



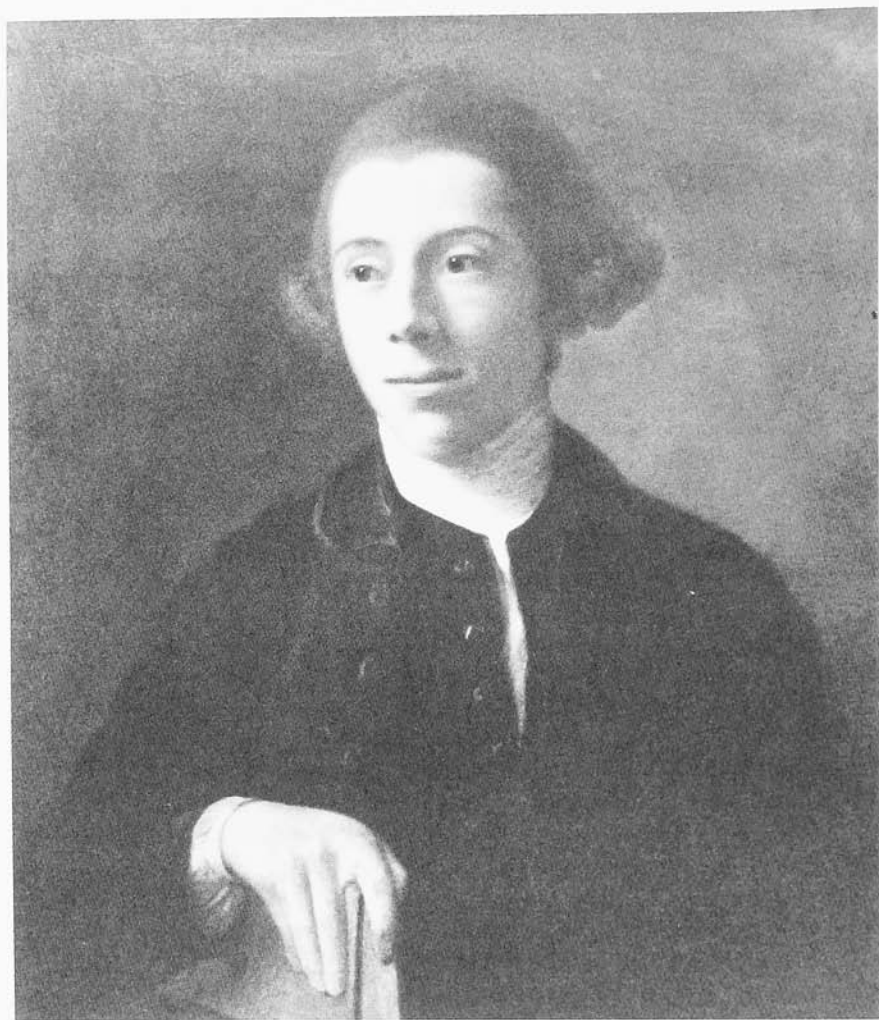
## ONE

### *The Worship of the Generative Powers*



**I**n the late spring of 1777, when much of the world was at peace, a young English gentleman was enjoying a scholarly and aesthetic tour of Sicily. The island lay somewhat off the beaten track of the usual “Grand Tour,” and Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) was hoping to make his reputation by bringing back pictures and descriptions of its classical remains. Two other gentlemen accompanied him. The senior member of the party was Philipp Hackert, a German painter; the other was his pupil, a wealthy English amateur named Charles Gore. The two artists made sketches on the spot that were elaborated, on their return, into finished watercolors of the Lipari Isles, the volcanoes Stromboli and Etna, the ruins of Segesta, Selinus, Agrigento, and Syracuse. Knight kept the journal, which he embellished with classical learning. It passed from Gore into the hands of his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who followed a similar route ten years later.<sup>1</sup>

Knight was the son of a Herefordshire clergyman who had retired in middle age, surprising everyone by marrying his servant (a carpenter’s daughter) and raising a family in his own large manor house. Richard was sufficiently sickly as a child to be kept at home and spared the experience of boarding school. After his father’s death in 1764 he was sent to a tutor, and became a keen Greek scholar. His foreign tours took the place of a university education. The death of an uncle had meanwhile made him heir to his grandfather, a self-made man whose fortune had come from ironworks. Knight thus entered manhood in a state of intellectual and financial freedom and with a combination of sensitivity and sensuality that invite comparison with his contemporary William Beckford.<sup>2</sup> Although his fortune was far more modest, he was, like Beckford, a builder, a collector, a traveler, an author—and a pagan.



*Figure 1.1. Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824), by Nathaniel Hone.*

Knight had been to Italy at least once before, in 1767<sup>3</sup> or 1772, presumably on a conventional tour of the mainland sites. His journey in 1777 was more serious in intention, undertaken for research as well as for pleasure and the broadening of the mind. Intensely responsive to the Sicilian atmosphere and to the interplay of natural scenery with classical remains, he was appalled by the contrast presented by the modern denizens. Heirs to a thriving civilization that had once filled the island with theaters and

splendid temples, the Sicilians now lived in dismal poverty and abject superstition. Knight could see only one reason for their decline: the baleful influence of Christianity. His was not merely the self-righteous reaction of an Anglican to the abuses of Rome, in an era when English vicars would argue from the pulpit that the Pope was the Antichrist: it was a thoroughgoing rejection of what he called the "sour mythology of the Christians."<sup>4</sup>

The broad and tolerant Anglican church did not often provoke the furious anticlericalism of a Voltaire, but in Knight's case the spectacle of Sicilian Catholicism led to a contempt for priestcraft as a whole. No doubt this attitude had psychological roots as well, connected with the clergyman father who had died when Richard was thirteen. In this passage from Richard's diary, the Reverend Knight and his way of life are indicted, by implication, along with the Sicilian clergy:

The Ecclesiasticks are immensely numerous & possess above one third of the Island, which being totally exempt from Taxes, the rest is of course heavily burdened. However the bigotry of the Sicilians is such, that an attempt to tax them, would be unpopular, as the reduction of their number has been found to be. Their influence is so great, that all inquiry or improvement of every kind is checked. Men, who gain vast emoluments of the blind belief of a few incomprehensible Mysteries, are naturally very jealous of every thing, that can tend to dissipate the cloud of darkness which protects them. Weak as human reason is, it would be sufficient in its lowest state to penetrate the thin veil of Priestcraft, if People only dared think; but the greatest Part of Mankind believe because they have never had the Courage to ask their own understandings, whether they believe or not.<sup>5</sup>

We will return to Knight and to the blossoming of these sentiments in creative scholarship, after making a digression that will explain the milieu that nourished his work. It was probably on an earlier tour of Italy that he first met Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803), whose embassy in Naples was an obligatory stage for English travelers even before the arrival in 1786 of the glamorous Emma (the second Lady Hamilton, who became Nelson's mistress). Sir William, who had acquired a fortune along with his first wife, was avid for vases and other classical antiquities and had assembled a magnificent collection, which he sold to the fledgling British Museum. The cataloguing and publication of these vases were entrusted by Hamilton to a certain "Baron" d'Hancarville, the pen-name of Pierre François Hugues (1719 or 1729–1805), a learned rascal of the Casanova type. The four folio volumes that appeared in 1766–67 were a tribute to the Italian engravers and printers, but d'Hancarville's own

contribution was a mixed blessing. A feast for the eye, the work became progressively more confusing to the mind as d'Hancarville changed his mind about his editorial policy, wrote long-winded discourses on the progress of the arts, and forgot half-way through to add an English translation to his French text. His conclusion, which must have gratified his patron, was that many of the scenes on Hamilton's vases referred to the Eleusinian Mysteries, whose great secret was the unity of God. This, d'Hancarville thought, was the key to the universal religion of antiquity, which had been brought to classical Greece from the Phoenicians and Etruscans by way of Orphism.<sup>6</sup>

Orphism and the Mysteries were magnets for those who investigated ancient religion, whether in a spirit of reverence or of disdain. A similar effort to d'Hancarville's appeared in 1772: *L'Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages* attributed to the skeptical mythographer Nicholas Boulanger (1722–1759) but rewritten by the Baron d'Holbach, most extreme of the atheistic *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment. This explained the Mysteries as having taught, through impressive displays, the survival of the soul after death—a belief not generally held in the ancient world until proclaimed by Christianity.<sup>7</sup> But the Orphics taught an even more esoteric doctrine: that of the past and future destructions of the world, and of the eventual death of the gods themselves. In this respect, says Boulanger, Orphism resembled the system of the Brahmins, with their successive creations and destructions of the globe.<sup>8</sup> Boulanger's own theory of origins traced all religious observances to memories of the last such cataclysm, the almost-universal Deluge.

To attribute to pagan religions two of the central doctrines of Christianity, namely monotheism and the immortality of the soul, was a strategic move in the Enlightenment's campaign to strip Christianity of its pretensions to uniqueness. This was welcomed both by atheists such as Holbach and by deists or pantheists such as Knight.

The Hamilton vase collection, as published, gives only an inkling of another aspect of pagan art and myth that had fascinated connoisseurs since the Renaissance, namely the sexual element, which is so carefully avoided in most Christian iconography. The recent excavations of Herculaneum had turned up a surprising number of erotic objects, especially ithyphallic statuettes and gems with scenes of sexual intercourse, to add to the examples already secreted in the museums of Rome and Florence. While the collectors of these artefacts, such as Sir William Hamilton, Charles Townley,<sup>9</sup> and Payne Knight, derived a certain humorous pleasure from forbidden fruits, these eighteenth-century gentlemen were not merely prurient, but scholarly and anthropological in their interests. They were the sort of people who, as boys, had discovered the obscene lyrics in the Greek Anthology—but only because they could read Greek.

Far from being a mere career diplomat, Sir William Hamilton was a natural researcher. He had already taken advantage of living near Mount Vesuvius to become an expert in vulcanology; now he was curious about local vestiges of paganism. One of these came to his attention in 1781, when he learnt how the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian was being celebrated in the remote town of Isernia, in the Abruzzo. Apparently wax ex-voti representing the male organs were taken to church, chiefly by women, who then dedicated them with kisses—presumably with prayers for successful pregnancy. At the same time, those who suffered from diseases of those parts had them anointed directly by the priest. Entranced by the news of this survival of the worship of Priapus, the Roman god of fertility, Hamilton made the pilgrimage to Isernia in the hope of witnessing the ceremony. But it had been suppressed in the meantime by an over-zealous bishop, and the disappointed tourist had to be content with acquiring some of the wax objects, euphemistically known as “big toes.”

Hamilton wrote of his discovery to his learned friend Sir Joseph Banks, the longtime President of the Royal Society, and in 1784 he came to London bearing his trophies, still said to lurk somewhere in the British Museum. Banks was also Secretary of the Society of Dilettanti, which voted to print Hamilton’s letter for private circulation among its members, together with another letter on the same subject from “a person residing at Isernia.” The Dilettanti had been founded in 1732 by Sir Francis Dashwood and a group of young bucks who had been to Italy (the qualification for membership) and enjoyed drinking together and talking about their experiences there.<sup>10</sup> Their meetings had a neopagan and libertine atmosphere, which, although not so extreme as that of the other club for which Dashwood was famous, allowed the indulgence of interests that outsiders might have found shocking.

