

Secularity and the Limits of Reason in Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine" and "Hymn of Man"

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IN "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" Kant famously wrote: "*Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another.*"¹ Reason was to save people from tutelage. Kant highlighted "the calling of every human being to think for himself" and lamented that, as far as religious matters were concerned, dogma still prevailed: "It is far from the case that humans, in present circumstances, and taken as a whole, are already or could be put in a position to make confident and good use of their own reason in matters of religion without the direction of another."² In this approach, the use of reason implies the rejection of external authorities and affirms the agency of the self.

As philosopher Charles Taylor explains, this notion of reason underlies one strand of secularity. By "secular," Taylor indicates a society in which faith has become, "even for the staunchest believer, . . . one human possibility among others."³ Under secularity, unbelief is a compelling possibility with various forms of belief thriving alongside it. Historically, the rise of secular societies in the West stemmed in part from the primacy of rational agency, which confers on individuals the same sense of "fullness" that religion typically offers believers (5). Relying on our own minds to comprehend and make sense of the world, we can experience a sense of fulfillment and find our existence meaningful. Taylor writes, "We have the power [in the form of] rational agency to make the laws by which we live. . . . The place of fullness is where we manage finally to give this power full reign, and so live by it" (8). In this strand of secularity, an awe-inspiring ability located within the human subject replaces a transcendent source of power.

Yet, as Taylor goes on to explain, other experiences of the secular have little to do with "the self-sufficient power of reason":

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[T]here are other modes of unbelief which, analogous to religious views, see us as needing to receive power from elsewhere than autonomous reason to achieve fullness. . . . We can recognize here theories of immanence which emerge from the Romantic critique of disengaged reason, and most notably certain ecological ethics of our day. (9)

Let us characterize this set of secular experiences and imaginaries as extrarational. In them, the self encounters a powerful external entity to which it remains susceptible. The human being becomes deeply aware of an alterity to which it must turn to seek meaning in life. It is a power external to the self that will make life “fuller, richer, deeper,” but that awe-inspiring element is not transcendent (5).

Formulated as an inner capacity, reason was very much in the foreground of Victorian discourses on secularity. Consider, for instance, George Holyoake’s apotheosis of reason. Coining the term “secularism” in 1851, Holyoake asserted the centrality of reason in free thought. “[T]he right of self-thought” should be “applied to the criticism of theology, with a view to clear the way for life according to reason.”⁴ The practice of reason, in his view, is the antidote to theology. Secularists are those who ask questions rather than accept things as they are: “A secularist is intended to be a reasoner, . . . one who inquires what a thing is, and not only what it is, but *why* it is what it is.”⁵ Holyoake is convinced that dogmas prevent theologians and laypeople from asking challenging questions about creation.

Holyoake does not seem to recognize the internally contradictory position into which he corners himself. To be a proper secularist, one must relentlessly ask questions to undermine religious dogma, yet at the same time refrain from venturing into the domain of the metaphysical.⁶ “*The Reasoner*,” writes Holyoake about the journal he edits, “restricts itself to the known.”⁷ He does not inquire into the origin of the universe, as his version of secularism does not dabble in speculation. Holyoake’s prose comes alive at the moment he begins to hint at what he must not pursue:

The origin of all things has excited and disappointed the curiosity of the greatest exploring minds of every age. That the secret of the universe is undisclosed, is manifest from the different and differing conjectures concerning it. The origin of the universe remains unknowable. What awe fills or rather takes possession of the mind which comprehends this! Why existence exists is the cardinal wonder.⁸

The secular mind must only dwell on what is demonstrable. Whereas for religion the question of why there is something rather than nothing is

central, for Holyoake it surfaces only tangentially. The rich plurality of "conjectures" pertaining to the mysteries of the universe only attest to the futility of the pursuit. Consequently, there is no room in his version of secularism for fully honoring the sense of awe of which he speaks so powerfully.

However authoritative Holyoake may sound, Victorian unbelief did not always put self-sufficient reason on a pedestal. How could unbelief move beyond the bounds of reason? What offered an experience of secular "fullness," if not the self-sufficiency of reason? What happened to human agency when unbelief became extrarational? With these questions in mind, I turn to Swinburne's poetry and argue that his representations of unbelief interweave the two strands of secularity I have described: the first reveling in rational agency, and the second locating a sublime power beyond the self. The first mode develops through Swinburne's republican ethos, in which humans, without a monarch, find themselves in charge of their own destiny. The second mode relies heavily on his notion of time as an awe-inspiring power that the mind cannot fully grasp.

Because time defies comprehension, representations of time provide a useful vantage point for visiting the vexed relation between reason and secularity. As Victorian scientists suggested, the depths of time lie beyond what we may observe or understand, no matter how hard science tries to quantify it. Swinburne's myth of deep time similarly takes us to the limits of reason and asks us to recognize the incomprehensible. His extrarational secular imaginary works in tandem with an aesthetic of bewilderment in which language becomes almost opaque, confusing the reader with its convoluted syntax and indecipherable metaphors.

