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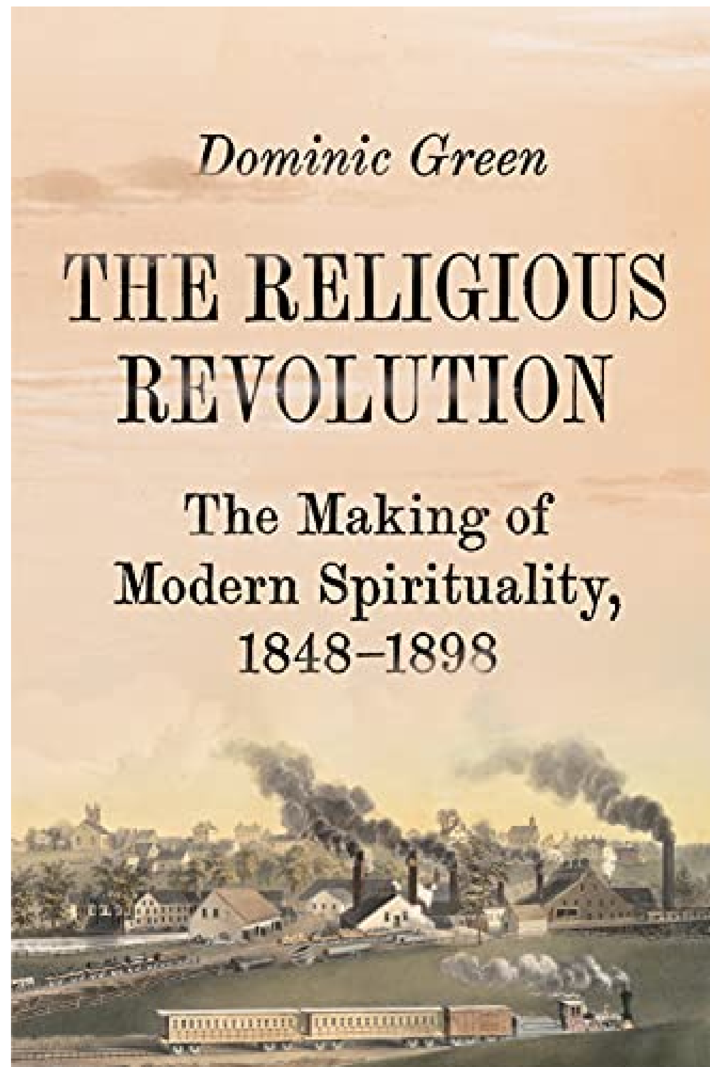
The Religious Revolution: The Birth of Modern Spirituality, 1848-1898

by
Dominic Green



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Synopsis

"An incisive study of the Western world’s shift from institutional religion to more personal beliefs in the second half of the 19th century . . . This is intellectual history at its most comprehensive and convincing." —Publishers Weekly, starred reviewThe late nineteenth century was an age of grand ideas and great expectations fueled by rapid scientific and technological innovation. In Europe, the ancient authority of church and crown was overthrown for the volatile gambles of democracy and the capitalist market. If it was an age that claimed to liberate women, slaves, and serfs, it also harnessed children to its factories and subjected entire peoples to its empires. Amid this tumult, another sea change was underway: the religious revolution.In The Religious Revolution, Dominic Green charts this profound cultural and political shift, taking us on a whirlwind journey through the lives and ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman; of Éliphas Lévi and Helena Blavatsky; of Wagner and Nietzsche; of Marx, Darwin, and Gandhi. Challenged by the industrialization, globalization, and political unrest of their times, these figures found themselves connecting with the religiousimpulse in surprising new ways, inspiring others to move away from the strictures of religion and toward the thrill and intimacy of spirituality. The modern era is often characterized as a time of increasing secularism, but in this trenchant new work, Green demonstrates how the foundations of modern society were laid as much by spirituality as by science or reason.The Religious Revolution is a narrative tour de force that sweeps across several continents and five of the most turbulent and formative decades in history. Threading together seemingly disparate intellectual trajectories, Green illuminates how philosophers, grifters, artists, scientists, and yogis shared in a global cultural moment, borrowing one another’s beliefs and making the world we know today.

Look inside the book

Begin ReadingTable of ContentsA Note About the AuthorCopyright PageThank you for buying thisFarrar, Straus and Giroux ebook.To receive special offers, bonus content,and info on new releases and other great reads,sign up for our newsletters.Or visit us online atFor email updates on the author, click .The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: .To MajaWe know that the world was made at one cast; what we find in ourselves, we recognize all around us. Whatever man sees, that he has a key to in his own mind … The religious impulse is the most revolutionary principle in human experience, uplifting and impelling the man beyond himself. Every nation of the globe is in our day, whether willingly or reluctantly, holding up its sacred books and traditions to our eyes, and we find in our mythology a key to theirs, and in our experiences a key to their experience.—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Natural Religion" (1867)PROLOGUE: 1848Great ExpectationsScything through sleeping woods, deaf to birds and blind to flowers, the Paris express thunders on through northern France. The earth shakes, the air sings, the beast breathes black smoke. Through the carriage window, the American passenger sees the old world in magic lantern images: a church spire and a flock of cottages, a stream and a green coppice, cattle and farmers like figures from a forgotten allegory. Overhead, a black spool of telegraph cable carries hidden code, a stutter of prices, politics, and gossip for the evening papers. The passenger feels his body vibrate.A bishop blessed the first train to travel on this line. A band played The Song of the Railways, music by Hector Berlioz, lyrics by Jules Janin:We, the witnesses to the marvels of industry,Must sing to peace, to the king,To the worker, the country,And to commerce and all its benefits.From Boulogne on the bare coast of Picardy, through Lille and Arras where cotton mill chimneys jostle the turrets of medieval belfries, down into the valleys of the green Somme and sleepy Oise, past the Gothic cathedral of Saint-Denis and the bones of dead kings, on through the villas and factories, vegetable plots and grubby tenements, grand avenues and lightless slums, the train carves a straight and graded line through the rippled surface of Earth and its topsoil of human settlement until, in an ecstasy of brakes and whistles and steam, it stops."From Boulogne to Paris fifty-six leagues, seven and one-half mortal hours": the power and haste of modern life. A tall man with a clerical air, a face of angles and planes, and dark hair turning to gray steps onto the platform. It is May 1848, the "Spring of Nations," and Ralph Waldo Emerson has come to Paris.The sooty air is moistened by an unusually wet and cold spring. These are Europe's Hungry Forties. The crops are rotting in the fields, and food prices are rising. There are mobs in the cities, and famine is in the country. There is mass starvation in Ireland, war in Italy, and revolution in the German states. Emigrants crowd the ports; cholera crosses to the New World in steerage. In Paris the streets are bare. Yet another French revolution has begun. The plane trees have been chopped down for barricades.It was an age of grand ideas and great expectations, and it forged our ecstasies and discontents. An age fascinated by speed and awed by machines. An age of evolutionary biology and religious fundamentalism, of global powers and tribal politics. An age of glowing cities and traditions lost, of the lone genius and the huddled masses, of restless tedium and the torments of hope. An age that believed in the infinite advance of knowledge, endured the infinite emptiness of a universe without purpose, and succored a pantheon of new gods.That age created global markets and global consciousness, but also class war and scientific racism. It dreamed of peace and genocide, chemical cures and chemical weapons. It

overthrew the ancient authority of church and crown for the volatile gambles of democracy and the market. It freed women, slaves, and serfs, but it harnessed children to its factories and subject peoples to its empires. It was the New Age, the era of democracy and emancipation, but the emancipated yearned to elect new Caesars. Its vocabulary is ours: spirituality, evolution, ecology, crisis, culture war, diversity, Darwinist, fundamentalist, neurotic, organic, sadism, masochism, atomic power, karma, reincarnation. So are its pleasures: the department store (1838), the motor vehicle (1870), the telephone (1875), the moving image (1895). And also its consolations of knowledge and escapism: thermodynamic entropy (1851), the germ theory of disease (1870), synthetic opiates (1874), pornographic films (1895), the contents of the atom (1911). And so are its ideals, the transcendent principles that give meaning to life by appearing, like gods, to exist outside the world they create and explain.Religion featured in few of these innovations but religiosity thrived amid them all. The age of scientific and technological discovery was also one of frantic religious creativity. Today, the world's largest democracies, the United States and India, are the world's most religious democracies. The market in spirituality is a multibillion-dollar industry, from package-tour pilgrimages to mail-order crystals. Two hundred years ago, perhaps a handful of Christians believed in reincarnation, and if they did, they were heretics. Today, at least a third of Americans believe not only that they have a soul that survives death, but also that it previously belonged to someone or something else. We want new cars and old souls: a life technological, founded on scientific rationality, but understood through our eternal wishes for meaning, endurance, and transcendence—the overcoming of mortality. This speculative realm of dreams and nightmares is the perennial province of religion, art, and sexuality. It is also the modern province of politics. As the net of technological civilization covered the globe, both provinces fell within the new empire of "spirituality," the distinctively modern experience of inner life as comprehensive and near simultaneous, novel in its infusion of biological ideas and technological metaphors, yet strangely familiar, even archaic.We became like this in the late nineteenth century, when mass communications, mass politics, and global markets converged, transforming lives across the world. People, products, and ideas moved faster and farther than ever before. Travel and communication became standardized to Greenwich Mean Time. English became the global argot of trade. The erosion of inherited beliefs and customs, and the eruption of new ideas and experiences, forced a radical reordering of values. Nietzsche's "death of God" was only an obituary for the Christian deity, a clearing away of the old so that new ideas of divinity could flower. And reports of the Almighty's death turned out to be greatly exaggerated. Certainly, the established religions lost ground, especially where new ideas and institutions mimicked the old forms. But the weakening of organized religion liberated the religious impulse from the inherited restraints of hierarchy and dogma. Rather than atrophying like a superfluous evolutionary inheritance, religiosity surged in hypertrophic vigor.The machine pulse of urban life and the rational proofs of science cracked the old barriers between the sacred and the profane. As the religious impulse flooded into all aspects of individual consciousness and collective endeavor, it sanctified all with transcendent significance, and disturbed the rule of Brahmins in Boston as in Bombay. Suddenly the heights of religious experience were no longer the privilege of hereditary male elites. Nor was religious joy the meager fruit of renunciation, abstinence, or retreat. Like Napoléon, who crowned himself emperor when the pope wavered, the modern individual personalizes his or her beatitude. And like Napoléon, who wanted to conquer India but never went there, the modern individual seeks to combine West and East, rational and sublime, personal and collective, science and spirit. As Emerson exhorted Margaret Fuller, "Write your own Bible!"Emerson's "religious impulse" seems to be innate to our

