



University  
of Glasgow

Davis, Deryl Andrew (2018) *"A Scottish Milton": Robert Pollok and epic theodicy in the Romantic Age*. PhD thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/30776/>

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>  
[research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk)

**“A Scottish Milton”: Robert Pollok and Epic Theodicy in the Romantic Age**

**Deryl Andrew Davis**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

Theology and Religious Studies  
School of Critical Studies  
University of Glasgow

September 2018

## Abstract

Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* was one of the best-selling long poems of the nineteenth century, outstripping works by much better known contemporaries such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. Yet today, Pollok and his poem are almost entirely forgotten by scholars and general readers alike. This thesis explores the factors behind the poem's enormous, decades-long popularity and its later sudden decline, arguing that neither can be understood without a recognition of the poem's distinctiveness as a Romantic-era Miltonic theodicy written from an evangelical Scottish Calvinist perspective. In contrast with most of his Romantic peers, Pollok used the Miltonic model to defend, rather than to challenge or reinterpret, traditional Christian doctrines under siege in the early nineteenth century, especially biblical authority, final judgment, heaven, and hell.

As the first comprehensive examination and close reading of *The Course of Time* in the modern era, this study begins with an exploration of Milton's significance for the British Romantics as a whole and compares that with his peculiar importance for Pollok, which lies primarily in the theodicean model of *Paradise Lost* and Milton's embodiment of the ideal of the Christian poet. Next, the study considers three figures contemporary with Pollok whose influence may have been decisive for *The Course of Time*: Lord Byron, whose short lyric "Darkness" inspired Pollok's poem and whose religious skepticism Pollok sought to challenge; theologian John Dick, who provided a theological framework and polemical stance that Pollok may have adopted; and apocalyptic Scots preacher Edward Irving, who called for a new Milton to affirm biblical understandings of judgment in an epic poem, and who did so shortly before Pollok began *The Course of Time*. Following, I undertake a close reading of the poem to investigate its larger didactic aims and performance as a "sermon in verse" intended to offer cautionary examples to its readership. The final chapter examines the poem's reception history through reviews, analyses, and commentaries and considers the reasons behind its dramatic rise to popularity and precipitous decline and near-disappearance decades later, finding both rooted in its deep religiosity and distinctive identity as a traditional Miltonic theodicy in the Romantic age. A comprehensive

examination of the poem and its history thus provides valuable insights into the changing relationship between religion and wider culture in the nineteenth century, the uses of literature as a vehicle for theological content and instruction, and the important and often overlooked role that religion played in Scottish Romantic literature.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	7
<b>A Note on Language</b>	8
<b>Introduction</b>	9
<b>Biography</b>	20
 <b>1. Robert Pollok's Miltonic Project I: Milton for the Romantics</b>	
Introduction	27
1.1 Milton and the Nature of Epic	31
1.2 The Romantic Poets and the "Milton Cult"	39
1.2.1 Political Milton	42
1.2.2 Satanic Impulses	44
1.2.3 A Prophetic Bard	46
1.3 Byron's Challenge to Miltonic Epic	51
1.3.1 An Epic of Negation	54
1.4 Epic Transformations	56
1.5 Conclusions	58
 <b>2. Robert Pollok's Miltonic Project II: What Milton Meant for Pollok</b>	
Introduction	60
2.1 Milton and <i>The Course of Time</i>	63
2.2 Virtue, Vice, and Milton's <i>Comus</i>	67
2.3 The Poet as Preacher: Milton's <i>The Reason of Church-Government</i> and Pollok's "Address on Preaching"	72
2.3.1 <i>Paradise Lost</i> and the Sermonic Mode	76
2.4 Prophetic History in <i>Paradise Lost</i> and <i>The Course of Time</i>	78
2.5 Theodicy in <i>Paradise Lost</i> and <i>The Course of Time</i>	81
2.6 Reason and Free Will in <i>Paradise Lost</i> and <i>The Course of Time</i>	84
2.7 Freedom of Conscience in Milton and <i>The Course of Time</i>	90
2.8 Miltonic Blank Verse and the Sublime	93
2.9 Conclusions	96

### 3. **Robert Pollok's Miltonic Project III: Contemporary Influences – Byron, John Dick, and Edward Irving**

Introduction	98
3.1 Byron and His "Sons"	100
3.2 Intimations of Mortality	104
3.2.1 Family Matters	106
3.2.2 Melancholy and the Consumptive Poet	107
3.3 "Eternity is All"	112
3.4 John Dick and the "Polemical Divine"	116
3.5 Edward Irving and Visions of Judgment	123
3.5.1 Gifts of the Spirit: Towards a Christian Literature	129
3.5.2 Affirming Judgment	130
3.5.3 Virtue and Sensuality	132
3.5.4 Byron and the Nature of Providence	133
3.5.5 Biblical Interpretation	137
3.5.6 The Apocalyptic	139
3.6 Pollok, Irving, and the Byronic Hero	141
3.7 Conclusions	144

### 4. **"The Poem a Sermon": A Close Reading of *The Course of Time***

Introduction	146
4.1 From Creation to Apocalypse	151
4.2 "The Essentials of Religion"	153
4.2.1 Hellish Realities	154
4.2.2 Divine Justice	159
4.2.3 The Bible	163
4.3 "Moral Portraiture"	173
4.3.1 Pollok and Moral Philosophy	174
4.3.2 The Bard as Moralizer	177
4.3.3 Portraits in the Eighteenth-Century Style	180
4.3.4 Gallery Highlights: Holy and Unholy Bards	191
4.4 Sharpening Weapons at the Forge of Byron:	
Romanticism in <i>The Course of Time</i>	195
4.4.1 Evangelicalism and Scottish Romanticism	197
4.4.2 The Figure of Byron	198
4.4.3 A "history of himself": Autobiography in <i>The Course of Time</i>	200
4.4.3.1 Melancholy and the Poet	202
4.4.4 "Deep and Sincere Feeling"	203
4.4.5 Nature Reverie in <i>The Course of Time</i>	204
4.5 Prophetic Vision and Apocalypse in <i>The Course of Time</i>	210
4.5.1 A Chosen Bard	213
4.5.2 In the Line of the Biblical Prophets	215
4.5.3 Visions of the End	216

4.5.4 A “Resurrection Man”	217
4.6 Apocalyptic Laughter	221
4.7 Conclusions	226
<b>5. The Rise and Fall of a Christian Epic</b>	
Introduction	229
5.1 “The Seeds of Immortality”: Reasons for the Poem’s Early Success	233
5.1.1 “A purely religious poem”	235
5.1.2 “The best didactic poem in the language”	239
5.1.3 “Traits of pure romanticism”	243
5.2 “A Literary Curiosity”: Why <i>The Course of Time</i> Was Forgotten	247
5.2.1 Religion’s “dark robes”	248
5.2.2 A “disjointed and unbalanced poem”	252
5.2.3 “A creed outworn”: Religious and Cultural Changes	256
5.3 Conclusions	267
<b>General Conclusion</b>	270
<b>Bibliography</b>	278

## Acknowledgements

I owe great debts of gratitude to many friends, mentors, family members, and colleagues whose advice, support, and wisdom made this endeavor possible. My supervisors at the University of Glasgow, David Jasper, Professor Emeritus of Literature and Theology, and Professor Gerard Carruthers, Francis Hutcheson Chair of Scottish Literature, provided unfailing help, direction, and support at every step of the way – including the occasional prod and encouraging pronouncement that I was “almost there!” Together, they instilled in me an enduring interest in the project and the faith that it could and would be done. I also am grateful for the support of many other friends within the faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, but especially, to Dr. Scott Spurlock, subject area head, who introduced me to Robert Pollok several years ago, and to Zanne Domoney-Lyttle, who helped a “Yank” navigate many ins-and-outs of graduate study and of Glasgow in general. To visiting theology scholar and fellow American Art Mielke, I am grateful for many long, impromptu, but deeply enjoyable discussions that transpired in the stairwells of the University Library, coffee and books in hand.

Special thanks go to friends and flatmates John Bell, who impersonated Robert Pollok at a first public reading at the Hunterian Museum several years ago, and to Pat Bennett, with whom I spent many happy hours talking about poetry, religion, and how (or why?) one writes a thesis anyway. These friends kept my spirits up with laughter and encouraged me to stick at it with the character we came to know as “the dear Pollok.”

My father, Dr. Earl Davis, provided the best proofreading and editing money could buy – but these gifts came completely free, as did the unflagging support of my mother, Pegeen Davis.

Finally, most important thanks of all goes to my long-suffering wife, Whitney, and children Nate, Eliza, and Caroline, who let their crazy dad and husband go to Scotland to do this, and who kept the ship afloat while I was away. I am more grateful than words.

## **A Note on Language**

Throughout this thesis I have used gendered language for the deity, and oftentimes in reference to humankind, not by preference, but as this was the common usage of the period in which Robert Pollok lived and wrote. This choice is both an attempt to avoid confusion and to maintain consistency with the usage of almost all nineteenth-century sources quoted here, including of course Robert Pollok himself.

## Introduction

At a junction of the Glasgow-Kilmarnock Road, just south of the small Scottish town of Newton Mearns, stands a stone monument to a local poet named Robert Pollok. Along with the poet's dates (1798-1827), it reads: 'He soared untrodden heights/And seemed at home' - a line taken from the poet's most famous work, a long religious meditation titled *The Course of Time*. While almost entirely forgotten today, even by critics of Scottish literature, the 8500-line blank verse epic of 1827 was a bestseller throughout much of the nineteenth century. Moreover, as a literary theodicy written in the Miltonic style, the poem marked its author and his intentions as quite different from most of his Romantic peers. While many poets of the era sought to re-invent the Miltonic epic and even to reinterpret the idea of theodicy, Pollok determined to use the epic form – or a variation of it – to defend traditional religious doctrine and the providence of God before an increasingly skeptical age. Reviewers immediately recognized that Pollok was doing something different. Unlike other poets, the young Scot's aim “was not so much to please a worldly taste, as to convey truth—truth as he had learned it from a devout study of his Bible.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the poem's deep religiosity, combined with elements of the High Romanticism then in fashion, proved irresistible to many readers. *The Course of Time* sold 12,000 copies in its first eighteen months, a remarkable number; by 1870, the poem had sold nearly 80,000 copies,<sup>2</sup> becoming “one of the surest of literary possessions”<sup>3</sup> for prominent Edinburgh publisher *William Blackwood and Sons*. As Richard Altick observes in a study of nineteenth-century reading habits, *The Course of Time* was one of only four “poetry blockbusters” published in the early nineteenth century, two of the remaining three being by Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott, who had established

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, ed. James Robert Boyd (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1854), 39.

<sup>2</sup> William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 630.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Oliphant and Mary Blackwood Porter, *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and His Sons, Their Magazine and Friends*. (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 269.

international reputations.<sup>4</sup> Early reviews of *The Course of Time* support this picture of the poem's remarkable success and help to identify its primary readerships. Writing in 1835, only a few years after the poem's first publication and its author's death (both 1827), book editor Robert Chambers asserted that *The Course of Time* had become "extensively read throughout the British empire, especially among the numerous and respectable classes of dissenters."<sup>5</sup> A few years later, in 1843, Robert or his brother William, joint-editors of *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, declared that *The Course of Time* had "obtained a degree of popularity scarcely equaled by any other poem of the age."<sup>6</sup> In the United States, the poem was equally if not more successful. New Jersey minister and literary critic James Scott wrote an extensive biography of the man he considered "the greatest Christian poet of the century,"<sup>7</sup> while New York editor James Boyd was perhaps only the most diligent (or exhaustive) of many editors who added copious notes, indices, introductions, and references to new editions of *The Course of Time*. Over the course of six decades, the poem would see twenty-five editions in the United Kingdom, over seventy-five in the United States,<sup>8</sup> and at least one in Germany.<sup>9</sup> Looking back on the poem's career at the centennial of Pollok's death in 1927, journalist W. Forbes Gray could assert that "[i]n early Victorian days there was probably no more popular book among upholders of evangelical religion."<sup>10</sup>

However, *The Course of Time* had been out of print for nearly thirty years when Gray penned his remembrance in *The Scotsman* and it would not see another edition. Likewise, Gray's article was very likely the last commentary on *The Course of Time* to appear in the popular press. Historian Crawford Gribben notes the "ambivalence" that began to seep into public responses to the poem

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard Daniel Altick, *The English Common Reader a Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 380.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Chambers, "Significant Scots: Robert Pollok," in *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Blackie & Son, 1835).

<sup>6</sup> "Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok," *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, 1843, 78.

<sup>7</sup> James Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...* (New York: R. Carter, 1848).

<sup>8</sup> A number of these American editions may have been pirated.

<sup>9</sup> These numbers are based upon my count from the publications listing in Joanne Shattock, *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, Third, vol. 4 (Cambridge [etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 420.

<sup>10</sup> W. Forbes Gray, "A Scottish Milton: Pollok's Centenary," *The Scotsman*, September 19, 1927, 8.

as early as the 1870s.<sup>11</sup> By 1898, the year in which *Blackwood and Sons* published the last edition of *The Course of Time*, biographer Rosaline Masson could presume that most of her readers had never heard of Pollok or his poem. Dismissive of both, she caustically asked of the poem, “who has read it?”<sup>12</sup> Writing with the distance of an additional thirty years, Gray found *The Course of Time* to be “a striking example of the perverse fate that often attends literary effort.”<sup>13</sup> In our own time, Gribben has observed that Pollok’s epic is “not mentioned even in the most definitive accounts of the [Scottish] national canon,”<sup>14</sup> and the poem is rarely acknowledged (and then, only briefly and most often dismissively) in histories and anthologies of Scottish literature. How could a work which was so popular and seemingly important for many decades suddenly disappear? What accounts for the extraordinary popularity of *The Course of Time* in the early and middle years of the nineteenth century and its momentous decline near the century’s end? Finally, what do these events tell us about the nature of the work itself, its readership, and the cultures out of which it arose and in which it existed?

These questions provide a starting point and a rationale for this investigation of *The Course of Time*, which seeks to recover and re-contextualize a largely forgotten yet culturally significant work of Scottish religious literature. In so doing, I argue that neither the poem’s significance nor its history can be properly understood without the recognition of its distinctiveness as a Romantic-era Miltonic theodicy written from a Scottish Calvinist perspective and blending popular Romanticism with a deep appreciation for Scottish history and culture. Central to this “recovery” project is the simple fact that *The Course of Time* has received so little scholarly attention in the modern era – only two scholarly articles published over the last forty years - and has never been the subject of book or dissertation-length study. On the grounds of cultural history alone, *The Course of Time* deserves attention. Also important is what a close and lengthy examination of *The Course of Time* reveals about the intersection of religion and literature where it resides. A study of

---

<sup>11</sup> Crawford Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” *Romanticism* 21.1 (2015): 31.

<sup>12</sup> Rosaline Masson, *Pollok and Aytoun: Eminent Scots Series* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1898), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Gray, “A Scottish Milton: Pollok’s Centenary.” 8.

<sup>14</sup> Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” 26–28.

the reception history of Pollok's poem sheds light on nineteenth-century debates about the relationship between religion and literature, the role of the religious poet, and whether there can be such a thing as "good" religious literature at all. These debates continue today in different forms, and as the interdisciplinary field of religion and literature continues to grow, the reception history of *The Course of Time* offers instructive examples and warnings about the use of literature - and poetry in particular - as a vehicle for theology.

Finally, *The Course of Time* is an important evidentiary artefact for the significance of religion in Scottish Romanticism. Scholars of Scottish literature and culture such as Crawford Gribben and Gerard Carruthers contend that religion often has been overlooked in scholarly approaches to Scottish Romanticism, and that religion often was more significant for Scottish Romantic writers than for their peers in other countries. Gribben even suggests that "the robust theological interests" of *The Course of Time*, challenging as they do some established norms of Scottish literary criticism, may be the reason why the poem "is now almost universally forgotten."<sup>15</sup> Thus, Pollok's poem has something to say about how present and future critics of Scottish literature, and of Romanticism in particular, might approach their subject matter – and all that subject matter might include.

The paucity of scholarly attention which *The Course of Time* has received in the modern era, compared with the significant critical and popular attention it received in the nineteenth century, says much about the momentous religious and cultural changes which have taken place over the past one hundred and fifty years. There is a great deal of literature on *The Course of Time* in the nineteenth century, primarily written between the poem's first appearance in 1827 and the early 1860s - when critic Thomas McNicoll published a lengthy essay comparing Milton and Pollok - and primarily in the form of newspaper and magazine reviews; introductions, commentaries, and notes attached to new editions of the poem; and biographies of the poet. The majority of this literature is from a conservative, often evangelical, point of view in publications such as *The*

---

<sup>15</sup> Gribben, 26.

*Eclectic Review* (a popular dissenting magazine based in London),<sup>16</sup> *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* (an organ of the Congregational Church in Boston intended to combat Unitarianism),<sup>17</sup> and *The Ladies Repository* of Cincinnati, Ohio, which was produced by the Methodist Episcopal Church. But Pollok's poem also received plenty of attention from secular sources and from those not affiliated with evangelical and dissenting traditions, including the periodical arm of its publisher, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*; *The London Literary Gazette*; *The Lancaster Gazette*; *The Belfast News-Letter*; *The Spectator*; and *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*. The poem received coverage in secular magazines in America, too, including *The North American Review* (Boston), among the oldest and most prominent literary magazines in the country,<sup>18</sup> and *The Southern Review* of Charleston, South Carolina, which focused specifically on issues related to the antebellum South.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, *The Course of Time* attracted the attention of independent scholars and literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic, including George Gilfillan, Thomas McNicoll, John Aikin, and, importantly, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine's* John Wilson (a.k.a. Christopher North), in addition to those who most discernibly shared Pollok's theological point of view. Among the latter was the aforementioned James Boyd, who published what may be the most detailed and thoroughly annotated edition of *The Course of Time* in New York in 1854, which included excerpts from earlier critical reviews, copious footnotes from multiple sources, and a comprehensive subject index.

Pollok also was the subject of several biographies in the nineteenth century. The first, at a length of 477 pages, was written by his brother David and published by *Blackwood & Sons* in 1843.<sup>20</sup> It is a primary source for biographical material on the poet, as well as of surviving poems, essays, letters, and writings apart from *The Course of Time*. A second biography, written by the Reverend James Scott, D.D., of New Jersey, followed in 1848.<sup>21</sup> Both works verge on hagiography at times,

---

<sup>16</sup> Altick, *The English Common Reader a Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 117.

<sup>17</sup> "Spirit of the Pilgrims (Magazine) Records," Congregational Library, Boston, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/sites/all/files/SpiritofPilgrims0162.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> *The North American's* claim to be "the oldest literary magazine in the United States" is prominently displayed on the magazine's website: <https://northamericanreview.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Book Review, 'The Course of Time.'" *The Southern Review*, II, no. III (November 1828): 454–70.

<sup>20</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1843).

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...* New York: R. Carter, 1848.

insisting on Pollok's enduring importance and the sense of "chosenness" which the poet may have cultivated. This is especially true of Scott's *Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M.*, which intends to be "a desideratum in religious poetical literature," as well as a biography of the poet, and which was written specifically for an American (presumably, evangelical) audience.<sup>22</sup> It testifies to the international reach of the poem's popularity. A third, final, and much shorter biography of the poet (part of a dual edition that included a biography of fellow Scottish poet William Edmondstone Aytoun) was by Rosaline Masson and appeared in 1898 as part of the *Eminent Scots* series published by Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier. As already noted, Masson's biography celebrates the decline and disappearance of *The Course of Time* as much as anything else, and its author appears to have nothing but disdain for both Pollok and his poem. The biography testifies in its own way to how far the fortunes of *The Course of Time* had fallen by the close of the century.

In contrast to the large number of literary resources devoted to *The Course of Time* in the nineteenth century – most of them in the popular press – only three scholars appear to have written on the poem in the last forty years, and only a handful over the course of the last century. The most recent work is Crawford Gribben's "Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827)," already alluded to, which appeared in the journal *Romanticism* in 2015.<sup>23</sup> Gribben uses Pollok's poem as a case study for an investigation of the relationship between evangelicalism and Scottish Romanticism and as an example of how modern critics have overlooked the importance of religion in the study of Scottish Romantic literature. By contrast, the only other scholarly article published on *The Course of Time* in the last four decades focuses on the comparison between Pollok's epic and Milton's. Julie Nall Knowles' "*The Course of Time*: A Calvinistic *Paradise Lost*" appeared in *Milton Studies* in 1983 and argues, as the title suggests, that Pollok's poem is "basically . . . a Calvinistic version of *Paradise Lost*," mainly significant for what it tells us about the choices Milton made in writing his epic and for providing readers with

---

<sup>22</sup> Scott.

<sup>23</sup> Gribben, "Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827)."

“a much better realization of the greatness” of Milton’s poem.<sup>24</sup> I take some issue with what I consider Knowles’ reductive assessment of Pollok’s poem in later chapters.

Karen McConnell takes a more expansive view of *The Course of Time* in “Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland,” an unpublished doctoral dissertation presented at the University of Michigan in 2013.<sup>25</sup> In separate chapters on Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, Robert Pollok, and Anne Bannerman, McConnell explores “the competing tensions of religion and rationalism” in the works of these Scottish Romantic writers and investigates why they so often return to the violent seventeenth century for subject matter.<sup>26</sup> Like Gribben and Knowles, McConnell is primarily concerned with certain facets of *The Course of Time* or its reception rather than with the work in its entirety. In her case, it is the poem’s apocalyptic elements and their possible radical associations that are of most interest. In a close reading chapter, I engage the question of apocalypse in *The Course of Time*, finding Pollok’s concern to be much more with traditional theodicy than with any formal conception of the end times, to which he gives less space and attention than the reader is led to expect.

Beyond these scholarly works that focus on or dedicate significant space to *The Course of Time*, the poem receives only brief attention in a few twentieth-century works of literary history and criticism. Perhaps most notable, at least in terms of length, is Michael Wheeler’s *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (1990),<sup>27</sup> which devotes several pages to tracing Pollok’s depiction of Armageddon, apocalypse, and millennium, which Wheeler finds “perhaps the most interesting” of contemporary attempts “to narrate the unnarratable.”<sup>28</sup> After Wheeler, one has to go back nearly sixty years to find much more than passing reference to Pollok and his poem,

---

<sup>24</sup> Julie Nall Knowles, “The Course of Time: A Calvinistic ‘Paradise Lost,’” ed. James D. Simmonds, *Milton Studies* XVIII (1983): 175.

<sup>25</sup> Karen M. McConnell, “Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland” (2013), University of Michigan “Deep Blue” Research Archive, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/97830>.

<sup>26</sup> McConnell.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Wheeler, 86.

although Herbert Tucker mentions it in *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse*, wherein he considers Pollok's poem the most sweeping of a raft of apocalyptic epics of the 1820s and thirties.<sup>29</sup> In volume four of her multi-volume *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (1957), Hoxie Neale Fairchild does present Pollok as a premiere example of the evangelical poet, although references are scattered, and there is no systematic investigation of the poem itself. In a chapter titled "Evangelical Christianity," Fairchild cites *The Course of Time* as illustrative of "[t]he long pseudo-Miltonic 'sacred poem' which is 'short-lived' and ultimately little more than 'edifying trash.'"<sup>30</sup> Going further back, Amy Cruse gives some space to Pollok and his influence on evangelical readers in *The Victorians And Their Books* (1935),<sup>31</sup> and even further, Margaret Oliphant and Mary Blackwood Porter provide details of *The Course of Time*'s early publishing history with *William Blackwood and Sons* in *Annals of a Publishing House* (first published 1897).<sup>32</sup>

We already have noted *The Course of Time*'s general absence or exclusion from the annals of Scottish literature, in particular. As Crawford Gribben has observed, the poem is not mentioned in any of the three volumes of the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2006), and as Karen McConnell notes, the poem is dismissed as a "dourly sub-Miltonic epic," without substantial further comment, in Robert Crawford's *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (2009).<sup>33</sup> While *The Course of Time* is briefly mentioned in the *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland* (2007), in regard to its influence on Welsh epic poetry,<sup>34</sup> and is excerpted in Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew: Poetry in the West of Scotland from the French Revolution to the First*

---

<sup>29</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Evangelical Christianity," in *Religious Trends in English Poetry. 4. 1830-1880. Christianity and Romanticism in the Victorian Era. 3.Print. 1957c. 4. 1830-1880. Christianity and Romanticism in the Victorian Era. 3.Print. 1957c.* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), 41.

<sup>31</sup> Amy Cruse, *The Victorians And Their Books*, 1935, <http://archive.org/details/internet.dli.2015>.

<sup>32</sup> Oliphant and Porter, *Annals of a Publishing House*.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 527. McConnell notes Crawford's reference in her dissertation, "Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland," 96-7.

<sup>34</sup> Philip Henry Jones, "Wales," in *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, Volume 3: Ambition and Industry 1800-1880*, ed. Bill Bell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

*World War*,<sup>35</sup> it largely has gone missing from accounts of Scottish literature covering the last two centuries.

This investigation of *The Course of Time* is thus the first attempt at a comprehensive evaluation and close reading of the poem undertaken in the modern era. It intends to return Pollok's epic to its original context and to highlight its historical significance as an important, but largely forgotten, artefact of Scottish religious and literary culture in the Romantic age. In so doing, I view *The Course of Time* as the centerpiece of a larger project undertaken by the poet, and alluded to in his letters, essays, and miscellanea, to affirm traditional Christian doctrine and attempt to present a "philosophy of Christianity" in poetic form.<sup>36</sup> The natural model for such an undertaking in English was Milton, revered by many of the Romantics of Pollok's era as the greatest of English-language poets. In chapter one, I explore Milton's importance for the Romantics, particularly in regard to the model of epic poetry and of the epic poet which he provided them, and how they reinterpreted both. My focus is on how Romantics like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake re-envisioned Milton's model of epic theodicy - or dispensed with it all together - in sharp contrast to Pollok, who adopted Milton's model of lyric theodicy for the like purpose of justifying divine providence, and especially, defending "the judgment to come." While Pollok's main nemesis, Byron, subverts the traditional purposes of epic entirely in *Don Juan*, Pollok uses *The Course of Time* almost in response to affirm the religious doctrines and moral codes that Byron appears to challenge.

Chapter two continues the investigation of how Pollok's relationship to Milton was different from that of most of his Romantic peers. In this chapter, I look specifically at similarities and differences between *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time* and propose that Pollok also may have been influenced by Milton's depiction of the poet as purveyor of virtue in *Comus* and, when divinely inspired, as equal in authority with the preacher - an argument Milton presents in *The Reason of*

---

<sup>35</sup> Tom Leonard, *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War : By Poets Born, or Sometime Resident in, the County of Renfrewshire* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990). Gribben notes Leonard's inclusion of *The Course of Time* in "Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827)," 26.

<sup>36</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 98.

*Church-Government Urg'd Against Prelaty*. There is a strong possibility that Pollok was familiar with both works. In the following chapter, I turn to three important figures contemporary with Pollok who were either certainly or very probably major influences on his project of epic theodicy. Byron, through his poem “Darkness,” supplied Pollok with the impetus for the project itself and a complex antagonist who both fascinated and repelled the young Scot. Secessionist theology professor John Dick provided the poet with a theological framework and a polemical model with which to combat the tide of religious skepticism that Byron represented. Finally, the charismatic Scots preacher and prophet of apocalypse Edward Irving issued the call for a new Milton to rise up and, in epic verse, defend the concept of divine judgment against deniers like Byron – a call that went out just before Pollok began *The Course of Time*.

In chapter four, I undertake a close reading of the poem to see how Pollok combines the genres and resources of the poet, the preacher, and to a lesser extent, the prophet, in order to accomplish his theological aims. By mixing elements of evangelicalism, Calvinism, Romanticism, and the traditions of Scottish moral philosophy in an unusual and almost unique fashion, Pollok and his poem are able to reach a large international audience, if a mostly conservative and deeply religious one. Although *The Course of Time* purports to be an apocalyptic epic about “the last things,” a close reading of the poem reveals that it is, as a contemporary critic observed, more accurately a summary of the moral and religious history of humankind with an emphasis on humanity’s moral and spiritual failures and their eternal consequences. Rather than focusing on apocalyptic events (which occur in the second half of the poem), Pollok makes the ostensible centerpiece of his epic a long series of cautionary “moral portraitures” culminating in the figure of Byron. *The Course of Time* is thus a sermon in verse, as biographer James Scott approvingly noted, privileging didactic elements over narrative ones, and supporting the conclusion that Pollok’s primary aim was to write a straightforward evangelical theodicy rather than the kind of apocalyptic epic more representative of the Romantic era.

The final chapter explores the reception history of *The Course of Time* for clues as to the poem’s remarkable international success in the early and mid-nineteenth century and equally precipitous

decline decades later. An examination of reviews, commentaries, and analyses stretching from 1827 (the year of the poem's first publication) to 1927 (the centennial of Pollok's death) suggests that the poem's deep religiosity and its performance as a lyric theodicy were, ironically, key both to its immediate and decades-long success and its near-disappearance less than a century later. Significantly for scholars of religion and literature, this history offers an important and largely unexplored window onto debates about the role of religion in literature and of religious literature, the religious poet, and the use of poetry as a vehicle for theology in nineteenth-century Britain and America. It also provides new evidence for the challenges that secularism posed for religious culture (and evangelicalism in particular) in the nineteenth century and how that culture responded and sometimes adapted to the challenges posed by science, biblical higher criticism, the rise of liberalism, and changing social values. The lessons to be drawn from a study of *The Course of Time* and its reception history are many, and not only for scholars of religion or literature, but also for the cultural historian and the literary artist. One such lesson is that religion was more significant to Scottish Romanticism than many modern scholars allow. Another is this: While the sermonic mode and the poetic mode share much in common (as Milton suggested and as later scholars such as Robert Lowth proved), they are not the same thing, and poetry which is too laden with theology is, in the end, neither good poetry nor good theology.

This introduction to *The Course of Time* concludes as many editions of the poem (after the first) began: That is, with a brief summary of the contexts out of which the work arose and a short biography of the man W. Forbes Gray dubbed "[a] Scottish Milton."

## Robert Pollok and the Contexts of *The Course of Time*

*It was to preach the gospel that he had devoted himself to literary pursuits.*

James Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M.*

In September 1827, *The Oriental Herald and Journal of General Literature*, a periodical devoted to matters related to British India, published a fundraising appeal written by Sir John Sinclair, a well-known Scottish politician, economist, and director of the first *Statistical Account of Scotland*. Sir John's appeal was in support of Robert Pollok, whose recently published epic, *The Course of Time*, had become a best-seller. Unfortunately, at the very time that his poem was gaining fame, Pollok himself was succumbing to the worsening effects of tuberculosis. The *Herald's* editors hoped that their readers, and specifically the directors of the powerful East India Company, might be moved by Sir John's appeal and by the prospect of "at once bringing such an individual [e.g. Pollok] into honourable usefulness in the church in India" – presumably through his recently published poem – and, more importantly, by "perhaps prolonging [the poet's] life."<sup>1</sup> To this purpose, the editors presented Sir John's appeal in full, which was dated August 20, 1827 and titled "Hints respecting a Poem recently published by Robert Pollok, A. M., entitled 'The Course of Time,' with a short account of the author, and specimens of his work."<sup>2</sup> In the brief appeal, Sinclair described *The Course of Time* as "the most extraordinary production that had appeared for some time, more especially as connected with religious subjects" and assured his correspondents that "Mr. Pollok's powers as a poet are of the highest order." The poet's health, however, had been

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Oriental Herald and Journal of General Literature*, vol. 14 (London: J. M. Richardson, 1827), 533.

<sup>2</sup> A copy of Sinclair's appeal exists in the University of Glasgow Library Special Collections. See John Sinclair, "'Hints Respecting a Poem Recently Published, Written by Robert Pollok, A. M., Entitled 'The Course of Time,' with a Short Account of the Author, and Specimens of His Work.'," August 20, 1827, Robert Pollok Manuscript Collection, University of Glasgow Library Special Collections.

so much impaired by his excessive exertions in preparing his poem for the press, and carrying on its printing, that, after a few trials, he has been under the necessity of relinquishing the labours of his profession; and being threatened with complaints, which, in the opinion of some eminent physicians, render residence in a milder climate the most probable means of restoring his health, it has become indispensably necessary for him to repair to the Continent without delay.<sup>3</sup>

Sinclair sought to raise funds to send Pollok to Italy, as, in a similar circumstance, friends of Pollok's contemporary John Keats had collected funds to send Keats there a few years earlier. Unfortunately, neither journey would prove successful in the end: Both poets would die of their disease (probably pulmonary tuberculosis) while still in their twenties, although only Keats would make it to Italy. Pollok would die on the way there, outside Southampton, on September 18, 1827, only weeks after Sinclair's appeal and barely six months after his poem was first published. Of course, the sympathetic Scottish peer had no knowledge of what the future held when he took it upon himself to tell friends and prospective donors something about the poet whose life he sought to save.

What Sinclair knew was that Pollok was born in the Scottish county of Renfrewshire, just south of Glasgow, in October 1798 (the 19<sup>th</sup>, to be exact), that he had received "a regular academical education" at the University of Glasgow (meaning, he had taken the A. M. undergraduate degree), and that, shortly after his poem was published in March 1827, Pollok also had been licensed to preach (May 1827).<sup>4</sup> What Sinclair did not know, or did not have space to include in his brief biography, was arguably as important for a student or critic of *The Course of Time*: That Pollok came from a rural farming family which proudly traced its descent, on his mother's side, to Scottish Covenanters in the seventeenth century; that the family was and had been for generations devoted members of Secessionist churches which had split from the national Church of Scotland over issues of theology, state control, and patronage; that Pollok had for some time considered poetry a "divine art" and "the noblest employment of the mind of man," by means of which he hoped to

---

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair.

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair.

accomplish “something . . . that might benefit both my contemporaries and those who should come after me.”<sup>5</sup> The wellbeing of others was, in fact, a concern the politician and the poet shared: Sinclair’s *Statistical Account* was intended to measure the “quantum of happiness” among Scotland’s people with an eye to their future betterment.<sup>6</sup> If he had read the first five books of *The Course of Time*, as likely he had, Sinclair also knew that the question of happiness – particularly future happiness - was of central importance for Pollok, too.

Undoubtedly, religion and literature were decisive influences, if not *the* decisive influences, on Pollok’s life. His brother David, who published a biography of the poet in 1843, records that their mother taught her children to read from the Bible and had them memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism and parts of the Psalms.<sup>7</sup> Robert later credited Margaret Pollok with providing the “divinity” or core theology which provided the foundations for *The Course of Time*.<sup>8</sup> Presumably, Margaret’s Covenanter ancestry (three of her forebears were persecuted or killed for their participation in the movement) inspired Pollok’s interest in the infamous “Killing Time” of the 1680s and the passionate devotion to civil and religious liberty represented in his epic. Before starting the latter in December 1824, Pollok wrote three novellas valorizing his Covenanter ancestors: *Helen of the Glen* (published 1824), *Ralph Gemmell* (published 1825), and *The Persecuted Family* (published 1828).<sup>9</sup> The first two were published anonymously during Pollok’s lifetime, and Robert suggested to David that he had only written them for money, which always was tight.<sup>10</sup> After Robert’s death, all three novellas were published together as *Tales of the Covenanters* and remained in print until 1928.<sup>11</sup> David records Robert’s uneasiness about having written these fictions, both as a distraction from what he considered his real calling in poetry and,

---

<sup>5</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 254. Factual details of Robert’s life are taken from David’s biography of his brother.

<sup>6</sup> “Statistical Accounts of Scotland,” University of Edinburgh Information Services, Edina, n.d., <http://stataccscot.edina.ac.uk/static/statacc/dist/exhibition/osa>.

<sup>7</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> David Pollok, 270.

<sup>9</sup> Shattock, *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, 4:420.

<sup>10</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 250–51.

<sup>11</sup> Shattock, *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, 4:420.

very likely, because of the historic Calvinist and evangelical suspicion of novels and imaginative literature in general.<sup>12</sup>

Along with David, Robert attended the University of Glasgow from 1817 to 1822, where he undertook the classical curriculum of moral and natural philosophy, logic, Greek, and Latin. It is apparent from Robert's correspondence, essays, and detailed notes on Professor James Mylne's moral philosophy class – an important source for Stephen Cowley's authoritative biography of Mylne<sup>13</sup> – that this was the poet's favorite subject. It also was one which would preoccupy him throughout much of *The Course of Time*.<sup>14</sup> Upon receiving his A.M. degree in March 1822, Pollok entered the Glasgow Divinity Hall of his denomination, the newly formed United Secession Church (1820). There he studied theology with John Dick, a leading Reformed theologian who had himself received an honorary D.D. from Princeton in 1815 and whose lectures in the Hall would be translated into an influential theology textbook after his death.<sup>15</sup> It was while Pollok was studying at the Secession Hall (1822-1826) that he undertook and completed *The Course of Time*. During a portion of this period (1824-1825), he also enrolled in the University of Glasgow's Divinity Hall, in order, his brother writes, "to get all the instruction he could on the subject of theology, as also to have access to the college Divinity Hall Library, which contained many valuable books. . . ." <sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 255. This suspicion is well-documented, and is discussed in Gribben, "Religion and Scottish Romanticism," *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, Murray Pittock, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 119, as well as in Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 132–33.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Cowley, *Rational Piety and Social Reform in Glasgow: The Life, Philosophy, and Political Economy of James Mylne* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> These notes are in the University of Glasgow Library's Special Collections, Robert Pollok Manuscripts, MS Gen 1355/101–3.

<sup>15</sup> Nigel M. de S. Cameron et al., eds., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 242.

<sup>16</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 249.

Having decided on a career in the church, as had David, when he was still a teen,<sup>17</sup> Robert seems to have felt an ongoing tension between the calling of the poet and that of the preacher. The tension only seems to have been resolved, at least to a large extent, when Robert began what would become *The Course of Time* in late 1824.<sup>18</sup> It may be that some of the tension stemmed from the attitudes of Pollok's conservative denomination, although as Andrew Muirhead notes, most Secession churches were relatively tolerant and subject to modern influences. At the same time, however, they could be "old-fashioned in their outlook" and strict in moral expectations.<sup>19</sup> If Pollok felt any specific tensions with regard to his denomination or the Secessionist bodies that preceded it, he did not articulate them. Instead, certain values of the United Secession Church and its predecessors find expression in *The Course of Time*. They include the rejection of compulsion, intolerance, and persecution regarding religion;<sup>20</sup> a reverence for the National Covenant of 1638 and the legacy of the Covenanters;<sup>21</sup> the rejection of church establishment and of state interference in matters of religion; and a questioning of some traditional Calvinist stances.<sup>22</sup> The latter would become more pronounced in the years immediately following Pollok's death, as the denomination – already the largest of the Secessionist churches – continued to grow and gain appeal with the rising middle classes<sup>23</sup> and new urban residents like the author of *The Course of Time*.

Pollok's specific literary influences will be a focus of chapter four. However, much of what he knew about English, Scottish, and classical literature was gained from his own study, which is impressive. This notably included University of Glasgow Rector and versifier Thomas Campbell's *Specimens of the British Poets* (1819).<sup>24</sup> Pollok's literary output while a student also was prolific and pertinent to a study of *The Course of Time*, as biographers David Pollok and James Scott attest. Among the essays and addresses Pollok wrote and/or presented between 1820 and 1823 and which

---

<sup>17</sup> David identifies this as the autumn of 1815. David Pollok, 15.

<sup>18</sup> This tension and its partial resolution is documented by David in his *Life*, 253-258.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew T. N. Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity: The Story of Scotland's Churches, 1560-1960* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 77.

<sup>20</sup> Cameron et al., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, 841.

<sup>21</sup> Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> According to Andrew Muirhead, this was particularly true of the "New Lights," one of several denominational groups that came together to form the United Secession Church in 1820. Muirhead, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Muirhead, 78.

<sup>24</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*.

are referenced in this study are the following: “An Essay on Compositional Thinking” defending the Scots dialect; a “Missionary Address before the Eaglesham Association for Religious Purposes” denouncing the slave trade and defending the humanity of its victims; an “Address on Preaching,” presented before fellow divinity students and arguing for the use of poetry and poetic devices in homiletics; a “Literary Address” arguing for, among other things, the importance of the poet and the moralist in contemporary (1820s) Britain; an essay asserting the relationship between virtue and happiness written for a future (but never established) public journal; a lengthy satire of the poet’s senior-year examinations and graduation ceremony as the judgment, apocalypse, and Second Coming; and a fictional (or heavily fictionalized) “Night Journey to Paisley,” in which the author recounts a series of interactions with various night-time characters, at the conclusion of which he imagines himself a prophet in the line of John of Revelation. These works, along with the Covenanter novellas and a group of shorter poems, represent the bulk of Pollok’s literary industry preceding *The Course of Time*.

Without a doubt, Pollok was fortunate in the timing of his magnum opus, setting to work at a unique cultural moment when both religious literature and the epic form were on the rise<sup>25</sup> and a new “trans-denominational Protestant evangelicalism” was asserting its power.<sup>26</sup> Just as religious communities were inevitably shaped by the broad currents of Romanticism, so Romanticism was being impacted by religion, at least in Scotland,<sup>27</sup> where Pollok took up his pen. Moreover, there was a preponderance of religious literature in nineteenth-century Britain generally, forming “the largest single category of books” published in the country.<sup>28</sup> According to Richard Altick, middle-class evangelicals (such as those who read *The Course of Time*) “formed an insatiable market for the edifying tales and serious didactic and inspirational works that flowed from pious pens”<sup>29</sup> like

---

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Tucker contends that the Romantic era was a high point of interest in and production of epics. See Tucker, *Epic*.

<sup>26</sup> Crawford Gribben suggests this rise of a cross-denominational evangelicalism “may be the most significant of the [Romantic] period’s religious developments.” Crawford Gribben, “Religion and Scottish Romanticism,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 121.

<sup>27</sup> This is Gribben’s argument. See Gribben, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Altick, *The English Common Reader a Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> Altick, 103.

Pollok's. Writing specifically of the years when *The Course of Time* was in gestation or in process, Philip W. Martin additionally asserts that "polite literature of the early 1820s," such as poetry,

was subject to powerful Christian influences. Not only were there more and more poems with Christian intentions or polemic, but certain influential critical schools of thought were also driven by Evangelical and censorious doctrine.<sup>30</sup>

Particularly relevant for this thesis is Martin's striking suggestion that Byron and his friend the Irish poet Thomas Moore (figures who reappear in chapter three) "set out to challenge" the strong Christian evangelical influences of the day, intentionally entering the fight over scriptural authority<sup>31</sup> which Pollok would join several years later with the publication of *The Course of Time*.

It would seem that battle lines were set. If indeed the 1820s represented a high tide both of Romanticism and Evangelicalism - and of the struggle between and within the two - Pollok had chosen exactly the right moment to make an appearance. Unfortunately for him, it would be a brief one.

---

<sup>30</sup> Philip W. Martin, "The Angels of Byron and Moore," in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford (New York ; Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 155.

<sup>31</sup> Martin, 153.

## Chapter 1

### Robert Pollok's Miltonic Project I: Milton for the Romantics

*Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour. . . .*

William Wordsworth, "London, 1802"

In mid-August, 1827, shortly before he was to embark for Italy, Robert Pollok received a letter from the theological students at the United Secession Divinity Hall in Glasgow. The poet's former classmates wished to congratulate him on the recent success of *The Course of Time* and to offer their concerns regarding his declining health, the seriousness of which they could only suspect. In celebrating Pollok, the students acknowledged a "lamentable truth" about the general "prostitution" of "poetical gifts" in their day, something the poet also had addressed in Books IV and IX of *The Course of Time*. Importantly, the students recognized a conjunction of poetic and theological purposes between Pollok and John Milton, the great English epic precursor. Contemporary poets might render "the highest efforts of intellect and imagination . . . subservient to the propagation of vice," but Pollok and Milton were among the "master-minds" who had "exerted their mighty powers in 'vindicating the ways of God to man.'" <sup>1</sup> Whether or not the students were sensible that the line they quoted was from the Catholic Alexander Pope and not the sometime Calvinist Milton, the inference that Pollok, like Milton, had written a theodicy was clear. <sup>2</sup> The students declared themselves joint heritors of the glory Pollok had accrued to the Hall, a glory seeded in the religion that they shared. "[H]ow enthusiastic does this pleasure become when such genius arises in splendour from among ourselves," the students exclaimed, "kindling its fire at the altar of God, and striking its harp to the immortal songs of Zion!" <sup>3</sup> They were among the first to place Pollok in Milton's company and to declare *The Course of Time* a modern-day theodicy, "fired" at the altar of divinity. Many favorable critics would add their voices as the years

---

<sup>1</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 366–67.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Dedication to Epistle I, l.16 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871).

<sup>3</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 366–67.

rolled by. The poet would be acclaimed the “Scottish Milton”<sup>4</sup> and his epic “Scotland’s national religious poem,”<sup>5</sup> in comparison with the English version, *Paradise Lost*. Reviewers would grandly suggest that Pollok had completed the unfinished, and sometimes theologically inaccurate, work of depicting sacred history that Milton had begun.<sup>6</sup> But for Pollok and his classmates, these accolades were short-lived or still in the future: Barely a month after receiving his fellow students’ glowing letter, the poet would be dead; exhausted, many suggested, by unstinting labor on a sacred project.<sup>7</sup>

Pollok was, in fact, a relative late-comer to the Romantic trade in Miltonic epic. By the time he began writing what would become *The Course of Time*, in December 1824, nearly all of the major English Romantics had tried their hand at the Miltonic form.<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth had planned *The Recluse* and embarked on the autobiographical *Prelude*, Keats had attempted *Hyperion*, Shelley had written *The Revolt of Islam* and Byron the madcap *Don Juan*, Coleridge had dreamed about *The Fall of Jerusalem*, and Blake had conjured the spirit of Milton from a cottage in Felpham (in the eponymous *Milton*). The great precursor had become an icon by which Romantic poets both measured and identified themselves.<sup>9</sup> His great work, *Paradise Lost*, was “seen to acquire the status of a sacred text,” Lucy Newlyn asserts, “while competition with Milton [was] felt to be analogous to the dangerous and potentially blasphemous activity of competing with God.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Romantic poets did emulate and attempt to compete with Milton, despite the “anxiety of influence” which Harold Bloom famously has argued and resultant works that are often, at least

---

<sup>4</sup> Gray, “A Scottish Milton: Pollok’s Centenary,” 8. Some nineteenth-century reviewers also view Pollok in this fashion.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> “Book Review, ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Southern Review*, II:III, November 1828, 454–70. This also is suggested by Scott in his biography and by the author of a review in *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine (Boston) in October 1828. In her 1983 article, “‘The Course of Time’: A Calvinistic *Paradise Lost*,” Julie Nall Knowles remarks on the *Pilgrims’* reviewer’s critique of Milton’s theology in favor of that represented by Pollok in *The Course of Time*.

<sup>7</sup> A note in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* is typical: “his [Pollok’s] health soon gave unequivocal evidence that, in composing his celebrated work, he had only erected a splendid monument to deck his tomb.” “Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok,” 78.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Balfour maintains that all of the major male Romantics, possibly excluding Shelley, “seriously aspired to write an epic.” Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford UP, 2002), 156.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Newlyn, 8. One of the themes Newlyn traces is “the Romantic tradition . . . of Milton as God.”

to his mind, “too-consciously post-Miltonic.”<sup>11</sup> Ian Balfour goes so far as to suggest that Milton had “a largely debilitating effect on the Romantics,” although he exempts Blake from this assertion, and I would argue the same for Pollok.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the case may be, at the very least, *Paradise Lost* “represented a challenge to the poetic ambition of those who came after,” as Lucy Newlyn affirms.<sup>13</sup>

Poets with grand ambitions had no choice but to confront Milton or to run away from him. Wordsworth originally planned an epic (*The Recluse*) that, at least in size, would have dwarfed *Paradise Lost*. What he completed was *The Prelude*, which reconfigured the epic tradition of *Paradise Lost* to Wordsworth’s own purposes, not “to justify the ways of God to man,” but rather to explore “the growth of a poet’s mind.”<sup>14</sup> In asserting the difference of his project from Milton’s, Wordsworth was “not simply . . . adapting the epic tradition to his own needs,” Newlyn argues, “he was appropriating Milton’s specifically *Christianized* epic in order to make his own personal and secular claims.”<sup>15</sup> The Romantic epic thus becomes about the poet rather than his God, the heights and depths of the human mind replacing heaven and hell, and human consciousness replacing divinity, as W. H. Abrams observes.<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth and his literary contemporaries may or may not have read and admired *Paradise Lost* for its religious content; they certainly read it as political or moral allegory which affirmed their own presuppositions.<sup>17</sup> To this “Wordsworthian process of internalization,”<sup>18</sup> Pollok was at least an outlier. The “ancient bard of earth,” now in heaven, who recounts the “history of man” in Pollok’s epic is clearly the poet himself; but the primary purpose of *The Course of Time* is not to chart the poet’s life, consciousness, or political persuasions, although all play some role. It is to do something few, if any, other Romantic poets attempted or perhaps wished to attempt, and certainly not on the same scale: To justify the ways

---

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110–11.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 156.

<sup>13</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> The subtitle of *The Prelude*.

<sup>15</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1999), 1.

of God through epic poetry, as Milton had done, but for a new age. Critics predisposed to Pollok's work happily pointed out that it was more true to *Paradise Lost* than the efforts of any contemporary.<sup>19</sup>

In the chapter which follows, I will provide an overview of Milton's influence on and appropriation by Pollok's Romantic peers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley in order to then distinguish Pollok's appropriation of Milton's legacy from theirs. Since it was through *Paradise Lost* that Milton had his most profound and enduring influence upon Pollok and his fellow Romantics, I also will sketch the broad outlines of the evolution of the epic in English from Milton's "Christianization" of it, to Wordsworth's "displacement" of the supernatural in it, toward Pollok's use of it as a vehicle for re-asserting and reaffirming divine justice and authority in a moment of cultural instability. A key figure here, looming behind and within *The Course of Time*, is Byron, whose *Don Juan*, written in the years before Pollok took up his pen, upends the very idea of epic as a vehicle for moral or divine authority and challenges the notion of a rational, ordered universe ruled by God. It is hoped that the reader will recognize a direct (if sometimes dotted) line connecting Wordsworth's reorientation of epic purposes to the individual sphere, to Byron's rejection of epic purposes altogether, to Pollok's "otherworldly" reproof of Byron's skepticism, using epic as a vehicle for theological argument, much as Milton had more than a century earlier. As the very title *The Course of Time* suggests, Pollok wishes to restore to epic (or he assumes it retains) its core function of interpreting the meaning of events, in this case, the meaning of human history. Whether or not Pollok was successful is a question for a later chapter. Here, I begin with the traditional concerns of epic, Milton's transformation of them, and how we may define what epic is or was recognized to be when Pollok began writing *The Course of Time* in 1824.

---

<sup>19</sup> Like several over-enthusiastic reviewers, the author of an early critique in London's *Eclectic Review* preferred Pollok's epic to Milton's. "Pollok's Course of Time," *The Eclectic Review* 28 (December 1827): 361–62.

## 1.1 Milton and the Nature of Epic

With *Paradise Lost*, Milton had radically reoriented the epic, making a classical, pagan literary form serve specifically Christian ends. While his primary model, Virgil, had called upon the muses to accompany him from their Aonian mount to tell of the founding of Rome, the Protestant Milton intended to “soar above” it,<sup>20</sup> pursuing “Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” – that is, a Christian, if sometimes heterodox, view of the human origin myth, including creation, disobedience, fall, and redemption. This “Christianization” of heroic epic form was a primary reason why *Paradise Lost* was often praised above its predecessors, at least by English-speaking critics. Samuel Johnson, who otherwise scandalized eighteenth-century readers with his harsh criticism of Milton and of *Paradise Lost*, praised the superior morality of Milton’s poem as well as the purposes behind its composition. According to Johnson, Milton was the only poet of the modern age who had fulfilled French critic Renée Le Bossu’s directive (in *Traité du poème épique*, 1675) that “the poet’s first work is to find a *moral*,” and that only in *Paradise Lost* was the moral “essential and intrinsick.” “[Milton’s] purpose was the most useful and the most arduous,” Johnson declared, because in “vindicating” the ways of God to man, Milton had illustrated “the reasonableness of religion, and the necessity of obedience to Divine law.”<sup>21</sup> By contrast, “The ancient epic poets, wanting the light of Revelation, were very unskilful teachers of virtue,” Johnson argued; it followed that their heroes could not be sources of emulation.<sup>22</sup>

Still, Milton employed many of the recognizable classical epic conventions, such as the invocation of a muse, beginning *in medias res*, including epic similes and catalogues, placing action in heaven and hell, and depicting heroic conflicts that are decisive for a people (or a universe!). While both Johnson and, before him, John Dryden dared to question the epic credentials of *Paradise Lost* - Dryden suggested it lacked a conventional heroic subject, and Johnson argued the poem “comprises neither human actions nor human manners” in which the reader could be interested – no one really doubted Milton’s poem belonged to a canon extending from Homer and Virgil, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 346.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets* (London, J.F. Dove, Printer, 1826), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, 117.

was, as noted, greater than their efforts because it was Christian.<sup>23</sup> Epic conventionality was to become far less recognizable a century and more later when Pollok's Romantic-era contemporaries wrote their long poems. Few of them were over-troubled with the classical conventions; on occasion, they inverted them, as did Wordsworth, or claimed to adhere to them while also mocking and subverting them, as did Byron.

All of which raises the important question of how to define what is or what constitutes an "epic" in the Romantic era. Brian Wilkie engaged this question half a century ago in *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, responding to suggestions that, because so many long poems of the Romantic era fail to observe the classical conventions (or a number of them), there really was no such thing as a "Romantic epic." Wilkie counter-argued that epic should be defined as "a tradition" rather than as a genre, something which is handed down from one historical period or one group of authors to the next. Thus, intention and, above all, "imitativeness" are important and largely outweigh the inclusion or exclusion of the conventions themselves.<sup>24</sup> Shelley gets at something of this in speaking of the "great poem," clearly identified with Dante, Milton, and with epic, in his *Defense of Poetry*, asserting that "after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed."<sup>25</sup>

For his part, Wilkie identifies certain recurring traits of epic across time, some congruent with the classical conventions, including exemplified ideals of human conduct, action decisive for a nation or cultural group, etiological purposes, a lofty and serious tone, and a sense of religious or spiritual mystery.<sup>26</sup> He also notes a heroic "flashback" formula, similar to but not identical with *in medias*

---

<sup>23</sup> John Dryden, "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire," in *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis: Translated into English Verse by Mr. Dryden and Several Other Eminent Hands*, ed. Jack Lynch (Orig., London: Jacob Tonson, 1693).

<sup>24</sup> Brian Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).

<sup>25</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 67. Readers also will be reminded of T. S. Eliot's seminal essay, now nearly a century old, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921).

<sup>26</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 9.

*res*, which appears in many epics and is central to Pollok's own poem. In that formula, the representative bard tells his audience that, while it will be difficult to relate the story they require, he will do his best to honor their request.<sup>27</sup> It is a sort of cultural affirmation which acknowledges the challenges and the dangers of relating origins and end purposes and of getting these things right. In *The Course of Time*, Pollok's "ancient bard of earth" makes a similar compact with his angelic audience, agreeing at the end of Book I to tell the entire "history of man," and when the task is completed nine books later, reminding his listeners of what they have heard, thereby emphasizing its significance:

Thus have I sung beyond thy first request  
 Rolling my numbers o'er the track of man,  
 The world at dawn, at mid-day, and decline;  
 Time gone, the righteous saved, the wicked damn'd,  
 And God's eternal government approved. (10.648-52)<sup>28</sup>

Pollok's bard may be more generous than most, since he gives his hearers (and most modern readers) more than they anticipated. But these lines are also important as a recapitulation of the bard's thesis (and the poem's theme) uttered in the opening verses of the poem. We will return to these with respect to the theme of *Paradise Lost* later in this chapter.

Like Wilkie, Herbert Tucker, in *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse*, also assigns the classical epic conventions a secondary importance, instead focusing his attention on the broader details of length, scope, and especially, the relationship between author and audience. In Tucker's view, epic is always written for a "unified" community, or one perceived to be so, and it has a didactic function to support that community. "[I]t is the very idea of epic to tell a sponsoring culture its own story,"

---

<sup>27</sup> Wilkie, 15.

<sup>28</sup> All quotations from *The Course of Time* are taken from James Boyd's edition of 1857, reprinted in 1871: Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*. (New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1871).

Tucker asserts, one “that links origins to destinies by way of heroic values.”<sup>29</sup> This idea of a culture talking to itself through epic makes that literary genre (if we may use that word) “the definitive form for collective self-understanding.” Not only that, but epic reinforces the values of the sponsoring culture, particularly if those values are starting to slip away. Speaking of the “fractal device” of epic prophecy (the above-mentioned flashback), Tucker argues that “by foregrounding the artifice of representation” in that device, epic “brought out with maximum clarity the forms of society consensus that it was epic’s business to represent.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, in Tucker’s mind, and perhaps in the minds of many epic practitioners (if only unconsciously), an epic and its audience were involved in a mutually reinforcing program of normative consensus:

Consensus furnishes the currency of an epic system where rendition of the generally acknowledged merges through explanation of the generally understood into prescription of the generally regulative – which then feeds back into the system to start the self-reinforcing cycle of facts, truths, and norms all over again. To narrate the tale of the tribe is at once to receive an order, to describe an order, and to issue an order, in a powerful gyrostabilized loop.<sup>31</sup>

It should not be surprising, then, if epic often looks backward, as it does throughout all of *The Course of Time*, to become a conservative art form used to defend ways of life that are passing or already have passed.<sup>32</sup> But if epic is prescriptive (and that is certainly the case with major parts of *The Course of Time*), it can also be transgressive: Witness the array of millenarian-style or millenarian-influenced epics which followed the French Revolution, including Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) and *Milton* (1804), Robert Southey’s *Joan of Arc*, and aspects of the long apocalyptic poems of the 1820s (including, again, *The Course of Time*). As noted earlier, Tucker sees important shifts in epic form and representation in each of these periods (that is, after 1789 and again in the 1820s), which are especially relevant to the study of Pollok’s project. In keeping with the Enlightenment ideal of progress, the eighteenth-century epic, when it appeared, was associated with improvement and civilization, nodding both to the notion of ongoing cultural

---

<sup>29</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Tucker, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Tucker, 13–14.

<sup>32</sup> Tucker, 308. Almost the entirety of *The Course of Time* is told in retrospect.

and institutional development and the idea of a rational, evolutionary history behind and beyond it. Whether or not God was directly invoked, epic's traditional concerns of cosmology and theodicy – of the order and Leibnitzian, or perhaps Popean, justification of things as they are – still held sway.<sup>33</sup> It was following the French Revolution, when the prophetic element that had always been part of epic tradition came to the fore, that the sometimes moribund literary form took on new and occasionally dangerous life. In *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, Tim Fulford notes that many poets embraced the millenarian expectations which followed the French Revolution, some drawn to Milton's millenarian tracts of the 1640s and some embodying those ideas in their own works, like Robert Pollok's near age-mate Shelley in his *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).<sup>34</sup>

In fact, both Tucker and Wilkie see the Romantic era as an exceedingly fruitful (if not the most fruitful) period for epic poetry. Tucker calls it “the most epically active period in English literature,”<sup>35</sup> and Wilkie notes that, quite apart from the more inventive work of the major authors,

the first half of the nineteenth century saw the publication of a great many attempts by obscure poets at fairly traditional epic; in practice if not in theory, and at the level of second-or-third-rate literature at least, the age was one of epic revival. If the major Romantic poets were idol-smashers, there seem still to have been many worshipers at one old shrine.<sup>36</sup>

This is somewhat surprising, because the epic had been on the wane for much of the eighteenth century, following Milton – due in large part to the Miltonic anxiety, which Pollok and some others, perhaps including Blake, apparently did not share - and because even in the eighteenth century, the epic form often had been considered anachronistic.<sup>37</sup> I speculate that this may be due,

---

<sup>33</sup> Tucker, 160.

<sup>34</sup>Tim Fulford, “Millenarianism and the Study of Romanticism,” in Tim Fulford, ed., *Romanticism and Millenarianism* (New York, NY and Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 234.

<sup>36</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 10. Tucker discusses the “abiding sense of anachronism” surrounding the epic, but also the false “categorical erasure” of the epic from modern conceptions of post-Enlightenment Europe.

in part, to the Hellenic revival of that era, which reinforced the association of epic with the ancient past, and to the enormous popularity of James MacPherson's pseudo-epic, pseudo-ancient Ossian poems, which being forged fragments, were neither ancient nor, in a sense, epic (but which were among Robert Pollok's favorite reading).<sup>38</sup> Nor can the student of epic forget that Milton himself worried aloud in *Paradise Lost* that he might already be working in "an age too late" for heroic verse.<sup>39</sup> All of this may suggest that, while marching forward into the Romantic era, epic was casting a wary eye backward, self-consciously employing archaic structures and devices in order to call attention to its very artifice, as Tucker affirms. If so, the medium is indeed much of the message, or at least closely associated with it. This is Kirstie Blair's argument in her study of Victorian literature *Form and Faith*, which centers on what she sees as a "direct link" between nineteenth-century literary form and religious expression.<sup>40</sup> The more traditional and familiar the literary form, the more traditional and familiar its theology, and vice versa. By this measure, a poem aspiring to epic length and epic scope is also likely to aspire to epic meaning and interpretation (the notable exception being *Don Juan*). This "epic conservatism" is reflected in Tucker's assertion that religious or biblical epic is at its height when the traditional values it espouses are most under attack, as they were during much of the Romantic period and again in the middle of the nineteenth century, following the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and the theological controversy-laden *Essays and Reviews* the next year.<sup>41</sup> Epic conservatism even extends, in a fashion, to the works of many of the best-known writers of the Romantic period, more remembered for shattering convention than for honoring it. Wilkie asserts that

in most of the great Romantic poems molded significantly by epic pressures the religious or moral emphasis is central; the poets recognized the relevance of theology, ethics, and spiritual ideals, often choosing explicitly religious settings, subjects, or guiding metaphors.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), IX.41. All subsequent quotations from *Paradise Lost* are taken from this edition.

<sup>40</sup> Kirstie Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Tucker argues this point at various places in *Britain's Heroic Muse*, but also in his chapter on "Epic" in the *Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 184.

<sup>42</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 17.

This is not to suggest that the religious content of these poems was always or even mostly orthodox or conventional. Often, it was not. But like their great forebear Milton, English Romantic poets (including Byron)<sup>43</sup> believed themselves to be speaking of the most serious things in the most serious fashion to a collective audience. They may not be moralists in the classic epic tradition, but Wilkie affirms that, in their epic poetry,

the Romantics usually preach values or assert standards which are meant to be applicable to man in general or in the lives of their contemporaries and immediate followers. Most of them thought, like Milton, that the epic should be doctrinal and exemplary to a nation. . . .<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, like Milton,

They generally tried to diagnose and cure moral or spiritual diseases of their time, and this urgent sense that something needs to be done is one of the things that connect the Romantics most clearly with the epic poets of earlier ages.<sup>45</sup>

This desire to cure what ails a fallen culture is readily seen in Wordsworth's famous sonnet to Milton, "London, 1802," which may be the clearest and most succinct example of a Romantic poet assuming the moral and spiritual authority of the great epic precursor. The "manners, virtue, freedom, power" which the English nation needs are, it is implicitly suggested, in the author's power to give. Here is the poet as moral educator, something Herbert Tucker suggests was central to the Romantic poet's self-conception, as was the presupposition of "an appetite for

---

<sup>43</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Lord Byron - The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Reissue edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> In the 1641 tract *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd Against Prelaty*, Milton describes one of the works of epic or high tragic poetry to be "doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation."

<sup>45</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 23.

improvement” in the epic reader.<sup>46</sup> This connection to the Enlightenment ideal of self-improvement offers context for Pollok’s intentions in *The Course of Time* (as he was a student of Scottish moral philosophy) and reminds us of the role Milton played in establishing, or re-establishing, the moral authority of epic. While we will return to the subject of moral poetry in a sub-section on Milton and Pollok, it is worth recalling that, despite his many criticisms of *Paradise Lost*, Johnson found Milton’s epic praiseworthy specifically because of its “essential and intrinsic” morality.

Not all Romantics, even among those who idolized Milton, would agree with Johnson’s assessment. (Shelley notably did not.) But Robert Pollok surely would. In many cases, Pollok held dissimilar or even opposite opinions on religion and morality from his poetic contemporaries such as Shelley, Keats, or Wordsworth, not to mention Byron. Yet common Romantic interests and styles, and common reverence for Milton, manage to contain them all. It is worth noting how the Scottish, Calvinist Pollok is both part of, and yet distinct from, the movement that gave birth to his English counterparts. As we will see in the next chapters, the enormous popularity of *The Course of Time* was due both to its High Romantic elements (including an emphasis on autobiography) and its distinctive religiosity. Whatever its degree of artfulness, it managed to hold Romanticism, dissenting Calvinism, and Scottishness together in a fashion that was appealing to many readers. But the paradoxes in Pollok and his epic are not unique (or not simply unique), as Wilkie reminds us:

[B]ecause of the curious mechanics of the epic tradition [e.g. imitativeness, patterning, conventions] the Romantics were able to express their deeply personal views and at the same time generalize about human life and the place of their own age in the continuum of history. This paradox, of extreme individualism in combination with extreme group-consciousness, has long been recognized as symptomatic of Romanticism and of nineteenth-century attitudes in general.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 29.

I will look further at the ways that Pollok is both Romantic and not Romantic through a close reading of *The Course of Time* in chapter four. But now we turn to Milton's importance for Pollok's better-known Romantic contemporaries.

## 1.2 The Romantic Poets and the "Milton Cult"

By the end of the eighteenth century, when the first-generation Romantics were coming into their own, Milton's poetry had gone through more than one hundred editions, and his masterwork *Paradise Lost* had become appropriated by some admirers, notably founder of Methodism John Wesley, for something akin to devotional use.<sup>48</sup> Peter Kitson asserts that, for the Romantics, Milton rather than Shakespeare, was "the prime precursor poet," and thus, "the target of emulation and even rivalry."<sup>49</sup> It is not hard to see how many Romantics could imagine themselves laboring under Milton's long, sometimes threatening, shadow. However, that did not prevent them from attempting similar accomplishments, despite Andrew Marvell's prescient warning, appended to the second edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1674, that "no room is here for writers left,/ But to detect their ignorance or theft."<sup>50</sup> Of course, some felt more closeted than others: Keats' exasperated remark that "[l]ife to [Milton] would be death to me," as he struggled to complete *Hyperion*, is well-known.<sup>51</sup> But Ian Balfour rightly argues that Blake did not feel such anxiety,<sup>52</sup> nor, I suggest, did Pollok (an assertion I will return to in a later chapter). In fact, Blake, Wordsworth, and Byron each directly invoke the invocation to *Paradise Lost* or one of its several proems in their own works, while Kitson argues that Coleridge, Blake, and Wordsworth each attempted to "rewrite" *Paradise Lost* itself in their own idiom for their own age.<sup>53</sup> Kitson sees Coleridge's early *Religious*

---

<sup>48</sup> Wesley edited *An Extract from Milton's Paradise Lost. With Notes* in 1763. Kay Gilliland Stevenson, "Reading Milton, 1674-1800," in Thomas N. Corns, ed., *A Companion to Milton*, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 10 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 447.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Kitson, "Milton: The Romantics and After," in Corns, 463.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Marvell, "On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*," ll.29-30, in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2007, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Letter to the George Keatses, September 24, 1819, quoted in Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introduction and Notes* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970), 561-62.