Swinburne's treatment of time is mythical in that it exposes and mystifies a natural phenomenon that lies beyond humanity's direct experience. Here, following David G. Riede, I define a myth as a "verbal construct [that] embod[ies] the experience of the life of man confronting the greater life beyond him."⁹ The affinity between Swinburne's myth of time and scientific explorations of the depth of time is not paradoxical. As William Guthrie points out, in the original Greek use of *mythos*, which highlights the articulation of "profound and universal truths," there was no sense of an opposition between reason and what lay beyond its bounds.¹⁰ It was not until the Enlightenment that myth was associated with an imaginative capacity that was to be assessed and validated by reason, a category that stood apart from what it claimed to judge. "[In] the newer binary," writes Asad, reason was "endowed with the major work of

defining, assessing, and regulating the human imagination to which ‘myth’ was attributed.”¹¹ The seeming opposition between reason and the imagination came under attack in the Romantic period, for example in Coleridge’s aesthetic theory.¹² Rather than align myth only with the imagination—or reason—then, I follow the Romantic impulse to place it squarely at their intersection, treating it as a product of both the imagination and reason.

In what follows, I first analyze “Hymn to Proserpine” to suggest that time for Swinburne lies at the limits of reason. Then I turn to Victorian science and show that Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin similarly emphasized the strain that deep time puts on our mental capacities. In the third section, I analyze the function of *logos* in “Hymn of Man” and argue that, by channeling the power of time, human subjects (gendered male for Swinburne) become infused with reason. Time both affirms human agency and bewilders the mind in this poem. Swinburne’s myth of deep time acknowledges an awe-inspiring external power while at the same time celebrating independence from divinity and foreseeing the future victory of republican consciousness.

1. THE SEA OF CHANGE IN “HYMN TO PROSERPINE”

The speaker of “Hymn to Proserpine” laments the triumph of the Christian god over the pagan pantheon in the Roman Empire. As Riede notes, “paganism gives way to Christianity in the speech of the fourth-century Roman poet [the anonymous speaker] and Christianity gives way to paganism in Swinburne’s dramatic monologue of the nineteenth century.”¹³ The death of Christianity, already foreseen at an early moment of its proliferation, confirms the power of time. Addressing the “Galilean,” the pagan speaker states: “In the darkness of time, in the deeps of the years, in the changes of things, / Ye shall sleep as a slain man sleeps, and the world shall forget you for kings.”¹⁴ The darkness of time is both a measure of its depth and an expression of the impossibility of penetrating its secrets. The influence of any god lasts only for a short while, in contrast to the larger stretch of time that bears witness to the procession of gods.

The pagan goddess externalizes the speaker’s preoccupation with time. As Yisrael Levin puts it, “Proserpine is less a goddess to be worshipped and more an embodiment of the speaker’s state of mind.”¹⁵ The speaker invokes the goddess who gives rise to the seasons to express his own sense of perpetual change. Time is victorious, not only over the

Christian god, but over human accomplishments. "Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day," declares the speaker, opposing the vast stretch of time in which gods rise and fall to the fleeting nature of mundane life (69).

Swinburne's verse becomes increasingly cryptic as he begins to describe the sublime ocean that stands for "continual change without progression."¹⁶ The confusion that his verse causes is commonly attributed to his privileging of sound over content, but the aesthetic of opaqueness here also captures the impossibility of comprehending time's flow. The sea of change resists our effort to grasp it. As the present becomes the past, it changes form: "All delicate days and pleasant, all spirits and sorrows are cast / Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of the past" (69). The sea is "far out" as it is located beyond the reach of everyday affairs. "The wave of the world" is similarly positioned, "beyond the extreme sea wall, and between the remote sea gates" (70). Its distance from the sphere of the mundane indicates its sublime character. The sea defies our senses, and its essence cannot be expressed: it is "impelled of invisible tides, and fulfilled of unspeakable things" (70). With the present, past, and future blending into each other in the forms of waves and the wind, time becomes an amorphous entity that the human mind cannot fathom.

Discussing poetic form extensively in *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868), Swinburne treats verse as a kind of artistry whose medium is time. In Swinburne's vision, poetic form "manifest[s] itself in time, as a process . . . rather than a static product," writes Andrew Kay, who notes that it was not uncommon for the Victorians to approach poetic form "in temporal terms." Kay notes that for Swinburne, "poems amass momentum as they gradually unfold themselves in the act of being read, and they do so by virtue of the arrangement of their constituent parts in a sequence." Poetic form consists of a "wave-like unfurling."¹⁷ If the motion of the sea is a metaphor for the passing of time in "Hymn to Proserpine," it also evokes the flow of the verse. The poem embodies what Swinburne appreciated about Blake: it gathers its form gradually. As anapests and dactyls accumulate to constitute the hexameter in each line, the stress often falls on long vowels ("Not as thine, not as thine was our mother, a blossom of flowering seas" [71]). The lapse of time becomes almost palpable in the prolonging of sounds. The lines stretch time out, registering its passing through meter and assonance, rendering audible the "invisible tides" that are described by the speaker (70).

With its waves and tides, the sea moves to its own beat. The speaker asks the Galilean, “Will ye bridle the deep sea with reigns, will ye chasten the high sea with rods?”¹⁸ Taming time is one of the projects of Christianity, not only in the sense that its doctrine designates a teleological endpoint, but also in that it seeks to impose order on time, as evident in biblical chronology. But the speaker’s rhetorical question suggests the futility of that effort. The principle of continual change is too powerful for Christianity to resist. Time will frustrate the effort to number its years and count its days. In “The Garden of Proserpine,” also published in *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Swinburne more directly evokes the impossibility of taming time: “Time stoops to no man’s lure.”¹⁹ The sense of human empowerment stemming from the Enlightenment celebration of reason is absent in these declarations of time’s might. Upon the demise of god, power belongs not to the human mind but to a nontranscendent entity outside the human self. At the same time, insofar as the anonymous poet externalizes his mind-set through the figure of a goddess, he affirms the richness of the imagination. As we will see, a similarly delicate balance governs the active role of the scientist vis-à-vis the sublime character of time in scientific discourse.

