. Hobbes moves the question of evil into the realm of moral philosophy and out of theodicy. He defines moral philosophy as “the science of what is *good*, and *evil*, in the conversation, and society of mankind” (105). But it becomes clear that Hobbes understands good and evil to have a very subjective meaning. He writes, “*Good*, and *evil*, are names that signify our appetites, and aversions; which in different tempers, customs, and doctrines of men, are different” (105). Evil events that happen (such as the earthquake at Lisbon) do not have anything about them that is essentially evil or wrong. Their status as evil is purely based on our perception and preference.

Moving to the realm of politics, Hobbes sees war as what happens when human beings disagree in their definitions of good and evil (105). Wars are thus the result of differing preferences between countries rather than any objective appeal to right or wrong or good or evil.

Hobbes demonstrates that both man-made evils and evaluations of natural disasters derive from the same root of moral subjectivity.

Hobbes opens up a space for thinking about the suffering experienced by events of inhuman origin by meditating on the consequences of God's omnipotence. He identifies two sources as the justification for why God he allows evil things to happen. One of the reasons he identifies is punishment for sin. This aligns in part with the views of writers of eighteenth-century prophecy to whom I will later turn in chapter three, as they often viewed natural disasters as an expression of God's wrath. Indeed, for Hobbes, fear of his wrath and punishment can motivate God's subjects to continue to follow his commands. If human beings obey earthly laws in part to avoid punishment by the sovereign, they should obey divine laws in order to avoid punishment by God, as God is in some sense the ultimate Leviathan. As William Sokoloff points out, for Hobbes, fear "was essential to creating and maintaining political stability" (1). The threat of terrible earthly punishments for sin can motivate human beings to live justly, and, as Christopher McClure writes, "the fear of violent death is the foundation of Hobbes' political thought" (2). The idea that God would use earthquakes in order to bring about judgment for sin resonates with the fear of a violent death.

That God is all-powerful is enough justification to allow or cause evil events without punishment for evil as a necessity. He does not need anyone to approve or disprove what he allows or does not allow to happen because he is God. The state of omnipotence, after all, does not yield to the power of human preference. Thus Hobbes writes, "though punishment be due for sin only, because by that word is understood affliction for sin; yet the right of afflicting, is not always derived from men's sin, but from God's power" (237). God's omnipotence and power

allow him to deal out what men experience as evil as he sees fit beyond the purview of human moral philosophy.

Hobbes looks to scripture for justification about why evil things happen in the context of God's supreme goodness. In particular, he sees the Book of Job as a meditation on the problem of evil that provides answers as to why God allows evil events to happen. He calls the Book of Job a "treatise concerning a question in ancient time much disputed, *why wicked men have often prospered in this world, and good men have been afflicted*" valuing the book more for its merits as a theological or philosophical text than as a narrative or story (255). He writes, "This question in the case of Job, is decided by God himself, not by arguments derived from Job's sin, but his own power" (238). Hobbes' solution to the problem of evil is essentially an argument of "might makes right" or *force majeure*. God allows evil things to happen simply because he can—or rather because we cannot stop him.

Hobbes does not appeal to God's infinite wisdom or goodness, as will Leibniz and Pope. Rather, he resolves the existence of evil in the nature of Supreme power. If God wills evil things to happen, then his will is enough justification. Hobbes utilizes scripture to back up this justification of evil as power. He references Job 38: 4 when God asks Job, "*Where wast thou, when I laid the foundations of the earth?*" and uses appeals to his power to justify allowing terrible things to happen to Job (238). While Job's friends believed that the evil Job suffers is the result of his sins, God explains that this is not the case, relying on "arguments drawn from his power" (238).

This justification of allowing evil to happen is an extension of Hobbes' view in *Leviathan* that rulers have the right to punish their citizens. The Leviathan, or supreme ruler, can punish his or her subjects as he or she sees fit. As Arthur Yates writes, "the sovereign is above

the law, or juridical accountability” (251). Just as a king or queen can punish subjects, so can God punish his subjects who have sinned or for no (humanly accessible) reason at all.

Evil and suffering are not always an expression of God’s judgment on a particular person or group of people. Hobbes also includes a verse from the book of John in order to suggest another possible reason why God allows evil things to happen to good people: “*Neither hath this man sinned, nor his fathers; but that the works of God might be made manifest in him*” (238). This verse relates to a man who was “born blind” and had suffering befall him even though he did not sin. In Hobbes’s explication of evil, bad things happen to good people in order to reveal God’s power (238). Leibniz and Pope share this premise, but critically recuperate the question of evil as a way to articulate not supreme power, but infinite goodness.

#### JOHN MILTON: *PARADISE LOST* AND THE FELIX CULPA

The philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope was greatly influenced by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. While Milton writes the most epic story of all—the creation, fall, and redemption of mankind—Leibniz attempts to give a rational account for the universe and a defense of God’s creation. Milton’s goal in *Paradise Lost* is to “assert Eternal Providence / And justify the ways of God to men” (Book I, lines 25-26). Similarly, Pope’s goal in *Essay on Man* is to “vindicate” the ways of God to men, a difference which I will discuss shortly (line 16).

A central theme from *Paradise Lost* is that of the *felix culpa*, or the fortunate fall. This is the belief that the fall of Adam and Eve after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a positive event because it gives us the possibility of Christ. The Archangel Michael explains this to Adam, claiming that because of Christ the world “Shall all be Paradise, far happier place / Then this of *Eden*, and far happier days” (Book XII, lines 464-465). Redemption is so wonderful, that it will make Earth even more glorious than before the fall.

Despite being banished from the Garden of Eden and suffering the consequences of sin, Adam is overjoyed when he hears of God's plan for redemption, exclaiming, "O goodness infinite, goodness immense! / That all this good of evil shall produce" (Book XII, lines 469-470). God's goodness is "infinite" and so "immense" that even the fall of mankind can be redeemed (469). Like the philosophical optimists, Adam sees a world where even seemingly evil things are a part of God's perfect plan.

Through God's redemption, the state of things is made even greater than it was before the fall of man. Adam claims that through redemption, the universe has been made "more wonderful / Then that which by creation first brought forth" (472-473). The fall was another part of God's plan to bring about an even better world, and one that includes the messiah. The redemption of Christ brings "more glory" to God and "more good will to Men" making this world even more glorious than before the fall (477).

Both Pope and Leibniz express belief in an infinite number of worlds that are intimately connected through God's divine will and goodness. Each pictures a sort of galactic destiny in which these worlds will emerge, culminating in the realization of perfect goodness and blessings. These mystical ideas bear little resemblance in Scripture but are seen by them as the rational result of a God who is infinitely wise and who has created an infinite number of worlds.

In the following comparative analysis of Leibniz's *Theodicy* and Pope's *Essay On Man*, I argue that while both writers are firmly occupied in the seat of philosophical optimism--arguing that this world is the best of all possible worlds as a solution to the problem of evil--each contains elements of the same structure that follows the structure of Exodus and apocalyptic prophecies. Leibniz believes that all seemingly evil events are ultimately part of God's plan to bring about a peaceful, perfect world. Similarly, Pope expresses longing for a world free from

the rationalizing rubrics of scientific measurement and logical calculation even as he uses logic to harmonize the presence of evil in the world. Pope creates an aesthetic explication in poetry even as he employs human reason to articulate it. The same arcs that runs through the Exodus narrative are found in the rational explanations of evil given by Pope and Leibniz. Both writers rationalize and accept evil as a natural part of the world, and as such, a necessary part of God's plan that culminates in a better, more peaceful world than any imagined alternative. Both writers take very different routes to get there. While Leibniz's *Theodicy* matches in structure his view of a perfectly calculated universe, Pope's *Essay on Man* matches in structure his view of an aesthetically beautiful world where God's plan follows perfect meter and rhyme.

Leibniz's views on the presence of evil, in all its forms, whether in the form of natural disasters, death, famine, or the evil that people do to one another, was influenced by his mathematical view of the universe. Leibniz invented calculus. This is useful to remember when considering his views on the problem of evil. As a brilliant mathematician, Leibniz discovered the mathematical rules that govern the universe and was fascinated by their complexity and perfection. Nonetheless, Leibniz still struggled to justify "God's moral perfection, holiness, justice, wisdom, and power" with the presence of evil in the world, leading him to embed his calculations in a prophetic worldview (Sleigh 165).

Just as derivatives or exponential functions are central, unchangeable aspects of calculus, for Leibniz, evil played a necessary, unchangeable role in the system of the universe. As Austin Farrer writes, Leibniz "was incapable of looking at the objects of any special enquiry without seeing them as aspects or parts of one intelligible universe" (7). Leibniz claims that "nothing can be changed in the universe (any more than in a number)"—therefore even "the smallest evil" could not be removed from the world because "it would no longer be this world" (129). Leibniz

replicates the associative law of mathematics and makes the problem of evil into a mere case of the fundamental premises of mathematics.

Extending the mathematical idiom, Leibniz lays out his approach to the problem of evil and human suffering in his religio-philosophical work, *Theodicy*, in which he presents his theory of the best of all possible worlds. The Oxford Dictionary defines theodicy as “The vindication of divine providence in relation to the existence of evil; an instance of this; a doctrine etc. in support of this” (3273). Leibniz is working within a conceptual tradition by calling the work a theodicy, placing himself in the company of Augustine and Irenus. Like Milton, he attempts to explain the ways of God to men within a consistent framework. In *Theodicy*, Leibniz’s account for evil in the world is strongly conditioned by his understanding of what constitutes the world as such. *Theodicy* is in many ways a justification of God’s purposes in allowing evil to exist in the world that is based on mathematical explanation. Leibniz defines the world as “the whole succession and the whole agglomeration of all existent things,” including suffering and what would commonly be thought of as evil (128). He explains that his goal is “to place reason at the service of faith than in opposition to it” (123). He goes on to rationalize evil in a manner that ultimately brings faith into question. His primary purpose in *Theodicy* was to “set out to prove the conformity of faith with reason” (Neiman 21).

Leibniz distinguishes between physical and moral evil, and claims that God “co-operates” in both kinds of evil (123). Rather than claim that evil is the result of sin, or the result of the necessary laws that God used to put the world into motion, Leibniz insists that God participates or cooperates in evil doings. In Leibniz’s view, god is not passive towards evil events, but actively participates in them. As Robert Sleight describes, Leibniz’s God “causally contributes to each sinful action in such fashion that, had he not so contributed, that sinful action would not



have occurred” (Sleigh 166). In Leibniz’s view, there is no denying God’s causal involvement with evil, since he has the power to prevent it.

The universe that Leibniz describes is ultimately deterministic. Everything that happens has already been pre-determined by God. He writes, “The foreknowledge of God renders all the future certain and determined” (124). However, he acknowledges that God’s perspective of events is far different from that of human beings, and does not occur in the same way (124). Instead of a variety of seemingly unrelated events, including natural disasters, God sees all things happen in “perfectly connected” order (124). But in order to appreciate this perfect order, one has to step outside the immediacy and particularity of suffering and the evil we attribute to it, and in essence, attempt to imagine the perspective of God. As David Scott writes, “For many, Leibniz’s view of the world, to be appreciated for the beautiful equation it is, requires us to stand so far back from suffering as to cause us to fail completely to recognize its stark and pervasive reality” (313). To appreciate Leibniz’s view, we can only really view suffering and evil in the most abstract terms. Throughout *Theodicy* Leibniz combats the views of Pierre Bayle, who suggested that Christianity was no longer “a sensible solution to the problem of evil” (Neiman 18). Leibniz grapples with Bayle throughout *Theodicy* and attempts to come to defend God by giving a rational account for evil (18).

Leibniz frequently discusses the problem of evil in mathematical or numerical terms. For example, he writes, “As in mathematics, when there is no maximum nor minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done: so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which no less orderly than mathematics, that if there were not the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any” (128). Leibniz compares mathematics to God’s “perfect wisdom” in this

passage, and claims that, like an equation that always yields the same result, this world, produced by God's "perfect wisdom" is the "best of among all possible worlds" and could not be different than it is (128).

This rationalization of evil as a necessary part of God's system of the universe could be used to justify terrible events. For example, if we apply this philosophy to the central disaster of the century, the earthquake (one, to be fair, that Leibniz did not live to see), then the earthquake emerges as simply the necessary result of laws that God put into motion so that the world could operate smoothly. Neiman writes, "Leibnizian arguments about the goodness of systematic law in general were enough to support claims about the necessity of earthquakes in particular" suggesting the expansive influence and utility of Leibniz's theory (245).

Stylistically, Leibniz's *Theodicy* incorporates a rich body of religio-Latin phrases that contribute to or relate to his argument which is important because it adds the use of religious language to a text meant to rely primarily on logic and mathematics. For example, he writes "O certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est!" which translates to "O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us!" (129). This quote comes from the Exultet, an ancient Catholic text used to celebrate Easter, and is "sung by the deacon at the blessing of the Paschal Candle" (Oxford Dictionary, 899). Similarly, Leibniz invokes the doctrine of the fortunate fall or "felix culpa" in order to prove his theory of the "best of all possible worlds" (128). Milton emphasizes this doctrine in *Paradise Lost*, also a theodicy that seeks to "justify the ways of God to man" (Book 1, line 26). His doctrine claims that Adam's sin and the suffering, pain, and death that resulted in it for the rest of humankind was ultimately a good thing because it brought us Christ. Philosophical Optimism is a very appropriate title for Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil. His perspective and attitude regarding all forms of evil—whether physical

or moral, is always optimistic. For Leibniz, the glass is always at least half-full, if not just altogether full. Even when he describes witnessing sickness and death, he is “astonished” that people “are sick so little” rather than upset at the fact that they are sick at all (131). Leibniz’s solution to the problem of evil was regarded by some as “a repulsive failure of compassion possible only in an unfeeling Enlightenment mathematician (Franklin 45). However, even when encountering people who are suffering greatly, Leibniz chooses to focus on a construction of the overall good.

Leibniz suggests that rather than bring attention to particular “evils” in the world, we should integrate them into the more complex calculus of God’s universe, since “evils are doubled by being given an attention that ought to be averted from them” (131). Instead, we ought to focus on “the good which by far preponderates” (131). Rather than focus on suffering and evil as incomprehensible in light of a perfect God, or ignore them entirely, Leibniz suggests a synthesis between these two binaries. Leibniz suggests a change of perspective, in which we understand individual moments of human suffering within the context of God’s perfect plan.

Leibniz bolsters his optimistic resolve by suggesting that those who question the evils of this world, that is to say, those who complain, in either their ignorance or blinding self-pity, call the will of God into question. He writes, “Those whose humour it is to be well satisfied with Nature and with fortune and not to complain about them, even though they should not be the best endowed, appear to me preferable to the other sort; for besides that these complaints are ill founded, it is in effect murmuring against the orders of providence” (131). He brings up the works of Pope Innocent III and Abbe Esprit in order to provide examples of those who are guilty of complaining about the will of God. He calls Pope Innocent III’s works “the books of human misery” which only make evil and suffering worse by focusing on them (131). Meanwhile, he

considers Abbe Esprit's *On the Falsity of Human Virtues* to be unhelpful because it "serves to turn everything wrong side out, and cause men to be such as it represents them" (131). For Leibniz, tracts that focus on suffering, evil or the failure of human beings to be virtuous are discouraging and (unlike his *Theodicy*) distract us from having faith in God's plan for infinite goodness.

Leibniz discusses some versions of Christian theology in *Theodicy* that he finds unnecessary. Leibniz describes the views of an unnamed writer who took his "principle of harmony to arbitrary suppositions" (133). He goes on to explain some of these views, such as the idea that evil exists in the world because "the chief of the bad angels" or Lucifer, tempted human beings to sin. For Leibniz, "Wit plays a greater part than Revelation" and complex theological narratives that attempt to explain the presence of evil in the world through inventions of factors such as a demonic alternative force are unnecessary and fantastical (133).

Even though Leibniz finds demonic narratives of evil in the world to be excessive, he admits that he still finds a particular interpretation of the Book of Revelation to be "pleasing" (134). In the apocalyptic vision he describes, "the second filiation" or a new messiah named "Adam Kadmon" will return to Earth to punish the wicked. Leibniz takes on prophetic language to describe this narrative, as he writes that Adam Kadmon "planted his tabernacle in that great sun which illumines us" (133). This bears a striking resemblance to how the Book of Exodus describes the tabernacle as the place of God, this new messiah resides in the sun, and will return to bring justice to the world.

In the apocalyptic vision that Leibniz finds "pleasing" but unnecessary, Adam Kadmon will come back to the Earth "thence to withdraw the good, transplanting them, it may be, into the sun, and to punish here the wicked with the demons that have allured them" (133). After this, the

world will turn into a burning comet, whose fire “will last for aeons and aeons” (133). It is surprising that Leibniz describes such an irrational, mathematically impossible vision, in such detail. For Leibniz, a vision in which righteous human beings are spared from judgment by being carried to the sun (presumably for safe-keeping) by a new messiah before the earth turns into a Hellish comet to punish the wicked for all eternity is a narrative that is useful for enjoyment only. He claims that this vision is full of “arbitrary suppositions that I in no wise approve” and, while it is “pleasing” he admits that “we have no need of such hypothesis or fictions” (133, 134). By including a discussion of this prophetic vision, Leibniz suggests that he too is capable of appealing to the aesthetic for affective resolution. Leibniz uses the language of religious prophecy to bolster his mathematical, reason-based solution to the problem of evil.

This “pleasing” vision of apocalypse anticipates the same pattern as the Book of Exodus (134). A great disaster and events of great suffering will ultimately bring about a renewed spiritual community. He writes, “But at last hell will render up its dead, death itself will be destroyed; reason and peace will begin to hold sway again in the spirits that had been perverted” (133). After the evil are sent to Hell for punishment, a better world will emerge—a world where “they will adore their Creator” and human beings will live in spiritually renewed communion with God (133).

Curiously, Leibniz momentarily leaves Earth and the problem of evil in order to discuss outer space and the possibility of alien life. Leibniz acknowledges that our world is one of many, and any of these “infinite number of globes” could certainly contain intelligent life (135). He hypothesizes, “It may be that all suns are peopled only by blessed creatures” (135). These beings, he hypothesizes are probably not “damned” as we are and do not have to deal with the problem of evil at all (135). Tapping into mystical language, Leibniz broadens the view of the

universe, and explains what he thinks exists “beyond the region of the stars” (135). Leibniz calls this the “Empyrean heaven” which is the point at which all worlds come together (135).

According to Leibniz, all “blessed creatures” are headed toward this place, which is “filled with happiness and glory” (135).

One might argue that Leibniz’s space mythos of aliens living on stars, headed towards a galactic confluence of joy and blessings is just as fantastical and absurd as the apocalyptic religious vision he earlier rejects. However, for Leibniz this narrative provides more proof that the problem of evil is not nearly as bad as the ungrateful complainers such as Pope Innocent III and Abbé Esprit (his representative writers of over-emphasized suffering and evil) make it out to be. Showcasing his optimism Leibniz writes, “haply it may be that all evils are almost nothingness in comparison with the good things which are in the universe” (135). The glass is (at-least) half-full indeed.

Leibniz further clarifies his definition of evil by naming three different kinds of evil: metaphysical evil, physical evil, and moral evil (136). He writes, “*Metaphysical* evil consists in mere imperfection, *physical evil* in suffering, and *moral evil* in sin” (136). These different kinds of evil are present in all the infinite worlds that Leibniz posits (136). While God does not participate in moral evil, he does participate in physical evil in certain scenarios (137). For example, according to Leibniz God will allow terrible things to happen to people as punishment for sin. He writes, “one may say of physical evil, that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt” showing that he believes evil things may happen as an expression of God’s judgment (137).

In a manner not so different from religious history and parables, Leibniz portrays physical evil as a manifestation of God’s judgment that will eventually bring about a better

world. For Leibniz, physical evil (such as natural disasters) can serve “as a means to an end, that is, to prevent greater evils or to obtain greater good” (137). Leibniz also points out that physical evil can help us to appreciate that which is good, or “make us savour good the more” thereby becoming more like Christ (137). This justification of physical evil, however will be the site of some of later philosophers most stringent critiques, as chapter two will show.

Leibniz describes physical evil as less damaging than moral evil. In this view, human beings have the potential to cause the greatest evil. He writes, “One single Caligula, one Nero, has caused more evil than an earthquake” pointing out that the actions of one corrupt individual can cause more harm and suffering than a natural disaster (138). Importantly, this claim was made before the disaster at Lisbon (though even here, he would likely persist in his view). Leibniz addresses the objection that God is in some ways responsible for the moral evil that people commit since “it is God himself who acts and who effects all that is real in the sin of the creature” (139). However, for Leibniz and the vantage of philosophical optimism, evil is instrumental to bringing about the greater good: “The supreme goodness of God causes his antecedent will to repel all evil, but moral evil than any other: it only admits evil at all for irresistible superior reasons, and with great correctives which repair its ill effects to good advantage” (186). Evil is a necessary part of the world, and is a part of God’s plan for the goodness of his best of all possible worlds. In this sense, evil that is accomplished or allowed by God is not truly evil at all.

ALEXANDER POPE: “WORLDS ON WORLDS” AND A “SPHERE UNKNOWN” (*ESSAY ON MAN*, PG. 2542, *EPISTLE 1*, 24, 58)

It could be said that *Essay On Man* is *Theodicy* rendered in heroic couplets. Alexander Pope shared Leibniz’s philosophical optimism, but Pope’s decision to approach the problem as

one in need of aesthetic resolution rather than as a mathematical equation is significant because it places the problem of evil in affective and qualitative terms rather than in the quantitative terms of mathematics. Pope's solution to the problem of evil was so similar to Leibniz's that he was actually accused of plagiarism by some critics, such as theologian Jean-Pierre Crousaz (Billingslea 17). But even if Leibniz's and Pope's ideas are similar, Pope's decision to approach the problem of evil in poetry significantly differentiates it from the mathematical calculus and treatise formulae of *Theodicy*. Leibniz offers a flight of aesthetic fancy that is affectively pleasant but distinct from his logical framework. Significantly, Pope collapses the logical into logic of the aesthetic, drawing from the affective power and rich allusive history of poetry to convey his argument. Written in heroic couplets, and invoking a poetic tradition from Milton and Homer, Pope seeks to "vindicate the ways of God to man" (16). Throughout the poem, Pope attempts to resolve the problem of evil. He suggests that it is the wrong question, relocating evil to the human sphere of morality. In this reading, I will highlight the spiritual aspects of Pope's account while also providing a close reading of the first epistle, emphasizing its poetic power.

Pope originally published the separate sections of *Essay on Man* anonymously in order to avoid the attention of his critics and enemies (Solomon 7). He even published other works at the same time in order to lead his critics away from suspecting his authorship of *Essay on Man* (7). Nonetheless, his critics discovered his authorship after Pope's friend Bolingbroke was mentioned in it, creating a new wellspring of resentment and criticism against Pope. Despite this criticism, the supremely optimistic tone of *Essay on Man* shines through, even when it comes across as naïve to readers set far apart from Pope's Augustan sensibilities. Rather than the political and aesthetic feuds of the Restoration period, or the biting sarcasm of Augustan satire, Pope provides a pleasing view of the universe, in which everything is exactly as it should be.



*Essay on Man* reconciles several different, and often opposed ways of viewing the world. It resolves nascent tensions between faith and science that would later come to characterize the Enlightenment. As Joanne Cutting-Gray and James E. Swearingen write, paraphrasing Pope's declarations about the poem, it "steers between the extremes of the new rage for mathematical certainty and the older traditions of faith" (480). Positing a rational argument for the best of all possible worlds, it also relies on faith in a benevolent God who is infinitely wise. Pope's *Essay on Man* couples faith and rational argumentation in an aesthetic resolution.

Pope sees the world as a vast, beautiful place we must explore to find meaning. A comparison between the perspectives advocated in *Theodicy* and *Essay on Man* suggests that while Leibniz wants us to understand the role of evil in the framework of the greater universe, Pope wants us to close-read our world, as though it were a poem to unlock the beauty and understand the underlying structure and harmony of the whole. The difference in perspective is intimately linked to the difference in form. Pope must "expatiate free o'er all this scene of man" and write about the world as he sees it (line 5). He describes this world as "A mighty maze! but not without a plan" suggesting that even though life is confusing and it can be difficult to find answers, God always has a plan (6). Throughout the first verse of Epistle 1 of *Essay on Man* Pope includes imagery of nature in order to build his view of the world as a beautiful, free place. He sees this world as a place "where weeds and flowers shoot" and compares it to a "garden tempting with forbidden fruit" (7-8). The world is full of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences, or "weeds and flowers" (7). But Pope suggests that questioning God's plan is akin to eating "forbidden fruit" and seeking knowledge that lies past human comprehension (8). From the opening of *Essay on Man* Pope emphasizes the pleasant aspects of life, and, like Leibniz, sees the world as a place where good outweighs evil.

Pope's poetical predecessor, John Dryden wrote, "The stones came candid forth, the hue of innocence" in his "Translations from Ovid". This notion of candor also guides Pope's poem, insofar as he frames the world in terms of innocence. Pope vindicates the innocence of God's ways against charges of cruelty, caprice, and injustice. A blithe, carefree mentality towards the problem of evil dominates *Essay on Man*. Like Dryden's white stones, we should blithely go about exploring our role as human beings in the universe. The mysteries of life are "giddy heights" we are meant to "explore" with a blithe attitude (11). Trying to come up with an answer for why innocent people suffer and die young seems hardly comparable to walking through nature contemplating flowers, gardens, and cliffs, but this is the attitude Pope brings to the problem of evil in *Essay on Man*.

Despite the repeated use of imagery that paints a picture of human beings exploring nature, it is the study of mankind itself that is Pope's focus. Even as Pope describes a beautiful natural landscape, these images are useful in that they cause us to ponder the place that human beings have in the world (Cutting-Gray 482). As Cutting-Gray and Swearingen write, "Here is man pitted, not against a cosmic question or an unfathomable God, but against himself" (482). *Essay on Man* works against prideful questioning towards accepting the limited knowledge and mystery of the place that human beings have in the larger universe.

Pope expresses a view of an extended universe beyond the human world that echoes Leibniz's considerations of extraterrestrial life, the habitation of beings on stars, and the interconnectedness of various worlds. Like Leibniz, Pope expresses belief in an infinite number of worlds. He writes, "Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known, / 'Tis ours to trace Him only in our own" showing that while Pope believes in infinite possible worlds, he also identifies this world only as our present concern, in which we can find God and vindicate his

ways (21-22). He claims that “worlds on worlds compose one universe” and “system into system runs” creating a vast network of different worlds throughout the universe (24, 25). Both Pope and Leibniz believe that our world is one amongst many different interconnected worlds in the universe. But Leibniz and Pope have different conclusions that they make from this view of our world as one amongst many. For Leibniz all the other worlds factor into the events or outcomes in our world through their interconnection, while Pope argues that these different worlds are analogues of each other, each appropriate for their own inhabitants. Whereas for Leibniz, our role is to understand this world in the context of a totality of worlds, for Pope our role is to understand our particular human duty in our human-versioned world.

Bringing a similarly authoritative tone as God’s response to Job in the Book of Job, Pope asks “Is the great chain, that draws all to agree, / And drawn supports, upheld by God, or thee?” (33-34). Pope suggests that in our pursuit of knowledge of God’s purposes, we overstep the role God has provided for us as part of a harmonious whole, and as part of a network of interlinking universes. Pope asks his readers if they can successfully “tell why Heaven has made us as we are” when we cannot see the “vast immensity” such as planets circling one another, aliens living on stars and the interconnectedness of different worlds (28, 23). His point is that only God can see these things, and so only God can answer why our world is the way it is, and why evil exists. This great chain of being is the hierarchical system of the universe.

Again, Pope compares questioning beautiful aspects of nature to asking philosophical questions about the nature of the world. Humankind is “so weak, so little, and so blind” and should not “Ask of thy mother earth, why oaks are made / Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade” (36, 39-40). Questioning why certain things exist in the world (such as what we may perceive as evil) is like wondering why oak trees are taller than weeds—it is ultimately futile and

absurd because God knows so much more than us in the first place. As Bernard Fabian writes, *Essay on Man* is a didactic poem that works towards teaching Pope's readers about the limits of human understanding (529). Fabian points out that Pope frequently invites his readers to "look and to see" in order to reconsider their perspective of the world (531). Pope examines the flaws with human understanding and pride and attempts to teach his readers a better way to think about the human condition by reconciling them with their limited purview.

Pope expresses a belief in philosophical optimism that suggests "Of systems possible, if 'tis confest / That wisdom infinite must form the best" (43-44). This replicates his belief in an "infinite wisdom" to which Leibniz also refers in *Theodicy*. Like Leibniz, Pope believes that a perfectly wise God would create the best of all possible worlds. Because human beings lack infinite wisdom, they cannot successfully judge what God's plan may be, and should not question why evil things happen. Pope writes, "Respecting man, whatever wrong we call, / May, must be right, as relative to all" suggesting that things which seem wrong or evil now may be a part of God's overall plan for the world (51-52). His inclusion of the verb "must" shows his conviction that we live in a beautiful, righteous world, and that this world is the best of all possible ones (52). While it may seem as though human beings are living "alone" without purpose, we act "second to some sphere unknown" and only see a brief glimpse of the whole picture (57, 58). For Pope, the ultimate or cosmic significance of human actions is shrouded in mystery. Some actions and occurrences will only make sense in the broader picture of God's infinite wisdom.

Pope believes that we ought not blame God for "suffering" and question what we perceive as injustice and randomness in a world where a person can be "This hour a slave, the next a deity" without any clear reason or relation to morality (67, 68). Despite this confusion

and apparent wistfulness in regards to our expectations or sense of justice, Pope sees humankind as created exactly as it was supposed to be—“man’s as perfect as he ought”—and therefore we need not question God for creating humankind (and the world) the way it is (70). We should trust that we are part of a bigger plan and not question how situations or human beings could be different. Instead, we should study ourselves to determine how we can ourselves reflect the perfection of creation.

Pope’s solution to the problem of evil involves an emphasis on the idea that human beings have only a limited perspective and limited wisdom, focusing on nature and divine will as opposed to human nature and culture. This limited perspective and wisdom stands in stark contrast to God’s eternal perspective and infinite wisdom. In a literary comparison, Pope claims that human beings can only see one page of “the book of Fate” (77). We cannot comprehend the role their “present state” plays in a grander perspective of the universe, just as how one page does not tell the story of an entire book in all its detail and complexity (78). However, closely studying this one page, or studying our part in this world as human beings, can help us to better understand the role we shall play.

Pope imagines a better, simpler world free from the chains of reason and science. Here, he breaks away from the knowledge culture Leibniz represents. He asks his readers to consider “the poor Indian” who experiences God in a powerful way unencumbered by philosophical questions. He has faith in “Some safer world in depth of woods embraced”—a place, like the spiritual community Richard Brothers, whose writing I will explore in chapter three, envisions, that is free from the violence and hypocrisy of war (105). He pictures “Some happier island in the watery waste” where “no Christians thirst for gold” and the hypocrisy and greed of eighteenth-century Christianity is not present (106-107). By using comparative terms such as

“safer” and happier” Pope implies the human longing for a better place than our current state (105, 106).

*Essay On Man* reveals the desire for a peaceful religious community where people live in close communion with God. Like the Book of Exodus, he envisions a land where human beings could live free from man-made forces of oppression. However, Pope expresses no strong belief in an afterlife in *Essay On Man*. As Solomon claims, Pope participates in a “knowing deconstruction of our hope for an afterlife” (90). Instead of proclaiming belief in the afterlife, Pope emphasizes the human condition as a place of uncertainty and limited knowledge. Nonetheless, a close-reading of this vision, or “happier island” reveals the possibility for a place where human beings are not concerned with questioning the spiritual or material, but instead focused on their roles as human beings living in peaceful community with one another and with God (106). Pope correlates the discovery of American Indians in their putative natural simplicity, hidden in the woods to philosophical optimism. The forward looking, discovery mentality is a form of philosophical optimism in which “Man never is, but always to be blest” (95-96).

To Pope, pride, especially a kind of pride that places emphasis on human desires is at the root of the human desire to question the state of the world—“In pride, in reas’ning pride, our error lies” (123). Instead of asking God why (what we perceive to be) evil things happen, human beings should accept that God has made the world as it is for a reason. Human beings should “Weigh thy opinion against Providence” and acknowledge that his wisdom far exceeds ours (114).

Pride creates a disruption in the Great Chain of Being that Pope knows holds society together. This hierarchy falls apart as its members attempt to reach higher places in it. Pride

runs through the whole hierarchy, as “Men would be angels, angels would be gods” creating rebellion and disruption of an eternal order that God set in place (126). Echoing Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Pope claims that questioning the evils of this world is like striving to have the power of an angel, or an angel that strives to have the power of God. Resentment or discouragement as a response the problem of evil is equivalent to the sin of pride.

Proposing that the world could be a better place, and that certain evils are unnecessary or arbitrary is a sin against the laws that God put into motion to govern the universe. Pope writes, “And who but wishes to invert the laws / Of order, sins against th’ Eternal Cause” showing that to him, questioning the problem of evil is not just a miscalculation of God’s wisdom (129-130). It is a grave sin against God. Even in Pope’s world of aesthetic perfection and beauty, sin and religious language still play an important role.

Both Pope and Leibniz refer to the myth of Lucifer attempting to overthrow the seat of God. While Leibniz discusses this as a myth that accounts for the problem of evil, Pope sees it as a relevant comparison to those who see evil as a problem in the first place and fail to accept the infinite wisdom of a God who created the best of all possible worlds. Despite their emphasis on reason, both writers resort to religious myth in order to interrogate the problem of evil and for Pope it is particularly useful as a metaphor or parable for prescribing moral boundaries to human inquiry and the hubris of human judgments of evil.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* lies in the background of Pope’s goal to “vindicate the ways of God to man” (16). In Milton’s epic poem, Lucifer begins his fall by questioning God’s judgement in the manifestation of Christ. Lucifer, or “the infernal serpent” has sent to hell because of pride: “his pride / Had cast him out from heaven, with all his host” (34, 36-37). The hubris or arrogance of doubting the rectitude of God is the heart of his fall, and itself constitutes

the source of any evil in our world. Even in Hell, Lucifer attempts “To set himself in glory above his peers” and his goal is “to have equaled the most high” or assume the full power and glory of God (39, 40). Throughout *Essay on Man* Pope sees humankind as committing a similar sin of pride by questioning God’s will in allowing evil to exist in the world.

While Milton justifies the ways of God to man, Pope “vindicates” them (16). The Oxford Dictionary defines “vindicate” as to “clear (someone) of blame or suspicion” and “show or prove to be right, reasonable, or justified” Nonetheless, both writers participate in the discussion of the problem of evil through poetry. This makes *Essay on Man* very different from *Theodicy* and Kant’s essays on the earthquake at Lisbon, to which I will shortly turn. Philip Pullman writes, “The way poems and stories work on our minds is not by logic, but by their capacity to enchant, to excite, to move, to inspire” (8). While Leibniz utilizes a logical, mathematical approach in order to bolster his theory of the best of all possible worlds, Pope uses poetic language and form to appeal to our senses and move our passions.

Pope employs beautiful images of nature in order to emphasize the good aspects of this world. Because human beings are prideful, we tend to see the world as set out for our enjoyment. Pope asks “for what end the heav’nly bodies shine” and wonders “for whose use” the Earth exists (131, 132). Pride causes us to believe that Earth was created for our enjoyment. All the beautiful aspects of nature such as “the rose” “the balmy dew” “ev’ry flower” and herb have been created for humankind’s enjoyment (135, 136, 134). Beautiful images from nature represent the persistence of good over evil in the world for Pope. However, pride causes human beings to view earth as our personal “foot-stool” and the skies as our “canopy” (140).

Pope argues that we want nature to act according to our will, providing an endless supply of “show’rs and sunshine” and “eternal springs and cloudless skies” (152, 153). This is an



unreasonable expectation. Since people are not “ever temp’rate, calm, and wise” nature is not going to be either. Humankind and nature are aligned in terms of mutability, and so we must accept that nature, like us, will also be unpredictable to some extent. Our pride causes us to attribute the good things about this world to God, while we question evils such as “plagues or earthquakes” (155). Pope claims that “In both, to reason right is to submit” and we should look to reason rather than our prideful desires in order to better understand God and nature (164). For Pope, we should reign in human nature and control our desire to seek ultimate knowledge of God’s designs, just as God controls nature.

As a contrast to beautiful aspects of nature, Pope considers natural disasters as a gateway to discuss his views on the problem of evil. He asks if God is responsible “When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep / Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep?” since God created the laws of nature that cause natural disasters to happen (143-144). Although the earthquake at Lisbon would happen over twenty years after *An Essay On Man* was first published, Pope prophetically hypothesizes the possibility of a terrible earthquake that wipes out an entire city as a valid touchstone in the discussion of the problem of evil. Nature “errs not” from the “gracious end” of “human happiness” even when terrible disasters occur (141, 141, 149). His question is an example of the type of question we should not be asking, since it questions God’s will.

Pope criticizes humankind for having a hypocritical view of nature. When good things happen, we think that nature is acting on our behalf to bless us. For example, when we enjoy “the juice nectareous” or “the balmy dew” we believe that nature brings “a thousand treasures” simply “for me” and have a prideful, self-centered view of nature’s dealings (137-138). Enjoyable aspects of nature have been put here on Earth by God specifically for our pleasure.

However, when terrible events, terrible for man anyway, occur, such as “earthquakes” or “tempests” we believe that this same nature should be governed by different laws, and think that God should change the laws of nature for us (143). In Pope’s view, even earthquakes and tempests are a part of God’s perfect plan.

Even in the worst of circumstances, such as a catastrophic disaster, God is still not to blame as a direct cause of evil. To Pope, God “Acts not by partial, but by gen’ral laws” and even terrible physical evil events that happen are the result of the laws that God put into motion in order to govern the best of all possible worlds (146). While man, in turn as only part of the whole, can only see and act in part, and indeed needs to act his own part rather than inquire into others, to question physical evils that occur is to exalt one’s pride over “the gen’ral order” that God placed in the world (171).

Pope’s poem extends to argue through analogy that questioning why evil things happen is like wondering why human beings were not given greater physical abilities. Pope sees the pride of humankind as causing people “To want the strength of bulls, the fur of bears” and selfishly covet inhuman characteristics (176). For Pope, wanting an explanation for why (what we consider to be) evil things happen, or finding God at fault for allowing them to happen is similar to wishing for the ability to fly or for superhuman strength. For Pope, it is ridiculous to wish things were different than they are.

Instead, it is important for human beings to exist the best they can accepting the ways things are. Pope writes, “The bliss of man (could pride that blessing find) / Is not to act or think beyond mankind” (189-190). Questioning or interrogating the problem of evil and wondering about the intentions of God is ultimately unproductive for Pope. He compares philosophical searching for answers to wishing that human beings were made like insects—“Why has not man

a microscopic eye? / For this plain reason, man is not a fly". If we were meant to comprehend God's infinite wisdom, God would have made us differently (193-194).

Pope claims that if God had provided human beings with greater sense abilities, we would ultimately wish to have them lessened. For example, if God had provided us with ears that could hear better, we would be "stunn'd" "with the music of the spheres" and "wish that Heav'n had left [us] still" because this experience would be overwhelming and in disproportion with the rest of our parts (202, 203). If God had provided human beings with greater knowledge and understanding of his purposes in allowing evil to exist in the world, it would yield the same result. According to Pope, we would come to resent a more powerful knowledge if we had it in the same way that we would be displeased with greater sense abilities. Thus we should focus not on our sense ability but our sensibility—our ability to feel, to interpret the aesthetic and the human.

This part of *Essay on Man* is an implicit critique of the utopian possibilities ascribed to instruments that extend human senses such as the telescope and microscope. Pope asserts humankind in its natural state over technological advancements such as the telescope and microscope. These references to the microscope reveal Pope's desire to "reconcile" this technology "with the older tradition of 'the Great Chain of Being' and a God-directed universe" (Williams 24). Williams claims that during this time, Addison and Steele "were debating the function and value of the microscope both satirically and seriously" (25). Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is in some ways an experiment in literary micrographia, as it utilizes a "miniaturization of epic poetry" (25).

Pope exalts humankind's ability to reason above all else. "Mental pow'rs" are more powerful than sensual or physical powers (208). Once again, Pope utilizes images from nature to

make a point about the state of something else—in this case, the ability to reason. In the seventh stanza, Pope lists many of the incredible qualities that some animals possess. For example, the ability to reason is far greater than “the mole’s dim curtain, and the lynx’s beam” but serves as a similar kind of home or place of repose for human beings (212). Just as a spider “Feels at each thread, and lives along the line” human beings have the ability to systematically reason along a particular line of thinking (218). Just as a bee “extracts the healing dew” from “pois’nous herbs” human beings derive wisdom from physical evil (220). After listing these various animal or insect qualities in comparison to humankind’s ability to reason, Pope concludes that reason is the culmination of all the beneficial aspects of nature. He asks, “The pow’rs of all subdu’d by thee alone, / Is not thy reason all these pow’rs in one?” implying that humankind’s ability to reason is the greatest gift of all (231-232). But what is important is that we direct our ability to reason not towards knowledge production for its own sake but towards self-reflection that slows us to feel at home in our world. The various animal qualities and attributes that Pope describes are each aesthetically pleasing and ordered, like *Essay on Man* and his view of the universe.