<sup>52</sup> Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 156.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Curran argues that Shelley and Keats engaged in their own versions of theodicy, foregrounding Milton's attempted solution, in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hyperion*, respectively.

*Musings* (1794-6) as an attempt at “a Unitarian version” of Milton’s epic, replete with millenarian vision, while “Kubla Khan” a few years later recalls the epic sublimity of both Eden and Hell in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Jonathan Shears argues that, in his later *Table Talk*, Coleridge suggests that “the aim of *Paradise Lost* was to create the poet as self-conscious hero,” not unlike the visionary seer depicted at the end of *Kubla Khan*.<sup>55</sup> It is Blake however, who undertakes the most comprehensive rewriting of Milton in his eponymous epic *Milton* (1804, with the epigraph, “To Justify the Ways of God to Man”), in which Blake calls the spirit of the blind bard down from heaven (and into Blake’s left foot) in order to rectify the “errors” of *Paradise Lost*. According to Lucy Newlyn,

Blake seeks in his prophecy not only to expose the deficiencies of institutionalized religion but to replace the hypostasized God of the Church with “The eternal great Humanity Divine” . . . which, in his view, dwells in every individual. He accuses the author of *Paradise Lost* of misrepresenting divinity as an abstraction from the human condition, and so of contributing to the evolution of religion as a system capable of enslaving mankind: he therefore confronts Milton with the necessity of reconciling divinity with humanity, so that the effects of oppression may be undone and mankind . . . awakened to its latent potential.<sup>56</sup>

M. H. Abrams suggests that, by explicitly identifying himself with Milton, Blake is “carrying out, by his imaginative endeavor, Milton’s unfinished task of redeeming the English people.”<sup>57</sup> Wordsworth hints at a similar act of grandiose appropriation in his “London: 1802” (written just two years earlier). Who, after all, is going to restore England’s “manners, virtue, freedom, power,” if - unlike in Blake’s imaginative universe - Milton is not coming back? In his classic work *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams outlines Wordsworth’s grand plan “to emulate his revered predecessor

---

Stuart Curran, *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism, 2nd Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 230.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Kitson, “Milton: The Romantics and After,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 471–72.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Shears, “Approaching the Unapproached Light: Milton and the Romantic Visionary,” in Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler, eds., *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens* (Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 261.

<sup>57</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 32.

– and rival – by writing the equivalent for his own age of the great Protestant English epic.”<sup>58</sup> The Lake poet may have declined to take up “some old/Romantic tale by Milton left unsung,” as he declares in the first book of *The Prelude*, but that was because Wordsworth had already determined on his own version, or inversion, of Miltonic theodicy: One in which paradise is restored, not by any kind of divine intervention, but by a psychological union of the poet’s mind with nature. Abrams has famously described the “Wordsworthian theodicy of the private life” which effectively secularizes the Christian narrative of conversion and redemption by translating it into a narrative about the poet’s own self-formation through crisis, transformation, and renewed self-awareness.<sup>59</sup> In his Prospectus to *The Recluse* (“Home at Grasmere”), Wordsworth at once identifies himself with Milton, directly quotes from *Paradise Lost*, and calls upon the same muse, Urania, to help him in his self-appointed endeavor:

Urania, I shall need  
Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such  
Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!  
For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink  
Deep--and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds  
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.<sup>60</sup>

The boldness of Wordsworth’s claim – he may need “a greater Muse” than Milton’s, and he will “breathe in worlds” beyond “the heaven of heavens” of Milton’s imagining – might be astonishing if not so familiar in our more secularized age. It reflects “[t]he tendency in innovative Romantic thought . . . to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God,” Abrams observes, leaving man, the world, the human mind, and nature as the prime agents of experience.<sup>61</sup> This internalization of the *Paradise Lost* narrative is something common to almost all Romantics, Abrams suggests, and often directly related to political disappointments in the aftermath of the French Revolution. (Kitson suggests that Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which

---

<sup>58</sup> Abrams, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Abrams, 95–96.

<sup>60</sup> William Wordsworth, “The Recluse,” in *The Complete Poetical Works* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 145.

<sup>61</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 91.

come on the heels of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror, also reflect this “internal move.”)<sup>62</sup> The result was a shift from hopes placed in outward political change to those placed in the powers of the human mind, as the subtitle of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* suggests.<sup>63</sup> Disappointed Romantics were, in a sense, following the line of advice the Archangel Michael had given a bereft Adam near the close of *Paradise Lost*: Having lost an external Paradise – or some specific vision of it – they might still “possess/A paradise within . . . happier far.”<sup>64</sup>

### 1.2.1 Political Milton

The secularization of Miltonic epic, decreasing or eliminating altogether the role and authority of the supernatural, is an important way in which the major Romantics’ appropriation of Milton is very different from Pollok’s, for whom Milton is the example par excellence of the great Christian poet. Another important difference is in the way Romantics from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Byron and Shelley admired Milton as a political hero and revolutionary.<sup>65</sup> In the eighteenth century, both Johnson and Hume had depicted Milton as a dangerous radical.<sup>66</sup> In his “Life of Milton,” Johnson had strongly criticized both Milton’s independent religious persuasions (“To be of no church is dangerous”) and his radical politics:

Milton’s republicanism was . . . founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of control, and pride disdainful of superiority. He hated monarchs in the state and prelates in the church; for he hated all whom he was required to obey.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 472.

<sup>63</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 64–65. The subtitle is of course, “Growth of a Poet’s Mind.”

<sup>64</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy Newlyn asserts that “[t]he reader of *Paradise Lost* is placed in the position of choosing between a Milton who is humanly involved in political concerns and a Milton who divinely abstracts himself from them.” Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 40. Pollok is certainly of the latter category.

<sup>66</sup> Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 466.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, 63.

By the late eighteenth century, however, the politics of the man who had written *Eikonoklastes* (1649) in defense of the execution of a king could be seen as apropos for an age replete with its own tyrannies. Milton was “a revolutionary poet for a revolutionary age,”<sup>68</sup> his radicalism embraced by young Romantics whose own hopes for change in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution had yet to be extinguished. Blake patron William Hayley’s *Life of Milton* (1794), following shortly after, was the culmination of a series of late eighteenth-century biographies extolling Milton’s patriotism, public virtue, and selflessness.<sup>69</sup> Twenty-five years later, after the dictatorship of Napoleon and under the constraints of the Georgian monarchy, Milton’s republicanism and religious iconoclasm were still a source of admiration among younger Romantics, although less so for the middle-aged Lakers. In his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1819), Shelley hails “the sacred Milton [who] was, let it ever be remembered, a republican, and a bold inquirer into morals and religion.”<sup>70</sup> It is Milton’s opposition to religious and moral, as well as political, oppression that elicits Shelley’s praise. The poet expresses a similar sentiment the next year in a six-line fragment titled “Milton’s Spirit” (1820):

I dreamed that Milton's spirit rose, and took  
 From life's green tree his Uranian lute;  
 And from his touch sweet thunder flowed, and shook  
 All human things built in contempt of man,--  
 And sanguine thrones and impious altars quaked,  
 Prisons and citadels . . . <sup>71</sup>

Lucy Newlyn asserts that “the Romantics turn to Milton when they are themselves preoccupied, as he had been, by the problematic relation of earthly politics to religious or moral truth.”<sup>72</sup> That is certainly the case with Wordsworth’s “London: 1802,” written amid the reactionary politics of the Napoleonic Wars, and of Shelley’s dream fragment, written a year after the infamous Peterloo Massacre and his initial response to that event in *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819). Stuart Curran agrees

---

<sup>68</sup> Peter J. Kitson, “Milton: The Romantics and After,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 464.

<sup>69</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 29.

<sup>70</sup> Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introduction and Notes*, 532.

<sup>71</sup> Wittreich, 536.

<sup>72</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 7.

that “one reason [Milton] must have appealed to poets of the Romantic age was that he wrote his last works [including *Paradise Lost*] under similar political pressures and in even direr political circumstances than those confronting them.”<sup>73</sup> Macaulay’s widely read *Essay on Milton* (*Edinburgh Review*, 1825), with its emphasis on Milton’s championing of freedom of conscience amid political and religious opposition, surely reinforced the view of Milton as a virtuous would-be martyr for liberty, fighting for “that species of freedom which is the most valuable, and which was then the least understood, the freedom of the human mind. . . .”<sup>74</sup> This is a part of what Newlyn sees as the Romantic “deification” of Milton, most evident in Blake’s epic, when the latter has the blind bard “descend to earth as fulfilment of the prophecy of Christ’s second coming.” Newlyn suggests that, in this figurative fashion, “Milton is thus made central to the millenarian hopes of Romantic writers,”<sup>75</sup> who would, presumably, be familiar with Milton’s own millenarian hopes for the English nation in the seventeenth century.

### 1.2.2. Satanic Impulses

Perhaps no Romantic more famously appropriated Milton’s politics, both religious and secular, than Blake, assigning Milton to “the Devil’s party” (which Blake associated with liberty) because he was “a true poet” who had, nonetheless, misconceived the real nature and sources of deity.<sup>76</sup> Milton’s Satan, as well as his creator, became central to many Romantics’ political conceptions, often appropriated as a republican hero himself, fighting against the tyranny of heaven.<sup>77</sup> Robert Burns claimed Milton’s charismatic Satan as “my favourite hero,”<sup>78</sup> while Byron affirmed Satan as the true hero of Milton’s epic<sup>79</sup> and a model for his *Cain*. Both Addison and Johnson in the eighteenth century had viewed Milton’s Satan as essentially harmless and intellectually

---

<sup>73</sup> Curran, *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, 2nd Edition, 231.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Essay on Milton*, ed. James Greenleaf Croswell (New York and London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1895), 84.

<sup>75</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Revised edition (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor, 1982).

<sup>77</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 35.

<sup>78</sup> Newlyn, 39.

<sup>79</sup> Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introduction and Notes*, 522.

ineffectual, at least in regard to Milton's readership. His fallen majesty was even considered part of the sublimity of the poem itself, perfectly calculated "to raise and terrify the reader's imagination,"<sup>80</sup> which was, after all, one of the jobs of epic poetry. But in the Romantic era, Satan could be a potent symbol of Milton's failure to justify both divine and human authority. Writing in his *Defense of Poetry* (1821), Shelley argues that

. . . Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system, of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in "Paradise Lost." It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil.

Moreover,

Milton's Devil as a moral being is . . . far superior to his God. . . . Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his Devil. And this bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius.<sup>81</sup>

Not only does *Paradise Lost* fail as theodicy, but it is also a moral failure. Or rather, to the agnostic Shelley, it is a success precisely for these reasons. Contra Le Bossu and Johnson, the poet's first purpose is not to find a moral or to promote dogma. In fact, "a poet would do ill," Shelley suggests, "to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time. . . ."<sup>82</sup> Good poetry does not come from following all the rules. Part of Milton's Satan's attraction for Shelley is that he does not. Instead, he challenges creeds and rules, especially those which

---

<sup>80</sup> Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steel, *Addison's Spectator*, ed. George Washington Greene (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860), 69.

<sup>81</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence Of Poetry* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1904), 62–64.

<sup>82</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 35.

Shelley associates with an outworn Christianity of which *Paradise Lost* will one day be the only reflection:

Analogy seems to favour the opinion, that as, like other systems, Christianity has arisen and augmented, so like them it will decay and perish . . . Milton's poem alone will give permanency to the remembrance of its absurdities; and that men will laugh as heartily at grace, faith, redemption, and original sin, as they now do at the metamorphoses of Jupiter, the miracles of Romish saints, the efficacy of witchcraft, and the appearance of departed spirits.<sup>83</sup>

This is a far cry from any interpretation Robert Pollok would have made of either Christianity or *Paradise Lost*. Having read and admired both Addison and Johnson, Pollok would probably have taken their viewpoint on the relative harmlessness of Milton's presentation of Satan, and would almost certainly have disagreed with the heroic God-hater embraced by Blake and by members of the "Satanic School" including Byron and Shelley. Satan, in fact, has curiously little to do with Pollok's epic until near the end, and there he is no figure of admiration. All in all, Pollok, as we shall see in the next chapter, was much more concerned with the moral shortcomings of human beings themselves – another curious commonality with the agnostic Shelley.

### 1.2.3 A Prophetic Bard

From the very beginning, commentators on *The Course of Time*, like the author of an early review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1827), recognized correspondences between Pollok's episodic depictions of humanity's moral "history" and the Archangel Michael's visionary unfolding of humanity's future to Adam in Books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>84</sup> Both narratives

---

<sup>83</sup> From "Notes to *Queen Mab* (1812-1813)," in Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introduction and Notes*, 529.

<sup>84</sup> "'The Course of Time', A Review," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. XXI, January-June, 1827. Pollok editor James Boyd suggests that *The Course of Time* might, in fact, "with more appropriateness have been denominated 'The moral and religious History of Man.'" James Boyd, "Introductory Observations," in Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various*

involve an angelic, or semi-angelic, seer depicting the consequences of sin and disobedience and foretelling the hope for redemption in the person of Christ. Just as Michael responds to Adam and Eve's confusion and tears (regarding their imminent expulsion from Eden) with a revelation of the future, so Pollok's bard answers the stranger spirit's questions about Hell and judgment with his narrative history of humankind. Michael is a "seer blest," according to Adam, who, just like his creator, measures "this transient world, the race of time,/Till time stand fixed."<sup>85</sup> Like Pollok's bard – and notably, like Milton – Michael sees into eternity, beyond apocalypse and even millennium, thereby teaching Adam that "to obey is best,/And love with fear the only God" (Book XII, ll.561-2) – a teaching central to the tale beyond time which Pollok's own bard relates. History, at least for Milton and Pollok, is prophetic, and for that reason, an important vehicle for religious and moral instruction, an idea we will return to in the next chapters with regard to Calvinist interpretations of the apocalyptic.

The appropriation of Milton's prophetic voice, including its apocalyptic and millenarian aspects, is an important commonality between Pollok and his contemporaries, although differences in political interpretation, as already noted, are clear.<sup>86</sup> William Riggs asserts that the Romantics viewed Milton as the ultimate poet-prophet in the English tradition,<sup>87</sup> for whom, according to M. H. Abrams, "prophecy and poetry were virtually identical."<sup>88</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, Milton had written the English language's greatest epic, which was a form long associated with prophecy, and in which poet and prophetic narrator were often conflated,<sup>89</sup> as they often are in *The Course of Time*. Milton also had incorporated both classical and Hebraic models of literary prophecy in his epic and invoked aspects of biblical apocalypse, as in Michael's prophecies to Adam or God the Father's descriptions of apocalypse, final judgment, and the return of Christ in *Paradise Lost*

---

*Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Ian Balfour argues that "[i]n its Romantic reincarnations . . . prophetic discourse ranges across the entire political spectrum from revolutionary to reactionary." Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 48.

<sup>87</sup> William G. Riggs, *The Christian Poet in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 10–11.

<sup>88</sup> Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 154.

<sup>89</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 197–98.

Books III and X. In his prose works, too - notably in the religio-political tracts of the 1640s, such as *Of Reformation* and *Areopagitica*<sup>90</sup> - Milton had stoked the fires of apocalyptic and millenarian thought, which would flame again in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>91</sup> In M. H. Abrams' estimation, apocalyptic thought "permeated the depths" of Milton's imagination,<sup>92</sup> as it would that of so many Romantics who came after, who also saw themselves living in an age of political and social upheaval. Coleridge's "Religious Musings" (1796) is but one example: In that "miniature Miltonic epic,"<sup>93</sup> the young Romantic envisions Milton as an apocalyptic emissary of the promised millennium, to whose trumpet "The high groves of the renovated Earth/Unbosom their glad echoes."<sup>94</sup>

The strongest claim for Milton's prophetic authority comes from the poet himself in works like *The Reason of Church-Government* (1641), where Milton affirms God's call "to take the trumpet" of the prophet "and blow a dolorous or jarring blast,"<sup>95</sup> and most especially, in the famous invocations, or proems, to *Paradise Lost* (Books I, III, VII, and IX).<sup>96</sup> Not shy of confidence, from the very beginning of the epic, Milton associates himself with the greatest of all biblical prophets, Moses:

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top  
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire  
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,  
In the beginning how the heav'ns and earth  
Rose out of Chaos. . . . (I.6-10)

---

<sup>90</sup> This is a central subject of Tims Fulford's essay "Millenarianism and the Study of Romanticism," in Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 1-22.

<sup>91</sup> Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*.

<sup>92</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Kitson, "Milton: The Romantics and After," in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 464.

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Religious Musings," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 108.

<sup>95</sup> John Milton, "The Reason of Church Government: Book 2," in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Vol. I, 1624-1642, ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 821.

<sup>96</sup> Riggs, *The Christian Poet in Paradise Lost*, 10-11.

In Book IX, the poet famously asserts a “nightly visitation unimplored” from his “celestial patroness,” who “dictates to me slumb’ring, or inspires/Easy my unpremeditated verse” (ll.21-24). Milton claimed a prophetic gift in his prose works, too, recognizing the role of the Holy Spirit or heavenly muses in the creation of all his writing, although it was still very much his own.<sup>97</sup> Again, Andrew Marvell was among the first to publicly affirm Milton’s claim, in his homage to *Paradise Lost*, placing the blind Milton in the literary line of blind prophet-seers reaching back to antiquity:

Where couldst thou words of such a compass find?  
Whence furnish such a vast expanse of mind?  
Just heaven thee, like Tiresias, to requite,  
Rewards with prophecy the loss of sight.<sup>98</sup>

Among the Romantics, Blake and Wordsworth, especially, saw Milton as a literary prophet and forebear. It is Milton, and not Shakespeare, whom Blake imagines entering into his left foot (“because by doing so he alters Blake’s *stance* . . . from civilizing poet to redeeming prophet”)<sup>99</sup> and Milton on whom Wordsworth calls for aid when England “is a fen/Of stagnant waters” and needs the “manners, virtue, freedom, power” that only Milton - or a poet-seer very like him – can provide.<sup>100</sup> Peter Kitson affirms Milton’s “rediscovery of the persona of the prophet-poet” from antiquity and out of biblical tradition which so many of the Romantics, including Robert Pollok, emulate.<sup>101</sup> Also, Milton was part of a long tradition in English letters associating poetry with prophecy.<sup>102</sup> Sir Phillip Sidney had written of the poet as “vates” in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), and his contemporary George Puttenham had explored a similar theme in *The Arte of English Poesie* a few years earlier (1589). Two centuries later, Shelley would emphasize the role of the poet-prophet in *A Defense of Poetry*, calling poets “the hierophants of an unapprehended

---

<sup>97</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski, “Milton: The Muses, the Prophets, the Spirit, and Prophetic Poetry,” *Milton Studies* 54, no. 1 (March 14, 2014): 59–78.

<sup>98</sup> Andrew Marvell, “On Mr. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” ll.41-44, in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2007.

<sup>99</sup> Commentary by Harold Bloom, in Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, 915.

<sup>100</sup> William Wordsworth, “London: 1802,” ll. 2-3,8, in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* / W. W. Norton & Company, Fourth Edition, vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 224.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Kitson, “Milton: The Romantics and After,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 472.

<sup>102</sup> Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 59.

inspiration,”<sup>103</sup> as well as in poems such as *Ode to the West Wind* (1819), with Shelley’s famous invocation to the wind to “Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth/ The trumpet of a prophecy!”<sup>104</sup>

Blake, perhaps, is best-known among the Romantics for his self-identification as a poet-prophet in the vein of Milton, calling readers of *Songs of Experience* to “Hear the voice of the Bard!/Who Present, Past, & Future sees. . . .” Balfour recognizes a “discontinuous line” of prophetic poetry running through English letters from Milton to Blake and including poets in Pollok’s own canon such as Gray, Collins, Young, and Cowper.<sup>105</sup> Notably, Blake called two of his longer poems “prophecies” (*America*, 1793, and *Europe*, 1794) and refers to himself as a prophet in correspondence with his patron William Hayley, author of *The Life of Milton* (wherein Blake rebukes Hayley for failing to recognize Blake as a prophet, too).<sup>106</sup> Balfour also argues that, in his *Milton*, Blake makes “immense” claims for the prophetic scope of the poet’s work – like the original Milton – which includes “nothing less than all of what Christians think of as history, from creation to millennium.”<sup>107</sup> The similarities with the scope of Pollok’s own project are clear. There really could be no other figure in the line of English prophetic poetry to whom both Blake and Pollok could appeal, although they would interpret (or reinterpret) him in very different ways. Both follow Milton in claiming divine inspiration and authority for their work. As Milton claimed “nightly visitation unimplored” from his “celestial patroness” (*Paradise Lost*, Book IX, ll.21-22), so Blake claimed, in a letter of 1803 to his patron Thomas Butts, to be directly involved in heavenly employment of like kind:

. . . I have in these three years [at Felpham, West Sussex] composed an immense number of verses on One Grand Theme Similar to Homers Iliad or Miltons Paradise Lost the Persons & Machinery intirely new to the Inhabitants of Earth . . . I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or

---

<sup>103</sup> Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, 90.

<sup>104</sup> Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” ll. 68-69, in Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* / W. W. Norton & Company, 2:704.

<sup>105</sup> Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 61.

<sup>106</sup> Balfour, 146.

<sup>107</sup> Balfour, 162.

sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will. the Time it has taken in writing was thus rendered Non Existent.<sup>108</sup>

Blake may not have needed to consciously invoke the heavenly muse or the Holy Spirit for his prophetic utterances - after all, his Milton makes them - but Pollok does invoke the “Eternal Spirit” in the openings of Books I and X of *The Course of Time*, as does Milton, at least in the early books of *Paradise Lost*. A common claim to the Miltonic gift of literary prophecy is, as already noted, an important point of connection between Pollok and the major Romantics, however differently that gift is used and interpreted. As Lucy Newlyn asserts, and Pollok’s example affirms, the Romantics interpreted Milton and, indeed, *Paradise Lost* in a variety of ways. For many of the major Romantics, Milton is “humanly involved in political concerns” and an exemplar of social action in the here and now; for others, among whom I count Pollok, Milton is a divinely “abstracted”<sup>109</sup> and idealized figure whose importance is almost entirely relegated to the field of religion and its corrolaries.

### 1.3 Byron’s Challenge to Miltonic Epic

Wordsworth may have inverted the Miltonic epic, placing the poet and his psychological development at the center of a now secularized narrative, and other Romantics may have celebrated Satan as the real hero of *Paradise Lost*, but in *Don Juan* (1824), Byron subverted the Miltonic epic altogether, taking up its conventions or expectations only to undermine them. As Nicholas Halmi notes, despite its satirical tone and facetiousness, “*Don Juan* calls itself an epic or calls attention to its use of epic conventions on more than a dozen occasions,”<sup>110</sup> and Byron often defended the poem as such in correspondence, telling his friend Thomas Medwin that *Don Juan* “is an epic as

---

<sup>108</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, 728. Balfour suggests the poem referred to may be *Milton* (Balfour, 163), although, according to accepted chronology, it could also be *Jerusalem* or the revision of *The Four Zoas*.

<sup>109</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 40.

<sup>110</sup> Nicholas Halmi, “The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem,” *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 5 (October 1, 2010): 589.

much in the spirit of our day as the Iliad was in Homer's."<sup>111</sup> Mocking classical convention within the work itself, Byron declares

My poem's epic, and is meant to be  
 Divided in twelve books; each book containing,  
 With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,  
 A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,  
 New characters; the episodes are three:  
 A panoramic view of hell's in training,  
 After the style of Virgil and of Homer,  
 So that my name of Epic's no misnomer.<sup>112</sup>

Milton is acknowledged as an epic forbear, too, even though on its surface *Don Juan* would appear to undermine the very values *Paradise Lost* was seen to represent. In the scathing "Dedication to Southey" which prefaces *Don Juan*, Byron directly invokes the proem to *Paradise Lost* Book VII ("fall'n on evil days,/ . . . and evil tongues") and, much like Wordsworth in "London: 1802," imagines a literally resurrected Milton reprimanding monarchs and reactionary statesmen alike:

If fallen in evil days on evil tongues,  
 Milton appealed to the avenger, Time,  
 If Time, the avenger, execrates his wrongs  
 And makes the word Miltonic mean sublime,  
 He deigned not to belie his soul in songs,  
 Nor turn his very talent to a crime.  
 He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,  
 But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.

Think'st thou, could he, the blind old man arise  
 Like Samuel from the grave to freeze once more  
 The blood of monarchs with his prophecies,  
 Or be alive again---again all hoar  
 With time and trials, and those helpless eyes  
 And heartless daughters—worn and pale and poor,

---

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*: (London, H. Colburn, 1824), 200.

<sup>112</sup> George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto the First, stanza CC, ll. 1593-1600 (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1837).

Would he adore a sultan? He obey  
The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?<sup>113</sup>

The parallels to Wordsworth's sonnet are striking, especially when one considers that Wordsworth, along with Southey, is a major target of Byron's satirical disdain in *Don Juan*. In his "Dedication," Byron skewers what Nicholas Halmi calls the "metaphysical pretensions" of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, depicting the latter as busying himself with "Explaining Metaphysics to the nation—/I wish he would explain his Explanation" (Stanza II, 7-8) and Wordsworth as hopelessly entangled in philosophical speculation in his epic-length *Excursion*, wherein the Lake poet

Has given a sample from the vasty version  
Of his new system to perplex the sages;  
'Tis poetry—at least by his assertion,  
And may appear so when the dog-star rages—  
And he who understands it would be able  
To add a story to the Tower of Babel. (Stanza IV, 27-32)

Metaphysical concerns are often central to the epic tradition - most obviously, in *Paradise Lost* - but Byron will have no truck with them in the solidly non-metaphysical, non-speculative *Don Juan*. Not only is God absent from the poem, but it may be (and has been) argued that meaning is, too, despite Byron's arguments otherwise. While Blake could feel himself resurrecting (or reappointing) Milton to "justify the ways" of a different kind of God, and Wordsworth in his *Prelude* could praise a transcendent "correspondent breeze" from wherever it might come, Byron appears to eschew both higher power and its justification. If "Byron is very close to preaching" in *Don Juan*, as Brian Wilkie suggests,<sup>114</sup> it is a gospel of uncertainty and skepticism that the eternal pilgrim expounds, though often with a comic flourish:

He who doubts all things, nothing can deny;

<sup>113</sup> "Dedication to Southey," Stanzas X and XI, in Byron.

<sup>114</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 223.

Truth's fountains may be clear—her streams are muddy,  
And cut through such canals of contradiction,  
That she must often navigate o'er fiction.<sup>115</sup>

### 1.3.1 An Epic of Negation

While epics are usually about affirmation – of a culture's history, origins, or prospective future – Wilkie sees *Don Juan* as “an epic of negation,” which Byron wrote to be “deliberately and in every sense inconclusive, since he wanted to show life itself as ultimately without meaning.”<sup>116</sup> One wonders, as does Wilkie, why Byron would go to such epic lengths (twenty-seven cantos, five-thousand-plus lines) to assert a philosophy of skepticism that denies the validity and authority of the literary form it represents. Wilkie argues that “Byron did so because, it would seem, he felt the pressure of what he considered specious orthodoxies and systems all around him”<sup>117</sup> – not unlike the Milton of the early *Reason of Church-Government* or the late *Paradise Lost*, or for that matter, Byron's older contemporary William Blake. In fact, Wilkie asserts that

. . . in his own way, Bryon was trying to be doctrinal to a nation. But his doctrine was to be the denial of particular doctrines and of the very notion of doctrine. . . . And what more striking vehicle could Byron have used to assert the emptiness of man's enterprise than the epic, a form in which the statement that after all there is no final Truth . . . has the kind of jarring effect it would have if one heard the statement from a pulpit?<sup>118</sup>

Of course, a pulpit is the very place, especially in the early nineteenth century, where one would expect to hear some aspect of the “final Truth,” if not that very Truth itself. Wilkie obliquely references *The Reason of Church-Government* here (where the phrase “doctrinal and exemplary to a nation” is found), and may be thinking of Milton's argument in that work for accepting the

---

<sup>115</sup> Byron, *Don Juan*.

<sup>116</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 211.

<sup>117</sup> Wilkie, 211.

<sup>118</sup> Wilkie, 211–12.

divinely inspired poet as equal in religious or spiritual authority with the preacher. Wherever such a poet's gifts are displayed, Milton affirms, they "are of power beside the office of a pulpit, to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue. . . ." <sup>119</sup>

Virtue, of course, is rarely associated with the figure of Don Juan, and Byron's poem was roundly attacked for its supposed immorality and propagation of vice. Byron's then-publisher John Murray attempted to censor the poem (against Byron's vehement protest) and refused to publish later cantos. For his part, Wordsworth declared himself "convinced that *Don Juan* will do more harm to the English character, than anything of our time," <sup>120</sup> and Byron noted (perhaps with delight) that "[t]here has been an eleventh commandment to the women not to read it." <sup>121</sup> But Byron also insisted that *Don Juan* was "the most moral of poems," and that even Samuel Johnson – who, one remembers, thought *Paradise Lost* the most moral of epics – could not quibble with *Don Juan*'s morality. <sup>122</sup> "D[on] Juan will be known by and bye for what it is intended a *satire on abuses* of the present *states* of Society," Byron asserted to Murray, "and not an eulogy of vice." <sup>123</sup> In his study of epic, Herbert Tucker similarly sees *Don Juan* as a response to a widely-shared sense of "cultural malaise" in the late Romantic period, <sup>124</sup> a version of which many evangelicals like Pollok, his theology professor John Dick, and the apocalyptic Scots preacher Edward Irving (both appearing in a later chapter) decried in sermons, lectures, essays, and poetry. For them, "cultural malaise" and the propagation of vice were not far apart; as we will see, both Irving and Pollok specifically charge Byron with the latter.

---

<sup>119</sup> Milton, "The Reason of Church Government: Book 2," 39.

<sup>120</sup> William Knight, ed., *Letters of the Wordsworth Family from 1787 to 1855*, vol. 2 (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 168.

<sup>121</sup> Letter to Richard Hoppner, October 29, 1819, in Leslie A Marchand, ed., *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals* (London: Picador, 1988), 329.

<sup>122</sup> Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, 324.

<sup>123</sup> Letter to John Murray, December 25, 1822, in Marchand, *Lord Byron*, 329.

<sup>124</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 235.

## 1.4 Epic Transformations

Importantly, *Don Juan* represents a major turning point in the history not only of Miltonic epic but of the genre itself.<sup>125</sup> While noting some similarities between *Don Juan* and *Paradise Lost*, George Ridenour points to Byron's attack on traditional conventions of warfare and martial glory – important still in Milton's Christianized epic – as evidence that, “in his lesser way and from his essentially secular and rationalist point of view, Byron is attempting as radical a redefinition of the nature of epic and the epic hero as was Milton.”<sup>126</sup> Byron recognized that he was doing something new in *Don Juan*, declaring his antipathy to “divine” poems and their “worn out machinery,”<sup>127</sup> and resolving to hold up “the nothingness of Life” by showing “things really as they are/Not as they ought to be.”<sup>128</sup> For Nicholas Halmi, *Don Juan's* contingency reflects “a distinctly modern understanding of reality,”<sup>129</sup> while Brian Wilkie argues that

in *Don Juan* we find precisely that typically modern distrust of objective values to whose influence the decline of epic and epic heroism, along with a host of other vanished certainties, is so often attributed.<sup>130</sup>

Milton may have left “no room” for those who followed but to acknowledge their inferiority, at least in Andrew Marvell's estimation, but according to Herbert Tucker, *Don Juan* so “reconfigured the literary field” that in its wake accomplished authors such as James Hogg were forced to re-think their own poetic programs.<sup>131</sup> Although the earlier Romantic period had been one of the most prolific periods for epic writing, Tucker asserts that *Don Juan* had “a downright contraceptive effect” on the genre, with many fewer epics published in the years immediately following *Don Juan* than before it.<sup>132</sup> As Brian Wilkie suggests, those Romantics who believed in the authority of

---

<sup>125</sup> George M. Ridenour, *The Style Of Don Juan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 92. This argument is central to the works by Brian Wilkie and Herbert Tucker previously cited.

<sup>126</sup> George M. Ridenour, *The Style Of Don Juan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 92.

<sup>127</sup> Letter to publisher John Murray, April 6, 1819, in Marchand, *Lord Byron*, 328.

<sup>128</sup> Byron, *Don Juan*.

<sup>129</sup> Halmi, “The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem,” 589.

<sup>130</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 224.

<sup>131</sup> Herbert Tucker suggests this is the case with Hogg's *Queen Hynde*, published in 1825. Tucker, *Epic*, 235.

<sup>132</sup> Tucker, 236–37.

epic and had tried to place themselves within its traditions generally viewed history as progressive and instructive and appreciated at least some of the values of the past. But in *Don Juan*, Byron seemed to deny that the past held any real meaning or greatness, or that progress or heroism were even possible in his own hypocritical age.<sup>133</sup> In the years immediately preceding Pollok's work on *The Course of Time*, and during its very composition, the epic genre as Milton had defined it - Christian, authoritative, doctrinal, meaning-filled and purposeful - had come to a juncture, if not a complete rupture. Tucker argues that

[Byron's] annihilation of existing heroic ideals and radical redefinition of the will-to-narrate drove epic into a bankruptcy from which nothing could redeem it short of apocalypse; the field was accordingly dominated during the later 1820s by eschatological themes and the evangelical certitudes that went with them.<sup>134</sup>

If grand themes and heroism on the old model (historical, nationalistic, or purely nostalgic) were no longer viable – since even *Paradise Lost* had been claimed as a nationalistic epic – aspiring epoists would have to turn to a larger canvas. Apocalypticism allowed them to “break free from the limits of time and inspect human history from some transcendent, God-like position.”<sup>135</sup> According to Tucker, the era of the apocalyptic epic (roughly late 1820s through 1830s) arose in direct response to Byron's annihilation of the old heroic ideal. Epoists of the later 1820s would see secular history with its tales of nations and peoples as “but an episode within a narrative vastly more capacious”<sup>136</sup> which, like *Paradise Lost*, told a trans-national, trans-global, trans-universal sacred history that, as the bard of *The Course of Time* asserts, involves everyone. In fact, out of all those who turned their hand to apocalyptic epic at the time – and Tucker argues that these, like Pollok, are mostly poets removed from the literary mainstream, representing marginal groups - only Pollok “compassed the whole story, and that is part of what made *The Course of Time* so impressive to his contemporaries” – and so challenging to readers today.<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, 226.

<sup>134</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 395, quoted in Tucker, 251.

<sup>136</sup> Tucker, 263.

<sup>137</sup> Tucker, 263. Tucker considers *The Course of Time* the bestseller among the “eschatological” epics of the 1820s.

## 1.5 Conclusions

In attempting to tell “the whole story” of sacred history from creation to apocalypse, *The Course of Time* epitomized “the 1820s project of reactivating epic’s suspended moral authority and collective force.”<sup>138</sup> As we will explore in following chapters, a considerable portion of *The Course of Time* is given over to moral vignettes intended as object lessons for its readers, including one of Byron, the lengthiest in the poem. It is little surprise, then, that Tucker finds “a fascination with moral classification” among evangelical epic writers of the period such as Pollok.<sup>139</sup> Many of them, like him, idolized Milton as the model of the Christian epic poet, which was not what Romantics like Wordsworth had aspired to. As we recall, Milton alone had made the teaching of a moral “essential and intrinsic” to his poem, thereby offering a lyrical, authoritative justification of religion and obedience to God’s law.<sup>140</sup> Shelley may have celebrated his belief that *Paradise Lost* was without a moral and thereby (happily) failed as a theodicy, but evangelicals like Pollok would almost certainly have agreed with Achsah Guibbory’s assessment that almost everything Milton wrote was in defense of “true religion,” and that “[v]irtue for Milton [was] inseparable from religion.”<sup>141</sup> The same is true for Pollok, who opens Book IX of *The Course of Time* with a lengthy apostrophe to Religion, “known by whatever name . . . Virtue, Piety, or Love/Of Holiness.”<sup>142</sup> We learn elsewhere, in Book I, that the personified Virtue is omnipresent, “like God,” being his glory and “excellent majesty.”<sup>143</sup> One may surmise, then, that if religion is absent, so must be virtue, and vice versa. Byron may claim a moral for *Don Juan*, but without religion, his claim is sheer mockery to the evangelical epist. Calling *The Course of Time* an “epic illustration of virtue militant,” Tucker argues that Pollok and Byron occupy opposite ends of the 1820s epic spectrum which we have been examining, the one theologically, doctrinally, and morally rigid, the other entirely loose and indeterminate. According to Tucker, *The Course of Time* offered its readers “all the flexibility

---

<sup>138</sup> Tucker, 245.

<sup>139</sup> Tucker, 251.

<sup>140</sup> Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, 111.

<sup>141</sup> Achsah Guibbory, “Milton and English Poetry,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 75.

<sup>142</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, IX. 3-5.

<sup>143</sup> Pollok, I. 414.

of an alabaster wall in the New Jerusalem,” while *Don Juan* provided “all the structural potential of mesh netting,” in which there was nothing for a reader to grasp at all.<sup>144</sup>

As we have noted, by the time Pollok began writing *The Course of Time* in December 1824, the English language epic had become a battleground for disputed literary and theological ideas and structures, much as in Milton’s day, with the return of a king who represented all the blind poet opposed. For many Romantics, the “king” was a reconstructed, and sometimes deconstructed, epic shorn of higher purpose and authority, ready to be toppled from his throne – and by 1824, certainly already falling. Stripped by Wordsworth of his divinity and by Byron of his dignity, the “king” was hardly recognizable or worthy of serious attention. If there were any chance of his ruling again, he would have to be completely cleaned up, re-costumed, and re-oriented. In their various ways, Milton and Pollok did just that, re-making and reaffirming the epic and its meaning for their own times. Both used literature, and specifically, the epic poem, to fight for the cause of “true religion” and against the forces they saw ranged against it. But how could poets as different, and even opposed, as Byron and Pollok look on Milton as an heroic figure and a source of emulation? How could both invoke the same poet for such seemingly different purposes? I will attempt to answer these questions in the next chapter by turning to Pollok’s appropriation of Milton’s legacy in *The Course of Time* and the possible influence on Pollok of three of Milton’s most important works, *Paradise Lost*, *Comus*, and *The Reason of Church-Government*.

---

<sup>144</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 256.

## Chapter 2

### Robert Pollok's Miltonic Project II: What Milton Meant for Pollok

*"The bard, by God's own hand anointed. . . ."*

*The Course of Time*, Book IX

Robert Pollok literally "discovered" *Paradise Lost*. In the spring of 1816, he found a copy of the poem hidden "among some old books, on the upper shelf of a wallpress" in the kitchen of his uncle's farmhouse near Kilmarnock, "where it had lain neglected for years."<sup>1</sup> His brother David recalls that

[t]hough [Robert] had never seen *Paradise Lost* before, he had often heard of it, and he began to read it immediately. He was captivated with it at the very first and after that, as long as he staid at Horsehill [his uncle's farm], he took it up whenever he had the least opportunity, and read with great eagerness. When he was leaving the place, his uncle, seeing him so fond of the book, gave it to him in a present; and from that time, Milton became his favourite author, and, I may say, next to the Bible, his chief companion. Henceforward, he read more or less of him almost every day, and used often to repeat aloud, in bed, immediately before rising in the morning, what was his favourite passage in *Paradise Lost*, the apostrophe to the light in the beginning of the third Book.<sup>2</sup>

In a lengthy essay comparing Pollok and Milton in 1861, Thomas McNicoll suggests that Pollok's discovery of *Paradise Lost* may have been the decisive moment when "the first vague longings for poetical renown, and the first dim outlines of his future theme, arose to animate and occupy the profound enthusiasm of his nature." Whatever the actual case, it was certainly the beginning of a profound relationship with Milton that would deeply influence the direction of Pollok's short poetic career, as well as of his poetic legacy. McNicoll is only one of many reviewers of the time

---

<sup>1</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 19.

<sup>2</sup> David Pollok, 19–20.

who note similarities between *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*, claiming for Milton and Pollok the same “involute office” (presumably as a sacred poet) and an “identical inspiration” that “may be said to have derived from one to the other.” “The priesthood of genius,” McNicoll asserts, “is not, indeed, hereditary; but each high *flamen* of the order is wont to light his torch at a predecessor’s fire.”<sup>3</sup> Years earlier, Pollok himself had noted, with satisfaction, comparisons with Milton, but also rebuffed any suggestion that he had not been entirely original.<sup>4</sup>

David’s account does not, in fact, suggest a specific line of influence from Milton to Pollok. Rather, it is remarkable for what it says about the importance Milton held for an eighteen-year-old aspiring poet from the Scottish countryside, as well as for what it does not address – the familiar Calvinist and evangelical concerns with imaginative literature and the fictionalization of biblical narrative. Apparently, these were not concerns shared by David and Robert Pollok, although the latter issue (fictionalizing biblical narrative) could and did trouble a mind as liberal as Coleridge’s, when he sat down to consider his own religious epic in the 1790s.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Pollok would attempt, to some degree, to re-write the Book of Revelation, as Milton had attempted to re-write the first three chapters of Genesis, suggests that the young Calvinist was, like Blake, not afraid “[t]hat he would ruin . . . /The sacred truth”<sup>6</sup> which Marvell had warned about, nor to apply imagination to scriptural narrative. However, as we will see in a later chapter, Pollok also was not prepared to stray far from his source, as early critics noted with both approval and disapproval, depending upon their theological persuasions.

Milton and his poetry, particularly *Paradise Lost* and *Comus*, crop up not infrequently in David’s biography of his brother, in Robert’s letters and notebooks, and even in student sermons. The poet’s first homily in the Divinity Hall of the United Secession Church (autumn 1822) was based upon Romans 5:19 (“By one man’s disobedience many were made sinners”), echoing of course a

---

<sup>3</sup>Thomas McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, (London: B. M. Pickering, 1861), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 311.

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, *The Fall of Jerusalem*, the ideological framework of which Elinor S. Shaffer explores in “Kubla Khan” and *The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Marvell, “On Mr. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” ll.7-8, in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2007, 3.

major theme of *Paradise Lost* which would recur in *The Course of Time*, and concluded by quoting Adam's lament for his descendants: "Fair patrimony/That I must leave ye sons!"<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Pollok claimed, as did Blake and Cowper, to have been visited by Milton in a dream, in which the great bard reflected on his *Comus*, a work centered around Christian virtue and resistance to temptation, both themes important to *The Course of Time*. Pollok also quotes from Milton's prose work, specifically from *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642), the last of the poet's anti-prelatical tracts, in a letter to David regarding the art of rhetoric:

I suppose you are still studying eloquence, and thinking of producing effect. In this pursuit it is proper to exercise and accustom the physical organs; but the grand thing is the love of virtue. 'How he should be eloquent who is not withal a good man, I see not,' says John Milton; and how he, whose mind is kindled into the love of virtue, whose circumcised fancy delights to hover around the throne of the Ancient of Days, and whose intellect, turning the leaves of man's destiny, grasps the whole interests of his time and his eternity, should choose to be aught else but eloquent, when he takes upon him to instruct and guide his fellow-men, I find not proof of.<sup>8</sup>

The Milton quote employed here recurs as an entry in one of Robert's last copy books and, so David Pollok surmises, may have been the last extract of any kind his brother put to paper.<sup>9</sup>

Curiously, neither Robert nor David ever tells us exactly what it was about Milton that so attracted the young poet, other than, as Robert himself suggested, the "sublimity" of *Paradise Lost*. Pollok clearly was taken with Milton's blank verse style, as we will explore later in this chapter, but other than that, we are left to infer what it was, specifically, about Milton that so captivated first the youth and then the young poet. Undoubtedly, Pollok was attracted by many of the things that captivated other Romantics, but in this chapter I will argue that Milton's example of lyric theodicy in *Paradise Lost*, of the poet as purveyor of virtue in *Comus*, and of the inspired bard as equal in

---

<sup>7</sup> Book X, ll. 818-820, in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of January 8, 1825, in David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 259. David recalls Robert's dream about Milton in his *Life*, 201.

<sup>9</sup> David Pollok, 303.

authority with the preacher in *The Reason of Church-Government* were decisive. Secondary points regarding the relationship between reason and free will, the freedom of conscience, and the influence of Milton's blank verse also will be considered. In so doing, I will endeavor to trace specific parallels between *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*, in order illustrate how Pollok's use of the Miltonic form and its purposes differs from that of his Romantic peers just examined. Here at the beginning, however, I want to establish that Pollok, although a Scot, a Calvinist, and a dissenter, was part of the larger, mostly English "Milton Cult" explored in the last chapter, which descended from the early eighteenth century and was arguably at its height in the Romantic era in which Pollok wrote.

## 2.1 Milton and *The Course of Time*

We have noted Pollok's immediate and lasting attraction to Milton and to *Paradise Lost*, habitually reciting his favorite passage from the latter each morning while lying in bed. Notably, that passage is the invocation to Book III, wherein Milton acknowledges himself "[s]mit with the love of sacred song" (l.29.), which could describe his disciple Pollok equally well. David's comments about his brother's engagement with *Paradise Lost* suggest that, like others of his time, Robert viewed Milton's poem as an almost sacred, certainly divinely inspired, text. Its author was, as Pollok describes him in *The Course of Time*, Book IX,

The bard, by God's own hand anointed, who  
To Virtue's all-delighting harmony,  
His numbers tuned; who from the fount of truth  
Pour'd melody, and beauty pour'd, and love,  
In holy stream, into the human heart. . . .<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Book IX., 501-505, in Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*.

Pollok invokes Milton at least three times in his poem and quotes from *Paradise Lost* the same number, including a direct citation of his forebear's statement of purpose in lines just following those above: To "assert Eternal Providence, And justify the ways of God to men."<sup>11</sup> (Blake had, of course, appropriated the latter part of the statement in his epigraph to *Milton*.) Pollok's own stated purpose at the beginning of *The Course of Time* is slightly different, although bearing Milton's influence: To utter "[t]he essential truth" of divine judgment on human actions, with "[t]ime gone, the righteous saved,/The wicked damn'd, and Providence approved" (I, 20-1). Like Milton in *Paradise Lost* Book IX, Pollok claimed or sought divine nocturnal inspiration. Whereas Milton receives "nightly visitation" from his "celestial patroness," who "dictates to me slumb'ring" (ll. 21-3), Pollok's bard tells his audience that

. . . the heavenly muse instructs me, woo'd  
At midnight hour with offering sincere  
Of all the heart, pour'd out in holy prayer. . . . (I.55-7)

The bard's repeated call to "unscale" his eye (I.9), while certainly invoking the tradition of Hebrew prophecy, also likely recalls the blind Milton, and through him, the classical tradition of the prophet-seer. I will explore this motif further in this chapter and those following.

Julie Nall Knowles argues that the overall style of *The Course of Time* is, in fact, clearly imitative of *Paradise Lost*," particularly evident in the first two books, where "it is quite obvious that Pollok echoes Milton's sentence rhythms and many of Milton's expressions."<sup>12</sup> For Knowles, the real significance of *The Course of Time* lies in its contrast with and borrowings from Milton's epic. "[B]asically it is a Calvinistic verion of *Paradise Lost*," Knowles asserts, suggesting that "Milton might well have written such a poem had he not rejected Calvinism before writing *Paradise Lost*."<sup>13</sup> Knowles primarily explores points of contrast between Pollok and Milton, specifically

---

<sup>11</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I.25-26; quoted by Pollok in *The Course of Time*, Book IX, 507.

<sup>12</sup> Knowles, "The Course of Time: A Calvinistic 'Paradise Lost,'" 175.

<sup>13</sup> Knowles, 191.

examining Pollok's rejection of epic conventions which Milton observed, including the invocation of a classical muse and the tradition of beginning *in media res*, Pollok's focus on end times and Revelation rather than Genesis and creation, and theological differences related to Calvinism. Knowles identifies the latter as differences in attitude towards free will and predestination, different conceptions of God, and different depictions or descriptions of Hell and of allegorical figures such as Sin and Death. While Knowles acknowledges that "*The Course of Time* was an important nineteenth-century poem," she views it largely as a failed re-working of *Paradise Lost* intended to "correct" Milton's doctrinal errors.<sup>14</sup> (Ironically, this was a central part of Blake's purpose in his Miltonic epic, although the doctrinal "errors" he wished to correct were of course quite different.) Knowles' contention presupposes that Pollok took up his pen in order to reassert Calvinist orthodoxy over and against Milton's corruption or rejection of it over a century and a half earlier. A close reading of *The Course of Time*, which I will undertake in a later chapter, does not support this contention or Knowles' declaration that Pollok was an "unbending" Calvinist.<sup>15</sup>

Karen M. McConnell is closer to the truth when she asserts that Pollok's theology is, in fact, "not transparent throughout," and that *The Course of Time* "does not provide a doctrinal roadmap," but rather, "appears to contradict itself at times in its reliance on competing strands found within the Presbyterian and Dissenting traditions (e.g., Scottish Calvinism, Arminianism)."<sup>16</sup> I will explore the theology of *The Course of Time* and what it owes to each of these traditions in greater detail in chapter four. Here, I propose that Pollok's interest in Milton and in *Paradise Lost*, in particular, had little if anything to do with Milton's divergences from Calvinist orthodoxy, despite the fact that a few early critics, including Pollok biographer James Scott, felt that *The Course of Time* had actually improved upon *Paradise Lost*. Rather, in what may be a very un-Calvinistic fashion, Pollok admired Milton because he had written the great epic theodicy in English, and because he either embodied or depicted themes and concerns of central importance to the young Scot.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Knowles, 191.

<sup>15</sup> Knowles, 177.

<sup>16</sup> McConnell, "Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland," 103.

<sup>17</sup> I will return shortly to the subject of Calvinism's traditional hostility towards extra-biblical attempts at theodicy.

Pollok's brief description of Milton in *The Course of Time*, partially quoted above, offers some insight into Milton's significance for him. As with Wordsworth's depiction of Milton in "London: 1802," Pollok's Milton has a role to play in the regeneration of humankind, although for Pollok, Milton is merely an instrument of divinity and not the means of salvation himself. Both poets depict Milton as involved in the dissemination of virtue and the revelation of truth. In *The Course of Time*, the blind bard "tunes" his poetry to the "all-delighting harmony" of "Virtue" and "pours" melody, beauty, and love "[i]n holy stream, into the human heart" (IX, 502-5). However, Pollok does not call Milton back to earth to right wrongs, as do Wordsworth and Blake, nor does he engage in metaphorical resurrection for the sake of political argument, as does Byron. Instead, his Milton sings "in heaven/Though now with bolder note, above the damp/Terrestrial," which had "restrain'd in part his flaming wing" while he was on earth (IX, 508-510, 511). The contrast between a heavenly Milton and an earth-bound (or earth-returning) one reflects Lucy Newlyn's assertion that Romantic readers of *Paradise Lost* are "placed in the position of choosing between a Milton who is humanly involved in political concerns and a Milton who divinely abstracts himself from them."<sup>18</sup>

Pollok's bard is no doubt the latter. In heaven, he continues his work, or "song," of justifying "the ways of God to man" (l.507), but now without hindrance or distraction. Anointed "by God's own hand," he is the definitive Christian bard, both prophet and poet, a peculiar combination neither Wordsworth nor Byron could or would wish to claim, although Blake - in another curious connection with Pollok - did. Significantly, Pollok's depiction of Milton as the ideal Christian bard comes immediately after lyric descriptions of poets, or poetic types, who mock that ideal and do not stand, as does the Christian bard, renowned among the blessed on Judgment Day. The first poet, "who sold/The incommunicable heavenly gift,/To Folly" (ll. 483-4), leads others to drunkenness, debauchery, and ruin by his verses. He resembles Byron or perhaps Burns. The second, having no such gifts to squander, "in indolent lament,/Unprofitable, pass'd his piteous days,/Making himself the hero of his tale. . . . " He ill-deserves "the poet's name," although apparently it has been given him (ll. 497-500). Neither Pollok nor later commentators tell us who

---

<sup>18</sup> Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*, 40.

these figures are, if indeed they are individuals and not types. However, the contrast Pollok makes between the Miltonic Christian bard and these secular adversaries is clear: The Miltonic bard “tunes” his songs to virtue and leads his listeners and readers to God; they sing of vice and indolence, leading their hearers to ruin and despair.

## 2.2 Virtue, Vice, and Milton’s *Comus*

Many readers are familiar with Blake’s insistence that, in adulthood, he received spiritual visitations from Milton (as well as from Shakespeare and others), and his claim to sculptor John Flaxman that “Milton lov’d me in childhood & shew’d me his face.”<sup>19</sup> So, too, did Robert Pollok claim to have had a dream visitation from the great bard shortly before embarking on *The Course of Time*, in which, in true Blakean fashion, the spirit of Milton discussed his own works. “He seemed quite conscious of his own greatness,” Robert told his brother, “and quite sensible of their [Milton’s works’] superiority.” Continuing, Robert told David that Milton

. . . spoke of them, and expressed his opinion of them freely and dignifiedly, and showed no false modesty. . . . At length I said to him, 'What do you think of *Comus*? '—' *Comus* ! ' he exclaimed, apparently having forgotten that he had written it, 'What *Comus* ? '—' *The Mask*, ' I replied ; ' is it not a well-done work ? ' —' Yes, ' he said, recollecting it, ' it is a finished piece.'<sup>20</sup>

According to David, from this day on, Robert joked that he was able to tell listeners, ‘I have Milton’s own authority for saying of his *Comus*, “It is a finished piece.”’ Presumably, Robert refers to the fact that Milton revised *Comus* after its initial performance in 1634, something that was unusual for the “ephemeral genre” of court masque, and that Milton was even then reluctant to

---

<sup>19</sup> Letter, William Blake to John Flaxman, September 12, 1800, in Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introduction and Notes*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 201.

publish it under his own name.<sup>21</sup> For readers of *The Course of Time*, in which the personification of Virtue appears in books I and VII, and in which virtue as well as freedom of will and conscience are such important motifs, it is not surprising that Pollok should ask Milton about *Comus* in particular. The masque depicts virtue (in the form of a Lady) under attack by temptation and sensuality (in the guise of Comus, god of revelry), and celebrates the ultimate victory of the former. Comus approaches the Lady while she is alone and on a journey through a wood, which, according to Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, “represents something altogether more spiritual, a journey into the world of the senses and back to a higher realm.”<sup>22</sup> Comus kidnaps the Lady and brings her to his pleasure palace, where she resists his various spells, temptations, and arguments for indulging her sensual appetites. The struggle for and final triumph of virtue is celebrated in the closing speech of the masque, in which an Attendant Spirit advises, “Mortals that would follow me/Love virtue, she alone is free” (ll. 1018–1019).<sup>23</sup>

Placing *Comus* in the literary context of 1630s England, Achsah Guibbory sees the god’s saturnalian pursuits as a reflection of the *carpe diem*-style Cavalier poetry of the period, which tended to emphasize bodily pleasure without reference to spiritual concerns. Much like Pollok’s depiction of the immoral poet who leads his readers to ruin instead of to God, Guibbory suggests that “Milton presents Comus’ courtly revels as a false religion, luring Christians from their proper devotion to God and reason” through his enticements.<sup>24</sup> What had started as a court masque celebrating an aristocratic patron’s political appointment<sup>25</sup> becomes a vehicle for affirming religious purity and the “true faith” against what Milton perceives as the “dangerous forces of irreligion” in early seventeenth-century England, including Laudianism and Catholicism.<sup>26</sup> Guibbory’s assertion, noted earlier, that religion and virtue are inseparable for Milton seems to be borne out in this masque, where both are put to the test. A decade later, a more combative Milton

---

<sup>21</sup> Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell and Corns, 83.

<sup>23</sup> John Milton, *Comus: A Mask*, in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1968), 228.

<sup>24</sup> Achsah Guibbory, “Milton and English Poetry,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> This was John Edgerton, the Earl of Bridgewater’s, appointment as Lord President of Wales.

<sup>26</sup> Guibbory, 75.

would famously refuse to praise any unproven virtue, “fugitive and cloister’d . . . unexercis’d and unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees her adversary. . . .”<sup>27</sup>

Temptation and the struggle to preserve virtue are major themes in Milton’s mature work. Guibbory notes that “the heroes in *Comus*, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* all face temptation; and Milton challenges his readers to discriminate between good and evil and make virtuous choices in their own lives beyond the literary text.” Certainly, Milton embraces an “activist, moral notion” of the poet and his art which Pollok shares.<sup>28</sup> But Leah S. Marcus suggests that Milton’s connection to *Comus* is more personal, and that the poet

identifies strongly with the Lady, and her dilemma was his as well. In his early works, we frequently find him awkwardly poised between a desire to experience life’s pleasures and a fear of self-pollution.<sup>29</sup>

While Pollok does not associate Milton with the Lady of *Comus*, the problem Marcus identifies is apparent in *The Course of Time*, especially in Book III, where Pollok’s bard spends one hundred and fifteen verses depicting the false attractions and deadly deceptions of a personified Pleasure. Drawing on Proverbs 7, Pollok portrays Pleasure as an outwardly desirable and alluring young woman, “[d]ecked to the very taste of flesh and blood,” who is, nevertheless, “full of all disease” inside:

. . . her bones  
Were rotten; Consumption licked her blood, and drank  
Her marrow up; her breath smelled mortally;  
And in her bowels plague and fever lurked;  
And in her very heart, and reins, and life,  
Corruption’s worm gnawed greedily unseen. (ll. 308-16)

---

<sup>27</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Fifth, vol. 1 (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 1431.

<sup>28</sup> Guibbory, 73.

<sup>29</sup> Leah S. Marcus, “John Milton’s *Comus*,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 242.

The ironic comparison with Pollok's own physical state may be apparent to readers, if not to the poet. However, his Pleasure – who shares some correspondences with Coleridge's Geraldine (from "Christabel") and Keats' Lamia – is both temptress and witch, luring young men to their doom by encouraging their vices and baser appetites:

. . . chief she loved the scene of deep debauch,  
 Where revelry, and dance, and frantic song,  
 Disturbed the sleep of honest men; and where  
 The drunkard sat, she entered in, well pleased,  
 With eye brimful of wanton mirthfulness,  
 And urged him still to fill another cup. (ll. 325-30)

Significantly, the narrative shifts from third to first-person (as it is in Proverbs 7) when Pollok's bard describes Pleasure accosting an "unwary youth of simple heart" with kisses and peace-offerings, before drawing him into her adulterous bed, "[a]s goes the ox to the slaughter." The young man does not return,

For none return'd that went with her. The dead  
 Were in her house; her guests in depths of hell;  
 She wove the winding-sheet of souls, and laid  
 Them in the urn of everlasting death. (ll. 363-67)

Pleasure does not of course tell her victims of what lies ahead. Instead, like the songs of the *carpe diem* poets, she distracts men from the all-important consideration of spiritual things by promise of immediate sensual bliss:

. . . she stood, and waved her hand  
 And pointed to her bower, and said to all  
 Who pass'd: Take yonder flowery path; my steps  
 Attend; I lead the smoothest way to heaven;  
 This world receive as surety for the next. (ll. 388-92)

Rather than magic, as in *Comus*, it is the Bible in *The Course of Time* that frees men from the deadly enticements of Pleasure and other vain pursuits of happiness. It becomes a mirror, reflecting the virtue (or lack thereof) of all who look into it. Nonetheless, most men refuse to consult the Bible, never learning that true fulfillment only can come by the practice of virtue, a theme Pollok had taken up in literary essays several years before. In one of them, as in *The Course of Time* Books I and II, Virtue herself appears as a woman, guiding men to true wisdom. In the other, Pollok insists on “the superiority of virtue to every other qualification, in giving happiness.”<sup>30</sup> If there is a hierarchy in the universe, Pollok suggests, virtue sits below happiness and “beckons and leans forward to hand us, if we will, up to her who smiles above.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, in Pollok’s depiction of Hell in *The Course of Time*, Virtue’s omnipresence serves only to remind men of the errant choices they made and the lives they did not lead. “[W]hen proved and full/Matured” – that is, tested – Virtue “inclines us up to God and heaven,” one of Pollok’s angelic spirits asserts early in the poem.<sup>32</sup> But Virtue compromised or rejected only leads in the opposite direction.

### 2.3 The Poet as Preacher: Milton’s *The Reason of Church-Government* and Pollok’s “Address on Preaching”

By his own inclination and the teachings of his conservative Calvinist denomination, Robert Pollok was almost presupposed to emphasize piety and personal morality, as he does throughout *The Course of Time*. “Where . . . is the moralist of the nineteenth century?” he asks in the first essay

---

<sup>30</sup> These are literary essays of December 14, 1821 and spring 1822, referenced elsewhere. The quotation is found in David’s biography, 142.

<sup>31</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 140.

<sup>32</sup> *The Course of Time*, l.137-8.

cited above.<sup>33</sup> The question is almost certainly rhetorical, since Pollok goes on to suggest ways that writers can make virtue attractive to their readers, and in *The Course of Time*, Pollok's bard and alter ego is clearly depicted as a teacher of virtue. While there is no direct evidence that Pollok knew Milton's *Reason of Church-Government*, as he certainly knew *Comus* and *Paradise Lost*, a study of Milton's religio-political tract of 1642, particularly the famous nine-page "digression" between Books I and II, offers important insights into Pollok's own project as it relates to the notion of the Godly poet as purveyor of virtue and defender of "true religion."

Whereas Milton did not initially identify himself as the author of *Comus*, *The Reason of Church-Government* is the first prose work to bear his name.<sup>34</sup> Written in response to pro-episcopal tracts supporting prelacy in the Church of England, the digression to *Church-Government* famously outlines Milton's own poetic program and his determination to appropriate "the office of a pulpit" for poetry, so that poetry, like ordained ministry, "may inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu."<sup>35</sup> In detailing his plan to become a national or epic poet, whose future work will be "doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation,"<sup>36</sup> Milton "separates himself from the 'libidinous' or 'parasitic' poets by defining the role of true poetry to exclude them, and he redefines the pulpit to include poetry."<sup>37</sup> We already have noted Robert Pollok's similar segregation of sensual poets from Milton and other sacred bards in *The Course of Time* Book IX, as well as his lengthy criticism of Byron in Book IV. For Milton as for Pollok, these poets' most damning trait is that they turn men from the pursuit of virtue (and thence, of God), which is the entire purpose the poet's singular, God-given gifts. Jameela Lares identifies five uses of these gifts, as outlined in *Church-Government*, "each of which activities has virtuous action as its topic or aim."<sup>38</sup> Notably, the first and arguably most important use, quoted above, is the power to germinate and spread virtue itself. From this, according to Milton, follow psychological and emotional well-being; rightful praise and worship of God; singing the glory of the church and its saints, as well as of nations obedient to God; and prophetic critique of and judgment on those nations and peoples who willingly disobey

---

<sup>33</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 110.

<sup>34</sup> Jameela Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2001), 38.

<sup>35</sup> Milton, "The Reason of Church Government: Book 2," 39.

<sup>36</sup> Milton, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Lares, 39.

their maker and his commands (“to deplore the general relapses of Kingdoms and States from justice and Gods true worship”).<sup>39</sup> Finally, the godly poet is, as Pollok suggested in his literary essay, to make virtue (and by inference religion) as attractive as possible to his audience: “[W]hatsoever in religion is holy and sublime, in vertu amiable, or grave, whatsoever hath passion or admiration . . . to paint out and describe.” “[W]hat a benefit this would be to our youth and gentry,” Milton asserts,

. . . may be soon guest by what we know of the corruption and bane which they suck in daily from the writings and interludes of libidinous and ignorant Poetasters, who having scars ever heard of that which is the main consistence of a true poem. . . doe for most part lap up vitious principles in sweet pils to be swallow’d down, and make the tast of virtuous documents harsh and sowr.<sup>40</sup>

Pollok readily embraced the notion that writers such as these and poetry, in Milton’s words, “rays’d from . . . the vapours of wine, like that which flows at wast from the pen of some vulgar Amorist . . . ,”<sup>41</sup> was dangerously misleading Britain’s youth. John Dick and Edward Irving railed against it, as well. Even Pollok’s divinity school classmates, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, lamented that too many – perhaps most – poets were purveyors of vice rather than virtue.

In *Church-Government*, “Milton believed that writing could be a form of preaching” and that, in respect to the poetry of vice, his own poetry could be a means for the reformation of both church and society.<sup>42</sup> Thus, not only does poetry have a function parallel to that of the pulpit and the poet to that of the preacher, but in *Church-Government*, Milton “redefines the pulpit to include poetry”<sup>43</sup> – something arguably beyond merely elevating poetry to the status of handmaiden. As Lares notes, it was not uncommon in Milton’s day, following the era of Donne, Andrewes, and Herbert, to find the preacher also was a poet. (“It is we,” Lares provocatively suggests, “who think that preaching

---

<sup>39</sup> Milton, “The Reason of Church Government: Book 2,” 39.

<sup>40</sup> Milton, 39–40.

<sup>41</sup> Milton, 40–41.

<sup>42</sup> Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Lares, 39.

and poetry are incompatible.”)<sup>44</sup> By Pollok’s day, or at least to Pollok’s mind, the separation of poetry from preaching had become more or less permanent.<sup>45</sup> This is the challenge that Pollok takes up in his 1823 Address on Preaching before his fellow divinity students in Glasgow. Pollok makes clear his aims at the beginning of the Address:

It is my design, brethren, to show you that many of the preachers of the present day are in language too barren, and in doctrine too argumentative, and draw the illustrations of the facts which they state from too narrow a field.<sup>46</sup>

According to Pollok, a ‘barren preacher’ of this type may be identified by several characteristics:

He will rarely use a phrase the least figurative or metaphorical. He will scarcely ever venture out into the world of nature for a simile or illustration. He will speak of the beauty or grandeur of nature in general; but he will be cautious of naming any particular valley, or mountain, or river, or tree, or flower, or animal.<sup>47</sup>

What these preachers fail to understand is the power of poetic rhetoric and its usefulness in preaching the Word, of being “purveyors of virtue” in opposition to (in Milton’s words) “the great Marchants of this world.”<sup>48</sup> Pollok argues “that figures and metaphors, simile and allegory, and all richness of language, are sanctioned by the example of the Bible.” In fact, “[e]very part of the Bible abounds with comparisons” and “[a]llegorical speaking is frequent in the Bible.” Furthermore, Pollok argues, “[w]e find Jesus Christ making frequent use of the objects of nature to illustrate his doctrines.” He “well knew that truths abstractly stated, however important in themselves, leave little impression on the human mind,” and he “scarcely ever stated a doctrine without a particular illustration.” While Pollok acknowledges that “[t]he mind, that has once been

---

<sup>44</sup> Lares, 10.

<sup>45</sup> One wonders, as I will speculate in the following chapter, whether or not Pollok had heard Edward Irving preach while in Glasgow, as Irving was known for incorporating poetry, both biblical and extra-biblical, in his lyrical sermons.

<sup>46</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 193.

<sup>47</sup> Scott, 195.

