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J. Hillis Miller

THE THEME OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GOD
IN VICTORIAN POETRY*



POST-MEDIEVAL LITERATURE RECORDS, among other things, the gradual withdrawal of God from the world. This long process is nearly accomplished by the nineteenth century. Many Victorian writers find themselves in the situation of the characters in *Vanity Fair*. They are “a set of people living without God in the world.”¹ This situation must not be misunderstood. It does not mean blank atheism (the “God is dead” of Nietzsche) as it is often interpreted. God, for such writers, still lives, but, as Hölderlin said, he lives “above our heads, up there in a different world.”² Arthur Hugh Clough expresses perfectly this paradoxical belief in a God of whose existence there is no immediate evidence:

That there are beings above us, I believe,
And when we lift up holy hands of prayer,
I will not say they will not give us aid.³

He will not say the gods do not care for man, but neither will he say they do. For such a man God exists, but is out of reach. The lines of

* Some of the material in this essay will be published in *The Disappearance of God* (copyright 1963 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College).

¹ W. M. Thackeray, *Letters and Private Papers*, ed. G. N. Ray (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), II, 309.

² Friedrich Hölderlin, “Brod und Wein. An Heinze,” *Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, 1923), IV, 123: “Zwar leben die Götter, Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.”

³ *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry, A. L. P. Norrington, and F. L. Mulhauser (London, 1951), p. 409.

connection between man and God have broken down, or God himself has slipped away from the places where he used to be.

How did this situation come about? In the Presocratic philosophers,⁴ in the earliest books of the Old Testament,⁵ perhaps even in archaic Egyptian sculpture,⁶ we can see evidence that our culture, at its beginnings, experienced the divine power as immanent in nature, in society, and in each man's heart. So Moses saw God in the burning bush, and so Parmenides and Heraclitus are philosopher-poets of total immanence. And even though the central tradition of Western civilization, in later Judaism, in Platonism, and in Christianity, defines God as transcending his creation, the miracle of the Incarnation brought God back to earth, so that once more he walked among us as he had before the fall, when history had not yet begun. Christ was seen as the mediator joining a fallen world and a distant God, and the daily re-enactment of the Incarnation on all the altars of Christendom was the manifestation and guarantee of communion. Poetry in turn was, in one way or another,⁷ modeled on sacramental or scriptural language. The words of the poems participated in the things they named, just as the words of the Mass shared in the transformation they evoked.

The history of modern literature is in part the history of the splitting apart of this communion which has been matched by a similar dispersal of the cultural unity of man, God, nature, and language. The transformations making up this dispersal can be identified easily enough, even though the question of which change causes the others can never be answered. In the social and material worlds there are all those changes associated with the rise of science and technology: industrialization, the increasing predominance of the middle class, the gradual breakdown of the old hierarchical class structure, the building of great

⁴ Martin Heidegger is of course the champion of this interpretation of the Presocratics. See especially *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main, 1950), pp. 296-343, and *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen, 1954), pp. 207-282. See also G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1957) for the best recent book in English on the Presocratics.

⁵ See Jacob Taubes, "From Cult to Culture," *Partisan Review*, XXI (1954), 387-400, Oskar Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* (Berlin, 1925), and Thomas Mann *Doktor Faustus* (Stockholm, 1947), ch. xxviii.

⁶ See Claude Vigée, *Les Artistes de la faim* (Paris, 1960), pp. 40-42.

⁷ For varying interpretations see Erich Auerbach's two essays: "Figura," *Archivum Romanicum*, XXII (1938), 436-489, and "Typological Symbolism in Mediaeval Literature," *Yale French Studies*, No. 9 (1952), 5-8; and three papers by Charles S. Singleton: "Dante's Allegory," *Speculum*, XXV (1950), 78-83, "The Other Journey," *Kenyon Review*, XIV (1952), 189-206, "The Irreducible Dove," *Comparative Literature*, IX (1957), 129-135; and see also Richard Hamilton Green, "Dante's 'Allegory of Poets' and the Mediaeval Theory of Poetic Fiction," *Comparative Literature*, IX (1957), 118-128.

cities. In the modern world nature is slowly *humanized* until, finally, man is surrounded by things he has made over into their present form. The city is the objective manifestation of this humanization of the world. And where is there room for God in the city? Though it is impossible to tell whether man has excluded God by building his great cities, or whether the cities have been built because God has disappeared, in any case the two go together. Life in the city is the way in which many men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world.