In the eighth stanza, Pope returns to discuss the theory he shares with Leibniz of infinite worlds that are gradually becoming part of a perfect whole. He reiterates this point, writing, “each system in gradation roll / Alike essential to th’ amazing whole” to express this view of infinite worlds (247-248). He explains that if God were to change anything about our world, it would interrupt this train of all best of all possible worlds colliding in cosmic perfection. Alluding to another passage that refers to planets and infinite worlds Fabian writes, “these and similar passages, which are usually singled out for what is called their planetary imagery, prove to be, when fully analysed, a complete exposition of the ‘scene of man’, to use Pope’s own

phrase, in the mechanistic terms of contemporary Newtonianism” (537). Pope has faith in God’s designs for planetary excellence, as infinite worlds move towards some greater good.

Even the smallest change could ruin this world’s telos of being part of God’s perfect goodness. Even “the least confusion” in one of these infinite worlds would result in the fall not of “that system only, but the whole” (249, 250). A disruption in the great chain of being, such as if human beings were given the wisdom of angels to discern exactly why physical evil events happen, would result in the failed completion of God’s plan of perfection for the universe.

For Pope, those who wish for a different world ultimately seek chaos (and a narcissistic chaos at that). Wishing that human beings had the ability to discern the higher divine purposes of physical evil is the equivalent of asking to “Let earth unbalanc’d from her orbit fly” and allow “Planets and suns run lawless through the sky” (251, 252). Human desire alone cannot be a just arbiter. For Pope, wanting a different world, or at least wishing for a world where things like earthquakes, storms, and other kinds of natural disasters don’t kill people at random is like willing the earth itself to be lifted off its axis and for chaos to take over the universe. For a writer who emphasizes reason, this seems like a rather false comparison to make. However, in Pope’s view, God has created “this dread order” in his infinite wisdom and it therefore cannot be broken (257). Those who question the great chain of being are guilty of “madness, pride” and “impiety” and to Pope are no better than “Vile worms” (258).

Pope translates the universal macrocosmic order by analogy to the organization of the human body to illustrate the necessary perfection of the whole. He asks, “What if the head, the eye, or ear repin’d / To serve mere engines to the ruling mind?” in order to show how ridiculous and nonsensical it is to resist the great chain of being (261-262). Once again, Pope creates an analogy in order to defend the existence of evil in the world. He rationalizes away evil through

these analogies. For humankind to wish to understand God's purposes in allowing or causing physical evil to happen is like if a hand "aspir'd to be the head" and govern the human body. We must accept our role in the world and not question God's purposes (260).

The problem of evil isn't really a problem for Pope. What men experience as evil plays an important role in the universe and is just another aspect of God's plan—a plan that leads to ultimate goodness and perfection. We should not question what "The great directing Mind of All ordains" even in the face of what seems like senseless evil and suffering, such as the earthquake at Lisbon (266). Human beings are part "of one stupendous whole" and need not question why evil things happen (267).

Pope's *Essay on Man* is built on faith in an ultimate divine plan. In the tenth stanza, he urges his readers to have faith in God and his ultimate divine plan to find true happiness. To Pope, "Our proper bliss" or our sense of happiness and joy "depends on what we blame" and can be inhibited by questioning evil and focusing on negative aspects of life such as needless suffering and misery (282). Rather than justify God's ways, or freeing him from blame, Pope vindicates "the ways of God to man" and explains or legitimates his ways (16). We are to "submit" to God and accept the gifts he has bestowed upon us—including our inability to fully comprehend his divine plan (285). If anything, we should enjoy the mystery of this plan. One extension of this philosophy can be seen in those who, according to Nieman, would see the Lisbon earthquake as supporting the "mystery that furthers awe and wonder" (246). It is perhaps relevant that for Pope such a catastrophe is merely hypothetical; nevertheless, his commitment to this approach extends beyond the merely personal or moral to the physical and the communal.

Pope fully accepts that whatever happens is a part of God's larger plan for the universe. From this perspective, evil events are rationalized to harmonies misunderstood as "discord,"

striking but one note in the music of the spheres (291). Large scale disasters and local discomforts together are but “partial evils” that are part of the “universal good” (292). Alexander Pope closes this stanza with, “One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right” (294). For Pope, belief in an omniscient God brings about two possibilities: either everything in the universe is exactly as it should be, or everything is wrong. Pope’s choice of the former makes up his belief in philosophical optimism.

#### IMMANUEL KANT: THE EARTHQUAKE AT LISBON AS A “TREASURE OF RARITIES”

While Leibniz and Pope test their philosophical optimism against speculative disasters, in 1756 Immanuel Kant deployed optimism, logical rigor, and aesthetic resolution to a world after the disaster of Lisbon. Kant’s perspective on the earthquake at Lisbon gains a detailed assessment in the context of his other works. Kant spiritualizes the pursuit of knowledge as a sublime experience, and the earthquake at Lisbon became a site for pursuing the limits of his philosophical approach. Kant studies different responses to natural disaster in his essay “Of The Dynamically Sublime in Nature”. He writes,

It appears to conflict with this solution of the concept of the sublime, so far as sublimity is ascribed to might, that we are accustomed to represent God as presenting Himself in His wrath and yet in His sublimity, in the tempest, the storm, the earthquake, etc; and that it would be foolish and criminal to imagine a superiority of our minds over these works of His, and, as it seems, even over the designs of such might. Hence it would appear that no feeling of the sublimity of our own nature, but rather subjection, abasement, and a feeling of complete powerlessness, is a fitting state of mind before the manifestation of such an object, and this is generally bound up with the Idea of it during natural phenomena of this kind. Generally in religion, prostration, adoration with bent head,

with contrite, anxious demeanour and voice, seems to be the only fitting behavior in presence of the Godhead; and hence most peoples have adopted and still observe it. (128)

According to Kant, frightening events such as the earthquake at Lisbon are an opportunity to experience divinity as the sublime. It is “foolish and criminal” for us to think that we can understand God’s purpose in allowing such events to happen, or “imagine a superiority of our minds over these works of his” (128). It is foolish to presume we can know better than God, and criminal to challenge his authority. The “feeling of complete powerlessness” allows us to consider our fragile state as human beings (128). Immanuel Kant responds to the problem of evil in the context of disaster with Enlightenment rationalism. Kant discusses the causes and effects of the notorious 1755 Lisbon earthquake in “History and Physiography of the Most Remarkable Cases of the Earthquake Which Towards The End of 1755 Shook A Great Place of the Earth” (1756). Like Leibniz and Alexander Pope, Kant has an optimistic view of the disaster. The relationship between Pope’s *Essay on Man* and Kant’s essays on the Lisbon earthquake is not so distant, and we can even cautiously ascribe some degree of influence given Harry Solomon’s claim that Kant “paced up and down his lecture hall excitedly reading aloud passages (from *Essay on Man*) to his students” (1). Kant greatly admired the poem, and offered his own approach to some of the issues it explores.

From the beginning of “History and Physiography of the Most Remarkable Cases of the Earthquake Which Towards the End of 1755 Shook a Great Place of the Earth”, Kant describes the earthquake as a special event that can lead us to an experience of the sublime. The essay begins, “Nature has not spread every where, in vain, a treasure of rarities for contemplation and admiration” (95). Kant sees the earthquake not as an opportunity to question God’s purposes, but as a gateway into experiencing the supreme powers of nature. Rather than a terrible disaster



that caused unjustifiable death and suffering, Kant sees the Lisbon earthquake as a “treasure” for people to admire and enjoy as an opportunity for aesthetic fulfillment via recognition of God’s power through nature’s dynamic sublimity (95).

Kant expresses his views on the power of disasters to help us to experience the sublime in *Critique of Judgement*. In “Of The Dynamically Sublime In Nature” Kant lists large rocks, “clouds piled up in the sky,” “volcanoes,” “hurricanes,” and other powerful events or aspects of nature as conveyors of the sublime “because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature” (125). Viewing natural disasters such as earthquakes is a sublime experience because they heighten our senses and makes us more aware of our feebleness in their context. Experiencing the sublime causes us to regard “as small the things about which we are solicitous (goods, health, and life)” and thus causes a valuable change of perspective (126).

Experiencing the sublime through natural disasters can also have an effect on our imaginations. According to Kant, great disasters can acclimate our imaginations to the divine, since without the sublime it is difficult to imagine a perfect God. The sublime present more feasibly the possibility of an all-powerful God. Kant writes, “nature is here called sublime merely because it elevates the Imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make felt the proper sublimity of its destination, in comparison with nature itself” (126). By experiencing the sublime through disasters, our imaginations more fully comprehend the overwhelming power of God.

The sublime allows us to see beyond evil and seemingly needless suffering to God’s plan for perfection. Kant claims that “moral Ideas” cause us to experience the sublime in the wake of

great disasters. He writes, “In the indications of the dominion of nature in destruction, and in the great scale of its might, in comparison with which his own is a vanishing quantity, he will only see the misery, danger, and distress which surround the man who is exposed to it” (130). Those who focus only on the destructive aspects of the earthquake at Lisbon fail to appreciate the sublime experience its contemplation provides. Incidents of great destruction, such as the earthquake at Lisbon, allow us to experience the sublime which overpowers and absorbs feelings of suffering and loss.

Kant distinguishes that which is beautiful from that which is sublime. He claims that “The *Beautiful* is that what pleases in the mere judgement (and therefore not by the medium of sensation in accordance with a concept of the Understanding)” while “The *Sublime* is what pleases immediately through its opposition to the interest of sense” (134). That which Kant regards as sublime, such as the earthquake at Lisbon, might not make sense to be appreciated as such at first, but only after moral contemplation and the elevation of the mind to the divine. The sublime involves an experience of being overwhelmed by our insignificance and obscurity in relation to the power of God in nature. Kant describes the sublime as “*the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of Ideas*” (134). Events such as the earthquake at Lisbon allow us to momentarily experience this “unattainability” in a powerful manner (134).

Kant displays his knowledge of the events that followed the initial earthquake at Lisbon, describing “the raging of the ocean” and fires that occurred after it as a “just consequence of constant laws” (95). Like Leibniz and Pope, Kant sees disasters as a necessary consequence of the perfect laws that God used to order the universe. In Kant’s view, the earthquake at Lisbon was no more abnormal than everyday inconveniences of nature such as frost or flies, what he

calls “usual causes of incommmodity” (95). Kant approaches the earthquake at Lisbon as an experience of the sublime in which our comprehension of the scientific causes behind these events is a necessary step. It was merely an “unpleasant consequence” of God’s perfect laws (95). The fact that Kant can in good conscience refer to the death of thousands of innocent people as an “unpleasant consequence” shows the failure of rationalism to account for human suffering (95).

Kant sees the death and destruction that occurred at Lisbon as an opportunity to reflect on our fate. He writes, “the contemplation of such dreadful events is edifying” showing his appreciation for this opportunity to think and reflect (96). Kant claims that we should not expect nature to conform to human desires. We should not “expect convenient consequences only from the laws of nature” but should also accept that terrible things will happen as a result of God’s perfect laws (96).

Like Pope, Kant sees human pride as causing the dissonance between what human beings want the world to be as opposed to how it actually is. Our dissatisfaction with worldly events such as the earthquake at Lisbon is the result of humankind believing that the world should change for us. Kant explains that “this *arena* of his desires ought not equitably to contain the aim of all his views” and that we should not expect a correlation between our desires and the state of nature (96).

Kant focuses on the causes of the earthquake at Lisbon to provide a scientific account for why it happened. Even though the account he provides for the earthquake was ultimately proven to be incorrect, by positing several causes and suggesting a few solutions to prevent earthquakes from causing such great destruction in the future Kant sees the potential for human beings to understand even the most devastating acts of nature through science and reason. Leibniz and

Pope claim that natural disasters are part of God's perfect plan without exploring their specific causes, while Kant delves into the origins of the earthquake in order to better understand it. He cites a meteor that supposedly passed over Switzerland a few weeks before the earthquake. This meteor brought about "a rain red as blood, that, when it was caught, deposited 1/9 of a reddish gluy sediment" that turned the snow red (101). According to Kant, this red or "purple rain" continued for another two weeks and appeared in parts of Ulm, accompanied by "whirlwinds in Italy" and rainy weather across the world (101). Kant interprets these events as foreshadowing the earthquake at Lisbon. Unfortunately, no one at the time could have predicted that strangely-colored rain in Switzerland would precipitate an earthquake over a thousand miles away in Lisbon.

Kant uses the language of fate and destiny in order to describe the fires that he claims preceded the earthquake at Lisbon. Touching *amor fati* language, Kant makes it seem as though the earthquake at Lisbon had to happen, and was part of some kind of fate. According to Kant, the earthquake at Lisbon was caused by a series of subterranean fires. He refers to the igniting of the fires as "the achievement of destiny" (103). Mixing scientific diction with the language of fates he writes, "when the dissolved combustible substances are heated in the mixture with the others to the degree to catch fire, the vaults of the earth are shaken, and the decree of the fates is fulfilled" (103). For Kant, the laws of nature bring about events predetermined by fate. Kant's references to fate and destiny show that his rational, scientific interpretation of the Lisbon earthquake is rooted in some sense of spirituality, fate, and the sublime. The earthquake had to happen due to the laws that govern the universe.

Despite his rational approach towards analyzing the scientific causes of the Lisbon earthquake, Kant still recognizes what a unique event it was. Demonstrating that no other

disaster really compares to the devastation at Lisbon he writes, “History affords no example of a commotion of all the waters and of a great part of the earth so extensive and at the same time in the course of a few minutes” (106).

Kant views the earthquake as a marvel of nature. He refers to it as “remarkable” and as a “great event” (113). Kant is particularly impressed by the tsunami that followed the Lisbon earthquake, which he calls “astonishing” (113) and “amazing” (114). Kant seems much more interested in providing an account for the causes of the earthquake and the phenomena itself than providing an account as to why so many innocent people died. Kant focuses on the scientific aspects of the earthquake rather than using it as a gateway to discuss the problem of evil.

Like Rousseau, Kant points to the planning of cities near the shore to be responsible for the destruction of earthquakes rather than God or divine judgment. He notices that throughout the history of earthquakes, “innumerable misfortunes” have happened “to cities or countries, which are near the seashore” (123). According to Kant, earthquakes seldom happen in locations that are far from the sea or “in the middle of the *terra firma*” (123).

All of the churches in the city of Lisbon were destroyed during the earthquake. Because the earthquake happened during the morning of All Saints’ Day, the churches were packed with citizens. It was difficult for many people to see the earthquake as anything other than an expression of God’s divine wrath against the people of Lisbon for their sins (Molesky). However, Kant suggests that churches can be utilized in order to determine where future earthquakes may take place based on their “vacillations” based on the church’s girandoles (128). It is doubtful that looking at the candles during the earthquake at Lisbon could have helped stop the damage, and those that noted the direction of the “vacillations” probably perished under the

rubble. But for Kant, every aspect of the earthquake holds scientific significance and opens up the possibility for knowledge.

Kant combats the spirit of moral inquiry that occurred in response to the earthquake with pure rationalism. After all, he points out, we are all going to die anyway—why is it such a great evil for some people to die in an earthquake? He writes, “As men, who were born to die, why cannot we bear that a few should die by an earthquake, and as such, who are strangers here below and possess no property, why are we inconsolable, when goods, which had shortly been abandoned by the universal way of nature, are lost?” (134). Kant points out that since we can’t take any of our possessions from this earth with us after death, there is no reason to be upset about losing them in an earthquake.

Per Kant, instead of blaming God for the terrible disaster at Lisbon, human beings should learn more about nature in order to adjust and prepare for disasters in the future. Kant writes, “Man must learn to accommodate himself to nature; but he would have nature to accommodate herself to him” (134). This is similar to Pope’s remarks about pride from *Essay on Man*. In our pride we expect nature to change for human developments. We would be better off adjusting our own practices to the laws of nature.

Like Pope, Kant suggests that unfortunate events such as the earthquake at Lisbon are necessary evils. Those who question God’s purposes in allowing so many people to die needlessly are being “impatient of the ways of Providence” (134). Earthquakes are a necessary result of the laws that govern the world, and instead of blaming the destruction on God or nature, we should consider how it is our fault for building “gorgeous habitations” and not considering the possibility of earthquakes (134).

Kant also conceptualizes the Lisbon earthquake in terms of a financial transaction. Metaphorical “payments” can be made to make up for the damage that occurred (134). He claims, “Whatever damage the cause of earthquakes may have occasioned men on the one side, it can easily make it up with interest on the other” (134). Some of these payments or reimbursements have to do with the caves of the earth that contain hot lava and gas. The release of these fumes into the air caused by the earthquake “purified the prisons, and in general all places” (135). Kant suggests that we have been paid back for the damage of the earthquake at Lisbon through a purification of the air. In Kant’s view natural disasters that take the lives of thousands of people and destroy entire cities are not really examples of evil, but are part of a natural order that is just and fair.

In Kant’s theory, the earthquake was caused by a “subterranean fire” that ultimately brings about “the most advantageous effects” such as the purification of the air (136). This fire also brings about “a soft matter” which helps “to forward the vegetation of plants and the economy of the kingdom of nature” (137). In considering these great advantages we should be grateful for the subterranean fire that caused the earthquake. Kant claims that we may not feel much gratitude towards Providence given the terrible effects of the earthquake, which he refers to as a “disadvantage” (137). However, we are incorrect in this feeling because we fail to grasp the magnitude of God’s plan.

Kant admits that his theory that subterranean fires caused the earthquake may be incorrect, or that his conjectures are “not of the nature of those, which afford the greatest conviction and certainty” (137). But his purpose in pursuing this theory is to find a rationale for those who question God’s purposes in allowing such a terrible event to occur that will translate their negative feelings of anger or despair into feelings of gratitude towards God (137). In his

view, as long as his theory causes people to thank and adore God again, it is worth believing. He writes, “But even conjectures, when the object is to move men to the desire of being grateful to the Supreme Being who, even when he chastiseth, is worthy of adoration and love, deserve to be assumed” (137).

Kant rejects the claim that the earthquake at Lisbon was God’s wrathful response to the sins of those who lived there. Instead of blaming the people of Lisbon and judging them for their sins, he hopes the earthquake will “excite philanthropy” and empathy for those who suffer and mourn because of it (139). He calls it a “gross mistake” and a “blameable audacity” to assume that the earthquake was a divine act of judgment meant to punish the people of Lisbon (139). Like Pope and Leibniz, Kant suggests that we must suspend our judgment when we try to ascertain God’s purposes in allowing events like the earthquake at Lisbon to occur.

In a similar vein to Pope’s *Essay on Man*, Kant claims that in their pride, human beings think too highly of themselves and their position in the world, or great chain of being, and strive towards knowledge beyond their appropriate place. He writes, “Man is so much taken himself, that he considers himself only as the sole object of the dispositions of the Almighty” (139). Human beings sometimes forget that we are not the only ones who are affected by God’s laws. Like Leibniz, Kant appeals to God’s wisdom in order to not question why evil things happen, but to have faith that they are a part of God’s overall plan of goodness.

Leibniz, Pope, and Kant each recommend that human beings accept that they are only part of the order of the world, and to accept their place as limited creatures that are nonetheless still part of God’s plan. He claims that human beings are a part of “the Divine Wisdom and of its dispositions” when we often think we are the whole (140). When terrible things happen, we forget “the rules of the perfection of nature” and would have that nature conforms to our desires



(140). Nature should change its laws for us, after all, since we are the most important creatures on earth.

While we enjoy aspects of nature that give us “convenience” and “pleasure” such as sunshine or a beautiful fall day, we expect negative things such as storms, earthquakes, and other natural events to conform to human civilization. When nature fails to conform to our desires, we interpret disasters as meant “to chastise, to menace, or to wreak vengeance” on us when these are simply the laws of nature (140). Kant very rationally points out that assigning God’s wrath to natural events is a mistake of human pride in failing to accept our place in the world.

In Kant’s view, human beings place too much emphasis on human creations (such as the city of Lisbon) and should instead focus on their role in God’s ultimate plan, remarking that “Man was not born to build everlasting cottages upon this stage of vanity. Because his whole life has a far nobler aim” (140). His solution to the problem of natural evil is to change perspective on the nature of the experience as well as how we experience it.

While Kant’s essays about the earthquake at Lisbon are primarily a rational, scientific analysis of what Kant believed to be its cause, (namely a series of subterranean fires) the problem of evil still has an important place. He states it plainly, just as Hobbes, Leibniz, and Pope do in their respective works. This statement of the problem of evil comes after many paragraphs of attempting to persuade his readers that we bear but a tiny place in a world governed by natural laws set in motion by a Supreme Being who is perfectly good and wise, and that it is prideful to assume that natural disasters or unfortunate events of nature are meant to punish us or are a sign that God is indifferent of human affairs.

Even after building this rational argument, Kant still finds it necessary to state the problem of evil in plain terms. Like Hobbes, the crux of his statement on the problem of evil

comes down to the question at the heart of the Book of Job, which is why do bad things happen to good people, while the wicked prosper? He writes,

We see, however, that innumerable villains die at peace, that earthquakes, without distinction of ancient or modern inhabitants, have ever shaken certain countries, that the Christian Peru, as well as the pagan, is liable to convulsions of the earth, and that many cities, which can pretend to no preference in point of being irreprehensible, have never been subject to this devastation. (140)

Kant points out the perceived lack of justice in the world, as evil people fail to meet punishment, defying our own secular moral and judicial calculus. He also points out the indiscriminate nature of evil events, as earthquakes happen all over the world. Even countries whose inhabitants Kant regards as morally good suffer from terrible disasters such as earthquakes. Like Pope and Leibniz, Kant recognizes the limited perspective and knowledge that human beings possess. He writes, “Thus is man in the dark, when he attempts to guess at the views of the Omnipotent in the government of the world” stating our inability to fully understand God’s purposes in allowing evil events to happen (140). For Kant, our inability to find a suitable explanation for the problem of evil is part of the state of being human. Instead, he focuses on the things that we can attempt to understand, such as the scientific causes of the earthquake.

For Kant, the incomprehensible nature of the problem of evil is evidence that this world cannot fulfill our desires, and only God can provide true happiness. In his view, the injustices and suffering of this world only reveal our need for the next world. He asks, “How beautifully do all the devastations, which the inconstancy of the world shows even in those things that appear to us the greatest and the most important, contribute to put us in mind that the goods of

the earth cannot satisfy our instinct for happiness?" (141). In this sense, the earthquake at Lisbon was a sublime reminder to Kant that it is foolish to look to worldly pursuits for happiness.

Kant ends this essay with a reflection that a "noble" prince might observe the destruction that occurs from natural disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon and in turn refrain from causing or contributing to "the miseries of war" (141). Reflection upon the fragility of human affairs in the context of the problem of natural evil might motivate some leaders to promote peace instead of war.

He concludes his essays concerning the earthquake at Lisbon with a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This passage provides a bleak vision of the state of humankind, and points out that while human beings are considered rational creatures "proclaiming peace" they "Yet live in hatred, enmity and strife / Among themselves, and levy cruel wars" (499-501). Perhaps these wars would cease if human beings realized that they have "hellish foes enow besides, / That day and night for his destruction wait". Kant places this passage at the end of his essay to compare the "hellish foes" that humankind has to deal with in *Paradise Lost* to natural disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon (504). He uses this passage to motivate rulers to stop causing and participating in wars, to stop adding artificial evils to rival the natural ones.

Although Kant included the passage from *Paradise Lost* as a coda, without interpretation or analysis, it provides opportunity for the reader to reflect upon the problem of evil, especially in the context of natural disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon. Milton points out that human beings are guilty of "wasting the earth" through wars, and focus on destroying one another instead of cooperating towards a greater good. Nations ask why God allows terrible events involving death and destruction to happen, when they cause wars, death, and destruction themselves.

Tapping into prophetic language, Kant includes a passage that comes from the narrator's reflections after Satan gives a rousing speech to the infernal host in Book 2 and volunteers to go explore the Earth in order to learn more about it and "seek deliverance" for his infernal legions (464-465). Even the most stark, rational approach towards understanding the earthquake--a scientific assessment of its causes--ends with an allusion to the spiritual. Kant's reflections on the earthquake at Lisbon end with a passage from *Paradise Lost*—a text that (like Pope's *Essay on Man*) explicitly advocates for the doctrine of the fortunate fall.

Leibniz, Pope and Kant each refer to spiritual matters when reason fails them. The eighteenth-century writers most regarded as bringing a rational approach to Enlightenment issues follow the prophetic arc of Exodus, envisioning a peaceful community created in the wake of disaster that makes the suffering and death all rational. Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil is to focus on the good things that this life offers, and to see terrible events as part of God's mysterious plan. He envisions an "Empyrean heaven" or a place where all the different worlds in the universe coalesce in a community of perfect goodness, joy, and worship of God. He pictures stars inhabited by aliens who are not cursed with sin, and who will one day join us in perfect communion with God. He has faith that evil—even in its most catastrophic, forms, is always a part of God's redemptive plan and leads towards the development of a peaceful community of believers.

Pope argues for a similar solution to the problem of evil as is found in the Book of Job. To question God's purposes in allowing evil events to happen is the result of human pride and a stubborn unwillingness to accept our fate as the wretched, hapless wanderers we are. Utilizing similar imagery as Leibniz, Pope pictures "worlds unnumbered" that all come together in a great

confluence, like a system of rivers running into the ocean. He has faith that this confluence is a place of perfect goodness and wisdom.

Outer-space and the stars play a key role in *Theodicy* and *Essay on Man*. Leibniz and Pope replace traditional prophetic or religious language with a pseudo-scientific or science fiction vocabulary of outer space and interstellar travel. Instead of the perfect communities of believers formed in heaven that one finds in works of eighteenth-century prophecy, these rationalist thinkers envisioned their communities formed in outer space amongst stars occupied by aliens.

Kant calls the earthquake a “treasure of rarities” and regards it not only as an opportunity to pursue scientific knowledge, but as a portal to a particular kind of sublime religious experience. Ultimately, Kant expresses his hope that a disaster such as the one at Lisbon can help create a peaceful community of nations, avoiding war and conflict, and working together to combat oppression. The earthquake at Lisbon also provides reason for him to suggest that we ought to focus on the life to come, since this one can never truly satisfy us.

## CHAPTER 2

### “OPTIMIST OR FOOL”: THE SATIRE AND SKEPTICISM OF HUME, SWIFT, DIDEROT AND VOLTAIRE

While philosophical optimism was a prominent mode of philosophical thought during the eighteenth-century, it was opposed by a different way of thinking about the problem of evil. Writers from this mode of thought, although also firm theists, saw philosophical optimism as blind acceptance of unsupportable beliefs, such as that God has a purpose for suffering and misery in the world. They saw Leibniz's *Theodicy* and Pope's *Essay on Man* as failing to provide a solution to the problem of evil, despite their prophetic belief in a master plan for human suffering. David Hume, Denis Diderot, Jonathan Swift and Voltaire combatted philosophical optimism with satire and skepticism. Each writer ultimately casts the optimist figure as the fool.

Each of these writers forms an argument that contradicts the philosophical optimism of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant. Diderot, Hume, Swift and Voltaire treat the problem of evil with skepticism in ways that manifest differently for each writer. While Hume does not see proof in nature of a beneficent God that has an ultimate plan for suffering, Diderot sees the problem of evil as a manifestation of Western ways of thinking about the world. Swift sees philosophical optimism as exhibiting intellectual hubris, claiming knowledge of truth that exists outside of human understanding. Voltaire exposes the naiveté of philosophical optimism through the character Pangloss, and claims that the suffering humans experience in this world has no divine justification whatsoever.

These writers form a group opposed to the views of the writers discussed in chapter one. While Leibniz, Pope, and Kant derive hope in the midst of human suffering from the viewpoint

of philosophical optimism, Voltaire, Hume, Swift and Diderot treat it with skepticism. Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire contradict the idea that terrible disasters are part of God's plan for creating a better world, while Swift shows the intellectual flaws in claiming belief in the best of all possible worlds. If anything, as Diderot argues, Western culture and Christianity is the cause of the problem of evil and, when used to infiltrate other cultures through imperialism, destroys utopian spiritual communities.

Hume posits human beings as living in total ignorance concerning the causes of suffering. While he does think nature shows evidence of a creator, there is no promise that this creator has any kind of divine plan. In *The Natural History of Religion* Hume argues that we have no knowledge of why there is so much suffering in the world. To Hume, we are living in the dark. Throughout *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* he emphasizes the amount of suffering and pain that exist in the world, and for which we have no reasonable explanation. His thesis differs vastly from the views of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant, who each believed that God had some ultimate cause for suffering in the world. Cleanthes, the character in *Dialogues Concerning Religion* that most accurately represents orthodox Christian views, is cast ultimately as a fool.

Religious enthusiasts are not always outcasts, prisoners, or rejects, such as the prophetic writers discussed in chapter three. Religious enthusiasm could also be found in the prominent denominations of Christianity during the eighteenth-century, such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. In *A Tale of a Tub* Jonathan Swift satirizes each of these denominations, showing the ways that religious enthusiasts misuse, mishandle, and misinterpret texts to serve their own selfish interests. He contrasts this with the ways that religious enthusiasm is channeled through the spoken word, making it even more untamable and dangerous. In either case, religious enthusiasm is more apt to create disasters than it is at helping us to cope with disaster.

As Jonathan Swift shows us in *A Famous Prediction of Merlin* as well as *A Tale of a Tub*, misinterpreting and misreading texts is both dangerous and foolish. However, Denis Diderot shows us another danger—failing to interpret at all. In *Jacques the Fatalist*, Jacques adheres completely to a text that he refers to as the prophecy written in the sky. This determinism, or unwillingness to interpret, prevents him from acknowledging his own agency. It also prevents him from learning to cope with the tragic death of his brother during the earthquake at Lisbon. Nonetheless, the conversational nature of *Jacques the Fatalist* along with the narrator's deviations from Jacques's story of his loves remind us that perhaps we can in fact, negotiate texts productively. Like Jacques, Pangloss from Voltaire's *Candide* similarly fails to successfully interpret the world, as he undergoes incredible suffering and tragedy and dogmatically persists in his belief in philosophical optimism.

While Leibniz, Pope, and Kant follow a prophetic strain in their writings that posits that terrible disasters are a necessary divine act that give way to a spiritually renewed community, Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire can find no reasonable justification for natural disasters or for the preponderance of evil and suffering in the world. Disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon have no discernible purpose in terms of an ultimate plan. Instead of preparing the world for a utopian spiritual community, as Leibniz and Pope suggest, natural disasters lead us to skepticism and Deism.

These skeptics articulate different ways of thinking about the problem of evil, natural disasters, and human suffering during the eighteenth-century. As a group of writers, they oppose philosophical optimism and find ways to satirize it. Characters such as Cleanthes from Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Orou from Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* and Pangloss from Voltaire's *Candide* mock and satirize not only philosophical



optimism, but Western Christianity, orthodoxy and imperialism. These writers substitute a satirical character for the prophetic leanings of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant. Through the following close readings, I show how Hume, Diderot, Swift and Voltaire differ in philosophical stance, rejecting the prophetic and optimistic styles discussed concerning Leibniz, Pope, and Kant in chapter one.

#### “ONE BAD DINNER”: DIDEROT’S VIEWS ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND ORIGINAL SIN

Throughout his writings, Diderot’s searing critiques of Christianity reveal a perspective very different from that of Leibniz, Pope, or Kant. Diderot construes the problem of evil as an offshoot of the problem of Christianity and Christian faith itself for giving us a poor view of the world. Throughout his entries in the Encyclopedia, whenever evil comes up, Diderot expresses skepticism towards the idea of a beneficent creator who has a plan for the role that evil plays in the world. In *The Sceptic’s Walk* and *Jacques the Fatalist*, he harshly criticizes Christianity from a practical and historical perspective, calling into question Biblical events and Christian practices that would have been taken for granted by many during his day. In *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*, however, he shows us the crippling results of Christian faith and a Western worldview on cultures unencumbered by heady philosophical concepts such as the problem of evil.

In the Encyclopedia entry for Prejudice, Diderot reveals some interesting views on divinity and the problem of evil. He writes, “*Prejudices*, says Bacon, the man who had meditated the most on this subject, are just so many spectres and phantoms sent to earth by an evil genius in order to torment men” (284). Bacon believes that the problem of evil is rooted in errors of human thought. In Aphorism XLVI from *The Doctrine of false Notions: Or, Idols of*

*the Mind* he writes, “When the mind is once pleased with certain Things, it draws all others to consent, and go along with them: and tho’ the Power and number of Instances, that make for the contrary, are greater; yet it either attends not to them, or despise them; or else removes and rejects them, by a Distinction; with a strong and pernicious Prejudice” showing the ways that we trick ourselves into believing what we want to believe (353). While Diderot takes an objective stance throughout much of the Encyclopedia, here he presents a possibility that Bacon brings up. Diderot suggests that our universe may be governed not by an infinitely good God who has a master plan for goodness, or even by a disinterested God who set the world and the rules that govern it into motion, but by an “evil genius” who takes enjoyment from our misery (284). Like Hume, he questions the essential goodness of God.

Readers can gain a brief sense of Diderot’s views on the problem of evil from reading entries regarding law and justice from the Encyclopedia, Diderot uses empirical reasoning to address the problem of evil and acknowledges its existence. In the entry for “law of nature or natural law” he recognizes (like Leibniz and Kant) that bad things often happen to good people, while the wicked prosper. He observes that “virtue does not always have the happy external effects that it ought to for he who practices it” (134). People who act virtuously or who look out for the interests of others above their own are not always rewarded for their virtue, and often fail to reap the same rewards as those who only selfishly pursue their own interests.

Diderot sees that natural law does not necessarily follow moral standards, and often falls short of our hopes for justice. He claims, “we often see that the goods and evils of nature and fortune are distributed inequitably, and not according to merit” (134). The correlation between virtue and rarely seems to be a fair one. In fact, “the evils of injustice assail both the innocent and the guilty” so that it does not seem to matter whether one acts virtuously (134). Even worse,

sometimes the virtuous are punished for their virtue. Diderot writes, “on occasion virtue even attracts persecution” (134). All of this occurs within the observation of a perfectly good God. Diderot questions whether a deity that seems to deal out fortune at random, regardless of virtue or morals, has a higher purpose for human suffering.

Diderot imitates the structure of epic poetry as a literary genre in *The Skeptic's Walk*, which follows a similar pattern as Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, following three separate journeys. Just as the gate to Hell that Dante passes through with bears the inscription, “Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here” the gate that Diderot's narrator Aristos and his friend Cleobulus bears an inscription as well. This one reads, “Happy are they who die unnoticed” (97). This is perhaps a comment on the negative attention Diderot garnered by writing tracts that honestly questioned the religious beliefs of his day. Cleobulus takes Aristos by the hand, leading him under some chestnut trees, and the journey begins.

The journey that Aristos and Cleobulus take is replete with social, political, and religious commentary. Cleobulus expresses his belief in the failure of the Church. Diderot writes, “Self-interest engenders the priests, the priests engender prejudice, prejudice brings wars, and wars last as long as prejudices exist, prejudices as long as there are priests, and priests as long as self-interest shall exist” (143). The greatest evils that exist in the world, such as fruitless wars and ongoing prejudice, are the result of the Christian Church. Diderot focuses on how institutionalized religion causes evil rather than the problem of evil itself. Instead of questioning why God allows certain things to happen, we should consider the ways human beings cause evil in the name of God. Rather than seeing Biblical books such as the book of Revelation as paving the way for a better, more peaceful community of religious believers, Diderot shows that these books, when utilized by the church, encourage hypocrisy and violence.

This view of religious institutions is deeply influenced by Francis Bacon and his writings concerning the idols. Bacon believed that “idols” such as the church prevent us from discovering the truth as we allow them to make judgments for us. For Bacon, idols such as the Christian church are “the deepest fallacies of the human mind; for they do not deceive in particulars, as the rest, by clouding and insnaring the judgment; but from a corrupt disposition, or bad complexion of the mind, which distorts and infects all the anticipations of the understanding” (239). Diderot echoes this suspicion of the Church and religious life in *The Skeptic’s Walk* as the priests and religious figures he describes are ultimately shown to be foolish, petty, and blind to an intellectual life.

Not only are some religious enthusiasts misguided and blind, they are also often untrustworthy. Like Chaucer’s Pardoner, they use religious enthusiasm as a ploy for personal or financial gain. In one of their discussions, Cleobulus expresses his distrust of Christians to Aristos. Diderot writes, “often those who claim to be carrying his will have been exposed as delusional or con-men, and one is tempted to believe that this may be true of everyone who ever claims to be his envoy” (239). Diderot shows distrust towards religious people who claim to have direct connection to God, which includes those who believe in philosophical optimism. Cleobulus then goes on to describe the contradictions and inconsistencies he finds with the Bible. He writes, “These books are written in such an uneven manner that it appears well that he has neglected to vet his secretaries, or that his confidence has often been abused by them” (239). To Diderot, the Bible does not make sense as a complete story. It is unreasonable to think that God could have commanded Biblical texts to be written as they are.

Diderot provides a critique of the doctrine of original sin in *The Skeptic’s Walk*. This is relevant to the discussion of the problem of evil because in many versions of Christianity, evil

was brought into the world when Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from the garden of Eden. Cleobulus explains to Aristos how human beings came into existence and now are in their present state. He describes how a “ruler” or “prince” created the first soldier by blowing on some silt and animating it (483, 491). The prince then “gave” the first soldier a woman, who “once made a bad dinner, thereby imprinting a black stain on their children and their furthest descendants, which made them odious to the Prince” (491). Diderot refers to the curse placed upon humanity after Adam and Eve’s fall from grace. In this satirical version of the story of Genesis, the history of human evil and suffering is caused by one “bad dinner” (491). Diderot paints the doctrine of original sin and the problem of evil that so often arises from it as an entirely ridiculous notions. Diderot also shows how unfair it is that the doctrine of original sin essentially blames Eve for first taking the apple from the serpent. It is absurd to blame man’s fall from grace on one “bad dinner” (491). It is equally absurd to imagine a prince who forever despises the army he created because of one “bad dinner” or a God who would place a curse on his creation because of original sin (491). Diderot specifically critiques extreme examples of Judeo-Christian thinking, as well as any sort of moral taxonomizing as unreasonable and officious.

Cleobulus goes on to list many more stories and events from the Bible, as Diderot reveals the silliness of Biblical narratives when cast in a different light, comparing Adam and Eve’s descendants to a group of corrupt soldiers. After the bad meal that curses them for all eternity, “the soldiers became so wicked that the monarch had them all drowned” (491). Here Diderot refers to the great flood of Genesis, which wiped out all the people on Earth except for Noah, his family, and of course two of each animal. Diderot points out that only a very corrupt or insane

ruler would drown his own army, and, analogously, a loving God would not wipe out his own creation. In doing so, he satirizes and questions biblical narratives.

In his critical unmasking of these Biblical events, Diderot critiques the history of Christianity, suggesting that the entire Biblical narrative is ridiculous, as whole groups of people are punished and killed by this “prince” who supposedly created them (491). While Diderot’s *The Skeptic’s Walk* is not a discussion of the problem of evil in the way that Leibniz’s *Theodicy* or Pope’s *Essay On Man* are, it is a relevant addition to the discussion because Diderot disagrees with the cause of the problem of evil in the first place, and blames Christianity for providing a false view of the world.

Through the character of Cleobulus, Diderot brings into question the “infinite goodness” of God that other eighteenth-century writers such as Leibniz, Pope, and Kant expressed belief in (566). Diderot writes, “There is another article that has been equally divisive for them: namely, the infinite goodness of our ruler, which this rhetorician has claimed to reconcile his premeditated and irrevocably fixed resolutions” (566). In Cleobulus’s analogy, the prince is deemed to be infinitely good, and yet has characteristics that do not seem as such. For example, this prince will “cast to the dungeons, without hope of grace, anyone who was not enrolled in his service” (566). Here Diderot satirizes the theological concept that all who are not Christian will burn in Hell for all eternity.

Just as Kant and Leibniz admit that the wicked often prosper, while the righteous suffer, Cleobulus accuses the prince of dishing out favor arbitrarily. He accuses the prince of “casting fortunes by the toss of a coin” and in doing so, ignores the plight of good people while favoring those who “are quite guilty” (566). Diderot sees Christian theology as irrational and nonsensical. While his critique shows his awareness of the problem of evil in the world, it sees the solution as

not lying in Christian theology. The alley of the thorns, or going through life constantly seeking meaning in religious experience and religious rules, is not a solution to the problem of evil, and is not a practical way to engage the world.

Diderot champions the intellectual life over a life of religious enthusiasm. Menippus asks Mark to renounce his faith and recognize it for the lie he deems it to be. Diderot writes, “Please recognize your mistake and abandon these illusions; in the end it is only your imagination that created all the miracles that embellish your history” imploring those who dwell in the alley of thorns to stop looking towards faith for ultimate answers about our existence (661). This suggestion is met with the threat of disaster. Mark responds, “The time is short, your fall is near, and your empire is at an end. I say empire, but the whole world is going to be remade; the Son of Man will appear on the clouds and judge the living and the dead” (667). When challenged to question his religious enthusiasm, Mark responds with more religious enthusiasm, claiming that an imminent disaster is at hand. He claims, “Many of those who are alive today will see these things fulfilled” showing his belief that an apocalyptic disaster is imminent (667). Hume shows how difficult it is to reason with or persuade the religiously enthusiastic.