<sup>48</sup> Milton, “The Reason of Church Government: Book 2,” 33.

fully convinced of the truths of the Gospel, will be pleased with the barest and most formal way of stating these truths,” non-Christians and unbelievers especially need to hear of God through the works of “creation” – by which he means or certainly includes poetry - “as well as from those of providence and redemption.”<sup>49</sup>

Pollok needed no convincing that the works of the divinely inspired poet “are of power beside the office of a pulpit.” As already noted, commentators on *The Course of Time* would compare it to “a mighty homily” and “a splendid poetical sermon,” although not all such comparisons were meant favorably. Pollok biographer James Scott averred that the young poet, who at the time of the initial publication of *The Course of Time* in March 1827 had never preached a public sermon, “continually occupies, in the estimation of the reader, the position of a mighty homilist, speaking in ominous and terrible phrase to the ungodly; but in silver tones of mercy and hope to the righteous.” Furthermore, as “[t]he truths of the Gospel had become axioms . . . it required the magic of song to give them the rich tints which please the intellect, and the associations which excite tumult among the feelings.”<sup>50</sup> Ancient Greece and Rome may have bequeathed *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*, but they were merely “systems of paganism.” “Popery” had given the world *The Divine Comedy*, but Dante’s “Paradise” was only “the scholastic theology of the dark ages.” Even Milton had mingled non-Christian “rubbish” with “the gold and silver of his mighty song,” offering a “dissertation on the terrible expulsion from Eden, with its causes and consequences,” but he had not told the whole story. *The Course of Time*, however, was “a poem about redemption,” so constructed as “to give a befitting history of time to an angel,” who presumably would have witnessed it in entirety. If, as Pollok imagined, the poet could share in and even enhance the ministry of the pulpit, helping especially to reach those who had not responded to the Gospel teaching, then according to Scott, he had proven his argument with *The Course of Time*. “A heathen could learn the way of salvation by reading it,” Scott declared, for “[t]here is unction in it to a broken heart, and a barbed arrow to the man of pleasure and sense.”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. . . .*, 196–97.

<sup>50</sup> Scott, 291.

<sup>51</sup> Scott, 290.

### 2.3.1 *Paradise Lost* and the Sermonic Mode

James Scott asserted that Pollok's bard had told the whole of sacred history, from genesis to apocalypse, as "a splendid homily." Just so, Jameela Barnes argues that Milton, who had once considered but ultimately rejected the priesthood, employed recognizable sermonic forms in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>52</sup> Her focus – and a focus of nineteenth-century comparisons between *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*, as already noted – is the Archangel Michael's "sacred history lesson" found in Books XI and XII. There, Lares finds Milton employing two dominant seventeenth-century sermon types of correction and consolation.<sup>53</sup> Michael informs Adam of the evil that will result from his act of disobedience, but also offers him the consolation of knowing a redeemer will come one day whose sacrifice will restore the breach he and Eve have made with their Creator. As Lares notes, Michael's sermonic discourse has both a text (Genesis 3:15, "the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent") and a "preacherly 'use' or 'application.'"<sup>54</sup> Michael first informs Adam of the pair's punishment, including the loss of Eden, but assures him that he and Eve will find God present everywhere, "still compassing thee round/With goodness and paternal love" (XI.353). Furthermore, Michael offers a prophetic vision of the future (the remainder of Books XI and XII) which will both instruct and encourage Adam and Eve in days to come, much as a conventional sermon would:

---

<sup>52</sup> In *Church-Government*, Milton tells his readers that he had been "destin'd of a child" to enter the ministry, but "perceiving what tyranny had invaded the Church, that he who would take Orders must subscribe slave, and take an oath withall," he determined otherwise. The objection to religious oaths or oaths pertaining to religious institutions – and to the same Stuart dynasty which imposed them – was something Pollok and his Covenanter ancestors shared. But it is likely that Milton's decision also was based upon theological and liturgical differences with the Laudian church, and perhaps, with Christian orthodoxy itself. Like Milton, Pollok also had concerns, albeit more temporary, about entering the ministry. "My manner of thinking and writing, the manner I have of generalizing man, unfits me very much for entering into that detail which is necessary for a preacher," he confessed to his brother David in January, 1826, about six months before completing his epic. "Nay, I often think, that I could not take interest in many of those subjects which it is a minister's most imperative duty to take interest in" (David Pollok, 276–77). Nevertheless, Robert completed his divinity studies and was licensed to preach in the United Secession Church in May, 1827, just two months after the publication of *The Course of Time*.

<sup>53</sup> Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts*, 143.

<sup>54</sup> Lares, 158.

Ere thou from hence depart, know I am sent  
 To shew thee what shall come in future days  
 To thee and to thy Offspring; good with bad  
 Expect to hear, supernal Grace contending  
 With sinfulness of Men; thereby to learn  
 True patience, and to temper joy with fear  
 And pious sorrow, equally inur'd  
 By moderation either state to bear,  
 Prosperous or adverse: so shalt thou lead  
 Safest thy life, and best prepar'd endure  
 Thy mortal passage when it comes.

(XI.356-66)

Michael's history is part "redargutive" sermon, designed to refute doctrinal error,<sup>55</sup> part moral treatise, critiquing human action and thereby suggesting appropriate alternatives, and part apocalyptic literature, revealing and warning of future events, including final judgment and the end of the world (XII.539-551). Although Pollok never specifically mentions Michael's revelation in *Paradise Lost*, it is easy to find parallels with *The Course of Time*, as contemporary reviewers did. Milton's reproof of false doctrine, found in *Paradise Lost*, but much moreso in his polemical tracts of the 1640s and 1650s, such as the *Church-Government* diatribes against prelates and oaths, finds it parallel in *The Course of Time* Book II, where Pollok attacks heresy, misinterpretation of scripture, and church-state collusion. Michael's move toward moral treatise in depicting the depravity of humankind up to and after the flood finds its reflection in *The Course of Time* Books III-VI and VIII-IX, which are largely given over to typological depictions of virtue and vice. Lares places Milton at the end of the Renaissance tradition of argumentative rhetoric, as the religious controversialist of the seventeenth century gives way to the less dogmatic moralist, focused on the behavior of man in society, in the eighteenth. We find elements of both traditions, the religious controversialist and the moralist, in the various parts of *The Course of Time*, as well as in Pollok's letters and essays. Intellectually, he has been stamped by Addison and Johnson, as well as Milton.

---

<sup>55</sup> Lares suggests Milton's use of the Renaissance-era "redargutive" sermon is found primarily in his prose tracts. I here apply it to *Paradise Lost*.

## 2.4 Prophetic History in *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*

We already have discussed the English Romantics' interest in and appropriation of the prophetic Milton and his affirmation of poetic inspiration and of the poet's role as seer. In *Paradise Lost*, both Raphael and Michael serve as poet-prophets or poet-seers, the one narrating the primordial war in heaven in Book VI, and the other depicting the future in Books XI and XII. Their narrations reflect the importance Milton places on the interpretation of history as an act both of moral instruction and of devotion. In concluding his narration, Raphael charges Adam to "let it profit thee to have heard/By terrible example the reward/Of disobedience" (VI.909-911), a reprise of Milton's central theme. In Book XII, Adam responds to that charge, having heard the entirety of Michael's revelation of the future, declaring that

Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,  
And love with fear the only God, to walk  
As in his presence, ever to observe  
His Providence, and on him sole depend. . . (ll. 561-4)

The prophetic interpretation of history for the purposes of moral and religious instruction is, of course, a central concern of Pollok's, too. At the very beginning of *The Course of Time*, the poet-narrator implores the "Almighty" to teach him

To strike the lyre, but seldom struck, to notes . . .  
Which wake the echoes of eternity---  
That fools may hear and tremble, and the wise  
Instructed listen, of ages yet to come. (I.23, 26-8)

Similarly, the entire purpose of Pollok's bard's "brief" sketch of "the history of man," comprising Books II through X, is to answer the stranger spirit's questions about Hell, and by extension, final judgment. Book II works almost as a catechism of the faith, as the stranger spirit asks questions

about the fall of man and his punishment, to which the heavenly bard responds by outlining the divine plan for redemption. Book III begins the long series of moral vignettes which comprise a kind of moral treatise throughout much of the rest of the poem, offering instructive examples of right and wrong behaviors. Unsurprisingly, the bard's narrative reflects a Calvinist view of history which, to the extent that it is intimately intertwined with apocalypse, Milton shares. Historian David Allan has identified a long tradition in Scotland connecting the study and interpretation of history with the teaching of virtue, suggesting that in early modern Scotland – the era of Milton and of Pollok's Covenanter ancestors – history and historians both had an “unashamedly moralistic function.”<sup>56</sup> Allied to this is a “Calvinist obsession with the apocalypse” that can be traced back to the founder of Scottish Calvinism, John Knox. According to Allan, Knox's successors (including Scottish historians)

believed that history itself was in some sense a special formulation of the Divine Word. Indeed, they were convinced that historical time was marked, or even motivated, by providential occurrences, and that history was therefore capable of being a prophetic medium second in authority only to scripture.

Thus,

Scotsmen of most persuasions were gradually enveloped in an all-embracing apocalyptic and providential vision of history, from which escape was neither possible nor desirable.<sup>57</sup>

One can draw clear parallels here between Pollok's bard's presentation of history throughout *The Course of Time* and that of Milton's angels Raphael and Michael in *Paradise Lost*. This is especially the case in Pollok's bard's descriptions of apocalypse, final judgment, and the destruction and recreation of the earth in Books VI-X and Michael's prophesy of the same in

---

<sup>56</sup> David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 62–63.

<sup>57</sup> Allan, 51.

*Paradise Lost* Book XII. Revelation, both the book and the idea, is important to both authors, although it informs much more of *The Course of Time*, wherein Pollok's bard tells his hearers that, in the last days,

Much prophecy—revealed by holy bards,  
Who sung the will of heaven by Judah's streams—  
Much prophecy, that waited long the scoff  
Of lips uncircumcised, was then fulfilled. . . . (IX.758-762)

Julie Nall Knowles has noted differences of interpretation and emphasis between *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time* with regard to depictions of millennium, Armageddon, and the nature of the second person of the Trinity.<sup>58</sup> As is evident, Milton focuses his revelation primarily before time and at the beginning of human history, while Pollok's tale begins in eternity, long after time and history have come to an end and judgment already has been pronounced and enacted. "Long was the day, so long expected, past," the poet declares, "Of the eternal doom, that gave to each/Of all the human race his due reward" (I.29-31). The view Pollok offered his readers was entirely retrospective, inviting them not to imagine themselves, as indeed they were, cast out of Eden, but instead, before the awful judgment throne of God when, as Pollok imagined, "all but character shall have left them."<sup>59</sup> An early reviewer of *The Course of Time* noted that "[t]he first man has been sung, in his glory and his fall," but asserted that Pollok's "attempt to pass, in a direction opposite to that which Milton took, 'The flaming bounds of time and space'" was bolder still.<sup>60</sup> As we will see in a future chapter, there were some who thought that, in writing *The Course of Time* from the standpoint of eternity, Pollok had completed the work of recounting sacred history which Milton had only begun.

---

<sup>58</sup> Knowles points out that, in several cases, Pollok is more biblically literal than Milton in regard to interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Knowles, 186.

<sup>59</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 279.

<sup>60</sup> "Pollok's Course of Time, The Eclectic Review," 344.

## 2.5 Theodicy in *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*

It is not hard to see how Milton's presentation of prophecy and his poetic narration of biblical and sacred history might have appealed to Pollok. The Scottish poet certainly would have agreed with F T. Prince's assertion (in regard to Michael's prophesies in *Paradise Lost*) that a vision of the future is necessary in order to justify God's ways to man.<sup>61</sup> The close correlation between the primary subject matter of *Paradise Lost*, being "man's first disobedience" in the primordial past, and that of *The Course of Time*, being the "final Doom of man" in an apocalyptic future, suggests that Pollok's epic indeed may be a kind of response to Milton's poem, although not, as Julie Nall Knowles asserts, an attempt to rewrite *Paradise Lost* in purely Calvinistic terms.<sup>62</sup> The two poems effectively bookend sacred history, with *Paradise Lost* focused on the creation and Fall and *The Course of Time* on the traditional "last four things" of death, judgment, heaven, and hell. In addition, the emphasis each poem places on virtue, right action, moral instruction, and faithfulness to God reveals common didactic and reformist purposes. Looking towards an apocalyptic future in which all will be revealed, both epics justify God's demands for obedience here and now and the necessity of punishment for disobedience now or in the future. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam reasons this "truth" even before he receives Michael's vision of the future. "God made thee of choice his own, and of his own/To serve him," Adam tells himself. "[T]hy reward was of his grace;/Thy punishment then justly is at his will./Be it so, for I submit, his doom is fair" (X.766-769). Similarly, Pollok's bard sets out to approve "God's eternal government" (*The Course of Time*, X.652) by justifying the existence of Hell through a purported recounting of human history and its catalogue of moral and spiritual failure. Years later, biographer James Scott affirmed the success of Pollok's theodicean enterprise, based almost entirely upon its apocalyptic vision of a divinely ordained future:

The poet gives such an account of the last, great, awful judgment of the human family, as to justify Providence in the condemnation of the wicked. In doing so, he

---

<sup>61</sup> F. T. Prince, "On the Last Two Books of *Paradise Lost*, *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 9 (1958):38-52, in Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts*, 141.

<sup>62</sup> Knowles, "The Course of Time: A Calvinistic 'Paradise Lost,'" 176.

is led to give a history of the redemption scheme, and its rejection by man. It is . . . an authentic history woven out of the pages of Scripture and the annals of man.<sup>63</sup>

We may surmise that it was the theodicean and related prophetic elements in *Paradise Lost* that were key for Pollok, who was, after all, a ministerial student in a tradition that engaged apocalyptic interpretations of scripture and who felt his first call to be a poet. However, despite the sometimes close relationship between theodicy and apocalypse, Pollok is not typically Calvinist in taking up the former. Stephen M. Fallon argues that, historically, “[t]heodicy, or the defence of God, was suspect from the Calvinist perspective. . . . Calvinists held that the justice of God’s actions is not subject to the scrutiny of limited human reason.” For Fallon, *Paradise Lost* is an “anti-Calvinist theodicy” by its very intent to interpret God to human intelligence.<sup>64</sup> If we accept this argument, *The Course of Time* is, to some degree, anti-Calvinist, too, or at least not hard-line Calvinist, although Pollok does assert the limits of human reason regarding God’s majesty and mystery in Book IV. Fallon notes that, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin himself warns against human attempts to scrutinize “God’s judgments”: “Monstrous indeed is the madness of men, who desire thus to subject the immeasurable to the puny measure of their own reason.”<sup>65</sup> How different, one wonders, is Pollok’s attempt to show “God’s eternal government approved”? Is there a difference between “justifying” and “approving” God’s actions, as Milton and Pollok, respectively, do? It seems clear that Pollok has inherited the Enlightenment conviction of the power of reason so persuasively argued by forebears at his own university (including his own moral philosophy professor, James Myne), but also the Calvinist conviction that reason has important limitations. Like his theology professor, John Dick, Pollok believes that only reason aided by revelation can lead one to God. In *The Course of Time* Book III, skeptics in particular earn Pollok’s rebuke because they have “despised” both reason and revelation, gifts by which they could have apprehended God. In the following book, Pollok’s theodicy extends to the defence of the Almighty against the Job-like questioning of his purposes and attacks upon the divine character and its providence:

---

<sup>63</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. . . .*, 290.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen M. Fallon, “Paradise Lost in Intellectual History,” in *A Companion To Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 329.

<sup>65</sup> Fallon, 330.

. . . the God of truth accused  
 Of cruelty, injustice, wickedness,  
 Abundant sin! Because a mortal man,  
 A worm, at best, of small capacity,  
 With scarce an atom of Jehovah's works  
 Before him, and with scarce an hour to look  
 Upon them, should presume to censure God,  
 The infinite and uncreated God!  
 To sit, in judgment, on Himself, his works,  
 His providence! And try, accuse, condemn! (IV.416-425)

This passage could be interpreted as undermining any attempt at theodicy, but in lines following, Pollok suggests that reason does have a place in understanding Providence and its works. While the wise man accepts that the "mysteries of faith" are ultimately beyond human reach, God still "ask[s] him to investigate" and to humbly "conclude" or infer from what he already knows of the Almighty, using his reason:

. . . So  
 It was with all the mysteries of faith.  
 God set them forth unveiled to the full gaze  
 Of man, and asked him to investigate;  
 But Reason's eye, however purified,  
 And on whatever tall and goodly height  
 Of observation placed, to comprehend  
 Them fully, sought in vain: in vain seeks still;  
 But wiser now and humbler, she concludes,  
 From what she knows already of his love  
 All gracious, that she cannot understand;  
 And give him credit, reverence, praise for all. (IV.459-470)

## 2.6 Reason and Free Will in *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*

One could argue that Pollok's bard's entire discourse, explaining the causes of human disobedience and the necessity of divine judgment, and offering multiple case studies of moral



. . . ordaind thy will  
 By nature free, not over-rul'd by Fate  
 Inextricable, or strict necessity;  
 Our voluntarie service he requires,  
 Not our necessitated, such with him  
 Findes no acceptance, nor can find, for how  
 Can hearts, not free, be tri'd whether they serve  
 Willing or no, who will but what they must  
 By Destinie, and can no other choose?  
 My self and all th' Angelic Host that stand  
 In sight of God enthron'd, our happie state  
 Hold, as you yours, while our obedience holds;  
 . . . freely we serve,  
 Because we freely love. . . . (ll. 526-539)

Likewise, after Adam's fall, the Father assures the assembled angelic hosts that there was "no decree of mine/Concurring to necessitate his Fall,/Or touch with lightest moment of impulse//His free will" (X.43-46). Nevertheless, God the Father earlier tells Raphael to warn Adam of Satan's advances, because "his will though free" is "[y]et mutable" (V.236-237) and subject to external influence good and bad. In both *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time*, human beings are free to accept or refuse God's grace and to be saved or not. Pollok makes this clear in the opening lines of his poem, describing the suffering of "the wicked who refused/To be redeem 'd" (I.48-49). Nor are they alone in exercising the freedom to deny God. In Book IX, Pollok's bard relates that, from the moment of his creation, Satan himself was "left free,/To prove his worth, his gratitude, his love," but "[t]hus free, the Devil chose to disobey/The will of God, and was thrown out from heaven" (ll.917-918, 927-928). On the other hand, we learn that

who ever wish'd to go  
 To heaven, for heaven's own sake; not one remain'd  
 Among the accursed, that e'er desired with all  
 The heart to be redeem'd: that ever sought  
 Submissively to do the will of God,  
 Howe'er it cross'd his own. (IX.853-858)

Writing of Pollok and other early nineteenth-century evangelical poets in her multi-volume *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, Hoxie Neale Fairchild asserts that “the notion that any man may be saved who wants to be saved pushes beyond the boundaries of anything that can be called Calvinism.”<sup>68</sup> And yet, both *The Course of Time* and *Paradise Lost* appear to contradict themselves at times, holding elements of Calvinism and Arminianism in tension. “[N]aught but angel’s foot, or saint’s, elect/Of God, may venture” to walk upon the mountain tops of Pollok’s heaven (I.73-74), as Knowles points out, and “the reprobate and vile,/Unpardonable sinner” does exist, experiencing hellish nightmares of the unavoidable “woe to come” (V.579-580, 594).<sup>69</sup> Similarly, explaining the plan of salvation before the assembled hosts in *Paradise Lost*, Book III, the Father asserts that

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace  
Elect above the rest; so is my will:  
The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned  
Their sinful state. . . .

(III.183-186)

The latter, “who neglect and scorn” God’s offer of redemption, “shall never taste” his grace and long sufferance, but rather, “hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,/That they may stumble on, and deeper fall” (III.199-201). John Leonard suggests that, while “Milton went to great lengths in *Paradise Lost* to refute Calvinist beliefs,” the problem of free will “clearly troubled” him. Leonard wonders whether Milton’s God’s occasional “slips” in language and tone suggesting predestination are mere aberrations or, as Blake suggested with regard to Milton’s Satan, unconscious markers of Milton’s true beliefs. The question, Leonard asserts, is whether or not “Milton created a Calvinist God in spite of himself.”<sup>70</sup> The truth is probably more ambiguous. Both Milton and Pollok after him at times appear to be balancing elements of free will and predestination, Calvinism and Arminianism, in poetic works that, as Karen McConnell offers in regard to *The Course of Time*,

---

<sup>68</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, vol. IV, 1830–1880 (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1957), 43.

<sup>69</sup> Knowles, “The Course of Time: A Calvinistic ‘Paradise Lost,’” 177–78.

<sup>70</sup> John Leonard, “Introduction,” xxix–xxx, in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (Penguin Classics, 2000).

do not provide “a doctrinal roadmap.”<sup>71</sup> Instead, the poets present examples, spurs, and goads to virtue and godliness in works whose primary purpose is, or is meant to be, literary. Writing of *The Course of Time*, McConnell suggests that, rather than presenting a consistent, systematic Calvinism, as Julie Nall Knowles asserts, Pollok’s poem “leaps between vignettes that foreground God’s goodness and humanity’s capacity to accept it, and prolonged expositions that reveal a recalcitrant depravity that consistently rejects such mercy.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Stephen Fallon attests to the dominant, if not unalloyed, Arminian strain in Milton’s epic. “Commitment to freedom . . . drives the theology of *Paradise Lost*,” Fallon asserts, adding that “Milton, or Milton’s God, carefully distinguishes between the divine grace that alone can save sinners, and the individual’s responsibility to choose to accept offered grace.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, Milton and Pollok appear to agree that salvation is offered to all, but God knows not everyone will accept it.

While correspondences in the presentation of salvation and free will in *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time* may suggest Milton’s influence on Pollok, the Scottish poet’s thought also may reflect contemporary or near-contemporary movements within Presbyterianism itself, which I will examine in more detail elsewhere. Among them are American theologian Jonathan Edwards’ “New Divinity,” combining elements of traditional Calvinist beliefs about predestination with the Enlightenment confidence in reason and self-improvement, emphasizing at once a universal, innate ability to respond to the Gospel and the individual’s moral culpability when failing to do so.<sup>74</sup> David Bebbington cites leading Scots preacher and theologian Thomas Chalmers, well-known for his parish ministry in Glasgow during Pollok’s undergraduate years there, as a representative of the more evangelical Edwardsean tradition in Scotland. According to Bebbington, this mission-minded, outreach-oriented theology became “the epitome of orthodoxy among most Evangelicals who stood in the Reformed tradition.” It therefore stood to reason, Bebbington argues, that if you believed in missions, you did not completely accept either predestination or the concept of

---

<sup>71</sup> McConnell, “Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland.” 104.

<sup>72</sup> McConnell, 104.

<sup>73</sup> Fallon, “Paradise Lost in Intellectual History,” 333.

<sup>74</sup> David W. Bebbington, “Evangelicalism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, ed. David Fergusson, Blackwell Companions to Religion (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 240.

irresistible grace.<sup>75</sup> Notably, Pollok's Secessionist tradition emphasized both outreach and missions, and the poet's first public address was given before a missionary society in his home church in order to raise funds for overseas evangelization.<sup>76</sup> Just three years after Pollok's death, his contemporary and immediate predecessor at the University of Glasgow Divinity Hall, John McLeod Campbell, caused an uproar in the Church of Scotland with his challenges to the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement, being stripped of his ordination as a result.<sup>77</sup> As Thomas F. Torrance notes, by the early decades of the nineteenth century,

a deep cleft had opened up in the Kirk between two kinds of doctrine and churchmanship, the evangelically earnest and the formally Calvinistic, or expressed otherwise, between two disparate ways of understanding the Christian faith, as a way of salvation or as a system of doctrines.<sup>78</sup>

Like Milton, Pollok seems to draw a connecting line between reason, freedom of the will, and the exercise of virtue. If reason is corrupted - as, for example, Pollok says the skeptic's is - then the individual will choose vice rather than virtue, surrendering the very freedom or "liberty" he desires. The situation is not unlike that famously described by St. Paul in Romans 7:15-20, of continuing to perform those sinful actions which, according to reason, he does not want to do. A corruptive cycle is engendered, as the free will needed to employ reason and, thereby, determine the proper course of virtuous action is absent. Milton touches on the symbiotic relationship between these attributes in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*, wherein the Archangel Michael lectures Adam on the decline of reason, and thereby, the loss of liberty, as a result of the Fall:

Since thy original lapse, true liberty  
Is lost, which always with right reason dwells  
Twinned, and from her hath not dividual being:  
Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed,

---

<sup>75</sup> Bebbington, 240.

<sup>76</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 58.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell*, first edition (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000), 262.

<sup>78</sup> Torrance, 243.

Immediately inordinate desires  
 And upstart passions catch the government  
 From reason, and to servitude reduce  
 Man till then free. (ll.83-90)

His reason greatly diminished from what it formerly was, Adam is a slave to his own “inordinate desires/And upstart passions,” which “catch the government” of his person. Rather than employing reason in pursuit of virtuous action, he cannot employ it at all. Pollok is concerned with “true liberty,” too, equating it directly with Christian faith and the practice of virtue, rather than with any mental or psychological process:

True liberty was Christian, sanctified,  
 Baptized, and found in Christian hearts alone;  
 First-born of Virtue, daughter of the skies,  
 Nursling of truth divine, sister of all  
 The graces, meekness, holiness, and love;  
 Giving to God, and man, and all below  
 That symptom showed of sensible existence,  
 Their due, unasked; fear to whom fear was due;  
 To all, respect, benevolence, and love;  
 Companion of religion, where she came,  
 There freedom came; where dwelt, there freedom dwelt,  
 Ruled where she ruled, expired where she expired.

(*The Course of Time*, IV.110-121)

For both Milton and Pollok, the state of freedom is a state of moral virtue, and virtue and religion are directly related. One cannot be obedient to God without being virtuous, and he cannot be free without obeying God. Michael Schoenfeldt argues that, for Milton, “moral authenticity and psychological autonomy emerge from the practices of obedience.” After the Fall, Adam learns obedience through the promptings of conscience, as well as from God’s law. Obedience, then, “epitomizes rather than opposes the inner life of the subject.”<sup>79</sup> For Pollok as well as for Milton,

---

<sup>79</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, “Obedience and Autonomy in *Paradise Lost*,” in Corns, *A Companion to Milton*, 363.

human beings are most authentically themselves when they are most attentive to their consciences, and thus, most obedient to God.

## 2.7 Freedom of Conscience in Milton and *The Course of Time*

Milton, of course, was famous as a champion for the freedom of conscience, as well as for religious and political freedoms.<sup>80</sup> In his *Areopagitica* (1644), the poet defended freedom of the press, and thereby, of conscience, from government censorship, declaring, “Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”<sup>81</sup> We already have noted Macaulay’s role in promoting the image of Milton as a freedom-fighter, asserting in his 1825 *Essay on Milton* (written as Pollok was beginning *The Course of Time*) that “the glory of the battle which [Milton] fought” was “for that species of freedom which is the most valuable . . . the freedom of the human mind. . . .”<sup>82</sup> Freedom of conscience was one of the most cherished freedoms for Pollok and his Covenanter ancestors, too; it is likely that Pollok knew of Milton’s vociferous defense of conscience, if not directly from *Areopagitica* or Macaulay’s *Essay*, then by reputation and by clues in *Paradise Lost*. In Book III, the Father explains the important role that conscience will play in leading fallen humanity, with its corrupted reason, towards virtuous action (“yet once more he shall stand/On even ground against his mortal foe,” III.178-179) and, ultimately, toward heaven itself:

. . . I will place within them as a guide  
My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear,  
Light after light well-used they shall attain,  
And to the end persisting, safe arrive. (III.194-197)

---

<sup>80</sup> Such a declaration must exclude freedom for Roman Catholics, whom Milton excoriates in *Paradise Lost*, Book III. This provides another, although unfortunate, connection between Milton and Pollok, as Pollok attacks Roman Catholicism in *The Course of Time*, Book II and elsewhere.

<sup>81</sup> John Milton, “Areopagitica,” in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Vol. II, 1643-1648, ed. Ernest Sirluck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 560.

<sup>82</sup> Macaulay, *Essay on Milton*, 84.

In *The Course of Time*, Pollok's concern is rather with the violation of God-given conscience. His bard shares with his angelic audience his amazement that even "enlightened, reasonable men,/Knowing themselves accountable," should ignore both the dictates of conscience and the warnings of God's prophets and "persevere in evil, and be lost" (II.496-501). A few lines later in his discourse, the bard affirms what Milton's God already had suggested:

Each had his conscience, each his reason, will,  
 And understanding, for himself to search,  
 To choose, reject, believe, consider, act:  
 And God proclaim'd from heaven, and by an oath  
 Confirm'd, that each should answer for himself.

(*The Course of Time*, II.625-629)

James Boulger has noted the particular significance that Calvinists, and Puritans in specific, placed upon conscience, seeing the individual will and the individual conscience as "the most important functions of the whole man."<sup>83</sup> For Pollok, the conscience is so important that the black hearts of the sinners in his Hell are forever gnawed by a giant worm ("the Worm that never dies," from Mark 9:48), representing eternal remorse, while the radiant figure of Virtue shines a constant light on the sinners' woes, stoking their eternal regret. Pollok's fiercest criticism with regard to conscience, however, is directed at those who dare attempt "to wrest the crown from off/Messiah's head . . ."

And in His place give spiritual laws to men;  
 To bind religion, free by birth, by God  
 And nature free, and made accountable  
 To none but God, behind the wheels of state;  
 To make the holy altar . . .  
 A footstool to the throne. (II.527-535)

---

<sup>83</sup> James D. Boulger, *The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry*, De Proprietatibus Litterarum 21 (The Hague: Mouton, 1980), 37.

Pollok's target here appears to be the Stuart regimes of Charles II and James II, which attempted to force episcopacy on the Scottish church, and thereby, introduced the "Killing Time" of persecution against Pollok's Covenanter ancestors and many others. Pollok's bard depicts the Stuart henchmen plotting "in open and in secret," devising and enacting illicit "creeds of wondrous texture, creeds/The Bible never owned, unsanctioned, too,/And reprobate in heaven," while also "[m]onopolizing rights and privileges,/Equal to all. . . ." (ll.537-543). Worst was the fact that the Stuart enforcers waved "the sword/Of persecution fierce, tempered in hell," against the Covenanters and others opposed to the imposition of state religion, and brought it down

. . . on the conscience of inferior men:  
 The conscience, that sole monarchy in man,  
 Owing allegiance to no earthly prince;  
 Made by the edict of creation free;  
 Made sacred, made above all human laws;  
 Holding of heaven alone; of most divine  
 And indefeasible authority;  
 An individual sovereignty, that none  
 Created might, unpunished, bind or touch;  
 . . . save by the eternal laws of God,  
 And unamenable to all below. (ll.545-555)

As with Milton, it is the state's or government's assault on the God-given freedoms of conscience that is intolerable and, at least in Pollok's case, also unpardonable, for this assault leads to the debasement of religion and of truth, as his bard declares. Writing of fictional representations of these "Killing Times," Karen McConnell asserts that "the tension between heeding that inner voice of personal conscience and the expectations and requirements of the larger group" is, in fact, inherent within Scottish Calvinism, whether "the larger group" is an individual congregation or, in the case of the Covenanters, a repressive regime.<sup>84</sup> For both Pollok and Milton, conscience is of ultimate importance as a primary means of communication between God and man, supporting and

---

<sup>84</sup> McConnell, "Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland," 23.

advancing reason, virtue, and the practice of “true religion.” Without it, the individual cannot hear and respond to God’s call; he or she only hears and responds to man’s.

## 2.8 Miltonic Blank Verse and the Sublime

In addition to thematic and philosophical similarities, *The Course of Time* owes particular stylistic debts to *Paradise Lost*. We already have noted similarities and differences between the two poems in terms of narrative, poetic invocations, claims on divine inspiration, stated purposes, and general epic program. Of equal or near-equal importance for Pollok may have been Milton’s appropriation of blank verse and the resulting “sublime style” for the English-language epic. Several of the poets Pollok directly invokes in *The Course of Time*, including Thomson, Young, and Cowper, wrote long meditative poems deeply influenced by Milton’s blank verse, and reviewers such as George Gilfillan note correspondences between Pollok’s poem and Thomson’s *Seasons*, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and Cowper’s *The Task*. In *Night Thoughts* particularly (subtitled *On Life, Death, and Immortality*), Young helped popularize the Miltonic blank verse style that had come to be associated with grand themes relating earthly existence to the world beyond.<sup>85</sup> In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), a standard text which Pollok had studied, Edinburgh rhetorician Hugh Blair promoted the use of blank verse for just such purposes, again with Milton as the great exemplar:

The boldness, freedom, and variety of our blank verse, is infinitely more favourable than rhyme, to all kinds of Sublime poetry. The fullest proof of this is afforded by Milton; an author, whose genius led him eminently to the Sublime. The whole first and second books of *Paradise Lost*, are continued instances of it.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> John E Sitter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 74.

<sup>86</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres: By Hugh Blair, ... In Three Volumes*, Vol. I (Dublin: Messrs. Whitestone, Colles, Burnet, Moncrieffe, and Gilbert, 1783; reprinted, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2009), 82.

Of course, the first and second books of *Paradise Lost* take place mostly in Hell, which also is (in general terms) where Pollok begins. Blair was instrumental in pointing out the links, not only between blank verse and the sublime, but also with the apocalyptic---such as a primordial Hell (Milton) or post-judgment one (Pollok). Milton also had depicted heaven, angels, devils, Satan, and even God himself. Pollok likewise would start in hell and rise toward heaven, but not before every soul also was (rather gruesomely) raised from the grave or the anatomy table and the entirety of the old creation had come and gone. Michael Wheeler notes the unique popularity of this “apocalyptic sublime” in eighteen-twenties and eighteen-thirties Britain, in which literature and artworks often depicted “biblical subjects with vast dramas, visions, and God’s impending intervention into human history, which is coming to its end.”<sup>87</sup> *The Course of Time* would seem to fit this description perfectly.

For his part, David Pollok makes much of Robert’s decision to use blank verse, seeing it as a turning point in his brother’s short poetic career. David and a friend initially had to coax Robert into using the verse form, because Robert apparently was smitten with Alexander Pope’s heroic couplet. (Pope himself questioned whether Milton’s use of blank verse would have been successful were it not for the latter’s “strange out-of-the-world” subject matter.) David also thinks it important to note each time Robert writes in blank verse prior to undertaking *The Course of Time*. It seems clear that he and Robert came to associate the “high style” of blank verse with moral and religious subject matter, as had Young, Cowper, and to some extent, Thomson. By 1821, Robert could declare that “blank verse is the spontaneous language of my soul,” in regard to writing in “contemplative moments.”<sup>88</sup> It is therefore no surprise when, writing to David four years later, shortly after beginning *The Course of Time*, Robert tells his brother that he has had three weeks of “glorious study” on his poem, and that “[b]lank verse, the language of assembled gods, the language of eternity, was the form into which my thoughts fell.”<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 84.

<sup>88</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 149.

<sup>89</sup> David Pollok, 258. Pollok was writing to David about early work on his poem in January 1825.

Whether consciously or not, Pollok was quoting Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), which he probably read and which likely influenced Pollok's own "Discussion on Compositional Thinking," written in 1821. In his *Conjectures*, Young asserts that "what we mean by blank verse, is verse unfallen, uncurs'd; verse reclaim'd, rethron'd in the true language of the gods."<sup>90</sup> Pollok certainly agreed – contrary to both Johnson and Pope, whom he admired – that blank verse in the high style was in some way "unfallen," the only proper and lasting vehicle for the most profound reflections:

All descriptive and moral thought expressed in the English language, is to be found most beautifully and most powerfully brought out in blank verse. The loss of the English blank verse would do our polite literature infinitely more harm than the loss of all our rhyme. It is blank verse, not rhyme, in which the British muse soars high above the other nations of modern Europe, and perches on the heights of immortality. . . .<sup>91</sup>

In this, as in much else, Pollok seemed to follow in Milton's footsteps. Man might be fallen – even depraved, in Pollok's view – but Milton had shown that the speech of Eden could, in fact, be reclaimed. Man might no longer be a "god," but in blank verse he still could sound like one.

## 2.9 Conclusions

*The Course of Time* is clearly indebted to Milton, as nineteenth century reviewers noted, and as I have attempted to demonstrate. But the poem is far from an attempt to rewrite *Paradise Lost* in order to conform with strict Calvinism, nor is there evidence to support Julie Nall Knowles'

---

<sup>90</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 60, quoted in Sitter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, 81.

<sup>91</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 303.

contention that Pollok “found he could not accept many of John Milton’s ideas” because they were in conflict with that theology.<sup>92</sup> Rather, the limited evidence we have from Pollok’s own writings, including *The Course of Time*, and his brother’s recollections suggests that Milton offered the young Scot a stylistic as well as theological model for his own work. Most significantly, *Paradise Lost* provided a successful model of Christian epic theodicy that incorporated many themes and concerns which Pollok shared, including biblical prophecy and the narration of sacred history, the idea of the divinely inspired bard, the affirmation of free will and of freedom of conscience in religious matters, sublimity and interpretations of apocalypse, and the role of the poet as moralist. Other of Milton’s works influenced Pollok, too – *Comus* almost certainly, with its emphasis on virtue and resistance to worldly temptation, and very possibly the anti-prelate treatise *The Reason of Church-Government*, in which Milton depicts the godly poet as purveyor of virtue and defender of “true religion,” whose art is equal in authority to that of the pulpit.

As we have seen, only some of these things, such as the prophetic function of the inspired poet, also were important to the major Romantics. Few or none of them admired Milton primarily because he was the great Christian bard or because he had defended the Christian God in epic verse. Rather, as Lucy Newlyn argues, the major Romantics valued a more human and politically involved figure who was a good deal more revolutionary and theologically heterodox than Pollok appears to have imagined. Milton provided these poets with an epic model and an ideological form that they could appropriate for their own use, as did Pollok, but the content was starkly different. Comparing Pollok with his Romantic peers, especially those who took up some form of the Miltonic epic, one is left wondering if Pollok knew of or was concerned by their debates over Milton’s depictions of God and Satan or of Milton’s deeper purposes in *Paradise Lost*. Certainly, Pollok did not see or celebrate Milton’s epic as a failed theodicy, as did Shelley, nor did he think Milton to be unconsciously “of the devil’s party,” as did Blake. But along similar lines, one wonders if Pollok knew of the discovery of *De Doctrina Christiana*, uncovered in 1823 and attributed to Milton, with its suggestions of Arianism and support for polygamy, or had read Macaulay’s famous essay on it in the August, 1825 *Edinburgh Review*? According to Macaulay, no one could have read *Paradise Lost* or known much about Milton’s life without suspecting him

---

<sup>92</sup> Knowles, “The Course of Time: A Calvinistic ‘Paradise Lost,’” 176.

of such heretical opinions. But did Pollok? Both Robert's and David's silence on these subjects suggests that the brothers were unaware of debates around them in the larger literary culture.

Milton was a hero, then, for both Pollok and his fellow Romantics, but for widely different reasons. While Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Blake (in his idiosyncratic way) prized the radical freedom fighter whose words and art challenged the restrictive orthodoxies of his day, Pollok valued (and perhaps only recognized) the divinely appointed bard who defended true religion and depicted the cause of "all our woe" in original disobedience to God. In their different ways, *Paradise Lost* and *The Course of Time* were and would be dedicated to the recovery of that obedience by warning of God's judgment on human actions now and in the time to come. It was not a theme the major Romantics cared for, and one which Byron and Shelley had, to many minds, actively worked against. But if judgment could be mocked, so could God; and if there were no judgment, as those poets seemed to suggest, there would be no life to come, no reward for the good or punishment for the bad. The very meaning of human action and of human history was at stake, and someone was needed to address it, to once more defend the justice of God. In the following chapter, I examine Pollok's concern with the life to come and three probable, or possible, contemporary influences on his project: The poet Byron, Secession Church theologian John Dick, and enigmatic Scottish preacher and writer Edward Irving.

## Chapter 3

### Robert Pollok's Miltonic Project III: Contemporary Influences Byron, John Dick, and Edward Irving

*"Nor had the author feared to sharpen his holy weapons at the forge of Byron. . . ."*

George Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*

"The subject of the poem in which I am engaged is the resurrection, a glorious argument," Robert Pollok wrote to his brother David in February, 1825. "[A]nd if that Divine Spirit, who giveth all thought and all utterance, be not offended with my prayers, it shall not be ungloriously managed."<sup>1</sup> For some time, Robert had harbored ambitions of writing a great work that would unite poetry, religion, and philosophy, as his hero Milton had done, but until very recently, no suitable subject had presented itself.<sup>2</sup> However, one evening in early December, 1824, "when he was sitting alone in his room in great desolation of mind, to turn his thoughts from himself he put his hand to the table for a book," David tells us.

He opened it at Byron's lines to "Darkness," and read where he opened. While he was reading these the resurrection was suggested to him; and it struck him that it might be taken for a subject to write on. He instantly began to think, and hastily running over in his mind various authors who had treated of it, was not satisfied with any of them. He thought that something new or different might be said on the subject, or, at least, that it might be set in a more striking light. A plan occurred to him. He immediately laid down the book, took up the first pen that he got his hands on, and began to write. . . .<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 264.

<sup>2</sup> David Pollok, 98.

<sup>3</sup> David Pollok, 265.

What Robert wrote was a thousand lines on the resurrection, which eventually became part of *The Course of Time*, Book VII, as his project rapidly expanded to include the millennium, the apocalypse, and the last judgment, as well as lengthy episodes of polemic, autobiography, and moral vignette. Ironically, Pollok owed the immediate origins of his poem to a fellow admirer of Milton who would become his primary antagonist - the infidel Byron. Whereas Pollok sought to affirm the biblical conception of resurrection and afterlife, Byron presented “a portraiture of a desolate and extinct world . . . such a scene as the Atheist might imagine,” according to Pollok biographer James Scott. “‘Darkness’,” Scott declared, “is the production of a mind, to which evidently had not occurred the ideas of God, human responsibility, immortality, or the resurrection of man.” By contrast, “[w]hen Pollok seized his pen . . . to utter his thoughts about the Resurrection . . . he felt as a Christian,” Scott asserted.

The Christian poet saw every thing in the light of the Gospel. The Bible cast its celestial radiance on every scene within the horizon of his intellect. “Darkness” suggested the topic; but religion enabled him to pourtray it in the rich and variegated colours of immortality.<sup>4</sup>

Milton already had presented the ambitious young Scot with a model of epic theodicy. Now, Byron had supplied him with a fit subject. The resurrection was a “glorious argument” which justified God’s intentions for humankind because it guaranteed an ultimate meaning to earthly life and promised a final valuation of human actions performed within it. By questioning the reality of resurrection and afterlife, poets and thinkers like Byron were effectively denying God’s plans for and control over the universe itself. As Pollok’s own plans unfolded, “Darkness” became the catalyst for a project that would tie life on earth to life beyond and illustrate, contra Byron and others, God’s “government approved.” In the chapter which follows, I will explore possible reasons for Pollok’s concern with “the second birth, and final doom of man”<sup>5</sup> – that is, with resurrection and afterlife – and consider three probable contemporary influences on his project and

---

<sup>4</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 241–43.

<sup>5</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, I.12.

its theodicean aims: First, Byron and the tradition of religious and philosophical skepticism that he represents for Pollok; second, Pollok's theology professor John Dick and his polemical engagement with Joseph Priestley and Unitarianism; and third, charismatic Scots preacher Edward Irving, who called for a new Milton to affirm biblical apocalypse in response to Byron, Southey, and the so-called "Satanic school" of poets. In examining these figures, we will explore the important role that Byron played as catalyst for and antagonist in Pollok's project; the theological framework that Dick offered his students, including Pollok; and how Irving's affirmation of biblical prophecy and emphasis on biblical apocalypticism could have influenced the young Scottish poet.

### 3.1 Byron and His "Sons"

It is not difficult to imagine how the resurrection was suggested to Pollok as a poetic theme after a reading of "Darkness." Byron wrote the 82-line lyric in Geneva during the celebrated "year without a summer" of 1816, when temporary climactic changes – the result of a volcanic eruption in Indonesia - induced apocalyptic fears across Europe. Skies darkened, temperatures dropped, and crops failed.<sup>6</sup> In "Darkness," Byron presents an imaginative scene that could be extrapolated from that summer of hysteria. As Catherine Redford notes, the poem fits into the apocalyptic dream-vision tradition found in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation,<sup>7</sup> as well as in a number of medieval religious texts. In the first line, Byron describes what he has seen and will share with his reader as both "a dream" and "not all a dream," suggesting that his dark vision potentially could be reality. As the poem begins, "[t]he bright sun" has been "extinguish'd, and the stars

Did wander darkling in the eternal space  
Rayless and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air. . . .<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Morton D. Paley, "Envisioning Lastness: Byron's 'Darkness', Campbell's 'The Last Man', and the Critical Aftermath.," *Romanticism* 1, no. 1 (April 1995): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Redford, "'No Love Was Left': The Failure of Christianity in Byron's 'Darkness,'" *The Byron Journal* 43, no. 2 (December 11, 2015): 133.

<sup>8</sup> "Darkness," ll. 3-5, in Byron, *Lord Byron - The Major Works*, 272.

Following the extinction of the sun and the freezing of the earth, animals and humans alike begin to perish of famine or to devour one another; War, “which for a moment was not more,/Did glut himself again,” as a meal is “bought with blood.” There is a suggestion of blasphemous religious rituals, as the last two members of the race attempt to revive “[t]he dying embers of an altar-place/Where had been heap’d a mass of holy things/For an unholy usage.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the would-be survivors die of fright at seeing “their mutual hideousness.” As in the beginning before creation, “[t]he world was void,” the narrator tells us, and

The populous and the powerful was a lump,  
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—  
A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.<sup>10</sup>

The poem ends with the extinction of all life and the complete triumph of darkness, which has no need even of the elements - the now-“dead” waves, the “expir’d” moon, or winds “wither’d in the stagnant air” (ll.78-80). If God was present and active in the creation, it is Darkness which reigns now, as the poet declares in the poem’s final line, “She was the Universe.” Strikingly, there is nothing more; no suggestion of resurrection, no new beginning, no re-formation of creatures or of worlds. “Darkness” presents a nihilistic vision of the end of all things in which death is the one, final reality.

In a recent essay on “Darkness,” Catherine Redford argues that Byron is more indebted to Christian theology and to the biblical tradition of apocalypse than generally has been acknowledged.<sup>11</sup> She cites biblical parallels to Byron’s depiction of the end of the world in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, suggesting that, in “Darkness,” Byron is contributing to a post-biblical

---

<sup>9</sup> Byron, ll. 58-60.

<sup>10</sup> Byron, ll. 70-72.

<sup>11</sup> Redford, “No Love Was Left,” 131.

tradition of Christian eschatological literature established in the eighteenth century, and including Isaac Watt's *The Day of Judgment* (1706), Jonathan Swift's *On the Day of Judgment* (published in 1774), and Ann and Jane Taylor's *The Day of Judgment* (1810), among others.<sup>12</sup> As Redford acknowledges, a connection between "Darkness" and biblical models of apocalypse had been recognized as early as 1828, a year after Robert Pollok's death, when a contributor to *The Imperial Magazine* of Liverpool remarked upon similarities with apocalyptic episodes in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.<sup>13</sup> It is conceivable that Pollok, who knew the apocalyptic literature of the Bible well and drew upon Isaiah among other biblical apocalyptic scriptures, would have recognized Byron's appropriation of these sources. The great difference, of course, is that Byron's apocalyptic vision contains no hope of future regeneration, and as Pollok particularly noted, no resurrection. Redford asserts that, in "Darkness," Byron frustrates our expectations for a second coming and for the promised end that his scriptural sources affirm. Instead, he evokes biblical models of apocalypse only to undermine them. Thus, the poet "departs radically from his scriptural model" in depicting an end to time and to creation in which God either is absent or wholly uninvolved.<sup>14</sup>

Redford suggests that God is not, in fact, uninvolved in "Darkness," although he is never mentioned nor invoked. Rather, she argues that in his poem, "Byron depicts a God who has consciously withdrawn Himself from His people, punishing the unrighteous with eternal darkness."<sup>15</sup> While the poem itself offers no specific evidence for this reading, it is plausible, and if accurate, would suggest that God was not completely absent from Byron's thought or his conception of the universe. However, this is almost certainly not the way Pollok and many contemporary readers would have understood Byron's poem. "Darkness" could be seen as yet another example of the wicked lord's apostasy, denying the biblical hope of resurrection and eternal life which were foundational elements of mainstream, and especially evangelical, Christian faith. It is a radical departure from Pollok's view of the eschaton, in which God's goodness and justice require apocalypse followed by revelation and final judgment.<sup>16</sup> In a sense, Byron was

---

<sup>12</sup> Redford, 131.

<sup>13</sup> R.L.L., "The Bible and Lord Byron," *The Imperial Magazine (Liverpool)*, August 1828, 700.

<sup>14</sup> Redford, "'No Love Was Left,'" 139.

<sup>15</sup> Redford, 131.

<sup>16</sup> This is obvious from the design and theology of *The Course of Time* itself.

denying the meaning and purpose of human life itself, which Pollok would describe as “[t]he sceptic’s route” in *The Course of Time*, Book III. There, in imagery strikingly resonant of “Darkness,” Pollok depicts the skeptic who, despising God,

. . . toiled with dark and crooked reasoning,  
To make the fair and lovely earth, which dwelt  
In sight of Heaven, a cold and fatherless,  
Forsaken thing, that wandered on, forlorn,  
Undestined, uncompassioned, unupheld;  
A vapor eddying in the whirl of chance,  
And soon to vanish everlastingly. (ll. 593-99)

Several hundred lines later, just after Pollok describes his divine calling (III.1000-08), it is “the mighty reasoner, Death” who confirms, rather than denies, the essential biblical theme that “Eternity is all” (III.11.1051-1053). Writing to his brother in January 1825, shortly after beginning *The Course of Time*, Pollok emphasized this point, expressing his hope that some of the lines he had so far written “shall outlive me in this world,” and that “nothing, I hope, shall make me ashamed to meet them in the next.” The poet went on to speculate about the relative value of finite things in comparison to all that is, or could be, eternal:

Thoughts, acquirements, appendages of any kind, that cannot be carried with us out of time into the help and solace of our eternity, but must be left the unredeemed and unredeemable of death, are little worth harbouring about us. It is the everlastingness of a thing that gives it weight and importance.<sup>17</sup>

The apparent nihilism of Byron’s “Darkness” to the contrary, for Pollok there was “proof within” that something more indeed did exist and that extinction was not, in fact, the final reality. In a notebook he kept in 1826, as he neared completion of *The Course of Time*, Pollok reflected that

---

<sup>17</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 258–59.

[w]hen we walk the waste places alone, and reason with ourselves, and think of immortality, we feel a proof within us of a future, fairer, kinder land, which all the dark, metaphysic, plodding sons of Byron can never outreason.<sup>18</sup>

The “proof within” is a reasonable guarantee, Pollok suggests, that immortality does exist; it is an intuition that the skepticism of the earthbound, “plodding sons of Byron” cannot deny or “outreason.” In *The Course of Time* itself, Pollok appears to suggest that Byron and his “sons” also are aware of this. At the conclusion of his one hundred thirty-eight-line cautionary description of Byron in Book IV, Pollok berates the recently deceased bard’s “monstrous” and “inconceivably vain” attempts “[t]o satisfy and fill the immortal soul” with “things of earthly sort” - with “aught but God . . .” (ll.767-70). For Pollok, Byron is neither innocent nor ignorant of the truth that God and immortality exist, although he may be willfully naïve in rejecting both. Byron’s vain attempts to satisfy his restless soul ultimately lead to wretchedness. In attempting “[t]o marry Immortality to Death” (l.772), denying the important distinction between them, it is death the misguided, reprobate poet gets. Pollok’s lengthy sketch of Byron, the longest by far of any historical figure in *The Course of Time*, ends on a note similar to that of “Darkness” itself. Loveless, friendless, and hopeless, human life is extinguished.

### 3.2 Intimations of Mortality

There were good reasons why Robert Pollok should be so concerned with the integrity of traditional Christian teachings about the afterlife, and why he felt that an attack on those teachings was also an attack on Christians like himself. In youth and early manhood, he had witnessed the deaths of a sister, a close school friend, and of his mother; he had wrestled with his own physical illnesses and perhaps intuited the possibility of an early death, as was to be the case; and he had put his fears of death and questions about immortality to paper in an early, undated genre poem titled “The Distressed Christian to His Soul.” It may be that “The Distressed Christian” - which in

---

<sup>18</sup> David Pollok, 313.

the nature of its internal dialogue somewhat resembles Milton's "On His Blindness" - is a response to Pollok's experience of these other deaths and very real concerns about his own.

In his biography, David Pollok provides no context for "The Distressed Christian," except to note that it was his brother's second attempt at blank verse (the first being in the autumn of 1816).<sup>19</sup> The poem is, then, probably among the earlier creative endeavors of a teen-aged author who died (as he fears in the poem) not many years after. In the forty-four-line lyric, the poet's soul is "ill at ease" and "convulsed with doubt and passion" regarding unnamed "evils" and, specifically, "time's most horrid frown."<sup>20</sup> Comparing his soul to "a hapless bark adrift," the poet urges the immortal part of himself not to be undone by such "things ephemeral" – presumably, mundane concerns, perhaps including death - but instead, to remember that

life and eternal joy,  
A crown of glory, an unfading crown,  
. . . will be thine,  
If in the path of duty thou abide. (ll. 17-21)

Furthermore, the poet urges his soul to recall God's promise

That he who perseveres in righteousness,  
Who fights the fight of faith, and turns not back,  
Shall immortality and honour gain. (ll. 26-28)

Therefore, the soul is enjoined to "[p]ut on the Christian armour" (a likely reference to Ephesians 6) and "bravely fight" against the powers of earth and hell, because "eternal victory is thine,/Immortal life, and everlasting bliss!" As a whole, the short poem resembles something of a

---

<sup>19</sup> David Pollok, 20.

<sup>20</sup> David Pollok, 413.

youthful pep talk on Christian duty and perseverance - themes that will become important to *The Course of Time* some years later - but the concern it obscures was only too real for its young author.

### 3.2.1 Family Matters

If death was a more familiar reality to young people in the nineteenth century than it often is today, that was especially true for Robert Pollok. He witnessed a sister's death from childbirth while still in his teens (a scene movingly depicted in *The Course of Time*, Book V.664-722), wrote a monody on the death of a close school friend, and nursed his mother during her final illness leading to her death from tuberculosis in July 1825, not long after he began *The Course of Time*. Biographer James Scott, although sometimes given to hyperbole, is probably not far off the mark in suggesting that Margaret Pollok's final illness and death, coming in the early months of the composition of *The Course of Time*, significantly influenced the scope and trajectory of the poem. While Scott's depiction of this event is clearly fanciful, it also may bear some truth. "It is easy to see," he asserts, "how 'The Course of Time' in its present form was suggested to the author's mind, out of the primary idea of a poem on the Resurrection":

He was in the chamber of his dying mother. It was midnight. Her eyes were closed in sleep. He alone was wakeful and vigilant. He thought of the approaching decease of that mother, and of her early teachings and frequent prayers for him. Her actions lay before him like a chart. He followed her in thought through the valley and shadow of death, to the judgment, and into the house of many mansions. Life, death, eternity stood out before him. But this was the track which led him as if to a mountain height, from which he saw "The Course of Time." The Resurrection then became a mere interlude in the history of man's being, an isthmus between time gone and long eternity. "The History of Man" opened up a vista, in which the awful realities of earth, hell, heaven, time, and eternity could be introduced!<sup>21</sup>

For his part, David Pollok records that, while sitting at his mother's bedside that spring (1825), Robert continued to work on the poem, and eventually "saw many things that he would like to

---

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 244.

bring in, that would not come in naturally under the subject of resurrection.” As Robert considered these things, he had a moment of remarkable inspiration, a theme which David reiterates later in the biography:

One night, by and by, when he was sitting alone, in Moorhouse old room, letting his mind wander back and forward over things at large, in a moment, as if by an immediate inspiration, the idea of the poem struck him, and the plan of it, as it now stands, stretched out before him; so that, at one glance, he saw through it from end to end like an avenue, with the resurrection as only part of the scene. He never felt, he said, as he did then; and he shook from head to foot overpowered with feeling; knowing that "to pursue the subject was to have no middle way between great success and great failure." From this time, in selecting and arranging materials, he saw through the plan so well, that he knew to what book, as he expressed it, "the thoughts belonged whenever they set up their heads."<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2.2 Melancholy and the Consumptive Poet

Evidently, Robert was at Moorhouse with his mother, David being elsewhere, from the spring of 1825 until her death in July. During these months, Robert completed at least the first three books of *The Course of Time* (the section on resurrection later becoming Book VII), as the poem encompassed salvation history from Fall to Final Judgment. However, Robert himself was plagued by ill health and financial hardship throughout this period and beyond, writing to David in March 1826, after completing another three books of the poem, that he finds

at present, my health very much in need of repair. My breast troubles me—I have just had on a blister, and I hope it will do some good. I do not intend to write any more for some time, and shall pay every attention to my health.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 266.

<sup>23</sup> David Pollok, 280–81.

Pollok's complaint echoes descriptions in earlier letters to David, episodes which possibly gave rise to short poems on the subject. In a letter of February 1824, Robert tells David that "[t]hese pains still continue to hover about me. They weary my body and they weary my mind," but "I have still the hope that I shall get rid of them."<sup>24</sup> The connection between physical ill health and mental depression runs throughout many of the letters and finds a place particularly in Book III of *The Course of Time*, in which Pollok, speaking as the "heavenly bard," describes a poet sunk under melancholy and disappointment:

Thus stood his mind, when round him came a cloud :  
 Slowly and heavily it came; a cloud  
 Of ills we mention not: enough to say  
 'Twas cold, and dead, impenetrable gloom.  
 He saw its dark approach; and saw his hopes,  
 One after one, put out, as nearer still  
 It drew his soul. . . .

(ll. 938-944)

Lines later, the despairing, solipsistic poet envisions the entire universe in entropy, recalling Byron's depiction of the same in "Darkness":

The blue heavens wither'd, and the moon, and sun,  
 And all the stars, and the green earth, and morn  
 And evening wither'd; and the eyes, and smiles,  
 And faces of all men and women wither'd ;  
 Wither'd to him; and all the universe,  
 Like something which had been, appear'd; but now  
 Was dead and mouldering fast away.

(ll. 969-975)

Such sentiments find their way into other of the poet's works, too. Biographer James Scott suggests that an undated ode "To Melancholy" may have been sparked by one of Pollok's recurring bouts of illness and the despondent mood which accompanied it. In imagery similar to the above lines

---

<sup>24</sup> David Pollok, 225.

from *The Course of Time*, the ode reflects the author's long struggle with depression related, at least in part, to his physical illness, and the desire to give up the "fight" and surrender himself to the encompassing darkness:

What gloom is this that gathers round my soul,  
And darkens all my mental hemisphere.  
'Tis Melancholy in his blackest robes.  
Come then, dull power! no longer I rebel.  
Ah! I have struggled long beneath thy gloom . . .  
But now 'tis solid darkness all around.  
I fight no more! dark power, cast wide thy arms;  
Possess my soul entire! nor book, nor friend,  
Nor muse, I summon to repel thy force.<sup>25</sup>

Inviting Melancholy to conduct him "through thy paths of utter darkness," Pollok imagines the worst scenes he could encounter, some strikingly reminiscent of the resurrection episodes in *The Course of Time*, Book VII: Graves and charnel houses; "demons yelling loud/On midnight blast"; "dungeons, where wide-mouthed despair/Forever pictures, to the wretch, the rope/Of death"; "widowed mothers" and "naked orphans" with "no hand . . . stretched/To help them . . . wasting down/To death"; "the straw where sickness pines/'Mid rags, and filth, and cold, and poverty," to name just a few. The speaker even challenges Melancholy to "Let famine, earthquake, pestilence, and war,/And every imp of woe, start up before me." But these are nothing, the despairing poet asserts:

. . . if thou mean'st, dread power! To sum my woe,  
Conduct me to myself; keep me at home;  
Pourtray a body wasted with corroding pain,  
And wasted more with dark and angry thought. . . .  
[I] hoped to cull a flower that might have bloomed  
Immortal o'er my grave, and told I lived;  
That fire now quenched, these fields shut from my mind,  
Pourtray me dark, dejected, flying thought;  
Hope bidden farewell, and turned her awful back;

---

<sup>25</sup> David Pollok, 442.

Where'er I lean, stabbed to the very quick,  
 Each thought a pang of woe. Do all thou canst;  
 But, O dark power! If thou hast mercy hear;  
 'Tis midnight, and cold sweat bedrops my aching  
 Temples, my weary heart tumultuous beats;  
 In mercy close my eye one hour in sleep.<sup>26</sup>

The poem's moving final lines provide a vivid picture of the gripping depression that accompanied Pollok's periods of physical decline. In a letter to David dated November 1825, Robert attests, "I had a few days of that horror with which I was oppressed autumn was-a year, not just so ill, and it is gone." Then, a warning: "Beware of it, it is a dreadful thing." So dreadful, apparently, that when Robert experienced another such episode at Moorhouse a few months later, the boys' alarmed father sent Robert to Glasgow for help:

My father noticed the fearful and dangerous state of my mind, and insisted that I should go to Glasgow, hoping that company and better lodging might recover me and, indeed, although slowly, I did recover, and resumed my study. Some weeks passed, however, before I regained confidence in myself, for I felt as if my mind had been shattered to pieces.<sup>27</sup>

Robert may have been loathe to share the full extent of his physical illness with his father; after all, his mother (Margaret) had only recently died. Nearly two years before the above correspondence, in early March 1824, Pollok, who was too weak to write himself, dictated a letter to his father describing his recovery from a severe bout of fever and referencing, for the first time in any extant letter, his "disease":

From blistering, and vomiting, and sweating, which were thought necessary to stop the progress of the disease, as well as from the painful nature of the disease itself, and my entire inability to eat any thing, I have been reduced to a state of great weakness. You need not be alarmed, however, as both from my own feelings and

---

<sup>26</sup> David Pollok, 442.

<sup>27</sup> David Pollok, 275.

the opinion of a very skillful physician whom I have employed, nothing serious may be apprehended.<sup>28</sup>

But in a letter written several weeks later to David, Robert is more willing to acknowledge the severity of the recent illness, describing himself as “reduced almost to a skeleton.” The recurring attacks of what would prove to be pulmonary tuberculosis exhibit the classic symptoms, already depicted in the final lines of “To Melancholy”: fever, night sweats, aching pains, and difficulty in breathing. One reads Robert’s exultant letter of July 7, 1826 telling David of the inspired completion of *The Course of Time* with a measure of sadness and foreboding, knowing that it also hints at unhappy possibilities ahead:

I neither can nor wish to ascribe [the rapid completion of the poem] to any thing but an extraordinary manifestation of Divine goodness. Although some nights I was on the borders of fever, I rose every morning equally fresh, without one twitch of headache; and, with all the impatience of a lover, hastened to my study. Towards the end of the tenth book — for the whole consists of ten books — where the subject was overwhelmingly great, and where I, indeed, seemed to write from immediate inspiration, I felt the body beginning to give way. But now that I have finished, though thin with the great heat, and the almost unintermitted mental exercise, I am by no means languishing and feeble.<sup>29</sup>

A tension between fears of mortality and the hope of immortality – not least, through accomplishments in verse – runs throughout Pollok’s letters, sermons, and verse such as “To Melancholy” and “The Distressed Christian to His Soul.” While *The Course of Time* best represented the poet’s great hope that some of his thoughts in verse “shall outlive me in this world,” its completion was also prelude to the poet’s mortal end. As his body “gave way” in the months following first publication of *The Course of Time*, Pollok’s mind may have wandered back to the poem’s initial inspiration. In a late short lyric, recalling Byron’s depiction of universal extinction, the dying young Scot asks,

---

<sup>28</sup> David Pollok, 226.

<sup>29</sup> David Pollok, 287.

Oh when wilt thou take me, dark night, to thy place  
 Where the sleep-frighting footsteps of day never tread  
 Where no cold eye of pride scowls on misery's face  
 Where death makes the weary and friendless a bed. (ll. 32-36)

The poem, which offers no hint of immortality or afterlife, is called, ironically, "To Darkness."<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3 "Eternity is All"

By contrast, the author of an early critique of *The Course of Time*, writing in *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* in 1827, extols Pollok's "genius . . . eminently fitted for the sublime" and suggests that his poem will reassure readers of the hope of heaven and its continuity with the life they have known on earth:

. . . when it is recollected that the speaker is one who is looking back through eternity on the scenes of his earthly existence, we are filled with interesting thoughts. We have no doubt that the faithful servants of God will enjoy the heaven in which the bard is represented as abiding; and it is most consonant with the few ideas we can have on such a subject, that every past period of existence, whether on earth or in heaven, will be capable of recal [sic].<sup>31</sup>

Such reassurances are consonant with Pollok's depictions of resurrection hope, particularly in Book VII of *The Course of Time*, which imagines general resurrection itself. They also are apparent in vignettes of Christian faithfulness amid loss in Book V, particularly those of a dying mother and of a widow visiting her husband's grave. Of the former, James Scott declares

<sup>30</sup> David Pollok, 440–41. Biographer James Scott suggests that "To Darkness" reflects the poet's state of mind at the time he took a trip to Aberdeen (July 1827), prior to and in anticipation of embarking for Italy in August. James Scott, *The Life, Letters, and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A. M.* . . . , 314.

<sup>31</sup> "Book Review," *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* (London) 1 (1827): 342–57.

We do not know of anything in the whole range of ancient and modern poesy, which will compare in faithful delineation, pathos, and beauty, with this description of the “Dying Mother.” . . . It is the very embodiment and solution of the apostolic query, “O death, where is thy sting ? O grave, where is thy victory ?”<sup>32</sup>

This mother was, as noted earlier, Pollok’s own sister, who died as a result of complications from childbirth in 1815. Writing for a periodical in the spring of 1827, as his poem was going to print, Pollok returned again to the theme of immortality and the promise of a future life, although he acknowledged the uncertainty generated by the thought of death. His aim, again, was reassurance:

when [man] leaves this world, and enters into the darkness of an untried and unknown futurity, he shall be led, by the golden chain of eternal love, with safe and unerring step into the everlasting chambers of his Father’s house, and shall drink of those pleasures which are before his face and at his right hand for evermore.<sup>33</sup>

Christ’s resurrection was of course the greatest source of assurance for a Christian troubled by the prospect of mortality. In another early, undated poem titled “Christ’s Resurrection,” Pollok reimagines the meeting of the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene as recounted in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John. The poem is faithful to the biblical narrative in which Mary discovers that the person she had taken for a gardener is actually the risen Christ, who reassures her with his presence. Pollok’s conclusion is an assurance to the Christian reader (“every child of heaven”) that, like Mary Magdalene, she will not be left desolate; the risen Christ will speak to her, too:

As Mary sought her loving Lord to find,  
So seeks each soul to heavenly grace inclined

---

<sup>32</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. . . .*, 46–47.

<sup>33</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 331–32.

As Jesus' word to cheer her heart was given,  
So will he speak to every child of heaven.<sup>34</sup>

It is a more hopeful, or at least, less combatitive picture than that presented by another, presumably early, undated poem titled "Lines to the Poor Despised Christians." In that poem, which only exists in manuscript and was not reprinted in David's biography of his brother, Robert extols the "faithful band! who mid reproach and shame/Dare to be good" and stand "on Immanuel's side." The poem depicts a persecuted minority - "ye poor, ye injur'd race" - who are reviled on earth by "Mammon's sons," but who will soon be rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven:

What tho' the worldling now with idiot smile,  
Your vows and prayers, you and your God revile?  
What tho' with savage, natural delight,  
Your fancied faults are keenly held to light?  
What tho' enthusiast, madman, hypocrite,  
Be names which while below you still must meet  
Soon shall ye be, ye poor ye injur'd race  
Where Mammon's sons your steps can never trace.  
Soon shall ye stand acquitted by your Lord  
To endless joy, to endless bliss restor'd.  
On that dread day when heaven's incarnate God,  
With all heaven's hosts attendant on his nod,  
Shall see descend, girt with almighty ire,  
To plunge his foes in ever-burning fire,  
Ye shall unsoil'd, unmoved on God's right hand  
Mid falling worlds, in peaceful glory stand. . . .<sup>35</sup>

The picture presented is remarkably similar to Pollok's later description of final judgment and the redemption of the faithful in *The Course of Time*, Book X. The wicked also receive their sentence, as the poet now directly addresses the enemies of God who, as in *The Course of Time*, are condemned to watch the saints enter Paradise:

---

<sup>34</sup> David Pollok, 413.