2. LYELL, DARWIN, AND THE DEPTH OF TIME

Swinburne’s treatment of time finds its full meaning in a scientific context, in which geologists had been asserting for decades that the Earth was much older than biblical chronology had supposed.²⁰ The debate on geological time had its origins in James Hutton’s *Theory of the Earth* (1788), in which the author, examining the rate at which the Earth’s surface changes, had eloquently noted: “we find no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end” (96).²¹ Facing harsh criticism, in an expanded later edition Hutton wrote: “I am blamed for having endeavored to trace back the operations of this world to a remote period, by the examination of that which actually appears . . . contrary . . . ‘to reason, and the tenor of Mosaic history, thus leading to an abyss, from which human reason recoils.’”²² His obsessed critic Richard Kirwan sneered that his theory implied the past eternity of a world always in transformation. Hutton explained the significance of Kirwan’s claim: “Such is the logic by which, I suppose, I am to be accused of atheism.”²³ The presumed avowal of an eternal past appeared heretical. To deflect the charge, Hutton declared that the length of time required to shape geological changes was hard to imagine but not eternal.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Lyell's geological writing cemented the principle that Hutton first proposed. "Until we habituate ourselves to contemplate the possibility of an indefinite lapse of ages having been comprised within . . . the earth's history," wrote Lyell in his *Principles of Geology* (1833), "we shall be in danger of forming most erroneous and partial views in geology."²⁴ By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was commonplace for scientists to assert that the Earth was much older than previously supposed, and the challenge was to articulate the exact age of the planet.²⁵ In *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin weighed multiple theories dating the origin of the planet from six million to two hundred million years. In the tenth edition of *The Principles* (1867), Lyell himself finally offered a quantitative scale. Yet despite all efforts to prove the precise age of the planet, the matter remained in dispute.

From Lyell to Darwin, scientists revisited the issue Hutton had originally raised: how were they to render millions of years imaginable? "The mind cannot possibly grasp the full meaning of the term of even a million years," wrote Darwin, articulating the difficulty of conceptualizing deep time.²⁶ Darwin employed a spatial comparison to enable his readers to construe the lapse of time between the consolidation of the Earth's crust and the present moment:

Mr. Croll gives the following illustration: Take a narrow strip of paper, eighty-three feet four inches in length, and stretch it along the wall of a large hall; then mark off at one end the tenth of an inch. This tenth of an inch will represent one hundred years, and the entire strip a million years.²⁷

The precision that quantitative measures seem to offer has limited use when the numbers are too large for our minds to process. In Darwin's illustration, mapping numerical length onto physical space partly resolves this problem. The best strategy for comprehending the flow of time was to deploy figures—to substitute space for time, and then to reason by analogy. Precisely because we have no way to comprehend the duration of long periods by reference to our own perception, deep time has to be invented. The historian of science Joe D. Burchfield notes, "Since geological time, like historical time, lies forever outside the scope of our direct experience, our concept of geological time is an artefact."²⁸ The effort to come to grips with the antiquity of the Earth required a secular myth, which, like religious thought, placed humans in a cosmos whose temporal and spatial limits lay beyond their immediate field of observation.

For the scientists and Swinburne alike, meditations on time provide an opportunity to probe the incomprehensible outside of a religious context. The treatment of time as sublime makes room for the possibility that Holyoake overlooked: secular thought can dwell on the limits of human comprehension and welcome the sense of awe that derives from facing them. The scientific line of inquiry about nature not only coexists with, but also demands, an acknowledgment of the limits of rational thought, even though it does not claim to go beyond them. To make this point, George Levine turns to the physicist John Tyndall's writing. Addressing the usefulness of the microscope, Tyndall questions "whether we ourselves possess the intellectual elements which will ever enable us to grapple with the ultimate structural energies of nature."²⁹ As the scientist is ready to admit, the mysteries of nature may have to remain just that.

The scientific construal of deep time and Swinburne's myth of it share some strategies for communicating the greatness of the length of time that had elapsed since the Earth came into being.³⁰ To evoke the antiquity of time, Lyell and Swinburne highlight the presence of perpetual change, one in expository prose, the other in verse. For both writers, the Vedic tradition and Greek and Roman history provide a rich archive for conjuring images of deep time. However, if, for Lyell, the sublime character of time reinforces one's belief in god, for Swinburne only by casting god aside can human beings come to see beyond mere "span" of time.³¹

To indicate the length of geological time, Lyell asserts that it is unfathomable. The challenges of geology parallel those of astronomy: "views of the immensity of past time, like those unfolded by the Newtonian philosophy with regard to space, were too vast to awaken ideas of sublimity unmixed with a painful sense of our incapacity to conceive a plan of such infinite extent" (1:92). Even as Lyell opposes traditional biblical chronology, he maintains a sense of a higher power whose "plan" we witness through what we see around us and accounts for the Earth's antiquity by reference to that power's ultimate greatness (1:92). Writing of the "fitness, harmony, and grandeur of all parts of the creation," he suggests that men in the past have simply been "spell-bound" as they confronted the immensity of time (1:101, 113).

To register the depth of time, Lyell foregrounds the amount of change that has taken place. "[T]he surface of this planet [was] regarded as having remained unaltered since its creation," he writes, "until the geologist proved that it had been the theatre of reiterated change, and was still the subject of slow but never-ending fluctuations" (1:108).

