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Living with Paine: The age of reason in nineteenth-century American literature

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Living with Paine:

The Age of Reason in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

(TITLE)

BY

Joe Webb

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Living with Paine:
The Age of Reason in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

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Summer 2006

Submitted for the fulfillment of the M.A. in English

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Table of Contents

Introduction – 3

Chapter I – 7

Pained Responses to the *Age of Reason*

Chapter II – 25

Echoes of Paine:

Tracing the Writings of Emerson through the *Age of Reason*

Chapter III – 43

The Paine Predates the Paine:

Deism, Darwinism, and Determinism in the Works of Mark Twain

Conclusion - 66

Works Cited – 69

Introduction

The completion of this thesis represents a reasonable stopping point after a year of detective work – a year spent trying to piece together one small story in the history of nineteenth-century American free thought. In July of 2005, I happened to pick up a copy of Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* at a bookstore in Chicago, and having nothing much to do for the next few hours, I sat down in a café and read the book cover to cover. I was captivated. My experience, in fact, was probably not unlike the experience of Mark Twain when he first encountered *The Age of Reason* as a cub pilot in 1857. Years later, in his autobiographical dictations, Twain would say about the book that he “read it with fear and hesitation, but marveling at its fearlessness and power” (*MTB* 3:1445). The young river-boat captain was stunned, as was I, and I set out to discover if the book had captured the attention of others in the same way it had fascinated me.

My first order of business was to read the best available biographies of Paine, and there are several good ones from which to choose. Background material on the author that is not cited in this project is an amalgamation of those sources – and for a more complete biographical sketch than will be given here I recommend Jack Fruchtman’s *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* and Eric Foner’s *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. Any biography available, however, will suffice for answering one important question about the revolutionary’s work: *what precipitated Paine’s fall from literary grace?* The answer to that question is easy to find – Paine sabotaged his own literary legacy (at least in the short term) by publishing *The Age of Reason*. But why did this occur? What caused such vehement responses? It was here that my search began in earnest in an attempt to highlight Paine’s influence on one strain of evangelical

Christianity throughout the American literature of the nineteenth century. Foner's biography pointed me towards a handful of early responses to *The Age of Reason* that helped define the attack against Paine's brand of scientific deism, and I paid special attention to those of Priestley, Watson, and Hannah More. According to Franklyn Prochaska, these were the most influential of the more than thirty evangelical rebuttals to Paine's deistic manifesto. Armed with the knowledge that Paine was often attacked by these evangelicals as an atheist, on a whim I also looked to see if I might find some response from the atheistic community to *The Age of Reason*. After examining refutations by Percy Shelley and Scepticus, I was shocked to discover that the period's atheists disliked Paine's religious views as much as most Christians did, and the two sides employed strikingly similar rhetorical tactics in their attacks on the work.

As far as I can tell, I am one of the first scholars to examine a juxtaposition of evangelical and atheistic critical responses to *The Age of Reason*, or at the very least, one of the first who found it necessary to write down my conclusions. Each side saw Paine's deism as a false compromise, and they united to crush the work, simultaneously crushing the reputation of the author. But ironically, though for the next two centuries Paine was branded an atheist, the ideas that defined his seminal religious work thrived. The negative attention given *The Age of Reason* created an underground culture that attracted students at institutions like Harvard University. Were it not for the strength of these negative responses, Paine's brand of deism would have most likely drifted into oblivion, as did Ethan Allen's *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man*, which sold only two hundred copies (Kaye 109). Today, Ethan Allen is best known for the furniture stores that bear his name, but Paine's works are coming quickly back into vogue. Most important to this

project, however, is that such violent reactions to *The Age of Reason* kept the work alive long enough for it to weave its way into the hands of young Ralph Waldo Emerson.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the underground study of Thomas Paine's deism was so popular that Harvard University administrators were handing out free copies of Bishop Watson's *Apology for the Bible* to entering students (Morison 185). Emerson, of course, was a student at Harvard from 1817 to 1821, where he was surely exposed, like the rest of his classmates, to Paine's deistic text. And although the great transcendentalist was always quick to label Paine a "blasphemer" or an "infidel" publicly, there is an undeniable likeness in their work. Last fall, while reading the 1838 *Divinity School Address*, my pen went crazy marking passages where Emerson sounded remarkably like Paine. Acting on a hunch that there was a deeper link between scientific deism and New England transcendentalism than Emersonians care to admit, I investigated the extent to which Emerson was familiar with the work of Paine, and found much proof that the former was well-acquainted with the latter. Going a step further, I re-read *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *The Divinity School Address*, and other Emerson essays through the lens of *The Age of Reason*, exposing the similar bent of the two writers' theological orientation. The results of that study can be found in Chapter II of this work.

Convinced that the echoes of Paine's work reverberated too widely to disappear, this spring I began looking for another American writer, one who followed Emerson chronologically, who owed a theological debt to Thomas Paine. I considered several authors, along with other historically relevant Americans, and I was surprised by the breadth of *The Age of Reason's* impact. Feel free to draw your own conclusions from

this list – but among the prominent thinkers of the latter half of the nineteenth century influenced by Paine’s deism were Andrew Carnegie, Abraham Lincoln, Robert Dale Owen, and Thomas Edison – all fairly important figures, I would say. Ultimately, however, I selected Mark Twain. Twain, I argue, is the representative American writer of the Gilded Age, and his books are still read widely. Chapter III focuses on the impact of Paine’s work on Twain’s thought, not only stressing the productive thirty-two year period from 1857 to 1889 when Twain was a practicing deist, but also considering the dark outlook which dominated the Son of Missouri’s final years. In establishing the link, I was helped along mightily by Sherwood Cummings’ *Mark Twain and Science*, which started me on the proper path. Going a step further, however, I have discovered that Colonel Robert Ingersoll can serve as a bridge between the two authors. In the rest of the chapter, I once again employ the technique of juxtaposing Paine’s text with the writer he influenced, and I conclude by bringing us to the close of the nineteenth century.

Chapter I

“Pained” Responses to *The Age of Reason*

Introduction

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, no author's works were more widely circulated than those of Thomas Paine, an English corset-maker turned excise official turned inciter of revolution in America and France. Upon its initial publication in January of 1776, his inflammatory pamphlet *Common Sense* became an immediate best-seller, helping to trigger the Declaration of Independence only a few short months later. Going through twenty-five print editions in the first year alone, historians have validated Paine's claim that the work sold an unprecedented 150,000 copies by the end of the century (Eric Foner 79). Indeed, up to the point of Paine's death in 1809, only the Bible and *The Rights of Man* (also a work of Thomas Paine) surpassed his first major contribution to world chemistry and chaos in terms of commercial success. Yet despite commanding an intercontinental following of more than half a million readers by the winter of 1793 (Clark 144), Paine was virtually ignored as an author throughout the nineteenth century. What makes this disappearance interesting is that Paine knowingly penned the work that nearly brought down his entire literary legacy. When he handed over the manuscript of *The Age of Reason* to Joel Barlow on December 28th of that year, he handed him the spark that would ultimately send the scientific deism movement down in an inevitable ball of fire.

How could one pamphlet, intended to enlighten the world with the virtues of natural religion and stop the growing spread of atheism, so completely destroy the reputation of a man whose previous literary contributions caused contemporaries to say

“every sentiment has sunk into my well prepared heart?” (Foner 86). It is a question that seems unanswerable to the populace of the twenty-first century, where almost all such offenses are forgivable. But perhaps some answer can be found in the strength and vehemence of the contemporary responses to *The Age of Reason*, which both validated the work as important and sullied the reputation and intentions of the author. By bringing an *haute couture* version of theism to the lower classes, Paine violated the sacred maxim later espoused by Karl Marx – “religion is the opiate of the masses.” With the publication of his pamphlet, Paine savagely tried to demystify the soma, and, in the process, he helped define exactly what it meant to be religious in America at the turn of the eighteenth century.

As the study of Paine has come back into vogue, scholars have once again begun to look at *The Age of Reason* as a representative piece of enlightenment literature. However, few have dealt with the firestorm created by the rebuttals of Paine’s contemporaries. More specifically, scholars have failed to draw comparisons between both the viciousness and the rhetoric of the Christian and atheistic responses to the document. For upon stating his personal beliefs (always a dangerous affair), “Paine was forced to endure a barrage of calumny and vituperation such as has been visited upon few men in our history” (Philip Foner 35).

The Principles of Scientific Deism

Reading *The Age of Reason* against the backdrop of contemporary American thought, the short pamphlet (particularly Part I) seems almost innocuous. Paine’s attacks on the Bible are forthright and aggressive, but not entirely original, and his modest

suggestion to study science in order to honor the universe's creator is by no means outlandish. Although we might view Paine's defense of deism's cardinal virtues as quaint and his "obsession with the contradictions in the English Bible" mildly childish (Jones 20), his conservative peers saw the same sentences as a dangerous attack upon the institutions governing American morality. Paine's simple rhetorical style was well suited to the public – he himself once stated "as it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall...avoid every literary ornament and put [my writing] in language as plain as the alphabet" (Eric Foner 83). Thus *The Age of Reason* became the first deistic publication that could possibly affect the new country's proletariat.

Yet as radical as Paine's doctrine was, his book was received equally harshly by the more progressive of his colleagues. They looked with disdain upon *The Age of Reason* as a book of appeasement, still essentially Christian, which simply replaced evangelical religion with that of an equally repugnant natural variety. Paine was thus confronted with opposition from two sides, and faced with fighting a war on two fronts, scientific deism was quickly crushed as a mass movement. But before getting into the exact arguments leveled against Paine's most controversial pamphlet, we need to examine the religious movement that used *The Age of Reason* as its most visible spokesman.

Deism was grounded in Newtonian philosophy, and codified its cardinal virtues as follows: 1) a belief in a universal First Cause wherein a Creator was responsible for existence, 2) the acceptance of a future state of being after death, and 3) a commitment to living virtuously while on Earth. Deists sought to strip Christianity of its necessary revelations, instead relying on the natural world as proof of the existence of a Divine

Architect. In *The Age of Reason* Paine wrote "THE WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD and it is in *this word*, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man" (68). Rather than study the Bible, proponents of deism advocated a study of astronomy (the purest science) as the best way to learn more about God. Is it too obvious to state that this position made them detestable to clergy, or that deists returned the hatred with a force of greater or equal magnitude? Paine levels a slew of accusations against the organized Church throughout *The Age of Reason*, most notably the charge that they created the Bible in an attempt to subjugate man and separate him from his Maker.

Amazingly enough, the most complete and accurate portrait of the deistic movement can be found in a seventy-one year old book by Herbert Morais entitled *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*. In this detailed history, Morais paints a picture of a faddish religion subscribed to by a freethinking group of wealthy renaissance-men. According to his research, by "about 1750...the *British Magazine* stated that half of the educated people of England were deists" (43). In addition to Paine, men like these would later draw their inspiration from such revolutionary deistic leaders as Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. Yet these intellectuals, with the exception of Paine, were generally leery of spreading this less dogmatic faith to the masses. Morais recounts that in one letter to the editor of *The Temple of Reason* in November 1802, a "Rich Deist" wrote "very few rich men; or at least men in the higher grades of society, and who receive a liberal education, care anything about the Christian religion. They cast off the yoke of superstition themselves; yet, for the sake of finding obedient servants, they would continue to impose it on the poor" (14). We will later see a relative of this same

sentiment echoed in Hannah More's response to *The Age of Reason*. For the very reason that deism was not a movement intended for the masses, its lifespan was terribly short. Franklyn Prochaska astutely notes that *The Age of Reason* was "the last representative of deism in decay" (576), but like the grand finale at a fireworks exhibition, the most explosive display was saved for last.