<sup>35</sup> MS GEN 1355/3, Robert Pollok Collection, University of Glasgow Library Special Collections.

Behold their God now your eternal foe,  
 Justly consign you to eternal woe. . . .  
 With devils wail blaspheming heaven's great Lord.  
 But mark the few that stand on Christ's right hand,  
 In bliss complete, ascend the heavenly land . . .<sup>36</sup>

The poet's combative tone suggests a sense of personal attack, and not simply a defense of the faith alone. He counts himself among the "poor despised Christians" who are persecuted in the present age, but will "soon" be taken up in the next, even as their tormenters are consigned "to eternal woe." What led Pollok to write this poem or to feel himself among the persecuted is unknown, although the theme of persecution is carried over into *The Course of Time*, where the author may be open to the same criticism Marvell, writing of the biblical Samson, directed at *Paradise Lost* – that it is, or might be interpreted as, a "revenge epic."<sup>37</sup> Pollok may well have felt himself part of a minority in terms of Scotland's religious culture, as a member of one of the dissenting churches. As noted, his family legacy also included a history of persecution: During the infamous "Killing Times," one of his Covenanter ancestors was shot by royal dragoons, another was forced into exile in Ireland, and a third was banished to Barbados, where he was enslaved until the Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>38</sup> Also, Pollok would write three short novellas about the Covenanting period (*Helen of the Glen*, *Ralph Gemmell*, and *The Persecuted Family*) drawn in part on his family history. All of these things may have contributed to a sense of persecution on Pollok's part. But most likely, it was the perceived taunts and skepticism of those like the leading bard of the "Satanic School" – Byron, who had dared to call Satan the hero of *Paradise Lost* – which were to blame for the young Scot's combative mood. The sons of Mammon and the sons of Byron could both be blamed, and would be in *The Course of Time*, for undermining Christian faith and the wrongly reviled faithful who proclaimed it, like Robert Pollok.

---

<sup>36</sup> "Robert Pollok Manuscript Collection," n.d., MS Gen 1355, Special Collections, University of Glasgow Library.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Marvell, "On Milton's *Paradise Lost*," in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 1–2.

### 3.4 John Dick and the “Polemical Divine”

If Pollok had been gathering tools for a “great work” and searching for the subject matter that would bind it together, he was provided a theological framework and a polemical, although not a poetical, model in the teaching of the Reverend John Dick, theology professor in the Divinity Hall of the United Secession Church. Dick had been among those entering the fray against the Rev. William McGill’s controversial *Practical Essay on the Death of Christ* (1786), which outraged ministers in the Secession churches as well as in the national church by what were perceived to be its Socinian and Unitarian views. “[W]ith his eye on McGill and others who ‘disseminate error, while they retain office in a church whose creed is orthodox’,”<sup>39</sup> Dick responded with a sermon, his first published work, titled *The Conduct and Doom of False Teachers* (1788). Presumably, Dick was, like many fellow Secessionist ministers, equally outraged by the Church of Scotland’s failure to successfully prosecute McGill.<sup>40</sup> Dogmatism and polemic seem to have been features of Dick’s theological approach, a professor whom George Gilfillan, another former student, satirically caricatured in a fictionalized memoir as “Dr. Dogmatic Dry.”<sup>41</sup>

Dick’s four-volume *Lectures on Theology*, compiled and published by his son after Dick’s death in 1833, likely represent the lectures Pollok heard in the Secession Divinity Hall not quite a decade earlier.<sup>42</sup> Their influence is attested by the fact that they were frequently reprinted and widely used by Presbyterian churches and seminaries in the United States (including Princeton), as well as by missionary outposts as far afield as Jamaica and India.<sup>43</sup> Dick’s high regard for scripture, distrust of reason as a sole guide to faith, and opposition to church establishment may be reflected in Pollok’s presentation of these issues in *The Course of Time*. Certainly, Pollok would seem to fit

---

<sup>39</sup> Preface to John Dick and Andrew Coventry Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (Edinburgh: W. Oliphant, 1834) xix.

<sup>40</sup> “William McGill” in Cameron et al., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, 514.

<sup>41</sup> George Gilfillan, *The History of a Man* (London: A. Hall, Virtue & Co., 1856), 156–60.

<sup>42</sup> In his Introduction to the *Lectures*, Andrew Dick asserts that the printed lectures are taken “nearly verbatim” from the manuscripts his father read to his divinity students in class. Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, v.

<sup>43</sup> Cameron et al., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, 242.

Dick's approving depiction in Lecture 1 of the "polemic divine" who "is a warrior; he goes forth into the field to encounter the adversaries of the truth."<sup>44</sup> The language closely resembles that former student-turned-critic George Gilfillan would use some years later in describing Pollok as a spiritual warrior who sharpens "his holy weapons at the forge of Byron." Dividing theology into the spheres of the didactic, the practical, and the polemic, Dick counsels his students that, while "[t]he private Christian, ignorant of the subtle disputes which have arisen concerning almost every article of faith, humbly takes up the Bible as the Word of God, and by a short and easy process" becomes "wise unto salvation,"

the minister of religion proceeds more slowly, encounters obstacles at every step, and often is compelled to assume the character of a polemic, because he must study Theology as a science, and be able not only to instruct the simple and illiterate, but also to contend with the wise and learned, whether as infidels they oppose revelation in general, or as heretics they impugn any of its doctrines.<sup>45</sup>

Dick notes that polemical theology has gotten a bad name in recent years, and that the prevailing idea is there "should be no controversy in the church." However, he asserts that "[n]othing is more obvious than that when the truth is attacked it ought to be defended":

If controversial Theology be accounted an evil, it is a necessary one; and let the blame be imputed to the men who have laboured, and are still laboring, to pervert the oracles of God, not to those, whom a sense of duty has compelled to come forward, and defend them against the rude assaults of presumption and impiety.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Pollok, Dick never invokes the figure of Byron or of any other apostate poet in his lectures, although he gives a brief description of the godless intellectual that comes near Pollok's depiction of Byron's "wretched" death in *The Course of Time*, Book IV. "[H]e who has stored his mind

---

<sup>44</sup> Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Dick and Dick, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Dick and Dick, 8.

with every kind of knowledge except the knowledge of God and divine things lives like a fool,” Dick declares, “and shall die without hope.”<sup>47</sup> As James Scott and James Boyd note in their respective volumes on Pollok, Byron is Pollok’s example of the “man of intellectual greatness”<sup>48</sup> who nevertheless abuses his God-given talent and fails to recognize that what God demands is not material or intellectual accomplishment, but rather, “moral excellence.” The theme is similar to some of John Dick’s exhortations to his students, which Pollok would have heard. Jack C. Whytock notes that Dick’s “introductory addresses” preliminary to each lecture “were full of Christian piety as the proper ‘prolegomena’ to the study of theology.”<sup>49</sup> This “marriage of theology and piety” was a commonplace emphasis in the Secession Hall of Glasgow, as in its precursor Burgher Hall prior to 1820.<sup>50</sup>

In his opening lecture, as later printed in *Lectures on Theology*, Dick told his students that there were three primary qualifications or prerequisites for being a theology student: piety first, followed by intellectual ability, and then the love of truth.<sup>51</sup> These things were not only important for the student, but for any man who would follow God. “Was it ever found that a truly virtuous and humble man was an infidel?” Dick asked in a later lecture on “objections” to Christianity. “Does infidelity abound among persons of this character, the devout, the pure, the modest, and dispassionate inquirers after truth? Or,” Dick continues,

. . . are its advocates the profane and the dissipated, smatterers in knowledge, false pretenders to philosophy, and self-conceited speculatists, who, from the lofty eminence of genius and science on which they suppose themselves to be placed, look down with contempt upon the opinions and pursuits of the multitude?<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Dick and Dick, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 160.

<sup>49</sup> Jack C. Whytock, “An Educated Clergy”: *Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Secession, 1560-1850*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007) 298.

<sup>50</sup> Whytock, 299.

<sup>51</sup> Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 11–13.

<sup>52</sup> Dick and Dick, 167.

It is not hard to imagine Byron in this description, although Dick is certainly casting a wider net, including philosophers, scientists, and “self-conceited speculatists,” among his targets of disapprobation – all types that Pollok’s bard would condemn in *The Course of Time*. Their reliance upon human reason as a guide to metaphysical speculation was directly contrary to Dick’s own approach, as recalled by his son Andrew in a Memoir attached to the first edition of the *Lectures* (1834):

He was distinguished by the strictness with which he adhered to the great Protestant rule of making the Bible, in its plain meaning, the source of his religious creed, and the basis of his theological system. His distrust of reason, as a guide in religion, was deeply sincere, and never wavered; and so was his confidence in revelation. . . .<sup>53</sup>

Dick taught his students that “our ultimate appeal should be to the Scriptures, by which alone the question of truth and error can be decided in religion.”<sup>54</sup> In common with other confessional bodies of the Reformed tradition in the early nineteenth century, Dick’s church emphasized the primacy of scripture and positioned itself toward contemporary concerns.<sup>55</sup>

Dick’s polemical stance may have played a role in the preparation of another influential publication, his *Essay on the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (1800), which defended the doctrine of plenary inspiration and is almost certainly reflected in both his lectures and in Pollok’s similar arguments on scripture in *The Course of Time*, Book II. The *Essay* found a ready reception in America, particularly with Princeton College, which awarded Dick an honorary D.D. in 1815, in part for this work.<sup>56</sup> In Dick’s view, the fact of the inspiration

---

<sup>53</sup> Introductory Memoir, Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, xiv.

<sup>54</sup> Dick and Dick, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Graham McFarlane, “Reformed Theology in Scotland and the Netherlands,” in David Fergusson, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, Blackwell Companions to Religion (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 358.

<sup>56</sup> Cameron et al., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, 242.

of scripture and its correct interpretation did not change over time or with new developments and circumstances. Nor was there much that could be added to the understanding of scripture itself, as he “admonish[ed]” his students in the introductory address to his first lecture. Having arrived in his classroom, students “ought not to expect”

to be entertained with things which can be properly called new. . . . It cannot be supposed that, in a field which has been so often and so carefully surveyed, there is any thing left to be gathered by the persons who shall walk over it again. Our purpose is gained, if we are able to communicate to the rising race the knowledge which was imparted to ourselves by our predecessors; we have not the presumption to hope that we shall make any material addition to it; and the utmost at which we could reasonably aim is, to suggest some small matter which had been overlooked, to propose a new argument, or a better statement of an old argument, or, it may be, to throw some light upon a portion of Scripture not yet fully understood.<sup>57</sup>

Dick explained that, indeed, discoveries “might have been made also in religion while Revelation was in progress . . . but as seventeen centuries have elapsed since it was completed . . . there is every probability that we have been anticipated in all our views.”<sup>58</sup> The Bible was a book closed and sealed, although available for examination of the proper kind.

Jack C. Whytock notes that Dick’s first introductory address seems aimed at conveying to students that Dick’s lectures (and perhaps the study of theology itself)

were not for entertainment or to promote novel ideas; rather they were to represent a great chain in the study of truth. The proper study of divinity was to promote the communication of these truths to the next generation. The premise here is that truth does not change and the canon of Scripture is complete and sufficient. . . . Though Dick does not state it categorically, he was really affirming confessional creedal Christianity. . . . This was not to be a school of doubt and questioning.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> John Dick, “Introductory Address,” in Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, vol. I, vi-vii.

<sup>58</sup> John Dick, “Introductory Address,” vii.

<sup>59</sup> Whytock, *An Educated Clergy*, 299.

But there were such schools, at least metaphorically, in terms of followers and influences, and Unitarian minister and philosopher Joseph Priestley was, to Dick's mind, a chief promoter of them. Priestley is mentioned by name in a number of Dick's lectures, as is his sect, whose ideas Dick had encountered early on in the controversy over William McGill's *Essay*, which was believed to reflect Priestley's thought.<sup>60</sup> In Lecture 30 "On the Divinity of Christ," Dick attacks Priestley's "Socinian" views on the second person of the Trinity (as human, but not divine), and warns of Unitarianism,

There is reason to suspect that this pernicious doctrine has spread beyond the boundaries of the sect by which it is openly avowed; that it has found its way into churches professedly orthodox, and is taught by unprincipled men, who have solemnly pledged themselves to preach a different faith.<sup>61</sup>

The picture is of a church which, if not in crisis, is at least fighting off serious challenges from within as well as without. Therefore, the proper theological training and faithful profession of its future ministers, which Dick was himself embarked on, was essential. These young men were being sent into the world not simply to guard Christ's sheepfold, but to engage in a great theological struggle. But that was to be expected. "We need not wonder that, in modern times, there should be disputers by whom the evidence of Christianity is impugned, and its claims are rejected," Dick asserted in an earlier lecture.

The corrupt passions of mankind account for their opposition. . . . Licentiousness wishes to be free from restraint; and pride of understanding will not acknowledge the deficiency of its own resources, and submit to the dictates of superior wisdom.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> "William McGill" in Cameron et al., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, 514.

<sup>61</sup> Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 81–82.

<sup>62</sup> Dick and Dick, 167.

Dick's language anticipates Pollok's arguments in *The Course of Time*, Book II, against those who, like Priestley and the Unitarians, seem to debase scripture, supplant its teachings with their own, and act as if there will be no judgment upon them or their actions. It is one thing, Pollok's bard tells his listeners, by way of explaining the consequences of the Fall, that debased idol worshipers "deserting once the lamp of truth,/Should wander ever on, from worse to worse/Erroneously." It is another entirely that

enlighten'd, reasonable men,  
Knowing themselves accountable, to whom  
God spoke from heaven, and by his servants warn'd,  
Both day and night, with earnest, pleading voice,  
Of retribution equal to their works,  
Should persevere in evil, and be lost. . . .

(ll. 496-501)

"This strangeness," the bard says, "this unpardonable guilt,/Demands an answer," which he will "unfold" in the story that he tells. Pollok's theodicean aims were clear to the author of an early review in Boston's *Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine (1828), who affirmed Dick's warnings to his students and Pollok's to his readers, that they lived in "days of daring doubt," especially in regard to belief in divine judgment:

Above all, that comprehensive view of God's government . . . adds to this work a double value in these days of bold assumptions, grounded on careless and imperfect notions of the nature of sin, and partial and half-way reasonings upon the character and providence of God,—days of daring doubt, too, as to the fearful woes pronounced against sin, because, forsooth, they sort not with our notions of benevolence.<sup>63</sup>

For the Reverend Professor Dick, denial of the doctrine of divine retribution was directly linked to the denial of immortality – the very thing that got Pollok started on his epic enterprise. In

---

<sup>63</sup> "Review of Robert Pollok's 'The Course of Time,' *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, Boston 1 (October 1828): 526.

Lecture IX, titled “Evidences of Christianity,” Dick explores Edward Gibbon’s arguments for the rise of the faith in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Dick notes Gibbon’s contention that the doctrine of immortality was a major impetus to Christian conversion, but differs from Gibbon by asserting that

Men gave themselves no more concern about the future state [then] than they do at present, when, with the exception of a few, they studiously keep it as much as possible out of view. It is contrary to experience to suppose, that the doctrine of immortality had such powerful attractions as to recommend to mankind at large the religion by which it was taught. To the ambitious, the covetous, the sensual, the vicious of every description, the Christian doctrine is revolting, because the happiness which it promises is reserved for the pure alone, and to others it announces an eternity of suffering. A heaven without a hell would have been more pleasing to the age when the gospel appeared. . . .<sup>64</sup>

And, we might add, to Dick’s own.

### 3.5 Edward Irving and Visions of Judgment

There were, of course, those publicly combatting these kinds of heresies from the pulpit, as well as from the lecture hall, and who wielded great influence. One of the foremost – if not *the* foremost by the mid-1820s – was a fellow Scot, and indeed a former Glaswegian, the charismatic, mercurial Edward Irving. Irving had been assistant to Thomas Chalmers at St. John’s Parish in Glasgow from 1819-1822, coinciding with Pollok’s undergraduate years at the university. In 1822, Irving accepted the post of minister at the Caledonian Chapel in Hatton Garden, London, and embarked on a briefly illustrious preaching career in the capital. Graham McFarlane observes that the cultural climate of the metropolis suited Irving’s “classically trained yet romantically inclined temperament and mind.” Irving became the friend not only of Chalmers, but also of Coleridge, Carlyle, and John McLeod Campbell. The latter just preceded Pollok at the university and also studied moral philosophy with James Mylne, although there is no evidence that the two students

---

<sup>64</sup> Lecture IX, “Evidences of Christianity,” in Dick and Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 88.

ever met. McFarlane states that it was during Irving's time at Hatton Garden, a period of rapid fame and increasing influence, that Irving began to combat Unitarianism and the deist origins from which it sprang. "Irving can be understood as an apologist for all that was being swept aside in the modernist rush of the mid-nineteenth century," McFarlane asserts.<sup>65</sup> Among those things, as already has been suggested, were traditional Christian notions of immortality, judgment, heaven, and hell. If, in "these days of daring doubt," one no longer believed in immortality, it followed that one no longer believed in judgment, heaven, or hell, either.

Irving took up these issues in 1823 in a nine-part polemic titled *The Oracles of God: Four Orationes for Judgment to Come: An Argument*. In it, Irving asserted mankind's responsibility for its own actions, God's right "to place the world under responsibility," the "Constitution" under which God had ordered the world, and of course, "The Last Judgment." The latter, longest section of the book, which included four independent chapters, was constructed around a central, repeated question: "How are men to escape Judgment and the condemnation to come?" Irving's answer, in simple terms, was to purify the heart and focus one's energies on acquiring "the fruits of holiness," e.g. virtue. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given commonalities in their evangelical Calvinist backgrounds, Irving's concerns bear striking similarities to some of Pollok's themes, language, and purposes in *The Course of Time*, including an emphasis on Christian virtue. Several things in the *Orationes* deserve particular attention from the student of Pollok's work. First is Irving's call in the section on Last Judgment – published not two years before Pollok began his epic – for a new Milton to "enrich the world with a 'Paradise Regained'" about Last Judgment "worthy to be a sequel to the 'Paradise Lost'." (Like many others, Irving doubted whether Milton had really completed the theodicean task he had undertaken with his *Paradise Regained*.) Second is Irving's attack on the "high priests of sensuality," Byron and his friend the Irish poet Thomas Moore, whom Irving accuses of misleading Britain's youth with their sensuous, amoral poetry. Finally, Irving condemns recent fawning or satirical depictions of heaven and of judgment by Byron and poet laureate Robert Southey (*The Vision of Judgment* and *A Vision of Judgment*, respectively) as "two most nauseous

---

<sup>65</sup> Graham McFarlane, "Reformed Theology in Scotland and the Netherlands," in Fergusson, *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, 360–61.

and unformed abortions” which undermine the truths of biblical revelation.<sup>66</sup> Thus, a gifted Christian poet was needed to defend these truths and to affirm them before the world.

Commonalities of purpose and subject matter are easy to find between Irving’s *Oracles* and Pollok’s epic. In addition to a defense of divine judgment, they include the use of literature for theodicean aims, an emphasis on Christian virtue and warnings about the dangers of sensuality, an affirmation of the primacy of scripture and its universal accessibility, invectives against Byron, and a deep interest in the apocalyptic. However, an editor’s note in an annotated edition of *The Course of Time* published in 1857 suggests the possibility of something more: That, beyond commonalities alone, Pollok may have known Irving’s work and actively responded to the preacher’s call for a new Milton to defend God’s ways in an epic poem about Last Judgment. Referencing lines in *The Course of Time*, Book X, in which Pollok’s bard invokes divine aid so that he may “sing the day/Which none unholy ought to name, the Day/Of Judgment” (ll.51-3), editor James Boyd remarks that

A learned friend has called my attention to a striking passage in the ‘Orations on Judgment to Come’ of the late celebrated EDWARD IRVING, of London; in which, with just severity, this eloquent divine animadverts on certain poetical productions of Southey and Byron, each bearing the title of ‘Vision of Judgment’. . . . Concerning it, my friend writes: “It appears to me that the anticipation of the author was realized in the pious and gifted author of ‘The Course of Time,’ who sung—

‘The world at dawn, at mid-day, and decline;  
Time gone, the righteous saved, the wicked damn’,  
And God’s eternal government approved.’”<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Edward Irving, *The Oracles of God: Four Orations ; For Judgment to Come: An Argument in Nine Parts* (London: T. Hamilton, 1823), 347.

<sup>67</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, X.650-52.

Having offered his “learned friend”’s observation that Pollok may be the true, divinely inspired poet Irving anticipates, Boyd then provides the striking passage from *Orations*, envisioning the Day of Judgment, which is the source of his friend’s observation. In that passage, Irving describes the difficulty of putting such apocalyptic events into words – “To give form and figure and utterance to the mere circumstantial pomp of such a scene, no imagination availeth” – but he then points out that Milton (“our divine poet”) did accomplish something of similar grandeur in his depiction of Satan and his fallen angels in Hell in *Paradise Lost*:

This mighty crisis in the history of the human race [the day of judgment], this catastrophe of evil and consummation of good, fortunately it is not our province to clothe with living imagery, else our faculties should have failed in the attempt. But if our divine poet hath, by his mighty genius, so rendered to conception the fallen angels beneath the sulphurous canopy of hell, their shapes, their array, their warfare, and their high debates, as to charm and captivate our souls by the grandeur of their sentiments, and the splendour of their chivalry, and to cheat us into sympathy and pity, and even admiration; how might such another spirit (if it shall please the Lord to yield another such) draw forth the theme of judgment from its ambiguous light, give it form and circumstance, feeling and expression, so that it should strike home upon the heart with the presentiment of those very feelings which shall then be awakened in our breasts.

“This task awaits some lofty and pious soul hereafter to arise,” Irving declares,

and when performed will enrich the world with a 'Paradise Regained,' worthy to be a sequel to the 'Paradise Lost,' and with an 'Inferno' that needeth no physical torment to make it infernal; and with a judgment antecedent to both, embracing and embodying the complete justification of God's ways to man.<sup>68</sup>

It seems clear that, to Irving, the “complete justification of God’s ways to man” will not occur until a godly poet can depict the awful Day of Judgment, which itself embodies this justification, in all its grandeur and sublimity.

---

<sup>68</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 258–59.

However, Irving's concern was not only that the Day of Judgment had not received the epic treatment it deserved and required; it also was that the "geniuses" of this "shocking" age had themselves actively undermined biblical revelation with "nauseous and unformed abortions" which mocked the truth and reality of God's sovereignty. "Instead of which mighty fruit of genius," such as a pious epic expounding on last judgment, Irving decried the fact that

this age (Oh shocking!) hath produced out of this theme two most nauseous and unformed abortions, vile, unprincipled, and unmeaning--the one, a brazen-faced piece of political cant, the other, an abandoned parody of solemn judgment. Of which visionaries, I know not whether the self confident tone of the one, or the ill-placed merriment of the other, displeaseth me the more. It is ignoble and impious to rob the sublimest of subjects of all its grandeur and effect, in order to serve wretched interests and vulgar passions.

"I have no sympathy with such wretched stuff, and I despise the age which hath," Irving fumed.<sup>69</sup> Of Southey and Byron, whose respective *A Vision of Judgment* (1821), a fawning depiction of George III's ascension to heaven, and *The Vision of Judgment* (1822), mocking the deceased king and his poet laureate, were the sources of Irving's ire, the Scottish divine asserted,

The men are limited in their faculties; for they, both of them want the greatest of all faculties—to know the living God and stand in awe of his mighty power: with the one [Southey], blasphemy is virtue when it makes for loyalty; with the other [Byron], blasphemy is the food and spice of jest-making. Barren souls!--and is the land of Shakspeare and Spenser and Milton come to this! that it can procreate nothing but such profane spawn, and is content to exalt such blots and blemishes of manhood into

---

<sup>69</sup> In his poem for Palm Sunday in *The Christian Year*, published the same year as *The Course of Time* (1827), John Keble seems to make a similar point, perhaps about the same poets (particularly Byron), when he considers, "Should bards in idol-hymns profane/The sacred soul-enthraling strain. . . ." John Keble, *The Christian Year*, Facsimile of first edition (London: Elliot Stock, 1897), 119–20.

ornaments of the age. Puny age! when religion and virtue and manly freedom have ceased from the character of those it accounteth noble.<sup>70</sup>

Irving concludes his diatribe by thanking God for having “given us a refuge in the great spirits of a former age, who will yet arrest the scepter from these mongrel Englishmen.” Instead of Byron and Southey, Irving suggests his readers turn to Jeremy Taylor’s *Christ’s Advent to Judgment* (1667), William Bates’ *The Four Last Things* (1691), John Howe’s *The Blessedness of the Righteous* (1705), and Richard Baxter’s *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (1654), “which breathe of the reverend spirit of the olden time.” As for Byron, Southey, and their ilk,

God send to [them] repentance, or else blast the powers they have abused so terribly; for if they repent not, they shall harp another strain at that scene they have sought to vulgarize. The men have seated themselves in his throne of judgment, to vent from thence doggerel spleen and insipid flattery; the impious men have no more ado with the holy seat than the obscene owl hath, to nestle and bring forth in the Ark of the Covenant, which the wings of the cherubim of glory did overshadow.<sup>71</sup>

At this point, Irving returns to his original theme, remembering that “our office [in the *Orations*] is not to create forms for the presentation of the last judgment to the fancy,” but rather, “to measure it by reason, and examine how it squares with the noble sentiments of justice which God hath implanted in our breast.” The “fanciful” yet faithful depiction of the Day of Judgment will, as Irving already has stated, have to wait for “such another spirit” as Milton, “if it shall please the Lord” to provide one. Perhaps it was no coincidence when, several years later, the bard of *The Course of Time* struggled, as did Irving, to express the awesomeness of judgment and the approaching end times. “Ye holy bards!—if yet a holy bard/Remain,” he rhetorically declaimed, “what chord shall serve you now! What harp!” The lines closely follow a tribute to Milton.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 259.

<sup>71</sup> Irving, 260.

<sup>72</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, VI.81-82.

### 3.5.1 Gifts of the Spirit: Towards a Christian Literature

If, in his chapters on judgment, Irving looks for a future holy bard to sing the story of last things, elsewhere in the *Orations* he imagines the gifts of the Spirit that would be required to do so. Powerful writing, Irving asserts, would be the necessary Pentecostal offering for his age:

I fancy, that if the Spirit of God were to choose out twelve men from the house of God, with whom to finish the great work of converting men, especially the men of this country, and for that purpose were, as on a second Pentecost, to bestow upon them special gifts, the gift of writing powerfully would be a chief one. For the press hath come to master the pulpit in its power; and to be able to write powerful books, seems to me a greater accomplishment of a soldier of Christ, than to be able to preach powerful discourses.<sup>73</sup>

Whether or not Irving had Milton in mind, the last lines recall Milton's assertion that poetic abilities are both "the inspired gift of God" and "of power beside the office of the pulpit."<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Irving suggests that every Christian, and not just the poet, should aim to cultivate this "powerful" gift in the service of a Christian literature:

To use this most powerful of intellectual and moral instruments in the service of Christ, is a noble ambition, which should possess the soul of every Christian. He doth, in a manner, multiply his soul thereby, and give to his ideal thoughts a habitation and a name; his ethereal spirit he doth in a way condense and present for the use of others, as they do the invisible steam of liquors; he doth rectify it, he doth make of it an *aqua-vitae*, an elixir of life, to the refreshing and saving of many souls.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 340.

<sup>74</sup> Milton, "The Reason of Church Government: Book 2," 39.

<sup>75</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 340.

Therefore, Irving asserts, he feels himself “like the knight that breaks his first lance” in an honorable contest by attempting, somewhat unskillfully, the current essay “in the cause of Christ upon the field of religious literature.” He expects that others of greater skill will follow.<sup>76</sup>

### 3.5.2 Affirming Judgment

Whether or not Pollok actually read Irving’s *Oration*s is unknown. Irving is not mentioned in David’s biography of his brother or in any of the poet’s extant letters, journals, or notes. Biographer James Scott suggests that Pollok may have heard Irving (as well as Chalmers) preach, but in context, this seems like mere speculation. However, Scott’s brief depiction of Irving does underscore commonalities between Pollok and the popular apocalyptic preacher:

It would be doing immense injustice to the mighty dead, if I were to overlook . . . the influence which the preachers in the city of Glasgow exerted at that time over the expanding mind of Pollok. Chalmers was then in the flood tide of his popularity. . . . Irving had just appeared, and was stirring up the masses with his wonderful oratory. He seemed alone in his manner and matter. Like the angels who make pastime with thunderbolts, so he played in the pulpit with philosophy and literature; and preached and prayed evermore as one who had a great commission from the heaven of heavens to guilty men.<sup>77</sup>

The *Oration*s certainly attest to the truth of the latter statement, for they are primarily an attempt to refute the deniers of judgment, as Pollok attempts to refute them in *The Course of Time*. “[I]t is as absurd to hope that [God’s] justice will give way when it comes to the push before his mercy, and leave us in safety . . . as it would be to believe that his justice will strengthen itself and sweep all before it, devouring even those who trusted in Christ,” Irving writes. “Revelation is a stiff and rigid thing, like stubborn fact, and will not be disputed.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Irving, 340–41.

<sup>77</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. . . .*, 9–10.

<sup>78</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 342.

Similarly, near the beginning of his “brief” sketch of “the history of man,” Pollok’s bard will challenge his listeners to

Weigh good with evil, balance right with wrong;  
With virtue vice compare, hatred with love;  
God’s holiness, God’s justice, and God’s truth,  
Deliberately and cautiously compare  
With sinful, wicked, vile, rebellious man;---  
And see if thou canst punish sin, and let  
Mankind go free.

“Thou failst,” the bard quickly concludes, telling his audience not to be surprised, for “I bade thee search in vain.”<sup>79</sup> Later, in Book IV, the heavenly narrator will defend God himself against the charge of injustice, remonstrating against the man who “should presume to censure God” (l.431).

Like Pollok in verse, Irving in prose goes to some length to defend God’s justice, and especially, the retribution for sin. I already have noted the recurring question (sometimes differently phrased) which Irving poses in the latter half of *Orations*: “How are men to escape Judgment and the wrath to come?” In Part VI, “The Last Judgment,” Irving defends divine justice and retribution with the recurring refrain, “It is impossible, it were a lie,” as he elaborates the ways that God would contradict himself and deny his own power and authority should he refuse to enforce his law:

It were impossible, it were a lie, that God should open up and amply unfold a paradise of life into which nothing enters that defileth or maketh a lie, where is no disturbance of evil nor sorrowful fruit of sin, that he should also open up and amply unfold a furnace of hell, into which evil and sin and death and the grave, and unregenerate sinners, and the devil and his angels were to be thrown . . . and when it came to the crisis of decision, should shrink and misgive, and, unequal to the execution, leave men unparted, to work together good and evil, happiness and

---

<sup>79</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, II. 113-20.

misery, hope and fear, as now they do. . . . It were to make God an egregious liar, a cruel tormentor, who scared men's lives with fears, or buoyed up their souls with expectations which from the first he knew himself unable to fulfil.<sup>80</sup>

Irving's argument is certainly more succinct than any Pollok offers, but imagining and defending divine judgment is only part of what Pollok and Irving have in common. Like Pollok, Irving also feels the slights of "[t]hese Deists" who "are always shedding sneers upon the Christian, because he believes."<sup>81</sup> Moreover, in the same chapter, Irving delineates and characterizes three kinds of "natural life" – the sensual, the intellectual, and the moral – which bear strong resemblances to Pollok's depiction of the vain pursuit of earthly happiness through knowledge, pleasure, wealth, and fame in *The Course of Time*, Book III. In both cases, it is spiritual life, and virtue in particular, that is redeeming.

### 3.5.3 Virtue and Sensuality

Interestingly, both Pollok and Irving cite Milton's court masque *Comus* as a supreme literary illustration of virtue fit for every reader's instruction. While Pollok claims to have spoken with Milton about *Comus* in a dream,<sup>82</sup> Irving declares that if any modern Epicurean would "know his degradation, or the heights of virtue whence he is fallen, he may see it represented in that most classical of all modern poems, the 'Comus' of Milton. . . ."<sup>83</sup> Pollok personifies Virtue in Book I of *The Course of Time*, wherein sinners burning in Hell are forced to eternally contemplate the figure of Virtue in the sky above them, and therefore, never forget the better selves they might have been. Pollok's sinners are also plagued by a monstrous "worm that never dies," which the "stranger spirit," relating what he has seen of Hell, describes as grasping

Malignantly what seemed a heart, swollen, black,

---

<sup>80</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 344.

<sup>81</sup> Irving, 342.

<sup>82</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 201.

<sup>83</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 346.

And quivering with torture most intense;  
 And still the heart, with anguish throbbing high,  
 Made effort to escape, but could not; for,  
 Howe'er it turned—and oft it vainly turned—  
 [The worm's] complicated foldings held it fast.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, two pages beyond his mention of *Comus*, Irving writes of the sensualists' fear of death, which “disarrays all sensual feasts.” He warns that one day, they too will experience resurrection; “[m]atter again shall invest the spirit,”

and a world of matter shall arise upon [the soul's] troubled vision, and she shall eye the spiry flames and the dun smoke of hell; and she shall bathe in the liquid element of fire, and snuff up the fumes of her sulphurous bed, and *at her heart a worm that dieth not shall gnaw*.<sup>85</sup>

Presumably, both Pollok and Irving are drawing on a common source in the Gospel of Mark, chapter nine, in which Jesus teaches his followers that it is better to avoid temptation, whatever the cost, than to risk being cast into Hell, “where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”<sup>86</sup>

### 3.5.4 Byron and the Nature of Providence

As has been suggested, Irving spends a large amount of time on the evils of sensuality, as Pollok does on the sinful pursuit of pleasure. Byron features prominently in both accounts as a purveyor of sensuality who is nonetheless deserving of Christian pity. John Keble will offer a similar

---

<sup>84</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, II. 192-97.

<sup>85</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 348. Emphasis mine.

<sup>86</sup> *The Bible: New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized)* (New York: Division of Christian Education, National Council of the Churches of Christ, United States of America, 1995). The specific verse is Mark 9:48.

response when speaking of Byron in his *Lectures on Poetry* over a decade later. For Irving, Byron epitomizes the “dangerous enchantment” of sensual life, which

is vanity and vexation of spirit, and hurries one through an exhausting variety to the lethargy and tedium of overwrought excitement. This is the form of sensual life, which is prevailing at this day among our lettered and reading people.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, Pollok’s Byron will die a spent man, “[b]eyond desire, beyond ambition. . . ./ . . cut from the sympathies of life,/And cast ashore from pleasure’s boisterous surge.”<sup>88</sup> While Byron is Pollok’s ultimate example of the man who squanders God’s gifts in the pursuit of sensual pleasure, for Irving, Byron and his poet-friend Thomas Moore

are high-priests of the senses, and ministers of the Cyprian goddess [Aphrodite], whose temple they have decorated with emblems of genius, and disguised with forms of virtue and surrounded with scenes of balmy freshness; but with all its forms and decorations it is the temple of immoral pleasure, and the service of its inward shrine is disgusting immorality.

“It is very pitiful to behold the hopes of a nation,” Irving asserts, “the young men and young women who are to bear up the ancient honours of this godly and virtuous island,

hearkening to the deceptions of such enchanters, who being themselves beguiled, would fain bewitch the intellectual and moral and spiritual being of others.”<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 347.

<sup>88</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, IV. 738, 752-3.

<sup>89</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 347.

The note of sympathy is telling. Byron and Moore are themselves “beguiled,” and so they beguile others. They dare not think on death or “encounter the reveries and quiet reflections of a sick bed” that might lead to considerations of eternity. “Well, I pity them not the less that they reject Christian pity,” Irving declares. “God help and deliver them all!” Significantly, the enigmatic preacher adds: “God enable me, or some worthier messenger, to reach them with the tidings of spiritual and everlasting life.”<sup>90</sup>

Whether or not Pollok was that “worthier messenger,” his conclusion about Byron, coming at the end of his lengthy description of the poet, was not dissimilar:

His groanings fill'd the land, his numbers [verses] fill'd;  
And yet he seemed ashamed to groan; --Poor man—  
Ashamed to ask, and yet he needed help.<sup>91</sup>

Pollok makes it clear in the lines that follow that the “help” the famous poet needed was divine. For his part, Keble seemed to betray a similar sympathy for the errant bard. In his *Lectures on Poetry* a decade later, the Oxford divine classified Byron under the heading: “Recent instances of mentally affected poets,” noting that already, “more charitable readers” attributed “anything base and irreverent in his writings . . . not to his own fault, but to the afflicting visitation of Providence.”<sup>92</sup> We will return to a comparison of Byron with Pollok and Irving near the end of this chapter.

Whether or not Providence was “afflicting,” both Pollok and Irving agreed that its gifts were not equally distributed. Byron himself was Pollok’s great example of that. In the lines preceding his

---

<sup>90</sup> Irving, 348.

<sup>91</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, IV. 758-60.

<sup>92</sup> John Keble, *Lecture's on Poetry*, trans. Edward Kershaw Francis (London, Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne: Henry Frowde, 1864), 339.

lengthy description of the poet, Pollok's bard muses on the mystery surrounding the inequality of worldly gifts such as wealth, power, and intellect. However, he justifies God's providence by asserting that conscience to distinguish what is right and "moral worth" to perform it are given to all men, and they are the gifts which ultimately count:

On all, [God] moral worth  
 Bestow'd; and moral tribute ask'd from all.  
 And who that could not pay! who born so poor  
 Of intellect so mean, as not to know  
 What seem'd the best; and, knowing, might not do!  
 As not to know what God and conscience bade?  
 And what they bade, not able to obey?  
 And he who acted thus fulfill'd the law  
 Eternal, and its promise reap'd of peace. . . . (IV.623-31)

Similarly, in the same chapter of *Orations* that we have been exploring, Irving asserts that "[m]en are constituted in various moulds. . . . "

Some are weak in reason, and some are strong; some are weak in passion, and some are strong; some are open and enlarged of heart, some narrow and confined . . . . Some inhabit the peaceful country, nursed amidst health and simplicity; others the crowded city, preyed on by disease and vice. . . . some under the eye and light of knowledge, others under darkness and the shadow of death.

But "in the fullness of time," Irving declares,

. . . it pleased the Lord to make known another kind of life, differing from all the rest, which might be within the reach of all forms and conditions of manhood, of every kindred and nation and tongue. This is spiritual life. . . .<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 353–54.

The spiritual life is available to all persons, Irving states, regardless of degree or condition, because God has given humankind a “universal instinct” by which to sense his presence and respond to it:

. . . this universal instinct to admire the perfect attributes of our God doth supersede at once the distinctions of intellectual and unintellectual, civilized and uncivilized, and make the whole human race alike impressible by it, as they are alike impressible by justice, benevolence, or power. And, accordingly, it is found to be so in all stages and conditions of man to which the missionary addresses himself.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.5.5 Biblical Interpretation

Irving and Pollok are also in agreement as to the ultimate authority and confirmation of this knowledge. “All this I trace to the revelation which God hath given of himself in his holy word,” Irving writes. Similarly, Pollok’s bard sings of the Bible, “the only star/By which the bark of man could navigate/The sea of life,” which was “set/Apart and consecrated to declare/To Earth the counsels of the Eternal One,” and which contained “Heaven’s will, Heaven’s code of laws entire.”<sup>95</sup> While the Bible was the ultimate sourcebook, confirming the intuitive knowledge of God and of morality, it also was clear and plain for all to understand - a position not all agreed upon. Irving goes to some length to reprimand “the evangelical preachers . . . whose practice confutes their theology, that the word of God is a riddle unresolvable, a mystery unsearchable, which cannot be found out by the understanding of men.” “So far from giving into their position, that the Bible is a sealed book to men in their natural estate, I hold this diametrically opposite position,” Irving asserts,

That there is not a book which, being read with all the faculties of the natural man, will produce upon the natural man so strong an impression; will so exalt his imagination, so convince his mind, so rebuke his sins, so captivate his affections,

---

<sup>94</sup> Irving, 356.

<sup>95</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, II. 270-2, 281-3, 285.

so overawe his willfulness, arrest all the thoughts of his mind, and touch all the feelings of his heart.<sup>96</sup>

Likewise, Pollok's bard defended the book which declared the truth

. . . in obvious phrase,  
In most sincere and honest words, by God  
Himself selected and arranged, so clear,  
So plain, so perfectly distinct, that none  
Who read with humble wish to understand,  
And asked the Spirit, given to all who asked,  
Could miss their meaning, blazed in heavenly light.<sup>97</sup>

Irving agreed that it was the sincerity and desire of the human agent that made God's word interpretable, not the content of the book itself. Referring to the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, Irving declares that God would bless the "impressions" any reader takes from scripture, "were his blessings cared for or sought for," because it is by these impressions that "natural men" will be "judged and condemned in the terrible day of the Lord."

Let not God's word be blamed, therefore, which is like the sun to the inward soul, heating it and inflaming it to what is good; but let the wicked preferences which men give to every other impression, of pleasure, vanity, interest and worldly occupations, be blamed, and let them be taught to relax their love of these, that the other may grow into its natural strength and fruitfulness.

---

<sup>96</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 365.

<sup>97</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, II. 355-61.

Much error in interpretation of holy writ was the result, not of the Bible's complexity, but of the manner in which mankind read it. For Irving, this was the equivalent of reading the Bible solely as literature. He criticizes those who

. . . read [the Bible] but little, many of them not at all . . . when they do read it, they read it often for form's sake, and consequently derive no benefit . . . or they read it for taste's sake; and are gratified in all the critical and imaginative parts of the mind, farther than which they aimed not.<sup>98</sup>

Pollok's bard, however, detected motives more sinister: humankind's intentional misinterpretation of God's word. "Hear," he called his heavenly audience,

. . . while I briefly tell what mortals proved,  
By effort of vast ingenuity,  
Most wondrous, though perverse and damnable,  
Proved from the Bible, which, as thou hast heard,  
So plainly spoke that all could understand. (II.385-88)

Regardless of a reader's specific motives, there was no excuse, Pollok and Irving agreed, for not responding to God's revelation in scripture. Both writers and preachers would make it a centerpiece of their respective teaching.

### 3.5.6 The Apocalyptic

One last point remains to be made, and that is Irving's apocalypticism, which becomes significant for this study, given the role apocalypticism plays in *The Course of Time*. David Bebbington argues that Irving's greatest significance, in fact, may lie in his teachings about Christ's Second Coming, which Pollok briefly depicts in *The Course of Time*, Book V. Bebbington notes that, by

---

<sup>98</sup> Irving, *The Oracles of God*, 366.

“[a]bandoning the post-millennialism of his contemporaries,” Irving set a course of belief in pre-millennialism (that Christ himself would usher in the millennium) which owed much to Romantic sensibilities emphasizing emotion and drama. This Romantic, pre-millennialist vision, in which the world becomes ever more corrupt before Christ dramatically reappears to inaugurate utopia, spread among evangelicals in the Church of England as the century wore on.<sup>99</sup> Iain Murray attributes the eventual change among evangelicals from post-millennialism to pre-millennialism to Irving himself.<sup>100</sup>

However, Crawford Gribben argues that this was not the case in Pollok’s Scotland, where eschatological beliefs developed differently. “Scottish Presbyterians across the denominations were slow to adopt the premillennialism that became so popular among clergy of the established churches elsewhere,” Gribben maintains. According to Gribben, the majority of Scots adhered to an older “postmillennial expectation of the impending betterment of the conditions of humanity before the second coming of Christ.”<sup>101</sup> Therefore, it would be unusual if Pollok were to adopt a pre-millennialist approach in *The Course of Time*, and Gribben argues that he does not. Nonetheless, I believe a strong case can be made that the poem actually does present a pre-millennialist approach akin to Irving’s own, whether or not Pollok has been influenced by Irving’s apocalypticism.<sup>102</sup>

In Book V of *The Course of Time*, Pollok depicts the tribulation preceding the millennium, in which Satan attacks the church and the Lord appears “clad like a man/Of war” (Isaiah 42:13) to lead his armies to victory in the battle of Armageddon. The three days’ battle immediately preceeds the bard’s description of the millennium (lines 930-1095), during which

---

<sup>99</sup> David Bebbington, “Evangelicalism,” in Fergusson, *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, 245.

<sup>100</sup> Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 187-96, referenced in Cameron et al., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, 436-37.

<sup>101</sup> Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” 33.

<sup>102</sup> This also is the view of Julie Nall Knowles, who describes Pollok’s “belief in a Millennial Reign of Christ before the final Judgment Day,” as well as his “detailed description of Christ’s reign on earth during the thousand years of peace following the Battle of Armageddon.” Knowles, 182-3.

The East, the West, the South, and snowy North,  
 Rejoicing met, and worshipped reverently  
 Before the Lord, in Zion's holy hill. . . . (1068-70)

And

Justice and Mercy, Holiness and Love,  
 Among the people walked, Messiah reigned,  
 And Earth kept Jubilee a thousand years. (1093-95)

If Pollok presents a pre-millennial understanding of apocalyptic events, as I believe the above texts illustrate, this offers another important point of commonality and possible connection with Irving and his influence, both within and without the *Orations*. I will explore the apocalyptic elements of *The Course of Time* more generally and in more detail in the following chapter.

### 3.6 Pollok, Irving, and the Byronic Hero

There is, ironically, more than a little Byron in both Pollok and Irving, as we have noted. Byron was both a favorite whipping boy and source of intense curiosity for each writer and apologist. Pollok commentator George Gilfillan echoes other critics of *The Course of Time* when he notes similarities between its author and his depiction of Byron - or of the latter's most famous creation, the Byronic hero:

The 'Byron' will occur to the mind of every reader,--a picture in which the artist seems for a season to become the subject as he paints him. The red source of Byron's genius, shut in death, sullenly opens at his spell, and, dipping his pencil in it, the painter hastily limns him in burning colours; and it closes again for ever. Byron has never himself described one of his burning heroes better, than Pollok, the soul which created them.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> George Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits* (Edinburgh : J. Hogg; etc., 1851), 332.

Nineteenth-century reviews of *The Course of Time* nearly always quote from the one hundred thirty-eight lines on Byron, among readers' favorites, if not *the* favorite lines of the poem. Pollok himself proudly reported to his father that the writer John Wilson had "pointed out the character of Lord Byron as a very extraordinary piece of writing; he will remember that he thought it the best of the whole."<sup>104</sup> It is clear that, like many evangelicals of the time, Pollok was both fascinated and repulsed by the wicked poet who represented so many things his own theology and moral certitude opposed.

While Gilfillan attested that Pollok drew Byron, or what would become known as the Byronic hero, better than Byron could, the critic curiously appeared to depict Irving as a Byronic figure himself. Gilfillan presents portraits of both men in his *First Gallery of Literary Portraits* (1846), the first in a popular series of literary and religious appreciations of late Romantic and early Victorian writers. Although Gilfillan lamented the "strangeness" and "absurdity" of the work that possibly connects Irving to Pollok – "In an hour fatal for his reputation, [Irving] published the "Orations," Gilfillan asserts<sup>105</sup> – the Dundee-based minister-critic both admired and pitied Irving, whom he extolls as the greatest preacher of his day. "[I]n whatever part or age of the world he had lived, he must have been an extraordinary man," Gilfillan declares, "one of those rare specimens of humanity who balance all their lives between the pinnacle of genius and the abyss of frenzy." Gilfillan's physical descriptions of Irving reinforce the Romantic stereotype: "[a] broad brow, swarthy complexion, shaggy locks, and wild sinister glare." No "mere size, however stupendous, or expression of face, however singular, could have uplifted a common man to the giddy height on which Irving stood for a while," Gilfillan asserts, almost echoing aspects of Pollok's own depiction of Byron seated on "Fame's dread mountain," gazing "contemptuously/On hearts and passions prostrate at his feet."<sup>106</sup> Like the famous poet, "[i]t was the correspondence, the reflection of his powers and passions upon his person" that made Irving appear larger than life:

---

<sup>104</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 318.

<sup>105</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 225.

<sup>106</sup> Gilfillan, 224–25. The lines quoted from *The Course of Time* are Book IV, ll. 720 and 709–710.

. . . independence stalking in his stride, intellect enthroned on his brow, imagination dreaming on his lips, physical energy stringing his frame, and athwart the whole a cross ray, as from Bedlam, shooting in his eye; it was this which excited such curiosity, wonder, awe, rapture, and tears, and made his very enemies, even while abusing, confess his power, and tremble in his presence. It was this which made the ladies flock and faint. . . .<sup>107</sup>

Irving also seemed to have his dark, Byronic, secret: “His aspect, wild, yet grave as of one laboring with some mighty burden,” Gilfillan suggested. “His public prayers told to those who could interpret their language of many a secret conference with Heaven;”

[T]hey pointed to wrestlings all unseen, and groanings all unheard,--they drew aside, involuntarily, the veil of his secret retirements, and let in a light into the sanctuary of the closet itself.<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, Pollok’s Byron has the capacity to move others to pity, joy, or fear, but keeps his own counsels secret. He “would not tremble, would not weep himself;/But back into his soul retired, alone,/Dark, sullen, proud,” Pollok’s bard explains (IV.707-10). Irving’s end, too, in Gilfillan’s telling, seems much like Pollok’s elegy for Byron:

. . . worn out in body, exhausted in mind, sick, sick at heart, his fame set, his prospects clouded, his name a jest, clinging to his theories to the last . . . what was left this good, great, misguided man, but to die?<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Gilfillan, 224–25. Crawford Gribben describes Irving as “the very epitome of Romantic sensibility,” who was “[h]ailed in somewhat Byronic terms as that ‘misguided son of genius’.” Crawford Gribben, “Religion and Scottish Romanticism,” *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, Murray Pittock, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 120.

<sup>108</sup> Gilfillan, 225.

<sup>109</sup> Gilfillan, 230–31.

And like Byron, at least in the estimation of Pollok and Keble, Irving deserved Christian pity, for all his faults:

We leave the subject with a mixture of feelings, but among them pitying love holds the principal place. We grant that his faults of taste were many; that some of his errors of opinion were pernicious; that his career was brief and disastrous; but throughout the whole his heart continued to live,--genius illumined his downfall, like lightning showing the leap of the cataract. . . .<sup>110</sup>

While the parallels between Gilfillan's depiction of Edward Irving and Pollok's portrait of Byron are striking, it is impossible to know whether or to what extent Gilfillan may have drawn on *The Course of Time* in his Byronic portrait of Irving. Certainly, Gilfillan knew *The Course of Time* well enough to write a lengthy, detailed, and reflective analysis of it, published in the same volume as his appreciation of Irving. Important for our purposes is that the similarities between these portraits would seem to strengthen connections or affinities already suggested between Irving and Pollok. But if Gilfillan, who appears to have been familiar with both men's work, suspected that Pollok's epic project was inspired by the declamations of the apocalyptic preacher, he too kept it a secret.

### 3.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to present the reasons why Pollok began his epic when and how he did, and why he should have taken as his theme "the second birth and final doom of man" – that is, resurrection, judgment, and afterlife. Byron's "Darkness" clearly was the catalyst for a "glorious argument" in blank verse linking this life to the next and countering the skepticism of Byron and "his sons" regarding biblical revelation. The reasons for Pollok's near-obsession with death and immortality also seem clear: The perceived attacks on central tenets of his faith by Byron and others; his early experience of the deaths of close friends and family members; concerns

---

<sup>110</sup> Gilfillan, 231–32.

about his own health and, perhaps, intimations of his early death. Undoubtedly, Byron was a singular contemporary influence on Pollok, providing him with an antagonist and a cause, as well as connecting his project with a major figure of Romanticism. The theological program of Pollok's divinity school professor John Dick offered the poet-preacher a model of the "polemic divine" who girds for battle against heretics and religious skeptics such as Byron and the Unitarians. Finally, in a long polemic on divine judgment, apocalyptic Scots preacher Edward Irving offers the intriguing possibility that Pollok's project could have been a response to the call for a new Milton to affirm biblical revelation and counter the "sons of Byron" in epic poetry.

Whatever the exact correlation between these persons and works may be, Byron's poem, Dick's theology, and possibly, Irving's oratory, played roles in the formation of *The Course of Time*. What started as a poem about the resurrection became, instead, a poem about eternity and about how life on earth affects and even determines the life to come. "Eternity is all," Pollok's bard preaches - a central theme of the entire work, told as it is from the perspective of the life beyond. Pollok's eventual aim, so it would seem, was to tell people how to get there, an aim that would require the resources of both the poet and the preacher. The next chapter, dedicated to a close reading of major themes in *The Course of Time*, examines how Pollok attempted to accomplish that aim.

## Chapter 4

### The Poem a Sermon

*“The author continually occupies, in the estimation of the reader, the position of a mighty homolist . . . “*

James Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A. M.*

Presiding at the installation of a Reverend Sharp in the Church of Hawick in 1784, Church of Scotland minister and noted historian Thomas Somerville delivered a series of “Admonitions” regarding the duties and conduct of a minister of the gospel. A particular point of focus was what Somerville perceived as an increasing infidelity among professed Christians.<sup>1</sup> “The sincere friends of religion cannot fail to observe, with serious concern, the progress of scepticism,” Somerville declared, “and a remissness with respect to the ordinances and public duties of the Christian religion, by many who still profess to reverence its Author.” Like John Milton before him and Edward Irving after, Somerville also acknowledged the limitations of the sermonic form - the minister’s primary means of public communication - in combatting such threats to religious observance. “It may be extremely doubtful,” Somerville warned Sharp and others in attendance, “whether any solid advantage will accrue to religion from our attacking infidelity in our public discourses. . . .” This surprising admission was both because the “advocates” of infidelity generally avoided worship services where sermons were preached and because “proper answers” to serious arguments against religion “can not be stated, with clearness and precision, within the compass of a single discourse [e.g. sermon], and must therefore lose their efficacy, when exhibited in a broken and disjointed form.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John R. McIntosh references Somerville’s address in *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland*, wherein McIntosh defines “infidelity” as a “catch-all” term “employed to denote the espousal of doctrines or practices which were seen as undermining Christianity or as leading to godlessness.” John R. McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas SOMERVILLE (D.D.), *Sermons* (Edinburgh: 1813), 466–67.

What was needed to combat the alarming rise of infidelity, Somerville appeared to suggest, was some kind of longer, non-sermonic form of disputation. Meanwhile, in their Sunday sermons, ministers like the Reverend Sharp “ought conscientiously to adhere to the simplicity and purity of the gospel, and to avoid encumbering it with foreign and eccentric difficulties, which ill-disposed men will be ready to lay hold of for the disparagement of our faith.” Nor were “ill-disposed men” (perhaps skeptics in the line of David Hume) the only or even the main concern. “Still more formidable than the assaults of avowed enemies,” Somerville asserted, “is the lukewarmness of pretended friends. The greatest danger, to which religion is exposed in our own times, arises from the decline of piety among many who still bear the Christian name.”<sup>3</sup>

Somerville’s twin concerns about the rise of skepticism (often from without the Christian community) and infidelity or impiety (from within) reflect general evangelical concerns of the time about Deism and its cousin Unitarianism.<sup>4</sup> They also foreshadow the major anxieties decades later of figures as different from Somerville, a supporter of church patronage, as the apocalyptic preacher Edward Irving and the Seceders John Dick and Robert Pollok.<sup>5</sup> We already have noted Dick’s call for (and training of) the “polemic divine,” a process reflected in his *Lectures on Theology*, and likewise, Irving’s vision for a Christian literature in the *Orations*, wherein the Scottish rhetorician declares the sermonic form inferior to the printed word in propagating the gospel and combatting infidelity. It comes as no surprise that Dick was conversant with the literary trends of his day, or that Irving counted poets and writers such as Coleridge and Carlyle among his closest friends and admirers. In his portrait of Irving, George Gilfillan remarks on the former’s

---

<sup>3</sup> SOMERVILLE (D.D.), 466–67.

<sup>4</sup> Heresy and infidelity were particular concerns with regard to the theological and philosophical faculty at Pollok’s alma mater, the University of Glasgow, where at least three prominent professors (including Francis Hutcheson) were charged with heresy in the eighteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> In his support of church patronage, Somerville is closer to the Moderate Party in the late eighteenth-century Church of Scotland, which generally approved the controversial practice of church patronage and often held more liberal theological views than their evangelical brethren. (See John R. McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland*, particularly pages 20–31.) I have noted elsewhere the Seceders’ strong opposition to matters of patronage, a subject Pollok satirizes in a fictional account of a night journey to Paisley. (See David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok*, pp. 158–161.)

penchant for quoting poetry in his sermons (“The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” is mentioned specifically), as well as for critiquing and sometimes attacking poets as if they were rivals.<sup>6</sup> One imagines that if Robert Pollok knew anything about Irving at all, he knew of Irving’s interest in and concern for the poetic.

*The Course of Time* reflects many of Somerville’s, Dick’s, and Irving’s concerns, and may to some degree represent the longer, creative vehicle for theological disputation that Somerville may have imagined – and which Irving certainly did. Pollok’s desire for an inclusive “philosophy of Christianity” may be his response to some of these pressures and *The Course of Time* its product. Although the young Scot offered no explicit justification for his poem outside the work itself, others did, linking him if only indirectly to the theodicean projects of Somerville, Irving, and others who sought to defend Christianity and its God. If Irving had called for a Christian literature, which he did, and if Pollok had responded to that call, which he did directly or indirectly, it was left to others to defend the methodology. Why was a poem needed to preach the gospel? For a start, poetry was one of the most popular genres of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival, used to great effect by the Wesleys in their hymns and by Pollok’s hero William Cowper, “the evangelical bard,”<sup>7</sup> in both hymns and longer works such as *The Task*. But Pollok biographer James Scott offers another reason. “It was time that a Christian canticle should have been written,” Scott declares, because “[t]he truths of the Gospel had become axioms.” Settled after the Reformation of the sixteenth century, these “truths” over the years had become “clothed in household words, and uttered through the boundaries of the Protestant Church” – good news, perhaps, to modern congregations, but in Scott’s parlance suggestive of an overfamiliarity bordering on indifference. Reflecting evangelical emphases on active feeling over cold reason, Scott concludes that “it required the magic of song to give them [the “truths of the Gospel”] the rich tints which please the intellect, and the associations which excite tumult among the feelings.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 226. Pollok biographer James Scott, who suggests that Pollok may have heard Irving preach, describes the latter as having “played in the pulpit with philosophy and literature” as angels play with “thunderbolts.” (Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 10.)

<sup>7</sup> Bebbington, “Evangelicalism.” 242-3.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 295.

If poetry were needed to re-engage the human imagination and the heart with enduring gospel truths, it must be of the right kind. Of course, there had been other Christian canticles, but Scott's assessment was that they either were limited in scope or defective in their theology. Dante indeed had provided medieval Catholicism with a theological road map for "dark ages," but it did not serve a more enlightened, Protestant era. Nor could Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in all its magnificence, meet the needs of the present age. Although a distinctly Protestant work, vigorously attacking Catholic faith and practice, Milton had limited the scope of *Paradise Lost* (as Edward Irving had noted) to an interpretation of the cause and consequences of the loss of Paradise. And, as already pointed out, Milton had unfortunately mingled pagan "rubbish" with "the gold and silver of his mighty song."<sup>9</sup> Thus, it had fallen to Pollok to write "a poem about redemption" so comprehensive that it could instruct both angel and heathen, affirming faith where it was found and attacking heresy where faith was not. It is Pollok, Scott suggests, "[who] has blown the trumpet of the angel who preached at Bochim," where the people of Israel received a divine reprimand for covenanting with the pagan Canaanites.<sup>10</sup> "[Pollok] has touched the old harp of God," Scott affirms, "and produced a song which will be read by the multitude, when these others<sup>11</sup> are perused only by the curious and the lovers of ancient lays."<sup>12</sup>

Commentators like James Scott readily acknowledged Pollok's theodicean purposes, which they considered unique among his peers. In notes to his 1854 edition of *The Course of Time*, James Boyd declared Pollok's aim "altogether different from that of most other poets: it was not so much to please a worldly taste, as to convey truth—truth as he had learned it from a devout study of his Bible." It was therefore unsurprising if his poem proved "unpalatable" to a "depraved heart." Nonetheless, "the general popularity it has attained, notwithstanding its high religious tone, is proof that it embodies no small amount of matter exceedingly agreeable to any intelligent mind."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Scott, 298–99.

<sup>10</sup> This event is depicted in the Book of Judges, chapter 2.

<sup>11</sup> This appears to be a direct reference to poets Byron, Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, whom Scott mentions in pages immediately preceding, and only indirectly to Dante and Milton.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 296.

<sup>13</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 39.

Proof was in Blackwood's account books and in the recurring interest in episodes such as (what George Gilfillan called) "the Byron," the one hundred-twenty-odd lines depicting the era's most famous poet. Then there were those, like James Scott, who tramped the hills around the Pollok family's Moorhouse farm in order to take in "Scotia's northern battlement of hills" as the poet had known them.

By combining religious elements with Romantic ones - dogma, prophecy, apocalypticism, and moral instruction with autobiography, Nature, melancholia, and allusion - Pollok had managed to engage several readerships at once. Probably, they were never entirely distinct. On the one hand, there were Somerville's concerned "friends of religion," perhaps including Evangelicals and Dissenters, who welcomed a long and forceful response to the problems of infidelity and skepticism. On the other were those like James Gilfillan, and perhaps even Edward Irving, who were entranced with literary Romanticism, with Byron, and the cult of nature, and who welcomed a religious response in kind. Then there were those like *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine's* John Wilson, instrumental in the publication of *The Course of Time*, who admired Pollok's literary style and powers of description and recognized, as the astute Wilson surely did, that the young Scot had managed to catch the literary and religious *zeitgeist* of late-Romantic Britain. The chapter sections which follow attempt to illustrate this through a close reading of major themes and ideas in *The Course of Time* that bear out Pollok's theodicean aims and may explain the poem's popularity over a number of decades in the nineteenth century. Specifically, I will explore the poem's theological program, centered on but not exclusive to Book II; the use of moral portraiture as a teaching tool in the poem's middle books; the employment of Romantic sensibilities, including subjectivity, autobiography, bardic tradition, melancholia, and nature reverie in various parts of the work; and Pollok's use of the apocalyptic, including millennium, resurrection, and judgment, in the poem's final sections. The overall approach will be to illustrate the ways in which Pollok, like Milton before him, combines the vocation of the poet with the office of the pulpit and the mantle of the prophet in order to accomplish his theodicean and evangelistic aims in *The Course of Time*.

#### 4.1. From Creation to Apocalypse

If both Milton and Pollok struggled to reconcile competing interests (e.g. poet, preacher, and prophet), so too with *The Course of Time*, which at points reflects an almost bewildering array of interests and influences. These include Calvinism, Romanticism, Enlightenment rationalism, Scottish moral philosophy, Evangelical piety, and, as Karen McConnell notes, both “formal” and “political” apocalypse. For McConnell, *The Course of Time* “stands at a fascinating crossroads, attempting to synthesize . . . perspectives that seem almost jarringly disparate two centuries later. . . .”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the poem’s expansiveness could be cause for praise or censure from its critics. An early reviewer in Boston’s *Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine (1828) observed that, while “[s]everal religious poems have appeared within a few years . . . the one taking the widest range, and with a subject requiring the very highest powers to master it, is *The Course of Time*.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a writer in *The North American Review* the following year (April 1829) asserted approvingly that “[n]o other poet has adventured upon a theme so vast,” including Milton.<sup>16</sup> However, a number of later critics agreed with George Gilfillan that, due to its very expansiveness, *The Course of Time* “is altogether . . . of a loose and shambling structure” and, therefore, “the most unequal of all works.”<sup>17</sup>

Brimming with youthful enthusiasm, Robert Pollok had imagined a work of great breadth which, as he suggested to his brother David, might comprise nothing less than a “Philosophy of Christianity.”<sup>18</sup> Years later, David was to recall that, prior to embarking on his epic, Robert had for some time “contemplated man, religion, philosophy, and poetry, in relation to one another; and meant one day to marry them in verse.”<sup>19</sup> For biographer James Scott, Pollok’s ambition evoked comparisons with the polymath Coleridge, who had espoused a comprehensive investigation of “Biblical theology – the philosophy of religion, the religion of philosophy.”<sup>20</sup> The product of

---

<sup>14</sup> McConnell, “Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland,” 19.

<sup>15</sup> “Review of Robert Pollok’s ‘The Course of Time,’ *The Spirit of the Pilgrims Magazine*,” 520.

<sup>16</sup> “The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books,” *North American Review*, 1829, 342.

<sup>17</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 375.

<sup>18</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> David Pollok, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of S. T. Coleridge* (London: Edward Moxon, 1836), 13.

Pollok's ambition was to be a poem of enormous scope and intention if, as reviewers like George Gilfillan suggested, uneven quality.<sup>21</sup> However, it is the scope and intention of *The Course of Time* which make it of interest today. Epic theorist Herbert Tucker underscores this point when he (perhaps sarcastically) asserts that "no epic ever staked a stronger claim to tell absolutely everybody's story."<sup>22</sup> Tucker goes on to suggest that, in its scope and ambition, *The Course of Time* "implicitly complete[s]" the work of contemporary poems with more limited aims. In so doing, it can be understood to fulfill (at least to some extent) the aspirations of all religious and apocalyptic epics in late-Romantic Britain.<sup>23</sup>

Such claims are not without foundation, but a comprehensive review of *The Course of Time* reveals that, contra his Romantic peers, Pollok was more interested in traditional theodicy than in apocalypse. Nineteenth-century reviewers note, sometimes with chagrin, that when it comes to depictions of the end times, Pollok sticks closely – sometimes too closely – to his sources. As George Gilfillan argues, a certain amount of what appears in the poem's last four books, directly concerned with the eschaton, is in fact, redundant – an oddity, given the distinctly linear drive of the poet's biblical material.<sup>24</sup> One senses, as do Gilfillan, Scott, and other nineteenth-century commentators, that by the time Pollok arrives at "the end of it all," he has run out of steam.<sup>25</sup> The survey which follows illustrates Pollok's greater investment in the religious polemic and moral portraiture of the first half of his poem – the distinctly theodicean elements – than in its almost "endlessly delayed" apocalyptic conclusion. It may be that *The Course of Time*'s reforming impulse, rather than its otherworldly setting or apocalyptic description, is what most closely ties it to *Paradise Lost*, as George Gilfillan suggests. "In respect of a sort of divine dogmatism," Gilfillan declares, "[*The Course of Time*] more resembles Milton's great work than . . . any thing else."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> It may be debated whether or not Pollok fulfills the scope he assigns to his poem.

<sup>22</sup> Tucker, *Epic*, 254.

<sup>23</sup> Tucker, 263–64.

<sup>24</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 376.

<sup>25</sup> Gilfillan observes of Pollok that, "when he tries, at the close, to sing the millennial glory, his harp seems to refuse its office." Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 367.

<sup>26</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 330.