Paralleling the development of urban, technologized life there has been a gradual dissipation of the medieval symbolism of participation. Many scholars have studied the breaking of the circle, the untuning of the sky, the change from the closed world to the infinite universe which slowly destroys the old polyphonic harmony of microcosm and macrocosm.⁸ During this process belief in the Incarnation begins gradually to die out of the European consciousness. The Reformation, if not immediately, certainly in its ultimate effects, means a weakening of belief in the sacrament of communion. The bread and wine come to be seen as mere signs commemorating the historical fact that Christ was once, long ago, present on earth: "This do in remembrance of me." And, as Claude Vigée has suggested, the Protestant reinterpretation of the Eucharist parallels exactly a similar transformation in literature (pp. 51–60). The old symbolism of analogical participation is gradually replaced by the modern poetic symbolism of reference at a distance. Just as the modern city is the social and material creation of a set of people living without God in the world, so modern literature betrays in its very form the absence of God. God has become a *Deus absconditus*, hidden somewhere behind the silence of infinite spaces, and our literary symbols can make only the most distant allusions to him, or to the natural world which used to be his abiding place and home.

When the old system of symbols binding man to God has finally evaporated, man finds himself alone and in spiritual poverty. Along with the development of modern science, the building of cities, and the destruction of the old forms of mediation goes the rise of subjectivistic philosophies. Modern thought has been increasingly dominated by the presupposition that each man is locked in the prison of his conscious-

⁸ See A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), M. H. Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle* (rev. ed., New York, 1960), Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore, 1957), E. R. Wasserman, *The Subtler Language* (Baltimore, 1959), and John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky; Ideas of Music in English Poetry* (Princeton, 1961).

ness. From Montaigne to Descartes and Locke, on down through associationism, idealism, and romanticism to the phenomenology and existentialism of today, the assumption has been that man must start with the inner experience of the isolated self. Whether this experience is thought of as consciousness (the *Cogito* of Descartes), or as feelings and sense impressions (the sensation of Locke), or as a living center (the *punctum saliens* of Jean Paul), or as the paradoxical freedom of Sartre, in all the stages of modern thought the interior states of the self are a beginning which in some sense can never be transcended.

Much modern writing has been a dramatization in existential terms of the consequences of this subjectivism. One great theme of modern literature is the sense of isolation, of alienation, of "world-alienation," in Hannah Arendt's phrase.⁹ Most of the great works of nineteenth-century literature have at their centers a character who is in doubt about his own identity and asks, "How can I find something outside myself which will tell me who I am and give me a place in society and in the universe?" Subjectivism, like urbanization and the failure of medieval symbolism, leads man back to an experience of the absence of God.

The discovery or redefinition of the autonomy of consciousness is associated with one more all-important quality of modern times: the appearance of the historical sense. The central factor in historicism is an assumption of the relativity of any particular life or culture, its limitation and fragility. The attitude of historicism accompanies the failure of tradition, the failure of symbolic language, the failure of all the intermediaries between man and God. Historicism consequently can mean the anguish of feeling that one is forced to carry on one's life in terms of a mockery of masks and hollow gestures. To Matthew Arnold, for example, it seems that a sense of history undermines our culture and our life within that culture, until all seems artificial and sham. "Modern times," he says, "find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that, for them, it is customary, not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit."¹⁰

Historicism and the rise of subjectivistic philosophies are inti-

⁹ *The Human Condition* (Garden City, N. J., 1959), p. 6.