D’Hancarville had meanwhile established himself in Paris, his work for Hamilton (from which he derived all the monetary profit) giving him entry to the rarefied circles of aristocratic connoisseurs. He found a collaborator of his own stamp in the Abbé Gaspar Michel Leblond (1738–1809), sublibrarian of the Mazarin Library. Together they produced three erotic works that enjoyed several reissues in French and English.<sup>11</sup> These were luxurious picture-books for private cabinets, illustrating antique gems with sexual themes; some copies are hand-colored. It is said that the plates in the third volume were engraved by the Duc d’Orléans, a notorious rake and later a revolutionary under the name of “Philippe Egalité,”<sup>12</sup> whom we will meet among the London occultists in Chapter Five.

In the book on the secret cult of Roman women, d’Hancarville protests that this is far removed from crude pornography. “The Ancients,” he wrote, “did not look upon the pleasures of love with our eyes . . . ; they “could attach no kind of turpitude to actions which they regarded as the

goal of nature and the height of felicity."<sup>13</sup> In the spirit of his century, d'Hancarville's libertinism, combined with antimonastic prejudice, was given vent in the following observation: "One might have considerable difficulty in deciding who better deserves the worship of mortals: a gallant woman who, following her temperament, has passed the best days of her life receiving and giving pleasure; or one who has ceaselessly destroyed through discipline and loathing a body formed by nature for another purpose, and deliberately filled her life with disgust, suffering, and sourness."<sup>14</sup> Was his tongue in his cheek when he went on: "The cult of the true God has dissipated that of a crowd of Divinities, whose example naturally led men to corruption; but it has not entirely restored them to the practice of civic and moral virtue"? Surely it was, for he concludes: "How can one reconcile the idea of a religion founded on kindness and clemency, yet which still rigorously condemns such natural pleasures, and ones to which we seem driven by an irresistible urge."<sup>15</sup>

D'Hancarville's next field of activity was London, where he became the resident scholar and curator for Charles Townley (1737–1805), member of the Dilettanti and owner of the finest collection of antique sculpture in the country. Under the pretext of illustrating and commenting on items from Townley's cabinet, the Frenchman now developed his theories on ancient symbolism into a fully fledged system, published anonymously in 1785 as *Recherches sur l'origine, l'esprit, et les progrès des arts de la Grèce*. In typical Enlightenment fashion, he believed that he was at last placing the study of antiquity on a scientific basis, by the "entirely new method" of founding it on "principles."<sup>16</sup> The first of these principles was that the world had originally had "one cult, one theology, one religion, and very likely one language."<sup>17</sup> The main symbols of this primordial religion were the Bull and the Serpent, both representing the Creator God. Over time, their statues gradually took on human lineaments, until people found themselves worshipping purely human figures and believed these to be the gods: hence the birth of idolatry and polytheism.<sup>18</sup> The primordial religion supposedly left its stamp on the arts of China, Tartary, and India, from all of which Townley's collection could furnish illustrations. Thanks to his connections with the East India Company, Townley had even acquired an erotic sculpture torn from a cave temple at Elephanta. It is comical to see d'Hancarville confidently reading his own cosmogonic theories into Tibetan paintings of wrathful deities,<sup>19</sup> or an Indian map of the Ganges.<sup>20</sup> He only has to see a triangle on a Chinese bronze plaque to be sure that it refers to the cult of Apollo and Diana.<sup>21</sup>

One traveler to the Far East had reported seeing a Japanese icon of a bull attacking an enormous egg with its horns.<sup>22</sup> D'Hancarville thought that this corresponded to the Orphic myth of the World Egg: the bull was the first being, Protogonus, bringing the material world out of chaos.<sup>23</sup>





*Figure 1.2. Charles Townley with his secretary Pierre-François Hugues d'Hancarville and his friends Charles Greville and Thomas Astle, by Johann Zoffany, painted 1781–83.*

Later the bull was personalized as Bacchus, a “mythological phantom” subsequently identified as the Scythian leader who carried this cult across Asia; it survives in India as the cult of the cow and of “Brouma.”<sup>24</sup> (How it got to Japan, he does not explain.) D’Hancarville saw the Mysteries as having revealed the secret theology to their initiates, despite its degradation into idolatry among the common people. This primordial system comprised three beings: a God who is the principle of all, exemplified by fire or a pine cone; a Son, as the supreme force or generator whose action brought the material world out of the darkness of Chaos; and Love, through which all creatures received life.<sup>25</sup>

This brief summary gives little indication of the disorganization of d’Hancarville’s thought, which emerges as a muddle of scattered learning, marshalled by sporadic attempts to impose on it an Orphism colored by Christian theology. He must have picked up ideas in Paris from two other mythographers whom the Abbé Leblond helped in their researches: Antoine Court de Gébelin (author of *Le Monde Primitif*, 1775–1784) and Charles Dupuis (author of *L’Origine de tous les cultes*, 1795), to whom we will return in Chapter Two. Yet d’Hancarville’s efforts were an integral part of the movement with which this chapter is concerned, which expressed itself in the instinctive homage paid to the beauty and mystery of ancient artefacts by projecting onto them a person’s own deepest convictions about God and the universe. It was just that in d’Hancarville’s case, these were not particularly deep.