## 4.2 “The Essentials of Religion”

The heart of Pollok’s theological argument is found in Books I and II of *The Course of Time*, while the remainder of the poem (Books III-X) illustrates in one way or another the consequences of accepting or denying the doctrines affirmed at the beginning. Book I essentially is a prologue, providing a framework for Pollok’s narrative and introducing the central, almost the only, character (the “ancient bard of earth”), while in Book II, the poet offers a fairly systematic overview of his theology and identifies many of the religious and moral concerns he will address throughout the epic. Like Milton before him, Pollok articulates his over-arching purposes in the poem’s opening lines:

[To utter] as 'tis  
 The essential truth—Time gone, the righteous saved,  
 The wicked damn'd, and Providence approved.  
 .....  
 [So] That fools may hear and tremble, and the wise  
 Instructed listen, of ages yet to come. (I.19-21, 27-28)

As we have seen, two of Pollok’s central concerns are to affirm the traditional “four last things” (death, judgment, heaven, and hell) and to call sinners (“fools”) to account. We also have seen how the two-pronged “essential truth” that time will end and universal judgment will occur had been cast into doubt in Pollok’s day by Byron, Southey, and any number of Unitarians, universalists, and free thinkers. But such truths (or their corollary doctrines) also had been challenged closer to home, at Pollok’s alma mater, where in the eighteenth century Glasgow professors John Simson, Francis Hutcheson, and William Leechman all had faced heresy charges related to Socinianism, or Unitarianism.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that Pollok knew this history, especially given his theology professor, John Dick’s, involvement in the William McGill controversy. However, a concern with judgment and eternal reward or punishment was and is central to the Calvinist

---

<sup>27</sup> These charges were brought at various times between 1715 and 1750. See John Rattray McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998), 16–21.

doctrine of the depravity of man, which Pollok affirmed; it would be surprising if these things did not play an important role in a poem about the afterlife by a “strict” (if not “unbending”)<sup>28</sup> Calvinist. The idea of judgment also was foundational to nineteenth century evangelicalism, which so successfully used the threat of eternal punishment as an exhortatory device.<sup>29</sup> But a sinner like Byron who remained unconvinced of future judgment would have little interest in salvation or reform. Such a one must be reminded, and often, that his actions had eternal consequences and that Christ one day indeed would sit as judge.

#### 4.2.1 “The Essentials of Religion”: Hellish Realities

To accomplish his thesis of affirming divine providence, calling “fools” to repentance, and reassuring the faithful, Pollok employs the “ancient bard of earth,” now in heaven, to be his spokesman and alter ego. As we will explore throughout this chapter, the bard (like his creator) combines the roles of poet, prophet, and preacher, offering what nineteenth century commentators recognized, and approved or deplored, as a long sermon in verse.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the bard’s job is to tell and re-tell salvation history for the gathered “youth of Heaven”; for this he plays a golden harp, “received from God’s own hand” on the day of judgment (I., 308, 360). The bard’s long narrative, which begins in Book II, is prompted by the queries of the “stranger spirit” newly arrived in heaven from another planet.<sup>31</sup> Functioning somewhat like a Greek chorus, the spirit takes the part of the reader, asking leading questions which trigger the bard’s recital. Central among these, and that

---

<sup>28</sup> This is Julie Nall Knowles’ description of Pollok, as referenced earlier.

<sup>29</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 144.

<sup>30</sup> James Scott titles a central section of his biography of Pollok, dealing specifically with *The Course of Time*, “The Poem a Sermon.” Scott, *The life, letters and remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M.* ..., p. 291

<sup>31</sup> The decision to have the stranger spirit arrive in heaven from another planet, rather than from earth, is unusual, but perhaps nothing more than a convenient plot device to introduce a figure unfamiliar with the concept of Hell. A more interesting possibility, however, is that Pollok was familiar with Thomas Chalmers’ popular “Astronomical Observations,” preached in Glasgow and published in 1817, shortly before Pollok became a student there. The “Observations” make a case for the reasonableness of Christian faith in light of then-recent astronomical discoveries and the possibility that life could exist on other planets. Notably, the “Observations” are listed as being among the books in the University of Glasgow Divinity Hall Library in 1821, when Pollok attended classes in the Hall. (*Catalogue of the Books in the Private Collection belonging to the Cives and Students of the Divinity Hall in the University of Glasgow, including Principal Leechman's Donation*, 1821, University of Glasgow Archives.)

which gives rise to all that follows, has to do with the existence of Hell, a concept largely challenged on the borders of Christianity in Pollok's day, but openly questioned by leading churchmen and liberal theologians decades later.<sup>32</sup> The stranger spirit's query thus anticipates larger controversies to come.<sup>33</sup> What, the spirit wants to know, were the "dire sights I saw, dire sounds/I heard" when en route to heaven? What was the "wall of fiery adamant," and who were the "[s]ad figures traced in fire . . . / . . . imitating life"? What you saw was Hell, the bard responds,

the groans thou heardst  
The wailings of the damned, of those who would  
Not be redeemed, and at the judgment day,  
Long past, for unrepented sins were damned. (I.451-4)

That being said, however, a more thorough answer to "whence, or why [the sinners] came to dwell in wo" and "Why they curse God" demands "a longer tale" (I.457-9), according to the bard. Thus, he announces his intention, surely familiar to long-time residents of paradise, to "sketch in brief the history of Man" (I.488) which will span the remaining nine books and nearly eight-thousand lines.

The bard's post-historic perspective – looking back after "the day, so long expected . . . /Of the eternal doom" (I.29-30) – implicitly affirms the reality of judgment (it already has happened) and the authority of one who, like God himself, speaks from outside time.<sup>34</sup> It also affirms the Scottish Calvinist interpretation of history as the field of divine action and the study of history as a form of

---

<sup>32</sup> See Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*, 144, and Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 9, 84. Debates about the reality and everlastingness of Hell came to a particular head with the publication of the controversial theological volume *Essays and Reviews* in 1860.

<sup>33</sup> Such as that which attended the publication of the controversial Broad Church volume *Essays and Reviews* in 1860. See Julie Melnyk, *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain* (Westport (Conn.): Praeger, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Steven Goldsmith argues that Pollok's contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, William Blake, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley all "resisted the temptation to speak with the authority that comes from positioning oneself outside history." Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 22.

moral and religious instruction.<sup>35</sup> While the reader may expect a detailed accounting of human events, in fact, the bard focuses almost exclusively on what editor James Boyd suggests is more accurately “[t]he moral and religious History of man.”<sup>36</sup> Like Dante and Milton before him, Pollok begins (after a short introduction) in Hell in order to point the way toward Paradise. How better to illustrate that actions have consequences? Like Milton’s Hell, Pollok’s involves “a lake of burning fire” (I., 243); like Dante’s, “miserable beings” burn continually, but are “unconsumed” (I., 253-4). They curse, blaspheme, and wish to die, but like Dante’s sinners, they cannot. Pollok’s stranger spirit witnesses these terrors after passing through a “horrid rampart” (I., 236), reminiscent of Hell’s Gate in the *Inferno*. But whereas the inscription on Dante’s gate presents sinners with the stark, unchanging reality of their present and future condition (“Abandon all hope, ye who enter”), Pollok’s offers a stern warning: “‘Who comes this way---behold, and fear to sin!’” (I., 228), suggesting the possibility that Pollok’s sinners, or more specifically, his readers, still may change their ways.

Most interesting, perhaps, in Pollok’s Hell are the two allegorical figures already mentioned, “the Worm that never dies” (I., 204), an apparent reference to Mark 9:48 and Isaiah 66:24 (wherein those who rebel against God are eternally eaten by worms), and the beautiful, self-illuminating figure of Virtue, alluded to at points throughout the epic. These figures appear to work in tandem, since the “Worm that never dies” is associated with remorse (python-like, it entraps and squeezes human hearts) and Virtue, illuminating every corner of Hell, is associated with an innate sense of right and wrong. In *The Course of Time*, it is Virtue that inclines the faithful, like the stranger spirit, toward God and heaven “[b]y law of sweet compulsion strong and sure” (I., 138-9). Those who resist Virtue find themselves, like Pollok’s sinners, in Hell, forced to listen time and again to the thunderous refrain of “Ye knew your duty, but ye did it not” (I., 277) – an auditory equivalent to Virtue’s ever-luminous presence. Virtue is thus introduced early on as a significant theological and moral idea in *The Course of Time*, as it was in so much of Pollok’s thought. As represented by the bard in Book I, Virtue also is an important part of Pollok’s theodicean argument. If mankind

---

<sup>35</sup> Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 5.

has an innate moral sense which enables it always to discern right from wrong; if God has determined and communicated the boundaries of right from wrong; and if mankind is accountable for its actions, without exception, then, as the bard argues here and in Book II, the sinners in Hell have only themselves to blame for their ruin. The bard's lengthy description of Virtue, offered in response to the stranger spirit, makes these connections clear:

Virtue, like God, whose excellent majesty,  
Whose glory virtue is, is omnipresent.  
No being, once created rational,  
Accountable, endowed with moral sense,  
With sapience of right and wrong endowed,  
And charged, however fallen, debased, destroyed . . .  
Can banish Virtue from its sight, or once  
Forget that she is fair. . . .

... so God

Ordains; and lovely to the worst she seems,  
And ever seems; and as they look, and still  
Must ever look, upon her loveliness,  
Remembrance dire of what they were, of what  
They might have been, and bitter sense of what  
They are, polluted, ruined, hopeless, lost,  
With most repenting torment rend their hearts.  
So God ordains, their punishment severe,  
Eternally inflicted by themselves.

(I.414-443)

Pollok may be directly invoking Francis Hutcheson here - one of the Glasgow “heretic” professors - with the reference to “moral sense,” a term Hutcheson coined. A seminal figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, the influential Hutcheson promulgated the idea that human beings have built-in positive and negative responses to morally right and wrong actions, and that the moral sense obligates us to act virtuously.<sup>37</sup> Hutcheson’s emphasis on virtue, duty, and the regulatory role of conscience - all ideas expressed or alluded to in the passage above - would have interested Pollok, who encountered Hutcheson’s thought in his undergraduate moral philosophy class with James

<sup>37</sup> See Leslie Ellen Brown, *Artful Virtue: The Interplay of the Beautiful and the Good in the Scottish Enlightenment* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 9; Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 87.

Mylne at the University of Glasgow.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Hutcheson's attempt at theodicy in the posthumous *A System of Moral Philosophy* (which was in the University of Glasgow Divinity Hall library when Pollok was a student there) might have resonated with the young poet, even if Hutcheson's more liberal theology did not.<sup>39</sup>

For Pollok, as for Hutcheson, virtue, duty, and conscience all are connected. So, too, for Pollok is remorse, a product of conscience that carries its own punishment. Pollok's bard asserts that every sinner in Hell feels remorse for his or her crime, in contradistinction to the sinners in Dante's Hell, and that constant remorse – and the inability to do anything about it – is a self-inflicted punishment. In the figure of Virtue, Pollok's sinners are forced to eternally contemplate the ideal or virtuous self each might have been and was ordained to be. They are forced to constantly consider their own moral failure:

‘Tis this, this Virtue, hovering evermore  
Before the vision of the damned, and, in  
Upon their monstrous moral nakedness  
Casting unwelcome light, that makes their wo,  
That makes the essence of the endless flame. (I.444-8)

‘Where this is, there is hell’, the bard declares - not other people, as is often the case in Dante's Hell as well as Sartre's. For an “unhesitating Calvinist,” Pollok here comes dangerously close to a metaphorical interpretation of eternal punishment. However, his bard supplies the requisite physical description to ensure that Pollok's hell is both very real and also ‘darker than aught/That

---

<sup>38</sup> Pollok sat in this course during the 1820-21 academic year and left copious notes of Mylne's lectures. They form an important source of Stephen Cowley's biography of Mylne, *Rational Piety and Social Reform in Glasgow: The Life, Philosophy, and Political Economy of James Mylne* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> *Catalogue of the Books in the Private Collection belonging to the Cives and Students of the Divinity Hall in the University of Glasgow, including Principal Leechman's Donation, 1821*. University of Glasgow Archives. James Moore speculates that Hutcheson's *System* was, in fact, primarily intended as a theodicy, "in which Divine Providence is shown to have made provision for the happiness of the human race." (Moore, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation*, 241.)

he, the bard three-visioned, darkest saw',<sup>40</sup> a rather back-handed tribute to Dante, whose metaphorical depiction of moral depravity may have influenced Pollok's own thinking on the subject. Whatever the case, the presence of Virtue in Hell and the twinning of Virtue and remorse ("the Worm that never dies") is unique on Pollok's part, reminding sinners and readers alike of what they are and have been - that is, their *history* - and what they might have been or were meant to be - the prophetic and teleological elements. It is a kind of moral assessment and moral history that looks forward to the series of portraitures that will dominate the middle books of the epic.

#### 4.2.2 "The Essentials of Religion": Divine Justice

As we have seen, the entire narrative of *The Course of Time* is framed as an explanation for Hell (and, therefore, of divine justice) in response to queries from the stranger spirit. The "ancient bard of earth" takes upon himself the roles of preacher, prophet, and also catechist in order to resolve the spirit's (and the reader's) "wondering doubt" (I.487). While Book I introduces the bard, the narrative framework, and the ultimate consequences of the failure to follow virtue and obey God, the promised "brief" sketch of "the history of man" does not begin until Book II. There, the bard commences in earnest his attempt to explain "whence, or why [sinners] came to dwell in wo," as the spirit has witnessed (I.457). The bard's role is not unlike that of Dante's Virgil, explaining and justifying the torments of Hell to his pilgrim charge. But the first third of Book II, up to line 263 and the lengthy defense of the Bible, is closer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which Pollok's mother taught him as a child, than to Scholastic interpretations of Divine Providence. There, in almost Bible lesson fashion,<sup>41</sup> the bard introduces divine revelation, incarnation, atonement, and humanity's rejection of salvation in less than two hundred lines. Unlike Milton, Pollok dispenses with the stories of creation and Fall in three pages, quickly moving on to his main theme, the apostasy of humankind.<sup>42</sup> Along the way, we learn that mankind was created with a

---

<sup>40</sup> Scott asserts that this is a reference to Dante. Scott, 292.

<sup>41</sup> Herbert Tucker notes that *The Course of Time* became a favorite Sunday School prize book. (Tucker, *Epic*, 258).

<sup>42</sup> Concerning the brief space given to the acts of creation and Fall, a writer in the *North American Review* of 1828 states: "The almost boundless compass intended to be embraced in the 'Course of Time,' made it necessary for the poet to touch but slightly upon the Creation and Fall, the two great topics upon which Milton concentrated the whole force of his genius. In this respect Pollok

“similitude of [God’s] holiness,” with ‘reason high/To balance right and wrong,’ with “conscience quick/To choose or to reject’, and most importantly, “[a] perfect, free, unbiased will’ (II.41-9). Perhaps again echoing Dante, in Virgil’s farewell to the pilgrim in *Purgatorio* XXVII, Pollok’s bard explains that, in this manner,

. . . man  
Was made upright, immortal made, and crowned  
The king of all; to eat, to drink, to do  
Freely and sovereignly his will entire. . . .

(II.49-52)

But again, unlike Milton, the bard offers little psychological insight into the cause of mankind’s fall, although he later associates it, like all forms of sin, with pride.

Man sinned; tempted, he ate the guarded tree;  
.....  
He ate the interdicted fruit, and fell;  
And in his fall, his universal race;  
For they in him by delegation were,  
In him to stand or fall, to live or die.

(II.87, 90-93)

Having established man’s original fault and its consequence in an inherited sinful nature (native depravity), the bard challenges his hearer to discover any way that God’s justice might be upheld, according to his original laws, without mankind suffering punishment. This is the very crux of the bard’s argument, and it is posed to an unfallen creature (the stranger spirit), whose reason also is perfect and unfallen – unlike that of human beings who would question God’s justice. “Thy powers are great,” the bard reminds the spirit, “and purified even at the fount of light.”

---

has imitated the solemn brevity of the sacred historian, never substituting the light of his own invention, where the silence of Moses has left us in darkness.” (“The Course of Time,’ A Poem, in Ten Books,” *North American Review*, 346.)

Exert them now, call all their vigor out . . .  
 Weigh good with evil, balance right with wrong;  
 With virtue vice compare, hatred with love;  
 God's holiness, God's justice, and God's truth,  
 Deliberately and cautiously compare  
 With sinful, wicked, vile, rebellious man;---  
 And see if thou canst punish sin, and let  
 Mankind go free.

(II.105-119)

This is, of course, a Sisyphean task. As we already have seen, there is no way that God's justice can be honored, and yet man's sinfulness go unpunished. This is not some philosophical game that the bard proposes, however, but a central part of God's "wondrous plan," which he explains in an overview of the theory of vicarious atonement in the following lines. There, the spirit learns that

. . . The Son of God,  
 Only begotten and well beloved, between  
 Men and his Father's justice interposed . . .  
 His wrath sustained;  
 And in their name suffered, obeyed, and died,  
 Making his soul an offering for sin. . . .

(II.138-43)

Surprisingly, the bard appears to describe a universal atonement, rather than the limited one of traditional Calvinist theology:

Jesus, Son of God . . .  
 . . . by Death, life and salvation bought,  
 And perfect righteousness, for all who should  
 In his great name believe . . .

(II.311-6)

As previously mentioned, Pollok published these lines only a few years before fellow Glasgow Divinity alumnus John McLeod Campbell was deposed from ministry in the Church of Scotland

for preaching universal atonement (1831);<sup>43</sup> similarly, Pollok's own United Secession Church would be roiled by divisions over the doctrine in the 1840s.<sup>44</sup> For Pollok's bard, universal atonement appears to go hand in hand with the freedom to accept or reject the fruits of Christ's sacrifice, another divergence from traditional Calvinist doctrine, as noted in an earlier chapter:

Free was the offer, free to all, of life  
And of salvation; but the proud of heart,  
Because 'twas free, would not accept. . . .

(II.238-40)

Pride is indeed a problem – the major problem - to be addressed later in Book II. Hoxie Neale Fairchild specifically identifies it as a major concern of contemporary evangelical poets.<sup>45</sup> That being so, the stranger spirit's presumption that understanding and discernment are the real issues - “Men surely lost their reason in their fall/And did not understand the offer made” (II.261-2) - is plainly wrong. Already, the bard has informed the spirit that the wicked lament in Hell “for love and mercy *twice* despised” (II.216; emphasis mine), implying comprehension and rejection - first by willfully disobeying God's law, and then by rejecting Christ, who “between/Men and his Father's justice interposed” in the act of atonement (II., 139-40). Mankind's failure, then, is a failure of will, not of reason; God already has abrogated divine justice for the benefit of mankind in order to lessen if not erase its deserved punishment. Presumptuous mortals who think Hell unjust or undeserved and its inhabitants doomed by ignorance or misunderstanding have failed – or more accurately, refused – to acknowledge and heed the clear light of revelation. This contention will occupy the remainder of the bard's discourse in Book II.

---

<sup>43</sup> Graham McFarlane, in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, ed. David Fergusson, Blackwell Companions to Religion (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 363–65. McLeod returned to Glasgow several years later to pastor an independent congregation; he would become one of the leading Scottish theologians of the nineteenth century.

<sup>44</sup> Muirhead, *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity*, 80. However, Thomas Torrance asserts that, while Secessionists did “in some sense” believe Christ died for all people, they rejected the idea that his death was an actual payment, or atonement, for all. (Thomas Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 245-46.)

<sup>45</sup> Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 1830–1880, 25–27.

### 4.2.3 “The Essentials of Religion”: The Bible

“I have copied you a few verses concerning the Bible,” Robert wrote to his brother David in March 1826, only a few months before completing the initial draft of *The Course of Time*. Robert considered the verses, in which the bard explains the purpose of the Bible to the stranger spirit, “not the best specimen of poetry I could have sent you,” but important because in them

you may see in how short a space I have attempted to delineate the essentials of religion; and that I may have your opinion of this very important part of my poem—important, both as it concerns myself, the world at large, and theological critics, who will, no doubt, quarrel much at this place.<sup>46</sup>

The almost one hundred lines on the Bible which Pollok shared with his brother (roughly verses 263-361 of Book II) are the bard’s response to the stranger spirit’s assumption, quoted above, that “Men surely lost their reason in their fall” and did not recognize or understand Christ’s sacrificial atonement (II., 261). On the contrary, the bard asserts, men “might have understood” because “[t]hey had the Bible” (II., 263-4), the ultimate spiritual guidebook containing “. . . Heaven’s will” and “Heaven’s code of laws entire,” while defining both “the bounds/Of vice and virtue” and “of life and death” (II., 285-7). There was no mistaking the Bible’s message, as we already have seen, for its “sincere and honest words” were authored, “selected and arranged” by God himself and “so clear,/So plain” and “so perfectly distinct”

. . . that none  
Who read with humble wish to understand,  
And asked the Spirit, given to all who asked,  
Could miss their meaning. . . .

(II.356-61)

---

<sup>46</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 281–82.

Pollok's letter and the bard's discourse make it clear that the Bible and the "essentials of religion" are practically synonymous in the author's mind, and that the Bible is the ultimate authority with regard to Christian dogma and religious duty. Further in this same letter to David, Robert also makes it clear that "duty" and proper response to God – e.g. the acceptance of the free offer of salvation and personal behavior attendant upon that acceptance – are also synonymous.<sup>47</sup> It is apparent, too, that Pollok anticipated criticism for the views espoused about the Bible in *The Course of Time*; he therefore solicits his brother's opinion on "this very important part of my poem" as it pertains to himself, "the world at large," and the "theological critics." Already, Pollok assumes a defensive and a polemical stance, and no doubt he has reason to do so; the new biblical criticism, gaining notice in Britain with the publication in English of Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1787)<sup>48</sup> and including a "Unitarian" Bible and new Bible translations drawing on German textual scholarship, had begun to challenge the traditional notion of a seamless, unified, univocal Scripture which Pollok and most orthodox Christians held.<sup>49</sup> Writing in reference to the hermeneutical developments of this era, David Jasper notes that a sense of "fragmentation" was, in fact, a common characteristic of the Romantic spirit,<sup>50</sup> but it cannot have been one that Pollok shared. For Pollok, as for Edward Irving, the Bible was no "mere" literary text to be scrutinized, dissected, and redacted like any other. Instead, it was divinely inspired, literally true, and

By prophets, seers, and priests, and sacred bards,

---

<sup>47</sup> David Pollok, 281–82.

<sup>48</sup> There is no direct indication that Pollok read Lowth, although the *Lectures* appears in the Glasgow Divinity Hall library holdings list for 1821, when Pollok was a student at the University. However, Pollok states that he did read Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), also in the Glasgow Divinity holdings, and which Ian Balfour asserts offered a summary of Lowth's work on Hebrew poetry. (Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 76.)

<sup>49</sup> Shaffer, "*Kubla Khan*" and *The Fall of Jerusalem*, 24. The "Unitarian Bible" was published in 1808; Alexander Geddes' Bible translation, which drew on German biblical criticism, was first published in 1792. Shaffer notes the "affinity" that Unitarians, in particular, had for biblical criticism in the late eighteenth century. Crawford Gribben attributes the disruption of an "imagined hegemony of [Calvinist] orthodoxy" in Scotland at the close of the eighteenth century to "the emergence of biblical rationalism," among other factors. (Crawford Gribben, "Religion and Scottish Romanticism," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, Murray Pittcock, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 112-3.)

<sup>50</sup> David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 79–80.

Evangelists, apostles, men inspired,  
 And by the Holy Ghost anointed, set  
 Apart and consecrated to declare  
 To Earth the counsels of the Eternal One. . . . (II.279-283)

Pollok's "bibliolatry," as Coleridge, writing about the same time, called the literal, non-interpretative approach to scripture,<sup>51</sup> was not an unusual evangelical response to contemporary hermeneutical challenges. Dissenters in general viewed the Bible as the major, or even the sole, source of Christian authority.<sup>52</sup> As John R. McIntosh notes, post-Humean and post-Enlightenment evangelicals in late eighteenth-century Scotland almost of necessity put the Bible at the center of their theological reasoning. Hume's deconstructive philosophy had punched a hole in purely evidentiary and rationalistic attempts to prove the truths of Christianity. "[A]ppreciation of the significance of Hume's work steered Scottish evangelical theologians away from a system of apologetics based on arguments derived from evidences of Christianity, and towards a more biblical approach to the defence of the faith," McIntosh asserts. This trend in scripture-based argument reached an apex, so McIntosh suggests, with Thomas Chalmers,<sup>53</sup> who left an indelible mark on the Glasgow of Pollok's era. On a similar line, Pollok commentator George Gilfillan avers that no one in the early nineteenth century saw the "tide of German skepticism . . . coming over the church" more clearly than did Chalmers.<sup>54</sup> It is tempting to imagine that Pollok's Bible-based defense of the faith was influenced by Chalmers during the latter's Glasgow years, but as mentioned earlier, there is no direct evidence that the young poet heard or read the renowned minister-theologian.

Apart from "Heaven's will" and "Heaven's code of laws entire," the Bible also spelled out the "plainest, most essential truth" about the relationship between God and man, according to Pollok's bard. Here in lines 291 to 354, Pollok is, perhaps, at his most Calvinist; while the bard may appear

---

<sup>51</sup> Coleridge likely appropriated this term from G.E. Lessing. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: Edward Moxon, 1853).

<sup>52</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland*, 177.

<sup>54</sup> George Gilfillan, *A Third Gallery of Portraits* (Hogg, 1854), 108.

to support the idea of universal atonement and rarely speak of a chosen “elect,” his portrait of God as all-powerful, universal lawgiver and mankind as completely mired in sin directly reflects the language and ideas of Calvinist confessional documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>55</sup> In fact, this section of Book II reads very much like a catechism. So, writing to William Blackwood in November 1826, when submitting his poem to the editor for possible publication, Pollok could assure Blackwood that

the sentiments which I have expressed of religion, which is especially treated of in the second book, are such as seemed to me agreeable to the Word of God and in few instances, I believe, will they be found differing from the approved creed of our country.<sup>56</sup>

Central among these sentiments, in accord with the Confession, was

That God is one, eternal, holy, just,  
Omnipotent, omniscient, infinite;  
Most wise, most good, most merciful and true;  
In all perfection most unchangeable . . . (II.292-5)

But also that “every man of every clime/And hue, of every age, and every rank,”

Was bad—by nature and by practice bad;  
In understanding blind, in will perverse,  
In heart corrupt; in every thought, and word,  
Imagination, passion, and desire,  
Most utterly depraved. . . . (II.296-302)

---

<sup>55</sup> The Pollok brothers evidently memorized the Westminster Shorter Catechism as children, and Robert later asserted that *The Course of Time* “has my mother’s divinity – the divinity she taught me when I was a boy” – perhaps alluding to the Confession and the Catechism. David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 6, 270.

<sup>56</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 315.

A signal proof of man's depravity was his willful misinterpretation and misrepresentation of God's word in scripture. We already have noted the bard's call to "Hear . . . what mortals proved/ . . . Most wondrous, though perverse and damnable/ . . . from the Bible" (II., 385-8). The remainder of Book II, almost four hundred lines, is given over to a detailed description of the various ways that, "[b]y effort of vast ingenuity" (II., 386), men perverted the scriptures and debased true religion. In its attacks on priestly corruption, church-state collusion, false prophets and false rulers, and suppression of freedom of conscience and of religion, the passage reflects a familiarity with Dante's *Commedia*, as well as with *Paradise Lost*. For the writer of a June 1827 review of *The Course of Time* in Blackwood's Magazine (whom George Gilfillan identifies as John Wilson),<sup>57</sup> the bard's depiction of religious and political corruption here and in Books III and IV is reminiscent of the Archangel Michael's visionary revelations to the recently fallen Adam in the latter parts of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>58</sup>

Many of the heresies and "perversions of the Bible"<sup>59</sup> the bard details in lines 389 through 473 can be speculatively identified with philosophical and religious positions of Pollok's day and beyond. Those who call the Bible "a lie" and "[a] fable, framed by crafty men, to cheat/The simple herd and make them bow the knee/To kings and priests" (II., 390-3) may represent atheists in general and Enlightenment humanists such as Voltaire, in particular, since they deny revelation and associate religion with oppression. Others, who hold that Jesus "[w]as naught but man, of earthly origin:/Thus making void the sacrifice divine" (II., 435-6) appear to represent Unitarians, a movement particularly distasteful to Pollok and his theological instructor John Dick, as we have seen. "Necessarians" of the Anthony Collins stripe<sup>60</sup> and, perhaps, strict Calvinist predestinarians also appear to be objects of censure, because they

---

<sup>57</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 380.

<sup>58</sup> "'The Course of Time,' A Review," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 849.

<sup>59</sup> This is the sub-heading which editor James Boyd gives to this section of *The Course of Time* Book II. Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, p. 78.

<sup>60</sup> Pollok mocks "Necessarians" in the graduation satire referred to earlier. David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok*, 183.

. . . proved that men  
 Might live and die in sin, and yet be saved,  
 For so it was decreed; binding the [human] will,  
 By God left free, to unconditional,  
 Unreasonable fate. (II.396-400)

Likewise, the bard condemns pagans and idol worshipers who deny “[t]he voice within, the voice of God, that naught/Could bribe to sleep,” instead setting up for themselves

. . . stocks and stones,  
 Reptiles, and weeds, and beasts, and creeping things,  
 And spirits accursed. . . .  
 . . . . .  
 And, bowing, worshipped these, as best beseemed,  
 With midnight revelry obscene and loud,  
 With dark, infernal, devilish ceremonies,  
 And horrid sacrifice of human flesh. . . . (II.463-70)

However unsavory this may seem, some of the bard’s sternest words are reserved for the creedal, ritualistic traditions and episcopacy – that is, Roman Catholicism and the episcopal traditions, perhaps including the Church of England.<sup>61</sup> Claims for papal infallibility are dismissed as willful misrepresentations of biblical teaching rendering the claimant “most fallen by such/Pretense”; likewise, priests who deny believers access to the scriptures, which God intended to be “open to all,” assume a “forged authority” rather than a real one (II., 411-16). The bard’s critique of episcopacy – of those who, “in outward rite devotion placed/ . . . imagining,/That God, like men, was pleased with outward show” (III., 421, 425-6) - recalls the prophet Amos’ well-known condemnation of ancient Israel’s ritual cult in Amos chapter 5. Similarly, those who trust “[a] creed in print, though never understood,” and “[a] theologic system on the shelf” - who may represent Catholics, Episcopalians/Anglicans, or other creedal traditions – will find “[t]hey sinned, and never knew./For what the Bible said of good and bad,/Of holiness and sin, they never asked”

---

<sup>61</sup> The Church of Scotland is of course the national, rather than the established, church in Scotland.

(II., 670-5). The bard will return to this theme much later, as the Day of Judgment approaches in Book VIII, depicting the “bigot theologian,” who “to his liking turn’d/The meaning of the text; made trifles seem/The marrow of salvation,” and

. . . proved all creeds false but his own, and found,  
At last, his own most false—most false, because  
He spent his time to prove all others so. (VIII.212, 220-2, 237-9)

This sort of sectarianism and meaningless theological dispute also is a focus of Pollok’s graduation satire, where of course it receives a more comical treatment.<sup>62</sup> However, the “bigot theologian” may be just the sort of person the author of *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine has in mind when he or she praises *The Course of Time* because

[I]t serves to counteract the influence of those who put aside the authority of the Bible, where convenience requires it; or professedly admitting it, torture its meaning, or render it unmeaning, that it may not speak contrary to their notions of what God should do, or God should be.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, the errant theologian of this kind and his close relative the corrupt churchman are at the receiving end of some of the bard’s harshest rebukes in Book II. They come as part of a lengthy diatribe against church-state collusion and the destructive lust for temporal wealth and power in lines 507 through 623. We earlier noted the bard’s vociferous denunciation of religious persecution in these lines, a likely reference to Stuart oppression of Scottish Covenanters and other non-conformers in the late seventeenth century. The debasement of religion by secular authorities seeking control over the church or corrupt religious authorities seeking secular power most incenses the bard because it encourages the masses of humankind themselves to “despise” and denigrate authentic religion. Although each individual has a God-given conscience, and therefore

---

<sup>62</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 182.

<sup>63</sup> “Review of Robert Pollok’s ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Spirit of the Pilgrims Magazine*, 528.

is responsible for his or her own actions – a significant point the bard will return to at the end of Book II - it is “the king and priests” “who [sit] in highest place,/Exalted” who are most “chargeable” “for sin by others done” (II. 507-9). The bard’s fierce denunciation of these corrupt temporal and religious rulers often approaches the rhetoric of Dante’s pilgrim in his outrage against the corrupt leadership of his day and perhaps borrows from it. The “uncircumsized potentate” whose “one intent,/Purpose, desire, and struggle” is “to wrest the crown from off/Messiah’s head, and put it on his own” will, the bard asserts, receive the damnation he deserves (II., 556, 525-8, 564-5). But words seem insufficient when it comes to describing “the unfaithful priest”: “[W]hat tongue/Enough shall execrate. . .” one whose “[f]irst, last, and middle thought” is

To ape the gaudy pomp and equipage  
Of earthly state, and on his mitred brow  
To place a royal crown. (II.565-6, 575-7)

This seems to be a clear allusion to the bishop of Rome, but also may encompass episcopal leadership in the established churches in Britain, particularly during the religious persecutions of the seventeenth century. It is this “unfaithful priest” who

. . . sold  
The sacred truth to him who most would give  
Of titles, benefices, honors, names;  
For this betrayed his Master; and for this  
Made merchandise of the immortal souls  
Committed to his care. (II.577-82)

Such stinging words directly recall Dante’s attacks on the corrupt papacy in *Paradiso* XXV and XXVII. The figure here invoked is a “[m]ost guilty, villainous, dishonest man,” a “wolf in the clothing of the gentle lamb,” “[d]ark traitor to Messiah’s holy camp,” and an “[a]ssassin masked/In Virtue’s robe” (II.611-5). Also like Dante, the exasperated bard ultimately finds words inadequate

- in this case, to the task of exposing such iniquity. “I strive in vain to set his evil forth!” the bard declares. He will return to this figure much later, in Book VIII, where the “false priest” stands among the resurrected sinners awaiting judgment. There he is “[m]ost wretched, most contemptible, most vile,” feeling in his “conscience” “[t]he fellest gnaw of the Undying Worm,” because “he had on his hands/The blood of souls, that would not wipe away” (VIII.749-53).

Regardless of the false priest’s guilt, however, the souls in his care ultimately are responsible for themselves:

. . . [W]hether I for man’s perdition blame  
Office administered amiss, pursuit  
Of pleasure false, perverted reason blind,  
Or indolence that ne’re inquired, (II.698-701)

The bard asserts,

. . . I blame  
Effect and consequence; the branch, the leaf.  
Who finds the fount and bitter root, the first  
And guiltiest cause whence sprung this endless woe,  
Must deep descend into the human heart,  
And find it there. (II.701-6)

In the final analysis, “[w]hat peopled hell” and “what holds its prisoners there” is “[p]ride, self-adoring pride” (II.711), as the bard already has argued. The machinations of the false priest, the corrupt churchman, and the deceitful politician may be unforgivable, leading men astray by their rituals and creeds, their persecutions and abuse of scripture, but in the end, men cannot escape responsibility for their own spiritual welfare. “They had the Bible” (II.264), the bard has attested, but they did not follow it; “[e]ach had his conscience . . . reason, will,/And understanding” (II.625), but did not “search/. . . choose, reject, believe, consider [or] act” (II.626-7). Instead, as the bard depicts at the end of Book II, echoing the language of Ecclesiastes, men dedicated themselves to

everything but God and “ran till out of breath” “[i]n Time’s pursuits” (II.651). Like the sinners in Dante’s hell, Pollok’s aspostate humanity reaps the fruit of its ill-conceived actions, “for so they wished it,” the bard asserts, “so did pride desire” (II.778). Moreover,

It was the ever-moving, acting force,  
The constant aim, and the most thirsty wish  
Of every sinner unrenow’d, to be  
A god . . . (II.724-7)

The bard declares.

Hence man’s perpetual struggle, night and day,  
To prove he was his own proprietor,  
And independent of his God. (II.735-7)

This constant attempt by man to set himself up as his own ruler and to locate happiness within himself, apart from God, is nothing but a “desperate frenzy,” a “madness of the will,” and “drunkenness of the heart,” the bard insists (II.745-6). Only the Bible taught how and where to find happiness, and the larger part of mankind had rejected the Bible. “Such was the cause that turned so many off/Rebelliously from God, and led them on/From vain to vainer still, in endless chase” the bard declares at the close of Book II (I.779-81). The books that follow in *The Course of Time* will offer many instructive examples of that “vain chase,” but also how a reader might set his or her eyes on heaven and live towards eternity, like the bard.

#### 4.3 “Moral Portraiture”

Written in a neat, almost feminine, hand inside the back cover of an early edition of *The Course of Time* are the words “Ethics class, 1832.” The inscription, which appears in an eleventh

Blackwood edition of the poem owned by the University of Glasgow, offers the tantalizing suggestion that *The Course of Time* might have been used in ethics or moral philosophy classes at the University in the 1830s.<sup>64</sup> The suggestion certainly would have been a welcome one to alumnus Robert Pollok, who prized the university's instruction in moral philosophy and clearly saw his poem performing an important didactic function. Unfortunately, although there is evidence that *The Course of Time* was used elsewhere in Sunday School and even seminary classes, no records exist from the 1830s to tell us if the poem was on any syllabus at Pollok's alma mater.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, moral instruction, or what George Gilfillan refers to as the poem's "moral portraiture," is central to its message and directly connected to the history of Scottish moral philosophy which Pollok studied at Glasgow. Despite criticism from Gilfillan and others that the lengthy series of didactic portraits in the poem's middle and later books detracts from its overall interest (and, importantly, delays the arrival of apocalypse), these vignettes are actually a focal point, or a focal illustration, of Pollok's argument. In them, the poet's pietistic theology, studies in moral philosophy, embrace of literary culture, and Calvinism all come together. If in Books I and II, Pollok sets out to defend his theological argument and to expose false doctrines and practices, in the poem's middle books, he offers examples of how to live and how not to live so as to gain the perfect, enduring happiness unobtainable on earth. In the section which follows, I will explore the reasons why moral portraiture may have been important to Pollok, and what may have influenced his use of it; how happiness and virtue were understood in the period, particularly in the tradition of moral philosophy at Glasgow; how the moral sense was connected to the artistic sense in the tradition Pollok inherited; and how the poet presents and utilizes moral portraiture in *The Course of Time*.

---

<sup>64</sup> This volume is part of the Pollok Manuscript Collection in the University of Glasgow Library Special Collections.

<sup>65</sup> No syllabi or course records detailing reading texts in theology or moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow in the 1820s or 1830s exist. However, in the introduction to his 1854 New York edition of *The Course of Time*, editor James Boyd asserts that *The Course of Time* is "extensively used in common-schools and in higher seminaries, as a text-book for parsing," and declares that he has prepared the present edition with additional notes, sub-headings, and an index in order "to answer . . . higher purposes in a course of education." James Boyd, ed., *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches and Notes, Critical and Illustrative* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1854), 4.

### 4.3.1 Pollok and Moral Philosophy

We already have noted the importance that the idea of virtue played for Pollok, who identified that quality in his hero Milton and in Milton's works; who heard it expounded from the lectern of his theology professor, John Dick, and in the tenets of his denomination; and possibly read about and reflected on in the writings and sermons of the charismatic Edward Irving. We recall that Dick had declared Christian piety the first prerequisite to the study of theology itself, arguing that no "truly virtuous and humble man" could be an "infidel." By implication, no infidel, heretic, or unbeliever could be virtuous, an idea which leading figures in the Scottish Enlightenment, especially Francis Hutcheson, had challenged.<sup>66</sup> What they and Pollok, Dick, and Irving held in common was the idea that virtue, duty, and happiness all were connected, and that one could not have the latter without the former. We already have seen Pollok place virtue and happiness in a universal hierarchy, wherein

happiness has her seat above virtue, who beckons and leans forward to hand us, if we will, up to her who smiles above. But we must rise by her assistance, or she will for ever turn herself between us and the seat of bliss.<sup>67</sup>

A century earlier at Glasgow, Hutcheson had declared the "pleasures" of Virtue "superior to any other," and in doing so, had identified Virtue as the ultimate source of human happiness.<sup>68</sup> Whether intentionally or not, Pollok closely echoed Hutcheson in a literary essay written in his final year as an undergraduate (1822), when the young Scot surmised that

---

<sup>66</sup> Leslie Ellen Brown, *Artful Virtue: The Interplay of the Beautiful and the Good in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 45.

<sup>67</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 130.

<sup>68</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections: With Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (London: Printed for W. Innys and J. Richardson, S. Birt, C. Hitch, 1756), 130, <http://archive.org/details/essayonnaturecon1756hutc>.

[w]ere we to quit this world for a moment, and view man standing naked and bare before the tribunal of his God, the superiority of virtue to every other qualification, in giving happiness, would need no proof.<sup>69</sup>

The image conjured here, of a man “standing naked and bare before the tribunal of his God,” almost exactly foreshadows the original idea behind *The Course of Time*, which Pollok described to his brother David in February 1825 as “a plan for the rigid depictment of the characters of men at that time when all but character shall have left them.”<sup>70</sup> That time, of course, is the Judgment following the general resurrection of humanity.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Hutcheson’s widely disseminated theory of the “moral sense” also may have captured Pollok’s imagination. That theory asserted an internal mechanism that instinctively enabled human beings to discern virtue from vice and good from bad in themselves and others and to act upon that knowledge.<sup>71</sup> The moral sense – and by extension, the qualities of virtue and duty – thus had an important social as well as individual function, highlighting behavior and conduct in society at large.<sup>72</sup> George Greig, a bishop in the Scottish Episcopal Church, took the idea further in an article on moral philosophy for the Third Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797), arguing that morality was an “art” with a system of rules leading towards virtuous action, and thence, happiness.<sup>73</sup> Whether or not Pollok read Greig’s article, he had encountered Hutcheson’s theories and the work of Hutcheson’s successors in moral philosophy at Glasgow, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid, through James Mylne’s lectures and his own reading. (In fact, Reid appears in Pollok’s graduation satire as a disembodied goblin.) By the time Pollok arrived at university, Glasgow’s heyday in moral philosophy was past, but Hutcheson’s theories still commanded attention, and ethics remained central to its undergraduate curricula. Pollok’s extensive notes from James Mylne’s moral philosophy class in the academic year 1820-1 (four years before he began *The Course of Time*) reveal a wide range of subject matter directly related

---

<sup>69</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 142.

<sup>70</sup> David Pollok, 265.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Artful Virtue*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, 27.

to his poem – including lectures on virtue, immortality, the nature of happiness, and duty - as well as a careful, attentive note-taker. If the notes reveal little of the poet's inner thoughts, Pollok could hardly have missed the Scottish philosophers' emphasis on the moralist as educator, the importance of duty, or the Enlightenment penchant for didactic art.<sup>74</sup>

One very important point on which Pollok certainly disagreed with Hutcheson was whether or not happiness could be found on earth. Hutcheson had infamously asserted that happiness could be attained through the practice of virtue alone, with or without God, and the kirk had roundly attacked him for it.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, over time, moderate elements in the established church gradually assumed the Enlightenment concern for the temporal happiness of society which Hutcheson had espoused.<sup>76</sup> It was, however, unlikely that Pollok could share that concern, and certainly not Hutcheson's optimism about finding happiness in the terrestrial sphere. In the literary essay quoted above, Pollok flatly asserted that, "whenever I see a fellow-creature urging and sweating after the light steps of earthly happiness, it reminds me of one running and bustling among the graves and tombs of the dead," adding, "[t]he pursuit of mere worldly happiness cannot be too soon relinquished by an immortal creature; and the pursuit of heavenly delights cannot be too soon begun."<sup>77</sup>

In fact, the long-running series of vignettes that stretch from Books III to IV and VIII to IX in *The Course of Time* juxtapose the vain pursuit of earthly happiness (largely Books III, IV, and VIII) with the practice of virtue and duty to Christ (Books V and IX) that lead to real, eternal bliss. Early in his narrative, Pollok's bard reveals that the first thing "every being rational made" hears upon creation is the command to "[l]ove God, love truth, love virtue, and be happy" (III., 32), a tidy summary of how to achieve eternal bliss. Unfortunately, the great majority of humanity will ignore this command and, thus, hear a very different refrain on Judgment Day: "Ye knew your duty, but ye did it not" (IX, 883, 888, 892). This is the charge levelled against the reprobate in *The Course*

---

<sup>74</sup> Brown, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, 45.

<sup>76</sup> Brown, 45.

<sup>77</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 129–30.

*of Time* for failing to recognize or to accept that morality (e.g. the practice of virtue) *is* duty to Christ. This is the point Thomas Somerville's colleague the Reverend Robert Walker had emphasized sixty years earlier in his *Sermons on Practical Subjects* (1771), wherein Walker admonished preachers to present "the great duties of morality" as "the genuine effects and proper evidences of faith in Christ. . . ." <sup>78</sup> "This, and this only, is the principle of that holiness, without which no man can see God," <sup>79</sup> Walker asserted. At the close of the eighteenth century, many ministers of the cloth in Scotland appeared to agree, feeling duty-bound, as Crawford Gribben suggests, to "preserve and disseminate an inherited tradition of faith and morals" irregardless of the cultural changes happening around them. <sup>80</sup>

#### 4.3.2 The Bard as Moralist

Interestingly, the transmission of moral sensibility or moral culture was an important part of the traditional role of the bard in Scotland, whom Lord Kames (another leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment) and fellow literati held up as a guardian of morality. <sup>81</sup> As Leslie Ellen Brown notes, the Third Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, to which George Greig contributed, emphasized at length the bard's role as preserver of culture, law, religion, and tradition. <sup>82</sup> Thus, in the Scottish Enlightenment, the "sentiment of morals" was promulgated not only via the study of Greek and Roman classics, as might be expected, but also by the tradition of the Celtic bard <sup>83</sup> in Scottish-penned works like James MacPherson's Ossian poems or James Beattie's *The Minstrel*, both of which Robert Pollok knew and admired. <sup>84</sup> It was, after all, in *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) that Hugh Blair had argued for the centrality of moral sensibility in epic poetry. <sup>85</sup> If Pollok were looking for examples of the bard as moralist or support for using

---

<sup>78</sup> Robert Walker, *Sermons on Practical Subjects / by Robert Walker* (Edinburgh : Printed for A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1771), 298, <http://archive.org/details/serprac00walk>.

<sup>79</sup> Walker, 301.

<sup>80</sup> Gribben, "Religion and Scottish Romanticism," 116.

<sup>81</sup> Brown, *Artful Virtue*, 219–20.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, 218.

<sup>83</sup> Brown, 225.

<sup>84</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal*. (London: : printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt ..., 1763), 25, <http://archive.org/details/criticaldisserta01blai>. Blair

poetry as a vehicle for the promulgation of virtue, he need look no further than the recent literary and philosophical productions of his homeland. Hutcheson himself had argued that the “moral sense” is “the Foundation . . . of the chief Pleasures of Poetry,” and that “art is more powerful” than nature in “affecting us towards virtue.”<sup>86</sup> The arts were morally justifiable because they reinforced morality itself, just as moral language and moral characterization enhanced the pleasure and aesthetic value of a poem or a play.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Hutcheson’s suggestion that God “made Virtue a lovely form, to excite our pursuit of it.”<sup>88</sup>

Without doubt, virtue was aesthetically pleasing to Robert Pollok, who describes it in *The Course of Time*, Book I as “a form/Of beauty without spot, that naught could see/And not admire – admire and not adore” (l., 395-7, 405). The young poet likely would have agreed with Aberdonian philosopher Alexander Gerard that virtue was the supreme aesthetic beauty, and where it was lacking, a work must be condemned.<sup>89</sup> In his proposed critique of literature, Pollok planned to condemn “[n]ovels of all kinds . . . entirely,”<sup>90</sup> and he did so in *The Course of Time*, Book IV, wherein the bard declares that “[a] novel was a book/Three-volumned, and once read, and oft crammed full/Of poisonous error. . . .” (ll. 325-7). Pollok may have known Lord Kames’ influential *Elements of Criticism* (1762), which established standards for literary appreciation, including moral ones,<sup>91</sup> but the poet’s concerns about the propriety of novels and novel-reading reflect standard evangelical views of the time. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason observe,

[p]opular demand for novels challenged the pre-eminence of the Bible at the same time as new intellectual trends began to undermine the aura surrounding the Sacred

---

also had authored an influential five-volume series of *Sermons* (1777) promoting practical Christian morality.

<sup>86</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue : In Two Treatises* (London : Printed for D. Midwinter, A. Bettersworth, and C. Hitch ..., 1738), 262, <http://archive.org/details/inquiryintoorigi00hutc>.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, *Artful Virtue*, 26.

<sup>88</sup> Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 9.

<sup>89</sup> Brown, *Artful Virtue*, 31.

<sup>90</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 324.

<sup>91</sup> Brown, *Artful Virtue*, 38.

Text. As a consequence, Evangelicals became increasingly anxious about contemporary reading habits.<sup>92</sup>

Then, too, novels could present immoral as well as moral characters and events. “We cannot . . . read continually a display of human passions and feelings, and remain wholly exempt from their contagion,” a writer in the *Christian Observer* declared in 1815.<sup>93</sup> The imagination was or could be dangerous. Given the historic Presbyterian hostility to secular culture,<sup>94</sup> and evangelical suspicions about literature in particular,<sup>95</sup> a reader may wonder that Pollok proceeded with his plans for a literary career alongside a ministerial one. However, the young author clearly did not share the wider concerns of his denomination about poetry, at least, describing it in a letter to his brother as a “divine art, which I looked upon, and which I do still look upon, as the noblest employment of the mind of man.”<sup>96</sup> Likewise, and importantly, the connections that the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment made between aesthetic sense and moral sense, art and virtue, provided a solid intellectual foundation for any artist who set out, as Pollok did, to be a teacher of morals. Sounding like a true heir of the “culture of improvement” so central to the Enlightenment in Scotland, Pollok declared that “the moralist . . . can never appear on the coast of life unseasonably. . . . [for] every age has its peculiar eccentricities in vice, [and] its ill-will at some particular virtue.” Such being the case, “[l]et the philosopher of morals arrive when he may,” Pollok declared,

only let him take his seat high on the imperishable battlements of virtue, and cast his comprehensive eye down on the vast changing world below . . . let him glance deep into the workings of the human heart, and examine the state of pride and envy, hatred and fear, of love, joy, compassion, and hope, which inhabit there—and he will hear duty calling him to lift up his voice, and teach the people knowledge.

---

<sup>92</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 132–33.

<sup>93</sup> *Christian Observer*, XIV (1815), 512–7, cited in Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 111.

<sup>94</sup> Carruthers, *Scottish Literature*, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Gribben, “Religion and Scottish Romanticism,” 119.

<sup>96</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 254.

Nor will there be any lack of work for the philosopher of morals. “He will see a thousand festering vices to eradicate,” Pollok affirmed, “and a thousand languishing virtues to cherish and invigorate.” Given the magnitude of this task, it was no wonder that the young poet rose to a dramatic flourish, asking “Where, then, is the moralist of the nineteenth century?”<sup>97</sup> The question surely was rhetorical, for the literary record would show that he had already arrived.

### 4.3.3 Portraits in the Eighteenth-Century Style

Within three years of writing the above words, Pollok had begun depicting what appeared to some critics as “a thousand festering vices” and “a thousand languishing virtues” in the middle books of *The Course of Time*. The series of cautionary vignettes was meant to affirm and to illustrate the bard’s thesis about a coming Day of Judgment, as well as the warning on the wall of Hell (“Who comes this way, behold, and fear to sin!”), the allegory of guilt in “the eternal Worm,” and the ever-present figure of Virtue. The bard’s starting point was the recognition that “the universal wish,/The aim, and sole intent” of every human being “was happiness” (III., 38-9), but also that God, “in his own essential nature” had “eternally” bound happiness and virtue together (54-55) - a point that bore repeating. However, as the bard had demonstrated in Book II, the majority of mankind had “scorn’d” the Bible, “[t]hat else to happiness and heaven had led,” and this unfortunate event had precipitated the present “narrative of woe” (27-9). Now, the stranger spirit and his heavenly companions were called to “[h]ear . . . more largely of the ways of Time” and of “[t]he fond pursuits and vanities of men” (30-1).

The reader might expect a “narrative of woe” to be freighted with negative examples, and true to form, Pollok’s gallery offers more rogues than saints, a point that Gilfillan and others lamented (although, notably, not James Boyd). The bard’s moral excursion begins in Book III by tracing humankind’s vain pursuit of earthly happiness through philosophy, the accumulation of wealth (“gold”), pleasure (personified as the female seductress “Pleasure”), worldly fame, and skepticism. The journey continues in Book IV, wherein the bard critiques the pursuit of power under the guise

---

<sup>97</sup> David Pollok, 107–10.

of “Liberty,” condemns slavery, reproves those who question God’s providence, and asserts the value of “moral worth” (e.g. character). Book V offers a melancholic interlude in which the bard reflects on the “contributions” to fleeting, temporal happiness afforded by childhood bliss, maternal affection, chaste youthful love, mature friendship, and the sensations of nature, while Book VIII expands upon the negative portraitures already presented in Book III. (For example, the “bigot theologian” here joins the “false priest” depicted earlier.) The bard’s gallery tour concludes on a positive note in Book IX, wherein a number of virtuous character types are drawn out of the crowd of faithful awaiting judgment; among their number, often in direct contrast to the negative examples earlier presented, are “the faithful minister,” “the true philosopher,” the righteous legislator, the generous philanthropist, and lastly and most importantly, the divinely appointed “Christian bard.”

Like much of the eighteenth-century literature of sentiment that Pollok draws upon, the portraits presented in *The Course of Time* Books III-V and VIII-IX are abstract and de-personalized. While Dante depicts sinners and saints as real persons with their own stories and histories, and Milton offers a cast of individualized mythological figures, *The Course of Time* is populated with anonymous character types created to serve a larger didactic purpose. Only the one hundred-twenty-four lines on Byron in Book IV seem to represent an individual person, and even he is never named by the poet (although readers immediately recognized the allusion). For many nineteenth-century critics, again including George Gilfillan and the ever-faithful James Scott, this was a significant weakness in Pollok’s poem. But as John Sitter notes, a good deal of eighteenth-century literature reflects an “appetite for abstraction” and a tendency towards “imagistic restraint”<sup>98</sup> which would have provided popular examples for an aspiring poet of a later generation. From both the style of portraiture in *The Course of Time* and what is known of Pollok’s reading, it was writers of sentiment such as Edward Young, Robert Blair, James Thomson, William Cowper, James Beattie, and Henry Mackenzie who most influenced the middle sections of *The Course of Time*.<sup>99</sup> Mackenzie, who visited the dying Pollok on his sick-bed in Edinburgh, was a

---

<sup>98</sup> Sitter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, 151.

<sup>99</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild cites a majority of these authors as particular favorites of contemporary evangelical poets such as Pollok. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, Vol. IV, 24.

particular favorite. His *Man of Feeling* (1771) employed episodic moral vignettes to tell the story of its hapless protagonist, Harley.<sup>100</sup> Barbara Benedict locates a source of Mackenzie's technique in the "character collection" tradition of the seventeenth century and in early "character books," such as Joseph Hall's *Characters of Virtues and Vices* in 1608.<sup>101</sup> The concept of character in general, and of the character sketch in particular, is of course central to Pollok's enterprise. It is in the portraiture sections of *The Course of Time*, specifically in Books VIII and IX, that Pollok finally realizes his original intention to depict men "when all but character shall have left them."<sup>102</sup> Newly arisen and awaiting final judgment in Book VIII, the entire human race appears as

. . . a congregation vast of men,  
Of unappendaged and unvarnish'd men,  
Of plain, unceremonious human beings,  
Of all but moral characters bereaved.  
His vice, or virtue, now, to each remain'd,  
Alone. All else, with their grave-clothes, men had  
Put off. . . .

(106-13)

Character is one of the few abstract ideas that Pollok does not personify in *The Course of Time*. Along with a penchant for abstraction, to which it was connected, personification was central to much of Pollok's favorite reading from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – in *Paradise Lost*, of course; in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (which Pollok described as "the funniest and the best system of theology I know")<sup>103</sup>; and in specific eighteenth-century works to which *The Course of Time* appears indebted, such as William Cowper's *The Task*, James Thomson's *The Seasons*, and Edward Young's *The Grave*. Pollok had read Hugh Blair's influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) – depicted in the former's graduation satire<sup>104</sup> – and may well have

---

<sup>100</sup> While bed-ridden in Edinburgh in the summer of 1827, after the initial publication of *The Course of Time*, Robert received a surprise visit from the elderly Mackenzie. "I felt his attention to be as if some literary patriarch had risen from the grave, to bless me and do me honour," Pollok wrote to his brother. David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 342.

<sup>101</sup> Barbara M. Benedict, "The Sentimental Virtuoso: Collecting Feeling in Henry Mackenzie's 'Man of Feeling,'" *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 478.

<sup>102</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 265.

<sup>103</sup> David Pollok, 223.

<sup>104</sup> David Pollok, 172.

remembered Blair's assertion in them that personification was the "life and soul" of poetry, connecting readers to other persons and things.<sup>105</sup> In *The Task*, Pollok would have encountered personifications of Nature, Discipline, and Knowledge, among other things; in *The Seasons*, the expected embodiments of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, but also more philosophical abstractions including Meditation, Cultivation, Industry, and "folly-painting Humour." John Sitter suggests that personifications such as these in eighteenth-century poetry often reflect "a shared response to . . . fundamental intellectual problems," and can be a way of harmonizing philosophy and poetry, as Pollok wished to do.<sup>106</sup>

While it would be both laborious and tedious to name the many personifications Pollok employs in *The Course of Time*, a short list underscores the importance of and relationship between philosophical, religious, and moral ideas: There is ever-present Virtue, reflecting man's original, intended state; Pleasure, a favorite evangelical concern, pictured as a disease-wasted whore tempting men to their physical and spiritual deaths; Religion as a modest virgin embodying virtue, piety, love, and holiness; Disappointment and Remorse as stern teachers reminding man of his ultimate duty to God; and Philosophy, which for all its useful labors, cannot "nurse a single plant that [bears]/True happiness" (III., 60-1). Although fellow Romantic William Wordsworth had famously rejected poetic personification in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* two decades before (1800), Pollok used it as an important didactic tool, sometimes as a cudgel, to promote virtue, godliness, and piety in *The Course of Time*.<sup>107</sup>

One important mode of eighteenth-century verse which Pollok did not employ in *The Course of Time*, at least to any extent, was satire. This was despite Pollok's appreciation for one of satire's great masters, Alexander Pope, who notably defended the genre's "moral utility" in his *Epistle to*

---

<sup>105</sup> Sitter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, 160.

<sup>106</sup> Sitter, 169.

<sup>107</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*, second edition, Volume 1 (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800).

*Augustus* (1737) and declared that it “heals with morals what it hurts with wit.”<sup>108</sup> Likewise, perhaps surprisingly, Pollok had shown himself adept at the genre in earlier literary pieces, such as his graduation satire, the lengthy description of a night journey to Paisley, and musings on apocalypse. Like Pope, Pollok too had defended satire’s usefulness in the literary essay of 1822, in which he declared that “[s]atire has been always in use among moralists,” and furthermore, that “every age has need of its satirists.”<sup>109</sup> Despite these assertions, however, Pollok may have shared the poetic and perhaps evangelical ambivalence towards satire expressed by one of his heroes, the “true bard of Zion,” William Cowper. In *The Task*, which Pollok had read, Cowper asked, “what can satire, whether grave or gay?/. . . What vice has it subdued? whose heart reclaim’d/By rigour, or whom laugh’d into reform?”<sup>110</sup> Cowper stands among those John Sitter cites in regard to growing concerns about the efficacy of satire in the later eighteenth century, and indeed, whether satire and poetry should be yoked together at all. Sitter is probably right to propose Byron – another great admirer of Pope – as the supreme counter-example of this trend in the early nineteenth century.<sup>111</sup> Byron’s greatest satire is, of course, *Don Juan*, which, we remember, he pronounced “the most moral of poems.” It may be that Pollok, whose satirical sketches are entirely in prose, did not think satire fit for the “divine art” of poetry. After all, he was effecting the “high style” of Milton in *The Course of Time*, which had little room for mere mockery. Pollok also may have observed Byron’s effective appropriation of satire for such deconstructive purposes, and decided that the fountain of the muses already had been poisoned. Whatever the case, nineteenth-century critics who viewed *The Course of Time* as too dark and too solemn could wish for the lighter touch of a Byron; similarly, glimpses of Pollok’s skill at prose satire encourage a reader to imagine what might have been accomplished had the young author employed that genre in a “sacred” poem.

---

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in George Alexander Kennedy, H. B. Nisbet, and Claude Rawson, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 4, The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106. “Moral utility” is the authors’ term.

<sup>109</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 109–10.

<sup>110</sup> William Cowper, *The Task, Table Talk, and Other Poems, of William Cowper: With Critical Observations of Various Authors on His Genius and Character, and Notes Critical and Illustrative* (A.S. Barnes & Company, 1856), 150.

<sup>111</sup> Sitter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, 113.

George Gilfillan was among Pollok's contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, who remarked on the "traces of resemblance, and even imitation of favourite authors" in *The Course of Time*. Apart from Dante, Milton, and notably, Byron, they were all from the eighteenth century. Gilfillan noted Pollok's particular debt to the "Graveyard School" epitomized by Edward Young in his *Night Thoughts* (1742-5) and Robert Blair in *The Grave* (1743) and, in regard to "sarcasm and strong simplicity," to the works of William Cowper.<sup>112</sup> Gilfillan also briefly noted Pollok's debt to fellow Scot James Thomson and his *Seasons*. Very likely, the future epoist first encountered many of these writers and works in Thomas Campbell's *Specimens of the British Poets* (1819), which Pollok notated in a small chapbook, probably during his undergraduate years.<sup>113</sup> Michael Wheeler observes that these poems (to which we must add Cowper's *The Task*) were among the most widely read at the end of the eighteenth century, examples of "meditative-descriptive" lyrics to which the later Romantics would be indebted.<sup>114</sup> We already have explored a probable stylistic debt to Henry Mackenzie and his *Man of Feeling*; *The Course of Time* also evidences debts of content and subject matter beyond those it owes to *Paradise Lost* or Dante's *Commedia*. *Night Thoughts*, which Pollok references in a letter to his brother,<sup>115</sup> and whose author is directly invoked in *The Course of Time*, Book III,<sup>116</sup> includes poetic musings on subjects central to the latter work, including friendship, death, immortality, consolation, and of course, time. Its subtitle – *On Life, Death, & Immortality* – would serve equally well for Pollok's own. Blair's *The Grave* is yet another very popular religiously themed blank verse poem dealing with these themes. In it, resurrection triumphs over the powers of Death and the Grave, as it does in *The Course of Time*. In his *British Poets*, Campbell had praised Blair effusively, asserting that "[t]he eighteenth century has produced few specimens of blank verse of so powerful and so simple a character as that of *The Grave*."<sup>117</sup> Notably, both *Night Thoughts* and *The Grave* were illustrated by William Blake, whose literary influences (and occasional nighttime visions) were sometimes curiously similar to Pollok's.

---

<sup>112</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*.

<sup>113</sup> MS GEN 1355/99, Pollok Manuscript Collection, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

<sup>114</sup> Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 85.

<sup>115</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 289.

<sup>116</sup> Young is referred to as "one well known/On earth for lofty verse, and lofty sense" in a stanza about lessons from the death-bed. Pollok, *The Course of Time*, III. 2019-20.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Specimens of the British Poets: With Biographical and Critical Notices, and An Essay on English Poetry* (London: J. Murray, 1819), 263.

While *The Course of Time* could be (and was) said to bear a “generic resemblance” to the works of the Graveyard School,<sup>118</sup> an equal if not greater debt was owed the pastoralists Thomson and Cowper. Both authors are directly invoked in Pollok’s epic – Cowper as the “true bard of Zion,” earlier noted, and Thomson as “[t]he bard, recorder of Earth’s Seasons,” who sings of “[v]exation, disappointment, and remorse” in Pollok’s vignette of the dangers of Pleasure in *The Course of Time*, Book III (ll.372-3). Undoubtedly, the popular passages on the bard in nature in Book V owe much to Thomson’s pioneering description of nature’s changing moods and landscapes in *The Seasons*. According to Gerard Carruthers, Thomson’s poetic influence was unrivalled by any other Scot, and all of the major Romantic poets of succeeding generations read him. Although Thomson was not the first poet to depict the changing particulars of nature, Carruthers argues that he was the first “to do so as extensively and also to couch his whole treatment in didactic terms. . . .”<sup>119</sup> Thomson’s use of a moral, didactic mode to describe the experience and grandeur of nature was new, and almost certainly shaped Pollok’s presentation of a Scottish landscape in *The Course of Time*. It also looked forward, as Carruthers suggests, to formalized theories on the “sublime” later in the century by Edmund Burke and others.<sup>120</sup> We already have noted Pollok’s encounter with the notion of the sublime through his reading of Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets*, Hugh Blair’s *Lectures*, and of course, *Paradise Lost*.

Cowper and Thomson shared several important emphases that would have appealed to the young Scot. One was a proto-Romantic connection between the religious impulse and the experience of nature, suggested above. Another was the idea of a philosophical or reflective melancholy that touched the poet. A third was a concern for “true” liberty, or freedom, and its connection to faith. To start with the first point, as we have noted, Pollok offers an extended picture of the bard in nature in *The Course of Time*, Book V. There, after thoughtless wanderings over “waste” places, the bard finds himself in “Nature’s . . . inner chamber” and has what appears to be a mystical or quasi-mystical experience which allows him to see “incommunicable visions” and hear

---

<sup>118</sup> “‘The Course of Time, A Review,’ Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine,” 846.

<sup>119</sup> Carruthers, *Scottish Literature*, 81–82.

<sup>120</sup> Carruthers, 82–83.

“unutterable things” (ll. 367-9). While the language is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* or *The Excursion*, Pollok is careful to connect the bard’s experience with the more traditional meditations on “God, redemption, holiness, and love” (l.382) which solitary involvement in nature encourages. Likewise, Pollok has Nature itself participate “[i]n silent contemplation, to adore/Its Maker” (ll. 230-2). Nature is valued both for its own sake and for how it may move or influence the human agent, with an emphasis on the latter. In his classic *Theology in the English Poets*, published over a century ago, Stopford Brooke noted a developing relationship between religion and nature in the eighteenth-century poets Pollok was reading, as well as a connection between religion and poetry founded on pastoral themes and contexts.<sup>121</sup> Cowper is of special importance to Brooke as a poet who, breaking with the tradition of Pope, focuses his attention on nature, rather than man, as something to be studied in itself. For Brooke, the “Poetry of Nature” which would come to its fruition in Wordsworth begins with Cowper’s *The Task* (1785). There, for the first time, Brooke suggests, “the pleasure of being alone with Nature in her solitudes now became a distinct element in modern poetry. . . .”<sup>122</sup> By contrast, Brooke finds that in Thomson, writing a half-century earlier, the poet still “stands apart and apostrophizes Nature,” rather than allowing himself to be lost in it.<sup>123</sup> It would seem that, at times, Pollok is drawing on both of these sources in his depiction of the bard in nature who revels in “the hour of lonely walk” and loses himself in “[t]he solitude of vast extent” (ll. 335, 336, 338), but likewise engages in reflecting on these experiences and reminding himself of their providential origins. A case in point is an autobiographical passage in Book V wherein Pollok extolls the rural surroundings of the family farm in Renfrewshire, recalling the place as “[w]here I first heard of God’s redeeming love;/First felt and reasoned, loved and was beloved;/And first awoke the harp to holy song” (ll. 509-11.) Similarly, it may be that the youthful poet who first had been enamored of Pope has not yet cast off the latter’s anthropocentric focus, remaining engaged in speculative reflection on human duties and destinies<sup>124</sup> even amid the grandeur of “Scotia’s northern battlement of hills.”