For Diderot, religious enthusiasm serves as a blindfold that inhibits one from perceiving the world as it is. Cleobulus tells Aristos about a certain group of people from the alley of thorns who have crossed over to the alley of chestnuts. He claims that this enlightened segment of the religious fanatics hold blindfolds over their eyes. Whenever the blindfold inevitably falls off, or their arms grow tired of holding it up, they find that the world and the objects of perception it contains are far different from the way the other members of the alley of thorns described them. Diderot writes, “Every object in nature presents itself to them as very different from what they had been told about them. These enlightened ones cross over to our alley” (709).

The alley of chestnuts, or free-thinking, challenging intellectual and philosophical thought, is a far better way to arrive at conclusions about the world. Instead of giving each other “cruel wounds” as they do in the alley of thorns, these reformed ones now “have the pleasure of resting under our chestnut trees and breathing that fresh air with us” (62). Diderot recommends that we think freely about religious and philosophical issues instead of getting involved in the violence and hatred that come with religious extremism.

For Diderot, the possibility of human suffering being the result of divine punishment brings into question the nature of God. He entertains the possibility that the problem of evil exists because God enjoys making his creation suffer, but ultimately concludes that this is unlikely. Discussing divine punishment in relation to human virtue, Cleobulus concludes, “If it is true, I say, that the degree of our virtue is the exact measure of our current happiness, this monarch might annihilate us, without doing any injustice to any of us” (63). To Cleobulus, and perhaps to Diderot as well, the hypocrisy and vices that most people have are enough to justify the ways of God if he decided to destroy all of us in an apocalyptic disaster such as the one Mark describes. As their conversation continues, Cleobulus begins to wonder what the purpose the prince, or God, has in punishing those who have sinned or who are wicked. On one hand, he wonders if God enjoys to make them suffer, and derives “his own satisfaction” from punishing the wicked (63). Like Hume, Diderot sees the possibility of ascribing negative human characteristics to God. Cleobulus decides that this cannot be in God’s nature, since if this were true it would make God “more wicked than I myself am” (63).

The other possible justification for divine punishment would be for the righteous to enjoy it, or as Diderot writes, “*For the gratification of the saved*” (63). However, this does not make sense to Cleobulus either, since God does not encourage pursuing revenge. Diderot writes, “This



would be a feeling of vengeance, incompatible with their virtue, to which our Prince, who does not regulate the whims of others, would take no interest in” (63). Cleobulus concludes that God does not punish the wicked either for his own satisfaction, or for the satisfaction of his believers.

Diderot satirizes Christian belief in the devil, painting this belief as yet another silly superstition, and painting even Christian beliefs that are widely accepted as examples of religious enthusiasm. He writes, “they believe they are haunted by an evil Magician, who’s as old as the world and a mortal enemy of the Prince and his subjects” (64). The Prince’s subjects face constant temptation from this magician, who “invisibly swirls around their heads, hoping to debauch them, endlessly whispering in their ears that they should drop their walking stick, soil their robe, tear off their blindfold and cross over to the alley of flowers or that off the chestnut trees” (64). Diderot mocks the idea of the devil, who is the main force behind much of the evil in the world according to Christian theology. Cast in this light, the fear that many religious people experience in regards to the devil is an example of foolish superstition.

Diderot satirizes the ways that some Christians try to cast out the devil from their presence, such as by saying prayers or crossing themselves. He writes, “When they feel they are pressed too hard they make a symbolic gesture with their right hand which sets the Magician a-flying” (64). He even criticizes the idea of holy water, mocking this particularly Catholic tradition, as the devil can be cast out “if they have dipped the tip of their finger into a certain water which only the Guides can prepare” (64). Rather than a legitimate source of evil in the world, the devil is just another way that the “Guides” of the alley of thorns, or priests, ministers, and other religious figures, can dominate their subjects through fear (64). Casting the devil as a flying magician makes him seem less plausible as an actual force of evil. He considers the

primary harbinger of evil as superstition and another example of religious enthusiasm that is used to maintain power over people.

Many books have been written about the devil, or, as Diderot refers to him, the flying magician. Some of these books, as Cleobulus asserts, depict him as being more clever and persuasive than God. These books, such as *Paradise Lost* “prove how much of a fool our Prince is by comparison” because “he is a thousand times more capable of stealing people than his rival is of holding onto them” (64). However, Cleobulus hopes to avoid discussing this topic further to avoid “incurring the censure laid on Milton, namely that this accursed Magician became the protagonist of the story” (64). In order to avoid the same attack that Milton faced, Diderot compares the flying wizard, or the devil, to a magical character named Freston from a “gloomy sequel to Cervantes” written by “the Duke of Medoc” (65). This possibly refers to any number of writers who attempted to write sequels to Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. The section on the alley of thorns concludes so that Diderot does not face the same attack that Milton did by religious figures. Diderot satirizes both the literary establishment and religious fanatics simultaneously. The literary establishment and religious fanatics are both over-zealous extremists that are quick to condemn those who fail to meet their standards, and who should learn to reserve judgment.

As *The Skeptic’s Walk* follows the structure of the *Divine Comedy*, with three separate parts that make up an epic, or in Diderot’s case, mock-epic narrative, his journey through dialogue and description with Aristos through the alley of thorns ends with a vision of Hell. Cleobulus assures Aristos that the devil, or the flying wizard “keeps to the alley of thorns” (65). In Diderot’s critique of religious belief, the devil only exists in the minds of those who believe in him. However, according to the Guides and to the other members of the alley of thorns, those who yield to his temptations “will be abandoned at the entry of the garrison, to share with him, in

for all eternity, the gulfs of flame—the terrifying fate to which he is destined” (65). No imitation of Dante’s *Inferno* would be complete without at least some vision of Hell such as Diderot provides here. However, Diderot questions the view of religious fanatics that so many should go to Hell, including honest people who sought the truth. He points out that if everyone religious fanatics say will go to Hell actually do, then “that will be the first time when so many honest men held congress with so many wicked ones, in such an ugly meeting-hall” (65). Much like how in Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Hell becomes a peaceful garden where artists reside, the extremism and judgments of religious enthusiasts may cause one to believe that Hell is a place where one would actually like to be, if only because presumably the religious enthusiasts will not be there.

Despite his thorough critique of religious enthusiasm and Christian belief, through the character of Menippus Diderot still expresses belief in a God who is good and has at least some kind of plan. Despite meeting a variety of religious enthusiasts who seem to enjoy condemning others and ascribing judgment, Menippus still believes in a just, good God. The evil that occurs in the world is not done at random, is not done to punish the unjust for the satisfaction of God or the righteous, and is not merely a prelude to apocalyptic destruction. Diderot’s Menippus says, “I think that our Prince, who is no less wise than he is good, does nothing that will not lead to some good” (63). While the solution to the problem of evil may not lie in religious fanaticism, or apocalyptic beliefs, Diderot expresses a basic belief in a God that has a higher purpose for terrible things that happen.

In Diderot’s *The Skeptic’s Walk* the possibility of a great disaster that will bring about a peaceful community is little more than a cop-out. For Diderot, apocalyptic prophecies are not an answer to the problem of evil, but a way of refusing to recognize the truth. They are another part

of man-made evil, and cause fear and oppression. Some religiously enthusiastic thinkers cannot be helped, and must be left to the alley of thorns that they have chosen. Menippus does not respond to Mark's threat of apocalyptic disaster, but instead "left the alley of the thorns, and left the fanatics to make as many speeches as they would, in their efforts to populate this alley" (676). The alley of thorns, or religious fanaticism, cannot offer a realistic solution to the problem of evil. Menippus leaves the fanatics because he recognizes that they cannot be helped. He has tried to convince them of the error in their way of thinking, but is only met with more vigorous religious fanaticism. By staying in the valley of the thorns, the fanatics have made a choice to go throughout life with a dogmatic outlook, and therefore cannot be helped. To continue to try to convince them that they are wrong would not only be a waste of time, but it would also require a similarly contemptible approach to that of the fanatics, who attempt to force their beliefs on others. Diderot shows us the impossibility of confronting religious fanaticism with a productive result.

The three different alleys that Diderot describes in *The Skeptic's Walk* also serve as divisions for various kinds of writing and forms of expression. The alley of chestnuts, for example, is symbolic of philosophical and scientific thought. He writes, "In the sand you can see traces of circles, triangles and other geometrical figures. Here systems are made, but not much poetry" (1). Poetry, such as "Voltaire's *Epistle to Uranus*" belongs in the alley of flowers (1). Diderot recognizes that these assorted styles of writing belong in separate categories, and each has its own style of exploration. Thorns, much like religious fanaticism, cause pain and discomfort. One must walk very carefully around thorns in order to prevent being pricked. Flowers, much like poetry and art, are very beautiful, and cause one to appreciate the pleasurable aspects of life. Chestnuts, however, are not beautiful, but are the only one of Diderot's three

symbols (alleys) that can be consumed for nourishment. Out of the three, the alley of the chestnuts is the most practical, as chestnuts can not only produce trees which provide shade and wood, but can serve a variety of purposes, culinary and otherwise.

Cleobulus claims that those who walk in the alley of chestnuts are sometimes met with opposition from members of the alley of thorns, “who regard and treat them as their most dangerous enemies” such as priests or religious leaders who sometimes regarded the results of intellectual or scientific pursuits as heresy (2). The alley of chestnuts, or the pursuit of knowledge, is “made only for those who can walk without a cane” or for free-thinkers who avoid dogmatic interpretations of the world (2). Through this assertion, Diderot suggests that religious fanaticism can serve as a mental crutch for those who cannot think for themselves. Perhaps, however, they can think for themselves but are too afraid or unsure to try. Religious fanaticism offers a series of predictable answers for the deep questions of human life and meaning, while the intellectual life that Diderot’s characters endorse offers much more mystery and confusion, with few final answers at all. In this sense, like the dark wood that Dante finds himself in, the alley of chestnuts can be a frightening place. Like the journey of Cleobulus and Aristos, as they explore various alleys and discuss them, Diderot suggests that we approach life and suffering as an intellectual and physical journey that we take on with others.

#### DIDEROT’S PROBLEM WITH THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Diderot does not directly engage with the problem of evil as much as he criticizes the beliefs that make up a belief in the problem of evil. He is interested in exposing the evil that is man-made and how traditional religious convictions and contemporary interpretations of scriptural texts are generous contributors to this evil. This critique spreads through several of his works and is instilled in a variety of different genres. Like Voltaire’s *Candide*, Diderot’s

*Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* also tells the story of a traveler and adventurer, but it is also a series of dialogues. The first dialogue is a conversation between two characters known as “A” and “B”. The two discuss Bougainville’s voyage to Tahiti. Bougainville transitioned from “a sedentary life” in which he studied mathematics to “the active, painful, wandering and distracted profession of a traveler” (111). Voltaire and Diderot each utilize the travel narrative to explore the problem of evil. Joseph F. Kelly calls Diderot’s *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* “a scathing attack on Western society and Christianity”.

The first dialogue of *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* begins with a discussion of the fog that prevents A and B from being able to see the landscape around them. Diderot writes, “The fog is so thick that it forbids us even the sight of the neighbouring trees” (111). This fog serves as a metaphor for the division between Tahiti and Western culture, and the inability of either to reconcile their enormous cultural differences. As we find later in the text, a great fog lies between the views of Bougainville, who attempts to push Western cultural norms on the Tahitiens, and Orou, who condemns Bougainville as an imperialist force of evil who attempts to corrupt Tahitian traditions. What Bougainville perceives as good, Orou perceives as evil, and vice versa. A and B discuss what will happen to the fog, wondering if it will sink or rise, or “fall back on the earth” or “gain the upper region” (111). While they wait to see what will happen to the fog, A notices that B is reading about the voyage of Bougainville. Their dialogue becomes a discussion of this voyage. While the story of Bougainville’s voyage may at first be hailed as a heroic travel narrative, his discussions with Orou ultimately prove it to be a condemnation of imperialism that posits Western culture as the primary cause of the problem of evil.

B claims that Bougainville's journey is worthwhile for three primary reasons. All three have to do with knowledge. Like Kant's treatise on the earthquake at Lisbon, Bougainville's journey is valuable because it provides us with scientific knowledge, which can help us to live more safely and free from danger. Diderot writes, "It affords us a better knowledge of our old home and its inhabitants; greater security on the seas he traversed sounding-lead in hand, and greater accuracy in our geographical charts" explaining the practical value of Bougainville's travel narrative (112).

While acknowledging that travelers and adventurers are bound to face suffering—"Every navigator exposes himself, and willingly, to peril of air, fire, earth and water" Diderot also recognizes that some examples of suffering and pain seem exceptionally harsh (113). He writes, "But that after having wandered months together between sea and heaven, death and life: after being struck by tempests, threatened with death by wreck, illness, shortage of food and water, a poor wretch should arrive with his ship smashed, and fall expiring with fatigue and misery at the feet of a brazen monster who refuses him the most urgent remedies or mercilessly makes him wait, that indeed is hard" (113). There are some cases of suffering that are so great or exceedingly cruel that they cause one to question God's greater purpose or motivation in allowing them to occur. A responds, "It is a crime that ought to be punished" showing that he agrees that there is a lack of justice in terms of this event (113). For Diderot, the problem of evil is not improved by human beings. In fact, human beings tend to bring out the evils in the world and make them worse.

A and B list many of the detestable practices that Bougainville saw in his travels, as Diderot will eventually compare these to Western practices that he will show can be considered equally "evil" or detestable. On an island near New Zealand, Bougainville discovers that the

people there practice cannibalism (114). On another place he visited during his travels, pregnant women are murdered to avoid over-population—“there the infant is crushed in the body of its mother, who is trampled under foot by a priestess” (114). A and B agree that some of these practices seem to have no rationale or motivation. B claims that the Tahitiens possess, “many a custom of a strange inevitable cruelty, of which the cause is lost in the night of time and becomes a matter of torture to philosophers” (115). Even great moral philosophers cannot discover the underlying reason behind forms of human cruelty and suffering like this.

Even though we cannot understand the reasons for deplorable practices such as the ones that A and B list, the close relationship between the religious and the political “has been consistently observed” in these communities (115). B points out the powerful relationship between “supernatural and divine institutions” which “strengthen themselves and become eternal, by becoming transformed in the long run into civil and national laws” (115). Simultaneously, “civil and national laws” gain divine or supernatural status through consecration by zealous believers. In this way, humanity is trapped by its own beliefs through an ongoing transition between divine and political beliefs. A calls this “one of the gloomiest of all vicious circles” lamenting the ways that human beings turn superstitious or religiously enthusiastic beliefs into laws that govern the fate of all (115).

By listing the inhumane practices of many distinct cultures and revealing the relationship these practices have to a nation’s core beliefs, Diderot focuses on how the problem of evil is exacerbated by human beings. Through the dialogue between A and B, Diderot shows the difference between an “ethnocentric” culture “that regards itself as universal” and “a more tolerant one that accepts some degree of cultural relativism” (Moscovici 2). Not only do we find ways to torture and treat one another with cruelty, but these practices become part of a national



belief system and consciousness, without regard to reason. Evil exists in the world in its present state at least in part because of humanity.

Diderot highlights human cruelty as the main cause of the problem of evil, but in *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* he focus on imperialism and Western culture as a fulcrum for human cruelty. B tells A about Bougainville's experiences in Paraguay. He witnessed the people of Paraguay treat their Indian slaves in a cruel manner, making them "drink their own sweat," allowing "no right of property," keeping them "in degraded superstition" and whipping them regardless of "age or sex" (115). Throughout his travels, Bougainville discovers a common theme of human cruelty. Everywhere he goes, human beings tend to treat one another poorly and without regard for one another. For Diderot, the biggest obstacle to the problem of evil is humanity itself.

Diderot sets up a dialogue that meditates on the inability for some cultures to communicate with one another effectively due to differences in language and cultural practice. Bougainville takes a Tahitien man named Aotourou with him back to France in order to show him French life and culture. A wonders what Aotourou will tell his family and friends once he returns to Tahiti. B responds that he will tell them "very little" because "he will find in his own language no terms corresponding to that little of which he has gathered some notion" (117). Even if Aotourou's family and friends do understand his descriptions of life in France, they will consider him to be a liar since they have no frame of reference for a culture so vastly different from their own (117). According to Diderot's reading of Bouganville's voyages, different cultures have a difficult time communicating with one another because of these linguistic and cultural gaps.

Just as the fog disappears near the end of the first dialogue and the “blue of the sky” appears, announcing the end of the discussion between A and B, so does *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* transition to a new discussion between two cultures, as the stark differences between the two of them will be confronted (118). The literary form of a dialogue transitions to a new dialogue as the weather changes around A and B. B directs A towards the supplement to the voyages of Bougainville, which is sitting on a table nearby. He advises A to “skip the preamble” of the supplement and go “straight on to the farewell addressed by the chief of the island to our travelers” (118). This farewell speech is Diderot’s critique of western culture and imperialism.

The second part of the Bougainville Supplement is a speech given to the people of Tahiti by an old man. As they lament Bougainville’s departure, the old man looks on with scorn. He knows that when Bougainville’s people return, they will enslave them. The old man warns the Tahitiens, “they will return to throw you into chains, to cut your throats, or to subject you to their extravagance and vices: one day you will serve under them, as corrupted, as vile, as luckless as they” (119). He discerns the threat the Bougainville’s visit represents. As Jimmy Klausen points out, “Diderot saw the conditions for trust, law and property—as well as the outer limits of principled colonization—in that risky form of human sociability called hospitality” and Bougainville has violated this hospitality in every way (171).

Next, the old man denounces Bougainville for coming to Tahiti and corrupting his countrymen. The Western religious and social practices that Bougainville has pushed on the Tahitiens only ruin their innocence and freedom. For example, the old man criticizes Bougainville for sharing the practice of marriage with the Tahitiens. Previously, the Tahitiens “held in common” their daughters and wives and monogamous sexual relationships were not

practiced (119). If anyone gets married, as Orou later explains to Bougainville's chaplain, it is based on an agreement that they will share the same bed and home, and can be terminated at any time. Tahiti was a place of communal bliss, in which "all things belong to all men" (119). The introduction of marriage has caused them to hate one another and seek violence against one another.

The old man asks Bougainville how he would feel if a Tahitian came to his country and engraved on a stone or a tree, "*This country belongs to the inhabitants of Tahiti*" (120). In his denouncement of Bougainville, he shows the arrogance and hypocrisy of imperialism. Bougainville has violated "natural and positive laws" in the way he has treated the people of Tahiti (Klausen 192). Once again, a character in eighteenth-century literature looks to natural disaster as an expression of divine judgment for sin or wrongdoing. The old man says to Bougainville, "withdraw, go, and may the guilty seas which have spared thee in thy voyage gain their own absolution and avenge us by swallowing thee up before thy return" (124). The old man sees divine forces such as the sea as guilty for ever allowing Bougainville to visit Tahiti and corrupt its people, and hopes that the sea will bring about divine judgment for Bougainville's corruptions. Here the old man questions a divine force that permits such an evil, corrupting force to visit his country. Diderot expounds on the ways that human hypocrisy and cruelty contribute to the problem of evil, as one man, Bougainville, manages to corrupt and poison an entire culture, pushing his own religious views and cultural practices on the Tahitians. As Sharon A. Stanley writes, "Tahiti has indeed shone with a utopian light throughout much of the text, particularly as it casts into relief the folly and dysfunction of modern European civilization" of which the problem of evil is a product (267). Diderot presents a Western representation of Tahiti through a trope of the noble savage, as The Tahitians do not have Christian faith, and yet seem

completely untroubled by the problem of evil. They live together in a peaceful, utopian community. There is no need for an apocalyptic disaster to prelude a better world because the Tahitiens already live in an ideal community.

Diderot presents a religious debate along with a critique of Christianity by articulating, with imaginative license, a utopian version of theism that comes to a standstill in discussions about the differences between the sexual practices of cultures. Orou and the Chaplain discuss the Chaplain's faith, and why he does not feel comfortable sleeping with the women of Tahiti. The Chaplain describes God as an invisible "workman" who has built the world, is everywhere, and is the father of everyone. Just as Orou has built his cabin and the furniture within, God has built the entire world (129). He then goes on to explain the concepts of free will and sin to Orou, who offers his own opinions on these matters and the God that has supposedly created these rules. Orou claims that this God must be "a poor sort of father" since he cannot be seen and has lots of rules (129). Orou carefully dismantles central tenets of Christian theology.

Orou describes in his own words the God that the Chaplain has first described to him. He claims that this is a god "who can prevent and does not do so" showing that to the people of Tahiti, the Christian God of Bougainville and his people is inept (130). Through this dialogue with the chaplain, Diderot suggests that the problem of evil is a product of Western civilization and Christianity. Rather than a universal, ongoing issue, the problem of evil does not exist for some cultures such as the Tahitiens, who live in peace and harmony. For Orou, the idea of a God who allows evil is "opposed to nature and contrary to reason" (130). The problem of evil, as understood by Western Christianity, is fundamentally illogical. According to Orou, and perhaps to Diderot, a God who can prevent evil but refuses to is unjustifiable.

According to Orou, the God the Chaplain believes in ordained divine commandments that only “multiply the number of crimes and continually annoy the old workman” (130). For Diderot, Christian faith only causes people to become more corrupt. Orou continues to denounce marriage as an unsuitable and illogical practice. He claims that the principles by which the Chaplain lives “presuppose that a thinking, feeling, free being can be the property of another like himself” and compares marriage to slavery (130).

Diderot relocates the source of the problem of evil, bringing into question Western values and positing them, particularly Christian values, as causing the problem of evil itself. B asks A, “Would you like an abridged account of almost all our wretchedness?” hoping to provide an answer for human suffering (154). He claims that human life began with the existence of a “natural man” (154). This natural man was forced to share his body with an “artificial man” through human conventions and rules (154). The introduction of this “artificial man” has caused the misery and suffering that human beings experience (154). Because of this division of soul, we are “pulled about, pinched with tweezers, tortured, stretched on the wheel, ceaselessly groaning, ceaselessly unhappy” as we navigate between our own desires and the demands of society (154). The problem of evil is not the result of some failure of God, but rather is the result of inner divisions caused by societal rules and cultural standards. In this particular iteration of the problem of evil, the great disaster is imperialism and the imposition of Western culture on an already peaceful, spiritually free community.

#### “AS WAS WRITTEN ON HIGH”: THE SATIRICAL DETERMINISM OF DENIS DIDEROT

Diderot uses prophecy as a metaphor to describe the nature of this life. In the opening paragraph of *Jacques the Fatalist* he proposes the belief that “everything that happens to us here below, for good and for ill, was written up there, on high” (3). Fate is like a written prophecy

that slowly comes to fruition. In Diderot's conception of fate, written prophecy is the means by which we respond to events and live our lives. *Jacques the Fatalist* "thematizes the determinism vs. freedom debate" as Diderot believes that everything is already written in a prophecy in the sky (Breines 235). Jacques adheres strictly to a text that cannot be altered or manipulated because it is absolute.

However, Diderot almost immediately brings this view of how events unfold, especially in the context of human suffering. The Master begins to beat his servant repeatedly and needlessly, because he is upset that they have become lost. After each strike, the servant says, "That one was apparently written up there too..." bringing into question the idea that all people are responding to a pre-determined fate that is somehow written in the sky (4). There does not seem to be any greater purpose to this servant's suffering, as it is the result of the Master's blind frustration. The rollicking, conversational nature of *Jacques the Fatalist* as a text consistently undermines the protagonist's insistence that we are all fated to blindly follow a text that is absolute and unchanging.

Despite the fact that Jacques depends so much on what he believes is written in the sky, it is the spoken word as text, or the conversation between Jacques and the Master that makes up a large part of the text of *Jacques the Fatalist*. The conversational tone with which the narrator engages the reader also adds to the sense of the book as an ongoing conversation. Throughout *Jacques the Fatalist* we hear "multiple cries" in the conversations of the various characters, as Diderot includes "an unusually broad acoustic register" of voices (Starobinski 369). This variety of voices with different opinions and questions resists the parchment in the sky. While Jacques believes everything has already been determined, the conversations within the text resist this sense of finality or doom.

The literary form of *Jacques the Fatalist* is one with the conflict between determinism and free will that runs throughout the book. The “picaresque form” allows the reader to participate in the “playful questioning” (Douthwaite 10). During their discussions, the Master questions Jacques’s deterministic view of the world. He says, “But if we follow the logic of your argument, then no crime we commit can ever be followed by remorse” (7). The Master sees the ways that a fatalistic view of life could excuse human evil. If one were to live with the belief that everything is already pre-determined, then it takes away the responsibility of free will.

Nonetheless, Jacques insists on his view that fate is like a great prophecy written in the sky. This prophetic text cannot be altered. He asks the Master a series of unanswerable questions, such as “Sir, do you know of some way of rubbing out what’s written up there?” (7). In this intimation of prophecy, prophecy is final and unchanging. Jacques even uses his view of prophecy to suggest that it is pointless for him to discuss the Master’s concern that it might allow one to commit terrible crimes without remorse. He says, “You can go on about it as much as you like and your arguments may be perfectly sound, but if it is written in me or up there that I shan’t agree with them, there’s not much I can do about it” (7). Diderot shows that an extreme or religiously enthusiastic view of prophecy not only takes away from the responsibility one takes for his or her actions, but also disables any discussion about those actions or one’s philosophical or religious views.

Jacques describes fate as “a great scroll that unrolls a bit at a time” (7). Everything that happens is a part of this great prophecy. Despite the fact that these events are revealed slowly, “everything was written down at the same time” indicating that this prophecy is final and absolute (7). Regarding the problem of evil, Jacques’ views suggest that terrible events such as natural disasters are also part of this unchanging prophecy. Physically evil events such as

earthquakes were always going to happen, since they were written in the prophecy. There is little point in questioning why evil things happen since all events are part of this unalterable prophecy.

Another feature of Jacques' prophecy is that is unreadable. He says, "since we can't read what's written on high, we never know what we want or what we're doing" (10). We can have little self-awareness about the greater context of our decisions because we are simply acting out what was written in the prophecy.

In Jacques' idea of prophecy, the text of the prophecy itself is far more important than the author. The Master asks Jacques who wrote the prophecy, and he responds that his captain "wouldn't have given a brass farthing" to know who wrote it, and neither would he (11). In this dogmatic focus on prophecy, the deity or prophetic figure behind prophecy is of no consequence. The type of thinking that believes in philosophical optimism is similarly dogmatic.

The narrator of Jacques the Fatalist imitates the power and control of the writer of the prophecy in the sky that Jacques describes. Occasionally, he chimes in to remind the reader that he is in control of the events that unfold in the book. Attempting to enter the reader's mind and predict his or her thoughts, he claims, "You're thinking that this small army is about to set about Jacques and his Master, that there'll be a bloody battle, with much laying on of sticks and many pistols fired. And there would be too, if I so chose. But then you could say farewell to the truth of this narrative and goodbye to the story of Jacques's loves" (12). The narrator reminds the reader that he is in control of the text, even though his protagonist believes he is controlled by a text.

Philosophically, Jacques' fatalism is not far-off from the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope. In either case, terrible events that happen are part of an unchanging will or



prophecy that we must blindly trust. Diderot uses his prophecy written in the sky to satirize this type of optimistic belief. As Whitney Mannies writes, “The point of *Jacques* is not to be found in the text, where all is determined, but rather in the reader’s transformation occasioned by textual engagement, which is skeptical, indeterminate, and creative” (A44). Philosophical optimism and fatalism both assume higher knowledge of events that are impossible to rationalize.

Throughout *Jacques the Fatalist*, the narrator works against Jacques’s deterministic way of viewing the world. The narrator interrupts Jacques’ narrative, much like an interventionist God. By consistently reminding the reader that he has agency in his writing, the narrator resists the idea that everything has already been written in a prophecy in the sky. As Whitney Mannies points out, “the flow of narration is interrupted no less than fifty-one times, often just so the narrator can relish his power to direct the story” (A32). The narrator’s power serves as a foil to Jacques and shows the inadequacy of blind interpretations of prophecy, as well as to blind adherence to fate.

The narrator shows the problems with Jacques’s deterministic philosophy. One of the flaws with his way of seeing the world is that determinism (as well as philosophical optimism) does not provide a good account for human suffering. Jacques frequently gets caught up in “abstract notions” regarding fate, determinism, and free will. One of these is when the Master asks Jacques if he feels sorry “for women in labour” (16). Jacques claims that “when it comes to the specific pain felt by women when they give birth, I’m not sorry at all, since, thank God, I don’t know what it’s like” (16). Jacques’s deterministic way of viewing human life prevents him from feeling sympathy for others who have not experienced the same things he has. If he cannot

pity an individual, his fatalistic views cannot give an account for the suffering and death of many in, for example, an earthquake.

Jacques tells the Master about his brother Jean who travelled to Lisbon. This part of the story is based on chapter twenty from *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shady, Gentleman*. As in *Jacques the Fatalist*, telling this story makes the character telling it very sad. Sterne writes, “I took her at first for the daughter of the peasant (for it was no inn)—so had offered her a little purse with eighteen florins, which my poor brother Tom (here Trim wiped his eyes) had sent me as a token, by a recruit, just before he set out for Libson” (461). Trim concludes, “I never told your honour that piteous story yet” and has to wipe his eyes once again (461). In both works, a character traveling to Lisbon results in a disaster of incredible loss and tragedy. In the case of *Tristram Shandy*, Trim’s brother Tom moves there and suffers a terrible death due to the Inquisition after marrying the widow of a Jewish man. Diderot changes this fate, substituting an event of tremendous human evil for a natural disaster in the earthquake at Lisbon.

As a friar, Jean conducts marriage ceremonies, although it is also insinuated that he may be romantically involved with the women he marries. The Master asks Jacques why his brother Jean went to Lisbon and Jacques responds “My brother went to Lisbon to get away and find peace and quiet. Very clever was my brother Jean, and that was his downfall” (35). Jean dies in the earthquake at Lisbon despite traveling there with the best intentions.

Jacques repeatedly tells the Master about when Jean gave him “five louis” just before traveling to Lisbon. Whenever he speaks about this, he begins to cry, and admits “I still can’t help blubbing” when it comes up in conversation (35). As much as *Jacques the Fatalist* is the story of Jacques’s loves, it is also the story of those he has lost, especially his brother Jean.

The Master asks Jacques again why Friar Jean travelled to Lisbon with his companion Pere Ange. Jacques responds, “To be there for the earthquake which couldn’t happen without them. They went to get crushed, buried, and burned, as was written on high” (39). Jacques’s view provides no underlying reason for his brother’s death. In adhering to the prophecy written in the sky, his fatalism simply insists that all human beings are part of this mechanical, unchanging plan that is ultimately meaningless. Like philosophical optimism, fatalism demands that we submit to some sort of masterplan that we have no knowledge about.

Comparing the fate of Jean from *Jacques the Fatalist* to the fate of Tom from *Tristram Shandy* reveals a similar emphasis on the unexplainable nature of much human suffering. Discussing his brother’s death, Trim exclaims, “poor Tom! to be tortured upon a rack for nothing” emphasizing the senseless violence of the Inquisition (219). Like Jean, Tom also had many admirable qualities. Tom and his friend Dick who also was killed in the Inquisition are described as “the children of honest people, going forth with gallant spirits to seek their fortunes in the world” and who unfortunately “fall into such evils!” (219). In both *Jacques the Fatalist* and *Tristram Shandy* characters “fall into” great suffering and death without just explanation or reason. In this way, Diderot shows that being governed only by cruel fate or blindly trusting in a master plan of divine goodness are both problematic.

Once again, the death and suffering due to the earthquake at Lisbon shows the weaknesses in proposed solutions to the problem of evil. Diderot shows us that trusting in an unknowable master plan, like Leibniz and Pope, is not so different from choosing to be governed by a grim sense of fate. Philosophical optimism, like fatalism, does not offer a sustainable answer to the problem of evil. It denies free will and makes divine benevolence suspect. Jacques returns to telling the story of his loves, and says to the Master, “I’ll never finish the

story, I tell you, it's written on high" (39). Even Jacques's own inability to tell his narrative is simply the result of grim fate.

### DAVID HUME AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

One of the reasons why the problem of evil is such an enduring issue throughout the history of philosophy, and especially eighteenth-century thought, is because human beings do not have a clear answer as to why bad things happen and cannot find sufficient reason for the suffering and misery they experience. As Hume writes in *The Natural History of Religion*, "We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us" (6). Hume compares our lot as human beings to that of actors or audience of a play. We do not know who wrote this play, why we are in it, or how it will end. He utilizes an aesthetic illusion produced by performance whose underpinnings and backstage machinations are hidden from us. In this analogy, Hume even questions the agency of human beings in their actions, as we are merely acting out roles predetermined for us. Our life exists in many ways as a dialogue between characters. We can never truly know the ultimate intentions of the director or playwright in presenting us with either blessings or suffering. Whatever role God has for human suffering is hidden from our viewpoint. Unlike Leibniz, Pope, and Kant, Hume fails to see justification for human suffering. If we are part of some sort of master plan, it is akin to being in a play that has no clear purpose or sense of morality.

David Hume articulates the central tenets of his views on religion and the problem of evil in *The Natural History of Religion*. This was published in 1757, forty-seven years after Leibniz's *Theodicy* was published in 1710 and twenty-three years after Pope's *Essay on Man* in 1734. In the introduction, he points out his two main goals in studying religion: first, to discover religion's "foundation in reason" and second to discover "its origin in human nature" (2). By

researching the foundations and origins of religion, we can better understand, he posits, the nature of questions such as the problem of evil. In order to interrogate the problem of evil, we must first trace the origins of religious belief.

Hume affirms theism as the most plausible explanation for the existence of the world. Nature is rife with evidence of a creator. He writes, “The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion” (2). The idea that God created the world is very logical according to Hume. Hume brings skepticism to the belief that nature has proof of a divine creator in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* through his characters Demea and Philo. However, he also here expresses firm belief in God as evidenced in the natural world.

Differentiating the existence of a creator from the existence of religion itself, Hume seeks to identify and determine the cause of “the first religious principles” to show the foundations of religious belief (2). He points out that human beings had polytheistic systems of belief long before believing in a single God (2). Human beings have a tendency to construct a higher power of some kind. He writes, “the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature” (2). A belief in some sort of creator is one of the most fundamental aspects of human life. Hume sees polytheistic belief as a precursor to monotheism and Christianity.

To Hume, good and evil, blessings and suffering, advantage and disadvantage seem to be handed out at random (6). Good and evil seem to be “distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable” (6).

This relates to the problem of evil due to the age-old question asked in Jeremiah 12:1:

“Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? *wherefore* are all they happy that deal very treacherously?”. Hume sees little correlation between the ways that people suffer and their moral character or actions. Hume acknowledges the problem of evil in a comparable manner as the writers discussed in chapter one such as Hobbes, Leibniz, Pope, and Kant. Dreadful things happen to good people with no clear justification or reasoning, and innocent people experience terrible suffering.

Because there is no known justification for evil and suffering, Hume argues that human beings often associate negative human qualities with God. Hume’s evidence-based approach demands evidence for hypothetical claims. While we attach human emotions and significance to many various aspects of nature, such as finding “human faces in the moon” or seeing “armies in the clouds” we also attribute human qualities to a divine force that is in many ways beyond our comprehension (7). Describing anthropomorphism within religious beliefs Hume writes, “the absurdity is no less, while we cast our eyes upwards; and transferring, as is too usual, human passions and infirmities to the deity” (7). Like Descartes’s view of God as an evil genius *in Meditations on First Philosophy*, it is possible to believe that God shares with us the worst of human corruption and evil (7). Descartes invites his readers to consider the possibility of God as “some deluding evil genius” or if it is instead “sufficient to invoke the darkness of the human mind” (166). In our ignorance of God’s purposes, we assume that he must be like us.

Suffering without redemption leads us to see God as “jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial, and, in short, a wicked and foolish man, in every respect but his superior power and authority” (7). However, this is at least in part the result of our ignorance to the justification for our suffering, if any exists at all. Part of the project of *The Natural History of Religion* is to

cause one to “consider how much of one’s religious practice is motivated by fear and the belief that God is the immediate cause of some events” (Marušić 735). While Hume believes that we do not have a clear justification for suffering and evil in the world, it is also unfair to designate God as the direct cause of evil and suffering.

Hume describes human life as fragmented and partial. Rather than the optimistic worldview of Leibniz and Pope, where all human suffering is part of an ultimate divine plan, Hume sees confusion that cannot be reconciled. Like Byron, who in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* writes “Thou seest not all; but piecemeal thou must break / To separate contemplation” Hume argues that a divine perspective in which all human suffering, evil, and needless destruction have a purpose is impossible for human beings to possess, we therefore see everything in fragmented, partial perspectives (CV, CLVII, page 273). Hume asserts, “it is not possible for us, by our most chimerical wishes, to form the idea of a station or situation altogether desirable” (35). The idea of a perfect community of believers living in unity with God, or Leibniz’s idea of worlds colliding in some sort of cosmic plan of joy goodness, is neither sustainable nor plausible to Hume. He continues, “The draughts of life, according to the poet’s fiction, are always mixed from the vessels on each hand of JUPITER: Or if any cup be presented altogether pure, it is drawn only, as the same poet tells us, from the left-handed vessel” (35). Even when circumstances are at their absolute best in human life, there is always a negative side to them.

Good always seems to be accompanied with evil, and even the most pleasurable and rewarding aspects of life often can involve suffering and pain. Hume writes, “The more exquisite any good is, of which a small specimen is afforded us, the sharper is the evil, allied to it; and few exceptions are found to this uniform law of nature” (35). No matter how good things seem to be at the present, we can always expect more problems to arise in the future. Hume points out that

even “the most ravishing pleasures” are associated “with the most cruel lassitude and disgust” and pursuing our greatest dreams means risking “the severest disappointments” (35). In this way, according to Hume, suffering and misery accompany all aspects of life, cannot be escaped, and do not seem to have any certain or perceptible justification.

Published in 1779, David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* expands on his meditations in *The Natural History of Religion* by providing several different possible answers to the problem of evil. Unlike Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, which focuses on philosophical optimism as the only plausible answer, or Pope’s *Essay on Man*, which utilizes aesthetics to form a similar philosophically optimistic solution, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* provides a conversation between three different philosophical figures. These dialogues tease out many different possible solutions to the problem of evil. Hume’s dialogues, like his view of human experience, are fragmented and piecemeal. His view towards the problem of evil matches the literary form of the *Dialogues*.

Like other philosophers who came up with solutions to the problem of evil such as Hobbes and Leibniz, Hume recognizes that it is a problem which has been going on for centuries. Hume sees theological questions as an integral and worthwhile part of every culture. This is why the subject of “NATURAL RELIGION” is necessary for discussion. He writes, “What truth so obvious, so certain, as the BEING of God, which the most ignorant ages have acknowledged, for which the most refined geniuses have ambitiously striven to produce new proofs and arguments” (8-9). Even what he refers to as “ignorant” cultures have grappled with the nature of God and theological questions concerning his existence, showing that the problem of evil is corollary to the contemplation of God (9).



Hume puts immense value in the study of natural religion. He sees in it “the ground of all our hopes, the surest foundation of morality, the firmest support of society, and the only principle which ought never to be a moment absent from our thoughts and meditations” (9). Asking religious questions and confronting philosophical problems such as the problem of evil can not only help support our emotional needs, but our conclusions can help provide a foundation for our morals and uphold our society.

Hume recognizes how difficult it is to come to final conclusions regarding the nature of God. Issues like the problem of evil have persisted for ages without ever reaching a strong solution. He wonders how human beings are to know God’s nature along with “his attributes, his decrees, his plan of providence” (9). It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern the true nature of God, and because of this “human reason has not reached any certain determination” concerning these qualities (9).

Utilizing the literary form of the dialogue, Hume explores religious issues through a conversational dialectic. Throughout *Dialogues Concerning Natural Reason* Hume records the fictional conversations of his three philosophers—Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea. Each one represents a different philosophical approach to the study of natural religion. This multi-vocal structure achieves for the reader the sense that he or she is listening to a lively discussion regarding the foundations of religion. At times readers may want to interject and offer their own perspectives. By crafting this dialogue, Hume plays the role of a creator and ensures the relationship between cause and effect. He crafts an illusory dialogue to discuss religious explanations to show that philosophical optimism fails to accept the illusory, fragmented nature of human perspective. Stylistically, the opposing viewpoints of Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea work against each other in a dialectic that pits religious orthodoxy against a more open-minded

approach. As in real discussions between multiple parties, they take sides against a character's viewpoint, switching allegiances and reacting to each other's statements. Philo's philosophy is characterized by "careless skepticism," Demea's is representative of "rigid inflexible orthodoxy" and Cleanthes's by "accurate philosophical turn" (10). The three of them discuss a wide variety of issues regarding natural philosophy, each representing a particular way of thinking about God. While Demea and Philo bring a more skeptical approach to the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes believes "that the existence of a designer of the world supports the hypothesis of an infinite benevolent Designer, even though some evil exists in the world" (Tweyman 113). Cleanthes's belief system is analogous to that of Leibniz and Pope in its optimistic approach to the problem of evil.