Richard Payne Knight shared with the Frenchman a freethinker’s attitude to religion, an interest in forbidden subjects, and a desire to unveil the secrets of antiquity. The Dilettanti, as we have heard, had agreed to publish Hamilton’s account of the Isernian customs, but nothing had yet come of it. In 1785, Knight again visited Sir William Hamilton in Naples, and the next year he published a book-length essay, “A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus and its Connexion with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients,” within the same covers as the accounts of the modern Priapic rites of Isernia. Although pride of place was given to Sir William Hamilton’s letter, the addition of Knight’s essay and its engraved plates made the whole into a substantial quarto, which was printed for the Society of Dilettanti in 1786, in an edition of about 250 copies. It was distributed only to members, and, if they wished, to one friend of each.

I suspect that Hamilton found in Knight a much more congenial mind than d’Hancarville’s, and that he encouraged the publication of the younger man’s work. The *Discourse* acknowledges the Frenchman’s work with brief courtesy, but owes nothing to it except possibly the determination not to make such a mess of the subject. Knight had the advantages of being a sympathetic reader of the Neoplatonists and understanding their efforts at theological synthesis. As a Greek scholar who had already written



*An Analytical Essay on the Greek Alphabet* (published 1791), he had no need for the translations of his contemporary Thomas Taylor, who was bringing Iamblichus, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus to the attention of English readers, much as Ficino's translations had brought them to Latin readers three centuries earlier. Knight was impatient with the "most exquisite ingenuity most wantonly wasted" of Taylor's beloved Proclus,<sup>26</sup> but he respected the "ancient Theologists" in general. He claimed to follow in his analysis the "true Orphic system," which he thought was probably the "true catholic faith."<sup>27</sup> It so happens that Taylor's first major work was also a translation and interpretation of the Orphic Hymns, and was published in the following year, 1787.

Besides Orphism, Knight also admired the pure theism of the eclectic Jews such as Philo, and the theology of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which he knew in Charles Wilkins's translation of 1783 (see Chapter Fifteen). Otherwise his study of Indian religious ideas was based on the reports of recent travelers (he cites Sonnerat's and Niebuhr's *Voyages*), and on a few Indian artefacts that he had seen, chief of which was Townley's fragment from Elephanta showing a man and a woman enjoying oral intercourse. Knight had it engraved for his *Discourse*, his commentary showing his fundamental seriousness: ". . . the action, which I have supposed to be a symbol of refreshment and invigoration, is mutually applied by both to their respective organs of generation, the emblems of the active and passive powers of procreation, which mutually cherish and invigorate each other."<sup>28</sup>

This interpretation gives a preview of the metaphysical system that forms the basis of Knight's *Discourse*. It is founded on Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, the primary source in antiquity for the kind of ecumenical theology that men of the Enlightenment found so attractive. At the summit is "the God of Nature, the First, the Supreme, the Intellectual,"<sup>29</sup> who as generator of the universe is symbolized by the phallus. This supreme god is creator, destroyer, and renovator; but "it must be observed, that, when the ancients speak of creation and destruction, they mean only formation and dissolution."<sup>30</sup> Knight recognized in the *Bhagavad Gita* "the same one principle of life universally emanated and expanded, and ever partially returning to be again absorbed in the infinite abyss of intellectual being."<sup>31</sup>

This emanating process, Knight explains, takes place through a division of the active and passive functions of the Deity, the Creator being both male and female.<sup>32</sup> The two functions manifest as the divine essence, and universal matter; we know them respectively as the life-force and the substance of the earth, the first invigorating the second to bring forth living beings. All images of copulation, therefore, signified in the purer, pre-Christian era the power of the infinite being; while the act itself, far from

being shameful in any of its varieties, was a copy of the universal process, and hence as sacred and joyful as Nature itself.

Nothing shocked Knight. Of the temple prostitutes and sacred orgies reported by Herodotus, he writes:

These acts of devotion were indeed attended with such rites as must naturally shock the prejudices of a chaste and temperate mind, not liable to be warmed by that ecstatic enthusiasm which is peculiar to devout persons when their attention is absorbed in the contemplation of the beneficent powers of the Creator, and all their faculties directed to imitate him in the exertion of his great characteristic attribute. To heighten this enthusiasm, the male and female saints of antiquity used to lie promiscuously together in the temples, and honour God by a liberal display and general communication of his bounties.<sup>33</sup>

Even Herodotus's account of the ritual copulation of a woman with a goat at Mendes in Egypt, and Townley's Roman statuette of a satyr with a she-goat, moved Knight only to a semblance of religious respect. Of the former he suggests: "It was one of the sacraments of that ancient church, and was, without doubt, beheld with that pious awe and reverence with which devout persons always contemplate the mysteries of their faith, whatever they happen to be . . ." <sup>34</sup> And should anyone object, he would only have had to point to the "Christian" ceremonies of Isernia.

At a time when the discovery of Indian erotic art was commonly regarded, even by those without missionary interests, as proof of the depravity of Hindus in comparison to Europeans, Knight was one of the very first to assert the unanimity of Hindu doctrine with the "ancient theology" of Egypt, Persia, and the West. Moreover, his sexual interpretations of everyday objects should be recognized as the first adumbration of Sigmund Freud's theories. The spires and pinnacles with which our churches are still decorated derive, says Knight, from the ancient solar obelisks still found in the North of England (referring to menhirs), which represent the sun's rays as well as the phallus; happily their mystic meaning is forgotten, he adds, or the Reformers of the seventeenth century would have destroyed them.<sup>35</sup> Knight discriminates between the two types of ancient monument, obelisk and pyramid.<sup>36</sup> The obelisk is the symbol of Light, Creation, and the god Osiris. The pyramid, on the contrary, symbolizes Fire, Destruction, and Osiris's murderer Typhon. From the union of the two forces springs "the goddess *Harmony*, who was the physical order of the universe personified."<sup>37</sup>