---

<sup>121</sup> Stopford Augustus Brooke, *Theology in English Poets*. (London: H.S. King, 1874), 7.

<sup>122</sup> Brooke, 29.

<sup>123</sup> Brooke, 35.

<sup>124</sup> This is Brooke’s description of Pope’s focus and that of his “Critical School.” Brooke, 22.

However, the bard's ruminations are not always joyous or transcendent. Transports in nature sometimes give way to melancholic reverie, as in passages depicting grief, loss, and the transient joys of mortal life in the middle of Book V. While aspects of these passages reflect the general literary interest in common human relationships, some incidents are drawn directly from Pollok's own experience, such as the depiction of a sister's death in childbirth in Book V, lines 664-722. John Sitter notes the historic connection between poetry and melancholy, which goes back at least as far as Milton, and may have roots in the Renaissance tradition of emblem books. Presumably, Pollok already had encountered the figure of "Philosophic Melancholy" in Thomson's *Autumn* (1730), and may have been familiar with Hugh Blair's assertions, in his *Lectures*, about the importance melancholy and "virtuous sufferings" held for the bardic tradition itself.<sup>125</sup> Likewise, Stopford Brooke comments on the role Cowper played in giving "direct, close, impassioned representation" to common human relations like motherhood, friendship, filial piety, and friendship – all echoed in later Romantic writing – and for making them religious.<sup>126</sup> Of course, Cowper himself was called a "melancholic," although a "religious" one, and may have promoted the image for his own designs. Diane Buie reminds us that melancholy was, in fact, a recognized illness in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and not infrequently exploited for sympathetic purposes.<sup>127</sup> It was, without a doubt, popular to be sad. We already have noted Pollok's ode "To Melancholy," prompted, perhaps, by his declining physical state and recurring bouts of depression.

Almost all of the major Romantics wrote about or depicted melancholy or its siblings: Coleridge in his *Ode to Dejection*; Keats in *Ode on Melancholy*, and most of the other major odes; Byron in both poems and persona; Shelley in *Stanzas Written in Dejection* and *Adonais*, to name only a few. We already have remarked on Pollok's depiction of melancholy's relatives, Disappointment and Remorse, in *The Course of Time*, Book III. There, they are "friends severe" appointed to warn and dissuade mankind from the path to ruin traveled by seekers after wealth, pleasure, fame, worldly knowledge, or skepticism. Tellingly, one of the most thinly autobiographical (and therefore, most

---

<sup>125</sup> Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal.*, 105.

<sup>126</sup> Brooke, *Theology in English Poets.*, 61.

<sup>127</sup> Diane Buie, "William Cowper: A Religious Melancholic?," *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36.1 (2013): 103-119.

popular) passages in *The Course of Time* immediately follows, wherein the bard describes a young poet struggling for fame and worldly success (ll. 894-1008). Disappointment and Remorse become the poet's harsh disciplinarians, as he drives himself towards despair and possibly thoughts of suicide. But before that can happen, the Almighty intervenes and marks the poet for his own (ll. 994-1008). The former "severe" teachers become, in hindsight, purveyors of wisdom, keeping the poet from pursuing a goal that could lead to his spiritual death. Similarly, by its sorrow-tinged recollection of fleeting "[l]oves, friendships, hopes, and dear remembrances," especially prominent in Book V, Melancholy assuages the deeper pains of life, offering "[s]weet drops, that [make] the mixed cup of Earth/A palatable draught. . . ." (V.723, 731-2).

While the pursuit of poetic fame may have been Robert Pollok's unique temptation, it is a concern for liberty and a distrust of worldly power which receive special prominence at the beginning of Book IV, set apart from the other vain pursuits of happiness depicted in the previous book. Of course, poems about liberty or poems featuring that theme had a long history in English literature, as Stopford Brooke observed over a century ago.<sup>128</sup> We already have noted Pollok's probable debt to Milton in writing about liberty, or freedom, and its relationship to the practice of virtue. In *The Course of Time*, Book IV, Pollok sets out to define "true liberty" in Pauline terms as a specifically religious, and not political, phenomenon derived from the relationship between the individual and God.<sup>129</sup> Pollok may have been influenced by Thomson's depiction of liberty in *The Seasons* and other works and by a Thomson revival on that score in the revolutionary 1790s,<sup>130</sup> but given Pollok's primary theological concerns, it is likely that Cowper was the more influential in the younger poet's thinking. Pollok directly invokes the elder poet in line 98 ("true bard of Zion, holy man!") and quotes a line from *The Task* alluding to Jesus' teaching his followers about truth. "He

---

<sup>128</sup> Brooke, *Theology in English Poets.*, 25.

<sup>129</sup> Karen McConnell draws attention to the specifically political aspects of Book IV, as well as the fact that Pollok does not carry them to conclusion, in terms of agitating for political change, as does a contemporary like Shelley. McConnell, "Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland." 111-16. Similarly, Hoxie Neale Fairchild observes that "[t]he social indignation of [evangelical poets such as Pollok] pauses well on the safe side of radicalism." (Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, Vol. IV, 33.)

<sup>130</sup> Carruthers, *Scottish Literature*, 85.

is the freeman whom the truth makes free,” Pollok declares in line 100,<sup>131</sup> shortly afterward switching tense to indicate exactly the sort of “truth” he is talking about:

“He was the freeman whom the truth made free,”  
 Who, first of all, the bonds of Satan broke;  
 Who broke the bands of sin; and for his soul,  
 In spite of fools, consulted seriously. . . . (122-25)

This “freeman” rejects “earth’s liberty,” which is nothing more than an attempt to enslave others. “Each man to make all subject to his will,” the bard asserts, “[t]o make them do, undo, eat, drink, stand, move,/Talk, think, and feel, exactly as he chose” (ll. 49-54). A long passage condemning slavery as anti-Christian and contrary to the will of God (roughly lines 62-84) may particularly reflect Cowper’s influence. According to Stopford Brooke, in his poems, hymns, and works like *The Task*, Cowper essentially re-crafted the traditional English paean to liberty into a lyrical polemic against slavery,<sup>132</sup> a subject of particular concern for evangelical Christians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Pollok follows Cowper in viewing slavery as a fundamental crime against God, as well as humankind, since for both poets God is the ultimate guarantor and source of freedom. Recalling a theme of his earlier address to a missionary society in 1821, Pollok strongly condemns fellow Christians who support or engage in a practice so abhorrent to God and contrary to his mandates. In *The Course of Time*, they are described as only partly human, “[b]eings that walked erect, and spoke like men;/Of Christian parentage descended, too,” and yet who dared

To buy and sell, to barter, whip, and hold  
 In chains, a being of celestial make;  
 Of kindred form, of kindred faculties,  
 Of kindred feelings, passions, thoughts, desires;  
 Born free, and heir of an immortal hope. (73-7)

---

<sup>131</sup> This line appears in Book V of *The Task*. Cowper, *The Task, Table Talk, and Other Poems, of William Cowper*.

<sup>132</sup> Brooke, *Theology in English Poets.*, 26.

The very suggestion that God would approve such treatment of fellow humans is “villainous, absurd, detestable,” the bard declares, and “[u]nworthy to be harbored in a fiend!” (ll. 78-9). It is “only overreach’d in wickedness” by attempts undertaken in the name of “earthly liberty” to “make a reasonable man/By legislation think, and by the sword/Believe” (ll. 80-4) – attempts such as the bard already has denounced in Book II. Whether or not Pollok saw the evils of slavery and oppression as problems of theodicy, as Jeffrey Bilbro suggests Cowper did,<sup>133</sup> Pollok came to the same conclusion as the elder poet and as Milton before him. “True liberty was Christian, sanctified,/Baptized, and found in Christian hearts alone,” the bard declares (ll. 110-1). It was the “[f]irst-born of Virtue,” the inseparable “[c]ompanion of religion” (l. 112, 119). Wherever religion went, freedom went, “where dwelt, there freedom dwelt/Ruled where she ruled, expired where she expired” (ll. 119-121). The equation of freedom, or liberty, with virtue and obedience to God is straight out of Milton and Cowper. To be virtuous is to be free. However, such freedom does not come without struggle, as the bard illustrates in the middle sections of Book IV. Virtue may “[s]it highest at the feast of bliss” in heaven, but on earth it took “the lowest place at table” (ll. 208-10). The Christian who sought it, and thereby sought “true liberty,” often “[w]as mock’d, derided, persecuted, slain,” and even worse, slandered (ll. 212-3). He could feel abandoned by God, as did William Cowper; or he could identify an earthly source of his vexation, as Pollok did, in one who took liberty and all worldly goods for granted and actively worked against the cultivation of virtue.

#### 4.3.4 Gallery Highlights: Holy and Unholy Bards

If to be virtuous is to be free, Byron clearly was neither, although he was a “libertine” in the classic sense, unencumbered by moral, religious, or sexual restraint. As we have noted, Pollok provides a series of positive character portraits in Books V (centered on familial and friendly human relationships) and IX (focusing on the Christian bard), but it is the one hundred thirty-eight-line cautionary portrait of Byron in Book IV that is the real highlight of Pollok’s gallery. It comes on the heels of sections condemning immoral literature (primarily novels), presumptive attempts to

---

<sup>133</sup> Jeffrey Bilbro, “Who Are Lost and How They’re Found: Redemption and Theodicy in Wheaton, Newton, and Cowper,” *Early American Literature* 47, no. 3 (2012): 561–89.

scale the “mount” of divine mystery, and the blasphemous questioning of God’s providence. While the portrait of Byron is almost certainly meant to be contrasted with that of the Christian bard exemplified by Milton in Book IX - and also reflective of Pollok himself - it is in the depiction of Byron that Pollok lays out his all-important argument for moral worth, as earlier examined. Byron has the worldly gifts of fame, fortune, and ability in abundance, but in his headlong pursuit of earthly happiness, he tragically fails to understand or to accept

That God no value set,  
That man should none, on goods of worldly kind!  
On transitory, frail, external things. . . .

Rather, it is “in the soul alone,”

The thinking, reasonable, willing soul,  
[that] God placed the total excellence of man;  
And meant him evermore to seek it there. (IV.560-7)

Even the rustic simpleton, “who never had a dozen thoughts/In all his life” and never looked “[b]eyond his native vale,” lived and died happy, unlike Byron, because “[h]e loved and served his God” (ll. 572-3, 594-5). By contrast, as we have seen, the libertine poet possessed every gift possible, and yet died wretched and forlorn, deriding the “moral excellence” that God required. Pollok’s portrait of Byron thus serves to reprove those who question God’s providence on grounds of worldly inequality. It also reaffirms earlier teachings in Book II about the dangers of pride (also the root of Byron’s evils), the necessity of virtue, and the reckoning that comes with attempting to put oneself in the place of God. Byron’s pitiable demise, in Pollok’s telling, illustrates the aphorism borrowed from Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* in Book III, that “[m]en may live fools, but fools they cannot die.”<sup>134</sup> Byron learns too late the possibility and the price of eternity.

---

<sup>134</sup> Edward Young, *The Complaint: Or, Night-Thoughts: ... To Which Is Added, a Paraphrase on Part of the Book of Job* (London: A. Mallard, J. Durfey, E. Nelson, W. Newton, R. Stanton, 1782), 74.

Nevertheless, reviewers such as Thomas McNicoll made it clear that Byron's was the most popular portrait in Pollok's gallery. Writing in the middle of the Victorian period, several decades after the "mad" lord's death and the debut of *The Course of Time*, McNicoll asserted that Pollok's depiction of Byron was "a favourite passage and well known to the young."<sup>135</sup> In terms of reader esteem, however, there was another portrait that demanded to be hung beside Byron's, and that was the author's. Reflecting on the genius behind *The Course of Time*, George Gilfillan observed "[t]here was . . . a soul in the entire picture,"

an eye looking forth from it which followed, pierced, and detained you. . . . Here was an honest, earnest man, talking to you, in solemn tones, of the most solemn things, and believing every word which he uttered.<sup>136</sup>

The author's earnestness and apparent sincerity were a drawing card, in strong contrast with his portrait of a supremely gifted but manipulative and self-indulgent Byron. Where Byron had failed to cultivate "soul," Pollok's was transparent in his work, or so readers like George Gilfillan imagined. Like the Christian bard with whom he identifies, Pollok is a figure worthy of emulation. "His Bible was ever beside him, and morning and evening he offered up prayer for God's help in the work," a writer in the *Ladies Repository* of Cincinnati, Ohio enthused.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, George Cubitt, editor of *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, which published a very positive biographical sketch of Pollok in 1843, encouraged aspiring teen poet Emma Tatham to emulate Pollok "as an example of a poet who prepared for his work by prayer and devotion," according to Amy Cruse.<sup>138</sup> While Tatham had read and studied Byron, among other poets, Pollok was her favorite. "He is erect and triumphant," she wrote, "yet withal so pure and tender that he is the very poet of my

---

<sup>135</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 98.

<sup>136</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 324.

<sup>137</sup> A. D. Field, "Review: Robert Pollok and *The Course of Time*," *The Ladies Repository: A Monthly Periodical Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion* XVIII (1858): 558.

<sup>138</sup> Amy Cruse, *The Victorians And Their Books* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 68. Cubitt's letter to Emma Tatham is quoted at length in the *Memoir of Emma Tatham, With "The Angel's Spell" and Other Pieces Not Publ. during Her Lifetime*, edited by Benjamin Gregory (London: Hamilton and Company, 1859), 22.

heart.”<sup>139</sup> For dissenting and evangelical readers like Emma Tatham, Pollok *was* the “true, legitimate, anointed bard” he depicts in Book IX,<sup>140</sup> one of those “chosen . . . from age to age” to awake “the sacred lyre” and “full on Folly’s ear,/Numbers of righteous indignation [pour]” (III., 687-9). A major part of his job, as we noted in earlier chapters, is to counter the Byrons, Burns, and Southey who corrupt others, especially the young, with their songs of debauchery or illicit romance. Contrasting portraits of holy and unholy bards are brought to the fore here in Book IX, where the labor of the Christian poet is compared to that of the treacherous bard “who sold/The incommunicable, heavenly gift/To Folly” (ll. 482-4) and the indolent one who “[whined] grievously of damsel coy,” lamented misfortune, and “[made] himself the hero of his tale” (ll. 495-99). While the work of the indolent poet (perhaps meant to be identified with poet laureate Robert Southey) is cause for concern, it is the first (likely identified with Byron, but possibly also fellow countryman Robert Burns) whom Pollok calls “[v]ilest of traitors!” (l. 486).<sup>141</sup> It is he who, “with lyre of perfect tone,”

Sat by the door of Ruin, and made there  
A melody so sweet, and in the mouth  
Of drunkenness and debauch . . .  
Put so divine a song, that many turn’d  
Aside, and enter’d in undone; and thought,  
Meanwhile, it was the gate of heaven. . . .

(487-93)

The discerning reader finds clear parallels between Pollok’s depiction of this deceitful poet and the earlier portraits of Pleasure (Book III) and the false priest (Books II and VIII). By contrast, and as mentioned in a previous chapter, the Christian bard “tunes” his “numbers” to “Virtue’s all-delighting harmony” (ll. 502-3); pours melody, beauty, and love into the human heart (ll. 504-5); warms the soul and encourages “brotherhood of being” (ll. 562-7); cares nothing for earthly fame,

<sup>139</sup> Benjamin Gregory, ed., *Memoir of Emma Tatham. With “The Angel’s Spell” and Other Pieces Not Publ. during Her Lifetime*, 1859, 38.

<sup>140</sup> The author of the biographical sketch of Pollok in Chambers’ *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, V. 4, 1835, suggests that *The Course of Time* enjoyed particular popularity among “the respectable classes of dissenters.” “Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok.”

<sup>141</sup> Pollok may well have noted important similarities between Byron and Burns, both characterized as literary libertines in the early nineteenth century. Byron possibly recognized this similarity himself in letters to his publisher, John Murray. See Donald Low, “Byron and Burns,” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 128–42.

but only “[t]o have the eternal images of truth/And beauty, pictured in his verse, admired” (ll. 585-7); “justifie[s] the ways of God to man,” as did Milton; and in eternity joins other “chosen bards” to play before the throne of God. Comparing the melodies of holy and unholy bards, as Pollok presented them, it was clear where the song of each eventually led. What was surprising was that the young poet heard and employed them both.

#### 4.4 Sharpening Weapons at the Forge of Byron: Romanticism in *The Course of Time*

In many ways, *The Course of Time* is as indebted to Romanticism as it is to Calvinism and evangelical Christianity. Karen McConnell observes that Pollok’s epic is “very much a product of the Romantic era,” not alone through “its revisions of Enlightenment thinking, depictions of the natural world, use of the sublime, and Gothic imagery.”<sup>142</sup> We already have explored several of these elements in earlier chapters. In this section, I wish to focus more directly on the Romantic aspects of *The Course of Time*, including (in addition to the above) the poem’s subject matter, autobiographical elements, depiction of the poet, and flirtation with nature mysticism. Drawing on the work of Crawford Gribben, Murray Pittock, Gerard Carruthers, and others, I also will examine the ways that Pollok’s epic stands at the crossroads of Romanticism and religion, and how it may reflect a distinctly Scottish variety of Romantic culture.

Contemporary commentators on *The Course of Time* highlight several of what we would consider Romantic aspects of the poem. These include autobiographical elements, celebration of nature, strong sentiment or feeling, apocalyptic setting and subject matter, and depiction of what we today call “the Byronic hero.” We already have noted George Gilfillan’s important observation that Pollok had not “feared to sharpen his holy weapons at the forge of Byron,” suggesting that, in addition to the eighteenth-century, distinctly Christian literary influences Pollok had drawn upon, he also had borrowed from the most famous (and notably skeptic) Romantic of his own era.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> McConnell, “Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland,” 103.

<sup>143</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 364.

According to Crawford Gribben, this paradox was not unusual among Scottish evangelicals of the time. Despite their determination to resist the wider currents of Romanticism and the skepticism associated with it, Gribben asserts that, for many Scottish evangelicals, “the strongest religious refutations of Romantic sensibility could [in fact] operate on the borrowed capital of Romantic ideas.”<sup>144</sup> This is particularly germane to *The Course of Time*, which Gribben uses as a case study for examining the relationship between Scottish Romanticism and evangelicalism, describing the poem as a “culturally specific construction of a Romantically infused and canonically aware variety of Scottish Calvinist faith.”<sup>145</sup> As we have seen, Pollok’s epic had its genesis in Byron’s poetry, recalled specific lines of Byron’s verse, and employed the libertine bard as its most complete creation, all while denouncing the traditions of skepticism and immorality which the latter represented.<sup>146</sup> Contemporary critic George Gilfillan illustrates this point by contrasting *The Course of Time* with the work of Byron and “the Lakers,” arguing that the tremendous success of Pollok’s poem was due in large measure to its religiosity:

[I]t was a religious poem, and this at once awakened a wide and warm interest in its favour. Galled by the godless ridicule of Byron, and chagrined by what they thought the vague and mystic piety of the Lakers, the religious community hailed the appearance of a new and true poet, who was ashamed of none of the peculiarities of one of the strictest of all their sects, with a tumult of applause.<sup>147</sup>

For her part, Hoxie Neale Fairchild (writing in the 1930s) argues that true evangelical poets like Pollok cannot also be Romantic because they believe in human depravity, the need for redemption by supernatural power, and the supremacy of God rather than of man. This being so, these poets necessarily “abdicate” any sense of their own imaginative and creative powers apart from those of

---

<sup>144</sup> Gribben, “Religion and Scottish Romanticism,” 119.

<sup>145</sup> Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” 25.

<sup>146</sup> In his notes to the Byron portrait in *The Course of Time* Book IV, James Boyd points out specific allusions to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and a specific quotation from the latter in line 684. (Boyd, *The Course of Time with Critical Observations*, pp. 162-66.)

<sup>147</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 322–23.

God.<sup>148</sup> However, Fairchild allows that in the Victorian period (when *The Course of Time* found its largest audiences) Christianity and Romanticism did become uneasy bedfellows, allying “in self-defense against their common enemies—utilitarianism, positivism, [and] scientific materialism.”<sup>149</sup> According to Fairchild, this “mutually debilitating alliance” was founded upon a common opposition to radical skepticism and atheism, a claim that may be questioned with regard to figures like Shelley and Byron. Rather than any attempt to prove intrinsic relationship between Christianity (especially of the evangelical variety) and Romanticism, Fairchild takes as her “principal theme” “the ferment of attraction and repulsion between Christianity and romanticism in an increasingly secularistic age.”<sup>150</sup>

#### 4.4.1 Evangelicalism and Scottish Romanticism

By contrast, contemporary historian David Bebbington does see shared influences between Christianity and Romanticism, arguing that the attempt “to come to terms” with the cultural impact of Romanticism is “[t]he central theme in the history of Evangelical theology from the 1820s onward”<sup>151</sup> – the very period in which Pollok is writing. As Crawford Gribben has shown, Scottish evangelicals had their own, culturally unique ways of dealing with Romanticism,<sup>152</sup> which *The Course of Time* exemplifies. Compared to their English and continental counterparts, Scottish Romantics were on the whole much more concerned with religion, morality, and social issues, all of which may be found in abundance in *The Course of Time*.<sup>153</sup> Gribben and Carruthers both contend that critics have long overlooked or ignored this distinctively Scottish strain of Romanticism because of its associations with Calvinism and with more conservative Enlightenment moral thought. Gribben suggests that this may be why *The Course of Time* “is now

---

<sup>148</sup> Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 1830–1880:25–26. I believe Fairchild’s contention here would be widely debated today.

<sup>149</sup> Fairchild, IV, 1830–1880:17.

<sup>150</sup> Fairchild, IV, 1830–1880:17.

<sup>151</sup> Bebbington, “Evangelicalism,” 243.

<sup>152</sup> Gribben, “Religion and Scottish Romanticism,” 115.

<sup>153</sup> See Gribben, “Religion and Scottish Romanticism,” 114–5, and Pittock, “What is Scottish Romanticism?,” 3, 8.

almost universally forgotten,”<sup>154</sup> a suggestion we will return to in the next chapter. For Carruthers, such thinking underlies “the critical problem of ‘Scotland and Romanticism,’” whereby the nation’s Calvinist heritage and “a supposedly culturally conservative Enlightenment” are deemed “resistant to the Romantic creative strain” found elsewhere.<sup>155</sup> For his part, Carruthers’ colleague at the University of Glasgow, Murray Pittock, agrees that Scotland had a unique Romantic culture, while also insisting that its greatest works “are in dialogue with the arguments of the Scottish Enlightenment,” and “neither in outright opposition to them nor subservient to them.”<sup>156</sup> Questions of artistic merit aside, *The Course of Time* seems to exemplify this dynamic between cultures of Enlightenment and Romanticism, as we see here and elsewhere in this chapter. “Far from the Scottish Enlightenment being ‘Romanticism’s antithesis,’” Pittock declares, “the Enlightenment and Romanticism are thus inextricably intertwined in Scottish Romanticism.”<sup>157</sup> His hope is that future critics will see the Scottish Enlightenment and Scottish Romanticism (or Romanticisms) as aspects of a single phenomenon,<sup>158</sup> as they may be in *The Course of Time*.

#### 4.4.2 The Figure of Byron

Contemporary critics seemed to have no problem reconciling the Romantic, Calvinist, and evangelical aspects of *The Course of Time*. George Gilfillan and Thomas McNicoll were among commentators who praised Pollok for his depiction of Byron, in particular, suggesting that the young Scot had out-done Byron himself in his portrait of (what we know as) the Byronic hero. We already have noted John Wilson’s estimation of “the Byron” as the best thing in *The Course of Time* and presumably important in his decision to help the poem see publication. Likewise, the author of a biographical sketch of Pollok in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* (perhaps editor George Cubitt) asserted that Pollok’s depiction of Byron “will bear comparison with anything of its kind

---

<sup>154</sup> Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” 26. Gribben cites the poem’s “robust theological interests” in particular as probable cause for this neglect.

<sup>155</sup> Carruthers, *Scottish Literature*, 97.

<sup>156</sup> Murray Pittock, “What Is Scottish Romanticism?,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh [Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2012], 8. See also Carruthers, *Scottish Literature*, 97.

<sup>157</sup> Pittock, 8.

<sup>158</sup> Pittock, 9.

in British literature” and quoted liberally from it.<sup>159</sup> For his part, McNicoll declared “[t]he character of Byron [to be] drawn with a vigour worthy of his own amazing pencil, and with a moral truth and comprehensiveness that exceed his most admired delineations,” adding “[i]t is a favourite passage and well known to the young.”<sup>160</sup> Also remarking on the popularity of these verses, George Gilfillan asserted that “[t]he Byron will occur to the mind of every reader – a picture in which the artist seems for a season to become the subject as he paints him.”<sup>161</sup> Pollok’s Byron was like “some fierce comet of tremendous size,/To which the stars did reverence” (IV.715-16), a being who “on the loftiest top/Of Fame’s dread mountain sat” (718-19) while talking with the thunder “as friend to friend” and seeming “an old acquaintance” with “Nature’s self” (687, 681). The vaunted poet had only to “[touch] his harp, and nations heard, entranced” (670), while “[w]ith terror now he froze the cowering blood,/And now dissolved the heart in tenderness” (705-6), before retreating back into his “[d]ark, sullen, proud” and enigmatic self (709). While comparisons between the “mad, bad, and dangerous” poet and his evangelical portraitist can seem surprising today, Hoxie Neale Fairchild reminds us that Byron “both fascinated and shocked the Evangelical mind” of the early nineteenth century.<sup>162</sup> As we know, Emma Tatham read Byron as well as Pollok, and Pollok’s poetry not infrequently accompanied Byron’s (including *Don Juan*) in Victorian commonplace books and among the coffee table reading in evangelical households of the period.<sup>163</sup>

#### 4.4.3 A “history of himself”: Autobiography in *The Course of Time*

Pollok’s lengthy depiction of Byron as his own anti-hero may be the most prominent or obvious Romantic element in *The Course of Time*. But Pollok’s numerous self-references and the poem’s obvious autobiographical material called attention to its author and identified *The Course of Time* with the larger Romantic tropes of introspection and subjectivity. Reflecting on the poem’s enormous success, George Gilfillan declared that

<sup>159</sup> “Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok,” 78.

<sup>160</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 98.

<sup>161</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 373.

<sup>162</sup> Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 1830–1880:26.

<sup>163</sup> St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 226–27. See also Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Books*, 68-9.

[a] pleasing feature of the poem, is the vein of fine egotism which pervades it, and breaks out frequently in personal allusions, and pensive reminiscences. This is one principal cause of its popularity. The poet who makes a harp of his own heart, and strikes its ruddy chords with skillful fearlessness, is sure of awakening the sympathies of the public.<sup>164</sup>

Similarly, the author of the biographical sketch in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* praised Pollok's "history of himself," particularly in Book Three, wherein the poet reflects on childhood days admiring "Scotia's northern battlement of hills" from his father's farm.<sup>165</sup> Of these childhood reminiscences in nature, Gilfillan had declared there was "nothing so beautiful."<sup>166</sup> For the *Chambers* author, the appeal of such passages was heightened "when we regard them, which the plan of the poem leads us to do, as the reminiscences of a glorified spirit, looking back from the mansions of bliss with a pensive and tender delight to the experiences of its earthly pilgrimage."<sup>167</sup> From the vantage point of 1843, when the *Chambers* sketch was published – or anytime after the poet's death in 1827 – Pollok could indeed be "a glorified spirit" looking back on his "earthly pilgrimage." The poet seemed to suggest as much in a short passage of Book VII, wherein a "youth of great religious soul," who in life had determined "[t]o write immortal things" despite "pain,/And weariness, and wasted health," on resurrection morn feels "[h]is form renewed to undecaying health" (207, 215-16, 226, 228).<sup>168</sup> The poet's premature demise also reinforced his identification with the ancient bard of his poem. In Gilfillan's estimation, it became "the principal cause" of the poem's popularity, lending "a consecrating magic to its every line."<sup>169</sup> Within a few years of his passing, Pollok was almost beatified himself by admirers such as the author of "Reminiscences of Robert Pollok" in the December 19, 1834 edition of *The Belfast News-Letter*. In a lengthy physical description of the poet, the author – who appears to have been a university friend – likens Pollok's

---

<sup>164</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 372–73.

<sup>165</sup> "Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok," 78.

<sup>166</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 373.

<sup>167</sup> "Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok," 78.

<sup>168</sup> Of these verses, Boyd declares, "I cannot forbear expressing the opinion that the poet, in this passage, was consciously drawing a portrait of his own mind, and writing his own intellectual history." Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 263.

<sup>169</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 323.

physical “symmetry” to the “beau-ideal statues of Hercules, Meleager, or the Fighting Gladiator.” The poet was, he insists, as “erect as a pine tree, clean-limbed as a race horse, and as firm and attenuated in muscular formation as an Arab of the desert.” Overlooking the physical ailments of which Pollok had complained since youth, the writer (evidently fancying the poet a highlander rather than the lowlander he was) asserts that, possessed of such magnificent physical gifts, Pollok could “outrun the deer of his native mountains . . . fell it with a single stroke, and afterwards carry it home on his shoulders.”<sup>170</sup>

Hagiography aside, readers like Emma Tatham and George Gilfillan saw a distinct personality behind the poem, “an eye looking forth from it which followed, pierced, and detained you,” as Gilfillan had observed.<sup>171</sup> The assertions of the poet’s remarkable piety, of which there were many - including George Cubitt’s remarks to Tatham - were based in large measure on the voice that spoke out of the poem itself. The young poet appeared to merge with the pious bard who told his story, so that in much of the poem - as in the invocations to Books I, VI, and IX, the poet’s calling in Book III, or the nature reveries of Book V – it was almost impossible to tell one from the other. When, in a passage from Book III often excerpted by commentators, the bard depicts the struggles of an aspiring young poet from the countryside, James Boyd and other readers knew exactly who he was talking about, even if the bard himself refused to say.<sup>172</sup> “One of this mood I do remember well,” the bard recalls, only then to declare, “[w]e name him not. What now are earthly names!” (Book III.894, 895). If, as friends remembered, Pollok had once criticized Byron for making himself the hero of his tales, there was little defense the Scottish poet could offer about placing himself in his own work.<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> “Reminiscences of Robert Pollok: Author of ‘The Course of Time,’” *Belfast News-Letter*, December 19, 1834, 10174 edition.

<sup>171</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 324.

<sup>172</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 125.

<sup>173</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 240.

#### 4.4.3.1 Melancholy and the Poet

Like Byron, Pollok recognized the attractions of melancholy, particularly when applied to a figure like himself (or his ideal self) and employed within his poem. We have already noted how Pollok employs melancholy to effective purpose in Book V, depicting the fleeting joys of human relationship in maternal affection, youthful love, and mature friendship. The bard's (and thus, Pollok's) reminiscences, including that of his sister's death in childbirth, become the "sorrows" which, when remembered, "sweeten present joy" – a line from Book I (434) inscribed into the inside cover of the 1832 Blackwood edition of *The Course of Time* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Pollok's depictions of the melancholy poet in his emotional and spiritual struggles (Book III) and as he wanders in nature (Book V) almost certainly owe something to Byron, if not to Wordsworth (although, as already noted, there is no definite indication of Pollok's having read or studied the latter). We already have observed Pollok's debt to the eighteenth-century tradition of melancholy. Here he adds his name to the list of poets like Chatterton and Keats who, suffering under the oppression of a world which denies their gifts, sacrifice their lives for their art.<sup>174</sup> Or so goes the mythology, which Pollok himself encourages in the lengthy semi-autobiographical passage of Book III, mentioned above, which like the late sonnets of Keats seems simultaneously prescient, beautiful, and foreboding.

#### 4.4.4 "Deep and sincere feeling"

The Romantic attraction of melancholy was, of course, an attraction to feeling, something the Romantics and their nineteenth-century evangelical brethren held in common.<sup>175</sup> We remember that James Scott had argued the importance of feeling in regard to the presentation of the gospel - its "truths" had become intellectual "axioms" in need of the poetic arrangement Pollok supplied in order to "excite [the] tumult among the feelings" that was their real power.<sup>176</sup> Gilfillan, too, had

---

<sup>174</sup> This idea, which we will explore further in the next chapter, is promulgated by some reviewers of *The Course of Time*.

<sup>175</sup> See Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 23.

<sup>176</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 295.

admired Pollok's ability to make "a harp of his own heart" and to strike it with "skillful fearlessness." The author of the early critique of *The Course of Time* in Charleston's *Southern Review* (1828) praised the honest emotions of the poem and affirmed the natural connection between "deep and sincere feeling," "true poetry," and religion:

Mr. Pollok's very successful attempt shews how naturally every deep and sincere feeling of the heart, producing a strong and glowing conception in the mind, prompts to true poetry, and how nearly allied true poetry, as every thing else implying deep and sincere feeling, is to religion.<sup>177</sup>

The sentiments are almost Wordsworthian. However, Hoxie Neale Fairchild asserts that true evangelical poets like Pollok (and perhaps unlike Wordsworth) always kept their emotions in check. She argues that "[g]enuinely Evangelical inwardness and emotionalism are held within Christian bounds by the objectivity of Reformation theology" - in this case, Calvinism. If one takes Fairchild's point, Pollok's allusion to Job in the section of Book IV rebuking those who question God's providence (roughly lines 414-441) offers support. In contrast to the typical, sympathetic Romantic depictions of Job as a man of great feeling and great suffering (as in Blake's illustrations to *The Book of Job*), Pollok denounces anyone who dares to question God's ways as "[a] worm, at best, of small capacity" (419). Rather, in *The Course of Time*, deep feeling is expended on things calculated to arouse the proper emotions in a chastened reader: The sentimental scenarios of Book V (the dying mother, the mourning widow, the parting of dear friends); the sublime depictions of Hell and judgment in Books I and IX; the Gothic, semi-comical resurrection of the dead in Book VII.<sup>178</sup> In each, strong feeling is married to (perhaps blunted by?) an affirmation of divine providence and its attendant revelation.

---

<sup>177</sup> "Book Review, 'The Course of Time,'" *The Southern Review*, 463.

<sup>178</sup> We remember that this was the first part of the poem which Pollok wrote, and may thus support the importance that deep feeling, directed towards the proper objects, held for him.

#### 4.4.5 Nature Reverie in *The Course of Time*

In addition to sentimental scenes, sublime descriptions, and Gothic episodes, nature is one of the primary vehicles for strong feeling in *The Course of Time*, as well as one of its major Romantic tropes. It is in nature that the bard experiences “a wondrous sort of bliss” (V.354) and where he loses himself in solitary contemplation as well as solemn, devotional meditation. The middle section of Book V, especially, is replete with the bard’s excursions in nature, depiction of specific Scottish landscapes, mystical or near-mystical experiences in these landscapes, and sense of nature’s living presence, however briefly evoked. These were among the most popular passages in *The Course of Time*, often excerpted in contemporary magazines and newspapers. Commentators in publications as geographically and culturally diverse as *The Western Monthly Review* and *The Ladies Repository*, both of Cincinnati, Ohio, and *The Eclectic Review* and *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* of London praise Pollok’s impassioned presentation of the “grandeur of nature.”<sup>179</sup> They also draw from many of the same passages in Books V and VII: The aforementioned stanzas beginning “Nor is the hour of lonely walk forgot” (V.335-385), which include the bard’s semi-“mystical” experience in nature; the poet’s sentimental depiction of the family farm at Moorhouse and of “Scotia’s northern battlement of hills” beyond (V.471-511); and the “Address to the Ocean” in Book VII,<sup>180</sup> a rather grandiose description of the seas giving up their dead on resurrection morn (VII.579-670). Not unimportant in regard to popularity were the distinctly autobiographical elements of the first two passages. In his 1854 edition of *The Course of Time*, James Boyd draws his readers’ attention to this fact, quoting at length from David Pollok’s biography of the poet. Apropos of the first passage, which emphasizes the Wordsworthian solitude of the poet in nature (“Pleasant were many scenes, but most to me/The solitude of vast extent,” V. 337-8),<sup>181</sup> David writes that

[n]othing . . . delighted [Robert] so much as walking out alone, in good day, without any definite purpose, into the moors that lie to the south and south-east of

<sup>179</sup> “*The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books*,” *North American Review*, 44.

<sup>180</sup> This is Boyd’s designated heading for these stanzas. Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 278.

<sup>181</sup> William St. Clair notes similarities between Pollok’s nature descriptions and Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 630.

Moorhouse; wandering among them from height to height, or from glen to glen, till, as he expressed it, "his soul was filled with their glories;" and then returning home at his leisure.<sup>182</sup>

According to David, this passage (beginning "Nor is the hour of lonely walk forgot," l.335) directly reflects these experiences, as well as the topography around Moorhouse, which Robert observed in minutest detail.<sup>183</sup> Especially striking is the second stanza, which appears to depict the bard's mystical experience in nature, and as such, is worth quoting at length:

It was indeed a wondrous sort of bliss  
 The lonely bard enjoy'd, when forth he walk'd  
 Unpurposed; stood, and knew not why; sat down,  
 And knew not where; arose, and knew not when;  
 Had eyes, and saw not; ears, and nothing heard;  
 And sought—sought neither heaven nor earth —sought  
     naught,  
 Nor meant to think; but ran, meantime, through vast  
 Of visionary things. . . .  
 . . . . .  
 He enter'd in to Nature's holy place,  
 Her inner chamber, and beheld her face  
 Unveiled; and heard unutterable things,  
 And incommunicable visions saw;  
 Things then unutterable, and visions then  
 Of incommunicable glory bright;  
 But by the lips of after ages formed  
 To words . . . (V.354-371)

Such passages have more in common with Coleridge than with Calvin, and indeed, the reviewer in *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine asks, "To whom, if not to Coleridge may be applied the words" of much of the passage.<sup>184</sup> The kind of reverie and near-pantheistic treatment of "Nature" on display here can seem suspicious from a Calvinist perspective; even moreso, perhaps, from a

<sup>182</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 29–30.

<sup>183</sup> David Pollok, 29–30.

<sup>184</sup> "Review of Robert Pollok's 'The Course of Time,'" *The Spirit of the Pilgrims Magazine*, 538.

poet deeply influenced by Enlightenment moral thought. But we have seen compelling arguments for an intrinsic connection between Scottish Enlightenment and Scottish Romantic cultures, as well as between Calvinism and Scottish Romanticism, and *The Course of Time* may provide evidence for each of these. However, it must also be acknowledged that, despite the above stanza and other brief references in *The Course of Time* – notably, the “unveiled Godhead” in Book VI, from whom the stranger spirit receives “an individual smile,/Of high acceptance” – Pollok’s depiction of transcendental experience may be nothing more than sheer rhetoric, perhaps influenced by someone like Coleridge. Hoxie Neale Fairchild argues that, just as no true evangelical poet is also a Romantic, so none can be a real mystic, either, because the evangelical poet’s beliefs are founded “not upon contemplative vision but upon a perfectly literal interpretation of the Bible.” In Fairchild’s view, the closest thing to mysticism one would find in an evangelical poet like Pollok is a kind of internal “quietistic tendency” focused almost solely upon personal piety.<sup>185</sup> This indeed may be the case with Pollok, however much one may wish to see him breaking the more restrictive norms of his religious culture.

George Gilfillan evidently interpreted what we might call “mystical” references in *The Course of Time* as mere rhetoric, asserting that, on the contrary, the poem suffered from a lack of transcendental qualities:

Pollok’s book . . . is remarkable in general for its clearness and simplicity of thought and style; so much so, that we almost long for a little more of that fine German mysticism, without which it is, perhaps, after all, impossible to speak of the deepest and the loftiest---of eternity, space, night, infinitude.<sup>186</sup>

To Gilfillan’s mind, so it would seem, Pollok was more man of Enlightenment than Romantic. “His peculiar power is understanding,” Gilfillan explained. “He ratiocinates, declaims, inveighs, but rarely feels on his half-blinded eyes flashes of intuitive and transcendental truth.” Gilfillan

---

<sup>185</sup> Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 1830–1880:30.

<sup>186</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 329.

concluded that Pollok was “a thoroughly Scottish soul; clear even in his extravagances---common sense even in its wildness.”<sup>187</sup>

Whether or not Gilfillan was correct, Pollok’s Scottishness was something reviewers remarked on, particularly with respect to the poet’s depiction of the family farm at Moorhouse and of “Scotia’s northern battlement of hills” beyond in Book V., lines 471 to 511. Reviewers were captivated by the bard’s (e.g. Pollok’s) recollections of “the blue mountain-paths,/And snowy cliffs” of his homeland and the “native scenery” which “press[ed] forward to be in my song” (474-5, 490-1). There was even a specific description of favorite trees in the farmhouse yard (ll. 493-505), so that Pollok aficionados like the Reverend James Scott could identify them as part of a literary pilgrimage after the poet’s death.<sup>188</sup> But commentators tended to agree with Gilfillan that no descriptive passage in *The Course of Time* matched the poet’s simple depiction of the hills round Loch Lomond, seen from the Moorhouse farm. They were the poet’s favorite picture, too:

Nor do I of that isle remember aught  
Of prospect more sublime and beautiful,  
Than Scotia’s northern battlement of hills,  
Which first I from my father’s house beheld,  
At dawn of life: beloved in memory still;  
And standard still of rural imagery. . . . (V.479-484)

David Pollok attests that the view of these “North Hills” from Moorhouse was “unsurpassed for boldness by any thing in Scotland,” and that Robert would often rise from writing at Moorhouse to go out to a nearby elevation “and admire them, in their varied appearances throughout the year.”<sup>189</sup> Clearly, the Scottish landscape had marked the poet, even if he mainly drew the supranatural shapes of heaven and hell. “[T]here can be no doubt,” David asserted,

---

<sup>187</sup> Gilfillan, 329.

<sup>188</sup> Scott describes his visits to sites around Moorhouse associated with Pollok, which occurred in the summer and fall of 1828 - a year after the poet’s death - in the Preface to his memoir. See Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M.* ...

<sup>189</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 29.

that the nature of the surrounding country entered largely into the formation of his character, and the development of his mind; that it greatly contributed to the boldness, energy, and variety of the one, as well as to the purity, elevation, and comprehensiveness of the other. It was impossible for a mind like his to contemplate such a scene as that around Moorhouse, without being deeply inspired with the spirit of freedom, and strongly impressed with ideas of vastness and magnificence.<sup>190</sup>

If Milton's sublime depictions were almost entirely a product of his imagination, Pollok's – so David suggests – had their root in the magnificence of the Scottish countryside, which tourists from the south already were discovering.<sup>191</sup> Readers of *The Course of Time* also could imagine southern Scotland's moors, hills, and lochs as the breeding ground for the virtuous character its author espoused and seemed to embody. Sublimity could lead to dizziness; in Scotland, apparently, it also could lead to sober morality.

A third often-excerpted nature passage in *The Course of Time* was the "Address to the Ocean" in Book VII. While Gilfillan found the above lines on "Scotia's northern battlement of hills" stirring, the author of the critique in *The Christian Review* (1828) confessed that he or she had "never read anything more beautiful" than the verses depicting sea-borne mariners transformed on resurrection morn, as the ocean gives up its dead<sup>192</sup> – a likely reference to Revelation 20:13. Thomas McNicoll acknowledged that the ocean was "a favourite theme with poets of every grade," and that many reputations had sunk in attempts to eloquently depict it; however, Pollok's verses on the subject were inferior to none which had come before, including Byron's in *Childe Harold*. "It is a magnificent apostrophe," McNicoll declared, "almost worthy the hallowed lips and the immortal harp of the long-sainted bard from whom it is supposed to break" – that is, the bard of *The Course*

---

<sup>190</sup> David Pollok, 6.

<sup>191</sup> George IV made his famous tour of Scotland in 1822, only two years before Pollok began *The Course of Time*.

<sup>192</sup> "Book Review," *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine*, 355.

of *Time* – “and of the resurrection-morning on which his triumphant memory revisits it.”<sup>193</sup> Both McNicoll and *The Christian Review* included lengthy excerpts from the passage, while in his poetry anthology of 1874, entitled *Parnassus*, American Ralph Waldo Emerson selected only sixteen lines.<sup>194</sup> Nonetheless, Pollok’s depiction of the “[u]nfallen, religious, holy sea” which “bow’dst [its] glorious head to none” (VII.593-4) placed him among Byron, Wordsworth, and other major Romantics whose celebration of nature extended beyond the mountains and the shore. Pollok, too, had made the experience of nature on land and sea a distinctly religious and even apocalyptic one, as the “Address to the Ocean” affirms.

Pollok’s presentation of nature and of nature reverie in *The Course of Time* Books V and VII seems fairly typically Romantic, including an episode of what might be interpreted as mystical or transcendental experience, only qualified by occasional references to meditative, distinctly Christian devotion in nature (V., ll. 381-2) and of the natural world as the setting for encounter with the God of Christianity (V., ll. 509-11). As noted earlier in this chapter, the poet is careful to connect experience in nature with the creator of it. As such, “Nature” is valued both for its own sake and for how it may move or influence the human agent towards an intimation of divine revelation. But in *The Course of Time*, experience in nature is never an end in itself, as it seems to be in some of Wordsworth’s poetry. Returning to a theme prominent in Books III and IV, Pollok’s bard affirms that happiness is not to be found in earthly things, including nature, however much Wordsworth and others may celebrate it:

Though poets much, and hermits, talk’d and sung  
Of brooks, and crystal founts, and weeping dews,  
And myrtle bowers, and solitary vales;  
And with the nymph made assignations there . . .  
    . . . Was happiness,  
Was self-approving, God approving joy,  
In drops of dew, however pure? in gales,  
However sweet? in wells, however clear?  
Or groves, however thick with verdant shade? (V.97-100, 104-108)

---

<sup>193</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 104.

<sup>194</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Parnassus* (Freeport, N.Y., Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 38.

Even to entertain such thoughts was “[d]elirious babble” (104), since “[t]rue happiness had no localities” (123), whatever Wordsworth and other nature-loving poets might suggest. Experiences in nature “were the occasion” but “not the cause of joy,” Pollok’s bard asserts (113). “They waked the native fountains of the soul,/Which slept before; and stirr’d the holy tides/Of feeling up” (114-16) – not unimportant work. But such experiences were not the source of happiness. That lay in “[t]he Christian faith” alone, as we have seen, “which better knew the heart/Of man” (118). Other Romantics may imagine happiness in specific place and time – above Tintern Abbey or climbing Mount Snowdon – but for Pollok and his bard, the only “high and holy place” (137) where true happiness could be found was in the heart dedicated to God. The bard might “[enter] in to Nature’s holy place,” as we have seen, even to “[h]er inner chamber,” beholding “her face/Unveiled” (366-68), but he would not, like Wordsworth, become Nature’s worshipful subject, nor would she ever be the guide of his “moral being,” as she is for Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey*. Pollok and his bard looked to the world beyond for these things, which were, after all, mere shadows of all that was to come.

#### 4.5 Prophetic Vision and Apocalypse in *The Course of Time*

The prophetic and apocalyptic elements of *The Course of Time* attracted their share of readers, although it took Pollok’s bard nearly five books to get to Armageddon and the Millennium, and even then, he did not spend enough time on either in the estimation of James Scott, George Gilfillan, and other reviewers.<sup>195</sup> Nonetheless, there were those, like the writer in *The Christian Review*, who praised Pollok’s handling of “the day . . . so long expected . . . /Of the eternal doom” (I, 29-30) when it finally arrived. “In no part . . . of his work, has our author shewn more true poetical skill,” the reviewer declared, “than in his transition from the calm and beautiful style which he has used to depict [the millennium] to that which he has employed in announcing the approach of the great and terrible day of the Lord.” The reviewer could almost hear the angelic

---

<sup>195</sup> See Scott, 300, and Gilfillan, 325, 334.

hosts girding for battle in Pollok's lines, affirming the opinion that "Mr. Pollok's genius is [most] eminently fitted for the sublime portion of his subject."<sup>196</sup> Decades later and more than an ocean away, the Reverend P. E. Royse of Kentucky seemed to view Pollok as a prophet of apocalypse, including short excerpts from *The Course of Time* in a book purporting to offer biblical and extra-biblical confirmation of the end times.<sup>197</sup> Whatever the case, Pollok sought to marry apocalypse with millennium, contra Byron, in such a way as to fulfill (consciously or not) Edward Irving's call for a "complete" justification of God's ways to man. That, as Irving had contended, would not occur until a godly poet depicted the Day of Judgment in all its terror and sublimity. If Pollok was the man, as the writer in *The Christian Review* appeared to suggest, he had a high bar to meet.

In fact, many of the leading Romantic poets, with the notable exception of Byron, attempted to bring apocalypse and millennium together, too. But as Morton Paley suggests, these attempts were mostly failures, reflecting the political and ideological uncertainties of the time.<sup>198</sup> Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, and Shelley all attempted such "marriages" to greater or lesser success. "What is important is that the narrative go from a revelation of the nature of human history, usually accompanied by great upheavals, to a society characterized by harmony and justice for a very long period of time," Paley asserts.<sup>199</sup> This, according to Paley, is the background of Coleridge's early "Religious Musings," Blake's *America*, and parts of Wordsworth's *Prelude* – all begun or completed amid the political and cultural upheavals of the 1790s.<sup>200</sup> Observing the latter, the Romantics saw commonalities between their era and Milton's turbulent seventeenth century, both periods when apocalyptic works – particularly the biblical Book of Revelation – had special appeal.<sup>201</sup> Many Romantic attempts at apocalypse were, in some measure, adaptations of the model employed by the author of Revelation,<sup>202</sup> and to this *The Course of Time* is no exception. If anything, Pollok came late in the day, as has been suggested, to the Romantic trade in epic and

---

<sup>196</sup> "Book Review," *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine*, 352.

<sup>197</sup> P. E. Royse, *The Voice of the Prophets: Proclaiming Wonderful Tidings about the Time of the End: As Exemplified by Collateral, Historical, and Critical Annotations on the Apocalypse*, self-published by the author (Louisville, Kentucky: 1860).

<sup>198</sup> Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*, 1.

<sup>199</sup> Paley, 4.

<sup>200</sup> Paley, 4.

<sup>201</sup> Peter J. Kitson, "To Milton's Trump," in Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 54.

<sup>202</sup> Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*, 5.

apocalypse, although his marriage of apocalypse and millennium, while descriptively thin, is perhaps more successful than most. Better than most of his contemporaries, Pollok knew how important the connection between apocalypse and millennium was and had been to Christianity, going all the way back to the early church.<sup>203</sup> Byron surely did, as well, so that his refusal to connect the two in “Darkness” was a deliberate sin of omission. According to John Beer, Byron’s natural skepticism, which Pollok had attacked, partly explains this. “[Byron] enjoyed using images drawn from the biblical apocalypse,” Beer asserts; however, unlike the young Coleridge, Wordsworth, or even Shelley, Byron was “deeply skeptical about any advent of the millennium in his time.”<sup>204</sup> Pollok thus followed poets who either had tried and mostly failed to marry apocalypse with millennium, as the Bible set forth, or had refused the attempt altogether.

If the plan of “Darkness” was in some ways opposite to that of “Religious Musings,” *America*, or *Prometheus Unbound* – not to mention *The Course of Time* – Byron had drunk from the same apocalyptic waters as these other poets. We already have mentioned the 1828 article in Britain’s *Imperial Magazine* – one year after the first publication of *The Course of Time* – noting Byron’s probable use of apocalyptic episodes and imagery from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, among other biblical prophets. Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation, in particular, were important to the British Romantics,<sup>205</sup> and Pollok uses all three in *The Course of Time*. According to James Boyd, it is Isaiah to whom the poet compares himself in the invocation to Book I (lines 2-8) and whose “unscaled” eye sees “the future pass/Before him” (l.3, 5-6) in ancient Judah<sup>206</sup> – a prophetic gift the poet wishes for himself. Isaiah notably reappears in Book VI, after the millennium, to lead the heavenly hosts in an evening song of praise to God, not unlike that sung by the angels to the godhead in *Paradise Lost* Book III. Daniel and his famous vision of the end times (in Daniel 8) are invoked in Book X, as the bard calls on the “Breath of the Lord” to

---

<sup>203</sup> Paley argues the historic importance of this “marriage” for Christianity. See *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*, 9.

<sup>204</sup> John Beer, “Romantic Apocalypses,” in Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 59–60.

<sup>205</sup> Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*, 9.

<sup>206</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 37.

. . . touch me trembling, as thou touched the man,  
 Greatly beloved, when he in vision saw,  
 By Ulai's stream, the Ancient sit; and talked  
 With Gabriel. . . . (59-63)

Of course, Revelation plays a role throughout *The Course of Time*, especially in Books V-X, which incorporate Armageddon, millennium, resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. Pollok's fidelity to his sources was not undercut, at least not to his readers, by his own questions about the reliability of any claims to such knowledge, as we shall see.

#### 4.5.1 A Chosen Bard

What Pollok did claim, at least rhetorically, was prophetic vision of the type also claimed by fellow Romantics Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, among others. We already have noted the ways in which Pollok, like them, appropriated Milton's prophetic voice and incorporated himself into the English tradition of the poet-prophet in which Milton was the pre-eminent example. Pollok places himself among the "[c]hosen bards [who] from age to age [awake]/The sacred lyre" (III., 687-8) from the very beginning of his epic, calling on the "Eternal Spirit" to "inspire my song" in the opening stanza (l.1,8) and asserting that "the heavenly muse instructs me" a few lines later (ll. 55-7). Among repeated entreaties to "unscale" his eye and to "hold my right hand, Almighty!," the poet/bard also describes his divine calling in Book III, which comes, as with Elijah in the cave at Horeb, in a moment of deep despair, when even religion seems to have failed him (or he has failed it). Following a lengthy autobiographical passage reflecting the poet's own struggles with depression and wasting disease, the bard recalls that "[W]hen thus [the poet] lay,/Forlorn of heart, withered and desolate,"

God passed in mercy by,---  
 . . . and on him breathed,  
 And bade him live, and put into his hands  
 A holy harp, into his lips a song,  
 That rolled its numbers down the tide of Time. (III.1000-4)

The author of an early commentary in *The Eclectic Review* (1828) may be recalling such passages when he or she declares that “[Pollok’s] poem breathes . . . inspiration,” and that not “of the Castalian fount” – that is, from pagan or secular sources – “but of Siloa’s brook,” a reference both to Jesus’ miracle at the pool of Siloam in John 9 and Milton’s reference to the same in *Paradise Lost*, Book I.<sup>207</sup> Pollok himself had asserted, according to brother David, that “the idea of [*The Course of Time*]” had struck him “as if by immediate inspiration,”<sup>208</sup> and that, as he raced to complete the poem in the summer of 1826, he seemed to write from that same inspiration, even as his body was giving way.<sup>209</sup> Of course, the Romantic claim to divine inspiration was nothing new; we have noted Hugh Blair’s contention, in his influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, that poets received their gifts from God,<sup>210</sup> and of course, Wordsworth in his *Prelude* and Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry*, had decisively contributed to the image of the poet as inspired prophet. We have noted, too, the Scottish Enlightenment conception of the arts as “divine gifts” to be cultivated and enjoyed for the benefit of society at large.<sup>211</sup> Pollok certainly was not deaf to any of these things, holding poetry as a “divine” and “sacred” art,<sup>212</sup> as we have seen, and dedicating himself to pursuing this “noblest employment of the mind of man”<sup>213</sup> for the betterment of others. “From the first moment I turned my attention to literature,” the poet recalled, “I felt within me . . . a strong desire . . . of doing something in that way that might benefit both my contemporaries and those who should come after me.”<sup>214</sup> *The Course of Time*, of course, would become that intended beneficial gift.

---

<sup>207</sup> “Pollok’s Course of Time,” *The Eclectic Review*, 362.

<sup>208</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 266.

<sup>209</sup> David Pollok, 287.

<sup>210</sup> Brown, *Artful Virtue*, 47.

<sup>211</sup> Brown, 48.

<sup>212</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 254.

<sup>213</sup> David Pollok, 254.

<sup>214</sup> David Pollok, 253.

#### 4.5.2 In the Line of the Biblical Prophets

We have noted Pollok's debt to and invocation of biblical prophets Isaiah, Daniel, and the author of the Book of Revelation. Like them, and like Blake, Milton, and Dante before him, Pollok assumes a prophetic role in order to pass judgment on an apostate culture - in this case, late Georgian Britain - which had "the truth of God/Turned to a lie, deceiving and deceived" (II., 379-80). Relating things past, as well as "things to come," Pollok's bard adopts the dual roles of prophet and historian, his narrative told retrospectively from the standpoint of eternity, in order to effect prospective change in the timebound world of humankind. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Pollok could hardly avoid being influenced by the prophetic interpretation of history common to Scottish Calvinism which, drawing on the Hebraic tradition, emphasized aspects of moral and religious instruction. History was a special formulation of the divine word, and Christian bards such as Pollok were its true interpreters, a point reiterated in the long description of the Christian Bard in Book IX (lines 479-511) examined earlier. Poets like Wordsworth and Shelley might claim a kind of divine inspiration, but as we have seen, it is only this "true, legitimate, anointed bard" (l. 537) who pours "melody, and beauty . . . and love" into the human heart "from the fount of truth," and in so doing, "justifie[s] the ways of God to man. . . ." (l. 503-7). Thus, Pollok's desire to hear and interpret the wisdom of "[t]he prophet harp" (invoked in the passage on Daniel's vision in Book X) sits within several traditions at once: That of biblical prophecy, that of Calvinist historical interpretation, and that of the Miltonic poet-prophet rightly defending the word of God.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, before embarking on *The Course of Time*, Pollok had imagined himself in the role of John of Patmos in a satirical letter to a friend and humorously depicted his undergraduate examinations and graduation ceremony as the eschaton.<sup>215</sup> Several years later, as he approached the latter sections of *The Course of Time*, Pollok returned to these themes, if in a distinctly earnest rather than humorous vein. After completing the more didactic and doctrinal sections of the poem, which included the long passages of moral portraiture, Pollok appeared to

---

<sup>215</sup> David Pollok, 162-64. The first is a letter written to school friend David Marr in the summer of 1822, satirically depicting a night-time journey to Paisley, during which, among many other exploits, the poet considers the writing of Revelation. The satire of senior-year examinations and graduation also is found in David's biography, 167-186.

take up, if only coincidentally, Irving's repeated question in *The Oracles of God*: "How are men to escape Judgment and the condemnation to come?" Pollok's answer, judging by the events of Books V-X, seemed to be they *can't* – at least, if men rejected Christ and refused to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of virtue. Thus, like the biblical prophets referenced in various parts of his poem – but distinctly unlike most of his Romantic peers, Blake perhaps excepted – Pollok invokes apocalypse as an invitation and a warning to repentance. In *The Course of Time*, apocalypse and attendant eschatological events can often seem closer to sermon illustrations than to experiences in and for themselves.

#### 4.5.3 Visions of the End

As noted, Pollok does not approach the "essential truth" promised in the opening lines of his poem – that of "[t]ime gone, the righteous saved,/[and] the wicked damn'd" – until the latter part of Book V, after "Providence" already has been "approved" in large measure and "the wise," such as they are, "instructed" (I.20-21, 27-28). What remains, and probably a good part of the intention behind Books V-X, is to depict the eschaton in all its sublimity and fearsomeness so "that fools may hear and tremble," according to the poet's initial statement of purpose (I.27). We already have noted the long-standing Scottish Calvinist "obsession with apocalypse"<sup>216</sup> and devotion to providential views of history which almost undoubtedly influenced Pollok's thinking and presentation of eschatological subjects. We also have speculated on connections between Edward Irving's pre-millennialism, Romantic sensibilities concerning apocalypse, and what is arguably a pre-millennialist (and thus, decidedly Romantic) presentation of apocalyptic events in *The Course of Time*. However, as Karen McConnell observes, Pollok is cautious about approaching the political dimensions of apocalypse and millennium, despite his strong condemnation of slavery in Books IV and VII (in which master and slave arise as equals on resurrection day) and of political, social, and economic inequality in various parts of the poem. Still, McConnell probably goes too far in asserting that *The Course of Time* is implicitly, if not explicitly, political, "a text that seems to

---

<sup>216</sup> Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment*, 62–63.

want to have it both ways . . . to be political *and* transcendent.”<sup>217</sup> Despite the political implications of Romantic and Scottish Calvinist apocalypticism, or that of Edward Irving, *The Course of Time* betrays no political interest that is not subsidiary to or almost entirely subsumed by its conventional theodicean aims. This contention is supported by the evidence of contemporary reviews of the poem, none of which single out any political elements for comment; rather, as we shall see in the next chapter, commentators focus almost exclusively on the poem’s theological, literary, and stylistic elements.

#### 4.5.4 A “Resurrection Man”

As noted in an earlier chapter, *The Course of Time* was similar to many contemporary apocalyptic epics in its focus on biblical subject matter and depiction of a vast cosmology. Michael Wheeler finds the poem “perhaps the most interesting of many attempts in this period to narrate the unnarratable, and to tread where the writers of the Revelation, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Paradise Lost* had already trodden.”<sup>218</sup> One of Pollok’s arch-nemeses, Joseph Priestley, had tried his own hand at the genre, offering a decidedly more revolutionary interpretation of apocalypse and millennium drawn out of similar biblical sources.<sup>219</sup> What was different about *The Course of Time* was how it presented its subject matter – retrospective reflection on eschatological events already subordinated to lengthy moral sermons – and where its focus lay. Wheeler is right to suggest that Pollok spends relatively little time on the millennium, a high point of many apocalyptic epics, because “[the poet’s] true subject is the depravity of sinners” detailed in the previous five books.<sup>220</sup> Similarly, we have noted George Gilfillan’s observation that, by the time Pollok attempts “to sing the millennial glory, his harp seems to refuse its office,”<sup>221</sup> which, when put in context with Gilfillan’s other comments on this part of the poem, suggests a lack of interest as well as ability.

---

<sup>217</sup> McConnell, “Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland,” 96.

<sup>218</sup> Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 86.

<sup>219</sup> This is Priestley’s *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies*, 1794.

<sup>220</sup> Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 88. The millennium is depicted after the apocalypse in just over one hundred-fifty lines (ll. 930-1095) in Book V of *The Course of Time*.

<sup>221</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 325.

Even James Scott lamented that “this wonderful epoch of a thousand years [the millennium] should never have been thrust in at the end of a book,” as it was in the closing stanzas of Book V. For Scott, it was a problem of proportion and a reflection of the poet’s true focus, as Wheeler would later note. “The poet seems not to have been guided by any earthly, epic measurement in the construction of [the poem],” Scott observed, “but rather, by his emotions and pictorial views of man’s wickedness.”<sup>222</sup>

If one hundred-fifty or so rather generic lines on the millennium were not enough for Gilfillan, Scott, and others, Pollok dispensed with Armageddon much more swiftly – a mere stanza - while lingering over depictions of the “whore of Babylon,” or papal Rome, as Milton had done before him. The poet stays close to his source material, however. As Armageddon looms, the Lord appears “clad like a man/Of war” (889-90), in reference to Exodus 15, and afterward, the defeated Satan, while “bound,” nonetheless remains to “lurk” around “the timorous skirts of things” (945-7) as in Revelation 20. In the new era which follows, Justice, Mercy, Holiness, and Love “walk” “[a]mong the people,” Messiah reigns, and “Earth [keeps] Jubilee a thousand years” (1093-5) as promised in the same passage. Even the animals live in peace, as Isaiah had prophesied, the wolf “dwelling” with the lamb, the bear and leopard with the ox, and “[t]he tiger . . . and the scaly crocodile” together meeting “with looks of love” (1072-6). However, despite some imaginative pictorialization (as in the last line), Gilfillan and others find Pollok’s depictions of the end times altogether too short and redundant. “[H]e sweeps the stage nobly, for the ‘great vision of the guarded throne,’” Gilfillan declares, “he excites a thrill of shuddering expectation. . . .” But after striking “some brief strong notes” on “the tremendous lyre of judgment,” the poet “recoils from the sounds he himself has made; and from an attempt to lift up his hand to the last trembling cords, he falls back exhausted and helpless.” Somewhat confusingly, Gilfillan also asserts that “the poet reaches his climax at the sixth book” (depicting another round of ungodliness following the millennium), while at the same time insisting that “[t]he last six books [that is, Books V-X] might almost have been spared.”<sup>223</sup> Certainly, the familiar depictions of human ungodliness and threats of divine retribution that recur in the last books – what Wheeler describes as the poem’s

---

<sup>222</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. . . .*, 300.

<sup>223</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 334.

“established pattern of deferral and repetition”<sup>224</sup> – can be confusing, perhaps leading Wheeler to suggest that “Pollok’s vision of judgment . . . fails not least because the earlier descriptions of divine intervention in the poem make the last judgment itself virtually redundant. . . .”<sup>225</sup> When we finally get there, after sorting sheep from goats in Book IX and much waiting around the judgment throne in Books VIII and X, the appearance of the godhead in the final stanzas of Book X can seem anticlimactic. God the Father appears in a “radiant cloud” to address the assembled multitudes, and the Son takes the Judgment Seat to pronounce sentence upon the damned, who are enchained beneath a burning cloud. Following the destruction and renewal of the earth, as promised in Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3, the great “Evangelical Epic” ends with Christ leading the elect, along with his bride, the church, through the gates of heaven, “[w]hich [close] behind them,” never to re-open.

If, as Gilfillan suggests, “Pollok . . . gives the subject [of apocalypse] the slip,”<sup>226</sup> that is decidedly not the case with the poet’s handling of one aspect of it, resurrection. Pollok gives more time and space to the subject – the entirety of Book VII – than to any other eschatological theme, and as we know, the nearly eight-hundred lines on resurrection were the first part of the poem to be written, before the entirety of the poet’s plan had been conceived. Gilfillan might disparage Pollok’s handling of the raising of the dead – “as coarse as though done by a *resurrection-man*”<sup>227</sup> – but Pollok’s emphasis on the subject serves his larger concerns about immortality and of portraying humanity in its original state, stripped of all but character alone. As noted in an earlier chapter, a denial of resurrection effectively was a denial of Christian eschatology in general, including the all-important idea of final judgment so important to Pollok and Edward Irving. The roots of such denial stretched beyond Byron, David Hume, or Joseph Priestley (a special case, since Priestley believed in the resurrection of a completely human Christ) all the way back to Paul’s preaching on the Areopagus in Athens. There, the great saint was confronted by Stoics and Epicureans who

---

<sup>224</sup> Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 89.

<sup>225</sup> Wheeler, 90.

<sup>226</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 336.