There has been a long debate about which of the three philosophers, Demea, Philo, and Cleanthes, most accurately represents Hume's own views. Up until the early 1900's it was widely regarded that Cleanthes is in many ways Hume's "chief spokesperson" throughout the text (Manning 590). Cleanthes sees evidence for God's characteristics in nature and has faith "in the power of human reason" (590). However, more recent work concludes that the skeptical reasoning of Philo is most analogous to Hume's own outlook on natural religion. While Cleanthes sees evidence for a God that has an ultimate plan for human suffering and misery, Philo is much more skeptical.

While religiously motivated morals and beliefs regarding the afterlife can motivate acts of great evil, religious people might also argue that without religiously motivated morals and beliefs, nothing is to stop people from committing acts of great evil. Philo, Cleanthes, and Demea approach the problem of evil and discuss the necessity for religion in part ten. Here, Philo points out that the evil actions of human beings are enough to convince anyone of the necessity for religious belief. He explains, "I am indeed persuaded...that the best, and indeed the

only, method of bringing ever one to a due sense of religion, is by just representations of the misery and wickedness of men” (172). According to Philo, without belief in God or an afterlife, there is little to stop people from committing horrible acts of evil. Philo recommends utilizing “eloquence and strong imagery” when impressing upon others the capability for evil that human beings possess (172). Choosing pathos over logos in this case, Philo claims that “reasoning and argument” are less powerful in persuading people of the necessity for religion than the true horror of evil acts (172). His argument supports Pope’s aesthetic approach of poetry over Leibniz’s rational treatise.

The expression of art and poetry can often be a more accurate way of describing the human condition than math or science. Philo goes on to claim that throughout history, sentiment and feeling have proven themselves to be the more powerful tool when describing and discussing human suffering (173). Philo claims, “in all letters, *sacred* and *profane*, the topic of human misery has been insisted on with the most pathetic eloquence that sorrow and melancholy could inspire” (173). One of the advantages of poetry and art is that they can adequately express the pain of human suffering in ways that philosophy, mathematics, or science never can. In this way, Philo questions the capability of any philosophical system to give a genuine answer for the problem of evil, since that system inherently lacks the ability to understand human suffering in its worst forms.

While human beings share many advantages over other creatures, there are aspects of suffering that no living thing is exempt from. Demea responds to Philo with some remarks about the state of the world in general. He asks Philo why human beings should “pretend to an exemption from the lot of all other animals?” (175). Like Alexander Pope in *Essay on Man* Hume brings up the possibility that human beings may be aspiring towards a level of existence

outside what is meant for them by God. According to Demea, it is irrational for human beings to believe they ought to be totally exempt from the suffering that animals experience on Earth. Demea sees this world as dealing out suffering impartially. He explains, “The whole earth, believe me, PHILO, is cursed and polluted” (175). The state of things is in general, very bad, and none are exempt from suffering. He continues, “A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want, stimulate the strong and courageous: Fear, anxiety, terror, agitate the weak and infirm” (175). Nature is in a constant state of conflict and struggle, and suffering is the logical result.

Agreeing to some extent with Demea, Philo points out other aspects of human life that are unpleasant and unjust, and that “embitter the life of every living being” (176). One of these facets of life is the constant competition and struggle that exists between all living things. He points out, “The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation” (176). Rather than living together in peaceful harmony of a spiritual community, Philo sees the current state of the world as utter chaos and suffering. Hume writes, “on each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction” (176). Humans are no exception to this reality.

Demea disagrees with Philo that human beings share this fate but is ultimately unconvincing because Philo points out that human beings cause great evils themselves, which indicates an indirect critique of philosophical optimism. Demea believes that human beings have a much better fate than animals because through community and society, they have the ability to defeat animals who are much stronger than them such as “lions, tygers, and bears” (177). However, Philo contradicts Demea, pointing out that while human beings may work together to

become the masters of the animal kingdom, they create their own “*imaginary* enemies” or “the daemons of his fancy” (177). Despite the fact that human beings might dominate the animal kingdom, they still have to struggle with “superstitious terrors” that ruin “every enjoyment of life” (177).

The “superstitious terrors” that Philo refers to have to do with religion (177). According to Philo’s view, even though human beings may not face the same type of suffering that animals do, they find a way to become oppressed through religious belief. Rather than serving as a comfort to human beings, religion only troubles and torments them more.

For example, Christians cannot always enjoy the pleasures of life because of the threat of sin: “His pleasure, as he imagines, becomes, in their eyes, a crime” (177). Rather than looking forward to death, which one day will provide “refuge” from all the problems and strife that human beings face, religious people find “only the dread of endless and innumerable woes” as some fear going to Hell for their sins (177). Philo emphasizes the ways that religion can inhibit someone from enjoying life. To Philo, even the aspect of life that should promise us hope and salvation frequently serves as another form of oppression.

Through the conversational nature of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Hume ironically leads us to the conclusion that it is our interactions with other human beings that is most dangerous of all. Human beings may dominate the animal kingdom and need not fear other animals—though--they must face a far greater threat. Hume writes, “Man is the greatest enemy of man” (178). He then lists a series of hardships that human beings create for one another: “Oppression, injustice, contempt, contumely, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud” (177). So many of the evils that human beings face are created by themselves and other human beings. In Philo’s view, the problem of evil is exacerbated, if not created entirely, by people.

Demea agrees with Philo that the evils from Philo's list "form a frightful catalogue of woes" (179). But he adds to this list the physical, emotional, and mental pains that human beings live with, and that are the result of "the distempered condition of our mind and body" (179). He includes a passage from Book 11 of *Paradise Lost* that adds to the list of griefs:

Intestine stone and ulcer, colic-pangs,  
Daemoniac frenzy, moping melancholy,  
And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,  
Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence.  
Dire was the tossing, deep the groans: DESPAIR  
Tended the sick, busiest from couch to couch.  
And over them triumphant DEATH his dart  
Shook; but delay'd to strike, tho' oft invoc'd  
With vows, as their chief good and final hope. (Book 11, 484-493)

In this section of *Paradise Lost* the archangel Michael describes to Adam the kinds of physical ailment that Adam, Eve, and their offspring and ancestors will have to face now that they have been expelled from the Garden of Eden: stomach problems, insanity, depression, malnourishment—all these lead people towards despair and ultimately death. The problem of evil then departs the realm of human interaction and becomes one of natural human destiny, encompassing all the pain, suffering, and sickness with which human beings are designed to live. Demea invokes Milton to fully describe the desperate condition of the human state. Just as how earlier in this section, Philo points out that poets and artists are most suited to using emotions to describe or relate human suffering, Demea draws upon a passage from *Paradise Lost* that catalogues and bemoans the human condition.

Philo's, Demea's, and Cleanthes's archive of human misery continues to include "labour and poverty" which are "abhorred by every one" and yet "are the certain lot of the far greater number" (179-180). Demea points out that most people in the world live in poverty and must work extremely hard to earn a living. And yet, as Demea points out, even those who are wealthy or do not have to work "never reach contentment or true felicity" (180). Even those that live without experiencing the difficulties of poverty and arduous labor do not find happiness. Together, Philo and Demea represent a "rejection of Panglossian optimism," (a concept to which I will shortly turn in discussions of Voltaire) and refuse philosophical optimism as a plausible way to view the world (Sessions 148).

At this point in the conversation, Hume has created a view of human life that is totally at odds with philosophical optimism. While Leibniz and Pope believe God has a higher purpose in everything that happens, Hume sees a world filled with inexplicable suffering, a world where even under the greatest conditions a person cannot find true happiness or meaning. He writes, "All the goods of life united would not make a very happy man: but all the ills united would make a wretch indeed; and any one of them almost (and who can be free from every one?) nay often the absence of one good (and who can profess all?) is sufficient to render life ineligible" (180). In this view of life, the ills that human beings face make life intolerable. Hume sees many things as primarily working against the immediate physical comfort of human beings.

Philo, Demea, and Cleanthes are so extensive in their cataloguing of human misery and suffering that they "at times, appear to be trying to outdo one another in their descriptions" (Tweyman 113). They work together in dialogue to provide Hume's bleak view of the human condition. Whereas Leibniz and Pope emphasize the pleasant aspects of life, and have a blithe attitude towards life's struggles, Hume emphasizes the negative aspects of life. Throughout their

discussions, as Tweyman points out, the generally terrible nature of human life and the extensive state of suffering are the only things that Philo, Demea, and Cleanthes “are in general agreement” about in the *Dialogues* (113).

Just as each character from Hume’s *Dialogues* must consider the perspectives of the other characters in the conversation, they also must consider broader, more objective perspectives in order to gain a different viewpoint on the state of life and the problem of evil. Demea brings up a hypothetical scenario, wondering how he would explain the human condition to someone who had never experienced life before. Hume does this in order to provide a panoramic perspective on human life in order to prove that objectively, life involves needless suffering and pain. Demea has no difficulty coming up with the types of things he could show this “stranger” in order to teach him or her about human suffering. Hume writes, “I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, an hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strowed with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence” (180). If he wanted to show someone the true nature of life, these terrible events would be representative of human existence, which is a mixture of man-made and natural evils. For Hume, suffering and misery are the primary characteristics of human life. The world abounds with terrible situations and images that could teach someone about the predominance of suffering.

Philo has a very bleak view of human life and suffering and responds that the unhappiness many human beings experience is also a result of their attitude. This corresponds with the views of Leibniz and Pope, who agree that human beings often hold the wrong perspective concerning their condition. To Philo, complaining about human suffering results “only from their discontented, repining, anxious disposition” (181). While “there is no evading”



the amount of suffering in the world, in Philo's view many people worsen this suffering by having a terrible attitude about it. However, as Philo contends, those that complain about the suffering they experience also lack the courage to end their lives. He asks, "if they were really as unhappy as they pretend, says my antagonist, why do they remain in life? (181). Those that suffer are under a great conundrum. They have found themselves in a state that Philo describes as "Not satisfied with life, afraid of death" and which presents no feasible solution (181).

Hume allows the tension in the dialogue to cause one side to overwhelm the other by creating ironic support for Philo in Cleanthes's attempt to refute his position. Cleanthes briefly claims that he does not share this grim view of life with Demea and Philo. Demea congratulates Cleanthes for his lack of misery, but provides more examples of those who, despite possessing the greatest financial and material resources, are still miserable. He includes amongst his examples Emperor Charles V, who admitted "*that the greatest prosperities which he had ever enjoyed, had been mixed with so many adversities, that he might truly say he had never enjoyed any satisfaction or contentment*" (183-184). Ruling over one of the largest empires in history and living with all the accoutrements of happiness is not enough to bring happiness. According to Demea, even after he handed over the empire to his son, Charles V did not find happiness (184). Demea includes Cicero and Cato amongst those who, despite achieving remarkable success, found life to be miserable.

Hume articulates a desire that persists through misery and suffering. He points out that some people still look for happiness at the end of life and wish that they were younger again. He writes, "And from the dregs of life, hope to receive / What the first sprightly running could not give" (185). Even when all hope for happiness is lost, after a lifetime of struggle and suffering, many people wish that they could be young again, and meet this struggle and suffering once

again. Demea finds irony in the problem of human suffering, noting how strange it is that after suffering so much, one should want to live life over again. Wanting to challenge what he perceives as Cleanthes's foolishness, Demea claims, "such is the greatness of human misery; it reconciles even contradictions" (185). Human misery is so great that in the end, it even fools human beings into wishing for it over again.

Philo disagrees with Cleanthes, who believes that divine qualities such as "justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude" are reflected in human beings (185). He concludes that although God has infinite power, he does not keep the happiness of human beings as a priority (185). Because happiness is so elusive, Philo concludes that God "does not will their happiness" (185). Based on the amount of misery and suffering in the world, happiness is just not a part of God's plan for human beings.

This discussion of the ills that human beings must cope with leads Demea, Philo, and Cleanthes to a discussion of the problem of evil. In response to Cleanthes's remarks about God, Philo makes the counterpoint that neither human beings nor animals really live in happiness. He claims, "the course of Nature tends not to human or animal felicity" (186). Philo (always the skeptic) brings up "Epicurus's old questions" concerning the problem of evil and considers them "yet unanswered" (186). Reciting Epicurus, he asks about God "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (186). Philo brings up these essential questions in regards to the problem of evil.

While Philo emphasizes the suffering and general unhappiness of all creatures, Cleanthes sees "a purpose and intention to Nature" (187). According to Philo, what appears on the surface to be happiness and concern attributed to Nature is actually survival, or "the preservation alone

of individuals, and propagation of the species” (187). What Cleanthes considers the beneficence of nature given from God, Philo sees as mere survival. This has nothing to do with “pleasure or ease” or “joy and contentment” (187).

Philo weighs pleasurable aspects of human life against all the different forms of suffering people face. He admits that there are enjoyable aspects of life such as “music, harmony” and “beauty of all kinds” that don’t seem to have to do with “preservation” or “propagation of the species” (187). Pleasurable aspects of life exist without relation to survival or procreation. However, we also face a variety of sicknesses such as “gouts, gravels, megrims, toothachs, rheumatisms” that cannot be cured and that serve no discernable purpose other than to induce misery (187-188).

Despite the extensive catalogue of evils listed in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Philo still articulates a view similar to philosophical optimism. He claims, “this life but a moment in comparison of eternity” suggesting, like Leibniz and Pope, that the suffering and misery human beings experience are part of a divine plan (190). The conversation switches to a viewpoint resembling philosophical optimism as Hume writes, “The present evil phenomena, therefore, are rectified in other regions, and in some future period of existence” (190). Hume acknowledges philosophical optimism as one way of seeing the world before further critiquing the idea that suffering and misery are justified through God’s ultimate plan of goodness.

Cleanthes disagrees with Philo’s approach of building upon several hypotheses, and calls this “building entirely in the air” (190). He chooses a different tactic to contradict Philo’s and Demea’s bleak view of the human condition, referencing chapter LXIII of *Don Quixote* when a churchman admonishes Don Quixote to stop “wandering about the world building castles in the air” and go home and take care of his children (285). Once again, Hume utilizes literary

reference within the conversation of his characters as a rhetorical strategy to highlight the views of a particular character. To Cleanthes, the views of Philo and Demea are “exaggerated” and “fictitious” as well as “contrary to fact and experience” (191). Not only are they illogical, but they are dangerous and irresponsible. The two of them have overemphasized human suffering and misery to support their views of a God that has no purpose for them. According to Cleanthes, “Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery” and a bleak view of the world hides these truths (191). Like Leibniz and Pope, Cleanthes believes that the good aspects of this life far exceed the bad. Those who have a negative view of life are simply exaggerating the level of misery they experience.

Philo responds that although pleasure might occur more often than suffering, suffering is “infinitely more violent and durable” (191). The only solace is death, which represents the end of human suffering: “nothing terminates our misery but the removal of its cause, or another event, which is the sole cure of all evil, but which from our natural folly, we regard with still greater horror and consternation” (192). However, according to Philo human beings can’t look forward to death either because of fear.

Philo concludes, “I will allow, that pain or misery in man is *compatible* with infinite power and goodness in the Deity” (195). He admits that it is plausible to believe in a God who allows human suffering and misery, but he does not believe that Cleanthes has proved this as a quality. William Lad Sessions summarizes Philo’s final point in part ten. He writes, “Divine power is compatible with misery, but not derivable from it” (148). So while the possibility of divine power exists even in the presence of human suffering, suffering itself does not prove a divine plan for redemption of suffering.

Hume rejects philosophical optimism. He cannot find a suitable cause for suffering, and cannot find in nature proof of a plan for it. Hume sees no evidence for a God who is intimately involved in human affairs and has a plan for human suffering. Through the conversation between Philo, Demea, and Cleanthes, he casts the prophetic figure as the fool. The representation of those who adhere to philosophical optimism is one of foolishness and a refusal to acknowledge some forms of suffering as unexplainable and unnecessary. Through conversation, Cleanthes reveals his optimistic views regarding human suffering and is cast as a fool when compared to the more balanced views of Philo and Demea. For the writers discussed in this chapter, characters who argue for philosophical optimism are presented as fools with specious arguments.

#### THE PROPHETIC SATIRE OF JONATHAN SWIFT

Jonathan Swift's *A Famous Prediction of Merlin* satirizes false prophecies while using the prophetic form. Combining both the satirical and the prophetic, he creates a parody of prophecy that reveals the danger and foolishness of unmitigated prophecy. Despite its brevity, the *Famous Prediction* is a complex and deeply embedded text, full of historical, political, and religious allusions which are effective because they suggest the violence that often erupts due to religious enthusiasm and contributes to the problem of human suffering. Swift's narrator, T.N. Philomath, claims that he found this prophecy "in an old edition of Merlin's Prophecies, imprinted at London by Johan Haukyns, in the year 1530" (195). He claims to have recorded the prophecy "word for word in the old orthography" and informs the reader that he "shall take leave to subjoin a few explanatory notes" (195). The narrator insists on his reliability as both recorder and interpreter. From the beginning of *a Famous Prediction of Merlin*, Swift employs a common tactic in prophecy—to include a sacred or religious text and assign allegorical

interpretations correlating to contemporary events. Swift makes fun of Biblical exegesis by providing farcical interpretations. This ridicule is effective because the interpretive practices his editor T.N. Philomath uses are so similar to that of religious enthusiasts who promote destruction and violence, adding to the larger problem of evil and human suffering. Swift not only discredits the accuracy of prophetic interpretations, but indicts prophetic thinking as dangerous and foolish.

*A Famous Prediction of Merlin* centers around an imagined interaction between two fictional characters—Merlin and the editor, T.N. Philomath. Both characters attempt to read the future. Swift understood that prophecy involves reading the future. The dynamic between Merlin and T.N. Philomath allows Swift to make political commentary on current events such as the Thames freezing twice in one year and the political turmoil experienced by French leaders, as well as satirize the gross stupidity and hubris of assuming to have divine knowledge about future events. The process of reading *A Famous Prediction of Merlin* involves negotiating the predictions made in Merlin’s poem with T.N. Philomath’s “Explanatory Notes” at the bottom of the page, all the while trying to interpret Swift’s greater satirical purposes. The work is deeply embedded in rich historical contexts, alluding to the complex political and religious life of early eighteenth-century England.

Swift uses an antiquated style for Merlin’s prophecy, perhaps imitating the style of earlier prophecies and to fool the reader into thinking it must be of mysterious and sacred origin. The poem consists of ten rhymed couplets of iambic tetrameter. Even though Swift utilizes a style that mocks Old English, the poem does not follow traditional Old English styles of meter or alliterative verse. The twenty lines contain very little alliteration, and lack the caesura in the half-line that characterizes much Old English poetry. By refusing to follow these conventions, Swift brings into question the reliability of his text and narrators. The rest of the text utilizes

modern English, as the antiquated style is reserved specifically for Merlin's prophecy. Swift uses an apocryphal prophet tied to the mythos of the Arthurian court to lend political significance to his faux prophecy. The irony of Swift's prophecy is that even his prophet is fake, making his prophecy completely irrelevant.

Valerie Rumbold explains that Swift's prophecy is "more than a commonplace allusion to the conventions of popular prophecy" and contains "a network of links with particular print products and personalities" and even draws on "the origins of printing in England" (394). The woodcut Swift uses in the text is drawn "from a woodblock twice used in Partridge's astrological politics of the 1690s" (394). By including an image from John Partridge's woodblock, he specifically implicates Partridge as one of the false purveyors of prophecy he satirizes.

Swift's poem begins, "SEVEN and TEN addyd to NINE, / Of France hir Woe thys is the Sygne" indicating the supposed time when these prophecies will take place (lines 1-2). From the beginning, the poem has a dark, foreboding tone, as "Woe" is predicted for France (line 2). In the Explanatory notes below, Swift writes, "This line describes the year when these events shall happen" (196). Swift mocks the immediacy of prophetic figures, who often claim that the end-times are upon us. Acting as both author and interpreter, Swift inhabits multiple roles in "A Famous Prediction of Merlin". In this sense, he mocks the relationship between author and literary critic, since both the "original" poem and his explanatory notes are a farce. Ironically, the prophecy that he claims to have found is said to take place in 1709, which is also the year it was written by Swift. Swift satirizes the prophetic tendency to claim that religious prophecies and texts were referring directly to current times. "A Famous Prediction of Merlin" is in this sense a double parody, as he mocks the both the prophetic text and the interpreter.

Even when T.N. Philomath fails to interpret the poem by Merlin, it is an occasion for Swift to use humor and irony. For example, in lines 12-13 Swift's Merlin claims, "Yonge Symnele shall again miscarrye: / And Norways Pryd again shall marrey" offering another mysterious prophecy. In his "Explanatory Notes" Swift's T.N. Philomath clarifies: "*Yonge Symnele, &c.* by *Symnele* is meant the pretended Prince of Wales; who, if he offers to attempt any thing against England, shall miscarry as he did before." Swift, or Philomath, uses this opportunity to criticize Lambert Simnel, a child who according to the Oxford Companion to Irish History was falsely heralded by Yorkist sympathizers to be Edward V of England.

Swift may be utilizing this reference in order to compare the boy to James Francis Edward Stuart, who attempted to overtake Queen Anne in 1708, just a year before the publication of *A Famous Prediction of Merlin* (Oxford World Encyclopedia). Merlin's prophecy, the explanatory notes, and perhaps Swift himself, compare James Francis Edward Stuart to a little boy who was used as a political pawn in order to insult and mock one who sought to gain the throne of England. As with Philomath's (or Swift's) criticisms of the Dauphin, the poem repeatedly mocks and criticizes political leaders, pretenders and heirs apparent.

At times, it is difficult to discern when Swift is providing serious criticisms, sarcastic mocking, or both in regard to the political leaders and prophetic figures alluded to in *A Famous Prediction of Merlin*. For example, while his predictions of the fate of political leaders seem spurious, his disdain for them seems real. Valerie Rumbold points out this ambiguity was part of Swift's goal, as "his playful nonsense was effectively indistinguishable from the nonsense—as he saw it—fraudulently or credulously peddled in the popular prophetic prints" (409). Swift



shows us that in works motivated by religious enthusiasm, the line between truth and nonsense becomes unintelligible.

The editor T.N. Philomath even offers to send the copy of the book that contains Merlin's prophecy to the publisher of his work "to let any body see it that pleases" because he believes "it is pretty scarce" (198). Rumbold refers to this offer as a "delusory promise" (394). Swift ironically points out that the book is "scarce" because he has created the only copy (198). Here he mocks the confidence of prophetic writers, who claim to be the only ones who have the truth, or to be the only ones who have God's explicit will. He takes the intellectual and spiritual confidence of these writers and creates a kind of textual confidence in his reproduction of Merlin's prophecy, physically embodying the foolishness and hubris of religious enthusiasm.

Swift casts the hubris of apocalyptic prophecy and philosophical optimism as insipid and laughable. The coded language of his prophecy invites easy interpretation, as Swift reveals the farcical nature of his prophecy while we are in the process of reading it by making silly allusions to different people, places, and events. For example, lines nine and ten of the prophecy allude to a fish and some berries: "Then shall the fyshe beweyle his Bosse; / Nor shal grin Berrys make up the losse". In the "Explanatory Notes" for these lines he explains that this "is understood the Dauphin of France, as the Kings eldest sons are called: It is here said, he shall lament the loss of the Duke of Burgundy, called the Bosse, which is an old English word for *Hump-shoulder* or *Crook-back*, as that Duke is known to be" (196). Swift uses the veneer of genuine prophecy to make fun of the Duke of Burgundy's physical appearance and call him names. Through Swift's satire, genuine prophecy becomes humorous name-calling and ridicule.

Swift weaves together mythology and history in *A Famous Prediction of Merlin*, combining different sources to create a prophecy that is nonsensical. Merlin's poem claims,

“Geryon shall have three Hedes agayne” a reference that is called “wonderfully adapt” in the Explanatory Notes, as Swift humorously compliments himself through the disguise of his “editor” T.N. Philomath (197). In *A Famous Prediction*, Swift’s false narrator congratulates his other false narrator. Everything about their interaction is a contrivance, as Swift reveals through satire that religiously enthusiastic prophets and writers of prophecy to be frauds.

*A Tale of a Tub* satirizes biblical interpretation and the differences between various sects of Christianity. The book is named *A Tale of a Tub* “after the mariners’ practice of throwing out a tub to divert Leviathan from their ships” (Korkowski 391). Utilizing diversion as a literary genre, Swift shows the problems with religious enthusiasm in many different forms (391). In a similar manner, *A Tale of a Tub* is also a series of “diversions” (391). The various digressions that make up the tale work to satirize religious, social, and political aspects of mid eighteenth-century life.

As much as interpretation itself is a key topic in the text, *A Tale of a Tub* confounds easy attempts at a sense of true interpretation, linking it to the certitude of Leibniz or Pope. Ashley Marshall calls it “an immensely complicated book,” a point that can hardly be disputed (110). F. R. Leavis mentions the “mental exercise involved in his irony” which combines with Swift’s “habitually critical attitude he maintains towards the world” making for a view of interpretation that, ironically, can be difficult to interpret (82).

Jonathan Swift applies aspects of many different literary forms in *A Tale of a Tub*. By mimicking various genres such as dialogue, treatise, and exegesis, he shows us the ways our interpretive practices are problematic. Swift “exploits” and “exhausts” “the transformative powers of mimesis” through his satire (Mackie 361). He ultimately reveals to us that major

philosophical issues of the eighteenth-century, such as the problem of evil, are worsened, if not entirely the result of, our misinterpretation of texts.

Swift uses the analogy of a father who provides each of his children with a coat, along with strict instructions for how to wear them. Swift writes a multi-frame text. The parable, the editor, and learned notes appended by notices, dedications, and prefaces coalesce to critique religious enthusiasm and interpretation. His narrator describes the father's will as "very precise, and it was the main precept in it, with the greatest penalties annexed, not to add to or diminish from their coats one thread without a positive command in the will" (63). Like the Bible, the father's will is not meant to be altered or abused. The sons have to be very careful to follow their father's will in regard to the coats he has provided them with. The choices of the three sons are analogous to various denominations of Christianity. The changes that Peter makes to the coat are symbolic of the canon of Catholicism, while Jack's simplification of the coat resembles the individual inspiration of the Calvinist. Each sect reads and interprets the Bible in a different way.

The father's rules are simple but direct. The sons should not change their coats to suit contemporary tastes or to further particular motives and desires. However, the sons immediately have difficulties with their father's rules. For example, it is considered unacceptable to not wear shoulder-knots on one's coat. Like religious institutions and writers of prophecy, they find ways to interpret or change their father's rules to their own advantage and convenience. When they can't find anything in their father's rules regarding shoulder-knots, one of the sons declares, "I dare conjecture we may find them inclusive, or *totidem syllabis*" creating new exceptions to the father's rules without any sound logic (64). Swift shows how prophecy can be manipulated to suit one's interests.

These changes to the father's strict rules continue, allowing the sons to make whatever they want out of the coats. When the latest trend becomes to wear gold lace, one of the brothers seems to recall "a fellow say when we were boys that he heard my father's man say that he heard my father say that he would advise his sons to get gold lace on their coats as soon as ever they could procure money to buy it" (66). This rationalization is entirely dubious, as the brothers pretend to remember something their father allegedly said according to someone three times removed from the conversation. But they have learned to interpret the rules in ways that allow them to do whatever they want. Afterwards, the sons "got the largest gold lace in the parish, and walked about as fine as lords" once again interpreting their father's commandment in whatever manner is suitable to them (67). Like religious enthusiasts and writers of prophecy who interpret the Bible in self-serving ways, the sons alter their coats in any way they see fit.

The sons' continual process of alteration is mirrored in the form and style of *A Tale of a Tub* (Lanning 515). Like the coats of Martin, Jack, and Peter, the text of *A Tale of a Tub* continuously changes, switching from digression to tale. In this sense, the literary form of *A Tale of a Tub* matches the argument Swift makes regarding interpretation. Alteration is also a key theme in the digressions, in which "the narrator discusses and performs illogical readings of ancient texts solely through added modern commentary" (Lanning 516). Throughout *Tale of a Tub* Swift critiques the process by which human beings alter texts of various kinds (516).

The sons also have disagreements about their father's instructions as they find that they do not suit the current fashions and styles of their time. Swift satirizes the attempt by religious people to adapt Biblical texts to modern times, showing the arbitrary nature of the application of sacred texts. When the fashion switches to wearing silver coats, they need to find a way to justify wearing silver. They decide that "the same word which in the will is called fringe does

also signify a broom-stick, and doubtless ought to have the same interpretation in this paragraph” using a totally arbitrary linguistic change to justify wearing silver (68). Religious beliefs, especially when fueled by prophecy, can be manipulated to serve the preferences of whoever holds them.

In a manner similar to fancy clothes, to Swift interpretive religious nitpicking is a form of vanity. He discusses how some lords wear ridiculous clothes as fashions change, and one lord who “came just from Paris with fifty yards of gold lace upon his coat, exactly trimmed after the court fashion of that month” (65-66). Human beings will do strange things for the sake of vanity, including wearing completely impractical clothing or insisting on bizarre interpretations of the Bible. In one humorous comment, a man who does not wear a shoulder-knot is accused of having no soul (64). Like clothes in many contexts, people make gross assumptions about others based on their particular theology or subset of Christianity. Swift shows the posturizing and self-aggrandizement of religious enthusiasm.

*A Tale of a Tub* directly impugns prophetic writers who interpret the Book of Revelation, showing the dangers of prophecy and prophetic interpretations as genres that contribute to human suffering and the problem of evil. It also impugns any type of learned commentary that asserts direct access to divine truth. Swift’s narrator writes, “But about this time it fell out that the learned brother aforesaid had read “Aristotelis Dialectica,” and especially that wonderful piece de Interpretatione, which has the faculty of teaching its readers to find out a meaning in everything but itself, like commentators on the Revelations, who proceed prophets without understanding a syllable of the text” (66). For Swift, prophetic pronouncements are arbitrary, and misread the original text. Not only do religious enthusiasts alter texts, manipulating them for their own purposes, but they also misread them. By including so many digressions, Swift mocks

the reader's ability to interpret the text, while also commenting on the tendency of religious readers to do so with Scripture.

Even when certain fashions are explicitly forbidden in their father's will, the brothers still find ways to justify them. For example, a "long antiquated" fashion of embroidering "Indian figures of men, women and children" on one's coat becomes extremely fashionable once again (69). Their father "made several paragraphs on purpose" in his will, "importing his utter detestation" of this practice as well as "bestowing his everlasting curse to his sons whenever they should wear it" (69). Despite the fact that their father's will explicitly forbids them to wear this embroidery, they find a way to justify doing so anyways. They decide that this new embroidery is different enough from the kind that their father despised (69). This is similar to when religious figures claim that Biblical precepts or laws are out of date.

After they depart from Peter, the two brothers begin to notice their differences. While living under the tyranny of Peter, they never considered that they could be so different from one another. Swift points out that before the Protestant Reformation, dissident religious groups suffered together under the Catholic Church, and had fewer opportunities to define themselves against other groups of Protestants. However, instead of seeing one another only as fellow sufferers, "when they came forward into the world, and began to display themselves to each other and to the light, their complexions appeared extremely different, which the present posture of their affairs gave them sudden opportunity to discover" (113). Swift writes, "One of them desired to be called Martin, and the other took the appellation of Jack" identifying the two brothers with Martin Luther and John Calvin (113).

While Swift compares Biblical texts to coats, he compares sermons and lectures to unpleasant vapors that spread and cause destruction. Texts are altered, misread, and manipulated

for one's purposes, but are easier to control because they can be seen. Spoken words, as in sermons, speeches, or lectures, are more difficult to critique. Through the spoken word, religious enthusiasm becomes especially potent, and can be "funneled" to the listener (134).

Swift's narrator critiques the tendency of religious enthusiasts to uphold extreme views. Those who believe that the kingdom of heaven is upon us, and that apocalypse is near, also tend to over-emphasize the reality of damnation upon those who do not believe the same. Swift's narrator writes, "it is with men whose imaginations are lifted up very high after the same rate as with those whose bodies are so, that as they are delighted with the advantage of a nearer contemplation upwards, so they are equally terrified with the dismal prospect of the precipice below" (137). By altering and misinterpreting Biblical texts, religious enthusiasts spread fear and paranoia. However, Swift's narrator is also biased in his interpretations, suggesting that interpretations of religious texts are always fraught with complications and inaccuracies.

Religious enthusiasm was a consistent source of danger in the eighteenth-century, although it was not a new phenomenon. Swift writes, "whoever pleases to look into the fountains of enthusiasm, from whence in all ages have eternally proceeded such fattening streams, will find the spring-head to have been as troubled and muddy as the current" (147). Swift's narrator describes religious enthusiasm as like a filthy stream that corrupts everything it touches. Alterations and misreadings of these texts cause more fear and corruption.

Swift's narrator explores the relationship between what some would consider madness and religious belief. He satirically points out that without enthusiasm, the suffering and violence human beings commit would not exist. Explaining these effects of enthusiasm, he writes, "Of such great emolument is a tincture of this vapour, which the world calls madness, that without its help the world would not only be deprived of those two great blessings, conquests and systems,

but even all mankind would unhappily be reduced to the same belief in things invisible” (147). Enthusiasm is like a powerful vapor that, when inhaled, causes people to pursue “conquests” or war and imperialism, as well as “systems” or oppressive ways of thinking (147). Even just a “tincture” of enthusiasm can have disastrous results (147).

Another dangerous aspect of enthusiasm is that it often spreads, as the leader gains followers and causes others to abdicate their reason for religious fantasies. Religious enthusiasts convince themselves that they have special access to divine truth, in which case no one can prove to them that they are wrong. Explaining the possibility of enthusiasm to spread like a contagion, Swift’s narrator writes, “But when a man’s fancy gets astride on his reason, when imagination is at cuffs with the senses, and common understanding as well as common sense is kicked out of doors, the first proselyte he makes is himself; and when that is once compassed, the difficulty is not so great in bringing over others, a strong delusion always operating from without as vigorously as from within” (148). He points out that once reason is given up entirely, not only is it possible for the religious enthusiast to believe anything, but he or she also finds disciples and fellow believers who have also disregarded practical thinking.

To the religious enthusiast, “cant and vision are to the ear and the eye the same that tickling is to the touch” meaning that religious excess and prophecy have a seductive quality, and only increase in power and intensity once first enjoyed (148). Swift’s narrator defines happiness as “a perpetual possession of being well deceived” (149). Following an “ignorance is bliss” type of attitude, Swift’s narrator shows us that religious enthusiasm enables prophetic writers to believe they have special access to sacred texts, along with the ability to alter and manipulate these texts as they so choose.



Painting the picture of a stereotypical religious prophet, Swift's narrator describes someone who "walks duly in one pace, entreats your penny with due gravity and ceremony, talks much of hard times, and taxes, and the whore of Babylon" (154). This caricature of a religious prophet is one who interprets the Book of Revelation and predicts imminent divine judgment, but who also is looking for money. Swift's narrator paints a picture of the religious prophet as not just a fool, but a con-artist.

Swift marks this caricature of religious enthusiasm with disgust. In *A Tale of a Tub*, the enthusiast is one who is "surly, gloomy, nasty" and "slovenly" and "raking in his own dung and dabbling in his urine" (155). In this interpretation, the religious enthusiast who wholeheartedly believes his or her own fantasies is like someone who eats their own excrement. To Swift's narrator, a religious enthusiast's diet includes "the reversion of his own ordure, which expiring into steams, whirls perpetually about, and at last reinfunds" (155-156). In this comparison, enthusiastic religious beliefs are like excrement which befouls the air and environment, thrown about by disgusting fools.

Swift's narrator's comments on interpretation are also relevant to prophecy and religious enthusiasm. Many eighteenth-century prophets interpreted certain passages from the Bible as predicting events from their time, precipitating current events such as apocalyptic storms and earthquakes. Describing the tendency of readers to find morbid, or dark interpretations in the works they read he explains, "wise philosophers hold all writings to be fruitful in the proportion they are dark, and therefore the true illuminated (that is to say, the darkest of all) have met with such numberless commentators, whose scholiastic midwifery hath delivered them of meanings that the authors themselves perhaps never conceived, and yet may very justly be allowed the lawful parents of them" (163-164). Readers' interpretations often go "far beyond" the intentions

of the author, especially in the case of scripture and are often taken out of context (164). Swift's narrator shows the danger of interpretation, as philosophers and scholars misread and misinterpret texts.

Further satirizing interpretation, Swift's narrator employs some bizarre strategies for finding meaning in *Tale of a Tub*. He satirically challenges the reader to follow these ruses to find alternative interpretations, informing the reader that "whoever will be at the pains to calculate the whole number of each letter in this treatise, and sum up the difference exactly between the several numbers, assigning the true natural cause for every such difference, the discoveries in the product will plentifully reward his labour" (164). By asking the reader to perform such a painstaking, tedious task, Swift's narrator shows the ridiculousness of some overzealous forms of interpretation. He satirizes the need to toil with and find patterns and calculations in texts. By treating a text or a genre of literature like a mathematical equation, interpreters alter the meaning of the text.

Swift's narrator exposes the prophet to be not just a fool, but a swindler as well. He shows us the very human inclination to interact with texts in various ways, frequently altering, misinterpreting, and misreading them. John R. Clark argues that many Swift scholars have found *A Tale of a Tub* to meander between two options for those who seek to interpret texts. We can become either "Fools or Knaves" (779). We are doomed to either become an ignoramus or a liar. Clark compares this to being either credulous or curious in our interpretive approaches (784). In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift's greater point seems to be that *while* each sect of Christianity interprets scriptural texts in ways that best suit the interests of its followers, and each is corrupt, certain forms of religious enthusiasm, especially apocalyptic interpretations of texts, are much more dangerous. Even Jack, the character who represents Calvinism, and who is resolved "to act

the part of a most dutiful son” finds ways to change his coat “into any shape he pleased” manipulating his father’s will (or interpreting the Bible) in whatever way suits him (169).

As satiric parodies of prophetic texts and their interpreters, “A Famous Prediction of Merlin” and *A Tale of a Tub* suggest that the problem of evil and human suffering is not so much the result of God withholding justification but rather the ways that we misinterpret texts, pridefully asserting our own desires and wills on scripture and on interpretations of natural events. The hubris of characters such as Swift’s fictional narrator, T.N. Philomath, as well as Jack, Martin, and Peter, are not so different from the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope. As John R. Clark informs us, *A Tale of a Tub* reveals that any attempt at interpretation of scriptural texts leaves us somewhere between knaves and fools, curious or credulous (784). This skeptical attitude towards interpretation relates not only to prophetic writings and scripture, but to proposed solutions to the problem of evil in the eighteenth-century.

As with the other works discussed here, the literary form of the text is reflective of the argument made by the author. In *A Tale of a Tub* Swift utilizes digressions to show us how quickly our interpretive practices begin to unwind and reveal our selfish or prideful motives. Mocking our tendency to look for suitable interpretations, Swift’s analogy of three sons as stand-ins for various sects of Christianity is continually interrupted by digressions, so that the tale itself nearly becomes one long digression. While other eighteenth-century writers used earthquakes as a gateway to discussing the problem of evil, Swift’s earthquakes are the process by which we falsely interpret scripture, using it for violence and madness.

#### VOLTAIRE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

In a similar attack on dogmatic approaches to the problem of evil such as philosophical optimism, Voltaire explores the problem of evil via natural disaster through his meditations on

the earthquake at Lisbon and the many examples of human suffering catalogued in *Candide* (1759). Voltaire was well acquainted with natural disasters and the philosophical and religious questions that they brought up. Echoing the spirit of the age concerning the problem of evil, Voltaire addressed the earthquake at Lisbon directly, forming a perspective on the relationship between natural disaster and the problem of evil dialectically opposed to the perspective of philosophical optimism. Voltaire describes the terrors of the earthquake, along with the philosophical, religious, and emotional response many had to it in his *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*. He writes,

OH WRETCHED man, earth-fated to be cursed;  
Abyss of plagues, and miseries the worst!  
Horrors on horrors, griefs on griefs must show,  
That man's the victim of unceasing woe,  
And lamentations which inspire my strain,  
Prove that philosophy is false and vain. (lines 1-6)

Voltaire's description of humanity as "earth-fated" is accurate, as thousands of people were literally swallowed up by the earth during the Lisbon earthquake (1). Voltaire takes the irony that all men go from dust to dust and creates faux prophecy, as his metaphor becomes literal. Contemplating this cruel fate, Voltaire ponders the meaninglessness of philosophy itself, which can do nothing to save each of us from a life of suffering and "unceasing woe" as well as an inevitable (and perhaps painful) death (4). In doing so, he mocks fatalism. This critique of philosophy is somewhat surprising, given Voltaire's status and contributions as a philosopher. He is viciously critical of religion and philosophy that presumes to explain away suffering, and questions the usefulness of either because of their restrictions. Although Voltaire's mode was

that of the Enlightened philosophe more so than the religiously-inspired prophet, his poem takes on the prophetic mode in some ways, mirroring in theme the book of Lamentations, a set of poems that mourned the ruination of Jerusalem. Similarly, Voltaire mourns the destruction of Lisbon and invites us to “meditate awhile” on this scene of immense suffering:

Approach in crowds, and meditate awhile  
Yon shattered walls, and view each ruined pile,  
Women and children heaped up mountain high,  
Limbs crushed which under ponderous marble lie;  
Wretches unnumbered in the pangs of death,  
Who mangled, torn, and panting for their breath,  
Buried beneath their sinking roofs expire,  
And end their wretched lives in torments dire. (7-14)

Voltaire mourned the destruction of Lisbon as though he were mourning the destruction of Jerusalem. Voltaire’s poem attempts to recreate the horror of the disaster, as thousands of people were killed. He describes a mound of bodies, many of which belonged to women and children, and wonders what kind of God would allow this to happen, or worse yet, what kind of God would cause this to happen as part of his will. Voltaire focuses on the unfathomable suffering and violence the people who died in the earthquake experienced. Their bodies were “mangled” and “torn” as they tried to escape being crushed by the falling buildings and walls (12).