species. The oldest known human burial site is around one hundred thousand years old: a man daubed in red dust, curled in the fetal position, and cradling a wild boar's jawbone, an accessory for the afterlife. The evolutionary value of religiosity has become a modern commonplace. Transcendent ideas and experiences bond us to our kin and its goals. They explain the twin mysteries of life and death, and the "problem" of altruism. Religious ethics sustain society by restraining personal desires in the name of the common good, notably by controlling sexual and marital relations. As for the frustrations this might cause, religious ethics protect society by externalizing aggression and even rationalizing self-sacrifice as the ultimate altruism. Anthropologists have identified over one hundred thousand religions. All are the work of Homo sapiens, none the work of apes. Religiosity is a threshold of human consciousness. It is human to possess religiosity, but its possession does not protect against inhumanity.Crudely, the difference between religiosity and religion is the difference between hunger and lunch. Hunger is a biological inheritance, its pangs inescapable proof of our nature. Lunch is a result of recent cultural evolution. The menu varies and is shaped by environment and appetite. Religion explains and organizes the experience of life, and when that experience changes, so does its explanation. The religious impulse endures but its forms are flexible, and its ideas and practices rise and fall like dynasties and empires. While biological evolution is glacially slow, culture evolves as far and fast as we can think—and sometimes faster than our minds and societies can bear.Scientific ideas change our language and our minds, our perception of life. The application of scientific ideas through technology changes our experience of the physical world, compressing distance and increasing speed, creating new conjunctions and capabilities. Ours is the age in which science lifted the veil from the material world, from the dance of the planets to the epic of heredity. But this has not been enough. Different lives require new ideas, new personal and collective goals whose pursuit transcends the inchoate and mundane and gives meaning to life—or rather, transcendent meaning to life. For our age of scientific rationality, planned economy, and organized politics is also one of mass folly and biological mysticism. We venerate facts and we rely on technology, but we remain enchanted by the irrational, the mystical, and the metaphysical.Our city life with machines created new social ideas and experiences, and these inspired new myths and ideals. These "spiritual" innovations are the common thread in the crazy quilt of modern life. Some responded to the weakening of traditional Christianity by fashioning a new faith. Éliphas Lévi's occultism, Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy, and Nietzsche's Superman were all spiritual responses to science and the dilemmas of modern individuality. For others, notably socialists and nationalists, politics was the explicit heir to religion, with the state replacing the church, and race theory and the cult of blood replacing theology and miracles. Even the holy trinity of skeptical materialism, Marx, Darwin, and Freud, were resisted in their own fields. Marx struggled against the Christian socialists who preceded him and the Jewish and German socialists who followed him. Darwin contended with his own ambivalence about a purposeless universe, as well as Alfred Russel Wallace and the precursors of "intelligent design" theory. Freud could not prevent Jung from turning the biology of the mind toward racial mysticism.The religious impulse demands explanations and purpose, images of perfection, and the logic of history and myth. Before we refashion Nature, nature fashions us. When innate religiosity interacted with science and the technological society it created, the results were the explosive "isms," the irrational appeals to salvation by nationalism, socialism, and racism that derailed the global civilization once in 1914 and again in 1939. This is what "New Age" originally meant: not an aisle of options in Whole Foods Market, but the total transformation of individual consciousness, a rebirth leading to a greater transformation, the remaking of the individual and

society. Technology created the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. I call the modern transformation of inner life the Religious Revolution.“All religious movements in history,” Emerson observed, “and perhaps all political revolutions founded on Rights, are only new examples of the deep emotion that can agitate a community of unthinking men, when a truth familiar in words, that ‘God is within us,’ is made for a time a conviction.” A movement to restore the individual’s spirit creates its social image. Protestantism made the personal political, because religion was now politics. The personal conviction that “God is within us” implied the political faith that “God is with us.” The wars of religion led to the emergence of nation-states and national churches with vernacular Bibles. Their politics were thick with apocalyptic arousal. The communities led by Jan of Leiden, John Calvin, and Oliver Cromwell believed that their leap of faith would land in the last days of history. To hasten its joyous end and secure their permanent salvation, they sought to perfect society in the biblical image.Religious impulses now expressed themselves in the new vocabularies of politics and science. While Henry VIII formed a national church, Copernicus placed the sun, not the earth, at the center of the universe. The ideal human became the hyphenated kind that Emerson’s age called the “Renaissance man.” Thomas More was a Machiavellian politician, a Platonic philosopher, and eventually a saint. Francis Bacon was an empiricist philosopher, the lord chancellor of a Protestant nation-state, and a practical scientist.By the seventeenth century, Protestants were feeling “spiritual” and “soulful.” Catholics, having fought the Protestant model, now adapted it and developed a competing brand, with a new technology, the confession box, as its incubator. As science emerged from the shattered unities of what was then called natural philosophy, so “spirituality” emerged from the cracked rock of organized religion.The individual conscience found itself in an unmapped continent, an America of the inner world. It deciphered the mechanics and customs of this strange land with the telescope and microscope, observation and rational analysis. It appeared that the Renaissance rediscovery of pre-Christian philosophy and literature was not just a “rebirth” of scholarship and skeptical reason. When the new science viewed Nature without the aid of Christian dogma, it returned to Nature in its pagan sense. The universe was a vast, amoral theater of incomprehensible forces, the individual an actor in a drama without a script.Until the nineteenth century, only the bold or reckless had dared to face the widening gap between Christian dogma and the new science. Pioneers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, and William Blake had appeared in the salons of the Enlightenment and the antic parade of Romanticism. Similar sentiments had appeared sporadically among the leaders of the American Revolution, and prominently among the ideologues of the French Revolution, where the new spirituality confirmed its potential for tyranny and havoc.The world, the poet Friedrich Schiller had complained, was “disenchanted,” but the need for meaning, transcendence, and immortality persisted. The religious impulse, deprived of the next world, reoriented toward this one. It turned outward into society, to pursue redemption through “secular” politics and the Epicurean good life. And it turned inward, into consciousness.The “once omnipotent traditions” might dissolve, Emerson wrote, but their “moral sentiment & metaphysical fact” survive as a permanent essence, expressed by each “new crop of geniuses.” Heir to the early adopters of “spiritual” democracy and “soulful” religion, Emerson’s significance for the Religious Revolution is akin to that of Benjamin Franklin for the American Revolution, or Rousseau for the French. He might not have caused it, but it would not have been the same without him.In Emerson, the streams of a global tide met for the first time. In the 1830s, the young Emerson realized that seven generations of Puritan rigor had desiccated into the “famine” of Unitarianism, a faith that dominated New England’s society while starving its spirit. If his defection from Christianity heralded the popular shift from

“religion” to “spirituality,” the direction of his spirit anticipated the modern movement. As an heir of Romanticism, Emerson revered nature and intuition as divine. He believed in Kant’s promise that the mind was moral, and he expected that the materials of aesthetic and spiritual perfection lay in the mystic East, beyond the sources of Christianity. As an inhabitant of an age of empire, philology, and cheap print, Emerson could read sacred Hindu texts in English through the translations of the East India Company and the efforts of his aunt Mary, who supplied him with its publications. And as an English-speaking liberal, Emerson was also heir to the optimistic, tolerant strand of the individualist revolt. He linked freedom in religion to freedom in politics and commerce. He trusted that the freedoms of thought, religiosity, and commerce would, like the Three Musketeers, fight for one another: “The powers that make a capitalist are metaphysical.”So we can call July 15, 1838, the day that Emerson declared the Religious Revolution in the United States: the day that, speaking at Harvard Divinity School, he deliberately provoked the divines by contrasting “the Church with the Soul,” and in a manner reflecting dimly on the Church and radiantly on the Soul. This, though, might have remained a purely Unitarian scandal, in the way that the Stamp Act might have remained a tax dispute or the Ninety-Five Theses a reform proposal. In the first decade of Emerson’s century William Blake had cried, “Rouse up, O Young Men of the New Age,” but few had listened. The difference is in the changes in environment—political, economic, and, above all, technological—that carried the Religious Revolution from the intellectual fringe to the mass market and catalyzed it into a global phenomenon.Almost ten years to the day after the Harvard Divinity School address, Emerson stepped off the train in Paris. He had come from a lecture tour of Britain that, despite the acclaim that awaited him in every hall, had left him thoroughly discomfited. The cost of “metaphysical capitalism” was written in the flesh. Britain’s cities were filthy. Its people were hard-eyed and brutal, and their ragged children begged in the rain. Coal dust and soot coated the entire island; in what remained of the countryside, they stained even the wool on the sheep.The industrial city was the crucible of modern life. In Paris, Emerson recognized one of its products. Socialism, once a gospel of vegetarian cranks, now emerged as a “feature new to history,” a doctrine of mass democracy. The rioting and rhetoric frightened him. The crowds seemed murderous and atavistic. The political rally was a primitive rite, a modern witch hunt: “Torchlight processions have a sleek and slay look, dripping burning oil drops, and the bearers now and then smiting the torch on the ground, and then lifting it into the air.” The intuitions that Emerson prized as divine led the marchers toward appalling outcomes: hatred, violence, and a conformity in which one solitary walker was no different from another. The transition from the woods of New England to the cities of Europe confounded his inner Sybil. “For the matter of socialism, there are no oracles. The oracle is dumb.”Emerson knew his Hegel. The religious impulse never slept, never ceased “uplifting and impelling the man beyond himself.” The forces that had unmade the old ways and faiths would also shape the new, universal, and absolute “Supreme beauty.” One way or another, the revolutionary principle of the expanded soul would emerge from technical civilization. He must seek the biological pattern that lay behind the smoky, speed-blurred images of modern life. When Emerson returned to Concord, he took to a diet of scientific and economic literature. Poetry had brought him this far, but from here on, the “currents of the Universal Being” would speak the language of science.This is the age of the Religious Revolution. It is also the age of science and race. This is the age of the Religious Revolution because it is the age of science and race.PART IThe Development Hypothesis1848–1871But mankind are now conscious of their new position. The conviction is already not far from being universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest

revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society. Even the religious world teems with new interpretations of the Prophecies, foreboding mighty changes near at hand. It is felt that men are henceforth to be held together by new ties, and separated by new barriers; for the ancient bonds will now no longer unite, nor the ancient boundaries confine.—John Stuart Mill, “The Spirit of the Age” (1831)1THE NEW PROMETHEUSSocialists and Spiritualists in the Age of the MachineIf there is any period one would desire to be born in,—is it not the Age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it. —Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837)At Brussels, the wind whipped off the North Sea and through the rooming house where Jenny Marx passed the first weeks of 1848. She would have preferred to stay in Paris, but the iron laws of history, represented here by the collusion of the Prussian and French police, had cast her and Karl onto this bleak, blank-skied Eurasian shore.Life with Karl Marx was never dull. He was a short man of excess energy, intellect, and hair, with a bantam’s barrel chest, a scholar’s wit, and a piercing, metallic voice that was a little too loud. Jenny had no money and three children to feed, but there was still hope, the last surprise in Pandora’s box. Karl’s father, a wealthy lawyer, had just died, and an inheritance was in the offing. So too, Karl promised, was the revolution in human consciousness.“Until now, men have constantly had false conceptions of themselves, about what they are or what they ought to be.” Men had invented ideas of God and illusions of a “normal man” whose body existed only as the vessel of his soul. They had bowed to these idols, and to the priests who curated them and the kings who protected them. Fortunately, the faculty that had led men to create and worship these spectral authorities now allowed men to see through them. Scientific knowledge of the physical world stripped Man of all illusions, religious, moral, and philosophical. The bedrock of Nature was the hard truth that Marx called “historical materialism.”Marx believed that the forms of human society came not from God but from technology. From the hand ax of the Neolithic hunter to the first civilizations, from the ancient empires to the medieval guilds, the surface patterns of class, power, and property reflected deeper currents: the creation, ownership, and use of technology. If, Marx argued, these forces of production evolved, then so must everything else. When Samuel Morse had tested his telegraph with the biblical inquiry, “What hath God wrought?” he had confused cause and effect. Man had always wrought everything in his world, God included. And now Man’s latest historical movement, the bourgeois age of capital and democracy, steam engines and telegraphs, was crashing to its inevitable end.“But what is most interesting,” Lady Constance Rawleigh tells her guests, “is the way in which man has been developed. You know, all is development. The principle is perpetually going on. First there was nothing, then there was something; then—I forget the next—I think there were shells, then fishes; then we came—let me see—did we come next? Never mind that; we came at last. And the next change there will be something very superior to us—something with wings. Ah! that’s it: we were fishes, and I believe we shall be crows.”Lady Constance has been reading The Revelations of Chaos. It is “all science”: everything is explained by geology and astronomy. The stars are churned into light from “the cream of the milky way, a sort of celestial cheese,” and the planets form and disintegrate in this cosmic dairy. “You see exactly how everything is made; how many worlds there have been; how long they lasted; what went before, what comes next.” Man is adrift in the monstrous vista of evolutionary time, a transient life-form, a work of unknown authorship, a species fated to eclipse. “We are a link in the chain, as inferior animals were that preceded us:

we shall in turn be inferior; all that will remain of us will be some relics in a new red sandstone. This is development. We had fins; we may have wings."Lady Constance is a fiction from Tancred, Benjamin Disraeli's novel of 1847. The real Revelations of Chaos was Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (1844) by Robert Chambers, a Scottish publisher and geologist. Chambers published it anonymously to protect his business and his reputation. More than a decade before Darwin published On the Origin of Species, "development" theory was familiar enough for Disraeli to spoof it in fiction. Yet the wider the commonplaces of development theory spread, the thinner they became. Every scientific doctrine speaks the language of its time, and in explaining grants cultural license: the image of Copernicus's heliocentric universe served the cult of the Sun King as well as the cause of individual Reason. But development, the idea that would be renamed "evolution" in the 1850s, was especially volatile. For if everything was evolving, then nothing could be permanent. There was no fixed hierarchy, no Great Chain of Being with God at one end and insects at the other, "the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate." There was only change, and the chain of development was its record. The world might have been "created at one cast," but its contents had not. Existence was not a fixed state of being but a fluid, uncertain process of "becoming."For the scientific and commercial society, evolutionary thinking would fill the role that God had played in the Christian worldview: the creator and prime mover, the master idea and moral explanatory. Where the ancient bonds and boundaries failed, evolution would legislate anew. The ethics of evolution would often resemble the Christian eschatology they replaced. For social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer, change meant "progress," and specialization a purposeful movement toward perfection. This ideal would permeate the age so fully that even those who defied it would not deny it but endorse it by heresy. Disraeli's Tancred, appalled by Lady Constance's meaningless universe, searches for a "new crusade."So far, the evolution of knowledge in the 1840s included rotary printing, the pneumatic tire, the planet Neptune, nitroglycerin, and the theory of the Ice Age. In 1848, while the infant Thomas Edison was conducting his first experiments in solid food, Lord Kelvin proposed the ideas of absolute zero in temperature and the entropy of molecular energy. The next five years would see the safety pin, the conical bullet, the refrigerator, the gyroscope, condensed milk, and the airship. In 1851 alone, Linus Yale would patent the cylinder lock, Isaac Singer would launch the single-stitch sewing machine, Henry Bessemer would invent a cheap process for deriving structural steel from pig iron, and Elisha Otis would design the other necessity of the skyscraper, the safety elevator.Meanwhile Europe was ruled by a decrepit caste of emperors and aristocrats. Each morning, the Duke of Wellington tottered up to the ramparts of Walmer Castle to scan the English Channel for a ghost fleet of French invaders. Each morning, his friend Prince Klemens von Metternich bent to his desk in Vienna to fight democracy, nationalism, and socialism, the trio of evils unleashed by the French Revolution. Each morning, as the hungry peoples of Europe awoke to toil or starve, a shadow army of informers, eavesdroppers, censors, and jailers took up its posts. If scientific man was, as Mary Shelley had called Victor Frankenstein, the "New Prometheus," then the eagles that pecked out his liver each morning were imperial ones.Europe's technical and social development was outstripping its political means. The scientific, commercial middle classes were growing in number and economic power, and they wanted their voices to be heard. Metternich and Wellington expected to witness the dissolution of the European system. Wellington had seen it coming in 1832, when middle-class troublemakers had taken their seats in a reformed House of Commons. "I never saw so many bad hats in my life," he had sniffed. In 1830, the bourgeois bad hats of France had forced a similar reform, and substituted one dynasty for another in the process. Out of office, Alexis de Tocqueville had acquainted himself with the democratic future

by touring the United States. Watching Europe's revolutions of 1848, he realized that revolutions occurred not only when people were hungry or hopeless but when they had hope too. The weakening of ancient bonds and boundaries, the sensation of affluence, and the promise of infinite possibility all encouraged a "revolution of rising expectations."Marx hoped for a revolution of rising frustration: the revolt of the proletariat, the despairing and hopeless underclass. But in 1848, Europe barely had industrial cities, let alone working classes. The majority of Europeans were still tied to the land. Most northern Europeans were farmers, most southern Europeans peasants, and most Russians serfs. The French were political experimenters but the majority of their industrial output still came from family workshops. Only Britain, the "nation of shopkeepers," had the necessary density of factories and misery. One of them was a Manchester cotton mill supervised by Marx's friend Friedrich Engels.No European nation had a workers' party. Europe's revolutionaries were fragmented and furtive, a rabble of wayward students and self-taught artisans. Their ideals were soaked in Christian metaphysics and abstractions of Justice and Reason, their methods in nostalgia for the French Revolution. Marx and Engels had spent much of 1847 scheming for control of the League of the Just, a London-based group of about eighty French and German artisans prone to secret conspiracies, sudden coups, and violently sentimental outbreaks of brotherly love. To Marx, the members of the league were utopians, dreamers, and fools. The revolution must commandeer the party, the machinery of politics.By the end of 1847, the League of the Just had renamed itself the Communist League. The almost Christian slogan "All People Are Brethren!" had become a selective call to class salvation, "Workers of All Countries, Unite!" Engels sketched a new constitution, a "Communist Catechism," its points of doctrine structured like a Christian confession of faith. He asked Marx to draft its final version. Marx began, but suffered one of his frequent attacks of procrastination. The New Year passed. The London committee grew restive."Think over the confession of faith a bit," Engels suggested. "I think it would be better to drop the catechism form and call the thing a communist manifesto."Two days after Engels suggested that Marx "drop the catechism," John Humphrey Noyes fled south on the rutted roads from Putney, Vermont, pursued by warrants for adultery."God has set me to cast up a highway across this chaos," Noyes believed, "and I am gathering out the stones and grading the track as fast as possible."In 1834, studying at Yale Theological Seminary, Noyes had reached Rousseau's conclusion that Man was not born wicked: he became wicked in society. Sin was not in the heart but in civilization. Most of what passed for Christian civilization was "the work of Antichrist." The Kingdom of God was not in the afterlife; it was here and now on Earth. The Second Coming had occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Kingdom of Heaven had existed on Earth since then, and the Apocalypse of Revelation was imminent.Expelled for preaching his revelation, Noyes spent eleven years in the wilderness, wandering through the leaderless network of Perfectionists, rogue Methodists who believed in the perfectibility of human conduct and society. Some of Noyes's hosts had dispensed with property like the early Christians did, others with monogamous marriage as an obstacle to the expression of love. In 1845, Noyes led forty young followers back to Putney. They settled near his parents and began to "redeem man and reorganize society." In 1848, Noyes wrote the other communist manifesto, Bible Communism, as a handbook for his elective community.Before socialism became scientific, it was religious. The Putney Association of Perfectionists practiced "true holiness" and "true spirituality." The Bible was their "creed and constitution." They had no weekly Sabbath, for if all life were holy, then there were "seven holy days in a week, and twenty-four holy hours in a day." They corrected unloving behavior by "mutual criticism," group truth-telling sessions. They shed their possessions and took to the fields as equal work- ers, each