Responses to *The Age of Reason*

During the winter of 1793, as Paine penned his manuscript, the revolution was taking a turn for the worse in Paris, and subsequently, in the life of the great pamphleteer. Less than a year earlier the French had honored Paine as a hero for his contribution toward their revolution and elected him to the National Assembly, but Robespierre was distrustful of foreigners and with each passing day that December, Paine was right to expect execution. Knowing that *The Age of Reason* would be controversial, he penned the following introduction to his profession of faith:

It has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion. I am well aware of the difficulties that attend the subject, and from that consideration, had reserved it to a more advanced period of life. I intended it to be the last offering I should make to my fellow-citizens of all nations, and that at a time when the purity of the motive that induced me to it could not admit of a question, even by those who might disapprove of the work.
(Paine 50)

Paine's motive, though unstated here, was unquestionably to halt what he feared was the growing trend toward atheism – a trend he believed was induced by overly orthodox Christianity and clerical corruption. And just as Paine suspected, reactions to *The Age of Reason* were as quick and violent as the guillotine he feared would soon take his life. Essentially, these negative responses (only one positive affirmation seems to have been

published) to *The Age of Reason* can be grouped into three categories – the Christian defense of revealed religion, the atheistic denial of any religion, and the practical response that Christianity was the best tool for maintaining social order.

The Necessity for the Church

In Voltaire's 1770 *System of Nature*, he concluded that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him. Although Paine himself was a believer in God, he failed to recognize that one result of breaking down Christianity would be a complete destruction of the Western world's social order. Indeed, many scholars note that Voltaire's logic in his profession of deism was far more sound in application than that of Paine. In fact, Paine's friend Joseph Priestley, who wrote an important Christian response to *The Age of Reason* of the "necessity for revelation" variety, noted that Paine "would have written more to the purpose if he had been acquainted with the writings of Voltaire and other better informed unbelievers" (Priestley iv). Voltaire's sentiment, and that of the "Rich Deist" formerly discussed, is most acutely expressed in the unlikely response to *The Age of Reason* by Hannah More, who under the pseudonym Will Chip retaliated with *A Country Carpenter's Confession of Faith*.

More, whose fame has survived moderately to this day, was a Sunday school founder and extensive letter writer who published a series of maxims for poor workers in the 1790's under the name *Cheap Repository Tracts*. Prochaska notes that the style of her tracts was "unpretentious and full of contrived humor, the kind of simpleminded, concrete writing that a laborer could grasp and enjoy without difficulty" (572). The stylistic devices that made her writing so widely read were the same tools that Paine

employed in his attempt to reach the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Thus, with her publication of *Village Politics* (which served as an answer to *The Rights of Man*) and *Country Carpenter's Confession*, she confronted Paine on his own literary stomping grounds. In answering *The Age of Reason*, More refused to attack Paine's philosophical proposals, leaving that fight to more intellectually inclined evangelicals and the atheists. She instead countered with body punches, citing that Christianity helped instill a sense of community and morality that an uninstitutionalized natural religion could not.

More's affected identity Will Chip not only freely admits that there are things about the Bible that he cannot understand, but he also emphasizes that he need not understand the Bible literally in order to grasp its gestalt morality (More 3-6). The church was the motor that drove the lives of the simple farmers and laborers whom he considered neighbors and friends. The necessity for "proof was not a priority in Will's mind: even without it he would not have relinquished his religion, for it brought him peace, prosperity, and hope beyond the grave" (Prochaska 573). Paine's appeal to these men to throw off the corruption of the church could necessarily only seem relevant to those parishioners whose clerics were, in fact, corrupt. And in his more cerebral response, Priestley accurately notes that "all knavery has not been confined to churchmen, nor all folly to the rest of the world. History shows that both these articles have been pretty equally divided between them both" (64). Because breaking free from the chains of revealed religion was an unappealing idea for Will, he remarks to Paine that "you must excuse a plain man if he does not chuse to try hazardous experiments" (More 23), experiments that could disrupt his daily life on this earth and jeopardize his hopes of a continued life of bliss in the next.

Thus, for the first time in his literary career, Paine misjudged his audience – *The Age of Reason* was not welcomed into “well-prepared hearts” like his many other political tracts had been. Although he knew in advance that the work would be condemned by the traditional powers-that-be, he had hoped that the same artisans and laborers who had previously embraced the spirit of republicanism would herald the call of scientific deism. However, though a slight minority embraced his ideas, his deistic think-piece was so loathed by the majority of British and American citizens that even many of his former friends conspired to discredit its contribution to religious philosophy. In the next section we will look at the shaky middle ground staked out by Paine, and see how enemies can sometimes be united as allies against a cause they hate even more than each other.

Philosophical Christians and Atheists United

Historians have shown us that for brief moments on the timeline of the world a precarious alliance can be struck between diametrically opposed forces. During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin were able to reach something of a friendship at Malta while discussing their mutual enemy Germany – and only after the conclusion of the war did the bitter enmity that marked much of the twentieth century between the Soviet Union and United States recommence. On a much less global scale, the same phenomenon occurred among bitterly conflicted atheistic and Christian contemporaries of Paine, only in this instance the bi-frontal war was waged on the common foe of deism. Why did these philosophers so distrust deism? The answer rests in the fact that liberal Christians were breaking ground in the direction of atheism, and

deism attempted to construct something of a barrier (and at the same time a bridge) between the two. As Morais concludes his book: "In the last analysis, then, deism proved too conservative and compromising for the atheist and yet, in its destructive phase, too radical and unyielding for the Christian; thus it eventually passed into the limbo of unfortunate causes attempting to steer a middle course" (28).

In "*The Age of Reason Revisited*" Franklyn Prochaska does a nice job of systematically labeling and breaking down orthodox Christian responses to Paine's pamphlet. Scholars today have identified at least thirty different rebuttals to *The Age of Reason*, and Prochaska smoothly deals with the five or six that are most well-written and influential. Of these, two thinkers have essentially dominated the fold for the better part of the last two hundred years – Richard Watson and Joseph Priestley. But because much of the emotional appeal in Watson's *Apology for the Bible* echoes Will Chip (i.e. "whether Moses was the author of the Pentateuch or David wrote the Psalms was unimportant to him compared to the moral precepts of the gospels and the rewards held out by Christianity" –Prochaska 567), for practical purposes his more philosophical arguments will be mixed into (and can be reflected throughout) one primary example of the Christian ideological response: Priestley's *An Answer to Mr. Paine's The Age of Reason*.

Priestley begins his return address to Paine with a disclaimer similar to the one which serves as an invitation to *The Age of Reason* – and as we shall see, also a notion reaffirmed by the atheists: "free discussion will in time enable us to demonstrate the truth of Christianity, if it be true, and also to ascertain the genuine principles of it, whatever they be" (Priestley vii). Although these men were certainly guilty of the

occasional cheap shot, it is important to note that they all began with the belief that public discourse on a subject would eventually lead to discoveries of truth. For Priestley, it is evident over the course of his seven letters that the truth rests in the Bible – and in the thousands of eye-witnesses he claims saw the miracles performed therein. To Priestley, Paine’s religion is a “strange mixture of truth and falsehood” (47). He acknowledges the corruptions that the organized Church has wrought upon the Christian faith, but he refuses to allow that these are cause for disbelief. After dealing briefly with the idea that the Bible was the first book to encourage chastity and end the barbarous practice of human sacrifice, Dr. Priestley goes on to stress a need for scriptural analysis, and this perhaps is the greatest weakness of his argument. His constant acceptance of the scripture as fact, (while at the same time asserting that some points, such as the trinity and the devil are untrue or metaphorical), blinds him to the arguments of Paine that scripture alone is insufficient to prove anything – for the words are only the words of man. Although Priestley’s reply concerning the truth of the Bible as a mystic and historical book was probably sufficient for fellow believers, it probably does as little to impress modern freethinkers today as it did Paine at the time of publication. However, his arguments against deism that run parallel to those of the atheists should be of interest to all.

Whereas Prochaska extensively covers Christian responses to *The Age of Reason* in his article, he fails to mention the refutations by the era’s most liberal thinkers. Although sparse, as outright professions of atheism would certainly prompt massive scorn, there were nevertheless several important atheistic tracts that dealt with Paine. In one sense, Paine pulled these philosophers out of the woodwork with his pamphlet.

When the public cried, as Theodore Roosevelt later did, that Thomas Paine was a “filthy little atheist” (E. Foner 191), real atheists felt the need to respond and distance themselves from the pamphleteer’s theism. Paine’s disdain for scripture and yet fundamental assertion that God created the world sounded inconsistent to these scholars. As a man (or woman) calling himself Scepticus Britannicus poignantly asks, “If you admit, Sirs, the omnipotency of the theological God, with what propriety can you deny that the Bible is his work? Is it impossible for an omnipotent Being to have caused a work of this kind to be written? Could he not have inspired the various men to whom its separate parts have been ascribed to write it?” (Scepticus 45, quoted in Berman 126). Interestingly, at some level, this question by the skeptical Scepticus underscores the argument of Priestley involving scriptural truth. There is an overlap in their common understanding that the beliefs in revelation and in a God require similar leaps of faith. Yet as potent as the rebuttal of Scepticus can be, the most widely read and best response to *The Age of Reason* by an atheist is Percy Shelley’s *Refutation of Deism*. Many atheists (and many others) still to this day regard Shelley as the “most perfect representative” of atheistic thought. And as the keen and discerning reader shall see, Shelley’s style of refutation shares remarkable characteristics with those of Priestley and Watson.

After opening with the customary rider whereby Shelley reminds his audience that he is working with ideas only, and “how far he accomplishe(s) what he proposed to do...the world will finally determine” (25), he goes on to employ a clever device of early atheists. In order to prove that “there is no alternative between atheism and Christianity,” Shelley straps on the armor of the fundamentalist Christian and goes to war in an inverted

manner against the plague of deism. Framed in a conversation between a deist (Theosophus) and his friend, Shelley creates for himself the character of Eusebes, an orthodox believer who concludes his argument in the following fashion: “the Christian Religion then, alone, affords indisputable assurance that the world was created by the power, and is preserved by the Providence of an Almighty God, who, in justice has appointed a future life for the punishment of the vicious and the remuneration of the virtuous” (Shelley 57). Yet, while on the surface arguing against deism for the side of Christianity, the bulk of Shelley’s argument is clearly meant to point the scholarly-inclined reader towards the truth of atheism. Early in their exchange, Eusebes receives permission to speak from the point of view of the heretic, hoping to show Theosophus that the slippery slope which has led him to deism will soon see him sliding into atheistic beliefs. Thus, any reader who counts himself not among the audience of Hannah More can clearly understand that Shelley is using this assumed false identity as a safe harbor for his actual vantage point. As Berman puts it, “the *apparent* result of the debate is the victory of Christianity; the *actual* result is that both Christianity and deism have been exploded. The substantial atheistic conclusion is masked by an apparent victory for fundamentalist Christianity” (Berman 135). The irony of this application, however, is that both the atheists and the evangelical Christians end up using almost exactly the same logic against *The Age of Reason*.