Since the distinctive mark of geology is its ability to note changes on the planet and analyze their pattern, the assumption of stasis goes against the very premises of the discipline. Flux puts the depth of time on display better than numbers can, as Lyell claims: "by the geologist myriad of ages were reckoned, not by arithmetical computation, but by a train of physical events—a succession of phenomena in the animate and inanimate worlds—signs which convey to our minds more definite ideas than figures can do of the immensity of time" (1:108). Change not only proves that long epochs have gone by but also becomes the measure of them.

Lyell's strategy of indicating the antiquity of the Earth by highlighting the difficulty of grasping it is not unique to him. Even mid- to late nineteenth-century scientists who became increasingly bent on fixing the Earth's age downplayed the validity of their estimates. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin highlights the difficulty of producing a numerical estimate but persists in the effort:

If, then, we knew the rate at which the sea commonly wears away a line of cliff of any given height, we could measure the time requisite to have denuded the Weald. This, of course, cannot be done; but we may, in order to form some crude notion on the subject, assume that the sea would eat into cliffs 500 feet in height at the rate of one inch in a century. . . . At this rate, on the above data, the denudation of the Weald must have required 306,662,400 years; or say three hundred million years. . . . I have made these few remarks because it is highly important for us to gain some notion, however imperfect, of the lapse of years. . . . What an infinite number of generations, which the mind cannot grasp, must have succeeded each other in the long roll of years.³²

Scientists endeavor to measure the age of geological formations, but the exactitude of the numbers they present contrasts with the inevitably vague sense that the mind draws from them. Relentless observation cannot fully unlock cosmic mysteries. "How incomprehensibly vast have been the past periods of time," Darwin notes, although in the same breath he offers a scientific means for comprehending it: "A man must for years examine for himself great piles of superimposed strata, and watch the sea at work grinding down old rocks and making fresh sediment, before he can hope to comprehend anything of the lapse of time."³³ However difficult it may be, the scientist endeavors to arrive at a number, thereby affirming his agency. A similar dynamic informs Swinburne's attitude toward time as it unfolds over the course of years, according to which time is both a source of awe and an index of man's power. Whereas

“Hymn to Proserpine” positions time as a singular power, man comes to channel its might in “Hymn of Man.”

3. TIME AS THE UNIVERSAL *LOGOS* IN “HYMN OF MAN”

Produced on the occasion of the ecumenical council meeting that was to announce the infallibility of the Pope, “Hymn of Man” foresees the fall of Christianity. As William Rossetti drafted a letter to “the Congress of Freethinkers” in response to the council meeting, Swinburne planned “a sort of Hymn” for it.³⁴ Along with “Hertha,” which also appeared in *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871), this poem was for Swinburne “mystic atheistic democratic anthropologic.”³⁵ As Riede notes, the poem “epitomize[s] the republican ardor” of the volume.³⁶ Like Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Swinburne describes a postrevolutionary state in which “man remains / [s]ceptreless, free, uncircumscribed” and “equal.”³⁷ Man awakens to a sense of his own power when the Christian god ceases to hold power over him.³⁸

Because the poem combines its atheistic anthropocentrism with a quasimystical cosmogony, critics have disagreed on the poem’s relation to the religious and the secular. Examining Swinburne’s republican aesthetics, Stephanie Kuduk writes: “‘Hymn of Man’ replaces the divine word with human expression.”³⁹ In the same vein, Margot Louis calls attention to the poem’s rejection of divinity. Swinburne, she writes, “reduce[s] God to mute impotence, and ascribe[s] life and vision to man alone.”⁴⁰ Riede, however, maintains that Swinburne “has transferred divinity from the heavens to the human mind.”⁴¹ Religious thought and feeling, he implies, do not disappear but are transposed onto something else.⁴² While these critics disagree on the role that religious feeling plays in the poem, they all assert the primacy of the human subject in it. My argument challenges the consensus on the poem’s anthropocentrism by demonstrating humans’ dependence on time, which remains a mysterious and indomitable entity. The human subject shares and embodies the power of time rather than surpassing it.

The poem opens with a mythical account of the primeval Earth, in which man has yet to come into being: “[the Earth’s] maiden mouth was alight with the flame of musical speech” (93). Reminiscent of lava, the flame perhaps evokes geological time, but more important for my purposes is the Earth’s “speech,” which evokes the Greek concept of *logos* that signified “reason” and “general rule” as well as “speech.”⁴³ The philosophical uses of the term were related to its ordinary meanings.

Heraclitus famously employed it in the sense of "the governing principle of the Universe."⁴⁴ The Earth's speech, which parallels the biblical "Word," is thus the primordial blueprint out of which matter, including living beings, will form. At this stage, the Earth's mouth is maiden and its feet and lids are virginal. Virginity figures the alterity of the young planet, expressing its vast difference from its current form. With "[e]yes that had looked not on time," the Earth's youth defies our capacity to grasp it (93). The Earth, of course, is not transcendent; yet while she exists in the same spatial and temporal frame that we inhabit, she does not display the characteristics of the here and now. The alterity of the virginal Earth signals time's ability to re-create and re-mold.