sharing the earth's bounty with all. Then they shed their inhibitions."Reconciliation with God opens the way for the reconciliation of the sexes," Noyes explained. The "sin-system" of sexual guilt underpinned the "marriage-system" of monogamy and the family unit. These incubated guilt and jealousy, and that "condensation of interests" fed the greed and acquisitiveness of the "work-system." Modern life was really a spiritual "death-system," in which sexual repression fostered economic exploitation. There was an alternative, however. A "vital society," its energies harmonized with the biological truth of Creation. A society of economic and sexual equality, where men and women were true partners, where work was "sport, as it would have been in the original Eden state," where sexual desire could be enjoyed without sin. Noyes called this "free love," or "complex marriage."The flaws of human nature meant that the sexual economy was a command economy, more complex than free. Left to its own devices, the community would founder amid erotic anarchy. The women would be constantly pregnant or nursing, and unable to work. When the men weren't fighting over their children's paternity, they would struggle to feed their growing population. As in economic life, the division of sexual labor must be reformed, and desire must be redirected toward a more perfect consummation in which all hold equal shares in joy. The community must separate sexual pleasure from its infant products, "amative" acts from "propagatory" consequences. Noyes trained his male Perfectionists in male continence, the deferral of ejaculation, and coached them to be more generous lovers. Slow learners received practical training from Perfectionist women past the age of menopause. "First we abolish sin; then shame; then the curse on woman of exhausting child-bearing; then the curse on man of exhausting labor; and so we arrive regularly at the tree of life."It was all too much for Noyes's neighbors. Cast out of his Eden at Putney, Noyes fled to a Perfectionist commune in Brooklyn, New York. In late January 1848, some admirers offered a haven where Noyes could pursue his prophet motive. The elect reconvened at four farmhouses, a barn, and a sawmill upstate at Oneida, near Syracuse. The world remained poised between the redemption of true holiness and the Apocalypse of the Beast. Only those who understood the signs of the time would survive."Between this present time and the establishment of God's kingdom over the earth lies a chaos of confusions, tribulation and war, such as must attend the destruction of the fashion of this world, and the introduction of the will of God as it is done in heaven."The Greek for "revelation" is apokalypsis, a "lifting of the veil," the laying bare of sacred mysteries. The people, Marx believed, must be forced to confront the historical revelation happening before their eyes. The Communist Manifesto, published in German on February 21, 1848, was his technological apocalypse.The revolution had already begun. There had never been a man more godlike than the middle-class Faust. Europe's bourgeois manufacturer overthrew kings and sacked churches. He jumbled the classes and races. He declared republics and rewrote the law. He moved mountains and remade Earth in his image: "subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for civilization, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground."The bourgeois "sorcerer" had grown rich from the "constant revolutionizing of production" and "the uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions." Now, like Faust, he was losing control of the "powers of the nether world." When the bourgeois took the peasants from the fields and conscripted them into his industrial army, capitalism created its destroyers. A "perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants" kept the workers enslaved to the machines. Noise and monotony stupefied the workers into "commodities" to be formed, used, and discarded. As competition pushed wages down, the workers competed for the scraps, shedding nationality, family ties, morality, religion, and all the other "bourgeois prejudices." But they could not evade

the logic of capital. They were now waste products, a “passively rotting mass” to be mulched into the “social scum,” the “swindlers, confidence tricksters, brothel-keepers, rag-and-bone merchants, beggars, and other flotsam of society.” They were reborn as proletarians.In ancient Rome, the proletarius was a citizen of the lowest class, his children fodder for the projects of the state. When the modern proletarians sensed their degradation, they would tear off their chains like Spartacus. The revolution would begin with individual nations and states, because the bourgeois had created the nation-state as the tool of capital and property. Though the world’s economies were at different stages of development, the spread of modern industry across the world would drag more and more peoples into the bourgeois phase of economic development. The destiny of capitalism was to lay the tracks of a global revolution. When the bonds of property and law dissolved, Man would finally be free and the state would wither with its creator. There was no danger of the vanguard becoming permanent dictators: economic liberation would straighten the kinks of capitalist personality, and innate goodness would flourish. Those who did not flourish satisfactorily would receive compulsory “social education” until they did.There would be no more uncertainty and no more agitation because there would be no more development. When Man maximized his industrial potential, he would complete the evolution of consciousness. History would enter a coda and Heaven, pleasant and monotonous, would arrive on Earth. The revolutionary leap forward landed in the verities of the preindustrial past: a little hunting in the morning, a little fishing in the afternoon, a little philosophy in the evening. The natural man would be like a Neolithic flâneur, or a leisured Prussian gentleman—Friedrich Engels, perhaps.Shortly after calling for the abolition of hereditary wealth, Marx received his share of his late father’s estate. He gave some of the money to his socialist friends in Brussels. They spent it on knives and revolvers. On March 3, 1848, Marx was ordered to leave Belgium at once. Jenny was packing when the police burst in. Though Karl protested that he was leaving anyway, they arrested him. When Jenny followed him to the police station, they incarcerated her for “vagabondage,” and added a night in a cell to the novelties of life with Karl.Released without charge next afternoon, the Marxes had two hours to gather their children and leave. Jenny sold some of their few possessions and left her silver and linen with a friendly bookseller. The police escorted the Marx family onto a train and out of Belgium. They reached Paris early the next morning. In February, the Parisians had overthrown a monarchy for the third time in living memory, but Marx, confined in Brussels, had only watched. He informed the Communist League in London that its executive committee had moved to Paris, the heart of the struggle.The revolution spread from Paris like a fever. In March, mobs brought down governments in Berlin, the capital of Prussia, and Vienna, the seat of the Austrian empire. Metternich, architect of the repressive system that had controlled Europe since the defeat of Napoléon, retired and took refuge in London. The emperor of Austria and the kings of Denmark, the Netherlands, and Prussia saved their thrones by signing democratic constitutions; the king of Bavaria preferred to abdicate. In the patchwork of peoples in eastern Europe, Hungarians and Ukrainians rioted against Austria, Romanians against Russia, and Poles against Prussia. All demanded national rights from the old empires.In London in April, marchers rallied in Hyde Park with a petition for democratic reform bearing over five million signatures. The Bank of England was barricaded with sandbags. The foreign secretary Lord Palmerston wedged his office door with bound volumes of The Times, and issued cutlasses and muskets to the clerks of empire.In May, a national assembly met in Frankfurt, intending to unify the numerous German states under a liberal constitution. In Italy, the people of Venice and Milan drove out their Austrian garrisons, the Venetians declaring the return of their ancient republic, the Milanese hoping to unite Italy under Victor Emanuel, king of

Lombardy. In Rome, Pope Pius IX prepared to flee to Sicily. In Sicily, the rebel parliament voted to depose their king."All that is solid melts into air," Marx and Engels wrote in the Manifesto, "all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." But none of Europe's turmoil had been caused by Karl Marx. The Communist Manifesto began the refurbishment of religious communism into scientific socialism, but in 1848 this was a prophecy that went unheard. The locomotive of history had already left the station, and almost all its passengers still believed that, though they must pass the stations of nationhood, politics, and economics, their ultimate destination was religious. "The war against evil and falsehood is a holy war, the crusade of God," the Italian socialist Giuseppe Mazzini informed the pope. The "tremendous crisis of doubts and desires" that was roiling Europe expressed itself in the language of politics and economics, but it was religious at heart. The world was in the grip of "the vices of materialism, of egotism, of reaction" and, Mazzini mourned, the traditional counterweights had lost their strength: "Faith is dead, Catholicism is lost in Despotism; Protestantism is lost in anarchy … Nobody believes." Society could not exist without religion, and if man no longer believed in the Christian heaven, then he must make a new religion and a new heaven—on Earth: "We shall have these not in the kings, and the privileged classes,—their very condition excludes love, the soul of all religions,—but in the people. The spirit of God descends on many gathered together in his name. The people have suffered for ages on the cross, and God will bless them with a faith."Metternich despaired. The old order had survived by pomp, illusion, intimidation, and the fear of war, but the spell had been broken. "My most secret thought is that the old Europe is at the beginning of its end. Resolved to founder with it, I will know how to do my duty. The new Europe, on the other hand, is still in the process of becoming; between end and beginning there will be a chaos."Two weeks after the fall of the Austrian government, the dead began to talk. The spirits were reborn at a one-story house in Hydesville, New York, a humble, wood-framed affair with two bedrooms, an attic, and a root cellar. As in the days of the Sibyl, women did the work of testimony.John and Margaret Fox had rented the house in December 1847. They slept in one bedroom, their daughters Maggie, fourteen, and Kate, twelve, in the other. From the middle of March, their home shook at night with loud knockings. Maggie and Kate moved into their parents' bed, but the noises continued. On the last two nights of March 1848, the knockings became so regular and insistent that no one could sleep. Finally, around seven in the evening on March 31, Kate Fox formally inaugurated a new phase in Western religion."Mr. Splitfoot," she called. "Do as I do."She clapped once. They heard a single rap in reply. She clapped twice, and they heard two raps. Her older sister, Maggie, clapped four times and got four in return.Kate, a canny double-bluffer, voiced the obvious suspicion. "Oh, mother, I know what it is. Tomorrow is April-fool day, and it's somebody trying to fool us."Her mother tested the presence by asking it to give the ages of her children. It duly tapped away, then paused and gave three emphatic raps to describe the age of her youngest daughter, the one who had died."Is this a human being that answers my questions so correctly?" Mrs. Fox called.Silence."Is it a spirit? If it is, make two raps."Knock, knock."If it was an injured spirit, make two raps."The flimsy house shook twice. By this method, Mrs. Fox learned that she was talking to the spirit of a peddler who had been murdered for his money on a Tuesday night about five years previously. His throat had been cut with a butcher's knife, and his body dumped in a creek that ran close to the house. His murderer was still alive.The neighbors gathered. Their excavation of the creek turned up only the bones of an old horse. The peddler reconsidered. His body was under the cellar, ten feet deep below the apples, potatoes, and turnips. John Fox, a regular Methodist in good standing, had his doubts, but neither his wife nor