It required a sophistication rare in Knight's or any era to distinguish these twin forces of creation and destruction from the subjective pair of "good" and "evil." Knight had no truck with Plutarch's idea of an original

evil principle, calling this "an error into which men have been led by forming false notions of good and evil, and considering them as self-existing inherent properties, instead of accidental modifications, variable with every circumstance with which causes and events are connected."<sup>38</sup> Nor could he take seriously the Neoplatonic concept of a deity "beyond Being," calling it an entertaining specimen of metaphysical theology, "a study very generally, and very deservedly, neglected at present."<sup>39</sup>

Knight could not, and surely had no wish to, separate his philosophy from the compassion aroused by seeing the Catholic Church in action. He defends the theory of emanation as having at least excluded "two of the greatest curses that ever afflicted the human race, dogmatical theology, and its consequent religious persecution."<sup>40</sup> In the same breath he praises the Roman Empire for its tolerance, saying that the early Christians were persecuted not for their religion but for civil crimes, treason, or their own intolerance.<sup>41</sup> Thus he joins the more famous infidels of his century, such as Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, in turning the tables on the Christians, who had changed a teaching of love into one of the most oppressive institutions the world had ever known.

Personal experience in Catholic France had lent emotional force to Knight's convictions. While Voltaire had his Calas (the Protestant judicially murdered, whose reputation and family the philosopher did so much to save), Knight had his Desrues. He was in Paris in the winter of 1777 when Bury Desrues was executed with the refinements of cruelty typical of the Ancien Régime, apparently on a false charge, which his widow was then forced into corroborating. Knight writes movingly in his political poem, *The Progress of Civil Society* (1796), of his horror at these events.

Knight's *Discourse* enjoyed a notoriety out of all proportion to its distribution, and its reputation followed him throughout his career—not that this troubled him. The outrage felt by less open minds on encountering it may be judged from that of Thomas James Mathias, author of a popular verse treatise *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794). It seems very unlikely that Mathias read, much less understood, Knight's neopagan essay; the mere sight of the plates was enough to move him to this diatribe:

A friend of mine would insist upon my perusing a long disquisition in quarto, *On the Worship of Priapus* (printed in 1786) with numerous and most disgusting plates. It has not been published, but distributed liberally. As I hope the treatise may be forgotten I shall not name the author, but observe, that all the ordure and filth, all the antique pictures, and all the representations of the generative organs, in their most odious and degrading protrusion, have been raked together, and copulated (for no other idea seems to be in the mind of the author) and

copulated, I say, with a new species of blasphemy. Such are, what we would call, the records of the stews and bordellos of Grecian and Roman antiquity, exhibited for the recreation of antiquaries, and the obscene revellings of Greek Scholars in their private studies. Surely this is to dwell mentally in lust and darkness in the loathsome and polluted chamber at Capreae."<sup>42</sup>

This is the first example—and we will be seeing many more—of the fury that our philosophers could arouse.

Knight's reputation in the wider world of culture rests on two things quite distinct from his Priapic theories. The first is his original approach to country house design and landscaping, which he put into practice in the building of Downton Castle, Herefordshire, from about 1773 to 1785. Contrary to current practice, Knight built an asymmetrical, castellated house, set in natural rather than artificial grounds. He elaborated on his principles in *The Landscape, a Didactic Poem* (1794). The second thing, which absorbed most of Knight's income after Downton was built, was the collection of classical statuettes, medals, coins, and gems, and old master drawings and paintings. His wish was that his classical objects should pass, after his death, to the British Museum, where they can now be seen. But few visitors notice them because of the superior attraction of the Elgin Marbles and other large exhibits. Knight made a fool of himself by being the only connoisseur of his day to despise the Elgin Marbles and advise against their acquisition; he was accused of fearing that they would eclipse his own little treasures, and mocked for preferring to spend three hundred pounds on a "Black Beetle" (presumably a scarab).<sup>43</sup> This is not the place to fill in all the details of his life; but it is appropriate to shed some further light on his character, which he revealed in a series of intimate letters to his fellow antiquary Lord Aberdeen, covering the period from 1805 almost to his death.

In 1796 Knight had already remarked that marriage was usually unhappy because of its indissolubility.<sup>44</sup> By 1809 he was reconciled to remaining single and childless, and gave Downton over to his brother Thomas Andrew. Thereafter he divided his time between his London house in Soho Square, where he kept his collection, and Stonebrook Cottage, a surprisingly modest house on the Downton estate. His philosophical devotion to Nature, as expressed in the *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, was more than a pose, for Knight was in love with the country: not, like many of his class, as a venue for shooting and hunting parties, but as the place where man serves as the gentle custodian of Nature and contemplates her in solitariness. To the end of his life, Knight would walk several miles a day, probably during what he calls the "most beautiful hours" of

six to eight A.M. and five to seven P.M.<sup>45</sup> He was a tireless planter of trees, and felt sad when he visited Scotland in 1812 and saw the mass fellings at Hamilton.<sup>46</sup> He complained that his fellow gentry "really do not know what a delightful planet this is or what a delicious portion of it has fallen to the lot of us grumbling Englishmen."<sup>47</sup>

Knight described his life at Stonebrook Cottage as spent "in as perfect happiness as my Nature is capable of—wandering through my romantic woods planning and executing improvements every morning, and enjoying my old books in undisturbed tranquility every evening."<sup>48</sup> Aberdeen must have teased him about his bucolic solitude, for Knight replied with an eloquent and amusing letter that brings his character most vividly to life. His single state evidently did not prevent him from conducting priapic researches on a practical level:

Do not imagine that I am in any danger of becoming a lovesick swain in my cottage—I am either too old or too young; and, were it not so, am so bristled over with Greek that Cupid might as well point his arrows at a porcupine. Indeed I believe that love, such as poets and novel writers have imagined and described never frequented any cottages but those ideal ones of their building. At least my experience, which has been very long and extensive, never found any in them, but of a sort which was to be bought ready made. Of this I get enough to keep my thoughts at Home, (and a little now sufficing) in a very secret and comfortable way—not of course without some suspicions, but without any glaring scandal. The Rustics are not nice, so that a small endowment gets a Husband when a cloak is wanting. I have however of late been fortunate in Borrens; and since the Army has been put into Barracks, and our soldiers been quartered at Ludlow the greater Evil has never visited us. Before, the arrival of a Regiment always spread contagion around, and poor Cupid was again put under the tuition of Mercury [referring to the treatment for venereal disease], who in the interpolated Tale of the Odyssey expresses the most eager desire to share with Mars in the Favours of his Mother, as he has since done most abundantly.<sup>49</sup>

Inured though he was to criticism of his Discourse, Knight must have regretted that the theories advanced in it were not more readily accessible. In later life he took the opportunity to give them a more mature and comprehensive form in a second treatise on symbolism: *On the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology* (1818).<sup>50</sup> The matters broached in the *Discourse* now take their place as merely part of an ancient and universal language of signs. As to its origins, Knight explains

that ancient religion was divided between the "natural" form (we would call it exoteric), common to all peoples and consisting in the worship of the sun, moon, stars, earth, and elements; and the esoteric or "secret mystic system" found in the more civilized countries and reserved to hereditary priesthods.<sup>51</sup> The latter taught more exalted and philosophical views of deity and the human soul and revealed them to initiates in the Mysteries.

Possessing in the system of emanations the esoteric key, Knight found himself able to interpret virtually any ancient myth or visual symbol. One can easily imagine the pleasure it gave him to "read" the coins, intaglios, statuettes, and artefacts to which he had dedicated his fortune and to see everywhere reflected the sublime principles of cosmogony. Reading in the *Odyssey* the famous myth of Venus and Mars caught in Vulcan's net, he perceived "a mystic allegory, signifying the active and passive powers of destruction and generation fixed in their mutual operation by the invisible exertions of the universal agent, fire."<sup>52</sup> Handling his collection of scarabs, he recalled that "The Aegyptians are said to have represented the pervading Spirit or ruling providence of the Deity by the black beetle . . ."<sup>53</sup>

Knight's esotericism was a speculative system of cosmogony, devoid of any consequences for personal growth beyond the dispelling of superstitious ignorance. It would have been laughable for him to assume the mantle of initiate (except among the Dilettanti, for whom he designed togas). Consequently, while his finely honed taste permitted him to shock the bourgeois mentality with his display of phallic objects, it did not give him any sympathy with occult or mystic pretensions. He was vigorously contemptuous of astrology<sup>54</sup> and indifferent to the angelic hierarchy of the Kabbalists and magicians.<sup>55</sup> Apuleius's famous epiphany of the "sun at midnight" during his initiation into the mysteries of Osiris, was, to Knight's urbane reading, nothing but the revelation of the sun's dual power, destructive as well as generative.<sup>56</sup> Any attribution of immense antiquity or mysterious, lost knowledge aroused his skeptical side: he rejected Jean-Sylvain Bailly's belief that a highly scientific civilization had existed in antediluvian times.<sup>57</sup> The "ancient" Egyptian system, as retailed by Greek and Roman writers of the Christian era, seemed to Knight a recent invention imposed on them by the Egyptian priesthood, owing more to Plato than to indigenous tradition;<sup>58</sup> the *Zend Avesta* recovered by Anquetil Duperron, merely the concoction of modern Zoroastrians.<sup>59</sup> In matters of scholarship, Knight was a modern man.

The authors of works on the origins and principles of ancient religion inevitably project their own views onto their subject-matter, whether through a negative attitude that throws into relief their own, superior creed (or unbe-



lief), or through a warm enthusiasm. Moreover, the choice of images and language for the expression of this metaphysics always reveals the writer's own personality and tastes. Knight was a freethinking Deist with an aversion to dogmatism of any kind. Thus his first principle is the agnostic one: that it is impossible for the human mind to conceive of Infinity. He found an echo of his sentiments in his beloved classical world, and in parts of the modern Orient. Of the Chinese, he wrote that "as their creed, like that of the Greeks and Romans, remains undefined, it admits of no dogmatical theology, and, of course, of no persecution for opinion."<sup>60</sup> And in the *Bhagavad Gita* he admired the sentiment of the incarnate deity Krishna: "Even they who worship other gods worship me, although they know it not."<sup>61</sup> He himself seems to have considered the most salient of the Supreme Being's attributes to be the universal principle of desire, leading to harmony.<sup>62</sup> This was the philosophy of Knight as we know him from his letters, at peace with his environment and with himself.

Knight's humanism made him distrust established religion and its ministers, seeing there a universal tendency to bigotry and deceit. His severest censure was reserved for the "sanguinary fanaticism, and [. . .] horrible enormities of massacre, pillage, and persecution, which had been consecrated by the religion of Mohammed; and which everywhere attended the progress of his followers, spreading slavery, misery, darkness, and desolation, over the finest regions of the earth . . ."<sup>63</sup> The regions in question were India, where Knight was hard put to find any satisfactory religious solution for the people. Brahminism with its caste system, while preferable to Islam, he found socially deplorable, for "in no instance in the history of man, has the craft of imposture, or the insolence of usurpation, placed one class of human beings so far above another, as the sacred Brahmins, whose souls are approaching to a reunion with their source, are above the wretched outcasts . . ."<sup>64</sup> Yet he could hardly favor the efforts of the Christian missionaries, either morally or politically, knowing that the light of the Gospel, with its message of equality before God, would eventually break not only the caste system but the colonial system as well.<sup>65</sup> Leaving the reader with this prospect, he concludes the *Symbolical Language* on an elegiac note, urging the preservation of Greek and Roman antiquities as the unique and probably unrepeatable zenith of human achievement.<sup>66</sup> In bequeathing his collection to the nation, Knight was paying the proper tribute to the highest thing he knew.