Voltaire’s humanistic approach focuses on the amount of needless suffering that occurred during the earthquake. He returns to these horrors in order to address the problem of suffering in broader religious and philosophical perspectives.

Voltaire's poem also shows a bleak view of life, as terrible things happen without an explanation from God or any kind of foreseeable hope for those affected by it. Following the earthquake, citizens of Lisbon found not only their city destroyed, but their faith and worldview shattered. As Molesky writes, "Once again in its history, the West found its conceptions of God, Nature, and Providence under a barrage of scrutiny" (19). Europeans were forced to ask, "How could a Creator, both beneficent and all-powerful, have permitted such a catastrophe?" (19). The quest for an answer to this question shaped and influenced eighteenth-century literature, culminating in works in a variety of different genres.

Voltaire's preoccupation with the earthquake at Lisbon is also reflected in the adventures of *Candide*. After surviving a shipwreck, Pangloss and Candide arrive in Lisbon, when a terrible earthquake takes place. As in his *Poem on the Earthquake at Lisbon* Voltaire describes the massive destruction that comes with the earthquake. He writes, "The sea boiled and swirled, smashing every ship anchored in the harbor. Fire blew up in whirlwinds, ashes and cinders covered streets and public places; houses collapsed, roofs flattened down to foundations, and foundations smashed and were scattered" (15). Like the actual earthquake at Lisbon, the disaster that Voltaire describes triggers a tsunami and a great fire. Thirty-thousand people are killed in the earthquake and its aftermath (15).

Pangloss reacts to the earthquake and the vast amount of suffering it caused with his usual optimism. As Candide and Pangloss eat a meal with some of the survivors, he offers his assurance (17). Pangloss says, "Because, if there's a volcano in Lisbon, it couldn't be anywhere else. Because it's impossible that things would not be as they in fact are. Because everything is for the best" (17). Pangloss's comments spark a discussion with "A dark-skinned little man, sitting alongside, who was intimately acquainted with the Inquisition"—someone who endured

great suffering in the name of religion (18). This man claims that if Pangloss really believes all must be for the best, he must not believe in either original sin or freedom of will. But this does not deter Pangloss, as he continues his small-minded, stubborn arguments towards philosophical optimism, the “dark-skinned little man” motions to the waiter for more wine (18). Pangloss is symbolic of Pope’s philosophical optimism as inherited from Leibniz. For Pangloss, Pope, and Leibniz, “natural evil is the unavoidable cost of getting anything to work at all” (Ruse 260). For philosophical optimism, terrible disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon are a necessary aspect of life, and are simply the result of natural laws that we could not live without.

Here Voltaire brings up a problem with Alexander Pope’s philosophical optimism that he brings up again in his 1756 *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*, which explores the philosophical and religious problems that many faced in response to the catastrophic earthquake. In the preface to his poem, Voltaire combats Alexander Pope’s philosophical optimism in his “Essay on Man”. Voltaire could not understand why one would believe in a personal God that always has the best interests of mankind at heart when thousands of people died such as in the Lisbon earthquake. The main maxim that Voltaire criticizes from “Essay on Man” is Pope’s idea that “whatever is, is right”. Voltaire shows that even from a Christian perspective, this statement lacks reason. In Voltaire’s mind, it is inconceivable that such a cataclysmic disaster could be considered “right”. He writes, “If the general order requires that everything should be as it is, human nature has not been corrupted, and consequently could have had no occasion for a Redeemer” (5). Orthodox Christianity holds that human kind needed a savior because of original sin. If Pope’s statement that “whatever is, is right” is true, then human kind would have no need for Christ. Furthermore, given the amount of suffering in the world, Pope’s maxim can only “insult us in our present misery” (6).

Voltaire is interested in the problem of evil as presented through the question of human suffering in the context of apocalyptic natural disasters. Pope's views on the problem of evil were greatly influenced by Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil was his argument of "The Best of All Possible Worlds". He lays out this solution to the problem of evil in *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*. He writes, "God's decree consists solely in the resolution he forms, after having compared all possible worlds, to choose that one which is the best, and bring it into existence together with all that this world contains" (151). As Peter Kivy points out in "Voltaire, Hume, and the Problem of Evil" Voltaire's *Candide* contains overt criticisms of Leibnizian optimism, so much so that Pangloss's dialogue is "well-larded with phrases and terms coined or made famous by Leibniz" and Leibniz is specifically mentioned as a source for Pangloss's speeches (211). Voltaire addresses the theory that this is the best of all possible worlds in his *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*.

In the poem, Voltaire concludes that "Ill could not from a perfect being spring, / Nor from another, since God's sovereign king" (151-152). According to him, Alexander Pope's optimism does not give an appropriate account for evil in the world or for a benevolent God. Pope, on the other hand, cautions those who rely too much on reason, and forget that they cannot know all of God's purposes. He writes,

So man, who here seems principal alone,  
Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown,  
Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal;  
'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole. (57-60)



For Pope, there is an element of mystery to life as well as to suffering. We may not find explanations for the awful things that happen in the world, but we still must trust that God is ultimately in control and has a purpose. Voltaire adamantly disagrees. Eschewing the explanation that the earthquake was God's will, Voltaire asks, "Should not our God to mercy be inclined? / Cannot then God direct all nature's course?" If God really is all-powerful and personally cares about the events of everyday life, why would he allow something like the earthquake at Lisbon to happen? As Michael Ruse explains in *Naturalism, Evil, and God* the Lisbon earthquake "cured the French Enlightenment figure Voltaire of any illusions about the friendly nature of this world" (260). After the earthquake, Voltaire not only roundly rejected Leibnizian optimism as a simplistic, naive way of viewing the world, but he also rejected belief in a personal God.

Despite the fact that he was a Deist, Voltaire expresses longing for a personal God in this poem, perhaps even a God more like the one eighteenth-century prophetic writers believed in. He writes, "But I can feel, my heart oppressed demands / Aid of that God who formed me with His hands" (95-96). Although his religious views eliminate the possibility of an omnipotent force that can directly speak to and inspire its creation, Voltaire at least understood the desire for a God that can provide grace and help in the face of suffering. While Pope and Leibniz saw natural disasters as the result of natural laws that we could not live without, Voltaire "demanded how a God and a Nature that produce such horrors could be good" as Jeffrey Burton Russell points out in *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (135).

While also a proponent of Deism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed in the ultimate beneficence of God much more deeply than Voltaire. Rousseau's letter to Voltaire regarding his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" and Pope's *Essay on Man* articulates a different view of the

earthquake at Lisbon that sparked so much philosophical debate during the eighteenth-century. Rousseau criticized the views expressed in Voltaire's poem, and aligns his views with the philosophical optimism of Alexander Pope instead. In a letter to Voltaire, he wrote "This optimism that you find so cruel consoles me still in those woes that you paint as inconsolable. Pope's poem softens my pains and inclines me to patience; yours sharpens my afflictions, prompts me to grumble, and, depriving me of any shattered hope, reduces me to despair" (37). This excerpt from Rousseau's letter is especially notable because "optimism"—the very philosophy that Rousseau admires, is also the subtitle and target of satire of Voltaire's *Candide*. Rousseau took comfort in a kind of optimism related to the complacent, immoral optimism that Voltaire condemned. Voltaire saw the philosophical optimism of Leibniz and Pope as a smug, complacent outlook that allows tragedy and suffering. Voltaire struggled with the immense suffering in the world, as evident in his *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* and felt compassion for those who suffered and died, and could not understand an outlook that simply explains suffering as a natural part of "the best of all possible worlds".

Rather than lament the needless destruction of natural disasters and question what kind of God would punish his creation in this way, Rousseau claims that human kind's suffering is often the result of human error. He writes, "If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all". Instead of blaming God for the death-toll, Rousseau considers that the plan, layout and housing of Lisbon were created in such a manner that many more people died. Finding fault with the manner in which people live in cities he asks, "Will we say that the order of the world must change to suit our whims, that nature must be subject to our laws, that in order to prevent an earthquake in a certain spot, all we have to do is build a city there?" Rousseau finds in Voltaire's

poem an unwillingness to accept the laws of nature and science. Instead of working around the laws of nature, Rousseau sees Voltaire's attitude about the suffering at Lisbon as thinking that nature should somehow change its own laws to better serve humanity. While human suffering is not entirely the result of man's error, the destruction at Lisbon could perhaps have been prevented if the city had been built in a way to prepare for such a catastrophe.

For some eighteenth-century readers, natural events bore spiritual significance, while for writers such as Voltaire and Hume, skeptical resistance to spiritual views of nature ruled the day. Kivy claims that according to Hume and Voltaire, "the laws of nature, which neither god nor man can thwart" show the inability of God to prevent human suffering (220). The relationship between science and spirituality, as well as disaster and the re-building of community and culture, was in part explored through prophecy.

In the writings of Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers, terrible disasters are no one's fault. For example, in his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" Voltaire addresses the widespread belief that the earthquake at Lisbon happened because the people of Lisbon were guilty of great debauchery and sin. Voltaire directly refutes the claim that the Lisbon earthquake was God's punishment upon the people of Lisbon for their sins. He writes,

Say, when you hear their piteous, half-formed cries,  
Or from their ashes see the smoke arise,  
Say, will you then eternal laws maintain,  
Which God to cruelties like these constrain?  
Whilst you these facts replete with horror view,  
Will you maintain death to their crimes was due?  
And can you then impute a sinful deed

To babes who on their mothers' bosoms bleed? (15-22)

Voltaire suggests that even if some people engaged in sinful behavior in Lisbon, surely the punishment of a disastrous earthquake that killed tens of thousands of people did not fit the crime. By calling the cries of those who suffered and died "piteous" and "half-formed" he shows the utter helplessness that occurs in the face of natural disaster. Evoking the innocent "babes" who died in the earthquake, Voltaire wonders how anyone can view the horrors of this disaster and think that God really intended the destruction as a fair judgment upon the city. If God's punishments are truly just, why would so many babies and children also be killed in the earthquake? He goes on to question why God would choose only Lisbon to be affected by this disaster, when people from many other cities in Europe are also guilty of sin. He writes,

Was then more vice in fallen Lisbon found,

Than Paris, where voluptuous joys abound?

Was less debauchery to London known,

Where opulence luxurious holds her throne? (25-28)

Here Voltaire compares the sins of Lisbon to those of London and Paris, cities that in his mind were more corrupt and debauched. Paris was known especially as a place of "voluptuous joys" and "opulence" or where wealth and the pursuit of pleasure was paramount (26, 28). In his mind, it does not make sense that God would punish only Lisbon, and spare far more sinful places. Surely it isn't fair that Lisbon would be utterly destroyed while "the light sons of France / Protract the feast, or lead the sprightly dance" (27-28). Voltaire refuses to see the earthquake at Lisbon as an act of judgment from God.

Hume, Swift, Diderot, and Voltaire each struggle with the problem of evil in the context of eighteenth-century philosophy. They each admit, on their own terms, the basic human

problem that good people often suffer while evil people succeed. Instead of believing that God has a plan for human suffering, including terrible disasters, they each conclude that we cannot know the reasons why human beings suffer, and that there is no proper justification for terrible disasters. Instead of philosophical optimism, Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire espouse Deism and skepticism as the best way to approach the problem of evil. While Leibniz, Pope, and Kant utilize aspects of the prophetic mode, especially the idea that a natural disaster is part of God's plan in creating a renewed spiritual community, Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire use satire to show the naiveté of philosophical optimism and religious enthusiasm, and that we can expect no divine justification for the presence of suffering and evil in the world.

David Hume traces the origins of religion in *Natural History of Religion*, concluding that while there is strong evidence for a creator, we possess no knowledge of his ways and live in the dark as to why human beings face a great deal of suffering. He expands on this catalogue of suffering in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, as Demea and Philo list all of the ways that human beings constantly suffer and experience misery. Cleanthes, his character that is in many ways a stand-in for orthodox Christian beliefs, and believes that there is proof in nature of God's greater good in the midst of suffering, is roundly defeated through argument by Demea and Philo. He uses a satirical figure to show the problems with philosophical optimism.

Instead of explicitly critiquing prophecy and prophets, in *A Famous Prediction of Merlin and Tale of a Tub* Jonathan Swift mimics and satirizes prophecy in order to show the flaws in form, interpretation, and the psychological disposition that credits prophecies. In *A Famous Prediction of Merlin* he utilizes prophecy as a genre, deliberately creating his own false prophecy to suggest that some prophetic figures are not merely fools, but frauds. Swift taps into traditions of prophetic writing, utilizing woodblock and old English script in order to create an authentic

feel for a farcical prophecy. The complex relationship between the various narrative voices in *A Famous Prediction of Merlin* mocks the relationship between apocalyptic scripture and interpreter, as the narrator named T.N. Philomath fails to interpret the prophecy Swift's Merlin has conjured. Instead of justifying human suffering through prophecy, Swift shows that prophecy and fanatical interpretations of prophecy contribute to human suffering, causing more violence and superstition. Religious enthusiasts read scripture through systematic analysis, predicting and justifying events of violence and destruction.

Swift's *Tale of a Tub* provides a satirical allegory for the story of the development of three primary denominations of Christianity—Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. Along the way, Swift consistently criticizes the process of scriptural interpretation. He shows how leaders of each sect manipulate scripture to suit their own best interests and desires. Swift's narrative voice is also a subject of critique, who should be examined in the same idiom of hubristic interpretive certainty. Comparing these different religious views to fashionable coats, he reveals the vanity and silliness of religious enthusiasts. Extending his critique to education and prophetic beliefs, he equates enthusiasm with madness, comparing it to a vapor that spreads violence and hatred wherever it goes. In this work, prophets are not only fools, but sinister promoters of violence that add to the problem of human suffering through misinterpretation and hubris.

Denis Diderot takes a different route in his approach of the problem of evil. Utilizing a similar style as Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Diderot makes his argument by having characters discuss religious questions with one another. In *The Skeptic's Walk* Aristos and Cleobulus, much like Dante and Virgil, walk together through three separate paths—the alley of flowers, the alley of thorns, and the alley of chestnuts. Cleobulus exposes the piety and

spirituality of the religious (the alley of thorns) as motivated by fear and superstition. Instead, one should choose intellectual and philosophical speculation, or the alley of chestnuts, in order to seek truth. In *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*, Diderot's character Orou exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of Bougainville, the French imperialist who attempted to push Western culture on the people of Tahiti. In this case, Orou castigates and condemns both Bougainville and the culture and religion he represents through verbal argument. For Diderot, the problem of evil is just another bleak manifestation of Christianity and western culture.

Prophecy and philosophical optimism can take many forms. In *Jacques the Fatalist* the main character Jacques believes that a prophecy is written in the sky. This prophecy, which continuously reveals itself, governs all life and action. Everything that happens has already been written in this prophecy. As he tells the story of his life, Jacques fails to believe that anything could have been different. This providential, fatalist thinking is reflective of Puritan ideas of providence and predestination. It is similar to ideas of Puritan election in which the saved are born saved, the damned born damned, and the events of our life reveal our election to us. Denying free will, he frequently mentions his brother Jean, a friar who travelled to Lisbon and died in the earthquake. In Jacques's providential view, his brother's death was determined by grim fate. This prophecy has no beneficent will behind it. The prophecy does not describe the best of all possible worlds as Leibniz and Pope would have it. It describes the only world—one where a grim, purposeless sense of fate governs all. Diderot brings skepticism to Leibnizian optimism, suggesting that blindly trusting that all suffering and evil that occur are part of God's plan for ultimate goodness is blind and dangerous, since the force behind these events may not be good at all.

Drawing from the characters and events described in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman* Diderot makes a crucial change. While the beloved brother who travels to Lisbon in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is killed in the Inquisition, in *Jacques the Fatalist* he is killed in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. This change reveals the magnitude the earthquake at Lisbon had on eighteenth-century thought. Switching from an atrocity brought on by human evil to one of natural disaster, Diderot shows us the danger and futility of blindly following prophetic texts.

Voltaire addresses the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster". Here, he sees religious enthusiasm and philosophical optimism as inappropriate responses to the earthquake that fail to show compassion for the victims of the disaster. Voltaire concludes that there can be no reasonable justification for the suffering and violence that occurred because of the earthquake, rejecting belief in a God that is intimately involved in human affairs. In *Candide*, his character Pangloss serves as a satirical embodiment of philosophical optimism. Tragedy after tragedy, suffering and misery constantly befall Pangloss, and yet he fool heartedly believes that all things happen as part of God's plan for goodness. For Voltaire, as well as for Hume and Diderot, the prophet becomes the fool.

As two groups of writers, Hume, Diderot, Swift and Voltaire provide a stark contrast to the philosophical optimism of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant. What Leibniz, Pope, and Kant might consider cynical complaining, Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire would see consider skepticism and rationality. Where Hume, Diderot and Voltaire see a fool, Leibniz, Pope, and Kant see a prophet. These two groups of writers represent two very important trends in eighteenth-century thought regarding the problem of evil. Yet another response to disaster, especially in the context



of the problem of evil, was explored through the millenarian prophets of the eighteenth-century, often regarded as lunatics, which I will discuss in chapter three.

## CHAPTER 3

### “SCRIPTURAL REVISIONS”: RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM, DISASTER, AND UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PROPHECY

Prophecy participates in the dialectic between destruction of a community and its reconstruction. The questions and problems surrounding the debate concerning religious enthusiasm persisted throughout the eighteenth-century. The millenarian prophet Richard Brothers predicted that a massive earthquake would dismantle London in his 1798 work, *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times*. He writes, “The judgment of God being to destroy the English Parliament, this mighty earthquake will swallow it up at the very time of its sitting; and likewise so much of London, as to leave but three divisions of it standing” (20). Interpreting the Book of Revelation, Brothers believed that the “great city” mentioned in Revelations 19 was London and that the city would be “divided into three parts” after the earthquake (20). He does not indicate what these three divisions are but assures the reader that the landscape will be shattered by this earthquake, so much so that “every island fled away, and the mountains were not found” (20). Brothers believed that a catastrophic natural disaster, the earthquake he predicted, would be sent from God to bring about an age of spiritual renewal and a new Jerusalem.

Apocalyptic destruction is a requirement for the new Jerusalem Brothers envisioned. For the new Jerusalem to be fulfilled, God’s judgment had to manifest in the form of a disaster. The earthquake that Brothers predicted was apocalyptic in nature and would lead to the creation of a new Jerusalem. He writes, “*this designed recorded earthquake* will be felt in all nations under heaven as well as in England, and its dreadful effects by most cities in the world as well as London” (20). It is important that Brothers designates the earthquake as “designed” because this

indicates that he believed the earthquake would be part of God's plan (20). The effects of the earthquake would be felt all over the world, with London as the centerpiece for God's judgment of the Earth. Brothers predicted that the very landscape of Earth itself would never be the same after this earthquake—"the earth will be shook so violently at this time as to make it sink in many places, and let the sea flow in where the land was; mountains will sink to a level with vallies, and many islands will disappear for ever in the sea" (20). In his great equalizing prophecy, the earth is leveled and made even along with the power structures of London. The cost of human life of Brother's apocalyptic disaster will be great: "This earthquake will spread desolation throughout all countries, and destroy great multitudes of people" (20). Yet, this is not just a punishment for the wicked, but a reward and renewal for the righteous. According to Brothers, there will be a reward for this suffering and destruction. Brothers is not alone in this formula but representative of an end of century motif. In regards to disaster, eighteenth-century prophets took philosophical optimism to an extreme, believing that disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon could create a renewed spiritual community.

Brothers appropriated the memory of this disaster and merged it with traditional Biblical imagery in his prophecy of doom for England; yet he does so not as mere warning but as a promise for England. In the mind of the eighteenth-century European, the threat of the earthquake that Richard Brothers predicted was no mere doomsday fantasy but had a clear precedent in European history, the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. The earthquake destroyed most of the churches of Lisbon, crushing thousands of people who went to mass that Sunday, a crucial detail for evangelical protestants who read the disaster as Godly judgment (6). The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fire that "guttled the principal institutions of Lisbon's political, religious, and economic life, laying waste to its opulent churches, palaces, monasteries, convents,

theaters, public markets, and private libraries” (7). For Europeans and dissenting British Protestant visionaries in particular, the earthquake was a forerunner of apocalypse.

Eighteenth-century prophets formed a very different argument concerning the problem of evil than the writers discussed in chapters one or two. In communion with Leibniz and Pope, prophetic writers such as Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott believe that the felt evil of natural disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon are part of God’s ultimate plan for a better world. However, while Leibniz and Pope believe that God is inscrutable and “the proper study of man is man”, these prophets believe that we can directly communicate with God through personal narrative and biblical exegesis to uncover the justification behind terrible events that occur (Pope, Epistle II, line 2) . This gives rise to a complex literary form that combines personal narrative and biblical exegesis as a Rosetta stone for translating God’s heretofore unknowable plan. Rather than seeing natural disasters as events of blameless suffering, such as Voltaire and Hume, Brothers, Gott, and Southcott believe that natural forms of suffering are ultimately man-made--the result of human sin. Furthermore, those who fail to repent and recognize natural disasters as expressions of God’s wrath will inevitably invite further catastrophe to be visited upon the earth.

#### NATURAL DISASTER AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Brothers’s narrative regarding his prayers and conversations with God makes up an important part of his prophecy. While for Voltaire, the loss of life in a natural disaster is senseless and great, Richard Brothers understands such phenomena as part of God’s plan, but importantly, and in distinction to the early eighteenth-century’s philosophical optimism, it is a plan that he understands materially, welcomes, and proselytizes. Brothers does show some concern for the people of London who would be killed by the earthquake he has conjured. For

example, he writes that he “beseeched” God to let him “inform the people of London of their danger, and try by all possible means to save them” (39). According to Brothers, it is only through his repeated appeals to God that London was spared from this disaster (39).

According to Brothers, a divinely inspired event such as his prophesized earthquake is the instrument for this grace. Whether or not he intended to, the fear brought about by his predictions and prophecies gained Brothers many followers. Despite his endorsement of a violent grace of God, Brothers makes it clear that he does not advocate violent acts committed by human beings. Brothers is not an advocate of violent acts, or human evil, as understood by previous writers in this study. He understands via Mathew 5:22 that only God has the right to destroy or harm men: “remember that no man, speaking or writing under the direction of the Spirit of God, can revile another, encourage acts of injustice, or disturb society, by promoting violence in any manner whatsoever” (44-45). Intra-human violence is evil, but the mass violence God visits upon man through nature is, for Brothers, not only justified, it is celebrated as the first step to paradise on Earth.

Brothers is representative of a strand of late eighteenth-century prophets who participated in the philosophical and religious discussions about disaster that unfolded throughout the century; however, their writings are seldom considered a part of this conversation. This chapter will examine apocalyptic strain of prophecy at the end of the eighteenth-century in which Brothers can be understood as reaction to and continuation of the Enlightenment’s inquiry into the relationship between evil, divinity, and human suffering. Enthusiasm, questions of insanity, and scientific rejection are all aspects of eighteenth-century prophets’ approach to the relationship between the problem of evil and natural disaster that should be questioned.

## RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM VS. REASON

A variety of groups of religious dissenters in England, from Quakers and Ranters to Muggletonians and Anabaptists made for new manifestations of religious enthusiasm. John Seed's *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England* explores the complex relationships between religious dissenters and the Anglican Church throughout the century. He writes, "Religious Dissent was both a religious and a political formation... [It is] an effect of dominant discourses about the recent past, crystallised especially in the form of legislation, and, at the same time, as an active self-making and remaking, through history and memory" (7). Seed shows how transgressive, religious thought works to renew and change beliefs. In prophecy we find the "self-making and remaking" of culture, identity, and community (7). Religious enthusiasm opened up the interpretive possibility that a great disaster such as the earthquake at Lisbon could be seen as a symbol of rebirth and result in a renewed spiritual community. Prophetic writers would not consider their beliefs to be the result of an egregious and unsound religious enthusiasm in the way the skeptical Deists of chapter two would, but rather the result of direct revelation from God and scripture.

For the Deists and their Enlightenment peers, natural philosophy contextualized the ongoing conversation concerning religious enthusiasm and disaster. While Leibniz and Pope saw the laws of nature as foundational and unchanging, Brothers saw the manifestations of these same laws as evidence that God was carrying out a plan to create a utopian religious community. Susan Juster describes the delicate balance between science and spirituality that persisted throughout the eighteenth-century. She describes this worldview as "a creative blend of old and new elements—a growing familiarity with the scientific principles that governed the natural world layered over a thriving quasi-magic sensibility" (35). While natural law dictated most

events, divine intervention still had a role to play in the prophetic worldview. This balance between science and reason helps to explain why a writer like Richard Brothers, who predicted natural disasters and aligned these events with spiritual significance, gained such a large readership during this time.

Reason and religion bore a complex relationship throughout the eighteenth-century. Lionel Laborie expands on the relationship between reason and religion in *Enlightening Enthusiasm: Prophecy and Religious Experience in Early Eighteenth-Century England*. He writes, “religion influenced early Enlightenment science to a greater extent than the other way around. Both in fact should be regarded as complementary rather than opposites. The English Enlightenment remained, in other words, intrinsically religious” (2). While questions of reason and religious revelation are often separated in discussions of eighteenth-century thought, the two are intertwined in complex ways. For example, eighteenth-century prophets were often conflicted about the state of their sanity. Not only were they often considered insane by those who read or listened to their prophecies, but they sometimes wondered if they were insane themselves. While apocalyptic prophets rejected Newton’s mechanical universe, they did not abandon reason as an evaluative tool. Their self-assuredness and faith in their prophetic powers were also conjoined with ambivalence and self-doubt. They appropriate the tools of reason for their own ends as a strain of enthusiastic empiricism.

The role of reason in religious revelation—whether it stood to reason that God was actually speaking to these prophetic writers, providing them with visions, and dictating to them prophecies concerning the future--caused eighteenth-century prophets to question their sanity through self-reflection. Lionel Laborie helps to clarify the ambiguous place that religious enthusiasm inhabited in the minds of eighteenth-century writers and thinkers. He writes,

“enthusiasm ought to be dissociated from religious dissent and more generally from ‘superstitious’ or irrational popular religion. Refusing to acknowledge this reality, the Enlightenment understanding of enthusiasm was that of a multifarious concept, halfway between a religious fanaticism, a social plague, and a bodily madness” (Laborie 10). Eighteenth-century prophets often shared this view, and were self-aware about the possibility that they might be insane.

In *Doomsayers*, Susan Juster discusses the ways that eighteenth-century prophets showed concern about their sanity. She writes, “prophets routinely included ritualized disclaimers about their mental status in their published pronouncements” (39). Juster explains that the link between “religious enthusiasm and mental debility” was “commonplace” during this time and points to a passage in Dorothy Gott’s *The Midnight Cry* in which Gott admits to understanding the perception of insanity in her visions: “if any body had told me what God has shewn me, I very likely might have thought them mad, or deluded” (39). She expresses the rhetorical function of these disclaimers as a formal feature.

Gott expresses anxieties of being misunderstood or her visions mistaken for madness in other points during *The Midnight Cry* as well. For example, she writes, “I was enabled to overcome the tempter, and so far favoured as not to be exposed to man, who would naturally conclude and say I was out of my mind, for my mouth was then shut” (47). Gott expresses her concern that it might be better to not speak to others about her visions, especially considering the abusive way her husband and siblings treat her. She associates enthusiasm with madness in a letter to John Murray from 1787. She goes on to admit that if her prophecies fail to come true, she must be insane. She writes, “I am sensible it is a great work to declare, and if it do not come



to pass, I know I must be deemed mad, or deluded by an evil spirit” (85). Her reputation as a prophet is dependent on whether or not her prophecies come to pass.

## THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM IN ENGLAND

To better understand how the discourse of religious enthusiasm influenced and affected the prophecies of writers such as Richard Brothers, it is important to understand the complex history of this debate in England. Religious enthusiasm infiltrated the minds of eighteenth-century writers and thinkers in opposing ways. While some writers such as John Locke and Samuel Johnson considered enthusiasm to be a dangerous, irrational indulgence, other writers such as Mary Astell and John Dryden articulated the view that religious enthusiasm could be a vital part of experiencing personal revelation or accessing the most creative aspects of the imagination. <sup>1</sup>In *The Historical Backgrounds of Early Methodist Enthusiasm*, Umphrey Lee discusses religious enthusiasm in England relative to John Wesley and the Methodists. According to Lee, Methodists that possessed enthusiasm often claimed “to be inspired directly by God himself” something that each of the eighteenth-century prophets discussed here shared (11). Part of why many of their works were met with outrage or ridicule is because each writer claimed to have direct access to God himself and (according to them) their words and message were essentially straight from God.

Lee traces the roots of enthusiasm back to Cicero’s *De Divinatione* and the cult of Dionysos, each of whom related religious inspiration to a form of divination in which the believer became one with a god through different means (13). This connection with a god was often accompanied with physical effects such as “frenzies” as the believer lost control of his or her body (13). To explain this connection with dissenting religious groups of eighteenth-century

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. See Dryden, Astell

England, Lee describes John Calvin and Martin Luther's views on religious enthusiasm. He writes, "Both Luther and Calvin, therefore, opposed the claims of the enthusiasts with the supremacy of the Word. Luther insisted that the Spirit follows the Word and the sacraments; and Calvin held that the Spirit accompanies the Word testifying to its truth and enforcing it upon the heart of the believer" (36). Thus, enthusiastic experience and enthusiastic prophecy were a departure from orthodox Protestantism (37). It was also a departure from orthodox political subordination.

Laborie describes religious enthusiasm as "fundamentally transgressive" especially because of the diverse ways it can "challenge any form of authority" (3). Works of eighteenth-century prophecy certainly share this trait. For example, Sarah Flaxmer's *Satan Revealed: Or The Dragon Overcome* describes a vision in which King George III dies an untimely death because he failed to listen to her prophetic messages (Flaxmer 5). Enthusiasm was a contentious topic throughout the long eighteenth-century, and, as Umphrey Lee claims, from the meeting of the Westminster Assembly up to the eighteenth-century "controversy over the question (of enthusiasm) never ceased" (38).

Helen Boyles discusses the origins of the debate about religious enthusiasm in England in *Romanticism and Methodism* and traces it back to the English Civil War. Boyles points out that enthusiasm was "identified with civil and religious disobedience" from the beginning (2). However, many writers and thinkers from this time also respected strong emotional convictions. Boyle looks to Samuel Johnson's multifaceted definitions of enthusiasm from his 1755 dictionary to show some of the conflicting perspectives around religious enthusiasm. Johnson first defined enthusiasm as "vain belief in private revelation, a vain confidence in divine favour or communication" (3). As Boyle notes, Johnson included a quote from John Locke to support

his definition, clarifying a usage that denotes the effects of “the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain” (3).

Like Locke, Johnson saw religious enthusiasm as an error of over-confidence and egomania. Johnson’s second definition that Boyle focuses on is slightly different: “Heat of imagination; violence of passion; confidence of opinion” (4). This definition focuses on over-confidence as the result of an imbalance between emotion and reason. As Boyles points out, David Hume also believed that religious enthusiasm was the result of “presumptuous pride and self-confidence” (3). It is hard to ignore the extraordinary level of confidence expressed in the writings of these end of century prophets. Richard Brothers believed he could command God’s army of angels. Sarah Flaxmer also proudly commanded imaginary armies in her visions. But these writers also often warn against the dangers of being prideful or exercising what Dorothy Gott repeatedly refers to as “self-will” in *The Midnight Cry* (16).

The confident belief in direct revelation was met with condemnation from a variety of eighteenth-century writers. Addison, for example, describes enthusiasm, or “Devotion, when it does not lie under the check of Reason” leads to “imaginary Raptures and Exstasies” (3)<sup>2</sup>. Addison and his contemporaries would have probably viewed the writings of Dorothy Gott, Joanna Southcott, and Richard Brothers as prime examples of the results of religious enthusiasm.

Many of the prophetic writers were dismissed during their time in part because of sexist assumptions regarding women and prophecy. Boyles points out that a misogynistic current runs through much of the eighteenth-century discussion on religious enthusiasm. She writes, “his choice of pronoun reflects a perception of physical and mental abandonment as essential female, the reverse of masculine sense and stability” suggesting that Addison’s statements about

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<sup>2</sup> Addison, Joseph. *The Spectator*. Ed. Donald Bond. Volume 5. Oxford: University Press, 1965 (201). Cited in Geoffrey Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 177.

enthusiasm reveal some underlying sexist notions about women (4). In fact, the entire discourse of religious enthusiasm often reveals a sexist and misogynistic ideology. In many ways, this misogyny prevents readers from discerning the complex role that many female writers played in the dialectic between enthusiasm and disaster.

Of the different writers who discussed religious enthusiasm, John Dryden was perhaps the most sympathetic. Boyles guides us to Dryden's *The Author's Apology For Heroic Poetry, and Poetic License*. In the preface, Dryden claims that enthusiasm, or "extraordinary emotion of the Soul" allows us to "behold those things which the poet paints" (186). For Dryden, enthusiasm is vital to fully experience poetry. Boyles claims that Dryden's view "anticipates the Romantic spiritualizing of the imagination" and appreciates the way enthusiasm can precipitate "visionary revelation" (6). Boyles compares these reflections on enthusiasm to Johnson's third definition of enthusiasm from his 1755 dictionary: "Elevation of fancy; exaltation of ideas" (5). This definition hints at the affirmation of poetic or creative imagination that Dryden sees in enthusiasm, and bears a less condemning tone.

The fact that Samuel Johnson provided three different definitions for enthusiasm shows the feeling of ambivalence that ran through discussions about it throughout the eighteenth-century. While many writers knew that religious enthusiasm could be dangerous and irrational, they also knew that it might have something to do with imaginative and creative power. The Earl of Shaftesbury differentiated between "inspiration" and "enthusiasm" in *Reflections upon "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm"* adding further condemnation to prophetic works in the strain of those written by Brothers and Gott (Boyle 7). He considered inspiration to be authentic, while enthusiasm was an illusion. Mary Astell responded to Shaftesbury's work in *Bart'lemy Fair: or, an Enquiry after Wit* (Heyd 229). As Michael Heyd writes in *Be Sober and Reasonable: The*

*Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* writes, Mary Astell “defended traditional Anglican doctrine against the Roman Catholics, against Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity*, as well as against Tillotson’s views on eternal punishment in Hell” (229).

Astell defends enthusiasm from the criticisms brought upon it by Shaftesbury. She writes, “AGAIN, there is a *Noble Enthusiasm*, which is the *Spirit* the Philosopher *allots to Heroes, Statesmen, Poets, Orators, Musicians, and even Philosophers themselves*; nor can we forbear *ascribing it to whatever is greatly perform’d in any of these ways*” (172). Astell claims that the same enthusiasm that Shaftesbury so deeply criticized is shared by talented people of all different backgrounds and professions, and is usually admired. She accuses Shaftesbury of making “odious Comparisons” (174). Employing the senses of the word that Johnson would mark as “heat of imagination” against Shaftesbury, she claims that her opponent’s “Judgment and Reason” have been destroyed “through the Distemper of an *Inflam’d Imagination*,” ironically suggesting that his condemnation of enthusiasm was the product of the very state he described (175).

John D. Morillo writes, “Her rhetoric demonstrates how a rational critique of enthusiasm carried too far becomes an attack on the gospels as the oracle of truth and therefore on the very principle of Christianity as revealed religion” (25). While writers such as Mary Astell and John Dryden explored the theological and epistemological justifications for religious enthusiasm, eighteenth-century prophets such as Dorothy Gott, Joanna Southcott, and Richard Brothers carried out these justifications through the prophetic mode.

Enthusiasm was not merely a British affair and was equally present and controversial across the channel. According to Laborie, French prophets “sparked a new, heated debate on the

nature of enthusiasm and the limits of toleration” (5). Laborie emphasizes the physical nature of French prophecy, as these writers experienced convulsions, spoke in tongues, and even foamed at the mouth (5). While prophets later in the eighteenth-century also had a physical aspect to their prophecies, their predictions and declarations were mainly physical in the sense that they would transform the world around them in destructive ways, such as through earthquakes, storms, and other disasters.

Writers such as Richard Brothers and Dorothy Gott supported religious enthusiasm for the very reasons that John Locke condemned it: it is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and capable of inciting mass panic. But for eighteenth-century prophets, this was a necessary force in order to transform society. Working from the tradition begun earlier in the century by the French prophets, English millenarians carried the ongoing dialogue about religious enthusiasm into the nineteenth-century. Through religious enthusiasm, prophets kept open the possibility for redemption in the wake of seemingly hopeless suffering.

#### RICHARD BROTHERS AND THE DEBATE OF RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM

The ambivalence and complexity of the debate concerning religious enthusiasm helped to shape Richard Brothers as a problematic and disconcerting figure. On one hand, Brothers’ writings were very appealing to those who longed for a different, more hopeful world, and the disasters he predicted came with the promise of change. Brothers promised a world like the one depicted in Revelations, where the palpable power of God would be apparent. The Book of Revelation promises a world where God lives with his people in an intimate, omnipresent manner--“God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelations 21:4). Correspondingly, Brothers promised a world free of the hypocrisy

and social inequity that many Londoners experienced. To disseminate this message to its fullest possible audience, he wrote with “simple language, the product of much poring over Scripture” which lent his work a quotidian style that many found relatable (Wordsworth Circle 242). For example, he describes some of his revelations as occurring in the most ordinary experiences that carry symbolic power, such as walking by a “very tall oak tree” that is “entirely withered” (Brothers 62). He merges the personal and the quotidian with divine prophecy into a high-low literary form uncovering God’s greater will in everyday experience.

Brothers’s writing represents both the hope, longing and creativity that religious enthusiasm could inspire, along with the fear, unrest, and rebellion it could produce. Brothers is known primarily for writing false predictions about the end of the world, being arrested for treason, and spending years in an asylum for the criminally insane. But re-readings of his collection of scriptural exegesis and prophecies reveal an intimate knowledge of Old Testament texts, a strong faith in a God who was immediately available, and self-fashioning through reading himself into Scripture. In *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* Richard Brothers predicts that a massive earthquake will destroy London. The particular target of this earthquake is Parliament. As Deborah Madden explains in “The religious politics of prophecy: Or, Richard Brothers’s *Revealed Knowledge* confuted”, Brothers was “pre-occupied with how corrupt institutions were created and made possible in the first place” and looked towards the “destruction of an established, but corrupt, order” (272). Brothers quotes Revelations 16: 16 which reads, “And he (meaning the king) gathered them together in a place, called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon”. According to Brothers, Armageddon refers to the English Parliament, which must be destroyed. He writes, “the allotted time is expired for the Lord God will pronounce from the Throne of heaven, in a voice of very loud thunder, the judgment of its utter

destruction on a sudden” (20). Brothers’ religious enthusiasm leads him to believe in an inevitable and disastrous earthquake that will wipe out the political system of England. His view of this prophesized earthquake differs very much from Voltaire’s views on the earthquake at Lisbon. Instead of a disaster that has no discernible purpose, and only brings about useless suffering, pain, and death, Brothers views disaster as part of God’s plan.

Often, prophets are determined to be true based on whether their predictions come to life. In this case, or at least in his mind, Brothers proved his validity as a prophet by preventing the very prophecies he made from happening. Brothers predicted that a massive earthquake would hit London in 1793(241). This earthquake would take place before the dawn of a new age and the return of Christ. However, Brothers claimed that he saved the city from destruction by interceding and stopping the earthquake (241). Brothers spoke to God on behalf of the people of London, and so the earthquake never happened. Brothers made other predictions such as “famine and distress for 1793” “the violent deaths of the kings of France and Sweden” the “defeat of the French and Prussian armies” as well as “the English conquest of Jersey and Guernsey” (241).

Brothers includes grim visions with his interpretations of Scripture, what Zall in one case describes as “a hodge-podge of Scriptural texts, autobiographical notes, and descriptive sketches of his own visions of Satan strolling down Tottenham Court Road with a sly, crafty smile while armed mobs choked the streets, fleeing before a river of blood” (242). In another grim moment, he predicts the destruction of Russia, which “will be convulsed in many parts by its generals and governors, each rising up in his place, and claiming an authority to command the other; they will fight until great multitudes are destroyed, and the country made desolate” (14). According to Zall, *A Revealed Knowledge* became a popular book because of Brothers’ tone and language.