If, as Swinburne would have it, poetic form consists of a wavelike unfurling over time, the textual medium here is one that renders the lapse of time noticeable. In the description of primeval times, one subordinate clause piles up on another, constructing the poetic equivalent of a gathering wave. "When her eyes new-born of the night saw yet no star out of reach" is followed by three more "when" clauses that open the subsequent lines (93). Further, a number of dependent clauses accumulate under the umbrella of the final "when," only to reach a climactic breaking point with a colon followed up by short questions ("did they know?" "did they dream of it?" [94]). The poem embodies "the rhyme of change" and "the rhythmic anguish of growth" that the young Earth is yet to learn, due not only to the grammatical structure of prolonged build-up and release but to its meter (93, 94). The iambic/anapestic hexameter marks each passing moment, leaving traces in the reader's memory just as the passage of time is to stamp the Earth's consciousness. The wavelike gathering and breaking is also evident in the structure of the end-rhymes. A sound is initially repeated just once, to be replaced by a new repeated sound in the next two lines (*aabb*), but after a long procession of fresh rhymes, the initial end-rhyme returns. Several end-rhymes are thus repeated over and over in the poem (began/man; breath/death), marking the beginning, or the end, of a new gathering point with each repetition.

Like "Hymn to Proserpine," "Hymn of Man" addresses what Lyell calls "perpetual flux" (1:20). Parodying the biblical account of creation *ex nihilo*, the poem poses unanswerable questions about a remote past in which man came into being:

The beautiful bird unbegotten that night brought forth without pain
In the fathomless years forgotten whereover the dead gods reign,
Was it love, life, godhead, or fate? we say the spirit is one
That moved on the dark to create out of darkness the stars and the sun. (95)

The measure of time's depth is the expiration of gods who once ruled over it. Outlasting the gods, man forgets a past that the poet-prophet afterward calls to mind. "[L]ove, life, godhead, or fate" may perhaps all be present in the forgotten past, but the "spirit" is the singular agent whose motion gave rise to the universe. Already present at the moment of origin, that spirit is coeval with time itself. The poem conceals the nature of the spirit as well as the exact role it plays in the creation of the cosmos. The spirit precedes matter but is not transcendent. Belonging at once to the Earth, time, and man, it has the potential to become manifest in each.

Man's spirit comes alive only after the emergence of a republican consciousness in the poem. Winning "the war against 'priestcraft' and 'kingcraft,'" ⁴⁵ man is to reign over the "kingdom of time":

We men, the multiform features of man, whatsoever we be,
Recreate him of whom we are creatures, and all we only are he. [. . .]
Not men's but man's is the glory of godhead, the kingdom of time,
The mountainous ages made hoary with snows for the spirit to climb. (96)

Like the accumulation of snow, the mountainous nature of the "ages" suggests their antiquity. Man possesses the kingdom of time in that his victory will last across the ages; the Christian god, in contrast, rules for only a brief period. With republican awareness, man will come to embody the mystical spirit that aspires to climb the mountain of time. The elusive past and the utopian future: god, transient and tenuous, can neither register the depth of the former nor survive in the latter. The spirit, in contrast, is at home in both. As with the scientific exploration of the Earth's antiquity, in Swinburne's vision time is no longer under the dominion of god. Having been a "slave" of god but for a "span," man will overcome the influence of "temple or tripod" (100).

Man's power derives from his ability to live in unison with time, which "hath substance in man" (101). If the ordering principle of the universe is time, man partakes of its power:

Time's motion that throbs in his [man's] blood is the thought that gives
heart to the skies,
And the springs of the fire that is food to the sunbeams are light to his eyes.
The minutes that beat with his heart are the words to which worlds keep chime,
And the thought in his pulses is part of the blood and spirit of time. (101)

The flow of time is incarnated by man. In his body is the "thought" that belongs to time, which shapes the natural world. The minutes are

"words" in the sense of a Heraclitean *logos*: they constitute the great principle that rules over everything. Embodied by man, the flow of time is the order that the universe obeys. Man is neither subordinate nor superior to the "minutes" that pulsate in him. His body becomes the materialization of what he cannot surpass.

The mind and the body together echo the beat that underlies the universe. Their union, of course, is typical for Swinburne, who "despised" the Christian idea of the soul's superiority to the flesh.⁴⁶ The special place man plays in this universal order is at once reminiscent of, and greater than, what Heraclitus described:

[T]he divine force which brings rational order into the Universe is at the same time a physical, material entity. . . . It follows that we get our share of it by physical means, which include breathing and the channels of the sense organs. . . . The senses, then, are for human beings the primary channels of communication with the Logos outside.⁴⁷

The "divine force" permeates the human body in Heraclitus's model. Zeno, a Stoic thinker who adopted Heraclitus's theory, offers a similar model wherein "*logos* resides in each individual soul as the governing principle."⁴⁸ As with Heraclitus and Zeno, so with Swinburne: the universal *logos* is internalized by man.

Man's mind becomes privy to the mysteries of time. Not any single man, but the collective will of men accomplishes this task: "He [man] hath sight of the secrets of season, the roots of the years and the fruits" (102). Most directly, the line describes the success of the future man, who will be attuned to the operation of time. The privileged relation that he bears to time may very well be rooted in Swinburne's reading of Blake. In *William Blake: A Critical Essay*, the analysis of *The (First) Book of Urizen* attends to the role that time plays in the poem:

The First Book of Urizen is perhaps more shapeless and chaotic at a first glimpse than any other of these prose poems. Clouds of blood, shadows of horror, worlds without form and void, rise and mingle and wane in indefinite ways. . . . The myth here is of an active but unprolific God, warring with shapes of the wilderness, and at variance with the eternals: beaten upon by Time, who figures always in all his various shapes and actions as the saviour and friend of man.⁴⁹

Unlike Swinburne's Earth, the worlds in *The (First) Book of Urizen* are created, and the process of their creation bears the mark of its author. Time in *The (First) Book of Urizen* is a transcendent entity that is in

operation before the creation of the universe. With “[a]ges on ages” rolling as Urizen lies “brooding,” the poem associates long stretches of time with the actions of the Eternals.⁵⁰ By contrast, Swinburne’s deep time is decidedly secular: his mythical cosmological account assigns no significant role to god. Even so, “Hymn of Man” replicates the affinity between time and man that Swinburne finds in Blake’s poem.