While Richard Payne Knight was working on his interpretation of the worship of Priapus, another scholar halfway across the globe was wrestling with similar problems. Sir William Jones (1746–1794), supreme court judge at Calcutta, wrote in 1784 the work that marks his transition from philologist to mythographer: the essay "On the gods of Greece, Italy, and India." Jones's thesis was the common one, for his time, of cross-cultural

identity: the gods of these different nations resembled each other because there had been contacts in one direction or another. Often applied to Greece and Egypt, this theory was now to be tested on the fresh ground of India. Drawing on Plutarch, as Knight was doing, Jones surmised that the Egyptian Isis and Osiris were equivalent to the Hindu god Ishwara and his consort Idi, and both pairs to "the Powers of Nature considered as Male and Female."<sup>67</sup> This is exactly the thesis of Knight's *Discourse*. As for the more lurid elements of both religions, Jones found no moral depravity in the sexual symbols of Hinduism, any more than in the Egyptian phallic rites reported by Herodotus: they were crude and literalistic, maybe, but based on a respectable, if pagan metaphysic of the dual energies of Nature.

Jones's essay was published in the inaugural volume of *Asiatic Researches* (1788), and no doubt passed beneath the eyes of some of Knight's readers. A couple of years later, one Reuben Burrow gave timid voice in the journal to another idea that corresponded to Knight's, and which would pervade the mythographic literature of the nineteenth century: the interpretation of ancient monuments as phallic symbols. Burrow suggested that the pyramids of Egypt, the "pyramids" lately discovered in Ireland, and probably the Tower of Babel were all "images of Mahadeo."<sup>68</sup> Mahadeo or Mahadeva ("great god") was a name given to the Hindu god Shiva, whose primary symbol, found in all his temples, was the lingam or phallus. Burrow adds that Cleopatra's Needle and the Devil's Bolts at Boroughbridge probably have some religious origin. Thus the new evidence from India was being brought into the same circle of ideas as Knight had outlined.

Knight had already laid considerable emphasis on the double nature of ancient sexual worship, and on votaries of the female as well as the more prominent male organ. Confirming Knight's suspicion that all he found in the West could be corroborated from the Orient, *Asiatic Researches* next offered a Hindu myth that exceeded all his hopes. It was Lieutenant Francis Wilford who published a summary of it in 1792, in his article "On Egypt and other countries . . . from the ancient books of the Hindus." Wilford was a bold, speculative scholar: so much so, that Sir William Jones felt obliged to add an afterword to his article, saying that he was not entirely convinced by it. But no issue was taken with the myth itself, attributed to the *Servarasa*, of the dual creation of the human race by Shiva and his wife Mahadeva (or Parvati). It told that in the course of mythic time, the two groups became polarized as the *Lingajas*, or devotees of Shiva and his lingam, and the *Yonijas*, devotees of Parvati and her yoni. Their rivalry erupted in war, from which the Yonijas emerged victorious. Wilford's Brahmin pundits told him that they were now called the Yavanas (who exist in modern times as an obscure tribe in Orissa), and

that the point of difference between the two groups was that the Yavanas insist on the primacy of the female, not the male parent in producing perfect offspring. Wilford comments that both parties of the conflict were known in Greece, where the yoni was worshipped at Eleusis, and also to the Hebrews, whose periodic lapses into Canaanite phallicism are testified to by their scriptures. He adds that a third, median sect was introduced to Greece by the "Pelarsgi," whose symbol represented the union of both sexual organs, under the concealing symbolism of the boat Argo, or else of the navel or *omphalos*.<sup>69</sup>

Wilford's account of this prehistoric sexual schism was reprinted verbatim in Edward Moor's influential *Hindu Pantheon* (1810).<sup>70</sup> In France, it was taken over by Fabre d'Olivet in his *Histoire philosophique du genre humain* (1822), without giving any indication of the source, presenting it rather as revealed prehistory and thus introducing it into the French esoteric tradition. By that time, it made little difference that Wilford was shown to have been sorely misled by his pundit informants, to an extent that discredited nearly all of his work.

Like many skeptical scholars, Francis Wilford devoted his energies to excavating precisely the kind of material that is seized upon by the makers of occult systems and presented by them as dogma. He argued in his book-length "Essay on the Sacred Isles of the West" that the legendary "White Island" of the Hindus was none other than Britain. It did not take much to move it a little further West, and make it into lost Atlantis. Again, in his "Remarks on the names of the Cabirian Deities, and on some words used in the mysteries of Eleusis," Wilford pointed out that the mysterious words that closed the mysteries, "Konx, Om, Pax," were the same as the Sanskrit "Cancsha, Om, Pacsha," pronounced at every transaction,<sup>71</sup> thus suggesting a primordial, world-wide system of mystery initiations.

For all his arcane interests and bizarre theories, Wilford had little respect for the tradition he studied. In 1798 he published an article "On the Chronology of the Hindus," whose explicit object was to overthrow "their monstrous system, which I have rejected as absolutely repugnant to the course of nature, and to human reason. Indeed their systems of geography, chronology and history are all equally monstrous and absurd."<sup>72</sup> Wilford was still unable to accept a greater age for the world than the six thousand years fixed by the divines: one of the current bones of contention that stuck in the craw of even the best scholars of the 1790s.