Even if his prophecies may seem a bit fantastical or delusional to contemporary readers, the voice with which he writes would have been relatable to eighteenth-century readers who were also susceptible to religious enthusiasm (242). Furthermore, the style likely increased his popularity, as “the visions may have been from God, but the voice was a real man’s speaking to the condition of man in the 1790’s” and this would make it popular because of the relatable diction and tone (242).

Richard Brothers as well as the female prophet Dorothy Gott represent a dialectical repudiation of both Voltairean deism and Leibnizian optimism with millenarianism. Brother’s religious enthusiasm represents the antithesis of Voltaire’s enlightened Deism. Written near the turn of the century, prophecies such as those written by Dorothy Gott and Richard Brothers represented a rejection of the very Deism the Enlightenment produced. While Voltaire viewed the earthquake at Lisbon as evidence that God was not intimately involved in human affairs, Brothers believed that a similar earthquake in London would prove to all that God had directly inspired his prophecies. Brothers believes that the same God who will bring about the earthquake speaks to him directly about it and leads him in his interpretations of the Book of Revelations. He explains that after receiving the revelation that a great earthquake would destroy London, he wrote “by command of the Lord God” to the French ambassador in London in order to acquaint “him with the future loss of the French islands, and likewise the fall of the English” (21). Brothers believed that the earthquake he predicted would completely wipe out these islands along with London and wanted to warn the French of the oncoming disaster. His religious enthusiasm was so great that he felt the need to contact political leaders about his predictions, incorporating his personal communications into the form of prophecy.

## THE ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT AND ANTI-ELITIST CULTURE OF DOROTHY GOTT

While Richard Brothers predicted a literal earthquake would rock London, Dorothy Gott appropriated this imagery as a spiritual metaphor. Gott presents the possibility of spiritual renewal apart from physical destruction and violence, which culminates in visions of a unified spiritual community. For Dorothy Gott, the solution to the problem of evil lies in eliminating our self-interests or “self-love” and coming together as a community to adore God (16). While Brothers focuses on political aspects of eighteenth-century London that require change, Gott recommends looking within and repenting. A widow and prophetess, Gott experienced visions and heard the voice of God speak to her often. She describes many of these visions and voices in her work *The Midnight Cry*. Gott could not write, and had a friend write down her visions for her. She claims, “Oh I feel a rod, as an earthquake, for many teachers, or forward spirits, who have not laboured to have their own vineyards cleansed, but look at others” (37). Gott’s “earthquake” is God’s spiritual judgment of men and women who have been hypocrites. Her earthquake is also the result of the pursuit of “self-will” and unrepentance (24). She asks her readers to look within and repent.

Dorothy Gott uses the language of earthquake as a way of figuratively depicting god’s judgment on the wicked. While Brothers hoped the earthquake he predicted would destroy Parliament, Dorothy Gott had a different power structure in mind—the Freemasons. Gott criticized the Freemasons for excluding women from their society as well as for failing to provide for the poor. She writes, “you think the women are not worthy of knowing your secrets, which are built on a sandy foundation, and are that house which will fall, when the floods beat” (34). Here Gott criticizes the Freemasons for being sexist and excluding women from their society, but she also predicts that disaster will befall them because, as she writes, “the free-

masons secret, or their wages, is the devil's penny" (34). She accuses the freemasons of focusing on building a house that looks beautiful from the outside, but is corrupt on the inside and will surely crumble. Dorothy Gott writes, "Oh I feel a great earthquake against this building" predicting God's severe judgment upon the Freemasons (34). A disaster such as the one Gott prophecies would bring about judgment for powerful groups of people that oppress others. For eighteenth-century prophets like Dorothy Gott and Richard Brothers, personal narrative and social commentary propelled belief in oncoming disasters that could dismantle the oppressive power structures of London. They welcomed such a disaster as a manifestation not of evil, but of God's liberation and redemption. Even if people would suffer and die in the wake of such a disaster, it was a necessary part of the production of a new community of believers. Instead of viewing disasters as unexplainable tragedies, eighteenth-century prophets saw them as productive manifestations of God's will, which also extended to societal institutions.

Eighteenth-century prophets tend to criticize societal institutions such as universities, churches, prisons, as well as elite groups such as the Avignon Society and the Freemasons. In this way, prophecy is often a platform for social critique. For example, Dorothy Gott reprimands educated gentlemen, or "ye scholars who pride yourselves in your classical education" for looking down on devout worshippers of God such as the Quakers (24). Gott sees education as secondary to spiritual development and accuses the educated of being "self-willed" (24). She criticizes those who "make game of those who were baptized with Christ's baptism" and accuses them of having "stony self-willed hearts" (24). Even though Gott claims she "was no scholar, and scarce ever got time to read" she displays an intimate knowledge of the Bible in *The Midnight Cry*, referencing many different Biblical stories and passages that inspire and comfort her (8).

Later in *The Midnight Cry* Gott criticizes those who have been affected by “the prejudice of education” (67). She claims that those who are educated risk learning “bad habits, swearing, and company, perhaps drink more than does them good” (67). Gott sees education as having the potential to turn people away from God and from a good spiritual path. She writes, “Poor souls! how my heart pities those who work in darkness; they get their bread with sorrow of heart” showing her concern for the spiritual state of the educated (67). For Gott, education is often at odds with spiritual growth and insight. Later in *The Midnight Cry* she discusses an educated man who failed to be inspired by her prophetic visions. She writes, “And this man shews how far the outward learning, or classical education, can reach, being taught in the letter, not waiting for the Spirit to quicken, the letter without the Spirit being dead” (74). For Gott, education was often contradictory towards spiritual development, and she instead emphasizes experiencing visions and personal narrative through the form of prophecy.

Gott predicts that an earthquake or act of judgment from God will happen to hypocrites. She writes, “Oh! I feel a rod, as an earthquake, for many teachers, or forward spirits, who have not laboured to have their own vineyards cleaned, but look at others; for God judges the heart, men judge the outside; and I with sorrow of heart say, God has shewn me there are many whitened sepulchers” (37). Gott’s choice of comparison between a “rod” and an earthquake is worthy of further exploration. In the Bible, “rod” or “the rod” is referred to in many different books and contexts. For example, Zechariah 11:10 reads “And I took my staff, *even* Beauty, and cut it asunder, that I might break my covenant which I had made with all the people”. The prophet Zechariah breaks his rod, symbolizing a broken covenant between a prophet and his people. Just as Zechariah’s rod breaks this covenant, the earthquake Dorothy Gott feels breaks the earth and condemns the hypocrites and “whitened sepulchers” she sees to judgment (37).

“The rod” is also referred to in Proverbs 23:13, in the context of punishing children for disobedience—“Withhold not correction from the child: for *if* thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die”. The rod is a symbol for punishment here as well. For Dorothy Gott, the “teachers” and “forward spirits” that Dorothy Gott criticizes need to be punished as God’s disobedient children (37). Only through a disaster such as the earthquake Gott describes can they hope to be redeemed from their hypocritical ways. Gott’s earthquake is symbolic of God’s staff or rod disciplining eighteenth-century England.

Gott’s views on the destruction of hypocrites is reminiscent of Tertullian’s views on the judgment of sinners. Tertullian imagines witnessing the torture of the unredeemed in Hell and finds boundless joy in their suffering. He writes, How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates, who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red hot flames, with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal, not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians, more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers!” (Gibbon, 27). Dorothy Gott brings a similar tone of vengefully celebrating the judgment and suffering of others in *The Midnight Cry*.

For Dorothy Gott, disaster is a necessary act from God that punishes those who judge other people but fail to look at themselves. While writers such as Voltaire and Rousseau explained disasters from a scientific perspective, Dorothy Gott explained it from a punitively spiritual one. The many cultural and social critiques that lay within works of eighteenth-century prophecy also participate in this dialectic between disaster and the rebuilding of a community. In

Gott's vision, hypocrites, elitists, and those who use their education or power to oppress others will be destroyed, and those who have humbly served God will be rewarded.

#### JOANNA SOUTHCOTT—HARBINGER OF GOD'S WRATH

While Dorothy Gott predicted that God would bring about an earthquake that would punish hypocrites, Joanna Southcott prophesied that she herself would be the instrument of God's judgment and would "destroy and devour" those who failed to believe in her as the Lord's prophet (23). Joanna Southcott was an eighteenth-century prophetic figure who believed she was pregnant with the new messiah. Southcott wrote many of her prophecies in rhymed verse, gaining followers and contributing to her intellectual climate even if her poetry goes unmentioned in the history of eighteenth-century poetry. Southcott had a formidable influence as a religious figure, as "her followers numbered in the tens of thousands" (Juster 1562). Tried for heresy in 1804, the transcript of her trial explains that many of her followers believed she was "more than human" and capable of divine power (152). William Sharp's engraving of Joanna Southcott portrays the intimate relationship between prophet and text, as she holds open the Bible. This rendering of Southcott shows her as the prophet ordained to interpret scripture in ways more powerful than any minister or priest could.

Juster calls Joanna Southcott "the matriarch of British millenarianism" (3). This title is especially fitting because of the anti-monarchical nature of Southcott's visions. Joanna Southcott also predicted an earthquake. The manuscript from her trial includes her "Letter to the Nation" which appeared in a newspaper in London in 1813. In this letter, she explains her prophecies concerning the apocalypse which she had been writing for the last twelve years (22). She writes, "They shall be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder and with earthquake, and great noise, with storms and tempests, and the flame of devouring fire" (22). Here Southcott quotes Isaiah

29:6. Her message to England is directly inspired by Isaiah's warning to Jerusalem. This is the threat of disaster that will happen if the people of England fail to repent or "obey the call" (23). Like her eighteenth-century prophetic contemporaries Richard Brothers and Dorothy Gott, Southcott knew the spiritual power that could come with the threat of an earthquake. But in Southcott's prophecies, she is depicted as the agent of God's wrath, carrying out acts of violence on London. Southcott claims that she will participate in the violence and destruction she warns of.

Southcott claims that she will participate in this apocalyptic disaster if nobody listens to her prophecies. She writes, "I have long time holden my peace; I have been still, and refrained myself; now will I cry like a travailing woman: I will destroy and devour at once" (23). Here Southcott echoes a quote from chapter eleven of the Bhagavad-Gita. In this chapter, Krishna says "I am Time, the mighty cause of world destruction, / Who has come forth to annihilate the worlds" (484). Southcott takes on a similar divinely destructive persona in her prophecies. In Southcott's religious enthusiasm, not only has a great disaster been ordained by God, but she will "destroy and devour" along with the earthquake, storm, and fire she predicts (23).

Southcott is a self-perceived destroyer. Taking on God's power, she promises to bring great violence upon unbelievers. Her prophetic stance is similar to that of Talus from Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*. Like Talus, Southcott believes in a diviner-law in a manner that is, like Artegall's Talus,

Immoueable, resistlesse, without end.

Who in his hand an yron flale did hould,

With which he thresht out falsehood, and did truth vnfold. (113)

Just as Talus travels with Artegall to bring about justice throughout the world, Southcott prophesies and communicates with God to bring about justice through disaster. The disasters Southcott claims to bring about will be in part the result of “unbelief” (122). Those who do not share Southcott’s religious enthusiasm and fail to recognize her as the Lord’s prophet will be greeted with disaster. Southcott writes, “if unbelief abounds, and men go on in their mockery, all the stripes and sufferings, that come upon thee as a shadow, shall come upon the nation” (122). This view of disaster differs greatly from that of other eighteenth-century writers, as her emphasis is primarily on threats of unimaginable, retaliatory suffering.

In Joanna Southcott’s version of religious enthusiasm, individual citizens bear responsibility for the disasters that befall their country. Southcott explains her interpretation of the Book of Revelation--“Now mark the judgments that were in Spain, by the plague, by the famine, by earthquakes, and by every trouble that was upon them; and these judgments would have went on till they were convinced the judgments of God were upon them, *if your land had not interfered with a war*” (6). If Spain had been destroyed or conquered through military conquest, the people of Spain would not realize that it was God’s judgment, but rather believe that they were falling under the power of another nation. She writes, “therefore I tell thee, no happiness can be in your land, nor any prosperity, as long as the sword of the war continues: for all nations shall know their visitations, and afflictions, and judgments come from God, and not from man” (6-7). For Southcott, disasters such as earthquakes, plagues, and fires are tools for putting to end man-made wars or conflict. In a reversal of Voltaire’s position that disasters are a sign of an apathetic god, Gott claims that disasters are a way to correct human error and bring whole nations to penitence.



Southcott's appeal to the natural as a tool of the divine encompasses a wider array of disastrous natural phenomenon, with a particular emphasis on storms. Like the plagues and earthquakes that afflicted Spain, they are the result of God's wrath against his people for their sins. These storms will have the effect of making people recognize Southcott for the great prophetess she is, as well as causing people to repent and look to God. She writes,

The Woman did so appear,  
And this is like your land,  
That will bring on a heavier storm  
Than was raised by the flood;

Here, Southcott invokes the great flood from the Book of Genesis. She also invokes "the Woman" of the apocalypse from chapter twelve of the Book of Revelation who will bring judgment to the world. Southcott synthesizes elements of the Old and New Testaments into a new prophecy that will destroy those who fail to believe her messages. Combining poetry and Biblical exegesis, she writes herself into the Book of Revelation as a woman of great power, possessing destructive abilities. Southcott continues,

And some will see the mystery,  
And fly near to the wood;  
That is, you see, in faith to ME;  
For now I warn you all, (135)

According to Southcott, those who believe her prophecies will be inclined to flee and literally "run to the hills" or "the wood" to escape the destruction of London (135). Southcott uses the threat of disaster to call her readers to look to her for hope. In her poetry, storms are another way that God shows his judgment of humanity and pushes them towards repentance. Along with this

storm, Southcott promises to bring “floods to man unknown” (136). While Southcott’s prophecies give a bleak outlook for eighteenth-century London, she does offer a way out, which is to look to her for guidance. She tells her believers “Do not fear though danger’s near” and that she has “Come to save her frightened sheep” (136).

### PROPHECY AS A TOOL FOR PEACE

While the prophetic writings seem to revel in suffering and desolation, a peaceful strain runs through many of Brothers’s prophecies insofar as his religious appeals (and even personal communications) call for an end to human evil through war. He even wrote to the king and queen of England asking for the war with France to end (Zall 241). In *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* Brothers sees peace as a vital part of Christ’s message, and sees “the nations of Europe” as being at fault for proclaiming Christian belief while also starting and participating in wars (12). If Christ is the “prince of peace” then nations who follow Christian belief should not participate in war. Brothers writes, “his doctrine prohibits War; yet, to the shame of all nations, they refuse to obey his commands” (12). In Brothers’ apocalyptic vision, war will no longer be tolerated in the age to come. In this new age, where Christ reigns supreme, the nations “must obey” him “OR BE BURNT WITH FIRE” (12). For eighteenth-century prophets such as Brothers, Gott, and Southcott, the threat of disaster is meant to promote peace through violence.

To Brothers, Babylon the Great is eighteenth-century London, noting that in chapter eighteen of the Book of Revelation, Babylon is referred to as a place “full of Ships, Seamen, and Commerce” (55). According to Brothers, Babylon or the “Mother of Harlots” also refers to Rome from a spiritual standpoint because of “excel of guilt” and “corruption of doctrine as a Mother” (55). The Beast in the Book of Revelation refers to the Pope, a view that is not

inconsistent with many Protestant interpretations. Brothers reads the Book of Revelation as an allegory for the destruction of London that he prevented.

Eighteenth-century prophets navigate the tension between disaster and peace. Zall explains that during a terrible storm in 1793 “thousands fled the city in expectation” of an earthquake that Brothers predicted would happen (242). The next part of *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* is titled “The Judgments of God” and begins with a brief paragraph in which Brothers comments on a thunder storm that occurred in 1791. He claims that the loud thunder during this storm “was the voice of the ANGEL mentioned in the eighteenth Chapter of the Revelation, proclaiming the Judgment of God and the fall of Babylon the great” (38). Like Southcott, Brothers interprets storms to be the manifestation of God’s judgment. While Brothers cites the angel from Revelation as causing the storm, Joanna Southcott claims to be the woman of the apocalypse from the Book of Revelation, directly bringing out God’s judgment herself.

Brothers interprets the thunderstorm that happened in January of 1791 as a fulfillment of a Book of Revelation prediction, bringing together contemporary events and scripture. This storm was so loud that Brothers compares it to “the falling of mountains of stones” (38). He writes, “The very LOUD AND UNUSAL KIND OF THUNDER that was heard in the beginning of January, 1791, was the voice of the ANGEL mentioned in the Eighteenth Chapter of the Revelation, proclaiming the Judgment of God and the fall of Babylon the great” (38). For Brothers, this thunderstorm announced the beginning of the apocalypse, after which the world would never be the same. He describes the thunder, or as he views it, the voice of the angel from Revelation, as “the loudest that, since man was created, ever was heard” (38). The thunder is in fact so loud that it “shook the whole earth every time the angel spoke” and “roared through the streets, and made a noise over London like the falling of mountains of stones” (38). This vivid

description of the thunder shows Brothers tendency to interpret events that happened during his life as directly predicted in the Bible, particularly in prophetic books such as the Book of Revelations. By recording these events and combining them with Biblical exegesis, Brothers participates in a unique literary genre that relies on the power of sensory description to influence an audience.

Brothers includes verses one through eight of chapter eighteen of the Book of Revelation. These verses describe the vision that Brothers believes was fulfilled through the storm, where Saint John sees an angel “come down from Heaven” and proclaim judgment on the world, particularly condemning “BABYLON THE GREAT” which Brothers makes a point to capitalize, along with the words “KINGS” “MERCHANTS” “RICH” and “MY PEOPLE” (38).

A sense of comfort, protection, and closeness with God is palpable and real in Brothers’s writing. He expresses his desire to warn others about the danger of the storm, writing, “I had beseeched him to let me inform the people of London of their danger” (39). But God will not allow him to because, as Brothers writes, “they would imprison and use me ill for it” (39). Brothers believes in a God who cares deeply about his well-being, even to the point of refusing to allow him to warn others about the coming storm. Next, Brothers includes a lengthy list of people for whom he prayed God would save from the destruction mentioned in the Book of Revelation. Among the list of those Brothers prays for are William Pitt, William Wilberforce, and other notable people from this time.

Richard Brothers describes his vision of Satan walking through the streets of London. He writes, “his face had a smile, but under it his looks were sly, crafty, and deceitful. On the right side of his Forehead were seven dark spots, he was dressed in White and Scarlet Robes” personifying evil not as a problem, but as a real person (41). Brothers’s description of the devil

as a real person reveals that for him the problem of evil is manifested through human beings. The appearance of the devil is met with a description of a “scene of confusion” in which the people of London are part of an angry riot along with “a LARGE RIVER run through London COLOURED WITH HUMAN BLOOD!” (41). Frightened by this vision, Brothers once again prays to God to spare the people of London from the violence that he foresees (41). This time, God becomes angry with Brothers for beseeching him to end his wrath against London. Brothers claims to hear a voice that says “They have MY BLESSED GOSPEL, and will not obey it” as once again the problem of evil is the human result of disobeying God’s commandments rather than a philosophical problem contingent upon God (42). After hearing this message, the angel that accompanies Brothers abandons him in fear, and God ignores his prayers for three days (42).

For Brothers, the only way we can escape wrath and destruction that are the result of man-made evil is through God’s mercy. Ten days later, Brothers has another vision, and is “carried up to Heaven” while God speaks to him from a cloud (42). God tells him, “ALL, ALL. I PARDON LONDON AND ALL THE PEOPLE IN IT, FOR YOUR SAKE: THERE IS NO OTHER MAN ON EARTH THAT COULD STAND BEFORE ME TO ASK FOR SO GREAT A THING!” (42). According to Brothers, part of his role as a prophet is to spare his people from the wrath of God, acting as an intercessor between London and God to save them from God’s wrath. Indeed, in *Revealed Knowledge*, Brothers claims that had he not interceded, London would have been completely destroyed and “no traces of the City might be ever found or even so much as looked for” (42).

Eighteenth-century prophetic writing by writers such as Southcott, Brothers, and Gott are shaped through intimate relationships with Scripture. The typical call towards repentance stands beside claims of divine authority and power, predictions of earthquakes and

tempests, possession by God himself, sexual encounters with Christ, and other bizarre visions and predictions that many eighteenth-century writers would claim are the results of religious enthusiasm. However, most of these prophets repeatedly encourage their readers to repent and wait upon God. The following short poem by Dorothy Gott from *The Midnight Cry* helps to reveal the call for repentance that infuses the spirit of eighteenth-century prophecy:

And now I can sing to glorify him  
That promised to come and be your King.  
If in silence you will wait for him,  
He'll give you to drink of the heavenly spring,  
And bring you into Paradise again (1-5)

In contrast to Southcott's violent, apocalyptic poetry, Gott urges her readers to wait silently upon God to be fulfilled and renewed. While Southcott's verses are filled with devastation and destruction Gott's poem is filled with imagery of physical comforts such as water from a "heavenly spring" and the promise of an oncoming Paradise (76). She continues,

Where you shall spiritually eat of bread and wine,  
And be ingrafted into the true Vine,  
That your branch good fruit may bear,  
And you may dine with Christ the heir. (6-9)

This nine-line poem reveals Gott's ability to write religious poems. She provides a comforting, hopeful vision to her readers in which they will be fed and cared for by Christ. Gott's poem is communal in nature, as she envisions a great meal with Christ prepared for her and her fellow believers. Just as Christ will provide his followers with "bread and wine" they will produce "good fruit" through him and for him (6, 8).

According to Gott's prophetic perspective, her poems are divinely inspired to guide her readers towards repentance in a mode similar to that of John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. For she too acts to explain the ways of God to her readers to help them know good from evil and lead them to find paradise. Aesthetic forms such as her poems are godly and can provide a vehicle for prophetic utterance. Gott's poetry is designed to help her readers hear her basic message: "it is time to awake and trim your lamps, for this is my message, or orders from my Captain to you, "Prepare to meet the Bridegroom, for the day draws nigh when you must know your doom, whether wise or foolish" (76). Gott wrote three poems in *the Midnight Cry* that have received little critical attention, and each reveals the holistic nature of her Christian vision, in which she hopes everyone that reads her works will gain a greater awareness of God's presence in their lives. Gott's readings of scripture are meant to speak to everyone. But the call to repentance was only part of the complex nature of these works, which blend social critique and commentary with personal narrative and biblical exegesis. Dorothy Gott admits that she "never learnt to write" in one of her letters to John Murray (87). She also admits that she reads very little, although she sees her spirituality as far greater than any education could offer. She writes, "I have been to the school of Christ, which shews me he is the Master of all God's writings, and will teach you so as never man taught" (87).

Gott often describes the voices she hears as "an inward voice" showing the importance that personal revelation holds in her unique literary form (28). Gott writes openly to her readers, bringing them into her prophecies, visions and the "inward voice" she hears (28). She writes, "I began to pray that the Lord would make your work light, and that he would dip me seven times seven in the river Jordan for you" (29). Expressing her hope that her prophecies would help

develop a new spiritually invigorated community of believers she writes, “I offered my life, if he would bestow this blessing on you” (29).

Eighteenth-century prophecy is rife with exhortations to repent and purify one’s soul. Dorothy Gott tells her readers, “O man, bring thy deeds to the light, and know thyself, for in love I tell thee, it is time to be up, and be doing thy day’s work” (9). She expresses concern for her readers’ spiritual state, writing, “Your soul’s welfare lays as near me as my own, and my prayers are night and day for you, as they were for myself” (9).

#### BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PROPHECY

One of the interesting effects of religious enthusiasm on eighteenth-century prophecy is that it enables readers to interpret, reorder, and rewrite Scripture in surprising and unconventional ways. Biblical exegesis is the foundation upon which writers such as Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott predicted disaster, offered social critiques, and envisioned new, religiously zealous communities that would be at one with God. It is necessary to examine the manner in which these writers interpreted and responded to Scripture in order to understand their broader visions for a new society. However, as Juster points out, many prophets recognized that Scripture was difficult to interpret: “Most prophets did not dispute the notion that the apocalyptic scriptures were hard to read and harder to understand: in fact, they celebrated the Bible’s “mysteries” as proof of their own exalted powers of discernment” (44). For example, Joanna Southcott writes, “The end’s a mystery all unknown. / The curtain’s drawn, the veil’s unseen / There’s no man knows what stands between” (88). While Southcott celebrates the mystery of Scripture, she also has faith that she will be the one to “unveil” this mystery. For Southcott, Scriptural interpretation is an ongoing process of discovery. She writes, “Till I the



veil do take away, / And then they'll see where it did lay, and every mystery I'll make clear” showing her faith that she is the prophet anointed to interpret Scripture (88).

Despite being firmly convinced of her own prophetic abilities, Dorothy Gott also celebrated this mystery. Dwelling on the ways that the “rebellious and stiff-necked a generation” has rejected prophecy and failed to listen to the word of God, Gott still appreciates the mystery of God’s ways (50). She writes, “O these things meet us with horror in our faces; for God’s work is a mystery, yea, a greater mystery than you can conceive in fallen nature, or ever will, till you bring your deeds to the light” (50). For Gott and Southcott, prophecy is accompanied by mystery, and not everything can be seen or understood until the final judgment. These writers knew the Bible well, which is evident in the diverse array of Bible verses reproduced in the pages to link together their prophetic visions. Their emphasis on scripture and mystery differentiates them from Leibniz and Pope.

*Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* is full of scriptural fulfillments in which Brothers links one Biblical text to another and ultimately to his own prophecies. For Brothers, Scripture is a tool for reading the future. *Revealed Knowledge* is characterized by prophecies about the times in which he lived and wrote based on religiously enthusiastic interpretations of Scripture. By selecting passages from Old Testament prophecies and including his own interpretations with scripture, Brothers manipulates and re-orders the King James Version of the Bible in a way that allows him to fashion himself as a prophetic figure, more powerful and with a closer relationship with God than any priest or minister. In *Revealed Knowledge* Richard Brothers presents selections from old testament texts with little commentary, hoping that the reader will come to a similar interpretation as himself. Brothers chooses to capitalize certain words and phrases to emphasize them. For example, in his criticisms of

Church and government practices, Brothers sometimes writes “SWEARING” and “WAR” in all capital letters to emphasize the level of hypocrisy he believes the church and the government are guilty of for supporting these practices, as well as to emphasize the gravity of these sins (59). He also prints certain particularly violent or catchphrases in all capital letters. In the section entitled “The Judgment of Desolation, On All Nations” Brothers writes the phrases “FLASHES OF LIGHTNING”, “SECOND THUNDER”, “BURNING FLAME” AND “GREAT AND MIGHTY HEAT” in all capital letters to emphasize them, almost like eye-catching newspaper headlines (46-47). This causes these phrases to stand out and probably incited fear in his readers. He also inserts his own comments in parentheses in between verses. In this way, Brothers offers a kind of revised version of the Bible, for which Old Testament texts have immediate relation to present events. These selections, according to Brothers, have been ordained by God himself. He writes, “The alterations I have made in copying some of the Prophecies, is by the direction and command of the Lord God” (37). Brothers claims divine authority to redress against charges of enthusiasm or insanity.

Brothers includes several selections from chapters 16, 34, 36, and 37 of the Book of Ezekiel. For Brothers, the Book of Ezekiel is an essential prophecy in the creation of the New Jerusalem he envisions. He claims that the visions in this book are “relative to Jerusalem” which adheres to most Scriptural interpretations of Ezekiel in that it “alludes to the grandeur and extent of it when rebuilt by the Jews” (28). In this way, the Book of Ezekiel foresees the renewed community of believers that Brothers sees as the result of a great disaster, namely the earthquake he predicted. However, Brothers predicted that Jerusalem would be rebuilt in 1798, when “it will be the Capital of the World, and from it will go once more to all nations the Commands of the Living God (28). Brothers also includes verses 8-21 of the Book of Obadiah in *Revealed*

*Knowledge*. He ends this selection with an interpretation, writing, “The Turks are descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob, but their Emperor and all his family are descended from Jonathan, the son of Saul, King of Israel” (32). After this he writes, “Told me by Revelation” (32). Brothers reading is a process of identification, in which figures and numbers from scripture must be identified with current events or individuals. He affirms his own powers of reading Scripture and is bestowed with revelatory powers through Scripture. Brothers’ assortment of Bible verses, exegesis, and timetables leads to his conclusion that an apocalyptic disaster and the subsequent creation of a New Jerusalem would happen very soon.

Richard Brothers sees his book as more than a collection of prophecies. He describes *Revealed Knowledge* as “the Chronology of the World” (2). According to Brothers, the chronology that he provides is the “True Age of the World” and corrects the “erroneous” chronology of the world that most people believe (2). In the pages that follow, Brothers offers a chronology that begins with events from Old Testament scriptures and leads up to 1798, the same year that *Revealed Knowledge* was written, as “the year of the World when the Jews will return to Jerusalem, which answers to the year of Christ” (9). This chronology depends on the supposed ages of various Biblical figures, either when they died or specific things happened. For example, he uses the idea that Noah supposedly lived for five-hundred years to add five-hundred years to the “true age of the world” (3). In a large equation that adds the supposed ages of many Biblical figures together, Brothers determines the time “from the Creation to the Flood” to be 1656 years (3). Brothers’ additions show his absolute faith in the veracity of Biblical texts, even when it seems unlikely that, say, Noah lived for five-hundred years, for example (3).

This chronology continues “from the flood to the birth of Abraham” to the time when “the children of Israel lived in Egypt” to Exodus and “the foundation of the Temple” (3).

Brothers continues to add the ages of Biblical figures to determine the age of the world. Often, Brothers overwhelms the reader with Scripture, and offers few interpretations of his own. Much of his book is comprised of recitations of Scripture, as if the proof of his prophetic nature is inherent in Scripture, with little to no explanation necessary.

Much of *Revealed Knowledge* is an interpretive extension of Biblical passages. He reads the prophetic books of the Bible and sees himself as in the company of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, combining these various Biblical texts with his own additional visions in the text. In between verses, Brothers occasionally includes his own interpretations and comments. For example, after Deuteronomy 32: 4 Brothers writes, “Compare this part to the preaching of Christ in the beginning of the fifth chapter of the Gospel by St. Matthew, and see how nearly they agree” (10). Matthew: 5 includes the beatitudes. The link that Brothers sees between Deuteronomy 32:1-4 and the beginning of Matthew 5 is that the Song of Moses predicts Christ’s preaching of the gospel in Matthew.

While Deuteronomy 32 is the Song of Moses, in which Moses announces his prophecies to his people, Matthew includes the sermon on the mount, as Christ proclaims that those who are humble will be blessed. Brothers then skips to verse twenty-one of Deuteronomy. For Brothers, Scripture is a tool for reading the future. According to Brothers, Deuteronomy “begins with describing Christ preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven” (9). Richard Brothers sees the book of Matthew as fulfilling the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy. While the beatitudes express the desire for peace, mercy, and love, the rest of the verses from Deuteronomy that Brothers cites express the jealousy, vengeance, and wrath of God upon his people. These references seem to be at odds with one another in tone, even if they both are prophetic in nature.

Brothers moves on to discuss Isaiah: 2. Brothers writes himself into scripture and into the Biblical narrative of redemption and prophecy. He records Isaiah 2: 11 and sees himself as the “branch” or chosen prophet (12). He writes, “And there shall come forth a ROD out of the Stem of JESSE, and a BRANCH (meaning myself) shall grow out of his Roots” (12). He also writes “meaning myself” next to the phrase “root of Jesse” (13).

Brothers seems at least somewhat aware of the ways readers might react to his proclamations and his view of himself as a prophet by equating himself with the “root of Jesse” (13). On page thirteen he writes, “everybody will say I am arrogating to myself the place of Christ: for the English and other European nations professing Christianity, have always supposed that the ROD out of the STEM OF JESSE alluded to in this Chapter, meant the LORD JESUS CHRIST” (13). Brothers understands that most Christians would believe these lines refer to Christ, not himself. He understands how many people might interpret his claims to prophethood as ridiculous and shameful, writing, “I shall be called a false Prophet” (13). Even though he claims to be a prophet sent from God, Brothers has some level of self-awareness about the way that people will see him.

Despite this acknowledgement, Brothers claims that God himself has ordered him to declare himself a prophet. He writes, “The LORD GOD commands me now to mention these things, to acknowledge the Error, (*though permitted to remove my unjust apprehensions for the consequences*) and with shame my own criminalty for doubting when he told me, and when I knew from his many records in the Scripture, and from his many Revealed promises to myself—that he was bound by the sacred truth of his Words to fulfill his Covenant and protect me” (14). Here Brothers shows shame and guilt for ever doubting that God has ordained him a prophet which is stylistically effective because it shows he has passed through doubt to complete faith.

Brothers believes he shares a bond with God through former works of Biblical prophecy. He writes, “I knew from his many records in the Scripture, and from his many Revealed promises to myself—that he was bound by the sacred truth of his WORDS to fulfil his Covenant and protect me” (14). Through scripture, Brothers shares a deep bond with God.

Some of Brothers’s interpretations of Scripture share aspects of Christian beliefs like Methodism or Anglicanism. While his views overlap with Methodism, his views are not reducible to pure Methodism or Anglicanism, and carry their own extravagances and idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, religious enthusiasm results in his own peculiar kind of apocalyptic faith. But there are times when the influences of Methodism, Anglicanism, and more traditional types of Christian faith are evident in his writing. For example, on page six Brothers includes Isaiah 7: 14 which reads, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a SON and shall call his name IMMANUEL” (6). After this verse, Brothers writes, “This was the LORD JESUS CHRIST, who was born of the BLESSED VIRGIN called MARY” (6). Brothers’ interpretation is consistent with most sects of Christianity, in which Isaiah prophesizes that Christ will be born from a virgin.

One of the startling features of *Revealed Knowledge* is the confidence and self-assuredness with which Brothers writes. Brothers declares himself as God’s prophet through scripture with absolute certainty. He interprets the Book of Daniel as foretelling his life and prophecies. He includes several verses from chapter eight of the Book of Daniel with interpretations. In Daniel 8: 13 Daniel witnesses two Saints speaking with each other in a vision. One Saint asks the other, “How long shall be the Vision concerning the Daily Sacrifice and the transgression of desolation, to give both the SANCTUARY and the HOST to be trodden under foot?”. Brothers sees this “sanctuary” referred to in Daniel 8: 13 as the New Jerusalem that is

his destiny to announce. He writes, “I am the appointed person for it to be revealed to, and the prophet commanded to make it known” (8). Brothers is an interpreter of Scripture and an announcer of truth.

In her interpretation of the Book of Revelation, Flaxmer identifies Richard Brothers as “the Lord’s Prophet” affirming the identity Brothers self-fashions in *Revealed Knowledge*. However, Flaxmer expresses her concern for Brothers’ current spiritual state. Revelation 12:11 talks about overcoming the Devil “by the blood of the Lamb” (22). In an interesting passage, Flaxmer claims that Richard Brothers “must let Blood before he will be quit of the evil Spirit that he has been caught by, by these Sorcerers” (22).

Imagined texts make up an important aspect of eighteenth-century prophetic visions. These writers interact with texts they see in dreams or in visions, while also creating an interpretation that re-imagines biblical passages as foretelling events from eighteenth-century England, such as thunderstorms and earthquakes. For eighteenth-century writers of prophecy, these predicted disasters will create a better, stronger community of believers. Eighteenth-century prophets call for these believers to come together in a new, reinvigorated community. For example, Dorothy Gott quotes Isaiah 45:22 which reads “Come unto me, all ye ends of the earth, and be ye saved” (1). Gott considers this verse, as well as her book *The Midnight Cry* a “fresh invitation from God to you” (1). Gott calls the world a “vale of tears” in which we are all “fellow travelers” (1). In this way, *The Midnight Cry* is infused with a sense of community.

Dorothy Gott also quotes Psalm 46:10 in the opening of *The Midnight Cry*: “Be still, and know that I am God” (1). Instead of longer exegesis with multiple passages of scripture, Gott incorporates Bible verses throughout her prophecies. Her work demonstrates a deep, intimate knowledge of scripture. She quotes John 8:7 after receiving criticism from her suitor’s family,

which reads, “He that is without fault, let him cast the first stone” (4). In this passage, Christ says this to the Pharisees who want to stone a prostitute to death for her sins. Defending herself against her own cruel persecutors, Dorothy Gott fashions herself in a similar manner—a woman who has the authority of Christ above the rules and regulations of men. In response to the criticism she received from friends and relatives, Dorothy Gott claims that God said to her, “I will give thee a writing they shall not refuse” (4). Gott negotiates power through her relationship to imaginative texts.

Foregrounded by the threat of disaster, enthusiastic eighteenth-century prophecy opens up the possibility for social critique based on God’s judgment according to Methodism influenced by religious enthusiasm and based on a reliance upon individual revelation. These critiques serve as a prolegomenon for the peaceful, reinvigorated community that the prophetic mode imagines will come to fruition after the disaster has passed. While the prophetic mode serves the grandiose purpose of foreseeing disaster that will ultimately bring about a stronger, more devout community of believers, prophetic writers like Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott were also human beings that experienced everyday problems. Their writings also reflect a keen sensitivity to social, human evils, and it is these evils which combine to solicit God’s wrath through large-scale, disaster born human suffering.

#### CRITIQUES OF MARRIAGE PRACTICES IN PROPHECY

While international war and armed conflict are certainly targets of prophetic slings and arrows, domestic policies, particularly contemporary marriage practices, rank as a punishable form of human evil in their writings. Both Richard Brothers and Dorothy Gott have criticisms of the institution of marriage. For Brothers, these criticisms are part of a broader critique of the Catholic Church. In his interpretation of the Book of Revelation, he finds fault with the Catholic



Church for forbidding priests to marry. He sees this as an example of “falling away from the true Faith” and cites God’s order to Adam and Even to “Be fruitful and multiply” as proof that priests should be allowed to marry (53). Like Blake, Brothers critiques the strict sexual regulations of the Catholic Church, describing celibacy as a “cruel imposition” (53). He weaves a cultural critique of sexual practices into his biblical interpretations.

Curiously, despite their very different views on religious enthusiasm, Voltaire also recommended marriage for many different types of citizens, and expressed outrage when the practice was denied to them. In the *Philosophical Dictionary* he discusses the benefits of marriage at great length. While Brothers focused on marriage for priests, Voltaire discusses the benefits of marriage for soldiers. He advises, “Let your soldiers marry, and they will no longer desert. Bound to their families, they will be bound to their country” (196). He refers to marriage as “the first of human obligations” and goes on to criticize countries that forbid marriage between those of different religious beliefs (197).

Voltaire criticizes the French for forbidding Catholics to marry Protestants, Jews to marry Catholics, and other different combinations of beliefs. Citing the writings of Augustine and Pope Benedict XIV, both of whom advocated marriage between those of different religious backgrounds, Voltaire argues that French law is backwards and unjustly strict. Noting that the Catholic Church supports marriage between those of different faiths he asks, “By what astonishing contradiction is it, that the French laws in this matter are more severe than those of the Church?” (199). While Brothers and Voltaire were on opposite sides of the dialectic of religious enthusiasm and disaster, they both had open-minded views “of marriage and saw something evil in the attempt to forbid it between two people due to career or belief. In exasperation Voltaire asks, “*A quels maîtres, grand Dieu, livrez-vous l’univers!*” or “*Which*

*masters, great God, indulge the universe!*” (200). In marriage practices, Voltaire saw the results of unnecessary laws created by corrupt rulers. Both Richard Brothers and Voltaire saw the needless cruelty and oppression that came with many of the laws surrounding marriage.

Brothers’s critique of marriage reflects a larger trend in his writing that indicates that hypocrisy is what ultimately causes needless suffering, and therefore, requires needful corrective suffering at the hands of God. Brothers finds many nations at fault for claiming to support God’s laws, all the while caring only for earthly laws and vows. He writes, “It is grievous and sorrowful to the Lord God to see Nations which acknowledge him—and which have the whole Scripture to inform them of his will, paying a blind--an idolatrous obedience to human Ordinances supported by bad Oaths and sinful vows” (54). In a fashion similar to Old Testament prophets that exhorted the Hebrews for falling away from God’s law, Brothers sees England as having failed to live up to its covenant with God. In Brothers’ view, an apocalyptic disaster such as an earthquake or storm will cause nations to stop relying on “human Ordinances” and instead focus on God’s will (54). In the new Jerusalem he envisions, God’s will reigns supreme over human oaths.

Drawing from the personal and radiating outward, Gott similarly indicates that cultural hypocrisy is also a type of human evil in her writing. With a general warning that echoes Brothers, she admonishes, “But the great darkness of this nation is, that they believe the scriptures that they are the command of god, and yet go against the command” (92). Like Brothers, she tethers her critique of hypocrisy to marital practice. Gott’s searing critique draws from personal experience rather than cultural theory. Gott describes a troubling marriage situation she experienced. She tells the story of meeting a man who immediately wanted to marry her after they first met, and told her he could never be happy without her (3). Through

“obliging behavior” this man became close to Gott. She writes, “At that time I have cried ready to break my heart, unto the Lord to prevent it, and much wished to break it off, even till the week we were married” (3). Despite her desire to break off the marriage, Gott stayed married to this man anyways and became very unhappy.