For both Shelley and Priestley (and for Scepticus and Watson), the revealed religion of the Bible is the only way that the existence of God could possibly, logically be true. Their common assertion is that Paine has operated upon a fallacy of reasoning in his development of natural religion. Essentially, they find themselves phrasing two

different types of questions in a variety of ways: first, *why is it apparent and unchallenged to deists when looking at the natural world that God existed before everything, and at some point decided to create the universe as it stands?* And second, *if God intended to simply start the world in motion and then stoically leave it alone, why didn't He do a better job in creating it, and a better job in making his intentions for man known, in the first place?*

When addressing the first question, Shelley's *Refutation of Deism* simply treads a step further on the problematic ideology of *The Age of Reason* noted by Priestley. Anticipating the atheists' objection to the first of deism's cardinal principles (that of the "First Cause"), Priestley writes: "For certainly we can have no conception of how the universe should require a cause, and yet that the cause of the universe should require none. But we find ourselves compelled to believe it, because we should otherwise involve ourselves in a still greater difficulty, viz. that the universe must have begun to exist without any cause at all. Consequently, something *must* have been uncaused" (79). Twenty years later, Shelley simply no longer feels "compelled to believe" this notion, arguing that "the assumption that the Universe is a design, leads to a conclusion that there are [an] infinity of creative and created Gods, which is absurd" (Shelley 47). He goes on to embrace Priestley's "still greater difficulty," stating that "until it is clearly proved that the Universe was created, we may reasonably suppose that it has endured from all eternity...[for] it is easier to suppose that the Universe has existed from all eternity, than to conceive an eternal being capable of creating it" (47). The deductions of the atheist and the Christian are essentially the same – only when faced with a "yes or no" question of belief, one side chooses "yes" and the other "no." Either way, the two shaky allies

have succeeded in turning the issue of creation into a Biblical litmus test of black and white, leaving no room for the common gray foe, deism.

Having begun to cast doubt upon the notion in *The Age of Reason* that at some point an always-existing God decided to create a temporal world, Shelley moves on, setting aside his previous point and carrying his rhetorical case one step further.

Conceding for argument's sake the idea that this watchmaker deity set the earth in motion and then left it ticking on alone, he levels his second attack against Paine's disinterested Maker of the Universe, the attack which centers upon the question of why an infinitely powerful God (who would refuse to step in and help out mankind later) did not create a more perfect world in the first place. Here again, *A Refutation of Deism* simply carries the questions raised by evangelical responders to *The Age of Reason* one step further.

In Priestley's response to Paine, he points out that in the nature of the world, there are many contradictions that seem to negate Paine's claim of the Maker's munificence. Omnipotency, he argues, can sometimes equal malevolency – and there are many occurrences in nature (without the aid of the Bible) from which man might draw out the idea that the Creator was far from benevolent (29). Watson, along the same lines as Priestley, phrases the question to Paine in this manner when responding to *The Age of Reason's* claim that the belief in Christ or Biblical revelation is an affront to God's dignity as Creator: "Why do you not maintain it to be repugnant to His moral justice, that He should suffer... smiling infants to be swallowed up by an earthquake, drowned by inundation, consumed by fire, starved by famine, or destroyed by pestilence?" (Watson 15). Not wishing to be viewed in the same heretical mode as the atheists, Watson quickly adds that he is far from capable of judging the morality of God. He simply wishes to

point out to Paine “that you have no right, in fairness of reasoning, to urge any apparent deviation from moral justice as an argument against revealed religion, because you do not urge an equally apparent deviation from it, as an argument against natural religion: you reject the former, and admit the latter, without considering that, as to your objection, they must stand or fall together” (Watson 17-18). Watson, of course, is not attempting to lead Paine away from God with this assertion, but rather to steer him back towards a more involved Creator. Shelley, however, uses the same logic to form a different conclusion, just as he did when asking and answering the first question in response to *The Age of Reason*.

Shortly after hearing his deistic counterpart’s proclamations against Christianity in the framed dialogue of *A Refutation of Deism*, Shelley (as Eusebes) begins attacking the very idea of a God based on the inconsistent examples of both virtue and vice in the natural world. He elaborates on Paine’s (Theosophus’s) point:

This is a difficulty which attends Christianity in common with the belief in the being and attributes of God. This whole scheme of things might have been, according to our partial conceptions, infinitely more admirable and perfect. Poisons, earthquakes, disease, war, famine and venomous serpents; slavery and persecution are the consequences of certain causes, which according to human judgment might well have been dispensed with when arranging the economy of the globe. (Shelley 42-43)

The argument made here is almost identical to that of Watson (and Shelley certainly may have read Watson’s rebuttal at some point), but the spirit behind the line of reasoning is completely different. For while maintaining his supposedly fervent Christianity, Shelley concludes that “certainly (Paine) will prefer to resign his objections to Christianity, [rather] than pursue the reasoning upon which they are found, to the dreadful conclusions of cold and dreary Atheism” (43). By using the safety of his falsified profession, Shelley

has helped score another point against Paine's natural religion. Once again the atheists and the Christians successfully conspired to squeeze deism from both sides, leaving no middle ground between a "yes" and a "no."

How would Paine have reacted had he lived to see Shelley's *Refutation of Deism* in print? He would not have been surprised in the least to hear the familiar arguments of Watson and Priestley rehashed by the next generation's atheists. In fact, when a Shelley or a Scepticus conspires with an orthodox Christian to attack *The Age of Reason*, they are to an extent validating Paine's assertion that "as to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me a species of Atheism – a sort of religious denial of God" (Paine 72). He goes on to state that Christianity is "as near to Atheism as twilight is to darkness" (72). Of course, the opposite forces of Christianity and atheism would never have agreed to such a statement, for Priestley calls this very passage a "random wild assertion" (85); but there can be seen a degree of anticipation in Paine's thought process that suggests he knew his unconventional middling religious views would be vilified equally by both sides of the religious spectrum. And while his atheistic and Christian counterparts may have succeeded in tearing down Paine's legacy for a time, they failed to make America's first great writer of the people disappear – his "Common Sense," employed throughout his writing, is as interesting and uncommon today as it was two hundred years ago.

Conclusion

Because deism was not a popular religion with anyone other than the most affluent classes of society in the late eighteenth century, and, without the publication of *The Age of Reason*, scientific deism could have very well been forgotten. Yet because

Paine's religious reasoning was so detested by both the church and the atheist, we are left with a book that endures. Morais notes that

in spite of the alarmist accounts of the faithful and the exultant reports of the heterodox, the deism of the Paine school was far from being popular. That it did attract some attention was due to the noisy aggressiveness of a small handful of militant deists and to the attention bestowed upon them by the clergy. The deistic Freneau hit the nail on the head when he remarked that *The Age of Reason* might not have achieved the popularity it did, had not the clergy written tracts answering it. (153)

Of course, Morais fails to investigate the equally vehement responses of the atheists. If he had, he would have discovered that the responses of both were almost exactly the same.

All told, the number of pages devoted to responding to *The Age of Reason* outnumber the actual pages in the work by a ratio of more than twenty to one. From the staunch supporters of the church's ability to harmonize society, like Hannah More, to the outraged philosophical Christians and non-believers who saw Paine staking a middle ground where none should exist, *The Age of Reason* was equally disliked by almost everybody. Eric Foner sums up the eventual impact of Paine's deistic manifesto well when he observes, "Reprinted in countless editions and languages, *The Age of Reason* became the most popular deist work ever written. It brought ideas long common among the elites of the eighteenth century to a new popular audience and also gave deism a new, aggressive, explicitly anti-Christian tone. Before Paine it had been possible to be both a Christian and a deist; now such a religious outlook became virtually impossible" (247).

As scholars have often pointed out, this aggressive nature of *The Age of Reason* may have actually killed the movement it set out to champion, but all was not lost. For today, looking back over a landscape littered with the fervent negations of Paine's viewpoints that sprung out of the Age of Enlightenment, we can salivate when

recognizing the untapped area of scholarship that these responses to Paine provide. If nothing else, the very existence of such heated rebuttals should validate Paine's place in the literary canon, for anyone who was so universally read, and at the same time universally disliked, deserves a place in American and British letters. Given the widespread distribution of his work, we must acknowledge his influence on a literate public in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. And the spark of that influence carried over into the nineteenth, where it eventually was rekindled in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Chapter II

Echoes of Paine:

Tracing *The Age of Reason* through the Writings of Emerson

In our country's brief history, no philosopher has cast a longer shadow over the great plains of American thought than Ralph Waldo Emerson, the prolific "sage of Concord." An active lecturer and essayist for more than fifty years, Emerson has been revered since his death by a wide range of Americans – from Presidents to novelists to humble outdoorsmen. Even Woody Hayes, the controversial Ohio State football coach of the 1960's and 1970's, declared that when it came to literature, Emerson was the captain of his starting eleven (Mott 64). A staple of the American literary canon, the revered writer and speaker is widely credited by high school teachers nationwide with championing the mid-19th century transcendental movement, bringing Americans closer to nature, and developing a new national identity based on self-reliance. All of these statements are largely true, but, unfortunately, their widespread acceptance has contributed to the American myth of Emerson, a myth that obscures certain other aspects of his philosophy. Though almost sanctified now, the great thinker was in his day the acme of radicalism – particularly in the theological community. As Donald Gelpi notes in his chronicle of Emerson's spiritual quest, "religious passion inspired almost everything Emerson wrote" (3), and thus we would be foolish to ignore the theological roots of Emerson's essays. The very skepticism that led Emerson away from orthodox Christianity also led to the development of his transcendental spirituality and, ultimately, to his status as a present-day icon of American individualism.

We see this skepticism throughout the writings of Emerson, where we are presented with the picture of a man struggling to achieve a more personal relationship with the God of creation. In his essays and lectures, he challenges his audience to pursue this same line of inquiry, most notably in the *Divinity School Address* of 1838. Over time and through this incredulous struggle, (along with the help of Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott, among others), Emerson built an army of followers devoted to a transcendental reflection of God manifested in the daily surroundings of nature. The natural spirituality he espoused was both personally satisfying to his legion of devotees and rational in its empirical basis, emphasizing observation and reflection. In fact, during a series of lectures commemorating the work of Emerson in 1885, three years after his death, Edwin Meade told a Boston crowd that the *Divinity School Address* was “the first free and full utterance of rational religion in America” (Meade 235). Yet though it is true that Emerson’s address was “free and fully rational,” *he was not the first person in America to make his transcendental claims*. Meade went on to state incorrectly that “of all the great religious thinkers of America, and almost of our time altogether, Emerson has been perhaps the most impatient of the Church and its doctrinal statements” (237). Here again, the devoted follower of Emerson was either uninformed, or unwilling to acknowledge the theological predecessors of the radical “sage of Concord.” Many of the philosopher’s thoughts can be found in the writings of scholars from the previous Age of Enlightenment, most specifically those who found support for their views on rational religion in the words of Thomas Paine. Echoes of Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* can be found throughout Emerson’s most famous essays.

Another 1885 quote by Edwin Meade can serve as an introduction to Paine's influence on Emerson. In the opening of *Nature*, Emerson speaks of a search for "an original relation to the universe" (27). Meade explicates these lines, claiming that Emerson describes "the spirit...and it is in the enforcement of this that he comes into collision with the Church upon its three doctrines of Miracle, the Bible, and Christ. His demand throughout is for an original relation [to God] and a uniform and universal law" (Meade 239). In this instance, Meade is correct. However, as accurate as Meade is in his assessment of Emerson's collision with the church on the issues of Miracle, the Bible, and Christ, he fails to acknowledge or recognize Emerson's debt to an earlier source: the theological ideas of Thomas Paine. Although Emerson publicly branded Paine a "blasphemer" and an "infidel," the observations Paine makes in *The Age of Reason* permeate the religious writings of the surprisingly sympathetic transcendentalist.