the rest of Hydesville shared them. The next day, nearly three hundred people gathered at his house, eager to contact the spirit world.Upstate New York was the seedbed of American spirituality. Evangelists called it the “burned-over district”: as in farming, the burning out of one spiritual harvest fertilized the soil for the next one. In the first years of the century this had been the terrain of the Second Great Awakening, where camp meetings had roiled the established churches with the promise of individual salvation. In the 1820s it had produced the revelations of Joseph Smith, who dictated the Book of Mormon after an angel had showed him “Golden Plates” buried in a wood near Palmyra. In the 1830s William Miller of Poultney, Vermont, had convinced his Adventist followers that the world would end in 1844 and later, despite what even Miller admitted had been a “Great Disappointment,” continued to insist that the Second Coming was nigh. In the 1840s the “Seer” Andrew Jackson Davis had claimed that his soul took nocturnal flight to commune with the spirits of ancient philosophers in the hills near Poughkeepsie.This territory of religious innovation was also one of human and economic disruption. The road to the Great Lakes and the West ran across upstate New York. An endless tide of emigrants poured past the Foxes’ door and the Perfectionists’ dormitory: unsettled people carrying the despair of Europe, dreams of a new life, and the real specter of 1848, Bengal cholera. As commerce and communications created new links between people, including fatal and invisible ones, anxiety, dislocation, and uncertainty spurred new growth.A hundred miles east of Hydesville, new converts were joining the Putney Perfectionists at Oneida, but not ejaculating or conceiving. The miracles of free love and mutual criticism were making the crooked straight. Beneath the midsummer moon, John Noyes, working by the North Star, staked out the foundations of their new home. Meanwhile, diggers in Hydesville turned up some scraps of bone and hair—probably animal, preferably human. Mrs. Fox sent Maggie and Kate to their elder sister, Leah, in Rochester. Twenty-three years older than Maggie, and with a seven-year-old daughter, Leah had been abandoned by her husband and scraped a living as a piano teacher. She soon discovered that she too had the gift. So did their brother David, who devised an alphabetical board for their mediumship. The board added drama and a whiff of scientific procedure. Like a conjurer who, reaching for his rabbit, flourishes his free hand, the board diverted attention from the medium to the magic.Spiritualism, the cult that cohered around the Rochester rappings, was the West’s first post-Christian faith. Spiritualism was the first faith to articulate divine wisdom through a machine; David Fox’s board was the forerunner of the Ouija board and a battery of Spiritualist technology. Like Karl Marx, the Spiritualist lifted the veil on reality. Marx claimed that all was matter, the Spiritualist that all was spirit, and both agreed that modern methods had allowed humanity to understand the unfolding of its destiny in real time.“Dear friends, you must proclaim this truth to the world,” the spirits rapped. “This is the dawning of a new era; you must not try to conceal it any longer. When you do your duty, God will protect you, and good spirits will watch over you.”“Resolved. That woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned for her.”On the bright morning of July 19, 1848, more than three hundred men and women squeezed into the Lutheran chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. Most came from Seneca Falls and the adjoining town of Waterloo, but some had ridden forty miles from Rochester or Syracuse. Although it was the “busy time with the farmers,” the chapel was full to the gallery. So nervous that she wanted to run away, Elizabeth Cady Stanton walked to the altar and launched the “greatest rebellion the world has ever seen.”“Resolved. That such laws as conflict, in any way, with the true and substantial happiness of woman, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and are of no validity.”“Oh my

daughter, I wish that you were a boy!" her father, a Philadelphia lawyer and congressman, had lamented after the death of his last living son. Elizabeth had excelled at a boy's education, but a woman could not enter a university. Instead, she had studied at the Presbyterian seminary in Troy, New York, where the ministers justified slaveholding by the Calvinist doctrine of election. She shed the "gloomy superstitions" of her Christianity. "The old bondage of fear of the visible and the invisible was broken, and, no longer subject to absolute authority, I rejoiced in the dawn of a new day of freedom in thought and action."Stanton had grown up amid campaigns for abolition, women's education, and "temperance," the reform of manners by renouncing or banning alcohol. Her father's law office was a redoubt of reformers. Her cousin Gerrit Smith of Peterboro, New York, was a prominent abolitionist whose house was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and whose father had given land to the Oneida Indian tribe. She married within the extended family of reform too, meeting her husband, Gerrit Smith's friend Henry B. Stanton, after he had spoken at an antislavery meeting. They honeymooned in London, with the American delegation to the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention.The delegation included eight women. A few months earlier, the American Anti-Slavery Society had ceded to its female members' demand for equality. Nine in every ten British abolitionists voted against admitting the American women to the convention at Freemasons' Hall. They were forced to listen from behind a curtain. William Lloyd Garrison, invited as a guest speaker, refused to take the stage. "After battling so many long years for the liberties of African slaves," Garrison said, "I can take no part in a convention that strikes down the most sacred rights of all women." The talk in the Americans' lodgings was of little else, and so heated that James Birney, the abolitionist candidate for the presidency, moved out.In London, Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, a Quaker from Philadelphia, resolved to form "a society to advocate for the rights of women" and to hold a convention as soon as they got home. Several years passed before the possibility arose. While Mott worked in Philadelphia for abolition and temperance, Cady Stanton followed her husband's career to Boston, where she bore him five children. When the New England winters weakened Henry's chest, they resettled in the small, malaria-prone mill town of Seneca Falls. Henry was absent for long periods, cultivating mind and society in what Elizabeth called a "magnetic circle" of reformers in Boston. Stranded, she experienced the depressing inequality of relations between men and women. She was "wife, mother, housekeeper, physician, and spiritual guide" to an ingrate household. By the time she had dueled with the builders, disciplined the servants, and planned the children's diet, she was desperate for intellectual stimulus but too tired to enjoy reading or company. She was a prisoner. She knew that the suffering of "women in particular" was, like the suffering of slaves, caused by "the wrongs of society in general." But while Henry had joined Martin van Buren's new Free-Soil Party and campaigned against slavery, he did not oppose the "odious" laws that disenfranchised all women, even educated white Protestants, on the day they married.On July 10, 1848, Cady Stanton took tea in Waterloo at the house of Jane Hunt, a Quaker friend. Two of Hunt's Quaker neighbors, Mary Ann McClintock and Martha Coffin Wright, joined them, as did Wright's sister, visiting from Philadelphia: Lucretia Mott. When Stanton poured out her "long-accumulating discontent," the women decided to announce a public meeting in the Seneca County Courier to "discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women." That meant drafting a declaration of principles. Leafing through the "masculine productions" of abolitionism and temperance, they felt as "helpless and hopeless as if they had been suddenly asked to construct a steam engine." They found the title "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments" in the founding document of the American Anti-Slavery Society. When Cady Stanton read aloud the Declaration of Independence, they found a format."The history of mankind is a