Gott describes her husband as “an Egyptian master” marking her relationship with him as abusive (5). Once again, in the writings of eighteenth-century prophets, evil is man-made and the result of human corruption. Gott writes, “I found no other way than to submit, and to shut my mouth” (5). These claims seem to contradict her claims that he was “a very sober man” and “never suffered me” (5). Gott also says that her husband “spent very few hours out of his own house” and that they “were very few hours apart” during the sixteen years they were married (5). Nevertheless, Gott looks to God for strength, and has faith that her prophecies will guide others in their faith: “My mind was much retired to God to enable me to pay every one their own, and I can magnify his Name that enabled me to do it” (5).

Trapped in this domestic terror and emotional abuse, Gott asks, “Can there be a worse hell than this?” (5). Gott refers to a “circumstance” which she says she “shall be glad never to mention, if it please God” (5). It is unclear what this “circumstance” is, but it is clear that it was very troubling to live with, as Gott claims she “was almost overwhelmed, or sunk in the deeps” (5). Gott’s question shows that to her, this marriage represented the opposite of Leibniz’s “the best of all possible worlds” and instead resembled the worst possible scenario. Gott’s story shows the unhappiness and oppression—the needless suffering--that can come with a troubled marriage.<sup>3</sup> Throughout these recollections, she seems helpless against the abuse her husband and family pour on her.

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<sup>3</sup> See Milton’s similar views on divorce: *The Divorce Tracts of John Milton*. Ed. Sara J Van den Berg. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007.

It is therefore unsurprising that Gott expresses little grief when her husband gets sick and dies, and reads it as *de facto* deliverance. She writes, “I cannot say I was affected as many are at death, for my soul seemed taken up, or looking to God for a more beautiful situation that I had found in carnal man, and now I can say I have found it” (6). Even when she was in a very dire situation as a widow, Gott thought instead about “a more beautiful situation” and focused on spiritual matters (6). She received “many offers” for marriage after her husband’s death, but instead Gott focused on her relationship with God. She delays from marrying until “I might be put into such a situation as that I might serve him night and day” (7). Gott’s faith in God and desire to serve him are earnest, even in the face of great financial and personal loss. Dorothy Gott does not seem to be very upset about her husband’s death, and at times seems grateful for the chance to start over with her life. She writes, I was very thankful to Providence for so many blessings I beheld he bestowed on me, for I often thought I had digged a pit, and fallen into it by that marriage” (7). While many would see a widow in eighteenth-century London as having little hope for a prosperous life, Gott challenges this view of widowhood by seeing her husband’s death as an opportunity for her to start over and commit herself to spiritual renewal. The earnestness with which she describes tyrannical marriage made her relatable as a person to her readers and distinguished her from many of the stereotypically negative views of prophets as rabble-rousers, liars, and imposters. The suffering she experienced in her marriage and the liberation she received at her husband’s death acts consciously or not as a metaphor for the motif of natural disaster, punishment, and deliverance in her work.

Gott contextualizes her marital oppression within a larger network of asymmetrical cultural power structures whose violence she unmasks as a human evil by pursuing a common thread of human suffering. Throughout *The Midnight Cry*, Gott reveals her compassionate,

sensitive outlook on others. She shows concern that people do not respect servants, as her friends criticized her for marrying a footman. She writes, “Must not that be a darkness, for people to despise servants, when they have had the best of their days. Do not you think God meant them to marry?” (10). Gott shows compassion for people of all trades and this builds her ethos as a prophet throughout her writings. Much as Voltaire recommended marriage for people of all different religious backgrounds and careers and criticized those who cruelly tried to prevent these marriages, Dorothy Gott expressed the belief that all people should have the right to marry, despite the suffering that she experienced in her own disastrous marriage.

### UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES

Within the discourse of disaster in eighteenth-century prophecy, a common thread emerges. In the minds of prophetic writers influenced by religious enthusiasm, disaster is the means through which a utopian community is created. Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott each envisioned renewed spiritual communities that would emerge after a great earthquake, storm, or other kind of disaster. From the New Jerusalem of Richard Brothers to the great communal meals described in Dorothy Gott’s poetry, each of the writers discussed here had a vision of communal religious life. This longing for an ideal religious community is reflected in the works of other writers from the eighteenth-century.

The prophetic narrative of disaster and paradise reflects and answers a longing verbalized by anti-enthusiast writers of the previous generation. Prophetic writing, therefore, should be considered as a rarefied solution to the problem of human suffering that earlier writers searched for. In terms of cultural intellectual history, the prophets are not just clarifying why natural disasters happen that cause suffering, but showing that they occur to eradicate human suffering through the human evil of hypocrisy and in a sense, end suffering through suffering. This brings

them into close company with writers like Voltaire, who expressed longing for a God that could offer special revelation and provide hope in the midst of disaster, and Samuel Johnson expressed longing for a place that was set apart from the London that he knew was corrupt and full of hypocrisy, to name a few.

While Voltaire did not believe in such a God, he at least recognized the human desire to have one—a point which Hume also observes. Johnson, a devout Presbyterian, expressed desire for a kind of paradise, even if he knew one could not exist in this world. He understood the desire for the renewed spiritual community that eighteenth-century prophets believed would be created through a great disaster. In *London: A Poem* (1738) Johnson writes,

Grant me, kind Heaven, to find some happier Place,

Where Honesty and Sense are no Disgrace;

Some pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play,

Some peaceful Vale with Nature's Paintings gay;

Where once the harass'd BRITON found Repose,

And safe in Poverty defy'd his Foes;

Some secret Cell, ye Pow'rs, indulgent give.

Let —— live here, for —— has learn'd to live. (43-50)

Eighteenth-century prophets also looked to heaven to find “some happier Place” where they could live in peaceful community with other believers. This imagined society would be free from the social problems that plagued eighteenth-century London, and “Honesty and Sense” would rule the day. Guided by religious enthusiasm, they believed that such a place could be possible only in the aftermath of a great disaster. Johnson also envisions a better, less corrupt community in “The Vanity of Human Wishes”. He imagines a place where the political and

governmental machinations of eighteenth-century London are no more. In this imagined society, courts of law and governing bodies will be fair. This will be a place where “change of Fav’rites made no Change of Laws / And Senates heard before they judg’d a Cause” (7). The community that Johnson envisions is just and fair, free of the hypocrisy that writers like Richard Brothers and Henry Fielding condemned as the source of earthly evil.

It is worth returning to Voltaire to consider his proximity to prophetic thought via imagined, utopian communities that eighteenth-century prophets imagined. In chapter seventeen of *Candide*, Candide and Cacambo travel to Eldorado, a place that is set apart from the other countries they visit. The two decide to “head for Cayenne” in order to avoid the violence that surely awaits them in Portugal and Westphalia (55). After a difficult journey, they reach a place where the children are clothed with fine clothing and jewels, and they are soon treated to an elaborate meal at an inn.

Candide and Cacambo are very impressed with Eldorado, and see it as a kind of paradise. They describe it as “the country where everything is indeed for the best, since there absolutely has to be a place of that sort” (59). Eldorado seems a lot like the post-apocalyptic societies that eighteenth-century prophets imagined—free from wars, social inequality, and possessing great religious fervor. When the two meet with an old man who their host describes as “the most learned man in the whole country” in order to learn more about the idyllic country, Candide asks the old man if the people of Eldorado are very religious (60). The old man responds that they “adore God” and “thank him ceaselessly” (61-62). Like the religious community described in the poems of Dorothy Gott, the people of Eldorado are in constant communion with God. In Eldorado, as in the imagined spiritual communities of eighteenth-century prophecy, there is no need for priests or ministers, because all are equally close to God. They also praise God in

communal song daily. The old man tells them, “Every morning, the King, and every head of a family, sing solemn hymns in praise of the great blessings with which God has showered us. And they are accompanied by five or six thousand musicians” (62). Voltaire’s Eldorado is very similar to the communities that would be described in eighteenth-century prophecy. However, while disasters such as the earthquake at Lisbon only showed Voltaire that we are essentially alone in a Deistic universe, for the eighteenth-century prophets, disasters are the means by which an ideal community can be created.

Works of prophecy in the eighteenth-century show a fascination with disasters of all kinds—earthquakes, tempests, fires, and the threat of spiritual ruin and damnation run through their prophecies. However, the threat of disaster is part of a broader vision for a peaceful community of reinvigorated believers produced in its wake. Richard Brothers, Sarah Flaxmer, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott each had a different idea of what this peaceful spiritual community would look like. Each had a different style of prophecy that expressed this vision in a different way. While Dorothy Gott creates images of people eating, drinking, and praising God together in her poetry, and Brothers describes being brought up to heaven to witness the re-creation of the Earth.

Gott also balances warnings of destruction with visions of peace and community. Her visions include images of people eating, drinking, and praising God together. Gott includes a sixteen-line poem on page 20 of *The Midnight Cry*. It reads,

That we may all with one accord  
Walk with his holy train  
As in the Paradise again  
That we all as in his living presence may stand



As with the scepter in our hand,  
To glorify that God who a new life can give,  
That in his body we may live  
That all may be done in his own time  
O then he will give us bread and wine.  
Then we his praises all shall sing,  
To glorify our heavenly King,  
That these good tidings unto us doth bring.  
Then we no more shall mourn,  
When the harvest work is done,  
The race of *self-will* will be run,  
And we shall be as the good Son. (1-16)

Gott uses the pronouns “we” “us” or “our” ten times in this short poem. Her poem depicts a vision of a community of people eating, drinking, and singing together in joyful communion with God. Throughout *The Midnight Cry*, Dorothy Gott expresses her disgust for “self-will” (35). She recommends that her readers persist in “becoming dead in self-nature” (35). She balances threats of damnation and suffering with visions of community such as in this poem.

Gott’s stance against the pursuit of “self-will” culminates in an act of spiritual possession over her body by God. According to Gott, God asks her, “Now will thee give up all will to me, and no free-will of thy own, that I may have full power of thy body, to speak and act in as I please?” (52). For Gott, total denial of self-will results in God literally taking control over her physical form. She responds, “that will be a great favour indeed, I should like that much” (52). Interestingly, at this point of *The Midnight Cry* Gott reverts to the Greek origins of enthusiasm,

which according to the Oxford English Dictionary meant “possession by a god” (829). While Southcott and Brothers focus on renewed spiritual communities, Gott’s unique vision of paradise involves literally becoming one with God as a figuration of ecstasy in paradise.

At first, Gott believes she will meet Christ in the “club room” at a tavern (41). She hears a voice that says, “I will come in the body, and walk in the body. Now if I should command thee to meet me at the Rose and Crown, in Fort-street; if I say, Go and meet me there, wouldest thou go?” to which Gott replies that she will (41). Next she thinks she will meet him in her bed.

Dorothy Gott hears a voice, or as she writes, “at that time it was put to me” that she perceives to be Christ (42). According to Gott, Christ says to her, “Do thee think I am come in the body? do thee think I can come in thy bedroom this night wilt thou wait naked for me” (42). Gott replies that she knows “all things are in thy power, O Lord” and will take off her clothes and await him “if thou wilt give me strength” (42). Christ’s message to her is “strongly impressed” in her mind, and Dorothy takes off her clothes and waits for Christ. Soon after, she is instructed to “open the closet door” and told that Christ will arrive through the window (43). Christ tells her, “The time is not yet come; but leave open the door, and I will come in at the window, in the night, even into thy bed” (43). Gott’s religious enthusiasm leads her to believing that God himself will have an intimate physical relationship with her and even possess her body.

Joanna Southcott shares a similarly intense view of God, as her visions of a peaceful community produced in the wake of a disaster are balanced with both the promise that if they recognize her as God’s prophet, English will be blessed, but if they fail to, they will experience more destruction. In *The Life of Joanna Southcott, the Prophetess* she claims that if her “commands are obeyed” England will experience blessings “such as were never experienced before” (27). If her readers believe her prophecies and repent, they can survive God’s judgment

and become a part of this renewed community of believers. She writes, “But, from the days of NOAH, there is a *long warning*, to awaken those who are not so strongly filled with the devil against my coming to bring in my kingdom of righteousness and peace” (27). Although her prophecies contain threats of destruction, the community produced by it will be one of peace. Later, she repeats her claim, saying that she is “coming to establish peace and righteousness on the earth” but warns her readers of “the justice of my threatenings” if they refuse to listen to her prophecies (29).

Brothers shares this belief in his ability to command or prevent destruction, as in his detailed commentary on the Book of Revelation, Brothers claims that he has prevented the “NEXT AND LAST THUNDER” which according to chapter sixteen involves the sun being extinguished by an angel (46). Brothers’ exegesis interprets the events of the Book of Revelation as fulfilled during his time and prevented by himself. Brothers’ visions are not solely ones of self-grandeur. He also has a vision of renewal and hope. Drawing on Isaiah 66: 22, he writes, “The new Heavens and the new Earth mean an entire regeneration of man through the power and knowledge from the Spirit of God” (21). This renewal will result in a world without wars. Brothers wonders how nations who pray, “thy Will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven” can still participate in wars (21). Brothers also finds issue with “Swearing” (21). In the new age that Brothers foresees, people will “find obedience to his blessed Gospel of peace” and stop making wars and swearing (21).

After her husband’s death, Dorothy Gott struggles to take care of her infirm sister. She prays repeatedly for her to get well, but finds in her own prayers a “self-will and darkness” (16). Gott often refers to this “darkness” that exists inside of people and keeps them from God. Gott’s sister abuses her in a similar manner as her husband did, so much so that Gott sometimes

wonders if her sister is under demonic possession. Her sister speaks to Dorothy “with an angry tone of voice, and sharp, not her natural disposition, but as if a power beyond her strength, often to my astonishment” and tells her that she “wilt never be good for anything” (16).

Eighteenth-century prophets also experience visions through dreams. Gott explains that a dream she had in 1779 gave her a “deep impression” that she feels moved to share with the public (16). Gott describes another vision in which she is lying down below a “Beautiful-gate” and has suffered “sores or wounds” (17). After begging Christ to heal her, a “great light” emits from the gate which raises Gott from the ground (17). Suddenly, and continuing with the military themes that run through many of her visions, an “army of soliders, clean and neat, with their fire-arms ready to march” appears (17). Using military imagery to describe spiritual warfare, Gott writes, “These are combats which the good Son, Christ, fights for us” (45). Near the end of *The Midnight Cry* Dorothy Gott encourages her readers to “enlist” to the service of God so that “he may make you valiant soldiers” (71). Gott’s vision for a new Christian community is that of an army she commands.

Gott writes, “A voice within me said, “These are my soldiers; they are ready to march when I give the word of command” revealing that the army that appeared belongs to her (17). Next, she sees a vision of a field of sheep and hears a voice say “Come and see where I make my sheep to lie down, as at noon day” (17). This line, along with the reference to shepherds, is reminiscent of Psalm 23:2, which reads “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters”. She follows this with an invitation to her readers to “come and taste how good God is” (17). Gott’s visions have a dreamlike quality, as they change setting and subject suddenly and without clear transitions. While Gott presents herself as God’s humble servant, struggling with domestic and family relationships, and treated rudely and condescended

to by her family she also paints herself as a commander of soldiers and owner of strongholds and houses. The tension between Gott's two different versions of herself is perhaps telling of "the meek shall inherit the Earth" theme that runs through *The Midnight Cry*. In her vision the hypocrites, ministers, and governmental officials that oppress others will be brought low by Dorothy Gott.

Gott's depiction of an army is consistent with a recurring theme from many prophetic books from the Bible. For example, the prophet Jeremiah predicts the destruction of Egypt in Jeremiah 46:22, which reads "The voice thereof shall go like a serpent; for they shall march with an army, and come against her with axes, as hewers of wood". Dorothy Gott prophesies that God will provide her with her own army that will punish the unjust. In Revelation 19:14, the writer envisions armies which follow Christ "upon white horses". Dorothy Gott may envision her army as the one designated in the book of Revelation as accompanying the apocalypse.

Eighteenth-century writers of prophecy navigate a variety of different genres in their prophecies. Sometimes prophecies involve telling the writer's story—there is an aspect of memoir or autobiography in each of the prophecies discussed here. For example, while *The Midnight Cry* is a repeated call for believers everywhere to repent and humble themselves before God, it is also the story of Gott's supreme loneliness and isolation. She describes a miserable marriage in which she feels trapped. Then her husband dies, leaving her in poverty with no one to help her. Her siblings despise her, as she consistently mentions times in she is brought to tears by their cruelty and unwillingness to believe her spiritual pronouncements. For example, she trembles and feels "overshadowed" by darkness asking, "O Lord, what am I going to do" for fear that her siblings find out she simply paid a carpenter (25). She has few friends, and her only solace comes from God. Eighteenth-century writers of prophecy balance seemingly absurd

claims and grandiose notions with a tone of utter humility. Personal narratives of isolated suffering like this lead them towards visions of communal bliss.

Dorothy Gott, Joanna Southcott, and Richard Brothers participated in a historical dialectic of discussion concerning human suffering and the problem of evil that unfolded across the eighteenth-century: it was energized by events such as the earthquake at Lisbon, and drew the attention of Voltaire, Rousseau, and other Enlightenment writers. The views of these prophetic writers that natural disasters are manifestations of God's judgment and the result of sin, coupled with searing cultural and social critiques leading to visions of reinvigorated spiritual communities provide a unique perspective on this ongoing, century-long dialectic between reason and religious enthusiasm. Unsatisfied with Leibniz's idea of "the best of all possible worlds" these prophetic writers imagined and envisioned what their own "best of all possible worlds" could look like, which took the shape of various visions of spiritually invigorated communities that emerged in the wake of God's overwhelming judgment.

The plentitude of writers who discussed and debated the dangers and justifications of religious enthusiasm throughout the century--ranging from Mary Astell to John Dryden—speaks to the power and influence this topic held and brings to attention the ways religious enthusiasm intersects with political, social, and literary thought. While many of these writers discussed religious enthusiasm, Dorothy Gott, Joanna Southcott, and Richard Brothers fully embraced it, resulting in a new outlook on human suffering in the context of natural disasters, the problem of evil, and apocalypse.

Dorothy Gott prophesized that a great earthquake would befall London, and punish hypocritical teachers and "forward spirits" that judged others and failed to look at their own sins. She describes visions in which she commands an army of soldiers. For Gott, the problem of evil

is the result of sinful human beings. Natural disasters and other unfortunate events are the result of our ineptitude and sin. Gott's vision of judgment culminates in the four poems that are included in *The Midnight Cry*, each of which envision communal meals where the redeemed will "dine with Christ" and become part of "the true Vine" (76-77). *The Midnight Cry* moves from Gott's self-fashioning as commander of God's army to peaceful protector of a joyful religious community.

In her poetry and in the transcripts from her trial, Joanna Southcott depicts herself as the wrathful harbinger of God's judgment, as she prophesies that she will personally punish the unrepentant with earthquakes and storms. While many eighteenth-century writers such as Leibniz and Voltaire sought to uncover the justification behind seemingly evil events such as natural disasters, Southcott wanted to bring them about herself as the instrument of God's wrath. These promises of violence and disaster were accompanied with the promise of blessings never seen before in England. Her texts move from fashioning herself as the bringer of death and destruction to the mother of a new messiah and a new age of peace.

Richard Brothers claimed that a great earthquake would befall London. This earthquake was God's response to the hypocrisy of England for engaging in wars and other vices while claiming to believe in Christ's message. Like *The Midnight Cry*, *Satan Revealed* and the poetry of Joanna Southcott *Revealed Knowledge* moves from frightening images of death, destruction and disaster to the promise of a new Jerusalem and home for God's people. For Brothers as well, the problem of evil has nothing to do with God, but rather our own sins and failures. These writers utilized a unique literary genre that combined personal narrative with biblical exegesis, allowing them to uncover God's plan in their own lives and in scripture.

While the problem of evil and human suffering is an old one, dating at least back to the Book of Job, the complex, meandering, and highly personal visions of these writers added something new to a century haunted by revolution and left with unanswered questions in the shadow of science. Each of these writers has a unique style and vision, incorporating personal narrative, poetry, and biblical exegesis, but despite these eccentricities they share a common belief in the power of disaster to create a new Kingdom of God upon Earth. These prophets were met with criticism from a variety of satirists who challenged and pushed this dialectic in new ways, and brought new concerns and ideas to the discussion, and whose works I will discuss in chapter four.



## CHAPTER 4

### “PROPHETS OF VIOLENCE”: RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM AND NATURAL DISASTER IN THE WORKS OF HEINRICH VON KLEIST AND WILLIAM BLAKE

The 1755 earthquake at Lisbon haunted literature of the eighteenth-century, as writers included the presence of earthquakes in their works to address the problem of evil as well as to offer innovative solutions to it. Eighteenth-century writers produced works that reacted violently to these solutions. Some satirized philosophical optimism while others took it to religious extremes, believing themselves to have special insight about God’s perfect plan directly from him. However, other writers saw the problem of evil in a completely different light or rejected its premise entirely. William Blake and Heinrich von Kleist carried the discussion of the problem of natural evil into the early nineteenth-century. The writers that preceded them utilized literary genres such as treatises, heroic couplets, dialogues, satire, and prophecy mixed with personal narrative and biblical exegesis. Blake and Kleist utilized visionary poetry and the novella, respectively--literary genres that adapted aspects of these, and yet remained unique in their Romantic exploration of human and imaginative potential.

Through a genre that combines elements of satire, prophecy, as well as his own unique visual art, Blake investigated the relationship between natural disaster and the problem of evil, casting those who assign judgment to natural disaster as tyrants and monsters. Incorporating elements of romance and tragedy, Heinrich von Kleist utilized the novella form to provide his own view on the problem of evil in relation to natural disaster. The evil in his novella *Earthquake in Chile* is not the earthquake itself, but the acts of murder and hatred committed by those who blame the earthquake on the sins of others.

William Blake had a complex relationship with many of the writers from chapters one and two, such as Hume and Voltaire. E.P. Thompson leads us to his address 'To the Deists' that prefaces *Jerusalem* (Thompson 197). Here Blake compares Rousseau and Voltaire to tyrannical leaders such as Titus and Constantine. For Blake, skeptical deism is the result of a crippling emphasis on reason rather than imagination. Ironically, in his other works, it is tyrannical characters like this that cause the earthquakes that writers like Leibniz and Voltaire were so concerned about.

Heinrich von Kleist also shared a complex relationship with the writers discussed in chapters one and two, and especially Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy troubled Kleist. Timothy J. Mehigan argues that Kleist's oeuvre "remains beguilingly in the shadow of Kant" due to the ways Kleist explored Kantian issues of self-consciousness (5). Nonetheless, Kleist articulated his own response to the problem of evil through characters that struggle against injustice.

Although they utilized very different genres, Kleist and Blake share similar views considering the problem of evil and its relationship to natural disaster. Rejecting philosophical optimism as well as a skeptical Deist approach to the problem of evil, their emphasis is on human potential and human action. While Kleist explores the possibility of seeking justice for evil, Blake sees the human imagination as surpassing all the evil or suffering in this world.

The tradition of utilizing satire to create parodies of religiously enthusiastic prophecy goes back to Jonathan Swift earlier in the eighteenth century. In this chapter, I show how writers such as William Blake and Heinrich von Kleist continued in this style, employing aspects of prophecy to satirize the interpretive practices of prophetic figures such as the writers discussed in chapter three as well as employing aspects of rational argument to satirize skeptical Deism.

They focus not on the physical event of the earthquake, but specifically on the problems of interpretation arising in response to it. Blake and Kleist examine how human evils produced by intellectual hubris and the desire to explicate the unknown leads to evils of their own that compound the suffering of the natural event. They accomplish this through characters that seek justice based on faulty interpretations of evil events of both human and natural origin. While the works by Voltaire, Hume, Swift, and Diderot discussed in chapter two cast the prophetic figure as a fool, each of the works in this chapter ultimately show the danger of religious enthusiasm, casting the prophet as a bringer of violence. The Deists were mainly interested in debunking the philosophical optimists and exposing the problems with dogmatic adherence to a doctrine, whereas Blake and Kleist are interested in broader questions of the human response to injustice and evil. Rather than a natural disaster paving the way for a peaceful community, in their works natural disasters bring about more violence.

In each of the works discussed in this chapter, literary form (and, in Blake's works, visual art) is essential to content and expression. For example, Blake utilized prophecy as a genre to show the corruption of religious or political leaders. Blake employs traditional aspects of prophecy such as predicting the future, describing disaster, and suggesting some form of liberation from oppression while utilizing illuminated printing, such as in *America: A Prophecy*. Blake's immersive literary style complements his belief that the imagination is greater than the mental constructs Enlightenment thinkers were preoccupied with, such as the problem of evil. *The Earthquake in Chile* tells a romance story that takes a tragic turn as Heinrich von Kleist explores the murderous violence that can be the result of religious enthusiasm, utilizing the novella to explore the fractured depths of human nature that results from misreading natural disaster.

Henrich von Kleist's 1807 novella *Earthquake in Chile* also explores the dangers of religious enthusiasm, especially in the context of natural disaster. Based on a devastating earthquake that afflicted Santiago in 1647, Kleist describes not only the horrific destruction of the earthquake, but also the religious enthusiasm that was sparked by it, as powerful religious figures spurn on the masses to find someone to blame for what they believe is an expression of God's wrath. The canon gives a sermon blaming Josefe and Jeronimo for the earthquake, and the crowd murders them along with their young child. Readers are left to wonder if the death and destruction caused by the earthquake are as bad as the hatred and murder that ensue from religious enthusiasm. Like Swift, Kleist explores the idea of the prophet as a promoter of violence. His meditations on natural disaster and religious enthusiasm end a century of literature and philosophy in which the two were often intertwined. Kleist manages to fit the entire destruction of a city, along with the murder of its survivors into a novella, pushing the boundaries of the novella as a literary genre.

For Kleist, injustice is at the heart of the problem of evil. When terrible things happen to good people, it challenges our sense of justice. Heinrich von Kleist includes many examples of this type of event in his stories. For example, in "The Foundling" a man who saves a sick child at the expense of his own son loses his wife and his home to the child once he becomes an adult. In "The Beggarwoman of Locarno" a wealthy Lord refuses to allow a poor woman to sleep on the floor of his mansion, and she dies after he startles and upsets her. However, In *Michael Kohlhaas* Heinrich von Kleist reveals what happens when people take justice in their own hands and seek to resolve what they regard as the evil in the world for themselves—a theme that parallels his investigation of human interpretation of the reason for natural evils. Kleist presents to us another possible solution to the problem of evil. Rather than trust that this is the best of all

possible worlds, skeptically interrogate the dealings of God and man, or prophesize apocalypse by drawing upon scripture and personal narrative, many of Kleist's characters seek justice for themselves. Through the novella, Kleist shows us that these efforts usually cause greater evil. Painting a picture of intimately connected characters, Kleist suggests that the selfish pursuit of justice results in the destruction of those relationships.

Blake also includes characters who ignorantly pursue vengeance or violence, sometimes through the means of an earthquake. Few natural events can match the apocalyptic destruction of an earthquake. It seems natural that a writer like William Blake who was so interested in various forms of apocalypse would write about earthquakes. There are several earthquakes in the prophetic books of William Blake. *Tiriël* centers around an insane tyrant who seeks to destroy his own children. He blames them for the loss of his wife, whose death the children had nothing to do with. Blind and described with the language of death and rot, Tiriël brings about an earthquake in order to kill his own children. Like some religious figures in Lisbon after the earthquake, Tiriël is desperate to assign blame. In Blake's mythos, an earthquake is not symbolic of an expression of God's judgment, nor is it part of the best of all possible worlds. It is symbolic of the abuse of power by a tyrannical figure.

Earthquakes are also present in Blake's "Jerusalem" "Milton" and "America: A Prophecy". Vala from "Jerusalem" is described as having an earthquake "in her Loins" and is a figure that brings great destruction and death (object 64, line 11). An "enormous conflict Earthquake" occurs to announce the appearance of Urizen in "Milton" just before he attempts to drain Milton's poetic genius by pouring "icy fluid" on his head (Object 20, line 10). The angel of Albion brings plagues and famine to America in "America: A Prophecy" overwhelming the country like an earthquake, an act that David Erdman interprets as being symbolic of England's

oppressive tactics on the colonies (Object 16, line 9). While many saw the Lisbon earthquake as an expression of God's judgment, Blake consistently uses earthquakes within the genre of prophecy to criticize figures who abuse their power to oppress others or assign blame unfairly.

The prophetic structure of the arguments of Leibniz, Pope, and Kant moves from disaster to a peaceful community. For Kleist and Blake, however, the disaster only creates more violence and chaos. Each of these writers use different literary genres to satirize and condemn religious enthusiasm. Just as natural disasters such as earthquakes altered the land, they gave writers such as Kleist and Blake an opportunity to alter and transform literary genres. The formal expression of their ideas about the complex relationship between natural disaster and the problem of evil allows them to raise questions, affect the reader, and express critique ways suited to their arguments against judgment and violence. Experimentation with these literary forms allows them to make effective, and destabilizing arguments about the problem of evil. Blake combines prophecy, visual art, and satire to create *Tiriell*, whose false interpretations of suffering result in the pain and death of the innocent. Kleist utilizes aspects of the novella and the romance story in *Earthquake at Chile* to show how innocent people can die due to the misinterpretation of natural events.

#### DISASTER AND ENTHUSIASM IN HEINRICH VON KLEIST'S *EARTHQUAKE IN CHILE*

Heinrich von Kleist's 1807 novella *Earthquake in Chile* tells the fictional story of two lovers who escape prison and execution as the result of a devastating earthquake that occurred in Chile in 1647. The story interrogates "the deepest theological and existential questions, leaving them of course unanswered" (Luke 14). Just as Jeronimo is about to commit suicide in prison, and while his lover Josefa is on her way to be executed for having an unsanctioned sexual relationship with him, the earthquake strikes. At first, the earthquake seems like an example of

divine intervention and invites the possibility of freedom for the two unfortunate lovers. Kleist describes the earthquake from Jeronimo's perspective:

The ground shook beneath his feet, all the walls of the prison were cleft, the whole structure threatened to collapse onto the street, and only the subsidence of the building opposite, occurring at the same time as the prison was slowly falling apart, prevented its complete levelling with the ground by creating an accidental supporting vault. (7)

At first, Kleist presents the possibility that a natural disaster such as the earthquake in Santiago could free those who are oppressed, as it literally frees Jeronimo from prison and saves Josefe from being executed. However, his novella works to undermine such magical thinking and raises questions about the meaning-making that attends natural disasters.

The earthquake is described with destruction from Josefe's perspective as well. She walks to the gallows "when suddenly the buildings had begun crashing down and scattered in all directions the procession that was leading her to the block" (55). The earthquake literally causes those who have come to watch her die scatter in fear instead. The earthquake seems to be an act of divine liberation, as Josefe is described as "protected by all the angels in heaven" as she returns to the convent to rescue her baby (55). An execution based on dogmatic religious rules transforms to a moment of motherly rescue. In a reversal of fortunes, she soon discovers the corpse of the Archbishop who condemned her to death, killed in the destruction of the earthquake.

Although the earthquake seems like a fortunate, miraculous occurrence for Jeronimo and Josefe, Kleist still gives a description of the destruction and suffering that the earthquake caused. He writes, "Here lay a heap of corpses, here a voice was still groaning beneath the debris, here people were shouting from burning rooftops" providing a vivid description of the aftermath of

the earthquake (9). The repetition of “here” in this description emphasizes that wherever one looks during the earthquake, they find violence and destruction. Kleist elicits a grim mood as suffering occurs all around. The corpses, groaning, and shouting that Kleist describes evoke a sensory spectacle of immense human suffering, as he brings up the problem of evil in the context of natural disasters. While having already introduced a liberating motive to the earthquake, as it offers the condemned lovers the chance to escape a miserable fate, Kleist also recognizes and mourns the great destruction that the earthquake caused, undermining the integrity of the interpretation and troubling generic expectations of Romance’s supernatural agency and inventions.

Having mostly escaped the terrors of their imprisonment and execution, and rescued their child, Jeronimo and Josefe attend a celebration during which a canon gives a sermon about the earthquake. The canon explains that the earthquake that occurred the previous day was “merely a foretaste” of “the Last Judgment” (25). In his sermon, the canon “turned to the moral depravity of the city; he castigated the city for abominations unknown to Sodom and Gomorrah; and he ascribed it only to the infinite forbearance of God that Santiago had not yet been totally wiped out by the earthquake” (25). The canon holds a view regarding natural disasters that is similar to Southcott’s—disasters such as earthquakes are God’s punishment upon sinners and are the result of sinful behavior. The canon reads the earthquake as both a sign of God’s judgment and a sign of what is to come.

In due course, the canon specifically mentions the sins of Jeronimo and Josefe as examples of human carnality. Kleist’s canon (or “prebendary”) and the members of the congregation carry out the judgment of God in an analogous way to what Southcott promises will happen to those who do not believe in her as a prophet (25). Kleist shows the destructive



violence that a religious-enthusiasm fueled reaction to an earthquake can cause, as several children are murdered along with Jeronimo and Josefe. As Isak Winkel Holm writes, “Josefa and Jeronimo survive the natural disaster but succumb to the social disaster in the church” (53). This disaster is the result of religious enthusiasm, indicating that human interpretation of disaster manifests disasters in kind.

Jeronimo is imprisoned, and Josefe is sent to a convent at the beginning of the novella because of the violent interpretation of scripture practiced by the religious authority of his day, as well as what Kleist describes as the “malicious vigilance” of Josefa’s family (50). The couple draw conflicting interpretations of the earthquake. When it offers them the opportunity to escape their respective prisons, the earthquake seems like it offers salvation. Before the earthquake, Jeronimo is poised to commit suicide, possessing “an inward certainty of the utter hopelessness of his position” and “hating his life” (51). The earthquake offers a “miraculous escape” that Jeronimo interprets as a gift from God and as a divine endorsement for his relationship with Josefa (53). The earthquake expands from a mere negative religious judgment to a larger question of interpretation.

In Kleist’s story, religious enthusiasm destroys any hope of the earthquake becoming an act of liberation or redemption. It strips the few positive results of such a disaster, inviting more violence. The two protagonists who are freed by the earthquake from a judgmental society that demands violence as the price of sin, are once again subdued by violence resulting from judgment and religious enthusiasm. Ironically, violence sparked by religious enthusiasm ends hope of renewal from the destruction of the earthquake. In “Religion, Power, and the Instability of Performance in Heinrich Von Kleist’s Stories” Elystan Griffiths claims that Kleist “draws attention to religious settings as a privileged site” for his “investigation of human self-

representation in a social context” (1468). “The Earthquake in Chile” shows how religious enthusiasm can destroy the possibility for redemption in a disaster, especially when wielded by figures of religious authority such as canons or ministers. However, the canon does not just destroy the liberation of Jeronimo and Josefe. Kleist interrogates the process of applying meaning to events of natural destruction altogether, as neither Jeronimo and Josefe nor the canon can adequately account for the divine motives behind the earthquake in Santiago.

Kleist’s novella enters the debate concerning philosophical optimism as inherited from Leibniz’s *Theodicy* which provides “a metaphorical image of a court of justice” (54). When terrible natural disasters happen, many people attempt to put God on trial for allowing such destruction to happen without at least providing any clear justification. Isak Winkel Holm argues that Kleist’s “The Earthquake of Chile” participates in this dialogue. He writes, “Kleist was familiar with the theodicy debate, primarily because Voltaire, Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant were important figures in his intellectual life” revealing that these key figures influenced the views expressed in his novella (56). The need for a just cause behind the earthquake caused many to believe that the earthquake was an expression of God’s judgment, or at least a part of God’s plan. Due to the fate of the characters in Kleist’s story, we can determine “there is no meaningful order behind the blind contingencies of the earthquake” (57). An event that, despite the destruction and violence it caused, offered new life for the protagonists, ends up resulting in their deaths when interpreted by figures of religious authority. However, even Jeronimo and Josefe are guilty of interpretive hubris by assuming that the earthquake was a divine act meant to free them. Thousands of innocent people were killed in the earthquake that had nothing to do with their imprisonment. Rather than mourn the loss of innocent life, Jeronimo, Josefe, and the canon rejoice in small-minded interpretations of the earthquake.

Like *The Earthquake in Chile*, Heinrich von Kleist's "The Beggarwoman of Lacarno" explores the supernatural as a means of dealing with man-made evil. Kleist tells the story of a poor woman who is mistreated by a wealthy marquis and returns as a ghost to haunt him and his wife. The events related to her repeated hauntings of the marquis lead to the destruction of his entire estate. Tom Spencer compares Kleist to Kant, explaining that "Like Kant, Kleist places the paranormal between the rational-scientific and religious worlds, but unlike Kant he permits it to call the integrity of both worlds into question" (262). One interpretation of this story is that Kleist's beggarwoman enacts justice for herself through the paranormal. While philosophical optimism claims that we should trust in God's masterplan, Kleist's characters seek justice for themselves, often through violent action. However, the ghost may not exist at all, and is rather a manifestation of the marquis's guilt. This ambiguity allows for tension between enacting judgment through violence and assigning supernatural causes to natural events.

Like *Earthquake in Chile* the evil in this story is done by men. Even though *Earthquake in Chile* describes a disastrous earthquake that kills thousands, the greatest evil is committed by religious leader seeking justice for the sins of others. Similarly, even though a disastrous fire occurs in "The Beggarwoman of Lacarno" this unfortunate event is overshadowed by the cruelty of one man, known as "an Italian marquis" (213). His mistress takes in a sick beggarwoman who has no place to sleep (213). After returning from a hunting trip, the marquis discovers her and orders the beggarwoman to move "behind the stove" so that she cannot be seen (213). The woman's crutch slips "on the polished floor" and she becomes injured and dies soon after (213). Despite possessing great wealth and a fine home with plenty of room, the marquis has no compassion for the beggarwoman. A woman the marquis could have helped dies because of his

cruelty. In the background lies the social and inter-relational problems that have resulted in a beggarwoman (who bears the title of Kleist's story) who is forced to seek shelter from strangers.

Philosophical optimism is absent from "The Beggarwoman of Lacarno". The beggarwoman suffers without justification and dies in part because of the cruelty of others. Even in the afterlife, she has no rest as she continually haunts the marquis. The ghost of the beggarwoman first appears when the marquis has a knight stay at his home for the evening. Kleist describes the sound of the apparition as it first is heard by the knight--"something that had been invisible to the eye had risen to its feet in the corner with a noise as if it had been lying on straw, and had then with audible steps, slowly and feebly, crossed the room from one side to the other and collapsed, moaning and gasping, behind the stove" (213). Focusing on the effects of human evil, Kleist's beggarwoman relives her suffering again as she repeats her movement from a comfortable place of rest to her death, just as the marquis made her get up and move before she died. Her moment of weakness and frailty during life becomes a recurring moment of power and vengeance after death, even if her presence in the story after her death is merely a psychological projection of the marquis's guilt. Like other eighteenth-century writers, Kleist sees human cruelty as paramount to the problem of evil as a philosophical problem.

After the first appearance of the beggarwoman's ghost, justice for the marquis's cruelty begins to occur through supernatural means, as the marquis's financial difficulties begin to worsen since her appearance "deterred a number of purchasers" of his home (214). As the hauntings continue, the marquis decides he must investigate the ghost himself. He hears sounds similar to the ones the knight described--"sounds as of someone rising from a bed of rustling straw, and crossing the room from one side to the other to collapse in moaning death-agony behind the stove" (214). The fact that the beggarwoman is invisible prevents the marquis from

being able to justify the sounds of her hauntings. The marquis must experience the beggarwoman's suffering audibly as a reminder of his cruelty. And yet, these sounds could be rationalized as auditory hallucinations by the marquis.

Despite their desire to sell the castle, the marquis and his wife cannot escape the "inexplicable, ghostly sounds" that haunt them night after night as Kleist's version of supernatural vengeance takes its toll (214). The marquis and his wife wait by the site of the haunting with "a rapier and pistols" along with their dog (215). The dog growls and barks when the sounds occur yet again (215). Determined to confront the ghost of the beggarwoman, the marquis attacks "like a madman in all directions through the empty air" while his wife leaves the house and accidentally drops a candle (215-216). As his house burns to the ground and the marquis perishes in the fire, the beggarwoman achieves supernatural vengeance for the cruel way in which he treated her. This destruction marks "the breaking down of human order" in the story (Novero 493). Kleist concludes, "and to this day his white bones, gathered together by the country people, still lie in that corner of the room in which he had ordered the beggarwoman of Locarno to rise from her bed" as the marquis experiences a similar fate to the one he condemned the beggarwoman (215). In a reversal of power, the ghost of the beggarwoman defeats a powerful marquis. Here the disaster, or the great fire that destroys the Marquis's home, is not the evil event, but disaster is caused ultimately by human cruelty. As in the earthquakes that occur in the prophetic books of William Blake, disasters are not the true evil, but merely a complement to the evil that human beings do.