The emergent republican consciousness lasts through the vicissitudes of time. In a mystic feedback loop, man nourishes the past that produces him: “His soul is at one with the *reason* of things that is sap to the roots” (101). Here, reason is both the primal cause that brings everything into being and the rational capacity that is the grammar of the universe. Once again, Swinburne’s line of thought abides by pre-Enlightenment theories of reason. Heraclitus found “in the arrangement of natural phenomena the working of a power similar to the reasoning capacity of man.”⁵¹ In embodying the universal *logos*, man internalizes an external power. “[T]he reason of things” is in union with man’s “soul,” and the two together nourish the past.

The poem’s allusion to Heraclitus’s philosophy is reinforced by a meter that evokes the Greek epic. To be sure, the poem’s most conspicuous generic affiliation is with the English hymn, whose characteristic themes (praise, glory) are appropriated such that the poem’s atheism carries traces of a genre devoted to the worship of God. Swinburne only slightly modifies the hymn’s traditional rhyme structure, *abab*, with the *a* sound migrating to the middle of a line, exactly to the third beat, and the *b* sound appearing at the end of the line.⁵² In this peculiar atheistic hymn, there is an aspect of otherness in the self, of external in the internal. The hymn, though, is not the only genre whose legacy shapes the poem. The poem’s hexameters, especially long because of its anapests, evoke the metric feet common in Greek epic. If dactylic hexameter is the signature of that genre, Swinburne’s anapestic hexameter approximates that meter, as one stressed syllable alternates with two unstressed syllables in both the Greek epic and its nineteenth-century simulation. When Swinburne nods toward antiquity through his use of meter, he offers a formal corollary to his appropriation of ancient Greek philosophy.

“Hymn of Man” combines what I have called the rational and extra-rational strands of the secular by embedding unbelief in a double context: having awakened to a republican consciousness, man is under the influence of no god, yet an awe-inspiring entity directs the universe. The operation of *logos* in the poem is central to this split. Insofar as

man embodies the universal *logos*, he possesses reason, which makes him powerful. Yet the reason that is within the human subject is ultimately an incorporation of the reason without—it is a reflection of time's ability to give order to the universe. The formulation of *logos* as both within and without turns the Enlightenment formulation of reason as a subjective capacity on its head. With a sublime power finding an echo in human reason and speech, the source of rational thought is external, even without theism. Yet for Swinburne this model of integrated reason is no threat to sovereignty; indeed, the ability to connect to cosmic forces strengthens the republican project.

In this vision, while the self has agency, it remains radically open to the external world. The human subject's oneness with "the reason of things" and its union with time reveals its porousness—a quality that Taylor associates with the presence of enchantment in the world. As Taylor explains, in premodern times, "the boundary between agents and forces" was porous (39). The forces of the cosmos operated on and through the self, which remained open to influence. By contrast, "the modern buffered self," emerging alongside secular thought, witnessed the erection of a "thick emotional boundary between [the self] and the cosmos" (38). The buffered self was no longer vulnerable to forces external to itself. Of course, anyone who has read William Wordsworth's poetry will be ready to assert that the porous self persisted in modern times and in secular thought—indeed, Taylor himself identifies the opposition to the buffered self as a feature of Romanticism. The relation between time and man in Swinburne's poetry abides by that Romantic tradition, opening the self up to cosmic influences without comprising agency or reason. Specifically by describing man as the incarnation of time's power to govern, Swinburne attains a model of selfhood that is at once porous and sovereign.

Through meter and alliteration, Swinburne's verse helps to produce the porous self it envisions. In *Electric Meters*, Jason Rudy writes of "Swinburne's desire to communicate a physiological experience by way of poetic form and sound." However, that bodily experience can only emerge through the self's communion with its outside: "[His] poetic ideal aims to transport readers beyond simple physiological experience to a union with the world, or universe, beyond."⁵³ The external world inscribes on the body its own rhythm and flow, not as an imposition, but because the body willingly opens itself up through the act of reading or reciting a poem. The sound pattern that Rudy describes as both physiological and cosmic consists of interrupted repetition: "Swinburne

organizes his lines with Anglo-Saxon alliteration and, frequently, strong medial caesurae—‘prone in passion, blind with bliss’—part of an effort to use poetic form to resituate Wordsworthian cosmic unity and sublime interconnectedness.”⁵⁴ The combination of medial caesura with alliteration marks “Hymn of Man” as well (“Was it praise or passion or prayer, was it love or devotion or dread” or “Child yet no child of the night, and motherless mother of men?” [93, 94]). The conspicuous alliteration challenges enunciation and induces a sense of deliberate effort. The pauses introduced midline signal switches between alliterative sounds. Especially when read aloud, each line invites readers to attain an awareness of the physiological experience in which the poem immerses them.