Transcendental Forefathers: Paine and the Deists

To most Americans, Thomas Paine is an enigmatic figure at best, not only known to us as the author of *Common Sense* and an inciter of revolution, but also remembered as a man who had some quirky and nonconforming views about religion. Indeed, this mystery and confusion regarding Paine is nothing new. As we remember, Theodore Roosevelt, who revered Emerson for his hardiness and emphasis on "Self-Reliance," called Thomas Paine a "filthy little atheist" (E. Foner 191). But contrary to the opinions of almost every American since Roosevelt, these two men's ideas about the *nature* of religion were so compatible that a discussion of one almost necessitates a discussion of the other. On a superficial level, perhaps, one man found his God in Reason and the

other in Nature, but a close textual analysis of their works will show that for Paine and Emerson the two words had almost identical meanings.

In *The Age of Reason* Paine wrote “THE WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD and it is in *this word*, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man” (Paine 68). Rather than study the Bible, proponents of deism advocated a study of astronomy (the purest science) as the best way to learn more about God. Emerson would rephrase the ideology some forty years later, keeping the deistic principle in tact: “if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars” (*Nature* 28), in order that he might understand that God “speaketh, not spake” (*DSA* 78).

Thomas Paine’s attempt to draw closer to the Creator while at the same time distancing himself from the church prompted the slew of rebuttals that squashed his reputation and severely hampered the movement he was championing. Although “the deistic movement waned and finally disappeared,” it did not die (Roper 108). As Roper explains in his article depicting early deists as scientist-religionists, “an important outgrowth [of deism] was New England Transcendentalism. ‘It denied the need of miracle, revelation, [and a] dependence on an outward standard of faith; it affirmed the need of intuition, mystic ecstasy, [and an] inward dependence upon an immanent life’” (108). In this claim Roper is correct; *these transcendental ideas were derived from scientific deism.*

Establishing a Link from Paine to Emerson

Trying to evaluate to what extent *The Age of Reason* informed the early religious writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson is a tricky proposition. Were Paine’s spiritual writings

a source for Emerson, or were the two scholars' ideas simply analogous? The truth is that the similarities in each of the philosopher's works are too pronounced to ignore, and Emerson was obviously familiar with Paine's political and religious tracts. *The Age of the Reason* can be seen as both an analog to the writings of Emerson and as a source, whether the transcendentalist was influenced consciously by Paine's writing or not.

To date, the most extensive research in this field has been performed by the English historian George Spater, who along with Ian Dyck published a series of essays on Paine in 1988. In the book's concluding essay, "The Legacy of Thomas Paine," Spater reasons that although Paine's writings had been out of print since the turn of the eighteenth century, they were still widely read, "perhaps in battered copies, by the students that attended Harvard" in the first few decades of the nineteenth century (Spater 140). As a student at Harvard, Emerson voraciously inquired into the preceding generation's religious skepticism along with many of his classmates. Spater further notes that although "Paine's name does not appear in the [Divinity School] Address, nor in any of Emerson's talks or essays, Emerson's notes confirm that he read Paine, as could be assumed of any educated person of the time" (142). This quote, however, is only partially true. While the Divinity School Address does not specifically refer to Paine, Emerson published the address after an explicit warning that the ideas contained therein were derivative of the controversial deist. Following his delivery of the address to the student body, his half-uncle Samuel Ripley wrote him a letter pleading that he not deliver the speech to his publisher, arguing that "the world needs to be enlightened – but I don't want to see you classed with Kneeland, Paine & co., bespattered and belied" (*Letters V* 20). Spater also overlooked the fact that Paine's name *does appear* in Emerson's essay

Nominalist and Realist, where he is grouped in the company of “the coarsest blasphemers” (*N & R* 140).

The negative light into which these comments cast Paine are not unique to Emerson – most of his contemporaries did the same. Despite the fact that the two philosophers’ views of religion were overwhelmingly similar, the transcendentalist repeatedly attempted to distance himself from the “bespattered and belied” Paine. For this, however, Emerson can hardly be blamed. Philip Foner notes in his introduction to *The Age of Reason* that upon Paine’s statement of personal belief, he “was forced to endure a barrage of calumny and vituperation such as has been visited upon few men in our history” (P. Foner 35). Who would want to be grouped in the same category as the deist and face a similar “barrage of calumny and vituperation?” Nevertheless, whether Emerson openly agreed with Paine or did his best to free himself from his philosophical forebearer, he could not escape the echoes of *The Age of Reason* that resonate throughout his essays. Furthermore, each attempt to cut down Paine as an infidel only suggests that Emerson was in fact acquainted with his work. With this in mind, we shall now examine a few more of the links that form a chain binding the writing of Emerson with his predecessor Paine, because there is further proof that Emerson himself was not so indifferent to Paine as his greatest champions would have us believe.

Due to the extensive work of Walter Harding in cataloguing Emerson’s library, we know that at the very least he possessed a first-run copy of Paine’s *Common Sense*. Robert Richardson’s biography *Emerson: Mind on Fire* also informs us that Emerson’s father, William, possessed copies of the liberal religious texts written by Priestley and Paine – and Emerson extensively studied the writings and library of his father

(Richardson 20). In his *Journal*, which led to the topics of many of Emerson's essays, the "sage of Concord" reflects that "Paine & the infidels began with good intentions" (*Journal B* 202), and in *Notebook ZO*, Emerson quotes Dumont's idea of Tom Paine that "he knew all his own writings by heart, but he knew nothing else" (*Topical Notebooks* 232). In short, we can assume that Emerson, through the course of his life-long education, had internalized the controversial religious ideas of Paine. We now turn to an examination of Emerson's use of Paine, working through the framework created by Emerson's student Edwin Meade, who we remember claimed his mentor was singularly unique in his collision with the church regarding the issues of miracle, the Bible, and Jesus Christ.

Debunking Meade's Myth

Upon opening Paine's text to the first page, anyone familiar with Emerson will immediately recognize a similarity in the bent of the two scholars' minds. Beginning with a call for open-mindedness, Paine implores his readers to remember that "I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it" (Paine 49). How similar does this sound to one of the most often-quoted passages of *Self-Reliance*, that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds?" (*S-R* 125). Paine then goes on, after a profession of faith in One God, to attack the bureaucratic and self-perpetuating nature of the organized church. Emerson, who resigned his position as junior pastor of Boston's Second Unitarian Church, could just as

easily have made the following quote about himself: "He takes up the trade of a priest for the sake of gain, and in order to qualify himself for that trade he begins with a perjury. Can we conceive any thing more destructive to morality than this?" (Paine 51), yet it comes from Paine's assessment of the current state of the clergy in *The Age of Reason*. What is this great perjury that a man in tune with God's nature must make in order to be ordained? It is a disregard for the word of God by which he is daily surrounded, it is a blind faith in second-hand revelation and books of hearsay, and it is a promise to subjugate the self-evident truth of God's beneficence beneath a system of trickery and "miracles" in order to force the laity into a false funnel of conformity. For both Paine and Emerson, these lies were incompatible with true faith, and thus we can see a similar collision with the church on grounds of false miracle, false Bible, and false man-prophethood.

THE FALSEHOOD OF MIRACLE

As science has progressed over the last few centuries, the existence of the miracle has become increasingly problematic for more liberal-minded theologians. If the Bible is to be interpreted as a divine text, inspired by the God of Christianity, then all of the texts contained therein must necessarily also be divinely accurate. John Mecklin framed the debate nicely in 1917 when he challenged dissenters among the Christian faith that "if we are to accept the records at all, we must recognize that miracle is an integral part of the early Christian world-view" (Mecklin 243). He then went on to pose this conundrum: "what we are really asked to believe is that there is a higher law of nature which at times interferes with natural law as we know it, although we have no information whatever as

to the operation of this higher law” (248). Ultimately Mecklin (like large numbers in this country today) concluded that he would accept the truth of the miraculous despite the conflict in which it necessarily finds itself with modern science. Of course, those who choose to make this leap of faith, like Mecklin, only find their faith in God strengthened by arriving at the conclusion that miracles are true.

Although neither Thomas Paine nor Ralph Waldo Emerson believed in miracles, however, their faith in One God never waned over the course of their lifetimes. Rather, through their distrust of unexplainable phenomena, they found a deeper need to rely on the primacy of intimate experience with God’s natural world to validate their faith. Why did these men distrust the necessity for miracles as a foundation for a belief in God? Paine offers two reasons, both of which essentially argue that the existence of miraculous fables is inconsistent with the harmony of God’s omnipotence: “In the first place...it implies a lameness or weakness in the doctrine that is preached. And, in the second place, it is degrading the Almighty into the character of a showman, playing tricks to amuse and make the people stare and wonder” (94). For Paine, the truth of God’s existence, stamped upon the very face of the world, admits no need of a miracle to prove its veracity. Interestingly, critics of Paine’s work would subsequently argue that the leap of faith necessary to acknowledge God as creator of the daily surrounding world was no different than the leap of faith necessary to acknowledge the possibility of miracles. But Paine held firm, citing the detailed structure of the universe as evidence of its having been created. Further expounding upon his distrust of miracles, he wrote: “Instead of admitting the recitals of miracles as evidence of any system of religion being true, they ought to be considered as symptoms of its being fabulous” (96).

Regarding the necessity of miracles for religious indoctrination, Emerson felt as strongly inclined to disbelieve them as Paine. Following the deist's point to its logical conclusion in the *Divinity School Address*, Emerson writes "to aim to convert a man by miracles, is a profanation of the soul" (*DVA* 74). Of course, in the evangelical ramifications of a statement like this, we can see the transcendentalist's collision with the more conservative churches of New England. But Emerson rebutted the arguments of the church, noting like Paine that the existence of true miracles would degrade God into a showman – incapable of capturing the world's attention without a flashbox or a hidden chamber. And because "God never jests with us," the soul can much better appreciate the truth of the Deity if it is "very incurious concerning persons or miracles, and not at all disturbed by chasms of historical evidence, [if] it accepts from God the phenomenon, as it finds it, as the pure and awful form of religion in the world" (*N* 49). Anyone aware of the most rudimentary basics of transcendental thought can recognize the harmony the philosophy seeks to achieve between man and nature. This union is important, because Emerson argues that Nature is God's miracle, and the constant magnificence of its ever-present imprint upon our eyes renders all other smaller miracles unnecessary. Those religious leaders who would impose miracles upon the laity as a staple of their doctrine offer them nothing other than tricks or sleights-of-hand, both of which fall below the dignity of a God capable of creating this earth and all its majestic pomp of land, sky, and sea. The miracle is incompatible with natural science, but, for both Paine and Emerson, natural science only serves to confirm the existence of God.

THE FALSEHOOD OF THE BIBLE

Harkening back to Meade's 1885 address, we remember his second claim that Emerson was singularly unique among American theologians in his collision with the church concerning the truth of the Bible. Here again, it will be seen that Emerson and the transcendentalists were simply treading upon ground already broken by Paine and the deists. In the opening sections of *The Age of Reason*, Paine lays out his reasoning for skepticism regarding the Bible. One of the fundamentals of both the Judaic and Christian religions, the Bible is revered by orthodox believers as having been divinely inspired by God, and its passages and stories are traditionally believed to have been passed along through a direct revelation from the world and the Word's Creator to the individual authors. But Paine claims semantically that a *revelation*, that direct disclosure of information from God to man, is only a revelation in the initial transaction, and afterwards becomes *hearsay* in its transfer from the primary receiver to modern man. Although certainly never discounting the ability of an omnipotent God to disclose any information he would choose to mankind, Paine argues he would rather garner his knowledge of the Deity by direct reflection than through *hearsay*, which could or could not be true. Simply put, the Bible was nothing other than a book – at times a book filled with useful stories of men and moral maxims to be admired – but, nevertheless, a book like any other.