While in "The Beggarwoman of Lacarno" a simple act of charity or forgiveness by the marquis could have prevented total destruction, in "The Foundling" an act of kindness and charity brings about the destruction of the main character Piachi as well as his family and estate.

Nonetheless, this act is independent of the decisions that Nicolo makes as he betrays his father. Piachi saves a young boy from Ragusa named Nicolo who is sick with the plague. Soon after, his own child Paolo dies from the plague after Nicolo's disease spreads to him. Nicolo recovers, and Piachi raises him as his own son, providing him with an education and making him his inheritor, only for Nicolo to take everything from him.

The story includes a collection of characters intimately linked by their tendency to both save and destroy one another, as Kleist once again explores human action as the cause of evil rather than evil and suffering as a philosophical problem that optimism, skepticism, or prophecy can provide answers for. Even after Piachi murders his adopted son Nicolo who raped his wife Elvira, stole his estate, and kicked Piachi and Elvira out of their own home, he still cannot achieve the justice he seeks, as his journey to Hell to punish Nicolo is prevented by the delay of his execution. While in "The Beggarwoman of Lacarno" Kleist explores the completion of supernatural judgment and vengeance, in "The Foundling" he shows the futility of seeking divine justice for evil actions.

Kleist employs elements of tragedy in this short story, as what seems like a loving relationship between father and adopted son slowly turns into catastrophe. As Nicolo grows to adulthood, Piachi employs him as his clerk. The young man is a model son, except for one fatal flaw. Kleist writes, "The only fault that the old man, who was a sworn enemy of all bigotry, had to find with him was the company he kept with the monks of the Carmelite monastery, who were paying very friendly attentions to the boy on account of the large fortune he would one day inherit from his adoptive father" (271). As in *Earthquake in Chile* Kleist shows the hypocrisy of Church leaders, who in this case are not only greedy, but involved with prostitution rings in Rome.

The relationship between Piachi and Nicolo mirrors the relationship between Elvira and Colino, who as a boy sacrificed his life to save hers. While Nicolo tries to manipulate his adoptive father at every turn, Elvira never forgets the sacrifice that Colino made for her, so much so that “an element of silent melancholy” is always with her (272). Caught in a fire as a young girl, Elvira contemplated leaping from the burning ruins of her home into the sea to meet certain death when “a young Genoese of patrician family appeared in the doorway, threw his cloak over the beam, took her in his arms and with great courage and skill, by clinging to one of the damp cloths that hung down from it, lowered himself into the sea with her” where they were rescued by boat (272). However, a stone hit Colino’s head during this brave act, and he died several years later after suffering great illness and injury. Nicolo’s actions are completely self-serving, and there is no indication that he feels any gratitude towards Piachi or Paolo. But Elvira keeps a portrait of Colino in her bedroom so that she always remembers him. Kleist shows that sacrificing ourselves for others is one way to combat the problem of evil, presenting the possibility of suffering with hope for redemption, but even then there is no guarantee our efforts will be appreciated. Nonetheless, we could interpret Colino’s injury and death as judgment for hypothetical wrongs he has committed in the past. Kleist reveals the deep-seated problems with human interpretation of evil events.

As Kleist develops Nicolo’s flaws as a character, we learn that his wife Constanza dies, leading him back to the Carmelite monks who are involved with Xaviera Tartini, a prostitute that Nicolo spent time with as a younger man. When Elvira discovers Nicolo in bed with one of Tartini’s chambermaids shortly after the death of Constanza, Nicolo blames her for a humiliating prank that Piachi plays on him to shame him for his actions. Once again, the errors of human interpretation are at play, as Nicolo blames Elvira instead of looking at his own actions. After

this, Nicolo becomes increasingly interested in his stepmother, seeking to sleep with her not only to gratify his own base desires but to shame her as he believes she shamed him. Soon he discovers the portrait of Colino in her room, and noticing the anagrammatic similarity between Nicolo and Colino, assumes that Elvira is interested in him, falling into another trap of hubristic interpretation. Nicolo's interpretation of signs influences him in becoming an abominable villain. Dressing up in similar attire as Colino, he rapes Elvira after she faints upon seeing him in her bedroom. When Piachi discovers his adopted son raping his wife, he demands that Nicolo leave their home. In response, Nicolo declares "that it was for Piachi to leave the house, for he, Nicolo, was now its owner by deed of gift and he would defend his title to it against all corners" (284). Nicolo's actions are atrocious. His actions alone, notwithstanding his indignant response completely undo the great sacrifice that his family has made for him, and make him a monster. Kleist shows that sacrifice cannot compensate for the evil that human beings can do.

In another veiled criticism of figures of religious authority, the Church sides with Nicolo against his father, as Piachi and Elvira are ordered to leave their home. Elvira dies shortly thereafter "who as a result of the recent episode had fallen into a burning fever" (284-285). Nicolo's transformation from debauched youth to sinister rapist is complete, as a character who was described only pages earlier as "not a model of self denial" is now described as an "infernal scoundrel" (272, 284). This change is in part due to his involvement with the Carmelite monks, who help Nicolo in the lawsuit against his father. The bishop, who Kleist refers to ironically as a "prince of the Church" issues "a decree confirming Nicolo's title to the property and enjoining Piachi to leave him in possession without further interference" and helps the wicked son take everything from his father without pursuing justice for his deplorable actions (284). In "The Foundling" figures of Church authority work against the pursuit of justice and contribute to evil.



Far from helping us to find answers to philosophical or religious issues such as the problem of evil, institutionalized religion works to further evil in the world.

Kleist brings up the pursuit of individual justice as a viable way of dealing with evil and suffering. When his wife dies, his lawsuit fails, and the Church sides against him, Piachi's last option is to take justice into his own hands. Traveling to his former home with the injunction, he attacks Nicolo, "crushed out his brains against the wall" and stuffed "the injunction into his mouth" (284). Once discovered, Piachi is condemned to be executed. At first it appears Piachi has achieved revenge against the man who ruined his life, but, as Kleist shows us, even the pursuit of individual justice against evil is not enough to combat evil or to satisfy one's desire for justice. Kleist complicates our most basic understanding of justice, as the standards and authority of those who claim to seek it are problematic.

In Kleist's short stories, institutionalized religion often works against justice, and contributes to the problem of evil understood as unjust suffering. The same bishops and monks who failed to pursue justice for Nicolo's rape of Elvira, and who helped Nicholo in stealing his father's home, hypocritically try "to convince him (Piachi) of the heinousness of his behavior" as he awaits execution (284). Piachi remains defiant in his pursuit of individual justice. When a priest describes to Piachi "all the terrors of hell into which his soul was about to be plunged" and offers the sacrament, Piachi rejects him (285). He hopes to travel to Hell to "continue my vengeance" on Nicolo (285). As in "The Beggarwoman of Lacarno" Kleist presents the supernatural as a means by which one can achieve justice or revenge and as a mode of explication that is always insufficient.

Even though Piachi has committed murder, Kleist describes his final days in a manner that vaguely echoes Christ, who also sought to return from the dead. For example, Piachi is

executed after being brought out to the gallows three days in a row. Kleist writes, “On three successive days similar attempts were made and every time without avail” echoing the three days Christ spent on the cross (285). Kleist presents Piachi as a Christ-like figure, even if his pursuit of justice failed. Piachi is prepared to face “the whole legion of devils to come and fetch him” so that he can travel to Hell to continue his punishment of Nicolo (285). Piachi is willing to face the law, the Church, and even Hell itself to pursue justice for the evil Nicolo has committed, making him a tragically heroic figure. Even if his pursuit of justice ultimately fails, Kleist leaves open the possibility of vengeance in the after-life.

The clearest, and most extreme example of a character from Kleist’s stories who seeks justice outside the boundaries of the law is Michael Kohlhaas. From the beginning of *Michael Kohlhaas* Kleist describes this character in somewhat ambiguous terms. His narrator calls Michael Kohlhaas “one of the most honorable as well as one of the most terrible men of his age” placing him in an ambiguous moral place from the beginning of the story (114). Kleist shows us the dangers of seeking justice for ourselves as a response to human evil, as Michael Kohlhaas loses everything, including his family as well as his own life, over two horses. Like Piachi, Michael Kohlhaas never truly achieves justice for the suffering he has experienced.

Like religiously inspired prophets, it is Michael Kohlhaas’s over-zealous sense of justice that works against him. His desire for personal justice over his horses that were confiscated and over-worked turns to wrath. With no recourse to law or religious figures for help, Kleist’s characters are often forced to take justice into their own hands, which leads to their destruction.

Kleist uses spiritual terms to describe Michael Kohlhaas’s pursuit of justice, which implies that spiritual justifications for revenge are often faulty and misguided. When his wife Lisbeth agrees that appealing to the law is the best plan of action, she claims “that he would be

doing God's work if he put a stop to abuses of this kind" painting a portrait of her husband as a religiously inspired hero (125). When Kohlhaas attacks Tronka Castle, Kleist's narrator describes this act "as if the avenging angel of heaven had descended on the place" (137). Kohlhaas takes divine justice in his own hands, as if he were God himself. After burning and destroying several other areas, Kohlhaas writes a public letter to explain his actions, calling himself "an emissary of the Archangel Michael, who has come to punish with fire and sword all those who shall stand on the Junker's side in this quarrel, and to chastise in them the deceitfulness which now engulfs the whole world" (146). Kohlhaas casts himself as a figure of divine judgment, here to punish the wicked for the evils they commit. In doing so, he creates far more evil than the Junker he pursues. Despite fashioning himself after an angel from God who brings justice, "Kohlhaas's turn to violence in an effort to enforce the authority he claimed turns out to undermine that very authority" (Champlin 441). His use of violence makes him much worse than those he seeks justice against.

Henry Pickford suggests that Kleist would have read Immanuel Kant's writings concerning moral theories, possibly during the writing of *Michael Kohlhaas* and integrated them into the development of his righteous, but deeply flawed protagonist (381). Pickford argues that Kohlhaas is often the victim of what Kant refers to as "circumstantial luck" such as when his lawsuit fails due to "nepotistic relations" between the Junker and the Elector of Brandenburg, or, much worse, when his wife Lisbeth tragically dies due to a misunderstanding as she is trying to appeal for her husband's cause (387). Although Kohlhaas's wrath is mostly a response to the injustice involving his horses, it is further ignited by tragic, unlucky events such as the death of his wife that make him even more determined in his campaign.

The only thing that interrupts Kohlhaas's brutal campaign and causes him to question his actions is a letter from Martin Luther himself. Kleist includes a fictionalized version of this letter in the novel, using the epistle form to interrupt the novel while also marking a dramatic change in action for the vengeful Kohlhaas. Letters play a significant role in influencing the decisions of the characters, as the written word has the power to drastically change the plot.

The critical part about Luther's letter to Kohlhaas is that he changes the view of Kohlhaas as a divine avenger and casts him as a corrupt villain instead. In another instance of "circumstantial luck" Kohlhaas sees the letter just as he is about to execute two men for plundering (Pickford 387). This execution is completely hypocritical, as Kohlhaas himself has plundered all over the countryside. Kohlhaas is about to carry out the execution with "a great angelic sword on a red leather cushion, decorated with gold tassels" followed by "twelve men with burning churches" (149). In this scene, Kohlhaas carries himself as if he were the divine bringer of justice. The twelve men that follow him are symbolic of the twelve apostles, as Kohlhaas continues his deluded view of himself as a Christ-like figure. It is just at this moment when Kohlhaas discovers the letter from Martin Luther. Luther writes that while Kohlhaas claims "to wield the sword of justice" he is actually "the very embodiment of injustice" revealing the hypocrisy with which Kohlhaas operates (148). He calls Kohlhaas a "godless man" and a "rebel" whose sword is "the sword of robbery and murder" and declares that in the end, he will be executed and damned to Hell (148). This letter robs Kohlhaas of his divine aspirations and righteous self-image.

Throughout *Michael Kohlhaas* Kleist uses the novella form to chart the transition of his protagonist to an inversion of Christian doctrine whose pantomime of religious justice decries his spiritual insufficiency. Whenever they meet, Luther says to Kohlhaas, "Your breath is pestilent

and your presence perdition” furthering his view of him as a satanic figure (150). Despite the fact that Luther agrees to appeal to the Elector on his behalf, Kohlhaas nonetheless refuses to forgive the Junker. Even a rebuke from one of the most influential religious figures of his time cannot halt Kohlhaas from seeking revenge and taking divine justice into his own hands. Kleist suggests that anyone who assumes the role of divinely sanctioned angel of justice is destined to become a corrupt villain, as well as a bringer of injustice.

The written word also plays a vital role in the text when the gypsy provides Kohlhaas with a locket that contains valuable information about the House of Saxony. This is one of the few times when, despite his excessively violent campaign, Kohlhaas threatens the political powers of his day. The mysterious gypsy has provided Kohlhaas with a document of great power, so much so that “if a single indiscreet word once made him aware of it, all the riches the Elector possessed would not suffice to purchase it from that ferocious ruffian, whose vindictiveness was insatiable” (192). The Elector of Saxony knows that this document contains valuable information, and fears what Kohlhaas will do with it. Ironically, a gypsy has provided Michael Kohlhaas with the power to bring down an extremely powerful political figure.

Comparing Michael Kohlhaas to Piachi from “The Foundling” it is notable that both characters are offered some kind of communion before their execution, as Kleist explores the pursuit of justice in the afterlife or supernatural. Piachi refuses communion in “The Foundling” because he wants to travel to Hell to pursue Nicolo. Kohlhaas, however, takes his own kind of communion. To the terror of the Elector of Saxony, just before Kohlhaas is beheaded, he eats the papers containing important information about the House of Saxony. Kohlhaas makes sure that the Elector of Saxony is watching him, as he “strode up close to him, took the locket from round his neck, took out the piece of paper, unsealed it and read it” before being beheaded.

Although readers do not know what information this piece of paper held, Kleist assures us that “the Elector of Saxony returned to Dresden physically and mentally a broken man” (211).

Through this strange communion, provided by the gypsy, Kohlhaas achieves a measure of vengeance against those who refused to allow him justice. Kohlhaas receives his communion from a figure of spirituality outside of the confines of traditional religious authority. Through the gypsy, Kleist questions the justice of an unjust social hierarchy.

What begins as the desire for justice completely consumes Michael Kohlhaas. His actions, which include burning cities to the ground and murdering innocent people, are “disproportionate to the minor injustice of the unlawful seizure of his horses” (Gerevich 79). In seeking justice, Michael Kohlhaas becomes an agent of evil rather than of good. At his execution, his eyes are described as “wide and sparkling with triumph” at the return of his two horses along with money for medical bills and a few other items (210). At the news that Junker Wenzel must serve “two years’ imprisonment” Kohlhaas becomes “completely overwhelmed with emotion” (210). This punishment seems paltry compared to the execution which Kohlhaas must suffer. His obsession with achieving justice for the crime committed to him is so great that he does not seem to care much that it has cost him his life. Kleist shows us the incredibly damaging effects of pursuing individual justice at all costs.

Rather than trust that this is the best of all possible worlds as a response to the problem of evil, skeptically interrogate the problem of evil, or rely on Biblical prophecy as a solution to the problem of evil, the characters in Heinrich von Kleist’s stories seek justice for themselves, often through violence. These characters also tend to reproduce the template of divine authorization that enables religious atrocities. Kleist posits human action as a way of managing the problem of

evil, as opposed to the more philosophical solutions of earlier eighteenth-century writers, but also shows us the deep problems with human interpretation that motivate this action.

#### EARTHQUAKES IN THE PROPHETIC BOOKS OF WILLIAM BLAKE

Like Kleist and other writers examined in this study, William Blake also used earthquakes to pursue through satire the dangers of judgment and condemnation. He is particularly interested in the context of both religious enthusiasm and reason, especially in the context of the discussion of the problem of evil as inherited from Leibniz, Pope, and the skeptical Deists. The characters that cause earthquakes in his works are often quick to judge others with distorted reason. While Blake would have disagreed with religious enthusiasts or prophetic writers who saw natural disasters as a result of God's judgment, he also disagreed with Deists such as Voltaire, Hume, and Diderot. Rather than surmising about the causes of earthquakes, Blake's characters cause them. As S. Foster Damon writes in *A Blake Dictionary*, "All his life, Blake fought Deism" (101). He resisted the idea that the divine is set apart from earthly considerations. Instead of focusing on physical causes of events, Blake believed "all effects are the result of spiritual causes" (101). Rather than an expression of God's judgment, in *Tiriel*, *Milton*, *Jerusalem* and *America: A Prophecy* earthquakes are the result of a corrupt ruler with distorted judgment.

While he had a much more spiritually infused way of seeing the world, there are some things that Blake and the Deists agreed upon. For example, Blake "shared the Deists' hostility to priests and kings, as enslavers of the minds of man" (Damon 101). In a way similar to Diderot's analogy of the Alley of Thorns, Blake often compared priests to insects and lizards that prey upon other forms of life and inhibit joy and desire. S. Foster Damon confirms that while *Tiriel* "is not a political allegory" it certainly was influenced by political controversies of Blake's day

(406). As David Erdman explains in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, Tiriël satirizes the insanity of King George (134). In *Tiriël*, the deranged leader causes the earthquake itself that harms his own family. Erdman points out that Tiriël “is the name for the Intelligency of the planet Mercury, both God of commerce and the cause of the contraries of plenty and poverty” (137). Interestingly, given the effects of mercury, Tiriël is also insane.

As a parody of a god that would punish people through natural disaster, Tiriël becomes unfathomable as God. Tiriël sits in judgment over his own children, punishing them and enslaving them, suggesting that the God of Leibniz and Pope, who has supposedly created the best of all worlds, can be reinterpreted as a tyrant. Tiriël is a caricature of the kind of punitive god the characters in Kleist’s stories believe in. He writes, “Earth thus I stamp thy bosom rouse the earthquake from his den” as Tiriël creates an earthquake through his supreme powers (object 11, line 5). Tiriël alters and damages the material Earth through blind anger. Tiriël literally bursts through the ground in an expression of rage towards his children, which causes an earthquake. His “dark & burning visage” is thrown “thro the cleaving ground” as he breaks through the ground to wreak destruction (object 11, line 6). Blake parodies the idea of a god who uses natural disasters to punish his creation for sin. Tiriël appears as the ultimate sign of suffering from divinely inspired natural disasters, as he summons an earthquake to punish his children for the death of his wife, which they had nothing to do with. However, his cruelty and insanity make him seem more human than divine.

There is nothing holy or even good about Tiriël, as he comes to resemble a corrupt king or priest rather than a god. By casting Tiriël as “king of the West,” which indicates that he is symbolic “of the body” Blake shows us that human beings, and especially tyrannical leaders, have the power to oppress, manipulate and destroy texts and other human beings in a way similar



to a natural disaster such as an earthquake (Damon 405). Like the canon from Kleist's *Earthquake in Chile* Tiriël condemns and assigns blame without proper justification, and in doing so stirs up violence. In one of Blake's separate drawings for *Tiriël* entitled "Tiriël, Upheld on the Shoulders of Ijim, Addresses His Children" Tiriël is depicted as a white-bearded old man, sitting on his brother's shoulders while gesturing menacingly at five figures who clutch one another in fear. Another figure bows before him fearfully.

There is a stark contrast between Blake's poetry which describes Tiriël as a powerful figure bursting through the ground who "rouses the earthquake" from his den and the drawing that shows him addressing his children (object 11, line 5). Tiriël appears weak and feeble, as he needs his brother's support to address his children. Through this contrast between text and image, Blake satirizes those who pursue judgment based on dogmatic interpretation of evil events as pathetic and foolish. The cane lying on the ground before Ijim shows that he cannot even walk, much less bring about an event of cataclysmic physical destruction. In the illustration, Tiriël is a caricature of an all-powerful God who deals out judgment.

Tiriël's anger is motivated in many ways by the death of his wife Myratana and his children's reaction to her death, as Blake continues his parody of a misguided ruler who falsely assigns blame for evil and suffering. Tiriël summons his children to his presence, asking them to bear witness to the death of their mother. Blaming them for her death, he refers to his own children as "sons of the Curse" (Object 2, line 11). Tiriël's "eldest son" responds to his father in anger for blaming them for the death of Myratana (Object 2, line 13). He says,

Old man unworthy to be calld . the father of Tiriëls race  
For every one of those wrinkles. each of those grey hairs  
Are cruel as death. & as obdurate as the devouring pit

Why should thy sons care for thy curses thou accursed man

Were we not slaves till we rebeld . Who cares for Tiriels curse

His blessing was a cruel curse. His curse may be a blessing (lines 12-17)

As a tyrannical ruler, Tiriel has become so corrupt that his powers to curse or to bless have been distorted, creating the opposite effect. Like fanatical religious leaders that blame disaster on those they find guilty of sin, Tiriel's judgment is askew, and inconsistent with reality.

Characterizing Tiriel as a cruel old man, (even his wrinkles and hairs are "cruel as death") Blake describes a leader like the canon from Kleist's story, who is full of anger, curses, and resentment (14). In assigning blame to others through religious enthusiasm, these leaders lose their human aspects, such as kindness and mercy. By misinterpreting events such as natural disasters, and misreading scripture, religious enthusiasts lose some part of their humanity. Blake satirizes those who assign blame to human beings for unfortunate events such as the death of Myratana. Like the prophetic writers of the eighteenth-century discussed in chapter three, Tiriel interprets the cause of evil events as the result of sin. In doing so, Blake uses him to expose the destruction and suffering that occur when the problem of evil is blamed on a scapegoat.

Tiriel lashes out at his children in his grief over the death of his wife. He does not want to grieve with his children so much as he wants to irrationally blame them for the death of their mother. As Hans Ostrom argues, "Whatever impact he achieves by demanding pity for his wife, who deserves it, he loses by childishly demanding pity for himself" making Tiriel's anger at his children detestable and pathetic (170). He refers to his own children as "serpents" and "worms of death" that are "feasting upon your aged parents flesh" (Object 2, lines 25-26). Tiriel's anger seems like insanity, as his children have played no role in the death of Myratana, but instead

have spent their lives being enslaved by their cruel father. Blake shows us that assigning blame to people for unstoppable tragic events and disasters is destructive and insane.

Tiriël wishes for an apocalyptic storm to wipe out his own children. Like the religiously enthusiastic prophets of the eighteenth-century, and like the canon from Kleist's *Earthquake in Chile* he predicts a great storm to punish who he deems as sinful. Cursing them, he says,

There take the body. cursed sons. & may the heavens rain wrath

As thick as northern fogs. around your gates. to choke you up

That you may lie as now your mother lies. like dogs. cast out. (Object 3, lines 11-13)

Tiriël wishes death upon his own children and compares them to stray dogs, revealing the dehumanization that results from his interpretation of disaster. In his insistence on assigning blame to someone for the death of his wife, he treats his own children with unimaginable cruelty. Blake's imagery of heaven raining down thick wrath upon them is similar to the storms predicted by Richard Brothers. This choking rain and fog is meant to punish Tiriël's children for sins they did not commit. Tiriël invokes natural events as indicative of divine judgment. Blake satirizes judgmental religious language that assigns blame to evil events.

Blake shows us that blaming the evil and suffering in this world has a destructive effect on the blamer as well, as Tiriël is destroyed by his hateful judgments. Like Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas, he loses more and more in his pursuit of justice. Transformed into a blind man, and begging his family members for food, Tiriël meets his "brother Ijim" in the woods (Object 8, line 12). However, Ijim does not recognize him, and threatens him with violence.

Like a deranged prophet or, like Nebuchadnezzar, Tiriël is forced to wander insane in the wilderness. Hans Ostrom compares Pope and Blake, explaining that while "Pope satirizes his dunces by placing them in a landscape that cannot contain their dangerous, chaotic energy, Blake

dramatizes the spiritual failure of Tiriël by having him stumble across unfixed, vacant, nearly surrealistic landscapes” (170). Blake’s literary form of free-verse prophecy allows space for his prophetic characters to wander in the wilderness, satirizing the fate of those who blindly insist on a vengeful interpretation of the problem of evil. Ijim calls his brother Tiriël an “Eyeless wretch” who “obstructs the lions path” (Object 8, line 6). Tiriël pleads with his brother, saying “O Brother Ijim thou beholdest wretched Tiriël / Kiss me my brother & then leave me to wander desolate” (Object 8, lines 23-24). Cursing his children has left Tiriël blind and alone, begging for recognition from his own brother. Blake shows us that abuses of power, and assigning blame to individuals for events that occur outside of human control leaves one totally alone. Ironically, even though it is Tiriël who is blind, it is his family who cannot see him.

Blake uses imagery of rot to describe Tiriël, which furthers his characterization as a figure of authority who is destroyed by his corrupt pursuit of justice. By wrongly blaming others for the death of his wife, he destroys himself. His son calls him “king of rotten wood & of the bones of death” (Object 4, line 5). When Ijim carries Tiriël to the palace, he says he should have “left him rotting in the forest” (Object 9, line 20). Tiriël’s misreadings and misinterpretations have made him like a rotting corpse. Ijim carries Tiriël to Tiriël’s palace, where his sons Huxos and Lotho are surprised to meet their blind, aging father (Object 9, line 13). At the sight of their father, who has oppressed and enslaved them, they cannot speak--“Their eloquent tongues were dumb & sweat stood on their trembling limbs” (Object 9, line 16). Judgment and anger have silenced the spoken word. As a tyrant, Tiriël inspires only fear.

Kleist shows that in assigning blame through paranoia about the causes of a great disaster, human beings can cause even greater destruction and evil, as innocent people die. Similarly, Tiriël’s destruction knows no bounds. His will to destroy conquers all. Tiriël brings

all his destructive resources to this scene, including “his fiery dogs” that “Rise from the center belching flames & roarings” (object 11, lines 7-8). These dogs rise from the ground like demons summoned from hell. Utilizing fire and flames in these descriptions, Blake provides a demonic or satanic aspect to Tiriél’s powers. He is more like a demon from Hell than a leader upon Earth. As a demonic figure, Tiriél unmasks the corruption behind those who see natural disasters as an expression of God’s judgment.

Personifying pestilence as a sleepy, disgusting spirit wearing a cloak that drips with disease, Blake sees judgment and paranoia as spreading sickness and disease across the Earth and to all peoples. Tiriél summons Pestilence itself, which “bathest in fogs & standing lakes” and commands it to “Rise up thy sluggish limbs & let the loathsome of poisons / Drop from thy garments as thou walkest, wrapt in yellow clouds” (object 11, lines 9-11). In his wrath and paranoia, Tiriél summons sickness across the earth, implicating the innocent in his will for revenge against his children. Like Michael Kohlhaas, Tiriél is prepared to kill innocent people in what he believes is a quest for justice. By attempting to confront the problem of evil through action, Tiriél and Michael Kohlhaas both cause even greater evil. The next day reveals a “hundred men in ghastly death” along with “four daughters” that have been killed by Tiriél’s terrible curse. The dead lie “stretchd on the marble pavement silent all / falln by the pestilence the rest moped round in guilty fears” (Object 22, lines 32-33). In his need to blame someone for the death of his wife, Tiriél has murdered his own family and erased his own children. Blake shows us the immense loss that comes when we assign blame to individuals for events that are out of our control. While Tiriél sees himself as a harbinger of justice, he is actually an insane murderer. Tiriél is blind both in the fact that he has no vision, and in that he is blind to his corrupt desires. Blake satirizes the human desire for vengeance based on religious enthusiasm.

Blake continues to characterize Tiriël as one who uses religiously inspired judgment to condemn others, as his wrath summons forces akin to the four horsemen of the apocalypse from the Book of Revelation. Pestilence, Death, War, and Famine all occur as the result of Tiriël's unjustifiable rage towards his own children. After this scene of death and destruction, Tiriël's daughter Hela takes her father, described as the "destroyer," "consumer," and "avenger" to her sisters (Object 12, line 24). Hela and her sisters embody the kinds of traits that political and religious leaders should possess. Hela describes them as "holy. & forgiving filld with loving mercy / Forgetting the offences of their most rebellious children" (Object 12, lines 27-28). They are drastically different from their vengeful, insane father. Blake emphasizes forgiveness and mercy over wrath and destruction. Nevertheless, Tiriël transforms Hela's hair into snakes, saying, "Let snakes rise from thy bedded locks & laugh among thy curls" (Object 13, line 11). This is reminiscent of Medusa as Tiriël, a monster himself, spreads his monstrous nature to his daughter.

Whereas E.P. Thompson reveals in *Witness Against the Beast* that Blake rejects the idea of original sin in his antinomian beliefs, *Tiriël* demonstrates that Blake further rejects the idea of a benevolent God who uses natural disasters to punish his creation for their sins. God does not need to punish his creation for their sins because they are already redeemed. In Blake's *Tiriël*, wrath and paranoia cause the greatest destruction. Tiriël kills and enslaves his own children because of the wrath induced by religious enthusiasm or a dogmatic emphasis on reason. In this case, a great disaster does not give way to a utopian community, but instead further enslaves and destroys human beings.

Blake uses earthquakes to satirize powerful figures who misuse their power and judge incorrectly. He shows the perverse psychologies motivated by religious enthusiasm that cause

suffering because of dogmatism. Another character from Blake's mythology that summons earthquakes, or, more accurately, embodies them, is Vala, or "the goddess of nature" (Damon, 428). Like Tiriell, Vala is associated with a number of destructive forces, many of which were present in the Lisbon earthquake. In *Jerusalem*, Vala is described in the following manner:

Her Hand is a Court of Justice. her Feet: two Armies in Battle  
Storms & Pestilence: in her Locks: & in her Loins Earthquake  
And Fire. & the Ruin of Cities & Nations & Families & Tongues  
(object 64, lines 10-12)

Vala's physical qualities are linked to images of judgment and destruction. The ampersands link powerful forces, as Blake characterizes Vala as an embodiment of both natural and human evil. Some of these are human forms of judgment, such as the "Court of Justice" which her hand represents and the "Armies in Battle" that her feet represent (object 64, line 10). Her limbs contain the power to deal out justice and bloodshed. But her powers do not end there. Her hair is symbolic of "Storms & Pestilence" and her reproductive organs are symbolic of "Earthquake / And Fire" along with "Ruin" (object 65, lines 11-12). Her hair and "Loins" are representative of the supreme power of nature (line 11). Vala physically embodies natural disaster.

Earthquakes appear in several places across Blake's oeuvre. They are always regarded as events of great destruction, but they also serve the role of announcing the entrance of a destructive character within his mythology or serve as a precursor to the destruction that these characters cause. For Blake, natural disasters are not the focal point in discussing the problem of evil, but rather used metaphorically to show the suffering and evil caused by incorrect judgment

and condemning others. In “Milton” for example, an earthquake occurs just before the arrival of Urizen, who rises from the shattered ground during the earthquake. Blake writes,

Thus darkend the Shadowy Female tenfold & Orc tenfold  
Glowd on his rocky Couch against the darkness: loud thunders  
Told of the enormous conflict Earthquake beneath: around:  
Rent the Immortal Females, limb from limb & joint from joint  
And moved the fast foundations of the Earth to wake the Dead  
Urizen emerged from his Rocky Form & from his Snows (Object 19, lines 47-52).

This earthquake is a precursor to Urizen’s appearance, as he rises from the ground. As in other appearances of earthquakes in Blake’s works, this one announces the arrival of an oppressive, tyrannical figure. These figures deal out judgment in an unjust manner, and are often blind or insane. Urizen’s arrival is accompanied by tremendous sound (“loud thunders”) and movement as the “foundations of the Earth” shake (Object 19, lines 48, 51). Rather than associate natural disasters with “sinners” or those who have violated God’s commandments, Blake associates natural disasters with oppressive rulers who unjustly blame the innocent for events out of their control. Urizen’s acts of oppression do not work out well for him, however, Damon writes, “Urizen hurls him into the western sea, only to suffer a Satanic fall himself. He promulgates the Ten Commandments, eyeing in dismay Orc, who is destroying curses, law, empire, and sexual repression” (Damon 19). In his poetic, Blake reverses the common association between natural disasters and God’s judgment, and substitutes it for the false judgment of corrupt leaders.

Blake continues to develop Urizen as a corrupt figure of power who overzealously interprets religious ritual. Urizen seeks to physically oppress Milton, pouring freezing water on



his head. Blake explains that Urizen “took up water from the river Jordan: pouring on / To Miltons brain the icy fluid from his broad cold palm” (Object 20, lines 9-10). Urizen seeks to destroy the poetic genius that Milton represents. As S. Foster Damon reads this line, Urizen “baptizes Milton” with the icy waters from the Jordan River to symbolize the dominance reason will have in his mind (Damon 423). Damon writes, “Urizen opposes his progress towards the universe of Los” claiming that Urizen seeks to lead Milton away from the realm of imaginative power (423). The earthquake in “Milton: A Poem” precedes an act of manipulative oppression disguised by religious ritual. Urizen inhibits Milton from the use of his imagination by attempting to freeze his mind with reason, all under the guise of a pious religious tradition.

In “America: A Prophecy” the angel of Albion gives “the thunderous command” to bring about destruction upon America in the form of several acts of nature similar to natural disasters (Object 16, line 3). Blake writes, “His plagues obedient to his voice flew forth out of their clouds / Falling upon America, as a storm to cut them off / As a blight cuts the tender corn when it begins to appear” (Object 16, lines 4-6). Blake compares the effect of the angel’s spiritual power to storms and pestilence, as the angel destroys the land. Blake uses the verb “cut” twice, indicating that America’s abundance is being removed due to the Angel of Albion.

Blake also describes this destruction in terms of an earthquake, as he writes that the effects of the Angel’s powers are “as a sea o’erwhelms a land in the day of an earthquake” (Object 16, line 9). David Erdman contends that Albion’s Angel is symbolic of England’s attacks upon the colonies following the Declaration of Independence. Once again, an earthquake is the prelude to the destruction caused by a tyrannical or insane ruler that opposes freedom.

Blake critiques prophetic interpretations that perceive natural disasters as an expression of God’s judgment. While other eighteenth-century prophetic writers saw earthquakes and other

forms of natural disaster as a manifestation of God's wrath, Blake does not believe in a vengeful, cruel, God, or in the problem of evil. For Blake, since original sin does not exist, the problem of evil is a manifestation of corrupt ways of thinking, and the failure to embrace the imagination. The oppressive, violent figures that bring about earthquakes (or whose appearance is prefaced by an earthquake) are incorrect in their judgments and obsessed with making others suffer needlessly for what they perceive as some form of sin.

Corrupt leaders and natural disasters have a prominent place in visionary poetry. Throughout many of his prophetic works, William Blake brings to life figures of incredible power. Tiriell, Vala, Urizen, and the Angel of Albion are all examples of these. For each of these characters, earthquakes are related to the abuse of power, as they punish, oppress, and blame other characters for events outside their control. As E.P. Thompson argues, for Blake "the source of 'evil' is human" and the idea of a vengeful God punishing us for sin is a projection of our own corruptions (205). Parodying flawed leaders such as King George III, and weaving the worst tendencies of religious enthusiasts into his mythological conflicts, Blake presents a world to us where judgment and sin are constructs of the mind.

Human evil can cause even more suffering and pain than the devastating natural disaster such as the earthquake at Lisbon that eighteenth-century writers sought philosophical or religious explanations for. Heinrich von Kleist explores this idea through his novella, *The Earthquake in Chile*. At first, natural disaster presents the possibility of liberation from an oppressive society. However, the members of that society interpret the earthquake as being the result of sin, which results in murder, including the murder of an innocent child. Kleist shows the danger of misreading the cause of natural disasters, especially when done so by religious enthusiasts.

Blake's and Kleist's characters are similar in their progression of wrong interpretation leading to vengeance. Like Tiriell, many of Kleist's characters seek justice for evil through their actions. In the novellas discussed here, the beggarwoman, the marquis, and Michael Kohlhaas each seek some form of justice for evils committed to them. While the beggarwoman of Locarno and the marquis achieve some measure of justice for the wrongs that have been committed to them, through Michael Kohlhaas Kleist reveals the destruction and loss that can occur when people seek justice for evil and suffering. Seeking individual justice is not a workable solution to the problem of evil. Both Blake and Kleist suggest that it is often morally unacceptable to inflict violence on others as a form of justice. This is especially true when violence is justified by belief in interpretation, whether that interpretation is of sacred texts or otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

There is a lot more work to be done in exploring these topics and writers, both within the dialectic of philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision and otherwise. There are many areas of this dissertation that could be expanded on and include a more detailed, nuanced analysis in order to better understand the dialectic between philosophical optimism and apocalyptic vision. I hope that my future work will include a greater analysis of the faux prophecies of Jonathan Swift, an exploration of the influence of seventeenth-century prophets on the works of Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott, a discussion of other natural disasters that influenced eighteenth-century thought, as well as a greater emphasis on literary form.

Close readings of the passages from the Bible that were utilized by writers of eighteenth-century prophecy could help provide a better understanding of the works of these writers. The basic tenets of both philosophical optimism and religious enthusiasm are rooted in the Bible. The idea of disaster and suffering paving the way for a utopian community can be seen in the Book of Exodus. The problem of evil itself is discussed in the Book of Job. Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott each reference the Book of Revelation. Providing close readings of these books would help me to gain insight into how works of prophecy were shaped by them.

The prophecies of Jonathan Swift provide compelling satire on the works of prophecy written by the writers I discuss in chapter three. Swift reveals the human flaws that are intrinsic in the production of prophetic writings, such as the tendency to misinterpret texts to our own advantage. However, it is important to more carefully consider the specific target of Swift's satire, especially in his "Famous Prediction of Merlin". In writing this prophecy, Swift satirized the works of John Partridge (Rumbold 394). A popular prophetic writer, Partridge was also "the

most prominent almanac maker of the early eighteenth-century” (McTague 83). I would like to more carefully examine the specific targets of Swift’s satire, especially from the perspective of literary form. I am especially curious to discover if Partridge predicted natural disasters.

Analyzing Partridge’s original prophecies would be the proper first step in understanding Swift’s satire of them, and to determine the nature of religious enthusiasm within them. While I study the form of Swift’s “Prophecy of Merlin” it would help to study the literary form of Partridge’s works to note the differences and better determine the nature of Swift’s satire. Closely reading the almanacs of John Partridge would also open up the possibility of providing a strong analysis of Swift’s Isaac Bickerstaff prophecies, such as *Predictions for the Year 1708*. Swift’s faux prophecies provided a valuable critique of prophecy and religious enthusiasm during the eighteenth-century, and an expanded analysis of their sources would add insight to the second and third chapters of my dissertation.

I hope to explore the ways that seventeenth-century prophets influenced the works of Richard Brothers, Dorothy Gott, and Joanna Southcott. Prophetic writers such as Lady Eleanor Davies, Anne Bodenham, Jane Hawkins, and others paved the way for the eighteenth-century prophets discussed in chapter three as writers of radical prophecy (Mack 16, 77). The seventeenth-century saw the emergence of many female prophetic writers that often threatened male-driven religious institutions. I hope to learn more about the influence of seventeenth-century prophecies on the prophecies discussed in chapter three, and especially to discover and analyze the differences in literary form.

While it is important to read works of eighteenth-century prophecy as part of broader philosophical conversations, it is also important to have a strong understanding of their place in the prophetic tradition. Comparing their works to seventeenth-century prophetic writings would

open up conversations about the different literary genres that prophetic writers employ. Brothers, Gott, and Southcott produced works that combine an array of literary genres, making them unique in their predictions of apocalypse and readings of the Bible. However, how these combinations of genres differ from works produced earlier remains an area to be further explored. This can give us a greater sense of the prophetic tradition and also give us insight into the influences of Blake's prophetic books.

Although the earthquake at Lisbon had a powerful influence on eighteenth-century philosophical and religious thought, it was not the only disaster to influence skeptical deists, religious enthusiasts, or romantic writers. For example, the Great Storm of 1703 was seen by many as a "manifestation of the divine wrath" (Cavendish 65). Daniel Defoe's *The Storm* explores the view of the 1703 storm as evidence of God's anger and influenced conversations about natural disasters.

Similarly, the 1746 earthquake in Lima resulted in writings that explore the earthquake as an expression of judgment. Charles Walker explains that in the aftermath of the earthquake, the citizens of Lima "disagreed deeply and publicly about why God was angry and how to appease him, blaming a variety of groups" (22). The discourse surrounding previous disasters must have influenced the discourse surrounding the earthquake at Lisbon, and especially the view of disasters as an expression of God's judgment. I would like to research the intellectual history of this view and its influence on eighteenth-century thought. I could also explore disasters from the seventeenth-century such as the Great Plague of 1666 and trace their influence in philosophical thought. Explorations of other disasters would help my analysis of the effects of the Lisbon earthquake on eighteenth-century thought.

Literary form plays a vital role in shaping the ways we think about fundamental human questions. In this dissertation, I argue that many of the literary forms used by the writers discussed here emerged as a response to the problem of evil, especially in regards to the Lisbon earthquake. I would like to more closely evaluate how literary form shapes the arguments and views of these writers. For example, the prophetic writers from chapter three utilize a variety of forms, making many of their prophecies a pastiche of different genres. I would like to provide a better evaluation of how these forms work together, contradict one another, and serve as inspirations. I would like to further uncover the literary methods of eighteenth-century prophecy.

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