¹⁰ "Heinrich Heine," *Works* (London, 1903), III, 174.

mately related. What once seemed objective fact, God and his angels, with all the harmonious structure depending therefrom, is now transformed into mere figments of man's imagination. This cultural change is once more mirrored in literature. As Ortega y Gasset has shown,¹¹ the change from traditional literature to a modern genre like the novel can be defined as a moving of the once objective worlds of myth and romance into the subjective consciousness of man. To Don Quixote the windmills are giants, to Emma Bovary, Rodolphe is the fulfillment of her romantic dreams, and for Henry James the novel presents not facts but someone's interpretation of them. The ideal world still exists, but only as a form of consciousness, not as an objective fact. Love, honor, God himself exist, but only because someone believes in them. Historicism, like all the other qualities of life in modern times, brings us back to the absence of God. Life in the city, the breakup of medieval symbolism, the imprisoning of man in his consciousness, the appearance of the historical sense — each of these is another way in which modern man has experienced the disappearance of God, and taken together they form the essential background against which much Victorian literature must be seen.

A number of possible responses to the disappearance of God have presented themselves since the early nineteenth century. Humanism, perspectivism, nihilism, pious acceptance — each of these has been a way to deal with the absence of God. But a group of important Victorian poets belong to another tradition: romanticism. The romantics still believe in God, and they find his absence intolerable. At all costs they must attempt to re-establish communication. Romanticism defines the artist as the creator or discoverer of new symbols, symbols which establish a new relation, across the gap, between man and God. The romantic artist, as Meyer Abrams has told us, is a lamp, not a mirror.¹² He is a maker or discoverer of the radically new, rather than the imitator of what is already known. The central assumption of romanticism is the idea that the isolated individual, through poetry, can accomplish the "unheard of work,"¹³ that is, create through his own efforts a marvelous

¹¹ José Ortega y Gasset, "The Nature of the Novel," tr. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marin, *Hudson Review*, X (1957), 11-42.

¹² *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953).

¹³ Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. de la Pléiade (Paris, 1946), p. 176: "l'oeuvre inouïe."

harmony of words which will reintegrate man, nature, and God.¹⁴

Many Victorian poets inherit this romantic conception of poetry, but such poets differ in one essential way from their predecessors. Almost all the romantic poets begin with the sense that there is a presence in nature, an immanent spiritual force. But many Victorians precisely do *not* possess this “sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused.”¹⁵ The spiritual power, for them, is altogether beyond the world. The literary strategy of the Victorian poets must therefore often be more extreme, more extravagant, as the gap between man and the divine power seems greater.

The initial situation of Arnold, Browning, Tennyson, and Hopkins is like that of many other modern men. For them too God is absent or unavailable. But unlike the novelists, who turned toward a purely human world, and unlike the nihilists, who turned toward a devouring emptiness as the true reality, these Victorian poets tried, each in his own way, to bring God back to earth as a benign power inherent in the self, in nature, and in the human community. Though their situations are more desperate than those of the romantics, their goals are similar. Their spiritual adventures might be defined as so many heroic attempts to recover immanence in a world of transcendence. Each of these attempts has its own special tone and atmosphere. Every poetic universe is unique and ultimately incommensurable with any other. The spiritual wrestling of Hopkins in “Carrion Comfort,” for example, is quite unlike the passive resignation of Arnold. Nevertheless, the writings of Arnold, Browning, Tennyson, and Hopkins, in spite of all their differences, can be seen as responses to similar spiritual situations. For these four poets the absence of God is, in one way or another, the fundamental starting place and presupposition.

I

Matthew Arnold’s special way of experiencing the disappearance of God is his inability to find any inner certitude or stability or permanence. Arnoldian man is bound to the law of succession in time and the law of limitation in place, for, as Arnold’s Empedocles says, “Man’s

¹⁴ See the definition of the central project of romanticism at the end of Albert Béguin’s *L’Ame romantique et le rêve* (Paris, 1956), pp. 393-404.