In *The American Scholar*, Emerson lashes out famously against a reliance on books for information. The information contained in libraries (which he called the Third Estate) could never ably substitute for the truth-filled world outside our very windows. "Man thinking," he suggests, "must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the

scholar's idle times. When he can read directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings" (AS 60). For Paine, and most probably for Emerson, this maxim applied doubly to the Bible. It represented the transcripts of other men's readings of God. Paine wrote:

It is only in the CREATION that all our ideas and conceptions of a *Word of God* can unite. The creation speaks a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds; and this *Word of God* reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God. (Paine 69)

Thus for Paine, because language is mutable, and the study of languages subsequently futile, the malleability of text across the boundaries of nations and time make the Bible a poor substitute for God's actual revelation to the world. Rather, it would be in man's best interests to read the Bible of nature while traversing the countryside: "Do we not see a fair creation prepared to receive us the instant we are born – a world furnished to our hands, that cost us nothing? Is it we that light up the sun, that pour down the rain, and fill the earth with abundance?" (58). Rather than killing spirituality by discrediting the Bible as the word of God, Paine and the deists sought to empower man to pursue a fresher, more lively relationship with the Creator of Nature.

In many ways, Paine never sounds more like Emerson than when he is championing Nature, and likewise Emerson *never sounds more like Paine than when he is critiquing orthodox Christianity and its primary text*. In the *Divinity School Address*, Emerson follows Paine's reluctance to place too much emphasis on the words of others when he speaks to the future clergy: "Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone;

refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil" (*DSA* 79). For these young Harvard divinity students, the Bible is that good model, held sacred by so many, that interferes as a mediator between the Deity and his creation. Emerson further expounds upon this idea of direct exposure to God's munificence in *Self-Reliance*: "If therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fullness and completion?" (*S-R* 128). Of course it is not, and in the imagery of the oak tree and acorn we can once again see the way Paine's work must have subconsciously permeated Emerson's thought. In the *Age of Reason*, Paine writes: "Our own existence is a mystery; the whole vegetable world is a mystery. We cannot account how it is that an acorn, when put into the ground, is made to develop itself and become an oak" (91).

Twenty years previous to writing his lines about the acorn, Emerson himself had faced the same veil of interference which he challenged the young divinity students to remove in his 1838 address, eventually finding himself a full and completed oak tree in the forest of American philosophy. He achieved that fruition by cutting a theological course independent of the Bible. Clearly for both Paine and Emerson, an active reflection upon and interaction with God's creation was far superior to a second-hand acceptance of a philosophical ancestor's truth. And so for the second time, we can successfully employ the following trick, but this time by inverting the relationship – these words, spoken by Emerson, could just as easily have been spoken by his predecessor Paine: "I had better

never see a book [the Bible included], than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system" (AS 59).

THE FALSEHOOD OF CHRIST

Moving on from a distrust of miracle and the Bible, both Paine and Emerson were placed in their most precarious position when they challenged the Church on Meade's third collision point – the divine nature of Jesus Christ. It is of course partially from the miraculous stories attributed to the birth and death of Jesus that Christianity draws its justification, and thus any attempt to undercut that truth would naturally lead to the "barrage of calumny and vituperation" that was visited upon Paine. However, though Emerson tried to distance himself from Paine for this very reason, he too was ostracized for his skeptical public lectures. After delivering the *Divinity School Address* in 1838, Harvard banned Emerson from ever speaking on campus again, and did not rescind that ban until 1866, well after the transcendentalist had achieved his deserved status as a fixture in American philosophy. This, however, should not be surprising. At that time (and to this day), millions of Americans hoped for the redemption promised through the birth and death of Jesus. The attempt to take that hope away, or rather to question the need for that gateway to the next world, left those millions of Americans hostile to Emerson's and Paine's skeptical message.

Although both of these men refused to believe in the divinity of Christ, they publicly espoused the view that no better human being ever graced this earth with his presence. As Donald Gelpi clarifies in his text scrutinizing the religious underpinnings of the transcendentalist's work: "Emerson regarded Jesus as the most morally influential

man who ever lived, a person of unparalleled magnanimity and spiritual greatness of soul. Emerson balked, however, at calling him a 'portion of the deity' in any unique sense of the term. At best, one can say that by his sensitivity to the spiritual influences of the deity, Jesus exemplified in a singular manner the divine moral character" (Gelpi 29). This understanding of Jesus Christ reflects Thomas Paine's own view of the man, as we shall shortly see. To both of these philosophers, Christ was not only the perfect teacher, "virtuous and amiable" according to Paine, but also too humble and accepting a man to force a system of religion on the world that by the late 18th and early 19th century had cycled back towards the closed-minded, and consequently, towards the hypocritical. Although Christianity borrowed its name from Jesus, the lessons he taught were more sympathetic to a transcendental worldview. Emerson claimed in the essay *Nature* that "the visible heavens and earth sympathize with Jesus" (N 33), and they did this because Jesus Christ served as the divine essence's most representative man – he lived a simple, philanthropic life and recognized the best qualities, those that make each of us divine, in each human being. Scholars have argued that Emerson, as the author of *Representative Men*, was attempting to establish that divine essence, "most completely embodied in Jesus of Nazareth," in the "less balanced geniuses of history" like Montaigne or Shakespeare (Gelpi 95).

Roughly sixty years before the publication of *Representative Men*, Paine painted a nearly identical portrait of Christ's "true nature" in *The Age of Reason*. Wishing to strip the Western world's leading religion of its many false tenets without stripping any dignity from its namesake, he wrote that "nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the real character of Jesus Christ....The morality that he

preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind...it has not been exceeded by any” (Paine 53). Paine believed that the church, however, had for many years ignored the principles taught by Christ, instead using the stories of his miraculous birth and death to justify the imposition of its own awful self-perpetuating tyranny on its subjects. For the deist, the story of Christ, at least the miraculous part, had “every mark of fraud and imposition stamped upon the face of it” (54). Paine accepted the truth of Christ having lived and taught, and he did not doubt that Christ had died by crucifixion – it was the primary mode of execution in that day. He simply refused to believe the myths handed down about his ascension into Heaven. Rather, while Christianity continued to dwell on the demands of a fable, Paine preferred to follow the teaching of Jesus, as a representative prototype for his own calling in life – that of a “virtuous reformer and revolutionist” (55). It is both telling and ironic that the words and lives of both Emerson and Paine, despite a collision with the Christian church on the falsehood of Christ as Deity, more closely mirrored the historical Jesus in their teaching and actions than did many of the clergy who labeled them heretics.

Society is a Wave

Earlier in this paper I noted that although by name Thomas Paine found his God in *Reason* and Ralph Waldo Emerson found his in *Nature*, the two words effectively had the same meaning for each philosopher. In 1944, Ralph Roper wrote that “one cannot rightly understand the scientific and religious views of Paine, nor of Franklin, Jefferson and other deists of their time...unless one realizes that they were essentially nature worshippers – God worshippers through nature” (Roper 101). In nature they found

evidence of order and benevolence that could have only come from a munificent Creator; in nature they found both reason and THE REASON for living a simple, philanthropic life, much like the one led by Jesus.

Emerson worked along this same circle of thought - choosing, however, to follow the chain of logic to its tautological conclusion by going clockwise as opposed to counter: "That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the FATHER" (N 35-6). The self-evident truth found in God's natural Creation impressed upon each man the need to dismiss as false the faulty doctrines of imposed religion found in the orthodox Church, a war that was waged upon Meade's three battlefronts of collision. Clearly from the evidence provided, Emerson was following in the footsteps of Paine, shadowing the steps of the deist and recreating his arguments for a new generation.

But what does all of this mean? The echoes of Paine that are found in *The Divinity School Address* and Emerson's other religious commentaries are themselves echoes of Voltaire, Hume, and Locke. Like Paine's reliance on these writers, Emerson, despite his public denials, was preoccupied with Paine to the point that he understood and could harmonize with him. He internalized the ideas of his predecessor, reconstituting them as needed for a new era, just as others continue to channel Emerson into the twenty-first century. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson tells us "society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed, does not" (S-R 136). Each new philosophy or school of thought is like a rivulet that joins with others to form a river, and out of the confluence of deism and a few generations of time a new river is formed that

can be called transcendentalism. The myth propagated by men like Meade that Emerson's skepticism was created out of a theological vacuum becomes nonsense as the water rolls on.

An historical view tells us that philosophy is dialectical, and we can better understand the work of Emerson by doing what Meade did not do: by listening to Emerson through Paine. If we first open our ears to the harmonious echoes of *The Age of Reason* found in *The Divinity School Address*, we can then understand that Paine's words enrich the writings of Emerson. And as these heterodox views continued to interact with each other, the skeptical melody of freethought coursing through the nineteenth century would attract the voices of other American writers, the most distinctive of which belonged to Mark Twain.

Chapter III

The Paine Predates the Pain:

Deism, Darwinism, and Determinism in the Writings of Mark Twain

“It has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion. I am well aware of the difficulties that attend the subject, and from that consideration, had reserved it to a more advanced period of life. I intended it to be the last offering I should make my fellow citizens of all nations, and that at the time when the purity of the motive that induced me to it could not admit of a question, even by those who might disapprove of the work.” (From Thomas Paine’s Introduction to The Age of Reason)

“Tomorrow I mean to dictate a chapter which will get my heirs and assigns burnt alive if they venture to print it this side of 2006 AD – which I judge they won’t. There’ll be lots of such chapters if I live 3 or 4 years longer. The edition of AD 2006 will make a stir when it comes out. I shall be hovering around taking notice, along with other dead pals. You are invited.” (Mark Twain, from a June 17, 1906 letter to William Dean Howells)

Introduction: The War between Science and Faith

As the manifest destiny of America’s westward expansion was beginning to be fully realized in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Mississippi River stood as a dividing line between the past and the future, between tradition and progress, between an entrenched society and a chance to reinvent our nation. During those turbulent years sandwiched around the American Civil War, the country also witnessed the creation of another dividing line, as science made drastic leaps forward in defining our understanding of the natural world. Most notably, in what is still perhaps the second most influential book (behind the Bible) to be published in the western hemisphere, Charles Darwin advanced his theory of organic evolution in 1859. This progress, and the ideas contained in this book, clashed violently with evangelical religion in a different civil war – a war for the faith of the American public. In so many ways, Mark Twain navigated these dividing lines. For the two years he spent as a cub pilot immediately

before the war, he literally traveled down the Mississippi, delivering trade goods from the industrial states of the Upper Midwest to the ports of Louisiana. And for the forty-five years he spent as a publishing author after the war, he struggled personally to negotiate the same tension between religion and science that so divided the rest of the country. As Baetzhold and McCullough note, Twain's "intellectual development from the fundamentalist Presbyterian of the Hannibal Sunday school to a deism molded by Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* and later modified by the evolutionary determinism of Darwin and his followers places [him] in the mainstream of the nineteenth-century conflict between science and religion" (xvi).