As in “Hymn of Man,” in the “Prelude” to *Songs Before Sunrise* the passage of time ensures the porousness of the subject. The poem traces the maturation of a youth who achieves freedom by recognizing the constancy of change across time.⁵⁵ The youth, an allegorical figure for a philosopher or poet whose “cloak [was] woven of thought,” possesses a selfhood that is open to cosmic forces.⁵⁶ He surrenders to time, which remains all powerful as everything else alters during its lapse: “He hath given himself to time,” fully aware of “the heat / And cold of years that rot and rust and alter.” The poem foregrounds time’s strength to “weave the robes of life and rend / And weave again” even as it acknowledges its limits (“strengthless [is] time / To take the light from heaven”).⁵⁷ Signifying what lies beyond time’s control, “heaven” transcends historical contingency, as does the republican will in “Hymn of Man.” Paradoxically, the youth overcomes the threat of perpetual flux by giving himself to time and thereby achieving communion with nature: “His heart is equal with the sea’s / And with the sea-wind’s, and his ear / Is level to the speech of these.”⁵⁸ The sense organs counter isolation, even as the self remains sovereign. “[M]an’s soul is man’s God,” declares the speaker. The youth is one whom “no God [can] cast down, whom none can lift,” precisely because he channels the might of the “[a]ir, light, and night, hills, winds, and streams.”⁵⁹ The “Prelude” shares with “Hymn of Man” a vision of porousness accompanied by strength.

The porousness of the human subject who rejects godhead resonates with what Jane Bennett calls “the enchantment of modern life,” which, as she discusses, involves a “state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience.”⁶⁰ Recently, Alex Owen has argued that fin-de-siècle occultism was thoroughly modern in spirit, and Simon During has located another site of modern enchantment in eighteenth-century secular magic. These authors revise Max Weber’s

famous account of modernization. Weber portrays a modern world devoid of magic: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'" ⁶¹ For Weber, secularization divests the world of the sense of enchantment that religion previously offered. Yet today, while some scholars argue that religion was never on the decline (Larsen, Vance), others maintain that enchantment persists in the absence of religion (Landy and Saler): "there are, in the modern age, *fully secular and deliberate* strategies for re-enchantment." ⁶² In Victorian studies, the tendency to locate experiences of awe and wonder in secular modernity surfaces in George Levine's *Darwin Loves You*, which argues that "Darwin's writing and experience . . . open up possibilities of enchantment." ⁶³ Attending to Darwin's eloquent descriptions of the natural world, Levine shows that scientific thought "makes its wonders available where they have been hidden from less inquiring consciousnesses." ⁶⁴ Swinburne's unbelief similarly restores awe and wonder to a world in which god remains absent.

Secular enchantment in "Hymn of Man" develops partly through the figure of the poet-prophet, who can see into the deep past. In a "humanistic parody of the Christian version of the world's beginning," ⁶⁵ the speaker asks: "In the grey beginning of years, in the twilight of things that began, / The word of the earth in the ears of the world, was it God? was it man?" (93). With its disorienting use of twilight, the opening line of the poem subtly positions the beginning as an end, signaling the difficulty of capturing an origin. The question posed by the first lines is addressed by the final lines of the poem, which affirm the speaker's ability to reproduce the word of the Earth. Swinburne modifies a liturgical Christian hymn: "And the love-song of earth . . . resounds . . . / Glory to man in the highest!" (104). The poet-prophet's words ventriloquize the love-song of the earth, and in reading the poem we have heard that song.

Unifying the desire for man's independence from god with a longing for porousness, Swinburne's mythopoesis nods toward a Romantic context in which, as Anthony Harding summarizes, myth "[took] up the Enlightenment's rational analysis into a higher synthesis." ⁶⁶ Insofar as myth is taken to reflect the workings of the imagination, it has the capacity to facilitate the strand of secularity that prioritizes the power of the human mind. As Harding claims in his reading of Shelley's *Queen Mab*, "mythology, when revisioned as borrowing its authority from the human imagination itself, can subvert the complacent

acceptance of orthodox religious belief.”⁶⁷ In this approach, myth serves secular thought by giving free play to mental capacities. Harding’s rationale, however, does not fully account for Swinburne’s use of secular myth. In “Hymn of Man,” humans’ relation to powers greater than themselves forges a mode of secularity that extends beyond the celebration of individual mental capacity.

The triumph of man who has divested himself of faith in god resonates with Ludwig Feuerbach’s philosophy of religion, which was available in English as early as 1854 in George Eliot’s translation. When Feuerbach writes that “the divine being is nothing else than the human being,” he asserts not only that god is created by humans, but also implies that humans themselves have divine attributes.⁶⁸ Religion deprives man of those divine attributes, because it projects them onto god: “the more, by reflection on religion, by theology, is the identity of the divine and human denied, [the more] the human, considered as such, is depreciated. . . . Man has his being in God, why then should he have it in himself?”⁶⁹ The implication is that belief in god divests man of his own abilities and skills. Swinburne expresses a similar idea in “Genesis” when he refers to god as “the shade cast by the soul of man.”⁷⁰ In “Hymn of Man,” when man leaves behind his dependence on god, he becomes more attuned to the operation of the universal *logos*.⁷¹

Time, whose depth defies comprehension, is an apt site for extrarational secularity to flourish. Molding a porous self that remains open to cosmic powers operating through it, Swinburne’s antitheism presents an enchanted version of the secular. His vision offers a fleeting glimpse of the plurality that the political philosopher William Connolly finds missing in Western secularism: “The need today. . . is to rewrite secularism to pursue an ethos of engagement in public life among a plurality of *metaphysical* perspectives, including, for starters, Christian and other monotheistic perspectives, secular thought, and aseular, nontheistic perspectives” (39).⁷² It would be going too far to suggest that such utopian plurality existed in the Victorian period. Yet, as Connolly suggests, a broad range of nontheistic perspectives can flourish outside the bounds of the dominant secular discourse. For his part, Swinburne contributed to the pluralization of nontheistic perspectives by challenging secular rationality.