¹⁵ *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1944), II, 262.

measures cannot mete the immeasurable All.”¹⁶ This means that there is no possibility of possessing a substantial and authentic self. Man, for Arnold, is merely a series of half selves, fragmentary and incomplete. As he says in “The Buried Life”:

we have been on many thousand lines,
And we have shown, on each, spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves.
(*Poetical Works*, p. 246)

Each man is forced to “fluctuate idly without term or scope,” and, as a result, “half lives a hundred different lives” (p. 260). Moreover, this series of half lives, each one truncated and momentary, is defined and redefined by whatever happens outside it in the aimless flux of events:

Hither and thither spins
The wind-borne, mirroring soul,
A thousand glimpses wins,
And never sees a whole. (p. 415)

Caught up, willy-nilly, in the universal flux, and “whirl’d” “in action’s dizzying eddy” (p. 60), the mirror-soul is condemned to a fragmentation imposed by a triple motion. It is moving with an aimless spinning through a milieu which is itself in motion, swirling to and fro in aimless ebb and flow. This double eddying, an eddying within an eddying, determines the incoherent fluctuations within the soul, where “passions . . . for ever ebb and flow” (p. 37), “linking in a mad succession/Fits of joy and fits of pain” (p. 33). This vertiginous wavering within the soul is the result of its double submission to the motion of things outside itself and to its own crazy motion through that motion: “And on earth we wander, groping, reeling;/Powers stir in us, stir and disappear” (p. 210).

Man has not always been in this intolerable situation. There was a time, near the green sources of history, when man possessed himself and at the same time possessed the whole world. Emanations and influences flowed back and forth between man and nature, and man and the gods. Man then had joy, and having joy possessed himself, the deep buried self making him one with the whole world. It was a time of pastoral immediacy, of the happy unselfconscious acceptance of a narrow, limited life. Such a time, when “the smallest thing could give us pleasure” (p. 436), Arnold’s Empedocles remembers from his youth.

¹⁶ *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London, 1950), p. 423.

Arnold associates this joyful time with the early Greece of Homer, and with Wordsworth, Maurice de Guérin, and other romantic writers. The lost condition of joy is in fact man's proper state, and he seems to have been deprived of it by a mere superficial accident, the accident of a bad society, the "damned times" and damned place in which Arnold happens to live. Even now it would be better in France where they have the Academy and the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. "My dearest Clough," laments Arnold in a famous letter, "these are damned times — everything is against one — the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great *natures*, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties."¹⁷

But if man's present bad situation seems to have been so fortuitously produced, he should be able without too much difficulty to regain his primal state, and, in the phrase which Arnold quoted over and over again in his notebooks, fulfill his essential task, which is the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.¹⁸

Arnold's first instinct is to turn outside himself, and to seek some still-living link between man and God, some power which will mediate between himself and the lost harmony. Man now is bare consciousness, the detached reflecting mirror. He must see if there is anything through which he can establish relationship again with the divine spirit. Arnold's early poetry and the letters to Clough are a record of the various means he tries. He tries the playing of a role, or the acceptance of a given law for his being. He tries the deliberate composition of poetry. He tries to believe that there is still some effective absolute law. He tries plunging himself in society. He tries, in the Marguerite poems, love. He tries to depend on the power of memory to form a link with the past. He tries to see nature as the romantic poets did. He even tries, in "The Strayed Reveller" and "The New Sirens," abandoning himself, in imagination, to passion and uncontrolled feeling. Each of these expedients leads, in one way or another, to further self-alienation. Through this repeated failure Arnold discovers for himself the truth expressed in Coleridge's

¹⁷ *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry (London and New York, 1932), p. 111.

¹⁸ "Voilà le but présenté par le Christianisme à l'humanité tout entière comme son but dernier et définitif: le royaume de Dieu sur la terre," Édouard Reuss, *Histoire de la théologie chrétienne au siècle apostolique* (Strasbourg, 1860), II, 542, quoted in *The Notebooks of Matthew Arnold*, ed. H. F. Lowry, Karl Young, and W. H. Dunn (London, 1952), pp. 108, 141, 152, 176, 192, 229, 263, 366, 387, 544.

“Dejection, an Ode”: “we receive but what we give.” Arnold cannot find joy in things outside himself unless he has joy already in his own heart.