To be certain, writing about religion can be a challenging task. A man like Thomas Paine or Mark Twain must maneuver through the unscientific fields of emotion towards some ostensible light of truth, and he must do so without alienating his readership if his quest takes him away from the majority opinion. To witness the truth of this statement, simply look at the double epigraph that headnotes this chapter. At the time each quotation was first published, its author was perhaps the most famous public writer in the world. Paine's *Common Sense*, which helped instigate the American Revolution, was read by over half a million people, and his *Rights of Man* outsold *Common Sense* (E. Foner 79). In the late eighteenth century, these sales volumes were unprecedented, and few authors have ever been so revered by the majority of a nation. Indeed, during that period, numerous songs were merrily sung each night in taverns and public houses praising the ideas of Paine (for an example of such a song, see E. Foner). Yet despite this, and a disclaimer at the beginning of *The Age of Reason* asking for the public to honor his humble religious opinions, upon the manifesto's publication, Paine

was obviously met with disapproval. Writing about religion, or the struggle between religion and science, even today, is almost always dangerous, but remains a courageous necessity.

Perhaps because Twain so well understood this truth, and was familiar with the story of Paine, he chose to reserve his controversial religious comments for posthumous publication, and even these publications may be tempered. Some critics have argued that the versions of Twain's damning manuscripts that we do have (i.e. *Letters from Earth* and *Autobiographical Dictations*) have been systematically edited for content by his biographer Albert Bigelow Paine and his daughter Clara. Even if these unsubstantiated claims are true, there is plenty of evidence in Twain's private musings to understand his jocular concern that they might cause his heirs to be "burnt alive." The Mark Twain who died in 1910 expecting to meet a disinterested scientist of a God was drastically different from the Presbyterian Samuel Clemens of the early Hannibal days.

Although we can trace the general deterioration of Twain's faith over the course of his lifetime, understanding such a large movement from the orthodox to the heterodox is not without its own trials – and primarily there are two that serve as major scholastic stumbling blocks. The first is Twain's nasty habit (depending on how we look at it) of moving from one religious vantage point to the next without completely dropping the old ideas in favor of the new ones. He was, by no means, a systematic thinker. Thus Calvinistic and deistic notions pop up in his dictations and writings sporadically all the way through the last years of his life, when, by almost any measurement, Twain was a skeptical, pessimistic man. As one befuddled scholar notes, "as far as God is concerned,

Twain's extensive comments are so contradictory that it proves difficult, if not impossible, to derive a comprehensive view of his God" (Nixon 327).

The second problem can be even more overwhelming when trying to make sense of the deism that dominated much of Twain's adult life, and that problem stems from the sheer volume of vitriol towards God that Twain churned out in his later years. Starting perhaps as early as 1888, but certainly by 1898 when Twain began composing *What Is Man?*, he underwent a fundamental shift in religious ideology that casts a long shadow over the more buoyant faith of his middle years. Hyatt Waggoner aptly summarizes this later, bleaker view:

Mark Twain lived the last fifteen years of his life a bitter pessimist and philosophical mechanist. He came to despair of the possibilities of human life. He came to think of man as a machine buffeted by an indifferent, if not hostile, mechanical universe. Such an outlook was not unique in his generation. The cold drafts of the new scientific doctrines were chilling the hearts of many men who had known the snugness of a God-centered, benevolent world. (357)

Twain, once again, like so many of his peers, struggled to navigate this great American dividing line. And certainly not intentionally, but nonetheless inaccurately, later Twain scholars have tended to place too much emphasis on the dark ending point of his religious thought, allowing it to overshadow the years he spent writing comfortably inside Waggoner's "snugness of a God-centered, benevolent world." After all, how could someone who approached death so angry at God not have harbored deep resentment towards the Deity throughout his life? The seemingly obvious answer to this question is the inaccurate one.

Mark Twain certainly read *The Age of Reason* in 1857, and that book had a profound impact on his thoughts (Cummings 20). At two different points in his life, once

in 1870 and again some time around a dozen years later, Twain nearly recreated the pages of *The Age of Reason* from memory in his own deistic manifestos. However, by 1891, he would claim that “all religions are lies and swindles” – blackening not only Christianity, but also his previous alignment with Paine’s religion of Theo-philanthropy. The last two decades of Twain’s life saw him come to embrace a sort of mechanistic determinism that roughly followed the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer. And as his anger grew exponentially, he chose not so much to dispute the existence of a God, but rather to dispute that Deity’s benevolence. God, so it seemed to Twain, was indifferent to the sufferings of humanity.

Perhaps because of this turn towards determinism, we might easily fail to acknowledge the impact Paine’s brand of deism must surely have had on Twain’s most important books. In fact, of the ten most widely-read Twain works, only two fall outside of his years as a deist – *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). As for the second of these two, *A Connecticut Yankee*, scholars seem divided as to whether it more embodies Darwinian determinism (see Cummings 169) or the deistic notions of Paine (see Kaye 171). Which side of this conversation is correct is debatable, but it seems that *A Connecticut Yankee* can at the very least be used as a dividing line between Twain’s years as a deist and his years as mechanistic determinist. Thus, in the thirty-two year span between 1857 and 1889, while Twain was writing most of the books we still read today, he revered a beneficent Creator who “we trust, believe in, and humbly adore” (*God of the Bible* 317).

The fiction Twain published during his deistic years includes *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (1867), *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), *The Gilded*

Age (1873), *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *Prince and the Pauper* (1881), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). During the same years that he wrote these works, Twain was publishing essays in which he navigated the line between science and faith. From these middle years of his career through his dark final years, Twain grappled with science and religion in ways that reflect his reliance on, and then his near abandonment of, Paine's *The Age of Reason*.

Establishing a Link: Twain's Reading of *The Age of Reason*, Masonry, and Ingersoll

As is so often the case with young men growing into adulthood, Samuel Clemens left Hannibal in 1853 at the age of seventeen in search of something which his hometown could not offer. For the next four years, we know relatively little about his life, though scholars agree that "his experiences were undoubtedly secularizing" (Cummings 20). We do know that during those itinerant years, the budding thinker spent time in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati, and along the way he evolved into the author we know of as Mark Twain. In 1857, he was hired as a cub-pilot by Horace Bixby, and, during the two years he spent on the river, he read voraciously. At this time, he first came across the Paine's deistic Bible and the echoes of the book evidently reverberated throughout Twain's thought for the rest of his life. According to Sherwood Cummings, "it is nearly impossible to exaggerate the impact of *The Age of Reason* on the mind of [Mark Twain]. Of the books that shaped his philosophies, it is the one whose echoes are the most durable in his succeeding thought...; its pristine meanings – even its phraseology – were lodged in the foundations of his memory. The book converted him" (20-21). Twain himself confirms this identification with Paine's dissension when he

replies to his biographer's comment that "it took a brave man before the Civil War to confess he had read the *Age of Reason*." Twain's response: "So it did....I read it first when I was a cub pilot, read it with fear and hesitation, but marveling at its fearlessness and wonderful power" (A. B. Paine, *MTB* 3:1445). The experience of reading Paine on the great Mississippi, coupled with the "undoubtedly secularizing" four years of travel throughout America, sent Mark Twain further southward down the river of religious heterodoxy. For a man seeking some explanation for the contradictions he had perceived in his Hannibal Sunday school classes, *The Age of Reason* provided Twain "a cogent belief in a deistic universe, put in motion by a distant God whose purposes did not run to vindictive punishment of sinners." In this universe, "human life was in human hands under the dictates of nature" (Camfield 24) – something that must have been appealing to an ambitious, young, working-class man. Armed with the new doctrine of deism, Twain set out to find like-minded men who sought to honor a beneficent Creator without the stifling guilt and apparent absurdity of conventional Christianity. In his turn to Masonry, he found such fellows.

Although Thomas Paine was never actively involved as a member of a Masonic lodge, he was well acquainted with the customs and beliefs of their order. His years in France led to his friendship with Nicholas de Bonneville, who exposed Paine to Illuminism and Freemasonry (Fruchtman 379-380), both of which focused their worship on the sense of God's power as evidenced by the sun's ability to bring light into the world. And in 1810, the year after his death, Paine's executrix published his essay probing the "Origin of Freemasonry," which posited, among other things, the thesis that Freemasonry predated Christianity as a religion by at least one thousand years. Fifty

years later, in 1860, Mark Twain continued to walk in the direction approved by Paine, and petitioned for admission to the Polar Masonic Lodge of St. Louis, stating that he wished to study “the mysteries of Masonry” (Jones 369).

Twain’s inclinations towards deism were surely fortified by this association. In a wonderful study of Mark Twain’s Masonic affiliation, Alexander Jones tells us that “one of the most important elements of Masonic doctrine during that period was a specialized type of deism; and this probably reinforced and supplemented many ideas Twain had absorbed” from previous interaction with *The Age of Reason* (369). Nixon informs us that the Polar Star Lodge focused their attention on “the Creator God,” who as “the archetypal artisan..., once studied, would evoke humility in the contemplative” (325). This notion of a masterful Creator God, who, though distant, was always beneficent, would stay with Twain until the publication of *A Connecticut Yankee*. According to Jones,

As Brother Clemens, it was his specific duty to “discover the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the Grand Artificer of the Universe, and view with delight the portions which connect the vast machine.” Thereafter, this was to be the view of God and His works that came the closest to satisfying Twain – the Supreme Being of the “great unvarying laws.” Though he was destined to drift with the shifting tides of uncertainty, he seems – at least in part – to have navigated with the aid of the Polar Star. (373)

In the concluding passages of his article, Jones quotes numerous passages in Twain’s novels where he purposefully employs the deistic language of his Masonic education, each time sounding amazingly similar to both the Masonic creed and the writings of Thomas Paine. Thus, in addition to the initial reading of *The Age of Reason* by Mark Twain as a cub-pilot in 1857 which colored his future thought, there is the

additional tangential link to Paineite deism brought about by Twain's Masonic association.

Were these the only links in the bridge between Paine and Twain, there would be ample evidence to point to an intimate knowledge and respectful admiration of the former by the latter. But we must consider at least two more small pieces of evidence before moving on to the close juxtaposition of the two authors' works. The first is the unrecognized (or at least undocumented) connection between the two heterodox thinkers through Colonel Robert Ingersoll. One of the leading champions of American Freethought during the back half of the nineteenth century, Ingersoll toured the country delivering dynamic lectures that either enraged or captivated his audiences. Though they only met one time in person, on November 13, 1879, Twain and Ingersoll shared a deep mutual respect for each other. That night, at a dinner honoring Ulysses S. Grant, according to Mary Minor Austin, the two men "spent several hours in each other's company" (395). Writing to his wife Livy about the evening, Twain calls it "the memorable night of my life," noting that Ingersoll's speech was "just the supremest combination of English words that was ever put together since the world began" (Neider 122). What the two men talked about can only be guessed, but their mutual interests might suggest at least one possible topic of conversation. According to Kaye, during his years on the public lecture circuit,

Colonel Ingersoll made redeeming Paine's memory one of his primary causes, and he was prepared to stir up controversy in pursuit of it. In 1877 he offered to pay \$1000 in gold to any clergyman who could prove that Paine 'died in terror because of religious opinions he had expressed.' The wager created a furor, but Ingersoll rightly prevailed. (168)

At the time of his meeting Twain, Ingersoll was still openly issuing this challenge, and perhaps this bold gauntlet and their mutual admiration of Paine occupied a chunk of their time that evening. In any case, Twain's respect for Paine and *The Age of Reason* continued for another decade, and his veneration never completely disappeared. Less than two years before his death, in 1908, Twain received a private letter from Buffalo enclosing a list of the world's "One Hundred Greatest Men," who had exerted "the largest visible influence on the life and activities of the race" (Neider 310). Looking for inspiration from those who had influenced his own life, Twain suggested the list should include three more men – listed first among these was Thomas Paine.