<sup>227</sup> Gilfillan, 329. “Resurrection-man” is a nineteenth-century term for a grave robber or body snatcher. Gilfillan would have been quite familiar with the famous case of convicted murderers and body snatchers Burke and Hare in Edinburgh, which had occurred only a few years before (and just after first publication of *The Course of Time*).

mocked the idea of resurrection,<sup>228</sup> as Pollok must have imagined Byron did. Given his unusual emphasis on resurrection in an age generally more concerned with salvation and atonement,<sup>229</sup> Pollok likely would have heartily agreed with Augustine's assertion that no Christian dogma was "so vehemently and so obstinately opposed as the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh."<sup>230</sup>

Pollok proves himself a resurrection man in other ways, too. It is in the lines on resurrection that the poet actually deviates from the order of events in the Book of Revelation, placing general and specific resurrection together, after the millennium rather than before it, so that saints, martyrs, and sinners are all raised or transformed at once.<sup>231</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, is the case (which Gilfillan only alludes to) that Pollok offers much more detail about physical resurrection and bodily transformation at the eschaton (as Paul preaches in 1 Corinthians 15) than about any other eschatological event, including final judgment. This may be a simple reflection of the fact that Pollok wrote these lines first, or that, as Gilfillan, Irving, and others suggested, it was difficult, if not impossible, to depict the final apocalypse itself. However, like the episodes of moral portraiture which precede them, the lines on resurrection appear to reflect the deeper interests of the author himself. While some descriptions are indeed "coarse," others border on the pathetic and even the (unintentionally) comic, as these about old men, beggars, and cadavers transformed:

Old men, that on their staff, bending had lean'd,  
 Crazy and frail; or sat, benumb'd with age,  
 In weary listlessness, ripe for the grave,  
 Felt through their sluggish veins, and wither'd limbs,  
 New vigor flow: the wrinkled face grew smooth;  
 Upon the head, that time had razor'd bare,  
 Rose bushy locks. . . .

the wretch, that begging sat  
 Limbless, deform'd, at corner of the way,  
 Unmindful of his crutch, in joint and limb  
 Arose complete.

---

<sup>228</sup> Acts 17:32.

<sup>229</sup> This is the contention of Boyd Hilton in his *Age of Atonement*, cited in Knight and Mason, 160.

<sup>230</sup> Augustine, Ps. lxxxviii, sermon ii, n. 5, in *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Appleton, 1911), 792.

<sup>231</sup> Although there is some dispute, in Revelation 20, the martyred faithful appear to be raised prior to the commencement of the millennium.

And as the anatomist, with all his band  
 Of rude disciples, o'er the subject hung,  
 And impolitely hew'd his way through bones  
 And muscles of the sacred human form,  
 Exposing barbarously to wanton gaze,  
 The mysteries of nature—joint embraced  
 His kindred joint, the wounded flesh grew up,  
 And suddenly the injured man awoke,  
 Among their hands, and stood array'd complete  
 In immortality—forgiving scarce  
 The insult offer'd to his clay in death. (160-66, 170-73, 191-201)

Elsewhere, the Egyptian mummy rises from his coffin to stand equal beside his most recent owner, and the slave and his master arise together with no distinction to be made any longer between them. While such egalitarianism might suggest unusual political interests, as perhaps it does for Karen McConnell, abolitionist sentiments, as we have seen, were often commonplace among late eighteenth and early nineteenth British evangelicals. Particularly compelling for some readers, no doubt, was Pollok's depiction of himself on resurrection morn, or someone very like him, in lines 207-228. We earlier noted this "youth of great religious soul," who suffers "pain,/And weariness, and wasted health" while in pursuit of the idol of poetic fame, much as the despondent bard depicted in Book III. As in that earlier experience, so here the poet is chastened, re-oriented, and (very literally) given new life, feeling "[h]is form renewed to undecaying health," as the "lighter current" of immortality runs through veins no longer subject to the curse of death (207, 215-6, 226-7).

#### 4.6 Apocalyptic Laughter

Clearly, resurrection was a very attractive idea to Robert Pollok, dominating in space, detail, and attention his poetic vision of the last things. Given the focus he placed upon the subject, several books before his narrative conclusion, it was almost inevitable that when he arrived at the terminus of final judgment, the latter would appear "virtually redundant," as Michael Wheeler suggests. Rather than lavishing extensive detail on grand apocalyptic episodes such as the battle of

Armageddon, the millennial reign of Christ, or final judgment itself (a matter of two hundred lines or so), Pollok's eye remains fixed on "the rigid depictment of the characters of men . . . when all but character shall have left them."<sup>232</sup> As I have suggested, unlike most of his Romantic contemporaries, Pollok's interest appears not to lie in the idea of apocalypse, as his title might infer, but rather, in theodicy – in defending divine providence and illustrating the consequences of human religious and moral failure. What he offers in *The Course of Time* is a sustained prophetic critique of human action, rather than a detailed and imaginative exploration of future revelation. In the end, Pollok and his bard may be more preacher or moralist than prophet, choosing a sermonic mode over a visionary one and valuing defensive, polemical engagement over abstract metaphysical interpretation. If this is so, the apocalyptic elements of *The Course of Time* serve more as sermon illustrations than as any real or imagined "end" in themselves. It also may be that, in approaching the apocalyptic in this fashion – as support or illustration for a larger argument – Pollok comes closer to answering Edward Irving's call for a poet to "sermonize" biblical apocalypse than originally imagined.

Support for such a view can be found in Pollok's own writing outside of *The Course of Time*, specifically in the aforementioned graduation exam satire and the reflections on the Book of Revelation in the fictionalized account of a night journey to Paisley. Unlike *The Course of Time*, these are humorous pieces which appear to cast doubt on, or at least poke fun at, the very ideas of apocalypse and revelation. Coming as they do several years before *The Course of Time* (both were written in the spring of 1822), these incidental pieces color how a reader might interpret Pollok's epic itself. The graduation satire, written in the form of a long letter to a friend aspiring to attend university, casts Pollok's final-year exams as the Judgment and his graduation ceremony as the rapture. The former, presided over by the poet's moral philosophy professor, James Mylne, and his professor of rhetoric and logic, George Jardine, includes numerous sightings of the "ghosts" or "goblins" of deceased philosophers, theologians, mathematicians, and scientists whose work Pollok and his fellow students have studied while at university. The ghosts of Locke and Cicero are given special acknowledgment, while the "goblin" of Scottish "common-sense" philosopher Thomas Reid appears, "actuated mostly by mechanical and animal principles," and much attention

---

<sup>232</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 265.

is given to “the rule-giving and rule-keeping dry ghost of [Hugh] Blair,” which carries “the book of ‘Belle-Lettres’ under its one arm, and a great chest full of rules under the other.” Other sightings include “the divisional spectre” of famed Glasgow engineer James Watt and the voice of Descartes, which attempts to explain the absence of ancient Greek mathematicians Euclid, Apollonius, and Archimedes, who “are ashamed of the University” because “[t]hey meant not that fools should be professors of mathematics, nor . . . that mathematics should make men fools.”<sup>233</sup>

Spoofing the judgments of academia and academicians is only one part of Pollok’s satire, however. Following the Day of Judgment (final exams), he depicts the graduation ceremony itself as the rapture, in which an enthroned female “Science” descends from the heavens to crown Pollok and his fellow worthies with the A.M. degree. Although St. Paul, John Calvin, and John Knox are not able or willing to attend the ceremony, Mammon sits on the university principal’s right hand (a satirical reference to a rise in academic fees) and the ghosts of Isaac Newton, Galileo, and even Joseph Priestley (among many others) make an appearance. (With “great difficulty,” we are told, the “idea” of David Hume’s ghost is detected “continually ‘changing from nothing to nothing’.”) Importantly for our study, Pollok appears to ridicule theologians who pretend (like Priestley, in his estimation) to know what they cannot or who deliberately promote and engage in sectarianism. Looking beyond the roof of the senate hall - which had “passed away” upon Science’s arrival - Pollok and his fellow graduands see a valley, similar in respects to Dante’s “Valley of the Princes” in *Purgatorio*, inhabited by numerous “theologic ghosts, with their works.” Here, Pollok declares, are found “[p]rodigious tomes on the Apocalypse of John, which tomes neither man nor angel could understand [for] none were found worthy to read them.” “Most marvelous,” the poet asserts,

was the number of the ghosts of books, written by one sect against another. The little, innumerable, ill-naming, sophistical, Scripture-wrestling, reasonless, stupid goblins, still wrangled loudly among themselves; and every one said plainly that it was better than its neighbour ghost. . . .<sup>234</sup>

---

<sup>233</sup> David Pollok, 171–75.

<sup>234</sup> David Pollok, 182.

As Karen McConnell observes with regard to *The Course of Time* itself, Pollok's rhetoric "is more notable for its ecumenalism than its partisanship,"<sup>235</sup> a rather surprising discovery, given the strident theological positions of that poem. Here, Pollok has criticism aplenty for most every sect, including his own. The theological valley into which he sees includes

[m]any shades of party books, written by Catholics; many, written by Episcopalians; many, written by the Scottish establishment; many by Reliefs, by Seceders, by Cameronians, by Independents, and by sects which time would fail me to name. . . .<sup>236</sup>

In what may be a play on Dante's depiction of sinners whose soul-less bodies still walk the mortal realm, in Pollok's vision of apocalypse, "the very shades of the books" are "dead, although many of their authors still live on earth," having witnessed the demise of their contentious children.<sup>237</sup> Pollok's graduation satire ends with Science re-ascending to heaven "with all her glorious retinue," after which the roof is restored to the senate hall, and Pollok and other newly "crowned" Glasgow graduates are "sent forth into the world with a great deal of knowledge" but, "like the true disciples of old," nothing in their purses.<sup>238</sup>

Like the graduation satire, Pollok's fictionalized night journey to Paisley, a crowded industrial boomtown on the outskirts of Glasgow, raises doubts about the possibility of apocalyptic knowledge or the truth of any individual claim on revelation. Mid-way through his overnight ramble, the poet shares a pipe with a local farm-wife – a strange and surprising scenario in itself<sup>239</sup>

---

<sup>235</sup> McConnell, "Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland," 100.

<sup>236</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 182.

<sup>237</sup> David Pollok, 182.

<sup>238</sup> David Pollok, 185.

<sup>239</sup> This curious episode begs interpretation. Is Pollok satirizing opium smoking and the dreams associated with it - such as Coleridge's contention that "Kubla Khan" arose out of an interrupted opium dream?

– and while doing so, happens upon a commentary on the Book of Revelation. He notes the writer’s presumption to “clear up all that was dark in his author” (that is, John of Patmos) and that, like most other commentators on the theme, the writer pretends to interpret what he does not understand. “They [the commentators] will explain it all,” Pollok muses to himself, before declaring,

Now, if man could do this, he would understand the leading events which are to befall the Church to the end of the world as clearly as God understands them. But this is not the design of the prophecy. It is true that 'the wise are to read it;' but they can understand it only in part. . . . Would not wise commentators do well, therefore . . . to keep in mind, that although the wise are to read and understand the Revelation, they are not to understand it all yet?<sup>240</sup>

The poet’s musings on John’s apocalypse lead him to reflect on the moment of revelation itself. “What immortal thoughts must have swelled the breast of the prophet,” Pollok wonders, “when he heard behind him a great voice, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last? When he turned to see the voice that spake with him. . . ?” Imagining himself as John of Patmos, Pollok envisions God on his throne surrounded by lightning, the crystal-clear river of the water of life, and “the voice of harpers harping with their harps,” when his reverie is suddenly interrupted. “I was going on in these sublime thoughts,” he declares, when

something produced an uneasiness in my hand, which happened to be in contact with some clothes that lay beside me. It was a bug! I started to the middle of the floor, and threw myself into a posture of defense, as I always do on such occasions. I saw the enemy posted around me in great numbers, but I was now on my guard.<sup>241</sup>

Ironically, but quite intentionally, the poet’s glimpse at the revelation par excellence turns into a revelation of a much different and decidedly mundane kind. Instead of cherubim, Pollok’s vision gives way to bed bugs or lice, a domestic Armageddon, and the call for some gifted prophet to

---

<sup>240</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 162–63.

<sup>241</sup> David Pollok, 163–64.

“envision” a way to destroy such creatures once and for all. Juxtaposing the “Revelation of Paisley” with the Revelation of John, and with Pollok’s remarks on the latter, it seems clear that the author of *The Course of Time* had no pretensions to special apocalyptic knowledge. Rather, he mocked such pretensions as illusory and self-serving, trusting in what he thought the Bible really taught – that a day would come, unknown to man, when justice would be served and all revealed. But that day was not here yet. Perhaps that was why Pollok, unlike his hero Milton and contrary to the critical instincts of George Gilfillan, had so “cautiously” and literally “adhered to the representations of the inspired volume”<sup>242</sup> that was John’s Revelation.

#### 4.7 Conclusions

We began this chapter by examining calls from Thomas Somerville, Edward Irving, and others in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for a different kind of religious rhetoric to combat the rise of skepticism and apostasy. If the sermonic form were no longer sufficient to the task, or if skeptics and heretics would not stay to hear it, another, perhaps differently creative, vehicle was needed. While Irving championed a specifically Christian literature and called for a new Milton, Pollok biographer James Scott provided the rationale for *The Course of Time*, arguing that “a Christian canticle” was necessary because “[t]he truths of the Gospel had become axioms.” According to Scott, Pollok put these truths to “the magic of song” (e.g. poetry), simultaneously engaging his readers on both intellectual and emotional fronts by providing “the rich tints which please the intellect,” alongside “associations which excite tumult among the feelings.”<sup>243</sup> In the Romantic era, it was, perhaps, no longer sufficient for an individual simply to be convinced of the truths of the Gospel; he or she must be made to feel them.

Through a close examination of major themes in *The Course of Time*, we have seen how Pollok is both Calvinist and Romantic, part moral philosopher and part poet of sensibility, combining the roles of the angel who preached at Bochim, reprimanding and instructing a fallen people, with that

---

<sup>242</sup> “Pollok’s ‘Course of Time,’” *The Eclectic Review*, 356.

<sup>243</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 295.

of the bard in nature, celebrating the beauty of an almost pre-lapsarian world. Like his idol Milton, Pollok strives to be preacher, prophet, and poet all at once, responding to theological and cultural concerns shared with men like Thomas Somerville, Edward Irving, and John Dick through a unique mix of Calvinist and evangelical theology, Scottish moral philosophy, eighteenth-century literary culture, Romanticism, and apocalypticism. “[N]otwithstanding its high religious tone,” *The Course of Time*’s remarkable popularity did offer “proof,” as James Boyd had suggested, that the poem’s comprehensiveness enabled it to reach a wide audience,<sup>244</sup> attracting the attention not only of evangelicals and dissenters like its author, but also of socially and intellectually important figures like Henry Mackenzie, John Wilson, and Sir John Sinclair.

Although purported to be a “history of man,” *The Course of Time* was really about mankind’s moral and religious failings and the necessity of salvation, so that by attempting to “instruct” the “wise” and to make “fools . . . hear and tremble,” its author might offer a response to Edward Irving’s repeated question: “How are men to escape Judgment and the condemnation to come?” James Boyd, James Scott, and others were surely right in declaring that, given its real subject matter, Pollok’s epic “might, with more appropriateness, have been denominated ‘The moral and religious History of Man.’”<sup>245</sup> Morality, and specifically, what George Gilfillan called “moral portraiture,” dominates the middle books of the poem and, as I have argued, constitutes its true focal point. This is in keeping with Pollok’s Miltonic model and with Milton himself, for whom virtue, as we have seen, was both a central concern and a central, necessary part of the poetic character. For Pollok, Milton and Byron come to represent the opposite poles of poetic conduct and purpose, the former providing a model of poetic theodicy and theological argument and the latter stripping all that away, to become Pollok’s ultimate cautionary tale and exemplar of moral failure. If *The Course of Time* lacks the chronology of human history suggested by its title, it does follow a sort of theological chronology, stating the terms by which humans are to live in Books I and II, focused on the Bible; providing illustrations of what happens when men try to live and pursue happiness on their own terms in Books III-V (centering on the Byron portrait); and offering

---

<sup>244</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 39.

<sup>245</sup> Pollok, 5.

a glimpse of what lies ahead for those who do not escape judgment or the “condemnation to come,” in Books V-X and the middle of Book I.

The patient reader of Pollok’s epic may find its organization somewhat arbitrary, as his bard often circles back on his theme, pauses, or otherwise delays the approach to apocalypse. While Gilfillan, Scott, and others lament the structural deficiencies of *The Course of Time* and, especially, the anticlimactic nature of Pollok’s revelation, these “problems” enable the scholar to see Pollok’s real focus, which is not, as with so many of his contemporaries, upon apocalypse at all, but rather on traditional Miltonic theodicy affirming (or, as in the poem’s final line, “approv[ing]”) “God’s eternal government.” Thus is *The Course of Time* indeed a “sermon in verse,” although a long one peppered with copious illustrations and personal reminiscences from the poet’s pulpit, if sometimes of a generic order. It was Pollok’s ability, however artful, to combine conventional, even conservative, theology and morality with the prevailing Romantic sensibility and episodes of authentic personal revelation that made *The Course of Time* so popular and, perhaps for the same reason, led to its near disappearance decades later. The poem’s reception history and what that says about the relationship between religion and literature and religion and the rise of secularism is the subject of the final chapter.

## Chapter 5

### The Rise and Fall of a Christian Epic

*“Concerning the poetical excellence of the work before us, critics have expressed diverse, and even quite opposite opinions.”*

James R. Boyd, “Introductory Observations” to *The Course of Time, With Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches and Notes, Critical and Illustrative* (1857)

If, in the mid-1820s, Robert Pollok had attempted to justify the ways of God to men in an epic poem, by the mid-1850s, editor James Boyd felt compelled to do the same for Pollok himself, presenting the public with a new, vastly expanded American edition of *The Course of Time* (1854) replete with critical commentaries, copious footnotes, author biography, stanza headings, and subject index. In prefatory remarks to the new edition, Boyd offered a “brief vindication of the poet” and described the volume as “an endeavor to place [Pollok] in a just position, that his admirable . . . poem may be read without prejudice” and “the more fully appreciated.”<sup>1</sup> That Boyd felt the need for such “vindication” suggested that the hopes of some of the poem’s earliest proponents, such as a writer in *The Christian Review* (1827) who believed *The Course of Time* might “improve” the declining “taste of our age,” had dimmed considerably.<sup>2</sup> The public had judged the poem’s “merits and demerits,” as the first reviewer, in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, had invited it to do,<sup>3</sup> and the result over several decades was a mixed bag. On the one hand, the work already was on its way to becoming “one of the most repinted poems of the nineteenth century,”<sup>4</sup> approaching twenty-one Blackwood editions alone by the time Boyd was

---

<sup>1</sup> Pollok, 10. As its title suggests, Boyd’s edition includes portions of major critical reviews, a biographical sketch of the poet, expansive footnotes and commentary, a subject index, and stanza headings.

<sup>2</sup> “Book Review,” *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine*, vol. 1, 1827, 357.

<sup>3</sup> “‘The Course of Time, A Review,’ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*,” 856.

<sup>4</sup> St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 219.

preparing his volume for print,<sup>5</sup> as well as many other editions in America and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> It was a Sunday school prize book (“one of the surest of literary possessions,” in Margaret Oliphant’s opinion)<sup>7</sup> which had spawned imitators at home and abroad and already begun to appear in collections of popular versifiers such as Felicia Hemans and Reginald Heber as early as the 1830s.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, there were cracks in the poem’s literary foundations from the very beginning, as the *Blackwood’s* review was the first to point out, so that by the 1850s, commentators like George Gilfillan in Scotland and Dr. John Aikin in America were criticizing what they saw as the poem’s excessively dark presentation of religion, as well as the immoderate praise it had received in earlier days. (“[T]he finest poem which has appeared in any language since *Paradise Lost*,” *The Eclectic Review* crowed in 1827).<sup>9</sup> Aikin’s observations on *The Course of Time* in his *Select Works of the British Poets* (Philadelphia, 1845) drew a particularly sharp response from James Boyd, perhaps providing an impetus for the latter’s new, expanded edition of Pollok’s epic. “It seems to be an act of simple justice, and of plain obligation,” Boyd asserted, “. . . to guard the reader against a gross misrepresentation of the poem, which is brought forward in the Philadelphia edition of the ‘British Poets.’” Quoting Aikin’s criticism that Pollok “arrays religion in dark robes,” Boyd declares that

it is surprising that any respectable critic should venture statements so glaringly false, and so easy to be refuted by a reference to the poem itself. It is not religion, but irreligion – not virtue, but vice, - which the poet “arrays in dark robes.”<sup>10</sup>

Boyd then spends several pages refuting Aikin’s accusation with examples from the text. However, it seems to be the cumulative effect of Pollok’s presentation of religion in *The Course of Time* – including the “moral pictures [that] are repeated till you sicken,”<sup>11</sup> in Gilfillan’s estimation, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Blackwood Archives, Publication Ledger III, p. 162, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>6</sup> Shattock, *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, 4:420.

<sup>7</sup> Oliphant and Porter, *Annals of a Publishing House*, 269.

<sup>8</sup> Shattock, 4:420.

<sup>9</sup> “Pollok’s ‘Course of Time,’” *The Eclectic Review*, 361.

<sup>10</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 333.

the “awful picture of wrath and vengeance” that troubles Aikin<sup>12</sup> – which is the real issue and which situates the poem in a sometimes heated debate about the proper relationship between religion and poetry, or whether such a relationship should exist at all. In responding to Aiken through an expanded edition of *The Course of Time* intended for moral and religious instruction,<sup>13</sup> Boyd enters the fray on the side of those who, by the 1850s, wished to recover Pollok’s epic for its edifying content and not, primarily or even secondarily, its poetic merit. This appears to be the view of Reverend A. D. Field, writing about *The Course of Time* in *The Ladies Repository* of Cincinnati, Ohio four years after Boyd published his new edition of the poem (1858). Field acknowledges that Pollok’s epic “is considered a poetic failure” by “the voice of critics generally”<sup>14</sup> – a somewhat astonishing observation, given the poem will go through a number of editions yet – but encourages his readers to give it another look. “Pollok has been be-praised; now he is ignored,” the reverend laments. However, he will not allow the self-styled arbiters of literary taste the last word on the bard of Renfrewshire. “[N]ow that the critics have done with him, will it not be well for us sober people to take his volume from our shelves and give it once more a hearing?” Field implores. After all, “[t]his generation may pass a more fitting verdict than any other.”<sup>15</sup>

Hopes in a new life for or a “more fitting verdict” on *The Course of Time* coincided with nostalgia for a theological perspective that, by the 1850s, appeared to be passing away. Concepts of Hell and eternal punishment long had been under siege, so that by mid-century, “fewer writers, Evangelical or otherwise, ended their stories by condemning individuals to severe providential judgement,” as had Pollok.<sup>16</sup> Then, too, the publication of the controversial *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 seemed the culmination of a long attack on the authority of scripture that had begun with eighteenth-century rationalism and only picked up steam with “the powerful revisionary readings

---

<sup>12</sup> John Aikin, *Select Works of the British Poets: In a Chronological Series ... with Biographical and Critical Notices* (Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle, 1845), 678.

<sup>13</sup> Boyd offers a number of reasons why *The Course of Time* is “a book most desirable to be read and studied by the young.” Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Field, “Review: Robert Pollok and ‘The Course of Time,’” 557.

<sup>15</sup> Field, 559.

<sup>16</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 145.

undertaken by [Pollok's fellow] Romantic poets.”<sup>17</sup> Scholars of nineteenth-century British culture such as Boyd Hilton and Philip Davis point to major shifts in theological thinking in the decades following first publication of *The Course of Time*.<sup>18</sup> Both Hilton's narrative of a century metaphorically split between an “Age of Atonement” (emphasizing human sinfulness and future judgment) and one of “incarnation” (emphasizing earthly transformation)<sup>19</sup> and Davis' view of an era moving from faith in a mostly transcendent God to a more human, mostly immanent one<sup>20</sup> help to explain the changing fortunes of Pollok's epic. By 1860, the remote, all-powerful, transcendent God who watches over *The Course of Time* (but only appears, very briefly, as a character in Book X) could seem quite distant from many readers' theological conceptions. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason observe, “[t]he extensive cultural transformations of the [Victorian] period forced people to reinterpret exactly what it was they believed and reconsider how those beliefs related to the world in which they found themselves”<sup>21</sup> – a world now shaped by the theological debates of *Essays and Reviews* and the scientific challenges of the new geology and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Among large swaths of the reading public, there would seem to be little space or perhaps patience for an epic so grounded in doctrinal certainty that, in George Gilfillan's words, “[n]o grand Perhaps is ever uttered [in it]: the very word never occurs.”<sup>22</sup> This is the context in which Hoxie Neale Fairchild envisions the death of *The Course of Time*, pronouncing “[t]he long pseudo-Milonic ‘sacred poem’ as practiced by Pollok, [James] Montgomery, and [John Abraham] Heraud” “short-lived”; its “last pure example,” according to Fairchild, is Edward Henry Bickersteth's *Yesterday, To-day, and For Ever*, published in 1866.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Fairchild attests that, by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, “such verse appealed only to a specialized and rapidly shrinking circle” – perhaps like the Reverend A. D. Field – because “most cultivated readers,” she insists, “regarded it as subliterate.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> This is noted by Mark Knight and Emma Mason in *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 161-2.

<sup>19</sup> See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> See Philip Davis, *The Oxford English Literary History: the Victorians Vol. 8* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 330.

<sup>23</sup> Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 1830–1880, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Fairchild, IV, 1830–1880, 41.

Sharp judgments aside, the shifts in fortune and reception of *The Course of Time* are remarkable, telling a story about the relationship between religion and secularism in nineteenth-century Britain and America, and more specifically, about the changing relationship between literature and religious apologetics in that period. Central to debates about the merits of Pollok's poem is its role as a piece of religious literature which attempts to defend a specific theological perspective. Early commentators often view it as a case study or a point of departure for public conversation about the nature of religious poetry, the difficulty (if not impossibility) of writing good religious verse, the separation of poetry from religion, the role of the religious poet, and the use of poetry as a vehicle for theology. This chapter will explore each of these questions by examining the reception history of *The Course of Time* and the changes in theological and cultural climate which affected and in some cases determined that reception. We will look first at the probable reasons for the poem's remarkable popularity in the early decades of the nineteenth century, then at the factors behind its equally remarkable decline and near-disappearance, and finally consider what good religious poetry – a poetry of apologetics – might look like. In each case, we start with what the commentators themselves have to say about the poem, while also considering the cultural, theological, and social factors behind their opinions. Given that the poem is meant to be a theodicy (as we already have established), the author's theological intentions must play an important role in any evaluation of the work itself. To return to the contention of this thesis: *The Course of Time* is Robert Pollok's attempt to justify the ways of God to a Romantic – and later, a Victorian – age increasingly uncomfortable with such justifications, particularly in an epic form. As the agnostic Shelley judged the success of Milton's enterprise, so the decades following 1827 judged – and in some ways, continue to judge – Pollok's project. It may be that some of the most incisive thoughts on the subjects of religious poetry and epic theodicy were uttered by critics on both ends of this study; that is, contemporary with Pollok and with us. In conclusion, we examine how T. S. Eliot's argument for a poetry that is “unconsciously” religious<sup>25</sup> mirrors and in some ways reclaims arguments presented in some of the earliest reviews of *The Course of Time*, including that of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. But first, we explore the reasons behind the poem's dramatic rise and fall.

---

<sup>25</sup> This argument is presented in the well-known essay “Religion and Literature” (1935).

### 5.1 “The seeds of immortality”: Reasons for the Poem’s Early Success

Nineteenth and twentieth-century critics alike identify a number of factors behind the poem’s early and decades-long popularity in the nineteenth century, some of which we already have considered. One of the first to attempt a critical analysis of the poem’s success was George Gilfillan, in his essay on Pollok in *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits* (1846), which, as we have noted, also featured essays on Edward Irving and Thomas Carlyle. Writing with the benefit of nearly twenty years of commentary on *The Course of Time*, when the poem had seen well over a dozen printings in Britain, the United States, and Germany, Gilfillan observed that “[t]here were, indeed . . . certain circumstances which, in some measure, explained the popularity of the poem, apart altogether from its intrinsic merit.” First among these, unsurprisingly, “it was a religious poem,” which “at once awakened a wide and warm interest in its favour.” We have observed Gilfillan’s suggestion that the poem appealed particularly to that segment of the reading public which had been “[g]alled by the godless ridicule of Byron” and “chagrined by . . . the vague and mystic piety of the Lakers.” Thus discomfited, they warmly welcomed a sincere and very serious religious poet “who was ashamed of none of the peculiarities of one of the straitest of all their sects.” This was the second important factor in the poem’s success: Pollok was “a dissenter,” uniquely able to appeal to a growing class of British readers which (in Gilfillan’s estimation) had no other poetic heroes and had produced little poetry “deserving the name.”<sup>26</sup> The bard of Renfrewshire was, therefore, “a brilliant star” in what Gilfillan and his compeers considered a rather narrow firmament. But it was Gilfillan’s opinion that “the principal cause of [the poem’s] popularity was the premature death of the poet,” which, as we have observed, “lent . . . a consecrating magic to its every line.”<sup>27</sup> This did not suggest an overabundant confidence in the poem’s intrinsic merit, but pointed instead to a romanticized view of the poet and his poem. By asserting that the popularity of *The Course of Time* could be attributed to its religiosity, its author’s religious and cultural identity, and above all, his early death, Gilfillan was implicitly connecting the Romantic and religious elements in the

---

<sup>26</sup> See the earlier reference to a biographical sketch of Pollok in Chambers’ *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, V. 4, 1835, in which the author suggests that *The Course of Time* enjoyed particular popularity among “the respectable classes of dissenters.” It may be that Gilfillan had read this biographical sketch and knew of the author’s assertion.

<sup>27</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 322.

poem which had been the key to its success. Time and again, reviewers had pointed (and would continue to point) to themes and content related to one or the other of these elements - and often, both - to explain the poem's appeal.

### 5.1.1 "A Purely Religious Poem"

In his 1848 biography of Pollok, James Scott declares *The Course of Time* "a purely religious poem," in which particular it is "unlike every other in the language." "Refined taste prefers the religious [poem] to the profane," Scott avers.

Indeed intellect, to be permanently gratified, if it seeks sober, meditative pleasure in poetry at all, must have a religious poem. This fact alone accounts for the immediate, continued, and wide-extended popularity of "The Course of Time."<sup>28</sup>

A majority of nineteenth-century critics appeared to agree with Scott that the primary value of Pollok's poem lay in its explicit religiosity. With regard to the poem's significance, they most often point to its conservative and evangelical theological positions, particularly with regard to the Bible; its role as a work of religious apologetics, defending the faith against its detractors; its use as a didactic tool for instructing the faithful, especially the young; its literary form as a piece of religious epic poetry in the tradition of Dante and Milton; and the sublimity of its description of the afterlife, affirming the hopes of Christians who looked to a future world for the justification of this one. In each case, the poem's identification as a Christian theodicy is central to its significance, whether that identification is explicit (as it is in many reviews) or not. Directly connected to the poem's religiosity, for many reviewers, is its value as a case study or locus for exploring – and, as we already have seen, debating – the nature and possibility of religious poetry, and more broadly, the relationship between literature and religion. This is apparent from the very beginning, in the June 1827 review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, when the reviewer (possibly John Wilson

---

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 299.

himself)<sup>29</sup> makes *The Course of Time* the context for a larger examination of the purposes and challenges of poetry in general, and of religious poetry in particular. The exploration and occasional debate continues in a number of early commentaries such as those in *The Eclectic Review* (1827) and *The Christian Review* (1827) in the United Kingdom, in *The Southern Review* (1828) and *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine (1828) in the United States, and, decades later, in longer works by James Boyd (1848), George Gilfillan (1848), and Thomas McNicoll (1861). One may argue that it also is apparent today in summary dismissals of Pollok as “the dour sub-Miltonic poet”<sup>30</sup> and his poem as an example of “those endless one-third-narrative, two-thirds-didactic sacred poems”<sup>31</sup> whose “primary significance lies in its relationship to *Paradise Lost*.”<sup>32</sup> Like the poem itself, the significance of its original context seems largely to have been forgotten.

In many ways, *Blackwood's* mixed review of *The Course of Time* frames the debate about the poem's merits which would unfold over the next several decades. The writer begins with a discussion of the ultimate purposes of poetry before acknowledging the challenges facing any contemporary poet, like Pollok, who attempts to strike the “Holy Harp.” Chief among these challenges is a “pleasure doctrine” currently in vogue which asserts that enjoyment alone is the ultimate measure of poetic success. This “doctrine” has “borne hard on all Sacred Poetry,” “disinclined poets to devoting their genius to it,” and “consigned, if not to oblivion, to neglect, much, almost all, of what is great in that magnificent walk.” In addition, “many objections have been urged against Sacred Poetry,” including the contention “that it is difficult or impossible.” While the reviewer contests the latter assertion, he (or she) does not deny the former, but rather, suggests that “as there are the lesser inspired prophets, so are there the lesser poets,—they too, in another sense, inspired, and the effusions of their spirits likewise, humanly speaking, divine.”<sup>33</sup> Pollok may be accounted among these “lesser” but inspired poets who nonetheless possess the

---

<sup>29</sup> This is the June 1827 review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. As noted earlier, George Gilfillan suggests that the reviewer was John Wilson. (Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 380.)

<sup>30</sup> Crawford, *Scotland's Books*, 443.

<sup>31</sup> Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 1830–1880, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Knowles, “The Course of Time: A Calvinistic ‘Paradise Lost,’” 191.

<sup>33</sup> “‘The Course of Time,’ A Review,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 845.

*mens divinator* or superior mind.<sup>34</sup> In the reviewer's estimation, Pollok should be applauded for the mere attempt at sacred verse, however mixed the result, for he still had created a work "of deep and hallowed impress, full of noble thoughts and graphic conceptions." "It is the production," the reviewer approvingly surmises, "of a mind alive to the great relations of being, and the sublime simplicity of our religion. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

Among reviewers who followed, some did not hesitate to place Pollok among the "greater" poets and to connect *The Course of Time* with the epic tradition of Dante and Milton. While acknowledging "the difficulty of religious epic poetry" and lamenting that "[w]e have few specimens of religious poetry from which, except for their sentiments, we should not turn with disgust," the author of a commentary in *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* (also 1827) judged *The Course of Time* "a worthy successor to the great master-pieces of Dante and Milton." Pollok's otherworldly subject matter being "one under which any ordinary genius must have sunk," the young Scot had written a poem distinguished "from every other of the present day by an originality of thought and style" and "a pure and sustained sublimity . . . that are deserving of the highest admiration." Given the prevailing tastes of the day, *The Course of Time* was "in truth a literary phenomenon. . . ."<sup>36</sup> Another commentator, writing the next year (1828) in *The Eclectic Review*, took the epic comparison a step further: In fact, Pollok had succeeded "where Dante . . . for want of better guidance than the dim and scattered lights" of his "dark age" had "failed." Declaring *The Course of Time* "the finest poem which has appeared in any language since Paradise Lost," the reviewer willingly admitted that Pollok's epic was "of the two, the poem of which we should ourselves prefer to have been the author."<sup>37</sup> Years later, however, George Gilfillan had no such illusions about "the daring of equalling [Pollok] with Milton, and his work with Paradise Lost," which could only redound to Pollok's discredit. Nonetheless, Gilfillan acknowledged that, on occasion, Pollok had managed to emulate "Milton's majestic tones and awful sanctity" and to catch "a shadow of a shade of Dante's terrible gloom."<sup>38</sup> Most importantly, the young Scot had

<sup>34</sup> "'The Course of Time,' A Review," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 856.

<sup>35</sup> "'The Course of Time,' A Review," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 846.

<sup>36</sup> "Book Review," *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine*, 346.

<sup>37</sup> "Pollok's 'Course of Time,' *The Eclectic Review*, 361–62.

<sup>38</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 323.

talent and honesty enough to avoid becoming one of the “mock Miltons,” as Gilfillan called them – “pretended pious poets, or poetasters” such as Robert Montgomery, author of *The Omnipresence of the Diety* (1828), who presumed to write as if

they had established a railway communication with the lower regions . . . took monthly ‘Descents into Hell’—were quite intimate with the angel Gabriel, and conflated the creation as coolly as you would set up a rocket.

These, Gilfillan asserted, “made no very deep impression upon the public mind. Dismay and disgust, dying into laughter, were the abiding feeling with which they were regarded.” That was distinctly not the case with the young Scottish bard. “[W]e know of no better proof of Robert Pollok’s essential superiority,” Gilfillan declared,

than the fact, that his poem, amid the general nausea of such things, has retained its place; that the sins of his imitators have not been visited on his head; and that, while their tiny tapers have been all eclipsed, his solemn star shines on undimmed, reminding us, in its somber splendor, of Mars, that dark red hermit of the heavens.<sup>39</sup>

If *The Course of Time* did not remind others of the planet Mars, it did spawn imitators, epic and otherwise. Montgomery’s poem may have been suggested by the success of Pollok’s the year before,<sup>40</sup> and further afield, “*The Course of Time* provided aspirants to Welsh epic poetry with a model regarded as second only to Milton,” according to Philip Henry Jones. There was even a knock-off imitation at an annual eisteddfod.<sup>41</sup> Beyond the epic was Pollok’s influence on aspiring religious versifiers such as Emma Tatham and even on visual artists including Thomas Cole, a founder of American landscape painting associated with the renowned Hudson River School.

---

<sup>39</sup> Gilfillan, 321.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Hopkins, “Reflections on ‘Satan’ Montgomery,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1962): 351–52. Gribben also cites this in “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” *Romanticism* 21.1 (2015), 30.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, “Wales,” 411.

Cole's well-known allegorical series *The Course of Empire* (1833-36) is thought to have been inspired by *The Course of Time*, which the painter concurrently had been reading, and to reflect aspects of the poem's theology.<sup>42</sup> If Pollok's epic had not managed to halt the declining "taste of the age," as the writer in *The Eclectic Review* had hoped, it had at least influenced it here and there - although, as the commentator in Charleston's *Southern Review* (1828) wisely suspected, any "permanent celebrity and reputation" the poem was to achieve would be "not, perhaps, among men of the world, but throughout the great community of Christian readers."<sup>43</sup> As the years passed, *The Course of Time* would be denominated "the Evangelical Epic"<sup>44</sup> and "the great Calvinistic poem,"<sup>45</sup> while its author would be pronounced "the greatest Christian poet of the century."<sup>46</sup> Such overweening praise, like the comparisons to Dante and Milton, would come back to haunt the poet's legacy. By 1858, a year after Blackwood published its handsome, leather-bound, illustrated edition of *The Course of Time*, *The Ladies Repository* of Cincinnati would ominously intone that, while the poet's life was indeed "insignificant," his poem deserved to be "embalmed."<sup>47</sup>

### 5.1.2 The Best "Didactic Poem" in the Language

For the poem's most ardent subscribers – above all, dissenters, as Robert Chambers contended<sup>48</sup> - it was not so much the poetry that mattered, but the author's religious and moral point of view. "By the true Dissenter poetry was valued for its religious content, not for its beauty or its music," Amy Cruse asserts with regard to Emma Tatham's infatuation with Pollok's verse.<sup>49</sup> This holds true for a number of the favorable reviews of *The Course of Time*, especially (although not always) where the commentator is associated with a dissenting tradition. The author of an early critique in *The Southern Review* of Charleston, South Carolina (1828) acknowledges that Pollok sometimes runs "the risk of sacrificing too much to utility," "occasionally . . . violating prosody by gross

<sup>42</sup> Alan P. Wallach, "Cole, Byron, and the Course of Empire," *The Art Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (1968): 376–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3048574>. This is also cited in Gribben, 30.

<sup>43</sup> "Book Review, 'The Course of Time,'" *The Southern Review*, 469.

<sup>44</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 295.

<sup>46</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, iv.

<sup>47</sup> Field, "Review: Robert Pollok and 'The Course of Time,'" 557.

<sup>48</sup> Chambers, "Significant Scots: Robert Pollok." (No page number.)

<sup>49</sup> Amy Cruse, *The Victorians And Their Books*, 68.

negligence,” but affirms that, “considered merely as a Didactic Poem, we do not know any thing in the language that is better than ‘The Course of Time.’”<sup>50</sup> The poem’s theological and pedagogical utility proved a key to its success and central to appreciations by Boyd, Gilfillan, Scott, the author of the early *Spirit of the Pilgrims* review, and many others. None were oblivious to the work’s poetical flaws, and some no doubt would agree with A. D. Field’s exclamation in *The Ladies Repository*, “Pity the poetry does not equal the scheme!”<sup>51</sup> However, it was the content of *The Course of Time* that mattered and how the poem strove at once to be a work of apologetics, defending God and the faith, and of pedagogy, rightly instructing its readers (and especially, the young) in proper behavior and belief. This was exactly the starting point for James Boyd who, as we have seen, undertook his “student” edition of *The Course of Time* in response to what he perceived as attacks on the poem by John Aikin and others, and in order “to render it, if possible, somewhat more attractive and useful to the popular and youthful mind. . . .” While Boyd acknowledged that “[t]o some readers, the poem would be more attractive, if in some of its parts it were less theological and didactic – less solemn in its tone, and less severe upon human character and conduct,” he also argued that

every lover of truth, and especially of Bible truth, must regard this poem with especial interest for the attractive manner in which the infallible statements of the sacred writers, concerning man’s character, history, and destiny, are herein set forth.

“On this account,” Boyd proceeded, *The Course of Time* “seems to be a book most desirable to be read and studied by the young,” for, “[l]ike the Bible itself, it is highly pleasing to the youthful mind, not yet contaminated by the poison of a corrupt and skeptical literature.” Furthermore, the poem’s

faithful portraiture of vice and virtue, with their appropriate retributions – its profound thoughtfulness, and nice discriminations . . . are eminently suited to

---

<sup>50</sup> “Book Review, ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Southern Review*, 462.

<sup>51</sup> Field, “Review: Robert Pollok and ‘The Course of Time,’” 558.

enlarge the mind, inform the conscience, regulate the passions, and rightly shape the moral education of the youthful student. . . .<sup>52</sup>

It might sound as if *The Course of Time* were a manual for pious Christian living, and in some ways it was, providing examples of moral (and immoral) conduct, right and wrong belief, and affirming the rule of God and the hope of heaven. These were things that even those like George Gilfillan, Thomas McNicoll, and the author of the *Blackwood's* review, who did not share an identical theological perspective with Pollok, seemed to value in the work. Despite concerns by Gilfillan and others that Pollok had over-moralized, in McNicoll's estimation, "[t]he vices of mankind" had "seldom been more truly discriminated, or more unsparingly exposed than in the pages of the young moralist and poet," and that was a very good thing.<sup>53</sup>

Pollok's defense of the faith, and particularly of the Bible, was of signal importance for many readers, as we know. While Milton had taken substantial liberties with the sacred text (albeit successfully), "[t]he palmary merit" of Pollok's work, according to *The Eclectic Review*, was that he had "so constantly steered his pathless course by the Bible; that every thing in his poem which is fiction, is kept subordinate – the mere drapery of Truth."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, a critic in *The North American Review* (1829) praised the fact that

Pollock [sic] has imitated the solemn brevity of the sacred historian, never substituting the light of his own invention, where the silence of Moses has left us in darkness. . . . [I]n all cases where he describes as past what is yet to come, he fixes a most rigid curb upon his fancy, and ventures no further than the prophetic intimations of Scripture seem to him to warrant. . . . [W]e regard this folding up of the wings of invention, where flight would have been so hazardous, as an exercise of the soundest discretion. . . .<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 99.

<sup>54</sup> "Pollok's 'Course of Time,'" *The Eclectic Review*, 1828, 362, 361-2.

<sup>55</sup> "'The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books,' *North American Review*, 346.

Perhaps no reviewer was more vocal in extolling Pollok's adherence to and defense of scripture – whatever his other faults - than the author of the 1828 review in Boston's *Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine, which itself was an organ to combat the rising Unitarian heresy.<sup>56</sup> The writer celebrates *The Course of Time* as an antidote to, or prescription against, the “bold assumptions” and unfounded “half-way reasonings” about God and his providence which, in recent years, have drawn men into damning theological error.<sup>57</sup> Most importantly, as already noted, Pollok's epic “serves to counteract the influence of those who put aside the authority of the Bible,” intentionally “torture its meaning,” or attempt outright to “render it unmeaning,” so that it does not “speak contrary to their notions of what God should do, or God should be.”<sup>58</sup> In the writer's opinion, “[t]he study of the Course of Time would serve as a corrective to these false views,” although “the man of the world may think its requirements high.” Nonetheless, “[w]e are indebted to Mr. Pollok for having presented in their connexions some of the leading principles of the Orthodox faith.” While it is true that, poetically speaking, “Mr. Pollok has not done his part as well as it might have been done,” the reviewer encourages his or her reader to

remember that he is the first who has attempted it in verse, and that he has set a noble example. Let us, too, make all allowance for his difficulties. He not only had to set forth in poetry God's system in relation to man; but, alas for the children of this world, he had to argue with them, argue, not with their reason, but their prejudices, their self-conceit, and their evil hearts.<sup>59</sup>

This almost seems a portrait of the polemical divine whom John Dick imagined, dressed for battle and sent forward in a poem which biographer James Scott considered “perhaps the only true one on earth, out of the Bible.”<sup>60</sup> If, contrary to the *Spirit of the Pilgrims* reviewer, Pollok was not the first poet to versify the “leading principles” of the faith, he was one of the few dissenters – and even fewer evangelicals - to do so in an epic fashion, as Gilfillan himself observed. In the late

---

<sup>56</sup> *Spirit of the Pilgrims* (Magazine) Records, <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/sites/all/files/SpiritofPilgrims0162.pdf>. Accessed 14.3.2016.

<sup>57</sup> “Review of Robert Pollok's ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* Magazine, 526.

<sup>58</sup> “Review of Robert Pollok's ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* Magazine, 528.

<sup>59</sup> “Review of Robert Pollok's ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* Magazine, 536.

<sup>60</sup> Scott, *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...*, 302.

Romantic era, Pollok's "noble example" might seem unique among specimens of the genre. That would seem to be the import of James Boyd's assertion that "Pollok's aim was altogether different" from most other poets.<sup>61</sup> Unlike the versifiers whom the *Blackwood's* reviewer may have had in mind when he deplored the valuation of poetry for pleasure alone, the young Scottish bard wasn't trying to please any particular fashion or taste – at least, in Boyd's opinion. What he was trying to do – as Boyd, Scott, and others agreed – was present the complete and immutable "Truth." That, of course, could mean only the Bible.

### 5.1.3 "Traits of Pure Romanticism"

In her essay on Pollok and Milton, Julie Nall Knowles asserts that "[f]or the most part, the public liked *The Course of Time* because it was a long poem filled with personal reminiscences," but also because "it reflected the tone of early-nineteenth-century sentiment" in "Pollok's affection for the humble folk of rural Scotland" and "his love of 'Scotia's northern battlement of hills,'" things Knowles describes as "traits of pure romanticism."<sup>62</sup> We already have identified a number of these characteristics in the previous chapter when exploring the role of Romanticism in *The Course of Time*, including autobiography, sentiment, nature reverie, and the poem's unusual mix of Romantic sensibility and Calvinist dogma. Pollok's epic does indeed support the idea, espoused by Hoxie Neale Fairchild, of an "uneasy alliance" between Christianity and Romanticism in the early nineteenth century and of evangelical Christianity trying to "come to terms" with Romanticism during the same period, as David Bebbington suggests. Similarly, *The Course of Time* bears out Crawford Gribben's contention that Scottish Romantics were "on the whole" more interested in religion, morality, and social issues than were their English and continental counterparts. All of these things have their place in the reception history of *The Course of Time*, along with the "traits of pure romanticism" that Julie Nall Knowles identifies.

---

<sup>61</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Knowles, "The Course of Time': A Calvinistic 'Paradise Lost,'" 174.

Starting with the *Blackwood's* review of 1827, it is striking how many commentators on Pollok's epic remark on and quote from both the poem's religious and Romantic themes. When reviewers cite passages from the poem, they most often come from these two sources, such as the lines on the Bible in Book II, the Byron passage in Book IV, the bard in nature in Book V, or the "address to the ocean" in Book VII. But commentators also were struck, as we have acknowledged, by the poem's epic scope, the sublimity of Pollok's depiction of the afterlife, and the poet's early demise. We have noted George Gilfillan's assertion that Pollok's premature death was the single most important factor behind the popularity of *The Course of Time* - an assertion with which the author of a centenary remembrance of Pollok in *The Scotsman* newspaper (September 19, 1927) agrees. "I cannot but think," the writer declares, "that the contemporary feeling of 'unanimous admiration' for 'The Course of Time' was due in a measure to the sympathy excited by the pathos of the poet's career. . . . [H]is life was as sad as it was brief."<sup>63</sup> In fact, many contemporary reviewers romantically interpreted Pollok's death as an artistic martyrdom, not unlike that attributed to age-mate John Keats, except that, in Pollok's case, it was a "martyrdom" for a sacred cause. According to the author of a fairly glowing biographical sketch in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, "in composing his celebrated work," Pollok "had only erected a splendid monument to deck his tomb."<sup>64</sup> Likewise, the writer of the piece on Pollok in *Chamber's* sister publication, the *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, asserted that "[t]he labour of preparing his poem for publication, and carrying it through the press, appears to have fatally impaired a constitution originally vigorous."<sup>65</sup> A. D. Field, in *The Ladies Repository*, could imagine the dying poet "in the silent night-time," as "he lay feverish upon his bed" and "his mind groaned under the mighty plan" of the poem which would claim his lifeblood.<sup>66</sup> For the author of an early review in *The London Literary Gazette* (1827), the thought that a recently deceased Pollok was "now mouldering in the grave," having given everything for his poem, "takes away from us the idea of criticism" altogether.<sup>67</sup> It would seem that sacred art, especially when produced at such cost, was beyond the reach of ordinary critical judgment.

---

<sup>63</sup> Gray, "A Scottish Milton: Pollok's Centenary," 8.

<sup>64</sup> "Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok," 79.

<sup>65</sup> Chambers, "Significant Scots: Robert Pollok," 1.

<sup>66</sup> Field, "Review: Robert Pollok and 'The Course of Time,'" 558.

<sup>67</sup> "'Review of New Books: Rev. Robert Pollok,' *The London Literary Gazette*, September 29, 1827, No. 558 edition, 625.

Another example of *The Course of Time*'s appeal to contemporary Romantic tastes was its sublimity. The author of the 1827 commentary in *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* told his or her readers that it was "on the merits of its pure and simple sublimity" that he or she recommended *The Course of Time*, rather than for "any of the particular features of the poetry at present popular among us. . . ." In the estimation of the reviewer, a part of Pollok's depiction of Hell in Book I contained "as sublime an image as can be found in the whole compass of poetical composition," despite the fact that other verses were clearly "an imitation." Sublimity, the reviewer intimated, was Pollok's forte just as it had been Milton's.<sup>68</sup> The author of the critique in *The Southern Review* meanwhile warned that "[m]any readers may find some of [Pollok's] descriptions revolting and disgusting . . . from their severe accuracy," but that

the poet's maxim seems to be 'rien n'est beau que le vrai' – and this homely strength of expression and painful minuteness of delineation in painting objects that can be properly described in no other way, is, in our opinion, an excellence of no mean order.<sup>69</sup>

The appropriate poetic comparison here, so the reviewer imagined, was to Spenser.

As we noted in previous chapters, part of the supposed sublimity of *The Course of Time* lay in its very size and scope, its author taking on a theme perceived to be greater than that of *Paradise Lost* or of any previous Christian epic. That was the argument of the commentator in *The North American Review* (1829), among others. For George Gilfillan, a significant part of Pollok's achievement was that he had undertaken and completed such a sizable work, and at such a remarkably young age. "He did not, like many of greater mark, fritter down his powers in fugitive effusions," Gilfillan asserted, perhaps thinking of Friedrich Schlegel and the German Jena Circle's fascination with the literary fragment. Unlike those authors, who created a fashionable mode for writing deliberately incomplete or fragmentary works, Pollok had "incontestably . . . written a book aspiring to completeness. . . ." "He is not remembered or forgotten as the author of literary

---

<sup>68</sup> "Book Review," *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine*, 346.

<sup>69</sup> "Book Review, 'The Course of Time,'" *The Southern Review*, 468.

remains, occasional essays, or posthumous fragments,” Gilfillan declared. Whatever one may judge of the design, execution, taste, or style of *The Course of Time* – and Gilfillan had concerns about each of these – an important recognition was due the man who, “in this age of fragments, and fractions of fragments, and first drafts, and tentative and tantalizing experiments, has written an undeniable book!”<sup>70</sup>

Possibly, in the back of Gilfillan’s mind (as it certainly was in the minds of the members of the Jena Circle) was that the new historical criticism of the Bible threatened to make it an equivocal book of parts rather than a univocal whole – a concern that, as we have seen, Edward Irving had warned against years earlier. Oddly, it was Gilfillan himself who, in the essay quoted above, declared *The Course of Time* a blemished yet powerful work which would come to be read, not in whole, but for its best parts,

which, separated, possibly from their context, and floating on the waters into which the volume itself shall have gone down, may long preserve the memory of the ambitious and resolute spirit whence they emanated.<sup>71</sup>

Pollok’s poem, like the book it sought to defend, faced the threat of fragmentation, although for very different reasons. It could not hope to present (or re-present) “great religious truth,” as the *Blackwood’s* reviewer put it, as well as had the original. Like the Bible, *The Course of Time* was “worthy of the finest arrangement of parts,” but it was “soon evident that the best interest must lie in these parts themselves,” the *Blackwood’s* author attested, and “less in reference to the making up of a unique whole, than to their individual worth.”<sup>72</sup> Although portions of *The Course of Time* would be extracted into commonplace books and reprinted in religious magazines for decades to come, the “individual worth” of its parts would greatly decrease as the years went by, until at last, interest became (at best) quite fragmentary.

---

<sup>70</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 321.

<sup>71</sup> Gilfillan, 336.

<sup>72</sup> “‘The Course of Time,’ A Review,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 847.

## 5.2 “A Literary Curiosity”: Why *The Course of Time* Was Forgotten

As, near the middle of the nineteenth century, George Gilfillan had postulated reasons for the immense popularity of *The Course of Time*, so W. Forbes Gray, writing in *The Scotsman* on the centenary of Pollok’s death in September 1927, postulated his reasons for the poem’s near-complete disappearance. Quite possibly, Gray’s remembrance, titled “A Scottish Milton,” was the last commentary on Pollok or his work to appear in the popular press. In it, Gray described *The Course of Time* as “a striking example of the perverse fate which often attends literary effort.” Whereas in past years the poem had been “[s]uperlatively praised, . . . attaining an extraordinary vogue,” it was now, in Gray’s estimation, only “a literary curiosity.” “In early Victorian days there was probably no more popular book among upholders of evangelical religion,” Gray ventured. “Even those who did not share the theological views expounded in ‘The Course of Time’ warmly recognized its poetic merits.” Nonetheless, in Gray’s view, “the unstable reputation of Pollok’s masterpiece” was “not difficult to explain.” “For one thing, it espouses a ‘creed outworn,’” Gray asserted, before confidently explaining that “[w]e have marched some paces forward theologically, as in other matters, since Pollok’s day.” In addition to these (apparently generally accepted) changes in theological climate, Gray pointed to some of the same structural and poetic problems in Pollok’s epic which Gilfillan had observed decades before. “[T]he subject is conceived on a scale far transcending the sharply defined powers of the author,” Gray pronounced. “Furthermore, while ‘The Course of Time’ contains one or two purple passages, it is for the most part mediocre verse.” Finally, Gray contended, quoting a damning phrase from an earlier review,<sup>73</sup> “the poem is rambling and undeniably tedious – ‘a dull sermon in blank verse.’”<sup>74</sup>

By 1927, Gray, a veteran Scottish journalist and literary man, could rightly presume that Pollok was unknown to most of his readers. He may have been aware of the judgment pronounced two

---

<sup>73</sup> This is the entry for Pollok in *Chamber’s Cyclopædia of English Literature*, Volume II. See Robert Chambers and David Patrick, *Chamber’s Cyclopædia of English Literature; a History, Critical and Biographical, of Authors in the English Tongue from the Earliest Times till the Present Day, with Specimens of Their Writings* (London : W. & R. Chambers, 1906), <http://archive.org/details/chamberscyclop02cham>.

<sup>74</sup> Gray, “A Scottish Milton: Pollok’s Centenary,” 8.

decades earlier (1906) in *Chambers Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, another Scottish publication, that *The Course of Time* was “save in occasional quotation, all but forgotten.”<sup>75</sup> Or he may have read Rosaline Masson’s dismissive biography of Pollok in Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier’s “Famous Scots Series” (1898), in which Masson caustically asked of *The Course of Time*, “who has read it?” “Have you read it, reader?”<sup>76</sup> For his part, in commemorating the poet, Gray did not so much try to persuade his audience to re-visit *The Course of Time* – in fact, he never even suggests they read it – as to alert them to the curious and dramatic reception the poem had received over many decades. If the poem were now “dead,” there must be reasons for its demise, and as noted above, Gray’s reasons tracked quite closely with those offered by George Gilfillan more than seventy years earlier. In essence, they broke down into two categories: The theological and the stylistic. The theological had to do both with Pollok’s own theology and his presentation of it in the poem, as well as with changes in the theological climate intimated by Gray. The stylistic had to do with everything else that reviewers from *Blackwood’s* on had observed and criticized: The poem’s overwhelming subject matter, its “mediocre verse,” the poor or repetitive structure, the lack of plot or character, that it was too imitative, and perhaps above all, too didactic. Contrary to the opinion of the initial *Blackwood’s* reviewer, in the estimation of some later commentators, *The Course of Time* verged not on teaching too little, but on offering its readers no pleasure at all. In the section which follows, we will explore reasons for the poem’s decline in the terms briefly set out by W. Forbes Gray in his 1927 “appreciation”: That is, with a view to the poem’s theology, its style, and to the wider cultural changes happening around it.

### 5.2.1 Religion’s “dark robes”

If the religiosity of Pollok’s poem was a (if not the) primary cause of its success, it also was central to the poem’s undoing. For every critic, and perhaps every reader, who hailed *The Course of Time* as “a purely religious poem” out of the Bible, there were others (and as time went by, more of them) who disliked it for the same reasons. We have noted Crawford Gribben’s supposition that

---

<sup>75</sup> Chambers and Patrick, *Chamber’s Cyclopædia of English Literature; a History, Critical and Biographical, of Authors in the English Tongue from the Earliest Times till the Present Day, with Specimens of Their Writings*, 793.

<sup>76</sup> Masson, *Pollok and Aytoun: Eminent Scots Series*, 11.

the poem's religiosity is, perhaps, why it has been overlooked or dismissed by modern critics of Scottish Romanticism. The same is true in degree, if not in kind, for many nineteenth-century critics of the poem, who often praise some aspects of the work, but find its intense religiosity – or its particular brand of religiosity - overwhelming. The author of the article on Pollok in *Chamber's Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, cited above, could attest that “there are many fine things in [*The Course of Time*]” which moderns neglected to their discredit, yet simultaneously declare the poem “harsh,” “turgid,” “antipathetic,” and “tedious.” “[W]hole sections,” the writer averred, “are like a dull sermon in blank verse.”<sup>77</sup> The very sermonic qualities which James Scott had celebrated and declared unique to *The Course of Time* – indeed, the key to its greatness - were also cause for criticism and grounds for the devaluation of Pollok's achievement. One of the most severe critiques of religion in *The Course of Time*, which had aroused James Boyd's ire, came from John Aikin in his five-volume *Select Works of the British Poets*. In Aikin's estimation, Pollok “saw only that which is cheerless in Nature, and depressing in Religion.” “He arrays religion in dark robes,” Aikin declared, “and considers it unnecessary to portray her features as both gentle and beautiful.” What is more, “[h]is volume, from beginning to end, is an awful picture of wrath and vengeance,” Aikin complained. “[I]t contains little to cheer, and nothing to gladden; and would tempt the reader to imagine that man was created only to be tormented.” Unlike George Gilfillan, writing at about the same time on the other side of the Atlantic, Aikin found it “difficult to account for the popularity [*The Course of Time*] has obtained.”<sup>78</sup>

The author of the commentary in *The North American Review* (1829) agreed, at least in regard to the sort of palette Pollok had employed. “[T]he picture is one . . . of mingled light and shade,” the writer begins.

But the dark tints are so many and so deep, compared with the light ones, that the whole may be likened to one blot. Satan, in the conception of Milton, though fallen,

---

<sup>77</sup> Chambers and Patrick, *Chamber's Cyclopædia of English Literature; a History, Critical and Biographical, of Authors in the English Tongue from the Earliest Times till the Present Day, with Specimens of Their Writings*, 792.

<sup>78</sup> Aikin, *Select Works of the British Poets*, 678.

had still some noble qualities. . . . But man, in the conception of Pollok, scarcely possesses one bright excellence. . . . Depravity cleaves to him in every aspect and in all circumstances.<sup>79</sup>

The author offers the fascinating suggestion that Byron of late has popularized a style of literature contemptuous of humanity, so that, by implication if not design, Pollok unknowingly may be following in the footsteps of the wicked laird, at least in regard to his intensely unflattering portraits of humankind. “Now the question arises,” the writer asks his or her readers, “Is this the view for a poet to take of human nature?”

As a tenet of religion we do not meddle with it. . . . [B]ut, we ask, need he call in the aid of poetry, to strengthen the impression of [humankind’s] utter unworthiness? Should [the poet] not rather employ this divine instrument, to make them appear less odious than they are? . . . [W]hy should not the poet cover the vices of human nature under the folds of fiction, that its virtue may appear more striking and beautiful? Let those, whose vocation calls them to it, uncover the human heart, and expose the base passions and low desires that inhabit there. But the poet lies under no such uncompromising obligation.<sup>80</sup>

Writing thirty years later, Thomas McNicoll was less concerned with the duty of the poet than with the quality of his poetry. Perhaps understating the case, McNicoll observed that Pollok’s “habit of denunciation” had not “contributed to the poetical perfection” of his work. “On the contrary,” McNicoll asserted, “it has marred with its intemperate tone, and lowered by its familiar phraseology, and broken by its abrupt and rugged versification, the grace, dignity, and harmony proper to epic song.”<sup>81</sup> George Gilfillan went further, along the lines of the commentary in *The North American Review*, declaring that Pollok had exacerbated an historic prejudice against religious poetry that stretched back at least to Samuel Johnson in the mid-eighteenth century. More recently, poets and hymnists such as William Cowper and James Montgomery had helped

---

<sup>79</sup> “The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books,” *North American Review*, 347.

<sup>80</sup> *North American Review*, 349.

<sup>81</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 100.

considerably to repair that breach.<sup>82</sup> But, whatever its other merits, the “indigenous gloom” of Pollok’s poem had unfortunately contributed to the stereotype – promoted by Byron, among others – of a dour, joyless Christianity. “[W]e regret exceedingly that [Pollok] had not done more justice to the bright side of the picture,” Gilfillan asserted, adding that

nothing, we think, has injured Christianity more, than the melancholy and miserable tone of the greater part of its authorship. We attribute much of the prejudice which exists against religion, to the severe and somber light in which many of its poets constantly represent that gospel, which means, “News that it is well.”

In Gilfillan’s opinion, Pollok had “discoloured the long tract of Millennial day” by the “shadow of his personal melancholy,” thus “leaving the Pleasures of Piety to be sung by a far feebler minstrel.”<sup>83</sup> The answer was either for the poet to remove himself and his personal travails from the poem, something T. S. Eliot would preach a century later, or perhaps for a different, happier poet to undertake a description of the true joys of the faith.

If “injuring” Christianity were not bad enough, the very first reviewer of *The Course of Time* left the undeniable impression that Pollok had failed in his epic purpose altogether, and that his dark depiction of Christianity had, in fact, undermined the very attempt at theodicy. “[T]here is a . . . difficulty in the way of our author,” the *Blackwood’s* reviewer asserted, “to make good the latter clause of his final argument,--the approval, by human sympathies, of God’s eternal awards.” The reviewer referred to Pollok’s depiction of the Final Judgment and his intent to show “God’s eternal government approved.” “[W]e cannot have, and God never meant us here to have, such a joy in contemplating the final overthrow of the wicked,” the reviewer declared, “as, in the counterpart of the feeling, shall vindicate thoroughly to our hearts the severe justice of retribution.” Still, if Pollok’s depiction of human depravity and divine retribution was indeed too dark, it was not entirely the poet’s fault. He had been “unfortunate” in his choice of subject, which, as many later

---

<sup>82</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 320.

<sup>83</sup> Gilfillan, 326.

reviewers averred, was simply beyond the powers of the human mind to conceive or articulate. Nonetheless, the reviewer's conclusion was damning: Pollok was "not altogether to be blamed"

if he hath not approved to human sympathies, the final justice of God; or, in the other clause of his argument, to set forth to our conceptions the full importance of 'Time gone;--the righteous saved, the wicked damn'd.'<sup>84</sup>

Like Pollok's fellow divinity students, the *Blackwood's* reviewer clearly recognized Pollok's theodicean purposes, attempting to justify God and to "approve" his "government" in an epic poem. But in contrast to the students, the reviewer had declared Pollok's enterprise a failure from the start. "The merit of this poem, instead, lies chiefly in excellent parts," he or she asserted, in a possible attempt to soften the judgment of the whole, "and on this account it is entitled to a . . . thorough analysis."<sup>85</sup>

### 5.2.2 A "disjointed and unbalanced poem"

As we have noted, it was not just Pollok's dark depiction of religion that was a problem for many critics. The very didacticism which James Boyd praised in the poem and wished to supplement in his new edition drew censure from a number of reviewers. George Gilfillan was by no means alone in decrying the "moral pictures" which "are repeated till you sicken, and spun out till you weary."<sup>86</sup> For that matter, the author of the critique in *The North American Review* felt that even Pollok's supposed statement of purpose – "That fools may hear and tremble, and the wise/Instructed listen, of ages yet to come" – sounded "too much like preaching."<sup>87</sup> Thomas McNicoll echoed the same concern thirty years later in his consideration of Pollok (along with Milton) as a "sacred poet." For McNicoll, Pollok "crafts whole paragraphs in a rhetorical rather than a poetic mould, and exchanges the tranquil, undoubting manner of the muse, for the denouncing and vehement tones

---

<sup>84</sup> "'The Course of Time,' A Review," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 847–48.

<sup>85</sup> *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 848.

<sup>86</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 333.

<sup>87</sup> "The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books," *North American Review*, 342.

of the preacher.” “It would appear that the author’s religious zeal urges him to this,” McNicoll surmised. “[B]ut, rightly considered, neither his subject nor his purpose demands so great a sacrifice.”<sup>88</sup> The commentator in *The Southern Review*, who was otherwise laudatory of the poet’s didactic aims, was more unflattering in his choice of imagery. “[T]he old bard delivers a sort of funeral discourse upon the world and its inhabitants,” the reviewer declared, “and in spite of all his inspiration, does, it must be owned, occasionally fall into a downright prone,” or old-fashioned sermon.<sup>89</sup>

Pollok’s sermonizing and moralizing were part of a larger pattern of repetition, prolixity, and imitation observed by many critics, perhaps highlighted or augmented by a dearth of plot and character. For the author of the biographical sketch in *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal*, “[t]he great fault of ‘The Course of Time’” was, in fact, “its elaborate redundancy,” which he or she identified as “the besetting sin . . . of the literature of the age.”<sup>90</sup> The *Chamber’s* author perhaps had seen the original *Blackwood’s* review, for the language was almost identical. “The enormous fault of this poem,” the *Blackwood’s* reviewer had asserted, “is . . . an elaborate redundancy in the making up of moral pictures.” Furthermore, “the worst part of [Pollok’s] sin,” the reviewer declared, “is, that he dilates upon the same subject more than once.”<sup>91</sup> If Pollok had failed to get to the point - or had gotten to it too many times over - he also had muddled his purposes with abstractions and generalities. The *Chamber’s* author conceded that, while Pollok’s “moral delineations are often admirably given,” they were “not in a few cases . . . too general to reach the conscience of the reader,” and his “denunciations of vice, though unsparing, are too broad and indiscriminate to be of much practical benefit.”<sup>92</sup> Thomas McNicoll’s opinion was that *The Course of Time* was more like “a bold cartoon, filled with all the typical characters of earth, but having little or no local colouring to give warmth and harmony to the whole.”<sup>93</sup> The lack of clear (or almost any) characterization was a significant problem, as reviewers had noted from the very beginning. “[I]n

---

<sup>88</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 101.

