From a few bones he found in a suburb of Paris, George Cuvier (1769–1832) constructed a population of flying dragons, gigantic reptiles, sloths, and predatory beasts that he claimed had been destroyed in a series of catastrophes or revolutions in prehistory, a temporal concept more original than what he discovered. However speculative, Cuvier’s vision of a ruined and resurrected natural world and his theory of extinction, crossed religious, linguistic, class, and geographic barriers, appealing to scientists, artists, and writers alike. Although prehistoric and ancient beyond conception, catastrophism was rooted in the contemporary, public, and international events between 1770 and 1830.

Politically, Cuvier’s theory addressed the experience of those helpless generations who endured and survived the French and American revolutions, the Reign of Terror, the Napoleonic wars, everyone’s subsequent defeats, and the massacres, explosions, unprecedented fatalities, disfigurements, and displacement of huge populations. But Cuvier’s vision also addressed those who inflicted this suffering, the power-driven elitists for whom his reconstructions extended French and British colonizing to prehistory, to a doomed prehistoric world of extreme weather and terrestrial violence, an ugly but convincing alternative to the popular, sunny, and tropically based primitivism of the eighteenth century and of the Biblical pastoral tradition. Like the
Victorian dinosaurs that followed, as W. J. T. Mitchell wrote in *The Last Dinosaur Book*, catastrophism expressed the unconscious and political fear of impending disaster and personal extinction.

Although Cuvier’s catastrophism was secular, the bones conveyed those supernatural associations that new scientific theories, including Cuvier’s, were supposed to overcome. Some believed that the bones were vestiges of mythological creatures such as the sphinx, Griffin, Pegasus, mermaid, or minotaur—the monstrous and magical figures that Adrienne Mayor in *The First Fossil Hunters* traces to ancient Greece and Rome, those pagan cultures whose pseudo-histories were revived by eighteenth-century mythogogues. British geologists, who identified the bones with the Biblical Flood, interpreted them as evidence of the primitive, jealous, and punitive Old Testament God in whom many contemporary religious sects still believed. As either pagan or Hebraic, the meanings the bones acquired reflected the appetite for wonder, magic, religious belief, and the sublime in a secular age.

Cuvier’s catastrophic theories and the evidence on which he based them also reflected an artistic and literary tradition, realistic in tendency although fantastic in execution. For example, the figures he and his assistants drew of fossil animals, such as the mammoth, mastodon, sea serpent, crocodile, giant deer, and the unlikely pterodactyl, appeared in John Martin’s *The Deluge* (1828) as a menagerie of drowning and terrified animals, inundated by a wayward comet, along with some exquisite semi-nudes in various poses of despair, an image that Cuvier declared “authentic.” On the basis of detail and function rather than religious conviction, Cuvier’s figures, the ecology in which he placed them, and Martin’s painting of them comprised a cultural record as much as a natural or even spiritual history, a collage assembled from Greek myth, folklore, superstition, *The Arabian Nights*, medieval romances, Celtic and Nordic epics such as *Ossian* and *Beowulf*, Perrault’s castle tales, the Brothers Grimm, contemporary diorama, pantomime, landscape painting, and even illustrated Bibles for children. To add veracity and emotional appeal to *The Deluge*, the explanatory pamphlet that accompanied the mezzotint quoted passages from Byron’s *Heaven and Earth* (Rudwick, *Scenes* 22–25).

In contemporary British literature, catastrophism extended and reinterpreted the gothic and the elegiac graveyard school. From Edward Young’s “Night Thoughts,” Robert Blair’s “The Grave,” Thomas Gray’s “Elegy…in a Country Churchyard,” and William Blake’s illustrations of most of them, to Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*