NOTES

1. Kant, "An Answer to the Question" 17 (emphasis original).
2. Kant, "An Answer to the Question" 18, 22.
3. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3. All subsequent references to this book are noted parenthetically in the text.
4. Holyoake, *English Secularism*, 3.
5. Holyoake, *English Secularism*, 36.
6. Holyoake was influenced by Comte's positivism (Wright, *The Religion of Humanity*, 68).
7. Holyoake, *English Secularism*, 46.
8. Holyoake, *English Secularism*, 23.
9. Riede, *Swinburne*, 1.
10. Guthrie, *The Earlier Pre-Socratics*, 2.
11. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 29.
12. For Coleridge's unification of reason and myth, see Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 44. In a similar vein, Coker shows that the German "System-Programm" and Keats's poetry call for a unification of reason and myth ("Keats, Hegel, and Belated Mythography").
13. Riede, *Swinburne*, 72.
14. Swinburne, "Hymn to Proserpine," 71. All subsequent references to this poem are noted parenthetically in the text.
15. Levin, *Swinburne's Apollo*, 45.
16. Riede, *Swinburne*, 72.
17. Kay, "Swinburne," 272–73, 281, 273.
18. Perhaps an allusion to Herodotus's account of Xerxes punishing the sea in this manner.
19. Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine," 171.
20. Biblical chronology commonly dated the Earth's origin to 4004 BCE. Christian churches had not always insisted on this number, which was, indeed, a product of a series of interpretations by James Ussher, archbishop of Armagh, in the middle of the seventeenth century (Vance, *Bible and Novel*, 37). In the Renaissance, the creation was dated to a range of dates such as 3928 and 4103, and earlier the Jewish teachers had singled out 3760 (Vance, *Bible and Novel*, 37).
21. Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*, 1788, 96.
22. Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*, 1795, 221.
23. Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*, 1795, 221–22.

24. Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 3:421. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
25. Burchfield, "The Age of the Earth"; and Albritton, *The Abyss of Time*.
26. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), 481.
27. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1899), 318.
28. Burchfield, "The Age of the Earth," 137.
29. Tyndall, *Fragments of Science*, 126; qtd. in Levine, *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism*, 36.
30. According to McGann, Swinburne "rejects . . . a scientific mythology, which sets everything to the number, weight, and measure of the rational mind" (Swinburne, 198). But since McGann's assertion in 1972, philosophers and critics alike have problematized the link between science and rationality, highlighting the ways in which science relies on affect—and even suggesting its potential irrationality. Feyerabend has proposed that ideas which are "now said to be in agreement with reason" in their moment of origin "opposed the dictates of reason," based as they were on "prejudice, passion, conceit, errors, sheer pigheadedness" (*Against Method*, 116). Precisely because "reason was overruled at some time in their past," great discoveries that are considered rational today came into being (*Against Method*, 116).
31. Swinburne, "Hymn of Man," 95, 100. All subsequent references to this poem are noted parenthetically in the text.
32. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), 287.
33. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), 282.
34. Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods*, 98.
35. Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, 2:45.
36. Riede, *Swinburne*, 131.
37. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 3.4.194–95.
38. Since the universal subject is gendered male for Swinburne, I use "man" when I am following Swinburne's train of thought rather than expressing my own perspective.
39. Kuduk, "A Sword of a Song," 262.
40. Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods*, 107.
41. Riede, "Swinburne and Romantic Authority," 29.
42. Riede's idea here is aligned with Abrams's famous thesis that "characteristic concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology, or else a secularized devotional experience" (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 65). Abrams attends specifically to Romantic reworkings of the Christian

ideas of the fall and redemption, the metaphor of marriage, and the sense of an underlying order. While I concur with Abrams that secular Romanticism shares certain tenets of religion (I would extend that Swinburne, as a belated Romantic, exemplifies Abrams's thesis), this paper's focus is not on revisions of Christian sacraments or narratives. For Swinburne's parodies of those sacraments and narratives, see Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods*.

43. Guthrie, *The Earlier Pre-Socratics*, 422.
44. Guthrie, *The Earlier Pre-Socratics*, 428.
45. Kuduk, "A Sword of a Song," 253.
46. McGann, *Swinburne*, 196.
47. Guthrie, *The Earlier Pre-Socratics*, 429–30.
48. Redford, "'A God with the World Inwound,'" 37.
49. Swinburne, *William Blake*, 246.
50. Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 24, 25.
51. Redford, "'A God with the World Inwound,'" 37.
52. For an identification of the traditional rhyme structure of the English hymn, see Kuduk, "A Sword of a Song."
53. Rudy, *Electric Meters*, 141, 142.
54. Rudy, *Electric Meters*, 142.
55. My reading here is influenced by Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods*, 86–91.
56. Swinburne, "Prelude," 4.
57. Swinburne, "Prelude," 5, 4, 7.
58. Swinburne, "Prelude," 4.
59. Swinburne, "Prelude," 7, 4, 4.
60. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 131.
61. Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 155–56.
62. Landy and Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 2 (emphasis original).
63. Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, 36.
64. Levine, *Darwin Loves You*, 26.
65. McGann, *Swinburne*, 193.
66. Harding, *Reception of Myth*, 15.
67. Harding, *Reception of Myth*, 163.
68. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 14.
69. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 26.
70. Swinburne, "Genesis," 117.
71. There are limitations to the comparison between Feuerbach and Swinburne that I pursue here. For the former, it is in particular

one attribute of the human subject—reason—that is objectified in god, but for the latter the experience of the body is central to the divinity of the subject.

72. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 39.

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