history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her," Cady Stanton wrote, substituting all men for George III. She read the final draft aloud to Henry. When she demanded the right to vote, he said he would leave town before the convention. Her father, the judge, visited, to check on her sanity. Even Lucretia Mott had her doubts: "Oh Lizzie! If thou demands that, thou will make us ridiculous! We must go slowly." Cady Stanton persevered, encouraged by Frederick Douglass, who edited the abolitionist North Star in Rochester.None of the women dared to chair the Seneca Falls meeting, so Lucretia's husband, James Mott, presided. All eleven of the resolutions passed unanimously, apart from the ninth, whose claim to "the sacred right to the elective franchise" squeezed through after Douglass spoke in support. Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the Declaration of Principles. A quarter were Quakers. One, Frederick Douglass, was African American. One, Susan Quinn, was of Irish descent. Henry Stanton did not attend.To Cady Stanton, the Declaration of Principles was the logical outcome of "republican principles and ethics." It also stemmed from a local peculiarity, the American faith that the "great precept of nature" was individual happiness. That faith was originally Protestant, its happiness the salvation of souls. Cady Stanton's religious faith was dissolving into a "new inspiration," the equality of souls into "new ideas of individual rights," but she believed these were changes of form, not content. The coercive Puritan endured in the temperance campaigner's efforts to deprive the poor and indolent of their unearned consolations. The abolitionists massed in evangelical chapels, and only when their argument for human dignity failed did they turn to the economic case against slavery. The moral principle was eternal, regardless of "corrupt customs" or the "perverted application of the Scriptures." The educated individual was sovereign in reason, and the Inner Light now shone toward the "enlarged sphere" of politics and public life.By creating the first organized protest against "the injustice which had brooded for ages over the character and destiny of one-half of the race," Cady Stanton changed women's rights from a domestic issue to a political cause. Newspapers from Maine to Texas covered the odd events in New York. The response was vicious enough to force many of the female signatories to withdraw their names from the declaration. But the reformers' press acknowledged the logic of the argument. The headline of William Garrison's Liberator read, "Woman's Revolution." In the New-York Tribune, Horace Greeley resisted the temptation "to be smart, to be droll, to be facetious" about the "Female Reformers" and endorsed their assertion of a natural right. In the North Star, Frederick Douglass repeated his support for giving women the vote. Diplomatically, the Seneca County Courier assessed the "spirited and spicey resolutions" as "radical," but praised the women for their "able" speeches and orderly proceedings. Cady Stanton saw an advantage in notoriety: "It will start women thinking, and men, too, and when men and women think about a new question, the first step in progress is taken."Two weeks later, a woman chaired a second meeting in Rochester, this time with her husband's support. Isaac and Amy Post were Quakers and radical abolitionists. The Inner Light of conscience had already called them to resist the subjugation of slaves and women. Now it called them to join the Fox sisters on the new frontier of spiritual struggle. As the Foxes gave their first public performances in Rochester that summer, their audiences were almost entirely summoned from the networks of reform. Spiritualism, the religion that spoke in a woman's voice, was now a political campaign.On the road from Amesbury in July 1848, black clouds dimmed the sun. Two men bent before a chill east wind as they traversed the treeless upland, a "vast, green, wavy tract" speckled with silent sheep. Regretting a dinner that had tasted like whale blubber, feeling "dreadfully cold" in a thin summer jacket, and thoroughly tired of his companion's unquenchable cheeriness, Thomas Carlyle led Ralph Waldo Emerson across the

fields to Stonehenge.No one else was there. Ahead, Emerson saw smooth hillocks and a concentric jumble of stones: burial mounds and megaliths, the ruins of a lost civilization. As they walked toward the center of the rings of rock, Emerson climbed onto a giant stone for perspective, then felt its solar warmth and mossy crevices. Carlyle ducked behind one to light a cigar.A wiry, scathing Scot, Carlyle had lost his Calvinism as a young man. He had been reborn a Romantic, pursuing the divine spirit in the wild places of Nature. The leap into art and imagination landed in new grounds for despair. When Carlyle confronted the life on his Chelsea doorstep without illusion, he saw not lakes and forests but the infernal regions of "Mechanical" civilization. Capital, materialism, and individualism; filth, degradation, and decline. Once, Christians had been "encompassed and overcanopied by a Glory of Heaven" and the old customs had expressed the unity of God and Man. Now the "omnipotence of the Steam-engine," the "fever of Skepticism," and the "barnyard Conflagrations" of economic panic expelled the Godlike from the world. The crowds in the streets of London reminded Carlyle of maggots teeming in cheese. A "Babylonish confusion of tongues" supplanted the Word, and the mob ran wild in the name of liberty.When Carlyle raised his eyes from the stunning noise he saw not infinity but a cage, "an iron, ignoble circle of Necessity." If he looked down, he would be "crushed under the Juggernaut wheels" of the machine age. If he looked inside himself he saw a hollow empire of doubt. That bewildering and chilling flow of dark air he felt was God in retreat: "The Divinity has withdrawn from the Earth; or veils himself in that wide-wasting Whirlwind of a departing Era."Wandering among the tombs of extinct nations at Stonehenge, Carlyle sensed his plight and the promise of redemption. The individualist spirit had undone the old unities. Spirit and matter would not cohere again until men accepted the burden of freedom that came with unfettered consciousness. They must either "realize a Worship for themselves, or live unworshipping." And an intuition of a new harmony waited among the ruins. The human soul was immortal, the human imagination infinite and inexhaustible. Like the veiling Divinity withdrawing from the fallen world, the human spirit was sheltering in the domain of the unconscious. From the unseen "abysses of mystery and miracle" a new heroic age would explode."Nay," Carlyle wrote, "in the higher Literature of Germany, there already lies, for him that can read it, the beginning of a new revelation of the Godlike; as yet unrecognized by the mass of the world; but waiting there for recognition, and sure to find it when the fit hour comes."From Goethe onward, he believed, German thinkers and poets had faced the modern dilemma more honestly and ably than any others. They had plunged into the tangled forests of philosophy and history, and emerged with new understandings of Man's mind and his place in Nature. In the "cry of their soul's agony," Carlyle heard the struggle to evoke once more the divine presence. The Germans had made religious faith possible again, and even "inevitable" for the scientific mind. On every page, Carlyle sensed new recognitions of the eternal fact that there was "a Godlike in human affairs"; that God "not only made us and beholds us, but is in us and around us; that the Age of Miracles, as ever was, now is."Kant described a mind both sovereign and moral, grasping the ideal forms behind the sense impressions of material reality. Friedrich Schelling named the "unconscious" as the cauldron of thought and passion, where the intuitions of the Geist, the Spirit, bubbled up in art. Poets like Hölderlin and Schlegel hymned its ferment as intimations of that ideal world of perfect forms. Cultural historians like Johann Gottfried Herder and Joachim Fichte traced the emergence of freedom, the German idea, from the tribal depths of the forest to its surfacing in nationalist politics. And the mighty Beethoven expressed all this without a word.Perhaps most valuably of all, Georg Friedrich Hegel revealed the hidden hand of history as the Geist. The Geist is the essence of being, the spirit of pure freedom. It surges through time like a baton in a footrace, rushing toward the

union of Man and the Absolute. As the Geist progresses through the flux of matter, its dialectic sifts out the inessential and the retrograde, shedding superfluous matter like old skin.The ways of the Geist were mysterious. Inscrutably it had marched from east to west, from Sanskrit and India to Latin and the French Revolution. Perplexingly it had brought forth Christianity from the Jews.Still, the Geist always ascended logically, and Hegel believed that his historical promontory afforded the perfect view of its motives in action. When Napoléon humiliated the Germans, he awoke them to historical consciousness. The nineteenth century, Hegel felt, would belong to Germany. After that, Hegel suspected that the twentieth century would belong to the Americas. But all that was too distant in time and space to consider.Although Hegel did not use the word "evolution," his theory of history is a theory of social evolution in all but name. His peoples and nations form and adapt as they compete to fill a historical niche. Then, their tasks fulfilled, they fall exhausted into decay and fossilization. Hegel, who trained in the Lutheran seminary at Tübingen, identified the Absolute, the source and destination of all life, with the Christian God. He believed that the birth of Christianity had been a historical rebirth, the moment that Man really began to grasp the nature of the Geist and his role in its great drive toward freedom. And because Hegel, like other theorists of evolution, identified what was necessary with what was desirable, he found the Geist in what seemed to be the necessary forms of modern society: the dictator and the nation-state. Carlyle agreed: only a Napoléon, an ancient hero in modern dress, could keep the democratic hordes in order.The light was fading and it was starting to rain. Carlyle and Emerson trudged back through the gloom. Amesbury was sunk in silence in the shadow of its stone circle. This road had been the ancient highway to London, but the Great Western Railway had emptied it overnight, taking the business of the world with it. When they reached their inn, there was not enough milk for their tea.While Carlyle brooded on tumbled altars and fallen civilizations, Emerson noted how almost every stone bore the scars of some "mineralogist's hammer and chisel." These implements seemed heirs to the Neolithic hand axes he had seen in the geological museum at Cambridge. He wondered if the Druids really had built Stonehenge. Perhaps it was the work of wanderers from the Mediterranean, Phoenician or Roman. Or, given its resemblance to "temples of the sun" in India, from even farther east. Perhaps some extinct species had shunted the stones into place —a giant Patagonian sloth, a woolly mammoth?Then he remembered watching Irish laborers building a house in Boston's Back Bay. With just an ordinary derrick and the sweat of the "Paddies," the masons had swung a large block of granite "of the size of the largest of the Stonehenge columns" without the help of Druid priests or Patagonian sloths. The powers that inspired a capitalist might be metaphysical, but his techniques were practical. And Emerson, though he shared some of Carlyle's alarm about the drift of their practical age, prided himself as a practical man. Man and Nature were partners in invention, with Nature the architect, and Man his navvy. The work was as slow as geological time, but each stroke was a realization that divine sparks fell everywhere in Nature, and in few places more fruitfully than in the mind of Man. In creating, Man concentrated "the radiance of the world" into a single object, and on reflection discovered his original potential. "Thus is Art, a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works."Fifty years after Rousseau took to his boat, Emerson had described in "Nature" how, as a solitary walker standing in snow puddles in the woods of Mount Auburn, he looked up at the clouded sky and intuited the unity of Man and Nature. In that merging of the finite and the infinite, he detected a higher unity, the merging of Man and Nature in the divine: "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the

Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."The last two words floated away. "Calvinism rushes to be Unitarianism, as Unitarianism rushes to be pure theism," Emerson wrote in a Carlylean meditation called "Character." The Christian God was becoming an elegant synonym for Nature, and Nature was supplanting God as a moral legislator. Man was becoming a part or particle, a "self-reliant" natural form.As Emerson turned from Unitarianism he rushed to his kind of naturalism, German Romantic in spirit and English liberal in matter. He transcended the contradictions between the two with an idiosyncratic blend of Greek philosophy and Indian religion. His German inspirations had anticipated this turn to the east. The blueprint of his "new revelation" is the "First Systematic Program of German Idealism," a document of 1797 in Hegel's handwriting, possibly copied from his university friend Schelling: "I shall speak of an idea that so far as I know has never occurred to anyone before: we must have a new mythology." The old Christian forms are exhausted, the religious sensibility disenchanted. To speed the making of a new mythology, the "profound, beautiful, and true" elements of the old mythologies must be reawakened.The sacred origins and actors of myth can shape present behavior. To do this, a myth must address its age and speak a shared language. Only then can it create a perfect and universally comprehensible image. As the Idealists realized, "we are unable to make our ideas aesthetic, which is to say mythological, they can be of no interest to the people." In 1797, the "aesthetic" mythologies of the modern West were still forming. There were many peoples, but few of them lived in a nation-state. If they did, party politics was a novelty, and voting even rarer. An ideologiste was a type of French social scientist who mapped private patterns of thought in the human mind, not in the public sphere. The political polarity of left and right referred only to the French division of 1789, when the king's supporters had moved to the right hand of the new National Assembly, and his challengers to the left. Five years later, the revolutionaries had abolished this arrangement, and with it the parties it encouraged; they had not expected either to return. The French republic was sliding into dictatorship and war, like the seventeenth-century English republic before it. The American republic had just survived the election of John Adams, but the failures of the democratic experiments in Britain and France suggested that America's second president might equally be its last.By the 1840s, the aesthetic mythologies of the nation and democracy had formed. The British Parliament had begun the staged reforms that would enfranchise increasing numbers of male electors. The French had taken a bloodier path but arrived at a similar arrangement. The Germans had still to form a political nation at the heart of Europe. In the earthquake of 1848, the implication of John Stuart Mill's "Age of Change" had disclosed itself by invading "outward objects." Yet, as after an earthquake, the brief rippling of solid forms was followed by shock, then calm.Across Europe that summer, declarations of fraternity abounded, and threats of violence extracted promises of reform. Yet the old order did not dissolve as asked. The revolutionaries divided into factions or dithered, or overplayed their hands. The workers accused the middle classes of betraying them by cutting deals with the kings and nobles in return for votes and privileges. The middle classes accused the workers of ignorance, of upsetting the cart in their hunger for apples. The radicals accused both groups of cowardice, and they both accused the radicals of fanaticism. As the wave of revolt broke, the chancellors regained their balance. They tiptoed back into their palaces, backed by the heavier tread of their armies.The reversal began in Paris. In February the National Assembly had responded to the unrest by giving all men the vote and creating the national workshops to give the poor work and bread. In April the voters had elected an assembly of liberals and conservatives. In May the socialists rejected the vote and stormed the assembly in an insurrection witnessed by Emerson. The liberals in the assembly feared civil war and shifted

toward the conservatives. In June the assembly closed the national workshops, which the socialists controlled. Up went the barricades again, and out came the national guard. In three days of rioting and fighting the soldiers killed more than ten thousand Parisians. Afterward the assembly exiled four thousand of its most zealous opponents and jailed their leaders.Similar repressions followed in Vienna, Berlin, Cologne, and Venice. In Vienna, the Austrian court returned while the provisional government bickered with the elected assembly. In June the Austrian army bombarded Prague. In October it shelled the Viennese themselves into submission. Heartened by the Austrian example, the king of Prussia turned down the offer of heading a constitutional assembly in Frankfurt and, with a sham concession here and there, began stealthily to undo the Prussian revolution. In December the French once more followed a revolution with a Napoléon, by electing the late dictator's nephew, Louis-Napoléon.The voice of authority remained the same but the revolutions had changed its language. The English, American, and French revolutions had not been aberrations; they had been harbingers of mass democracy and nationalism. The vocabulary of modern politics had arrived: constitutions, parliaments, national rights, and even natural ones. The autocrats recognized the strange children of the revolution: conservatism, dutiful and rigid, the firstborn sitting at the king's right hand; liberalism, cheerful and subversive, splitting the difference like a middle child; and socialism, the prodigal exile whose return threatened to bring down the house. Mass politics, with its parties, rallies, platforms, and voting, would become part of everyone's life. The personal would be political, and the name of the modern catechism was "ideology.""The main fruit of the revolutionary movement of 1848," Karl Marx concluded on Christmas Eve 1848, "is not that which the people have won, but that which they have lost—the loss of their illusions."They had also fashioned some new illusions. Apart from meaning "mind" and "spirit," Geist also means "ghost."2THE STONES OF VENICERuskin and Thoreau Against the JuggernautThis world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no Sabbath. —Thoreau, "Life Without Principle" (1853)Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and a protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. —Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1843)The gondola glides down a green canal toward the lagoon. The English couple tip now to one side, now the other, as the unseen oar plunges into the sucking water. From inside the humped cabin, they see the rank grass of the shore, an occasional stunted tree, and an autumnal flight of birds, briefly framed in black. Far to the west, the pale afternoon sun colors the Alps purple, like the dead rose leaves he gave her on their wedding day. Ahead, four or five domes emerge from the mist and water, a coil of black smoke from a belfry. Then the mirage dissolves. The brick arches of a railway bridge undulate across the water like a sea snake in a medieval map. It is November 1849, and the Ruskins have returned to Venice.John and Effie Ruskin have been married since April 1848 but have yet to consummate their union. After a fumbled, shaming wedding night, John suggested that they wait a few years, and Effie agreed. Venice in winter is damp and foggy, and in 1849 it is emptier than usual. When the Venetians revived their ancient republic in the summer of 1848, the Austrians bombarded and retook the city. The tourists have yet to return. Austrian officers have invested Caffè Florian, on the south side of the Piazza San Marco. Defeated republicans glower from the café on its north side. Effie escapes from her cold suite at the Danieli to flirt with the Austrian officers.A tall, thin man with thick blond hair, reddish whiskers, and a "delicacy" of manner that was "partly feminine," John Ruskin was the only child of two first cousins. His mother, Margaret Cock, was a publican's daughter who had

bowdlerized her surname to Cox and prayed that John would become a clergyman. John's father, John James Ruskin, was a Dickensian striver who had raised himself from a clerk's stool to a partner's desk as a wine importer. He envisioned his son as a gentleman artist. Like little John Stuart Mill, whose father, an official in the India Office, had used his son's nursery as a laboratory for the testing of Utilitarian theories, little John Ruskin grew like a bloom in a walled garden, shielded from harsh influences and other people's children. When John went to Oxford, his mother went too.Ruskin, reconciling his parents' expectations, became the foremost aesthetic preacher of his time. Art and architecture were spiritual and political testaments. The lines of a church or railway could be read like Holy Writ or a share index. The beautiful was good, and the ugly was not just bad but evil, an inspiration to wickedness. Ruskin found an image of perfect line and life in the Gothic architecture of medieval Europe. Instead of the inhumanely strict Classical line, the curlicues of Gothic masonry elaborated as naturally as leaves from a branch. These organic forms created their social content. The medieval craftsman, secure in his guild, had worked in harmony with his society and created soaring monuments to the Christian ethic. Unlike the egotistical modern artist, he signed his handiwork only with chisel marks. These tiny imperfections were humanity writ in stone, frail proofs of the soul's need for perfection. There were no machine copies in Ruskin's paradise.Ruskin was a guild socialist for aesthetic reasons. His Christianity was also aesthetic. The dreadful hammers of the archaeologists were pulverizing his faith, and with it the inspirational power of religious art. What remained was the religion of art, the cultivation of organic forms in life as in marble. In The Stones of Venice, Ruskin told the modern British a parable of salvation and ruin—a warning of the evils of bad art.Venice had been a "golden clasp on the girdle of the earth," an imperial clearinghouse connecting northern Europe to the Mediterranean. Its sailors had written history on "the white scrolls of the sea surges." Its palaces had filled with silks and spices and money. Its architects had blended three traditions, the Arabic, Byzantine, and Romanesque. The Doge's Palace, reconciling all three traditions "in exactly equal proportions," had been "the central building of the world." From "the burning heart of her Fortitude and Splendour," Venice had radiated a "world-wide pulsation, the glory of the West and of the East."And now Venice rotted in her lagoon "with the quietness of the Arabian sands."In the dank basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Ruskin borrowed a ladder and climbed through dust and cobwebs to the plaster effigy that topped the tomb of Andrea Vendramin, a brief, disastrous doge who had died of "pestilence" in 1478. Vendramin's effigy raised one hand, as though waving from posterity to the pews below. Ruskin wanted to see his other hand."At first I thought it had been broken off, but on clearing away the dust, I saw the wretched effigy had only one hand, and was a mere block on the inner side."The sculptor, Alessandro Leopardi, had betrayed God, traduced Nature, and lied to his fellow man. Ruskin was not surprised to discover that Leopardi had been banished from Venice for forging false coins. Venice, Ruskin believed, had not fallen to the jealousy of popes and princes, or the loss of its import monopolies after the opening of sea routes between Europe and India. Venice had fallen from within, to a plunge in the market of civic virtue: to the egotism, greed, and sensuality of the Renaissance, and to Machiavelli's gift, politics without morality.Like Edward Gibbon in the forum in Rome, Ruskin read the stones of Venice as runes of Britain's decline: "The foundations of society were never yet shaken as they are at this day." Nothing shook those foundations like a train. Steam technology asserted Man's power over Nature, but this alchemy of water, coal, and steel also imposed Nature's power upon Man. The new lines sliced up the countryside, smashed through city slums, and disturbed the sleeping dead in the cemeteries. The passenger had to submit to regimentation by schedules, to the mobile class system of

