

elements of their own destruction. He has not permitted in His works any symptom of infancy or of old age, or any sign by which we may estimate either their future or their past duration. *He may put an end, as he no doubt gave a beginning,* to the present system, at some determinate period of time; but we may rest assured that this great catastrophe will not be brought about by the laws now existing, and that it is not indicated by any thing which we perceive.\*

The party feeling excited against the Huttonian doctrines, and the open disregard of candour and temper in the controversy, will hardly be credited by the reader, unless he recalls to his recollection that the mind of the English public was at that time in a state of feverish excitement. A class of writers in France had been labouring industriously for many years, to diminish the influence of the clergy, by sapping the foundations of the Christian faith; and their success, and the consequences of the Revolution, had alarmed the most resolute minds, while the imagination of the more timid was continually haunted by dread of innovation, as by the phantom of some fearful dream.

*Voltaire.*—Voltaire had used the modern discoveries in physics as one of the numerous weapons of attack and ridicule directed by him against the Scriptures. He found that the most popular systems of geology were accommodated to the sacred writings, and that much ingenuity had been employed to make every fact coincide exactly with the Mosaic account of the creation and deluge. It was, therefore, with no friendly feelings that he contemplated the cultivators of geology in general, regarding the science as one which had been successfully enlisted by theologians as an ally in their cause.† He knew that the majority of those who were aware of the abundance of fossil shells in the interior of continents, were still persuaded that they were proofs of the universal deluge; and as the readiest way of shaking this article of faith, he endeavoured to inculcate scepticism as to the real nature of such shells, and to recall from contempt the exploded dogma of the sixteenth century, that they were sports of nature. He also pretended that vegetable impressions were not those of real plants.‡ Yet he was perfectly convinced that the shells had really belonged to living testacea, as may be seen in his essay “On the formation of Mountains.”§ He would sometimes, in de-

\* Playfair's Works, vol. iv. p. 55.

† In allusion to the theories of Burnet, Woodward, and other physico-theological writers, he declared that they were as fond of changes of scene on the face of the globe, as were the populace at a play. “Every one of them destroys and renovates the earth after his own fashion, as Descartes framed it: for philosophers put themselves without ceremony in the place of God, and think to create a universe with a word.”—Dissertation envoyée à l'Académie de Boulogne, sur les Changemens arrivés dans notre Globe.

Unfortunately, this and similar ridicule directed against the cosmogonists was too well deserved.

‡ See the chapter on “Des Pierres figurés.”

§ In that essay he lays it down, “that all naturalists are now agreed that deposits of shells in the midst of the continents are monuments of the continued occupation of these districts by the ocean.” In another place also, when speaking of the fossil shells of Touraine, he admits their true origin.