The True Nature of God: The Bible, Jesus Christ, and the Revelations of Science

Unfortunately, we have no Edwin Meade to ridicule (and structure an argument around) when exploring the religious similarities of Thomas Paine and Mark Twain. Yet perhaps the easiest way to trace the influence of *The Age of Reason* on the "Son of Missouri" is to categorize each writer's objections according to subjects they both discussed. If we classify the deistic expressions of Paine and Twain into three large categories, we find a marked similarity in their approaches to understanding the Bible, Jesus Christ, and the true revelations of God as depicted through science.

THE BIBLE

As a young boy attending the Presbyterian Sunday school in Hannibal, Samuel Clemens was exposed early and often to the various tales of the Bible. This intricate knowledge of the book (he claimed to have read it in its entirety by the age of fifteen) is

essential in his later attempts to adapt Biblical stories for comedic purposes, as in the diaries of Adam and Eve, and also in his more serious attacks on the stories contained therein. This intricate knowledge is also reminiscent of Thomas Paine, who, when composing his attacks on the Bible in *The Age of Reason* from a French jail cell, had his request for a copy of the book denied, and thus was forced to recall large portions of the text from memory, proving his intimate acquaintance with the Christian God's word. As for Twain's relationship with the work, Baetzhold and McCullough argue that "there are grounds for asserting that the Bible influenced him more profoundly than any other single book. There is no question that the problems posed by the fallacies he found in the Scripture continued to trouble him throughout his lifetime" (xvi-xvii). This assessment makes sense; the religion of youth is often never forgotten, and the troubling problems Twain found in the Bible must have made him all the more receptive to Paine's attacks in *The Age of Reason*. As Cummings notes, it is the book that had the "most durable and substantial" impact on his succeeding thought (20).

Echoing Paine's sentiments that the Creation is the true Word of God, Mark Twain would write about the Bible: "His real character is written in plain words in His real Bible, which is Nature and her history; we read it every day, and we could understand it and trust in it if we would burn the spurious one and dig the remains of our insignificant reasoning faculties out of the grave where that and other man-made *Bibles* have buried them for 2000 years and more" (Paine, *MTN* 361). This emphasis on *reason* is an echo of Paine, and clearly both thinkers find the evidence in the natural world sufficient proof of a Creator, citing each tree and mountain as the words of the true Bible.

As for the “spurious one,” Twain articulates the same problems with it as Paine does. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine acknowledges that there are beautiful and moving passages throughout the Bible; he readily appreciates much of the poetry it contains and also agrees with many of the moral maxims. However, despite these occasional bright spots, the radical patriot closes his discussion of the Bible by saying that “when I see throughout the greater part of this book scarcely anything but a history of the grossest vices and a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales, I cannot dishonor my Creator by calling it by His name” (63). Mark Twain’s own criticism of the Bible follows this same pattern.

Twain admits to the beauty of some of the poetry and lessons, but he argues like Paine that it is generally a recreation of previous moral and religious texts, save for the unquenchable vengeance of the Old Testament God. In *Letters From Earth* he declares the Bible

Is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and some good morals; and some execrable morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.

The Bible is built mainly out of the fragments of older Bibles that had their day and crumbled in ruin. So it noticeably lacks in originality, necessarily. Its three or four most impressive events happened in earlier Bibles; all its best precepts and rules of conduct come also from those Bibles. (227)

In his myriad writings, Twain goes on to point out many other inadequacies with the Bible, generally arguing that believing in this version of the Christian God places unnecessary restraints on the true Creator’s power. Twain, like Paine, found the God of the Bible too small-minded and too limited in virtue: “To trust the God of the Bible is to trust an irascible, vindictive, fierce, and ever fickle and changeful master” (*God of the*

Bible 317). Twain ridicules this vision of a petty God, by pointing to the advances of science. We shall see how Paine's and Twain's true, scientific-minded Creator rectifies this tension through His overwhelming grandeur.

JESUS CHRIST

During both the latter half of the eighteenth century when Thomas Paine developed his thoughts on religion, and the latter half of the nineteenth when Mark Twain did the same, an overwhelming majority of Americans practiced Christianity. This homogeneity of beliefs posed an interesting problem for the two dissenters. Each needed to differentiate his own deistic belief structure from that of the Christian masses, yet neither wished to do so by tearing down the figure of Christ himself. For although Paine believed in "one God, and no more" (51) and Twain "believe[d] in God the Almighty" (as qtd. in Nixon 325), they both denied Christ's miraculous virgin birth and the Christian trinity. Yet each strongly revered Jesus Christ, the man, as a teacher of morality.

Twain, like Thomas Paine and Emerson, believed that the world would do well to follow the teachings of Christ more closely, ignoring the church's dictates to the contrary. Although Twain's view of Christ is somewhat equivocal, his sometimes contradictory views can be understood to be perfectly ordered by using the following distinction, which also applies to the writings of Thomas Paine: Jesus Christ, the man, is a benevolent teacher who should be admired and followed; Jesus Christ, the god, is a man-made fraud. It would be easy to point to comments like those found in Twain's notebook (i.e., "If Christ was God, then the crucifixion is without dignity. It is merely ridiculous, for to endure several hours' pain is nothing heroic in God" – *MTN* 364) as evidence of his

antipathy towards Jesus without such a distinction. Rather, Twain's vehemence is reserved towards the religion which takes its name from Christ without bothering to take much else. For instance, Nixon cites Twain's 1871 declaration: he "felt that 'all that is great and good in our particular civilization came straight from the hand of Jesus Christ' and that the Church has neglected its responsibility to shape the lives and the conscience of its congregation" (326).

At various points in his writing, Twain portrayed Christ as "just, merciful, charitable, benevolent, forgiving, and full of sympathy for the suffering of mankind" (327). In light of this esteem, such a virtuous man could not be at fault for the later horrors carried out in his name; it was those who would elevate this man to a God for their own purposes that bothered Twain. Much like Emerson, whom Gelpi notes "balked at calling [Christ] a 'portion of the deity,'" preferring instead to think of him as exemplifying "in a singular manner the divine moral character" (29), Twain, in an 1878 letter to his brother Orion, "pointed out that neither he nor Howells believed in hell nor in the divinity of Christ, though he did confess that Christ is 'a sacred Personage'" (Nixon 326). Each of these views draws heavily on Paine's own declaration in *The Age of Reason* that Christ was a "virtuous and amiable man" (53), one that we should study, who blazed a trail that should be followed by honoring the benevolent God who created the natural world.

THE TRUE GOD, AS REVEALED THROUGH NATURE AND SCIENCE

After establishing, then, what it is that God is not (He is not the God of the Bible and a third part of Him is not Jesus Christ), we are left with a question. Who is God, and

how do we know He exists? Thomas Paine answered this question as thoroughly as he could in *The Age of Reason*, and, for his thirty-two years as a deist, Twain followed Paine's lead. To each man (until Twain became angrier), God was a benevolent Creator, one who displays Himself to us through our own examination of nature and the study of science. We have already seen Paine's expression of the "true theology," one that manifests itself in a "Creation prepared to receive us the instant we are born – a world furnished to our hands, that cost us nothing" (58). If we follow this truth, then it is our duty, according to Paine and Twain, to immerse ourselves in the study of science to learn what we can of the real Deity. Of course, this notion of scientific study has often run counter to the aims of the Christian church. Paine tells us in *The Age of Reason* that

the advocates of the Christian system of faith could not but foresee that the continually progressive knowledge that man would gain, by the aid of science, of the power and wisdom of God, manifested in the structure of the universe and in all the world's creation, would militate against, and call into question, the truth of their system of faith...." (79)

Nevertheless, both Paine and Twain ignored these fundamentalist mandates, and they explored the natural Creation through the applied study of sciences, particularly astronomy.

This study of science fascinated Twain, and his own reading of the new scientific publications of the nineteenth century is often underestimated by scholars. But Hyatt Waggoner, in his study "Science in the Thought of Mark Twain," extensively details the many scientific books Twain is known to have examined closely. As for the scientific curiosity of the "Son of Missouri," Waggoner notes that "he had a very keen interest in and some knowledge of geology, with...its time-scale that dwarfs all human history and makes the individual human life so insignificant an event as to be invisible to the

observer accustomed to the majestic pulses of geologic time” (359). He further notes that Twain also “had a keen and lasting interest in astronomy, and an imaginative grasp of its implications, although his memory for its distances and speeds was somewhat inaccurate” (360).

Paine, whose Chapter XV details the “Advantages of Life in a Plurality of Worlds,” was here clearly again an influence on Twain. The size of the universe astounded each, and both men saw this immensity as proof of a Creator. Twain, calling attention to the grandeur of the universe, writes

It consists of countless worlds of so stupendous dimensions that in comparison ours is grotesquely insignificant; they swing in spaces so vast that in comparison the spaces of the Biblical universe are but those of an orrery. The nearest star of the Biblical universe could not have been more than a bird’s flight removed. The nearest fixed star in the modern heavens is twenty trillions of miles away. To merely *count* these miles – counting with good rapidity (150 per minute ten hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days in the year), would occupy a man close to *four hundred thousand years*. (*God of the Bible* 317).

This expression recalls with accuracy what he had read some twenty years earlier of Paine’s take on the size of our own world. Paine says of our Earth that “it is infinitely less in proportion than the smallest grain of sand is to the size of the world, or the finest particle of dew to the whole ocean, and is therefore but small; and...is only one of a system of worlds of which the universal creation is composed” (85). Even more closely resembling this passage of *The Age of Reason*, Twain offers nearly the same analogy at another point: “one might represent the Biblical God by a grain of sand on the shore and then draw the proportions of the modern Deity upon the boundless expanse of waters” (*God of the Bible* 314).

Moving on to a more microcosmic study of the infinitesimal science found in God's creation, Paine informs his reader that in our world, "we find every part of it – the earth, the waters, and the air that surrounds it – filled and, as it were, crowded with life down from the largest animals that we know of to the smallest insects the naked eye can behold, and from thence to smaller and totally invisible without the assistance of a microscope" (86). In this study of life via the magnifying glass, Mark Twain continues his established pattern of recalling the deist's manifesto, also waxing upon the most minute life-forms extant in such a boundless world. He echoes Paine: "every drop of water and every grain of matter is populous with living forms. The very microscope has created a world compared with which the entire universe of the Bible is meager, unmarvelous, and inconsequent" (317).

Until the publication of *A Connecticut Yankee*, this version of God, drawn much from his reading of Paine, was to be the model of the universe that made sense for Twain. How then did he systematize this Deity? How did he view this scientific God? He folded himself into Waggoner's "snugness of a God-centered, benevolent world," and repeatedly referred to the Deity by using Thomas Paine's two favorite adjectives from *The Age of Reason* – *beneficent* and *munificent*. The following passage closes *God of the Bible vs. God of the Present Day*:

To trust the true God is to trust a Being who has uttered no promises, but whose **beneficent**, exact, and changeless ordering of the machinery of his colossal universe is proof that he is at least steadfast to his purposes; whose unwritten laws, so far as they affect man, being equal and impartial show that he is just and fair; these things, taken together, suggest that if he shall ordain us to live hereafter, he will still be steadfast, just and fair toward us. We shall not need to require anything more. (317)

Never did Twain sound more like a deist, and never did he sound more like Thomas Paine. However, this confident view of the Creator and His goodness would not stay with Twain, and, in the last years of his life, he abandoned the religion of Paine, the religion that had inspired him during his most productive period.