ticketing, and to a ride that jolted mind and body alike. Dickens found that the train's rhythm complemented his experiments in hypnosis, but nearly died in a train crash. Tolstoy, who would die in a station waiting room, gave Anna Karenina an erotic awakening in one train, but killed her under the wheels of another.When the train bounded over the lagoon to Venice, Ruskin saw that the "noble" landscape of the ancient approach by sea was reduced to a postcard, a snapshot "seen only by a glance, as the engine slackens its rushing on the iron line." As Venice fell into the mechanized net of trains, timetables, and tourists, even its memory would be erased. This was worse than the bubonic plague, the opening of the sea route to India, or Napoléon's abolition of the Venetian republic: "The last few eventful years, fraught with change to the face of the whole earth, have been more fatal in their influence on Venice than the five hundred that preceded them." Man despoiled his inheritance by intellectual and moral degradation. The locals even defecated in the arcades of the Doge's Palace.Napoléon had called himself another Attila the Hun, but Ruskin saw that the leader of the modern vandals was Thomas Cook, the pioneer of package tourism. Within a few years, the Baedeker-toting barbarians would overrun Venice. Oddly enough, they would carry pocket editions of The Stones of Venice and take Ruskin as their expert, if querulous, guide to the city that stood for everything lost and beautiful."Laissez-faire the only way," Emerson wrote in 1848. "Meddle, & I see you snap the sinews."If ugliness were evil and the factory ruined everything, then the British were on the road to hell. They paved it with the best of intentions. They had freed the slaves in their empire. They had reformed their electoral system. They had regulated their morals with evangelical faith, and their productions with copyright laws. With native coal and cotton from America and India, they had made the cities of northern England the "workshop of the world." Manchester was "Cottonopolis," the citadel of liberal individualism and its economic double, laissez-faire capitalism. By 1851 Britain was the world's leading industrial and military power, a steam-powered hive of invention and industry that generated a third of global output. Through technical ingenuity, commercial energy, and the equally energetic dispersion of their armed forces and surplus populations across the world, the British had become the first truly global nation.At home, the English became the first people to escape the ancient pattern of human society. By 1851, more than half of them were living in cities. The rhythm of urban life was a machine pulse, as regular, efficient, and monotonous as the chains of standardized actions that extracted, delivered, processed, and dispersed its products. In December 1847, while Emerson was in England, the British government standardized clocks all over the British Isles to Greenwich Mean Time, to heighten the efficiency of privately owned telegraph and railway companies."It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided," Ruskin fumed, "but the men—Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life." The dumb repetition and "perfectnesses" of the factory were "signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or helot Greek." The machine stamped the worker like it stamped its products. "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both."The Thoreau company's pencils were among America's best, and the proprietor's son was so much their creature that, without looking, he could pick up by feel alone a perfect dozen "at every grasp."Pensive and awkward, with the hangdog face of a bloodhound that has lost its sense of smell, Henry David Thoreau was manifestly not destined for the life of "quiet desperation," but he knew it well enough. When he found himself unable to survive by writing, he forced himself back to the factory. Adjusting his father's lathes, he sharpened the lines of the Thoreau pencil into a "perfectedness" of New England wood.The price of that wood was rising. The forests of New England were the raw materials for construction, railway sleepers, and fuel. When Emerson saw that the

revolutionaries had cut down the plane trees in Paris, he pondered the loss of value. He knew their price in Concord too. He had already bought and cleared one lot in the woods by Walden Pond when, in 1845, he bought a further fourteen acres. It is unclear whether Emerson wanted to conserve Nature's sacred precincts or speculate on a diminishing resource. A year earlier, Thoreau had contributed to the rise in local wood prices when, cooking fish in a hollow tree stump, he had started a fire that consumed some eight hundred acres of mature woods.Thoreau was not the woodsman he claimed to be, but he was as rooted in New England as any yeoman of Old England. He refused the temptations of nostalgia among the stones of Europe, and of amnesia among the settlers rushing westward: "Would it not be more heroic and faithful to till and redeem this New England soil of the world?" But Concord was no longer a farmer's town. After Irish navvies had laid the Boston–Fitchburg railway, town occupations and trade boomed. The businessmen of Concord huddled over their newspapers like pigs with truffles, gorging on the news and prices that Emerson called their "second breakfast." The commercial network that Hegel had called the "compact system of civil society" constricted around Thoreau, and he searched for an escape. Emerson pushed him onto the train and into the marketplace, bearing introductions to newspaper editors in New York.At P. T. Barnum's American Museum on Broadway, Thoreau saw the precocious dwarf General Tom Thumb, a troupe of Indians doing war dances, and the Fiji mermaid—a monkey's head sewn onto a fish's body. At the offices of the New-York Tribune, he met Horace Greeley, the defender of the common man against land speculators, slaveholders, and monopolists. Greeley accepted Thoreau's essays for the Tribune and offered his services as agent too. But within a few months Thoreau was back in Concord. "We will not be imposed upon by this vast application of forces."Thoreau retreated to the woods. He shed his possessions and reduced his social exchanges and economic needs. Directing his "eye right inward," he seceded into a one-person state. On Emerson's plot by the pond, and with Emerson's ideal of self-reliance as his model, he hacked down some of Emerson's white pines and built the "little world" of Walden: the cabin, the journal, the bean patch, the mystical botanizing, the meditative union with Nature, the subtle antagonizing of society.While Marx deferred the natural life of hunting, fishing, and philosophy to a distant and rather vague future, Thoreau jumped the tracks and lived it. His ascetic vows buffered him from the merchants and machines. His means of production were his mind and body, and the worker controlled them both. He hoed beans not for the market, but for food. The rhythm of work strengthened his muscles and made them receptacles of sensation. The turn of seasons sharpened his mind like a pencil at the lathe. Whispers of intuition arose from his body like mist on the water. He felt his "awake" self penetrate the surface of things and touch an inner, absolute reality. "Time is but the stream I go fishing in … Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains."Ruskin could conjure an ideal of eternity in stone, but an American mystic had no medieval past, no churches and canals; only the forest and the pathways of its disinherited inhabitants, the calls of birds not gondoliers, the blank slate of the waters. Walden Pond had no tributaries. The melting glaciers had filled its declivities eons ago, and only the rain had sustained it.Every morning, the steam train clattered past as regularly as sunrise. Meditating on the front step of his cabin, Thoreau integrated the train's pulse with the harmony of the woods and the water. "God Himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us." Its departure left a deeper silence. He sensed himself merging with Nature, the divine spirit infusing all life. "The yogi absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things."The Indian on

Emerson's reservation was the first American yogi.Sleepless in the sticky July nights, Emerson reached for something humid and sensual: "There was nothing for me but to read the Vedas, the bible of the tropics." He returned to it every three or four years. "It is as sublime as heat and night and a breathless ocean. It contains every religious sentiment, all the grand ethics which visit in turn each noble and poetic mind." Each time he read it, the image of Nature as life's "first legislator" overran his imagination. "It is of no use to put away the book: if I trust myself in the woods or upon a boat in the pond, nature makes a Bramin of me presently: eternal necessity, eternal compensation, unfathomable power, unbroken silence,—this is her creed."Emerson found it easy to sift "primeval inspiration" from the "endless ceremonial nonsense which caricatures and contradicts it." He also found it easy to read. He read his "tropical" bible in English, like his Christian Bible. Over the previous century, the global rivalry of Britain and France had created an arsenal of translations and studies. While traders and soldiers mastered India's resources and markets, the scholars of comparative religion probed its faiths.In the early 1760s, Jean Calmette, a Jesuit missionary in the French foothold at Pondicherry, obtained Sanskrit copies of all four Vedas; soon, partial French translations appeared. In 1767, a second Pondicherry Jesuit, Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux, notified the Académie des Sciences in Paris of the parallels between Sanskrit, the language of Hindu holy texts, and Latin, Greek, German, French, and Russian. In 1771, a third missionary, Abraham Anquetil-Duperron, published a translation of the Zoroastrian Avesta; in 1787, Anquetil-Duperron finished the first reliable French version of the Upanishads. By then, however, the British had displaced the French from India.After the fall of Pondicherry in 1761, the French government had executed the city's governor, Count Lally, and imprisoned its military commander, the Count de Morangies. In 1773 these executions inspired the first use of Indian religion as a weapon in Western polemics, Voltaire's Fragments Relating to the Late Revolutions in India. The judges, Voltaire said, had scapegoated the defenders of Pondicherry. The real culprits were the French Enlightenment's usual suspects: an absolutist monarch and the Catholic Church. The new scholarship on India offered new ways of interrogating them. In his Philosophical Dictionary, Voltaire pointed out that the ancient Hindu texts predated the Gospels and the Church, and the "declarations of Birma, Brahma and Vishnu" anticipated the parables of Jesus. If, as the Church claimed, eminence rested on tradition, then Hindu wisdom ranked higher than Christian dogma. "Is it not likely that the Brahmins were the first legislators of the earth, the first philosophers, the first theologians?"This historical perspective was no less harsh on Christian institutions. To explain India's current disarray, Voltaire repeated the theories of early European travelers. The climate of India caused voluptuousness and ease in its people and "effeminacy" in their leaders. Like fruit rotting in the sun, rational faith decayed into superstition, astronomy into astrology, and the rule of the Brahmins into the despotism of the lavish but feeble Mughal emperors. In this light, the power of the decadent court at Versailles was also a chimera.After the revolution of 1789, this anticlerical, republican use of India's past became government policy. In 1795, the revolutionary regime opened the École Spéciale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, Europe's first secular institution for the study of Eastern languages. Its advocates included the anticlerical polemicist Constantin-François Volney, author of the law by which the revolutionary government had sequestered the lands of the French church. In the sweep of history, Volney decided, Christianity seemed a "relatively insignificant and young" religion. Why should the age of universal reason grant political privileges to "local varieties of solar myth"?As the Americans were leaving the British Empire with French help, the people of India were passing from French influence to British control. While American lawyers composed their Constitution and French intellectuals used India's past

to undermine the legitimacy of their kings and cardinals, British administrators used scholarship to consolidate an empire in the east.In 1783, the Welsh judge William Jones arrived in Calcutta. Jones, a prodigious amateur linguist and a friend of Benjamin Franklin's, detected a common source behind the resemblances between Sanskrit and the European languages. He also noticed a striking similitude between the Hindu cults and those of pagan Greece. In 1784, Jones founded the Asiatic Society, initiating the formal modern study of India's religions, laws, arts, botany, and geography. In the mornings, he presided over the high court of Bengal. In the hot afternoons, he shuttered himself in his residence and conversed with Brahmins about Hindu poetry and algebra.

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