The early volumes of the *Asiatic Researches* were hard to obtain (being printed in Calcutta), but the writings of Sir William Jones, which were the most important of their contents, were published separately and read in every academy of the Western world. Whereas Oriental philosophies and religions had hitherto been known only from isolated documents and travelers' tales, Jones and his colleagues ensured that they

would henceforth be described in a proper scholarly manner. No longer dismissible as heathen superstitions, Oriental wisdom now cried out for integration into the world view of anyone concerned with mythography, religious origins, and esoteric studies. But this incurred a painful collision with the thinking habits of Christian culture, not least that of prudery in sexual matters.

Such was the case with another influential Indianist, the Rev. Thomas Maurice. In his seven-volume *Indian Antiquities* (1793–1804), Maurice writes of the Hindu lingam worship: “Our pity and abhorrence are at once excited by the emblem under which they represented, in this recess [of a Shiva temple], the Supreme Creator.”<sup>73</sup> Obligated, as a clergyman, to base all human history on the Bible, Maurice attributed this degenerate superstition to Noah’s bad son Ham, whose legacies of phallic, serpent, and sun worship, and human sacrifice had migrated to India from Egypt with his descendants, the Cushites.<sup>74</sup> But Maurice, like Wilford, was a preserver and transmitter of this degeneracy, and, not least, of the memorable story of how Shiva’s lingam cult began.<sup>75</sup> The myth tells that the god Shiva was wandering around the world, naked as usual, when he came upon a group of ascetics performing their devotions. Amused by them, Shiva uttered indecent and insulting remarks, whereupon they cursed him, and his phallus dropped off. Poor Shiva roamed the earth in his mutilated state, while his distracted wife Parvati followed, singing songs. When eventually the missing part turned up, it had grown to monstrous size and was endowed with life and motion. The sacred lingam was now cut into thirty-one pieces, each a perfect replica of the original, which were distributed around earth, heaven, and hell. Shiva himself was reborn entire.

This myth rivals Zeus’s castration of Kronos and the masturbation of the Egyptian sun god Ra as the story least likely to induce respect for the gods of the heathen. It did not take a very advanced mythographer to detect a similarity to the Egyptian myth of Isis, wandering the earth in search of the lost phallus of Osiris, nor to the many myths of mutilated and resurrected savior-gods, such as Dionysus, Attis, and Adonis. Correspondences between the Oriental religions and Christianity also forced themselves on these early researchers: Wilford wrote on the parallels between the lives of Jesus and Krishna, and on the identity of the crucified and resurrected Hindu hero Salivahana.<sup>76</sup> This could have but one meaning to him, as the Jesus-Krishna parallels had to Sir William Jones: that the Indians had acquired them from early Christian missionaries, just as they had borrowed myths and symbols from Greece and from Egypt. There was really no alternative, so long as all humanity was believed to stem from Noah’s Ark, in the third millennium BCE. But once the age of the earth was pushed beyond the biblical boundary, these parallels

became perilous indeed, for they could be, and were, used to support the contrary thesis: that Christianity was only a borrowing from Hinduism.

After Payne Knight, there was one man who proclaimed the phallic theory loud and clear: the short-lived Irish scholar Henry O'Brien (1808–1835), author of *The Round Towers of Ireland*. Coming from a completely obscure background, O'Brien did not even learn English until he was twelve. Then someone took his education in hand and enabled him to attend Trinity College, Dublin. Here he discovered, of all things, the *Asiatic Researches*, and determined on the vocation of a scholar.

Scattered throughout Ireland are some hundreds of round towers of unknown age and purpose, tall and slim, with conical roofs and with their only entrance sometimes many feet above the ground. When in December 1830 the Royal Irish Academy offered a gold medal and fifty pounds for the best essay on the origin and uses of these curious monuments, O'Brien felt that the summons had come that would draw him out of poverty and oblivion. Having grown up near a ruined tower at Bally-Carbery, which the peasants called "The Temple of Delight," he had sought out several others, read everything written on the subject, and already made up his mind as to its origin and use.<sup>77</sup> Confident that no one could possibly know more about round towers than he, the young antiquarian embarked on a five-hundred page prize essay.

*The Round Towers of Ireland* was finished by 1 June 1832, the deadline for the Academy's competition. It is a sprawling and incoherent work, into which O'Brien poured every ounce of his learning and opinions, whether they had to do with the subject or not. He had conceived the notion that the round towers dated from the colonization of Ireland from the East, and that they belonged to the oldest religion on earth, at the same time phallic, fiery, and "Budhist," stellar and solar.

O'Brien introduces into his book several themes from *Asiatic Researches*: the disquieting presence of the lingam in Indian temples, the story of Shiva losing his phallus, the sexual schism and the victory of the Yavanas, and the crucifixion of Sulivahana. He shows the relationship between fire, sun, and phallic worship, much as Payne Knight had done. Then he plays his ace: *Budh* in Irish means both phallus and sun; therefore "Budhists" are phallicists! To confirm this, O'Brien quotes a tenth-century Irish annal, which calls the round towers *Fiadh-Nemeadh*. *Fiadh* is etymologically the same as *Budh*; and *Nemeadh* means "consecrated." Therefore these buildings are "consecrated lingams."<sup>78</sup>

O'Brien could get away with this because the Western ignorance of Buddhism was still so abysmal (a theme to be developed in Chapters Thirteen and Fifteen). He sums up, not unjustly, the prevailing view of his time: "... if you look into any encyclopedia or depository of science for a



*Henry O'Brien*

*Figure 1.3. Henry O'Brien (1808–1835), from The Round Towers of Ireland, 1898.*