God as a Mad Scientist: Darwinism, Determinism, and Twain's Anger with the Deity

Although deism dominated the thirty-two year period of Twain's life in which he produced such works as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*, he did ultimately turn away from this more positive view of the Deity. His final years were his darkest, when he lost faith in Paine's benevolent deistic God and embraced a more mechanistic determinism. As Robert Bannister notes in his study *Social Darwinism*, "between the time [Twain] wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *What is Man?* (1906), [he] lost...faith that man might so easily transform his world. In his early work, Twain repeatedly played on the tension between individual character and will, on the one hand, and the determining influences of environment and culture on the other" (216). After reading and digesting over a period of twenty years Darwin's *The Descent of Man* and Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, he seems to move away from the possibilities of human willpower and to turn towards the "vicious, treacherous, and malignant" law of nature (216). Where once Twain saw God as a beneficent Creator, this later view of God can best be characterized as something of a "mad scientist." In *Letters From Earth*, Twain's mad-scientist of a God declares "Man is an experiment, the other animals are another experiment. Time will show whether they were worth the trouble" (221). This later version of Twain's God

is aloof and disinterested. His creation is neither good nor bad; it is simply an exercise to pass the mundane days of eternity. This experiment is governed by universal, deterministic law, and nothing more.

Yet perhaps part, if not most, of this darkness can be accounted for by more than simply the books Twain read. Shortly following the completion of *A Connecticut Yankee*, Twain endured a barrage of misfortune that might make the most devout Christian question the benevolence of his Maker. In 1889, both his mother and mother-in-law passed away. Two years later, he began to experience the financial hardship which necessitated his relocation to Europe, and, in 1894, he was forced to file bankruptcy. This setback was followed closely by the death of his daughter Susy in 1896 and, subsequently, by the slow deterioration of his beloved wife Livy until her own death in 1904. Thus, although Mark Twain's turn towards determinism is quite tragic, it is also understandable.

But in this later, bleaker period of Mark Twain's life, he did not completely abandon *The Age of Reason* and Thomas Paine. Rather, he modified the Paineite notion that "the creation we behold is the real and ever-existing Word of God, in which we cannot be deceived. It proclaims His power, it demonstrates His wisdom, it manifests His goodness and beneficence" (*Age of Reason* 98). Sherwood Cummings believes Twain "salvaged from his deistic belief the conviction that natural law did indeed prevail, but he went beyond Paine, who declared that men were 'free agents' and insisted that such law controlled people's thoughts and actions, that men's responses were automatic, that they had no will of their own" (666). This change in ideology made life pointless; it

made an afterlife irrelevant. Man was nothing more than a machine, and this condition clearly angered Twain.

In his last years, Earth became a Darwinian model: “giant combinations of labor and capital, lapsing periodically into warfare; nations adopting a similar course to the peril of Western civilization; individuals driven by primal instincts” (Bannister 110). After three decades navigating the dividing river between science and faith, the former cub-pilot abandoned his ship and moved squarely into the camp of science that jeered at the faithful followers of a benevolent Creator. In *What is Man?*, perhaps his most pessimistic piece, he wrote:

Who devised the blood? Who devised the wonderful machinery which automatically drives its renewing and refreshing streams through the body, day and night, without assistance or advice from the man? Who devised the man's mind, whose machinery works automatically, interests itself in what it pleases, regardless of his will or desire, labors all night when it likes, deaf to his appeals for mercy? God devised all these things. *I have not made man a machine, God made him a machine. I am merely calling attention to the fact, nothing more. Is it wrong to call attention to the fact? Is it a crime?* (104-105)

Clearly, Twain could not quiet the voices in his mind in the last years of his life. He felt that God was “deaf to his appeals for mercy.” This was not the Mark Twain who had written of a God “whom we trust, believe in, and humbly adore.” This was not the Mark Twain who had read *The Age of Reason* in 1857, “marveling at its fearlessness and wonderful power.” In that 1793 manifesto that once so influenced the young Mark Twain, Thomas Paine described what it is that man might learn from nature, and this hierarchy of education and example appealed to Twain for many years:

The Almighty Lecturer, by displaying the principles of science in the structure of the universe, has invited man to study and to imitation. It is as if He has said to the inhabitants of this globe that

we call ours, "I have made an earth for man to dwell upon, and I have rendered the starry heavens visible, to teach him science and the arts. He can now provide for his own comfort, AND LEARN FROM MY MUNIFICENCE TO ALL, TO BE KIND TO EACH OTHER." (76)

How different is this from Twain's final understanding of the Creator; how violently does this clash with Twain's determinism? Years after his declaration that "all religions are lies and swindles," Twain denounces Paine's conclusion about the lessons we might learn from nature. In his notebook, we find the following statement:

The Book of Nature tells us distinctly that God cares not a rap for us – nor for any living creature. It tells us that His laws inflict pain and suffering and sorrow, but it does not say this is done in order that He may get pleasure out of this misery. We do not know what the object is, for the Book is not able to tell us. It may be mere indifference. Without a doubt He had an object, but we have no way of discovering what it was. The scientist has an object, but it is not the joy of inflicting pain upon the microbe. (361-362)

Once a believer in Divine goodness and human choice, Twain left this earth a man of broken faith. We might now recall the epigraph which opened this chapter, where Twain wrote to Howells on June 17, 1906 that he should soon dictate a chapter that would have his heirs "burnt alive." Six days later, he finished that dictation, and this June 23 passage of his autobiography best summarizes the theological endpoint of Mark Twain's life:

In the case of each creature, big or little, He made it an unchanging law that that creature should suffer wanton and unnecessary pains and miseries every day of its life – that by law these pains and miseries could not be avoided by any diplomacy exercisable by the creature; that its way, from birth to death, should be beset by traps, pitfalls, and gins, ingeniously planned and ingeniously concealed; and that by another law every transgression of a law of Nature, either ignorantly or wittingly committed, should in every instance be visited by a punishment ten-thousandfold out of proportion to the transgression. (*Autobiographical Dictations* 325)

Yet why dwell on this bleak view of the world found in Twain's last years? So much effort and study has gone into this period of Twain's life and thought that scholars have come to see these last fifteen years as representative of Twain's lifelong theological paradigm. However, this is not the case. Although he held these pessimistic religious views at the end of his life, his most productive years were dominated spiritually by Paineite deism. This turn away from Paine happened *not until late in his life*, and tracing Twain's movement from Calvinism to deism to determinism allows us to truly appreciate the significance that *The Age of Reason* had on those of his works which have remained world masterpieces long after Twain himself could no longer find inspiration in Paine.

Conclusion

Trying to follow the religious thought of Mark Twain is not an easy task, nor is it terribly rewarding for a scholar who finds himself bogged down in the last years of the great satirist's life. But, by distinguishing the vantage points Mark Twain occupied along a timeline, we can begin to see three distinct periods in his spiritual life. The middle years of Twain's career, those in which he wrote most of his canonized works, owe a sizable theological debt to Thomas Paine and *The Age of Reason*. Distinct similarities can be noted in each of the author's takes on religion, specifically through their individual comments on the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ, and the true nature of God as revealed through science. Time and time again, the private musings of the "Son of Missouri" echo the declarations made in Paine's deistic manifesto. And while Mark Twain did not ultimately die a practitioner of Paineite deism, "he never left Paine's

intellectual universe” (Camfield 24). Twain struggled always with rectifying the need for faith with the continual progression of science.

Although his faith was ultimately broken, by examining his many contradictory statements on the Deity at various points in his life, we can piece together a puzzle with no answer, but one that ironically speaks to the difference between man and his Maker. Jude Nixon poignantly and comically points out that “what we are left with – and it would be a sinister joke if Twain deliberately forged it – is an incomprehensible view of God. To that extent, then, Twain is right. For, ultimately, if God could, in human terms, be figured out, then he could not be God” (372). Perhaps Thomas Paine would have been amused with this joke, and he would have admired the ferocity with which Twain attempted to rectify the two colliding nineteenth century forces of science and faith. Regardless, in Twain’s major works, we can point to evidence of their creation in a time when much of Mark Twain’s thought echoed *The Age of Reason*, and thus Thomas Paine’s heterodox religious views march on into the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Society is Still a Wave

After tracing *The Age of Reason* from its initial publication into the twentieth century, we now come to the conclusion of this project, inspired by the Emersonian idea which closed the second section – that society, and consequently the subculture of free thought, is a wave. Constantly lapping against the coastline of orthodoxy, the wave of ideas contained in *The Age of Reason* has re-emerged through the voices of Emerson and Twain. Yet the nature of the wave tells us that these reincarnations will never stop, will never cease to manifest themselves in the voice of new American free thinkers.

Initially, my plan for this project involved exposing another link in this chain of free thought. I sought out a contemporary author to whom I could connect Thomas Paine, and I spent considerable time investigating modern humanists in hopes of finding the perfect piece in the puzzle. My advisor for this project, Dr. P. A. Boswell, recommended Kurt Vonnegut, and after reading his latest memoir, *A Man without a Country* (2005), I was certain I had found an important author who was carrying the torch of Paine's legacy. In that book, Vonnegut writes:

My parents and grandparents were humanists, what used to be called Free Thinkers. So as a humanist I am honoring my ancestors, which the Bible says is a good thing to do. We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. My brother and sister didn't think there was one, my parents and grandparents didn't think there was one. It was enough that they were alive. We humanists serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community. (79)

Along with several quotes like this, I later discovered Vonnegut's affinity for Mark Twain and Voltaire, and I was certain I was on the right track. In almost every place I initially looked, Vonnegut sounded quite like Paine in *The Age of Reason*.

Yet the more engrossed I became in the Vonnegut research (I read nearly the entirety of his twenty-five work canon, along with a plethora of secondary materials), the more I became convinced that he did not belong in this thesis. Besides my eventual acceptance of the fact that the project was much tidier squared away within the snug confines of the nineteenth century, it also became apparent that despite my early excitement, Vonnegut and Paine did not really agree on all that much. This, needless to say, was problematic. Where were the disagreements? For starters, Vonnegut does not believe in a *prima causa*; that, of course, is the first cardinal principle of Paine's deism. And whereas Paine believed only through the promotion of science could we truly honor God and achieve greater harmony within society, Vonnegut is a Luddite, who believes modern science will ultimately destroy mankind. Finally, Vonnegut is a meliorist, who feels that mankind invents religion out of necessity, and this is a good thing, a pious fraud; this thinking is much more in line with Hannah More, who we remember wrote a stinging rebuttal of *The Age of Reason*. Paine hated meliorism. He wrote "my own mind is my own church." The problems, I came to find, were essentially limitless, but my research was not done in vain.

Thomas Paine may not have served as a direct influence on Kurt Vonnegut, but he certainly influenced Mark Twain, a man whom Vonnegut appreciated so much that he gave his first born son the same name. Thus, there is a link between the two. The influence of Paine's contemporary Voltaire on Kurt Vonnegut further speaks to the

continuing importance of the Age of Reason, symbolized by *The Age of Reason*, on a prominent writer of the twentieth century. And although my initial hunch may have been disproved, I am certain that there *is* a contemporary author out there whom Thomas Paine has greatly influenced – in fact, I am sure there are many, and my research in this area will continue. His greatest religious work, *The Age of Reason*, has certainly captivated me, as it did so many writers for the first hundred years following its publication.

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