<sup>89</sup> “Book Review, ‘The Course of Time,’” *The Southern Review*, 463.

<sup>90</sup> “Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok,” 78.

<sup>91</sup> “‘The Course of Time,’ A Review,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 846.

<sup>92</sup> “Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok,” 78.

<sup>93</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 109.

the poem before us, we know not real and moving individuals of earth,” the *Blackwood’s* reviewer observed.

We are made acquainted, indeed, with the qualities of individual minds; but these are no better than the abstract beings of an allegory, and the final fate with which they are respectively visited, strikes us but as the victory of God over sin in general, over the wicked follies of men and devils.<sup>94</sup>

Pollok had, in fact, personified Sin in general, as had his great predecessor Milton, but unlike Milton, Pollok had failed to give his readers real flesh and blood characters who could be seen to struggle with that reality. Perhaps Pollok’s ambition was simply beyond the limits of his ability, and the attempt required someone with the extraordinary gifts of a Milton. “To paint, with distinctness and truth, the character of a single people in a single age, demands a combination of talents and acquirements, possessed only by one in many millions,” the commentator in *The North American Review* reflected.<sup>95</sup> Pollok evidently was not that singular individual, nor had he given his readers one with whom to identify, unless one counted the anti-hero Byron who was, ironically, the closest thing to a rounded character *The Course of Time* could supply. “There is no hero or connected chain of events,” the author of a review in the *Lancaster Gazette* (1828) lamented, “which subjects the author to a great disadvantage, and requires a more extraordinary display of intellectual and imaginative powers to keep alive the interest of the reader.”<sup>96</sup> If there were no real character, there could be no conflict or plot, as the *Blackwood’s* reviewer was the first to point out. “In the general fate of mankind, as given in Mr. Pollok’s poem, there is no doubtful conflict,” the reviewer observed, and “no strife of equal interests.” All in all, he (or she) concluded, “a main action is wanting.”<sup>97</sup> Writing a few years later, George Gilfillan concurred, although his language was more abrupt: “It has no story,” he wrote of *The Course of Time*, “and an exceedingly imperfect

---

<sup>94</sup> “‘The Course of Time,’ A Review,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 847.

<sup>95</sup> “The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books,” *North American Review*, 347.

<sup>96</sup> “‘The Course of Time’ by the Rev. Robert Pollok,” *The Lancaster Gazette*, February 9, 1828, 4, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>. Accessed 3.3.2017.

<sup>97</sup> “‘The Course of Time,’ A Review,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 847.

plan. In defect of incident, it is full of descriptions and moral portraitures. . . . Consequently, as a whole, it lacks interest.”<sup>98</sup>

This was fairly surprising from someone who prized the poem’s religious intentions, if not always the theology itself. But the flaws in *The Course of Time*’s design, especially in comparison to Milton’s, could not be hidden. Gilfillan called it “clumsy,”<sup>99</sup> the word Professor William Spalding of St. Andrews University used thirty years later, in his *History of English Literature*.<sup>100</sup> “However noble the design,” the *North American Review* suggested, “we might reasonably complain of the execution, which might have been greatly improved by re-touching and revision.”<sup>101</sup> For his or her part, the commentator in *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* declared that, “[a]s a whole, [*The Course of Time*] claims our approbation neither for management nor design.” The writer found the poem’s organization “simple in the extreme” and “the order of its great divisions [books], if such they may be called,” routinely sequential.<sup>102</sup> Such structural and stylistic flaws increased the distance between Pollok and his idol Milton, not to mention Dante. For David Keir, writing a history of the Glasgow-based Collins publishing house (which published Pollok’s first Covenanter tales), the young Scot’s “disjointed and unbalanced poem was too much a hollow echo of Milton’s sonorous cadences without the master’s organ-note.”<sup>103</sup> While the author of the early critique in *The Eclectic Review* preferred *The Course of Time* to *Paradise Lost* and A. D. Field of *The Ladies Repository* declared “Milton’s scheme . . . puerile by the side of Pollok’s,”<sup>104</sup> George Gilfillan, Thomas McNicoll, and the author of the critique in *The North American Review* all asserted Pollok’s “vast inferiority” to Milton, “with whom,” the latter regretted, “it is his special infelicity that his subject continually exposes him to be compared.”<sup>105</sup> Thomas McNicoll pronounced himself “reluctant . . . to compare the merits of Milton and Pollok,” but then did not hesitate to declare that

---

<sup>98</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 333.

<sup>99</sup> Gilfillan, 324.

<sup>100</sup> William Spalding, *The History of English Literature, with an Outline of the Origin and Growth of the English Language, Illustrated by Extracts. For the Use of Schools and Private Students. With Appendix by W. Houston*. (Toronto: A. Miller, 1876), 383.

<sup>101</sup> “The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books,” *North American Review*, 341.

<sup>102</sup> “Book Review,” *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine*, 356.

<sup>103</sup> David Keir, *The House of Collins* (London, 1952), 90.

<sup>104</sup> Field, “Review: Robert Pollok and ‘The Course of Time,’” 557.

<sup>105</sup> “The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books,” *North American Review*, 342.

“[t]he great inferiority of Pollok’s work may be admitted from the first.” “In truth,” McNicoll admitted, “no reflecting person could fail to observe that the two works are of widely different orders of merit.”<sup>106</sup> Gilfillan was more succinct: While *The Course of Time* occasionally replicated (or more accurately, imitated) some of Milton’s poetic felicities, “it ought never to be named” with *Paradise Lost*.<sup>107</sup>

Pollok had tried to follow Milton into the realms of the sublime, but was found wanting. It was not, perhaps, all his fault, as the *Blackwood’s* reviewer had suggested, and the poet might be lauded for the mere attempt, as A. D. Field argued. “Shall the skill of the player be ignored because the harp-strings are ill-tuned?” Field asked his readers. “Shall the genius of the poet be forgotten because there is limping in poetic feet?” In Field’s estimation, “[t]he mind of the poet was there to plan and conceive, but not the practiced pen to give poetic embodiment to his beautiful images.” The implication was clear: Pollok’s poetic abilities simply did not match his vision. George Gilfillan observed that there was much “stilted and stumbling prose” amid the nuggets of “pure poetry” in Pollok’s poem,<sup>108</sup> while W. Forbes Gray judged *The Course of Time* “for the most part mediocre verse.”<sup>109</sup> If only Pollok “had been of Milton’s age and practice when he wrote, what a grand thing the Course of Time might have been!” Field speculated. As a might-have-been *Paradise Lost*, *The Course of Time* surely deserved something more than to be “cast to cold oblivion” as early as 1858, the year of Field’s review.<sup>110</sup> As it happened, the poem’s publication life would be extended by another forty years, despite “limping poetic feet” and “stilted and stumbling prose,” proving, perhaps, that “mediocre verse” could survive as long as its content was sufficiently valued.

---

<sup>106</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 107–8.

<sup>107</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 322.

<sup>108</sup> Gilfillan, 333.

<sup>109</sup> Gray, “A Scottish Milton: Pollok’s Centenary,” 8.

<sup>110</sup> Field, “Review: Robert Pollok and ‘The Course of Time,’” 558.

### 5.2.3 “A Creed Outworn”: Religious and Cultural Changes

As we have seen, as early as 1854, James Boyd, in his expanded edition of *The Course of Time*, had acknowledged that the poem would be more attractive “to some readers” if it were “less theological and didactic.”<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, A. D. Field, writing four years later, had suggested that the poem’s theology and religious content were the very reason why it deserved to be rescued from “cold oblivion,” its presumed destination.<sup>112</sup> Theological change, or the spectre of it, seemed to be in the air. As we have noted, some scholars of nineteenth-century British culture point to major shifts in theological understanding around the middle of the century - shortly after Boyd and Field made their pronouncements. In *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain*, Julie Melnyk observes that the years 1859 and 1860 were particularly important, for they “saw the publication of two of the most controversial books of the century” in Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and the theological collection *Essays and Reviews*.<sup>113</sup> Together, these volumes represented many of the core scientific and intellectual challenges to traditional faith in the nineteenth century. Whereas evolution, like the geological discoveries of earlier decades, questioned the accuracy of biblical accounts of creation, *Essays and Reviews* challenged central tenets of belief such as eternal damnation, Christ’s atonement, and the plenary inspiration of scripture.<sup>114</sup> As Melnyk rightly notes, there was nothing “radically new” in either work (almost all of the questions they raised had been raised before), but together, the volumes “seemed to constitute a summary of a half-century’s unsettlement of traditional Christian beliefs”<sup>115</sup> - an “unsettlement” that had begun well before Pollok took up his pen.

Looking back several decades to the encounter between evangelical Christianity and Romanticism in the broad period when Pollok was writing, David Bebbington makes the striking observation that “the most important developments associated with the new impulse [of Romanticism]” pushed evangelicals towards rather than away from theological liberalism. Bebbington cites

---

<sup>111</sup> Pollok, *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Field, “Review: Robert Pollok and ‘The Course of Time,’” 558.

<sup>113</sup> Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, 25.

<sup>114</sup> Melnyk, 137–38.

<sup>115</sup> Melnyk, 147.

Congregational theologian and pastor Horace Bushnell, a near-contemporary of Pollok, as a prime example of this movement in America in the first half of the nineteenth century, when James Boyd and James Scott also were Stateside thinking and writing about *The Course of Time*. In his book *God in Christ* (1849), Bushnell “contended that religious discourse should be understood not literally but poetically,” Bebbington observes, challenging the notion that there could be any precise, dogmatic formulation or presentation of the faith.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, Pollok had used poetry in *The Course of Time* to affirm traditional dogma, and in many cases, a literal view of the Bible. Bushnell also was instrumental in promoting the moral influence theory of Christ’s atonement – that Christ’s death was an encouragement to human goodness rather than a substitutionary sacrifice, as depicted in *The Course of Time* – and in affecting ideas about the nature of God himself. “The central doctrinal shift,” Bebbington asserts, “was away from the conception of God as Governor” – important in the federalist theology to which Pollok subscribed – and towards “the idea of him as Father. Tender feelings encouraged by the temper of the times, especially in respectable families, made it easier to think of [God] as a kindly parent than as a stern judge,” Bebbington observes.<sup>117</sup> This is quite different from the God of Pollok’s imagining, whose “government” must be “approved,” who sends his son “to purchase, by his blood,/As many as believed . . . ,”<sup>118</sup> and who

. . . in the grasp  
Of his Almighty strength, took [sinners] upraised,  
And threw them down, into the yawning pit  
Of bottomless perdition. . . .

(X.479-482)

As the years went by, Bebbington suggests, it became harder to believe that a kindly parent would do anything of the kind, “and so the traditional doctrine of hell became less widely believed.”<sup>119</sup> Similarly, Mark Knight and Emma Mason trace the growth of public misgivings about hell and eternal punishment from F. D. Maurice’s *Theological Essays*, published in 1853, to H. B. Wilson’s

---

<sup>116</sup> Bebbington, “Evangelicalism,” 246.

<sup>117</sup> Bebbington, 246.

<sup>118</sup> *The Course of Time*, X.270-1.

<sup>119</sup> Bebbington, “Evangelicalism,” 247.

contribution to *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, and Bishop John William Colenso's *Commentary on Romans* the next year, with its outright denial of eternal damnation.<sup>120</sup> "As the [nineteenth] century developed," Knight and Mason argue, "Evangelicals [like their broad church brethren] became less confident in asserting that those who had died were going to endure everlasting conscious torment. . . ."<sup>121</sup> While the response to such liberalizing trends included, in 1864, a public statement signed by 11,000 Anglican clergy reaffirming traditional views of heaven, hell, and biblical inspiration,<sup>122</sup> it could all seem too late. Of the theological changes wrought by these and other works, even an atheist such as the writer Anatole France could lament, "We have eaten the apple from the tree of knowledge, and the apple has turned to ashes in our mouths. . . . It was sweet to believe, even in hell."<sup>123</sup>

Taking up this theme in *Hell and the Victorians*, Geoffrey Rowell asserts that the "real concern" of many clerical signatories to the 1864 declaration "was not hell," in fact, but "the authority of the Bible." "If you disbelieved hell," Rowell surmises, "you disbelieved the Bible and if you disbelieved the Bible you lost God."<sup>124</sup> Thus, the road to hell was paved, not with good intentions, but cast-off Bibles, and Pollok's concern with scriptural integrity and authority can be seen as the source of and very reason for his overriding interest in hell and damnation. ("The doctrine of future punishment, especially, had seized hold on his imagination as with iron talons," George Gilfillan had asserted.<sup>125</sup>) The Anglican clergymen who had affirmed their belief in hell in 1864 also had affirmed the plenary inspiration and authority of scripture as "the Word of God."<sup>126</sup> The two were directly connected, as they were in *The Course of Time*. What changed in the decades between the first publication of Pollok's epic (1827) and the 1864 clergy declaration was the breadth and nature of the challenges the Bible faced. Christians of Pollok's era were familiar with the problems geological science posed for traditional, and certainly literal, interpretation of the scriptures, such

---

<sup>120</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 144.

<sup>121</sup> Knight and Mason, 145.

<sup>122</sup> Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 121.

<sup>123</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 105.

<sup>124</sup> Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 120.

<sup>125</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 324.

<sup>126</sup> Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, 148.

as the age of the earth and the story of creation.<sup>127</sup> Pollok alludes to these sorts of scientific challenges in *The Course of Time*, Book III, speaking of men who are “[p]erplexed exceedingly why shells were found/Upon the mountaintops, but wonder[ed] not/Why shells were found at all, more wondrous still!” (ll. 561-3). However, as Mark Knight and Emma Mason observe, it was the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, more than the science-based *Origin of Species*, that most impacted evangelicals, who would make up a sizable portion of Pollok’s reading public.<sup>128</sup> While historical and higher critical readings of the Bible had been available to the British public before - notably through George Eliot’s 1846 translation of D. F. Strauss’ *Leben Jesu (Life of Jesus)* - *Essays and Reviews* and the controversy surrounding it helped to disseminate the ideas and insights of the German higher critics to a large audience in Britain for the first time.<sup>129</sup> Readers could find Rowland Williams arguing for the spiritual, rather than literal or historical, truth of the Bible, while fellow essayist Benjamin Jowett wished to persuade them that the Bible must be read, not as a divinely prescribed text, but as a piece of literature “like any other book.”<sup>130</sup> It would not be long before Matthew Arnold followed suit, announcing his own endeavor in *Literature and Dogma* (1873) - one he presumed to share with many contemporary religious-minded intellectuals - “to free the Bible—by showing that it is not science but literature, by following it continuously and interpreting it naturally.”<sup>131</sup> Liberal attempts to promote a clearer or deeper apprehension of the Bible - Arnold’s stated aim - like the new historicism, caused shock waves among many evangelicals. However, David Bebbington notes that, with the passage of time, evangelical scholars and theologians adopted many of the historicists’ tools and approaches, so that, “[b]y the end of the century, higher criticism was entrenched in most of the theological institutions of the English-speaking world.”<sup>132</sup> The view of the Bible Pollok had espoused in *The Course of Time*, and for which George Gilfillan had posthumously congratulated him - that of a single, unfragmented, authoritative text - had become harder and harder to maintain.

---

<sup>127</sup> Melnyk, 137.

<sup>128</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 156.

<sup>129</sup> Knight and Mason, 131.

<sup>130</sup> Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, 147.

<sup>131</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Literature And Dogma An Essay* (The Macmillan Company, 1924), 205.

<sup>132</sup> Bebbington, “Evangelicalism,” 247.

Undoubtedly, wider social and cultural shifts also contributed to the decline of interest in and popularity of *The Course of Time*. Religion was, as Knight and Mason argue, “not just another aspect of the nineteenth century,” but something that permeated all aspects of life.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, in his landmark study of nineteenth-century European secularization, Owen Chadwick recalls the famous axiom that “the religious is a social phenomenon.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, we would expect a profoundly religious poem such as *The Course of Time* to be bound up with and deeply affected by the momentous cultural changes of the nineteenth century, including the growth of secularism and shifts in public and private religiosity. Knight and Mason, Chadwick, and Callum G. Brown point out a number of factors that contributed to these changes, among them the rise of liberalism and demands for freedom of conscience; the challenge of materialist philosophies, including socialism and Marxism; the Industrial Revolution and resultant urbanization; the rise of a newly empowered working class; and the popularity of the novel and the growth of a secular press. Comparing Pollok’s native Scotland to other European countries, Callum G. Brown observes that, while political secularism and anti-clericalism contributed to “secularizing trends” in France and Germany, in Scotland – and perhaps in Britain as a whole – “it was lifestyle rather than ideology that seemed to instigate religious decline. . . .”<sup>135</sup> Brown points to the effects of industrialization and urbanization, which threatened the older, agrarian communal culture; led to feelings of alienation and isolation, as workers moved to anonymous cities for jobs; and left a number of social ills in their wake. Urbanization, in particular, was blamed for a sense of moral and religious decline.<sup>136</sup> Brown quotes one J. C. Symons opining about Pollok’s native city in 1839, a decade after the poet himself had lived there. “It is my firm belief,” Symons declared, “that penury, dirt, misery, drunkenness, disease and crime culminate in Glasgow to a pitch unparalleled in Great Britain.”<sup>137</sup> For his part, Thomas Chalmers, likely reflecting on his own work with the city’s poor, almost simultaneously lamented “the deep and dense irreligion which, like the apathy of a

---

<sup>133</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 9.

<sup>134</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>135</sup> Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>136</sup> Brown, 4.

<sup>137</sup> James Burn Russell and Archibald Kerr Chalmers, *Public Health Administration in Glasgow: a Memorial Volume of the Writings of James Burn Russell* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1905), 8.

mortification or paralysis, has stolen imperceptibly on the great bulk of our plebeian families.”<sup>138</sup> For many, although by no means all, newly urbanized citizens, the atomizing and depersonalizing trends of modernity which led to the city also led away from the church.<sup>139</sup>

Owen Chadwick observes another outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution and its empowerment of the lower middle and working classes in “the rise of the non-conformist conscience,” which did not much concern itself with the trappings of respectability such as church-going.<sup>140</sup> Liberty and the desire for increased personal freedoms went “hand in hand with growing secularism,” Chadwick affirms, as institutional religion came to be seen as one of the societal structures that inhibited, rather than promoted, personal expression. In Chadwick’s view, nineteenth-century secularization was not so much about changes in doctrine or ideology as it was about shifting social, economic, and political realities. The nineteenth-century working man or woman was interested in whatever addressed his or her immediate circumstances.<sup>141</sup> Behavioral norms changed, too, as old class divisions and roles were re-examined. Working men did not have to go to church every Sunday to attain respectability; it was enough for them to remain “rough,”<sup>142</sup> as they were. Callum Brown observes that, “[o]ver time, ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ came to be defined less and less in religious ways, and religion became a less important part of class identity.”<sup>143</sup> Even religious dissenters like Pollok, had he lived, enjoyed the very real opportunity of becoming pillars of middle-class British society.

Part of the splintering of religion and identity had to do with the growth of liberalism. As new freedoms were granted, the old religious and moral consensus, along with the obligation to follow it, began to fragment. The very liberties of conscience, religion, and worship which Pollok had

---

<sup>138</sup> Thomas CHALMERS (D.D.), *The Right Ecclesiastical Economy of a Large Town ... Third Edition* (John Anderson, 1835), 21.

<sup>139</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 175. However, Knight and Mason argue that these trends were already in motion by the nineteenth century, and that rapid urbanization more likely exaggerated than encouraged them.

<sup>140</sup> Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, 136.

<sup>141</sup> Chadwick, 105.

<sup>142</sup> Chadwick, 17.

<sup>143</sup> Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707*, 7.

celebrated in *The Course of Time*, and for the violation of which he had castigated the autocratic Stuarts, also had opened the door to irreligion. Ironically, “[l]iberal faith rested in origin upon the religious dissenter”<sup>144</sup> like Pollok, who wished to believe and worship as he pleased beyond state control and oftentimes in a more conservative fashion. But, as Chadwick observes of nineteenth-century liberalism, “[a] free market in some opinions became a free market in all opinions,” including those regarding religious practice and adherence.<sup>145</sup> The right to worship as one pleased suggested the possibility that one did not have to worship at all. Freedom of religion and freedom from religion were the twin offspring of the freedom of conscience Pollok so valued - something Edward Irving may have recognized when he declared religion “the very name of obligation” and liberalism “the very name for the want of obligation.”<sup>146</sup> Where religion went, so went morality and public mores. With freedom of conscience and the toleration of different viewpoints and behaviors, the moral authority of traditional institutions like the church also declined. Chadwick argues that “the demolition of an established consensus in moral authority was fundamental to the secularizing process,” a movement enhanced by the expansion of a secular press.<sup>147</sup> While the popular press “did not create the arguments” spun around moral and religious issues, it “sharpened, quickened, magnified” and spread them across the land in the columns of newspapers and magazines,<sup>148</sup> as it had with debates about *The Course of Time*. If the media did not actively contribute to the process of secularization, it at least reflected what was already happening and suggested that a variety of opinions could be tolerated, if not accepted outright. In Chadwick’s estimation, it was the secular media’s distinction to air the “collapse” of the old religious and moral consensus,<sup>149</sup> and if that did not alert people to change, nothing would.

Along with the changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, liberalism, and nonconformism, were those engendered by the rise of materialism and materialist philosophies. The attempt to scientifically account for and materially prove everything, including the historical

---

<sup>144</sup> Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, 26.

<sup>145</sup> Chadwick, 21.

<sup>146</sup> Edward Irving, *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse ...* (William Collins, 1828), 128.

<sup>147</sup> Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, 40.

<sup>148</sup> Chadwick, 45.

<sup>149</sup> Chadwick, 40.

existence of Jesus, further challenged systems of belief that had once been taken for granted. Chadwick notes a growing agnosticism even within religion itself, as doubts arose about all that resisted historical proof.<sup>150</sup> The “old agnosticism of Hume and the Enlightenment”<sup>151</sup> became ever more congenial to those who recognized that almost nothing could be known for certain, and even the authority of the best witnesses – like the Gospel writers – was open to question. “Science,” Darwin asserted, “has nothing to do with Christ, except in so far as the habit of scientific research makes a man cautious in admitting evidence.”<sup>152</sup> Even the father of evolution acknowledged that science had its limits; while Darwin no longer believed in a deity, he avowed his preference for the “unaggressive” attitude of the agnostic over that of the atheist.<sup>153</sup> There was much that could not be explained, and what could not be explained, materialism said did not exist. “Ultimately,” Knight and Mason assert, “it was materialism rather than science per se that posed problems for religion” in the nineteenth century.<sup>154</sup> Science might drive one to agnosticism; materialism to atheism or its cousins, socialism and Marxism. While some men and women could find new faith in these political philosophies or in science, progress, or humanism, “most could gain no such faith,” Chadwick declares. “In jettisoning [religious] faith they jettisoned all faith.”<sup>155</sup>

A last cultural element which may have contributed to the decline of *The Course of Time* is the rise of the novel, a literary form Pollok himself had criticized in his epic and which he had planned to make the centerpiece or first subject of his proposed review of literature “by the light of Divine Revelation.”<sup>156</sup> We already have noted that for Pollok, as for many evangelicals of the time, the novel was viewed as a morally suspect literary form sometimes presenting loose characters and behaviors and “oft crammed full/Of poisonous error” (*The Course of Time*, IV. 325-7). We also noted Knight and Mason’s assertion that “[p]opular demand for novels challenged the pre-eminence of the Bible” at the very moment that intellectual trends, such as those examined in the

---

<sup>150</sup> Chadwick, 225.

<sup>151</sup> Chadwick, 185.

<sup>152</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin: Including an Autobiographical Chapter* (New York, 1911), 277.

<sup>153</sup> Darwin, 286.

<sup>154</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 155.

<sup>155</sup> Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, 255.

<sup>156</sup> David Pollok, *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*, 323.

preceding paragraphs, “began to undermine the aura surrounding the Sacred Text.”<sup>157</sup> In a bibliographic study of the English novel in the early nineteenth century, Peter Garside and Rainer Schoweling observe that the production of novels rose by over twenty-five percent in the years between 1820 and 1824, just before Pollok starting writing *The Course of Time*.<sup>158</sup> The English poet John Clare, a near-contemporary of Pollok’s, and also from humble farming stock, recognized that he - and presumably, other poets of the 1820s – were working “at a time when fiction sales were marginalizing the market for poetry.”<sup>159</sup> But it wasn’t just the perceived immorality of the novel or its rapidly growing popularity that may have affected the fortunes of *The Course of Time*; it also was the “interpretive indeterminacy” of the new literary form, which, as Knight and Mason assert, “called the dominant Evangelical hermeneutic into question.” According to them, “Evangelicals who regularly read novels were bound to start thinking about the biblical narrative differently.” The implicit multivocality of the novel, open to competing interpretations, “challenged Evangelical reliance on the alleged univocality, transparency, and simplicity of the Gospel message”<sup>160</sup> - something Pollok, Irving, and Dick all had assumed, and which Pollok had vehemently asserted in his epic. Meanwhile, Matthew Arnold, writing in *Literature and Dogma*, raised the concern that the newly economically and socially empowered “masses” were losing both their Bible and their religion because Protestantism had made the sacred text a “fixed authority . . . endued with talismanic virtues,” which should be preserved from any new or differing interpretation.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, as Knight and Mason note, Arnold argued in another essay that the “dominant idea of religion” needed to be transformed through the revitalizing energy of poetry and culture.<sup>162</sup> This was literature as a kind of religion itself, or at least, literature appropriating aspects of religion. In his study of Romantic-era reading habits, and especially poetry, William St. Clair observes that, in the nineteenth century, “literature and art began to supply some of the psychological needs previously offered by religion. . . .”

---

<sup>157</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 132–33.

<sup>158</sup> Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling, eds., *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38.

<sup>159</sup> Michael F. Suarez and Sarah M. Zimmerman, “John Clare’s Career, Keats’s Publisher, and the Early Nineteenth-Century English Book Trade,” *Studies in Romanticism* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 379.

<sup>160</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 134–35.

<sup>161</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay*, 33.

<sup>162</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Sweetness and Light,” in *The Works of Matthew Arnold: Culture & Anarchy ... and Friendship’s Garland* (Macmillan and Company, limited, 1903), 1.

Like the religious texts they were superceding, the works of the great English poets were to be read intensively. At the same time, some of the worship that previous generations had accorded to saints and heroes was transferred to artists and poets.<sup>163</sup>

St. Clair proposes that, in the post-Romantic period when *The Course of Time* saw its greatest sales, a new Victorian canon of literature replaced the older one (familiar to Pollok) more closely tied to accepted religious and moral standards. St. Clair writes that, [i]n the old canon,”

the link between literature, sublimity, feeling, and morality had been constantly emphasized and any hint of irreligion condemned and excluded. In this new Victorian canon the morally improving power of literature was still emphasized . . . but [Shelley's] *Queen Mab* and [Byron's] *Don Juan* were readily accessible. . . .

It was impossible, St. Clair suggests (as does Herbert Tucker, earlier noted), for literature to be the same after the publication of a work like *Don Juan*. A floodgate had been opened, which was widened by the growing market for and manufacture of cheap editions of poetry, novels, and literary collections, not all of them created with didactic intent. As a result, literate working-class Victorians could access and read literature which most Romantic-era readers and their predecessors had been discouraged from reading. “Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley and the now universal Shakespeare would not supplant the English-language Bible as the defining texts of the nation, but would be elevated to a near equal status in official esteem,” St. Clair asserts.<sup>164</sup> While he notes “an explicit secularizing agenda” among some leading Victorian-era intellectuals, major change may have been wrought by mass edition literary publishers who “had a humanist faith that ‘literature’, almost irrespective of textual content, would bring about a more moral world.”<sup>165</sup> This always had been the realm of religion, and specifically, of the Bible, the contents of which contained, as Pollok had written, “Heaven’s code of laws entire,” and which alone “defined the

---

<sup>163</sup> St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 428–29.

<sup>164</sup> St. Clair, 429.

<sup>165</sup> St. Clair, 429.

bounds/Of vice and virtue, and of life and death” (II.285-7). Now, it seemed, the Bible and secular literature were trading places, a move that would have important consequences for all religious literature, but especially for a work, such as *The Course of Time*, tasked with justifying a higher order of things – an order ordained by God.

### 5.3 Conclusions

An examination of the reception history of *The Course of Time* highlights its significance as a piece of religious literature which attempts to defend a distinctive theological point of view and to persuade its readers of God’s justice in regard to the economy of the afterlife. As George Gilfillan, James Scott, James Boyd, and many other early commentators asserted, the poem’s religiosity was central to its remarkable early success and decades-long popularity. While writers in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, Charleston’s *Southern Review*, Boston’s *Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine, and much later, *The Scotsman*, attested to the poem’s particular popularity among religious audiences, and specifically, readers of evangelical and dissenting persuasions, Pollok’s generally skillful employment of recognizable Romantic themes and devices assured his poem a broader appeal. Depictions of the lonely bard in nature, autobiographical allusions, and a concern for common human experience were “traits of pure romanticism” that directly reflected contemporary tastes. For many readers, like editor James Boyd and the author of the critique in *The Southern Review*, the poem’s didacticism and moral sensibility were of first importance. These were important tools for the religious and moral education of the young. For other readers, the poem’s literary form as a piece of religious epic poetry in the tradition of Milton, as well as its sublimity, high style, and grand subject matter, made it particularly compelling. No one, not even Milton, in the estimation of some reviewers, had attempted anything so great. If there were flaws in *The Course of Time*, they could be forgiven in light of its ultimate purposes – different from almost all other contemporary poems, Boyd and the *Spirit of the Pilgrims* reviewer had suggested – to defend the faith, re-assert biblical authority and teaching, and justify God’s ways before men.

However, the fact that there were qualifications, even among many of the poem's strongest public admirers, suggests that a work which purported to explain the "course" of time was in reality living on borrowed pieces of it. The *Blackwood's* reviewer – possibly John Wilson, as has been noted – was the first to identify the poem's poetic and thematic flaws and to assert that Pollok had failed in his twin aims to "[approve] to human sympathies, the final justice of God," as well as "set forth to our conceptions the full importance of 'Time gone;---the righteous saved, [and] the wicked damn'd.'"<sup>166</sup> Whatever *The Course of Time's* poetic, stylistic, and structural flaws – and reviewers noted many – its presentation of a dark and punitive religiosity (what John Aikin called religion's "dark robes") threatened to damn the poem's larger apologetic enterprise from the start. Rather than elicit interest in a sunny, joyous faith, some reviewers charged that Pollok only had reinforced the stereotype of a dour, unhappy Christianity that was all too familiar in his native Scotland. Asserting the poet's "obsession" with future punishment, George Gilfillan had asked, "Is this really piety, after all? Is she not a gladder, franker, milder, more amiable thing?"<sup>167</sup> The passage of time, Pollok's very concern, would suggest this might be so; by 1927, W. Forbes Gray could assert that Pollok's severe Calvinist version of Christianity – or what Gray perceived as such – was "a creed outworn."

There were many other factors at work in the middle to later decades of the nineteenth century which may have contributed to the declining fortunes of *The Course of Time*. One was the theological "forward march" Gray had alluded to in his remarks on Pollok's centennial. While it was a matter of opinion as to whether or not the "march" was "forward," the changes it wrought were indeed significant. Doctrines central to Pollok's project, such as plenary inspiration of the Bible, sacrificial atonement, final judgment, and eternal reward and punishment came under question – increasingly, after the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 – and were in some cases rejected outright, even by evangelicals. For Victorian-era Christians, and particularly Victorian-era evangelicals, losing Hell was only a few steps away from losing the Bible, and thus, losing God, as Geoffrey Rowell suggests. This spiritual economy (or the loss of it) is clear to see in *The Course of Time*. Other momentous cultural, social, and economic changes, including

---

<sup>166</sup> "'The Course of Time,' A Review," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 848.

<sup>167</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 330.

industrialization, urbanization, liberalization, materialism, and the ongoing challenge of science, led many religious persons to ask new questions of their faith and some, perhaps, to abandon it. Ironically, the very freedoms of conscience and of choice which came with liberalization, and which Pollok had championed in his epic (as had Milton before him), also opened a door onto secularism and patterns of belief which *The Course of Time* could not support. While some scholars see this as part of an inevitable “intellectual march from belief to skepticism,”<sup>168</sup> in which the nineteenth century played a vital role, Knight and Mason suggest a more nuanced narrative which focuses less on Christianity’s decline and more on its adaptation to the momentous cultural changes taking place around it.<sup>169</sup> In this case, a poem like *The Course of Time* which resisted adaptation, allowing “[no] grand Perhaps”<sup>170</sup> in theology or outlook, was bound to have an increasingly limited appeal.

However, as Thomas McNicoll observed in 1861, *The Course of Time* had been both over-praised by its admirers and “unduly depreciated by the literary world.”<sup>171</sup> Its story was a more complex one than that simply of a cultural artefact whose time had come and gone. Taken together, the author’s aims and the poem’s reception history reflected important concerns of and changes in the religious life of the reading public of both the British Empire and the young United States. They raised questions about the relationship between religion and literature, the role of the godly poet, and whether a poem meant to “preach” could be any good. McNicoll was right to compare Pollok and Milton as “sacred poets,” for as he, Scott, Boyd, and the *Blackwood’s* reviewer (among many others) recognized, the writers’ purposes and poetic identities were nearly the same. When Pollok quoted Milton’s famous argument in his own poem and based *The Course of Time*’s thesis on it, he must have known – as his fellow theology students clearly did – that he was inviting comparison with the great poet and entering into a similar theological fray. What he could not have known, and which McNicoll highlights, is how differences in time, context, and poetic ability would affect the final outcome.

---

<sup>168</sup> St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 427–28.

<sup>169</sup> Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 153.

<sup>170</sup> Gilfillan, *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*, 610.

<sup>171</sup> McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature*, 108.

## Conclusion

*A great religious poem in our language is something still to be desired.*

*The Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine, 1828

This thesis has argued that Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* is a distinctive representation of Romantic epic literature as Miltonic theodicy, unusually combining conventional Romantic themes and literary styles with evangelical Calvinist theology and a concern for Scottish history and culture. Once broadly popular for its mix of these elements, and its religious and moral sensibilities in particular, the poem experienced a sharp decline of interest in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This change in fortune was likely due to a combination of factors, including the work's inherent poetic flaws, its particular brand of religiosity, and the larger cultural, economic, and social changes that took place around it. Ironically, the poem's deep religiosity appears to have been both the primary source of its early popularity and the leading cause of its decline and near-disappearance decades later. Although largely forgotten today by scholars of religion as well as of Scottish and Romantic literatures, the poem is significant and worthy of scholarly attention and reassessment for several reasons: First, as a distinctive, and perhaps unique, example of Christian epic theodicy in the Miltonic style in the Romantic age; second, as a cultural marker reflecting important shifts in theological understanding and religious adherence in nineteenth-century Britain and America; third, as a case study and point of departure for nineteenth-century critical debates about the relationship between religion and literature and the use of poetry as a vehicle for theology; and finally, as an example of the important but often overlooked role of religion in Scottish Romanticism and the ways that religion often shaped the literature of Scotland in that era.

Modelled on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *The Course of Time* was written in rebuttal to what its author perceived as a rising tide of religious skepticism personified by Byron and also to affirm traditional Calvinist views on the Bible and the "four last things": death, judgment, heaven, and hell. In line with much evangelical preaching of the era, Pollok was particularly concerned to defend the danger and reality of hell, to present the "glorious argument" of resurrection, and to attest to the "essential truth" that "Eternity is all." Nineteenth-century reviewers recognized *The Course of Time* as a contemporary epic theodicy - in some cases, peculiarly so - and contrasted it with the work of other, better-known Romantics influenced by Milton. In these comparisons, Pollok stood out as a distinctly religious poet in the Miltonic line shared by more secular contemporaries. While many of Pollok's literary peers valued Milton as the premiere model in English of the poet as prophet, *The Course of Time* presents evidence that its author instead shared Milton's well-known desire to see the harmonious "numbers" of the godly poet made co-equal with the "office of the pulpit." Although Milton ultimately rejected a career in the church, choosing poetry instead, Pollok attempted to combine the two, becoming through his authorship of *The Course of Time* an image of John Dick's "polemical divine" for whom preaching, rather than versifying, ultimately is the preferred or more natural mode of address.

While Jameela Lares asserts that it is only the modern era which has viewed preaching and poetry as incompatible, debates about the relationship between religion and literature among reviewers of *The Course of Time* suggest that this concern is an old one. Perhaps in rejecting an ecclesiastical career, Milton was implicitly acknowledging that preaching and poetry were very different arts - one linear, didactic, and message-driven; the other ambiguous, polysemic, and open-ended.<sup>1</sup> While a number of nineteenth-century critics favorably compared *The Course of Time* to *Paradise Lost* (and some wildly over-praised it), others recognized just how far Pollok was from Milton. *Paradise Lost* was character-oriented and narrative-driven, presenting a complex portrait of desire, frailty, and aspiration, as Satan railed in hell and the first couple fled Eden for the unknown. By contrast, *The Course of Time* eschewed substantial character and narrative for a rather thinly veiled

---

<sup>1</sup> As noted earlier in this thesis, Milton explained his decision not to undertake holy orders as the consequence of his disgust with the "tyranny" which had "invaded" the church and his refusal to take a religious oath that would make him a "slave" to that tyranny.

catalogue of human moral failure and what at times resembled a catechism of religious doctrine. If anything, Pollok's poem was more clearly a theodicy than Milton's. But whatever one's views on *The Course of Time*, no one in the nineteenth century seemed unclear as to what the poem meant or what it was for. *The Course of Time* was "a sermon," as James Scott asserted, and a fairly direct one. Whether that was good or bad depended on how you liked your religion or your literature.

As has been demonstrated, reviewers of *The Course of Time* often used it as an embarkation point for critical debate about the relationship between religion and literature, the role of the religious poet, how religion should or could be presented in verse, and fundamentally, whether there could be good religious poetry at all. An overview of the poem's reception history suggests the difficulties and limitations of undertaking religious verse, as many reviewers asserted. Additionally, undue praise of a poem for its religious content, while ignoring its flaws, could undermine the poem's fortunes in the long run, as Thomas McNicoll, George Gilfillan, and others proposed in regard to *The Course of Time*. The particular nature of that content also was of signal importance. What some critics perceived as the inflexibility and severity of Pollok's religious views cast a shadow over *The Course of Time*'s softer merits, including a refreshing poetic honesty, skillful employment of familiar Romantic tropes, and sometimes compelling portraits of the artist himself. The particular equation of religious sensibility and poetic merit did indeed make a difference. In the estimation of George Gilfillan, Pollok's "dark" religiosity inadvertently placed him among religious poets who actively "injured" the progress of the faith. The *Blackwood's* reviewer went further, declaring that *The Course of Time* failed as a theodicy (as *Paradise Lost* had not) because it presented Christianity and its God in such an unsympathetic and unappealing light that no one would be moved to interest in or sympathy for either.

Similarly, John Aikin, who had originated the line about Pollok depicting religion in "dark robes," suggested that writers like Pollok, "who have exclusively devoted themselves to the treatment of Religion, in verse," actually deprive the faith "of one of its most powerful and effective advocates." Religion "is made most influential," Aikin argued, "by those who are indirectly its supporters – who describe natural objects, and excite love as well as veneration, by leading the mind through

Nature up to Nature's God."<sup>2</sup> While Aikin was thinking specifically of Wordsworth, whom he goes on to quote, the sentiments might equally be applied to Wordsworth's friend Coleridge, whom *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* reviewer had called upon to devote "his latter days" to writing the "great religious poem in our language" which, unfortunately, Pollok had failed to do.<sup>3</sup> Aikin's suggestion about approaching religion "indirectly" seems particularly apropos for *The Course of Time*, in which the subtleties, ambiguities, and uncertainties of great poetry – what Pollok's age-mate Keats termed "negative capability" – can seem particularly lacking. It also interestingly anticipates T. S. Eliot's call, nearly a century later, for "a literature which should be *unconsciously*, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian" – that is, a literature which arises out of a religious worldview wherein the poet treats "the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit" rather than "confining" him or herself to a sub-species of poetry and of subject matter denominated "religious."<sup>4</sup> This would seem to offer a compelling alternative to the time and context-bound variety of religious poetry Pollok's epic represents.

As evidenced by the afore-mentioned critical debates, the reception history of *The Course of Time* offers a window onto the changes in and variations of theological interpretation and religious understanding in nineteenth-century Britain and America. While the poem was widely reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic for over sixty years, critical response was, in fact, mixed from the beginning, and as early as the 1850s, commentators such as James Boyd and A. D. Field were concerned that *The Course of Time* already might be headed for "cold oblivion." The religious and moral positions which had made the poem popular with large numbers of evangelicals and dissenters at home and abroad had begun to lose their cultural force and would continue to do so as the 1850s became the 1860s and evangelicalism itself began to adapt to the liberalizing influences of the late-nineteenth century. By 1898, the year the last edition of *The Course of Time* was published, Rosaline Masson could presume that almost none of the readers of her Pollok biography would recognize his name (or much less, had read his epic), and shortly after, *Chambers Cyclopaedia of English Literature* would note the irony that Pollok's "immortal poem," like his

---

<sup>2</sup> Aikin, *Select Works of the British Poets*, 678.

<sup>3</sup> "Review of Robert Pollok's 'The Course of Time,'" *Spirit of the Pilgrims* magazine, 540.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, "Religion and Literature," 100.

tombstone, was “sought after by few, and, save in occasional quotation, all but forgotten.”<sup>5</sup> One may surmise that, as the nineteenth century progressed and the theological ideas embodied in *The Course of Time* came under increasing pressure, the poem’s long-recognized poetic, stylistic, and structural flaws began to outweigh the value that its religious and moral content once held for many readers. Fairly or not, *The Course of Time* came to represent, in the last popular press appreciation of it, “a creed outworn” which was no longer presumed to reflect the beliefs or theological interests of a contemporary readership.

The same popular and scholarly disregard largely holds true for the near-century since that evaluation was made. Crawford Gribben, one of only several scholars to write on *The Course of Time* in the last forty years, observes that “the poem is not mentioned even in the most definitive accounts of the [Scottish] national canon,”<sup>6</sup> and in the few instances when Pollok and his work receive mention, they are almost always summarily dismissed. For Gribben, “[t]he strange fate of this best-selling artefact of early nineteenth-century Scotland” is reflective of “the disappearance from scholarly view of elemental components of the cultural movement from which it emerged.”<sup>7</sup> Chief among these components is religion, and particularly evangelicalism, which was on the rise in the period in which Pollok wrote and which he and his poem – which Thomas McNicoll termed “the Evangelical Epic” – came to represent. Thus, for Julie Nall Knowles, another contemporary scholar who has written on *The Course of Time*, the poem is significant, in part, for what it tells us about “the early-nineteenth-century religious milieu.”<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Gribben argues that *The Course of Time*’s very religiosity has caused it to be overlooked or dismissed by contemporary scholars much as it was by acerbic critics a century ago. In Gribben’s view, the poem’s “robust theological interests” challenge “the established canons” of Scottish Romanticism because generations of critics of Scottish literature have “sidelined” religion as unimportant if not irrelevant

---

<sup>5</sup> Chambers and Patrick, *Chamber’s Cyclopædia of English Literature; a History, Critical and Biographical, of Authors in the English Tongue from the Earliest Times till the Present Day, with Specimens of Their Writings*, 794.

<sup>6</sup> Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” 26–28.

<sup>7</sup> Gribben, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Knowles, “‘The Course of Time’: A Calvinistic ‘Paradise Lost,’” 191.

to their work.<sup>9</sup> Another significance of *The Course of Time*, then, is that it materially supports the contention of Gribben, Carruthers, and others that, contrary to long-established scholarly opinion, religion was a shaping and oftentimes powerful influence on Scottish Romantic literature, and perhaps uniquely so in comparison to other national romanticisms. Thus, if there were to be a Romantic and distinctly religious epic theodicy, we should not be surprised to find it arising out of Caledonia.

Both Gribben and George Gilfillan - critics separated by more than a century - may be right in suggesting a certain prejudice against religious literature (or religion in Scottish Romantic literature) which has limited scholarly interest in *The Course of Time*. Likewise, the work's significant poetic weaknesses, first observed by critics in the nineteenth century, no doubt have contributed to the same neglect. Nonetheless, the poem's distinctiveness as a Calvinist theodicy of the Romantic era, as well as its remarkable popularity for many decades in the nineteenth century, suggest that it is an important cultural marker deserving of greater scholarly attention for what it has to say about the times in which it was written and the intentions of its author. Clearly, more scholarly work remains to be done, in which *The Course of Time* may again serve as a useful and important case study and point of departure. This work includes a more extended exploration of the historical relationship between religion and literature, particularly in early nineteenth-century Britain and America; for a broader consideration of literature as a vehicle for religious apologetics, and indeed, theodicy (and whether or not literary theodicy can, in fact, succeed in the modern era); and for further examination of the complex and increasingly important role that religion played in Scottish Romanticism, as it certainly did in *The Course of Time*. While this author agrees with the *Blackwood's* reviewer and with George Gilfillan that, ultimately, Pollok's epic is best consumed in parts – as it came to be in the later nineteenth century – the poem as a whole deserves “resurrection” as a significant missing piece of the Scottish literary canon.

---

<sup>9</sup> Gribben, “Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827),” 26.

Not many years after Thomas McNicoll penned his comparison of the “sacred poets” Pollok and Milton, sometime Anglican clergyman Stopford Brooke wrote his own work on poetry and religion called *Theology in the English Poets*. Writing of Pollok’s hero Cowper, as well as of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the poet’s countryman Robert Burns, Brooke argued that the theology of poets differed from that of churches because poets spoke, not in intellectual propositions as did the church, but with the emotions. “[Poets] have a theology,” Brooke asserted, “independent of conventional religious thought.” Whereas churches presented their dogmas in the “logical order” of creeds and confessions, in poets, Brooke attested, “[w]e see theology, as it were, in the rough; as, at its beginnings, it must have grown up in the minds of earnest and imaginative men. . . .” This “theology in the rough” did not offer specific answers or conclusions, but instead expressed the “true” feelings and emotions experienced in the contemplation of God and of creation.<sup>10</sup> For Brooke, this was the glory of religious poetry: Not that it would be conclusive, but that it could remain open-ended; that it could dare to ask questions which it could and would not answer; and that it could rest content for others – specifically, the theologians – to attempt some answers, if they dared. Poetry, Brooke seemed to suggest, had to reflect the experience of the heart.

It may be that Robert Pollok faced a similar truth in the end. For all his grand plans to judge the canon of Western literature “by the light of Divine Revelation,” his last work was both much more modest and less self-assured. “To Darkness,” possibly written during a grueling journey to Aberdeen only weeks before the poet’s death, reflects the weariness, fear, and perhaps uncertainty of a man who knows the end cannot be far away. The poet calls to Darkness, almost as a lover, to come quickly and release him from the pain of his increasingly desperate physical condition and the “scorn” of a world which he no longer hopes to possess. Like the poem which incited Pollok’s entire theodicean project – and unlike his grand epic enterprise – there is no mention of heaven, hell, or any kind of afterlife. There is no matter-of-fact presentation of doctrine or belief, only the sense of an impending end, which under present circumstances, the poet appears to welcome. Perhaps it would be too much to presume that Pollok wrote “To Darkness” in response to Byron’s “Darkness,” as enticing as that idea is. But we may rightly ask ourselves how Pollok’s work might have developed had he lived longer and had further encounters with Byron, Milton, and other poets

---

<sup>10</sup> Brooke, *Theology in the English Poets*, 1–3.

inhabiting either side of the intersection of religion and literature that so involved him. Like Milton, Pollok may have come to see that, while preaching and poetry may serve similar ends, they are not the same thing. Like Byron, he may have been willing to mock his own pretensions and to allow more irony and humor – things he was good at - into his verse. Above all, as the young Scot matured into an older writer and more experienced preacher, he may have recognized the truth which Stopford Brooke expounded: That religious poetry at its best is, indeed, a “theology in the rough” which requires, even demands, no further polishing.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources (including manuscripts and reviews)

- “Biographical Sketches: Robert Pollok.” *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, 1843, 77–78.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*. Edited by David V. Erdman. Revised edition. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor, 1982.
- Blake, William. *Blake’s Poetry and Designs: Authoritative Texts, Illuminations in Color and Monochrome, Related Prose, Criticism*. Edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1979.
- “Book Review.” *The Christian Review and Clerical Magazine* (London) 1 (1827): 342–57.
- “Book Review, ‘The Course of Time.’” *The Southern Review*, II, no. III (November 1828): 454–70.
- Byron, George Gordon. *Don Juan*. Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1837.
- Byron, George Gordon. *Lord Byron - The Major Works*. Edited by Jerome J. McGann. Reissue edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Chambers, Robert. “Significant Scots: Robert Pollok.” In *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, Vol. 4. Edinburgh: Blackie & Son, 1835.
- Chambers, Robert, and David Patrick. *Chamber’s Cyclopædia of English Literature; a History, Critical and Biographical, of Authors in the English Tongue from the Earliest Times till the Present Day, with Specimens of Their Writings*. London: W. & R. Chambers, 1906.
- Cowper, William. *The Task: A Poem. In Six Books*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2007.
- Cowper, William. *The Task, Table Talk, and Other Poems, of William Cowper: With Critical Observations of Various Authors on His Genius and Character, and Notes Critical and Illustrative*. Philadelphia: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1856.
- Crabbe, George, Robert Pollok, and Reginald Heber. *The Poetical Works of Crabbe, Heber, and Pollok*. Poems. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1853.
- Dick, John, and Andrew Coventry Dick. *Lectures on Theology*. Edinburgh: W. Oliphant, 1834.
- Field, A. D. “Review: Robert Pollok and ‘The Course of Time.’” *The Ladies Repository: A Monthly Periodical Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion* XVIII (1858): 557–59.
- Gilfillan, George. *A First Gallery of Literary Portraits*. Second Edition. Edinburgh: J. Hogg, 1851.
- Gray, W. Forbes. “A Scottish Milton: Pollok’s Centenary.” *The Scotsman* (September 19, 1927): 8.
- Irving, Edward. *The Oracles of God: Four Orations; For Judgment to Come: An Argument in Nine Parts*. London: T. Hamilton, 1823.
- Johnson, Samuel. *The Lives of the English Poets*. London, J.F. Dove, Printer, 1826.
- . *The Selected Writings of Samuel Johnson*. Edited by Katharine Rogers. New York: Signet Classic, 1981.

- Letters of the Wordsworth Family from 1787 to 1855*, vol. 2. Edited by William Knight. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969.
- Masson, Rosaline. *Pollok and Aytoun: Eminent Scots Series*. Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1898.
- McConnell, Karen M. "Confrontations with the Invisible World: Religion, History, and Modernity in Romantic Scotland." Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2013. "Deep Blue" Research Archive: <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/97830>.
- McNicoll, Thomas. *Essays on English Literature*. London: B. M. Pickering, 1861.
- Milton, John. *Complete Prose Works*, Vol. I, 1624-1642. Edited by Don M. Wolfe. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.
- . *Complete Prose Works*, Vol. II, 1643-1648. Edited by Ernest Sirluck. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
- . *Paradise Lost*. Edited by John Leonard. Penguin Classics, 2000.
- . *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Barbara K. Lewalski. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007.
- . *The Poems of John Milton*. Edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler. London and New York: Longman, 1968.
- MS GEN 1269, Inventory of Pollok Papers, Robert Pollok Collection, n.d. University of Glasgow Library Special Collections.
- MS GEN 1355, Manuscripts by or relating to Robert Pollok, Robert Pollok Collection, n.d. University of Glasgow Library Special Collections.
- Pollok, David. *The Life of Robert Pollok, Author of The Course of Time*. Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1843.
- Pollok, Robert. *The Course of Time, a Poem, in Ten Books*. Edited by William Jenks. Boston, New York: Crocker and Brewster; J. Leavitt, 1828.
- . *The Course of Time, with Critical Observations of Various Authors on the Genius and Writings of the Poet, Biographical Sketches, and Notes, Critical and Illustrative*. Edited by James Robert Boyd. New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1854.
- . "The Neglected Guide." *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* 1, no. 43 (October 21, 1852): 688.
- "Pollok's 'Course of Time.'" *The Eclectic Review* 28 (December 1827): 344–62.
- "Reminiscences of Robert Pollok: Author of 'The Course of Time.'" *Belfast News-Letter* (December 19, 1834).
- "Review of New Books: Rev. Robert Pollok." *The London Literary Gazette*, 558 (September 29, 1827): 1-2.
- "Review of Robert Pollok's 'The Course of Time.'" *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, 1 (October 1828): 516–40.
- R.L.L. "The Bible and Lord Byron." *The Imperial Magazine*, 10 (1833): 699-701.
- Scott, James. *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. ...* New York: R. Carter, 1848.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence Of Poetry*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1904.
- . *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Vol. 2. Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- Sinclair, John. "Hints Respecting a Poem Recently Published, Written by Robert Pollok, A. M., Entitled 'The Course of Time,' with a Short Account of the Author, and Specimens

- of His Work.” August 20, 1827. MS GEN 1355, Robert Pollok Manuscript Collection, University of Glasgow Library Special Collections.
- . *Statistical Account of Scotland*. Edinburgh: William Creech, 1791.
- Somerville (D.D.), Thomas. *Sermons*. Edinburgh/Hawick: 1813.
- Spirit of the Pilgrims* (Magazine) Records. Congregational Library, Boston.  
<http://www.Congregationallibrary.org/sites/all/files/SpiritofPilgrims0162.pdf>.
- The Bible: New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized)*. New York: Division of Christian Education, National Council of the Churches of Christ, United States of America, 1995.
- “The Course of Time, A Poem, in Ten Books.” *North American Review* 28, no. 63 (April 1829): 340-354.
- “‘The Course of Time,’ A Review.” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. XXI (January-June, 1827): 844-856.
- “‘The Course of Time’ by the Rev. Robert Pollok.” *The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser*, 1391 (February 9, 1828): 3-4.
- “The Life of Robert Pollok’: Book Review.” *The Spectator* 16, no. 759 (January 14, 1843): 42-43.
- “Scottish Poet.” *The Oriental Herald and Journal of General Literature*, 14 (London: J. M. Richardson, 1827): 533.
- Walker, Robert. *Sermons on Practical Subjects by Robert Walker*. Edinburgh: Printed for A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1771. <http://archive.org/details/serprac00walk>.
- Wilson, John. *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1887.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Complete Poetical Works*. Edited by John Morley and E. E. Reynolds. London: Macmillan and Co., 1934.
- Wordsworth, William. *Selected Poems and Prefaces*. Edited by Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965.
- Young, Edward. *Night-Thoughts*. Edited by Stephen Cornford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

## Secondary Sources

- Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- , ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Fifth. Vol. 1. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986.
- , ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Fourth. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979.
- Addison, Joseph, and Sir Richard Steel. *Addison’s Spectator*. Edited by George Washington Greene. New York: Derby & Jackson, 1860.
- Aikin, John. *Select Works of the British Poets: In a Chronological Series ... with Biographical and Critical Notices*. Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle, 1845.
- Allan, David. *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993.
- Altick, Richard Daniel. *The English Common Reader a Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998.

- Amy, Cruse. *The Victorians And Their Books*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1935.
- Arnold, Matthew. *The Works of Matthew Arnold: Culture & Anarchy ... and Friendship's Garland*. New York: Macmillan and Company, 1903.
- Balfour, Ian. *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*. Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Bebbington, David W. "Evangelicalism." *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, edited by David Fergusson. Blackwell Companions to Religion. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Benedict, Barbara M. "The Sentimental Virtuoso: Collecting Feeling in Henry Mackenzie's 'Man of Feeling.'" *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 473–99.
- Bilbro, Jeffrey. "Who Are Lost and How They're Found: Redemption and Theodicy in Wheaton, Newton, and Cowper." *Early American Literature* 47, no. 3 (2012): 561–89.
- Blair, Hugh. *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal*. London: : printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt ..., 1763. <http://archive.org/details/criticaldisserta01blai>.
- . *The Poems of Ossian*. Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1839.
- Blair, Kirstie. *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Boulger, James D. *The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry*. De Proprietatibus Litterarum 21. The Hague: Mouton, 1980.
- Brooke, Stopford Augustus. *Theology in English Poets*. London: H.S. King, 1874.
- . *Theology in the English Poets: Cowper--Coleridge--Wordsworth and Burns*. London : Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896.
- Brown, Callum G. *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.
- Brown, Ian, General Editor, with Thomas Owen Clancy and Murray Pittock. *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707-1918)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
- Brown, John, ed. *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated, by James Hog, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and Others: Occasioned by the Republication of the Marrow of Modern Divinity*. New ed., Greatly enlarged and improved. Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton & Co [etc], 1831.
- Brown, Leslie Ellen. *Artful Virtue: The Interplay of the Beautiful and the Good in the Scottish Enlightenment*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015.
- Buie, Diane. "William Cowper: A Religious Melancholic?" *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 103–19.
- Cameron, Nigel M. de S., David F. Wright, David C. Lachman, and Donald E. Meek, eds. *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993.
- Campbell, Gordon, and Thomas N. Corns. *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Campbell, Thomas. *Specimens of the British Poets: With Biographical and Critical Notices, and An Essay on English Poetry*. London: J. Murray, 1819.
- Carruthers, Gerard. *Scottish Literature*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- Carruthers, Gerard, and Liam McIlvanney. *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

- Carson, John L. "The Doctrine of the Church in the Secession." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1987. <http://digitool.abdn.ac.uk>.
- Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Appleton, 1911.
- Chadwick, Owen. *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*. Gifford Lectures (University of Edinburgh) 1973–1974. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Chalmers (D.D.), Thomas. *The Right Ecclesiastical Economy of a Large Town ... Third Edition*. Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1835.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. Edited by Henry Nelson Coleridge. London: Edward Moxon, 1853.
- . "Religious Musings." In *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912.
- Corns, Thomas N., ed. *A Companion to Milton*. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 10. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Cowley, Stephen. *Rational Piety and Social Reform in Glasgow: The Life, Philosophy, and Political Economy of James Mylne*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015.
- Crawford, Robert. *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Curran, Stuart. *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism, 2nd Edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Danielson, Dennis, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*. Cambridge, 1999.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin: Including an Autobiographical Chapter*. Edited by Francis Darwin. New York: Appleton and Company, 1911.
- Davis, Philip. *The Oxford English Literary History. the Victorians Vol. 8*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Dryden, John. "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire." Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1999.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London and New York: Methuen, 1983.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Edited by Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Parnassus*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.
- Fairchild, Hoxie N. *Religious Trends in English Poetry. 4. 1830-1880. Christianity and Romanticism in the Victorian Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.
- Fallon, Stephen M. "Paradise Lost in Intellectual History." In *A Companion To Milton*, edited by Thomas N. Corns. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Fergusson, David, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*. Blackwell Companions to Religion. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin*. Second Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Flint, Kate, ed. *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Frei, Hans W. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974.

- Fulford, Tim, ed. *Romanticism and Millenarianism*. New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- Garside, Peter, James Raven, and Rainer Schöwerling, eds. *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Gilfillan, George. *A Third Gallery of Portraits*. Hogg, 1854.
- . *Modern Christian Heroes: A Gallery of Protesting and Reforming Men, Including Cromwell, Milton, the Puritans, Covenanters, First Seceders, Methodists, &c.* London: Elliot Stock, 1869.
- . *The History of a Man*. London: A. Hall, Virtue & Co., 1856.
- Goldsmith, Steven. *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Gregory, Benjamin, ed. *Memoir of Emma Tatham. With "The Angel's Spell" and Other Pieces Not Publ. during Her Lifetime*, 1859.
- Gribben, Crawford. "Religion and Scottish Romanticism." In *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, edited by Murray Pittock. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- . "Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827)." *Romanticism* 21.1 (2015): 25–36.
- Guite, Malcolm. *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*. Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination, and the Arts. Farnham and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2012.
- Halmi, Nicholas. "The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem." *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 5 (October 1, 2010): 589–600.
- Hanna, William. *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers*. New York: Harper, 1979.
- Henderson, Henry F. *The Religious Controversies of Scotland*. Religion in Literature and Life. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905.
- Hilton, Boyd. *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Hopkins, Kenneth. "Reflections on 'Satan' Montgomery." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1962): 351–52.
- Hopps, Gavin, and Jane Stabler, eds. *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*. Ashgate, 2006.
- Howie, John. *Biographia Scoticana, or, A Brief Historical Account of the Most Eminent Scots Worthies: Noblemen, Gentlemen, Ministers, and Others, Who Testified or Suffered for the Cause of Reformation in Scotland; from the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century, to the Year 1688*. Fifth. Glasgow: W. R. M'Phun, 1828. <http://wellcome-library.org/item/b2814594x>.
- Hugh Blair. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres: By Hugh Blair, ... In Three Volumes ... printed for A. Strahan; T. Cadell; and W. Creech in Edinburgh, 1787*. <http://archive.org/details/lecturesonrheto31blaigoog>.
- Hutcheson, Francis, John Adams, and Boston Public Library) John Adams Library BRL. *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections: With Illustrations on the Moral Sense*. London: Printed for W. Innys and J. Richardson, S. Birt, C. Hitch ..., 1756. <http://archive.org/details/essayonnaturecon1756hutc>.

- . *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue : In Two Treatises*. London : Printed for D. Midwinter, A. Bettersworth, and C. Hitch ..., 1738. <http://archive.org/details/inquiryintoorigi00hutc>.
- Irving, Edward. *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse ...* William Collins, 1828.
- Jack, Alison M. *The Bible and Literature*. SCM Core Text. London: SCM Press, 2012.
- Jasper, David. *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- . *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Studies in Literature and Religion. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992.
- Jones, Philip Henry. "Wales." In *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, Volume 3: Ambition and Industry 1800-1880*, edited by Bill Bell. Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Keble, John. *Lectures on Poetry*. Translated by Edward Kershaw Francis. London, Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne: Henry Frowde, 1864.
- . *The Christian Year*. Facsimile of first edition. London: Elliot Stock, 1897.
- Keir, David. *The House of Collins: The Story of a Scottish Family of Publishers from 1789 to the Present Day*. London: Collins, 1952.
- Kennedy, George Alexander, H. B. Nisbet, and Claude Rawson. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 4, The Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Knight, Mark, and Emma Mason. *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Knowles, Julie Nall. "The Course of Time: A Calvinistic 'Paradise Lost.'" Edited by James D. Simmonds. *Milton Studies* XVIII (1983): 173–93.
- Lares, Jameela. *Milton and the Preaching Arts*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2001.
- Leonard, John K. "Did Milton Go to the Devil's Party?" *The New York Review of Books*, July 18, 2002.
- Leonard, John, and John Milton. *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667-1970*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Leonard, Tom. *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War : By Poets Born, or Sometime Resident in, the County of Renfrewshire*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990.
- Lewalski, Barbara K. "Milton: The Muses, the Prophets, the Spirit, and Prophetic Poetry." *Milton Studies* 54, no. 1 (March 14, 2014): 59–78.
- Low, Donald. "Byron and Burns." *Studies in Scottish Literature* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 128–42.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. *Essay on Milton*. Edited by James Greenleaf Crosswell. New York and London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1895.
- Macleod, John, and G. N. M. Collins. *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History since the Reformation*. 3rd ed. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974.
- Marchand, Leslie A, ed. *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals*. London: Picador, 1988.
- Martin, Philip W. "The Angels of Byron and Moore." In *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, edited by Tim Fulford. New York ; Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- McGann, Jerome J. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago, Ill. and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

- McIntosh, John Rattray. *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998.
- Medwin, Thomas. *Conversations of Lord Byron*. London, H. Colburn, 1824. <http://archive.org/details/conversations00medw>.
- Melnyk, Julie. *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain*. Westport (Conn.): Praeger, 2008.
- Moore, James. "Hutcheson's Theodicy: The Argument and the Contexts of 'A System of Moral Philosophy.'" In *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation*, edited by Paul Wood. Rochester, N.Y.; Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2001.
- Muirhead, Andrew T. N. "'Associate Synod (Burgher) Divinity Hall (1747-1820) and United Secession Divinity Hall (1820-1847)'" Dissenting Academies Online: Database and Encyclopedia, Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies., November 2011. <http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/sample1.php?parameter=academyretrieve&alpha=235>.
- . *Reformation, Dissent and Diversity: The Story of Scotland's Churches, 1560-1960*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.
- Newlyn, Lucy. *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.
- Oliphant, Margaret, and Mary Blackwood Porter. *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and His Sons, Their Magazine and Friends*. New York: AMS Press, 1974.
- Paley, Morton D. *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*. Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press, 1999.
- . "Envisioning Lastness: Byron's 'Darkness', Campbell's 'The Last Man', and the Critical Aftermath." *Romanticism* 1, no. 1 (April 1995): 1–14.
- Pittock, Murray. *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- . "What Is Scottish Romanticism?" In *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, edited by Murray Pittock. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- Pope, Alexander. *Essay on Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871.
- Prickett, Stephen. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Rajan, Tilottama. *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism*. Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Redford, Catherine. "'No Love Was Left': The Failure of Christianity in Byron's 'Darkness.'" *The Byron Journal* 43, no. 2 (December 11, 2015): 131–40.
- Ridenour, George M. *The Style Of Don Juan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.
- Riggs, William G. *The Christian Poet in Paradise Lost*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Rowell, Geoffrey. *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Russell, James Burn, and Archibald Kerr Chalmers. *Public Health Administration in Glasgow a Memorial Volume of the Writings of James Burn Russell*. Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1905.
- Shaffer, Elinor S. *"Kubla Khan" and The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

- Shattock, Joanne. *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*. Third. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Sitter, John E. *The Cambridge Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Smith, Richard M. *The United Secession Church in Glasgow 1820-1847*. SCHS, 2004.
- Spalding, William. *The History of English Literature, with an Outline of the Origin and Growth of the English Language, Illustrated by Extracts. For the Use of Schools and Private Students. With Appendix by W. Houston*. Toronto: A. Miller, 1876.
- St. Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge, U.K. and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Suarez, Michael F., and Sarah M. Zimmerman. "John Clare's Career, 'Keats's Publisher,' and the Early Nineteenth-Century English Book Trade." *Studies in Romanticism* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 377–96.
- The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*. Peter Garside, James Raven, and Rainer Schowerling, general editors. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Tillotson, Geoffrey, Paul Fussell, and Marshall Waingrow. *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.
- Torrance, Thomas F. *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell*. First edition. Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000.
- Tucker, Herbert F. *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- VanDoodewaard, William. *The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition: Atonement, Saving Faith, and the Gospel Offer in Scotland (1718-1799)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011.
- Wallach, Alan P. "Cole, Byron, and the Course of Empire." *The Art Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (1968): 375–79.
- Webster, Alexander. *Theology in Scotland, Reviewed by a Heretic*. London: Lindsey Press, 1915.
- Wheeler, Michael. *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Whytock, Jack C. "An Educated Clergy": *Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Secession, 1560-1850*. Studies in Christian History and Thought. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007.
- Wilkie, Brian. *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965.
- Wittreich, Joseph Anthony. *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introduction and Notes*. Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970.
- Wood, Paul. *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation*. Rochester, N.Y.; Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2001.