So the poet turns within himself. “Resolve to be thyself,” he cries (*Poetical Works*, p. 240). Withdraw from all false exterior forces, and seize the substantial inner core of self. Find your own *assiette*, Arnold advises Clough, and stick to it (*Letters to Clough*, p. 130). The movement of withdrawal means, in one direction, a complete rejection of the social world as it is. But this condemnation is undertaken in the hope that by a process of self-purification he will not only remove the inauthentic but will allow the deep buried self which is his real identity to rise up and fill his inner emptiness. At the same time this will be a possession of the “general life,” the soul of the world, the All. But to possess the All is in the same moment to reach the divine. The spark from heaven will fall, and Arnold will be himself a source of a current of true and fresh ideas from God, a “bringer of heavenly light,” as he puts it in “Westminster Abbey” (*Poetical Works*, p. 447). This light will illuminate and make authentic all human society.

But it is just through trying this strategy that Arnold makes his most frightening discovery, the discovery recorded in many poems, but most completely in “Empedocles on Etna.” At this very moment, the thin strand connecting the self to the All is being cut, and the self is being transformed into sheer emptiness. Whether by going down toward the deep buried self and finding it infinitely distant, or by going up toward God, Arnold discovers that by separation of himself from everything limited he gets not possession of himself, but the final loss of all life and all joy. Though he gets higher and higher above the turmoil of contemporary life, he does not get one inch closer to the buried self or to the divine spark. No revelation, no intuition, no presence of God is possible. What happens is merely a progressive evacuation of the soul, a progressive appearance of the true emptiness of the self. This emptiness is defined by its infinite distance from the true buried self and from the divine transcendence. So Arnold writes of the tragic situation,

When the soul, growing clearer,
Sees God no nearer;
When the soul, mounting higher,
To God comes no nigher. (p. 38)

Empedocles commits suicide just before this death of the soul, while a tiny strand of joy still connects him to nature, but after that darkness descends on the Arnoldian soul and isolation is his lot. He has

become “Nothing but a devouring flame of thought — /But a naked, eternally restless mind!” (p. 438). This mind transforms whatever it knows into itself, and therefore remains cut off from whatever it knows. Moreover, Arnold is now at last brought to recognize that this catastrophe is no accident. He sees that it is a true revolution or pivoting of history, the moment when God withdraws completely from the world.

Arnold has now discovered the truth about man’s present condition: emptiness and distance are what man really is, in these bad times. But he also learns that to know this and to suffer from it paradoxically bring man closest to the divine spirit and make him superior to forgetful, self-sufficient nature. So Arnold’s last posture is that of the man “wandering between two worlds, one dead, /The other powerless to be born” (p. 302). He is the man of the no longer and not yet, the man whose only honest way to testify God is negatively, by denying truth to whatever is now, and by formulas which are so general that, though they assert the existence of absolute values, they do not have enough real content to be false. This is the stance of Arnold the elegist, the mourner writing in sorrow for the death of Thyrsis, the dear friend whose death is a symbol of the death of a world, as are all the deaths in Arnold’s poetry. For there are an extraordinary number of elegies among Arnold’s poems. Arnold’s notebooks, and his social, literary, and religious criticism are like the elegies in the sense that they too reject whatever exists in the present as inauthentic and hollow and, on the other hand, embalm an essentially dead wisdom: the best that is known and thought in the world, but is no longer current in society. Though the tone of Arnold’s prose is so different from that of his poetry, this difference testifies not to Arnold’s escape from his earlier situation, but to the resigned acquiescence in which he ultimately comes to poise. Arnold finds in the acceptance of the absence of God the *assiette* he has sought vainly in more positive strategies. Arnold the critic can only say: “God exists, and I know it, but I don’t know it directly, and I know too that He would be the only support of a true civilization, a civilization built on eternal truths. However, unfortunately, at this particular moment I cannot tell you, and no man can tell you, just what those truths are. Believe no man but him who tells you, like a prophet crying in the wilderness, that the truth is, but not here, not yet.”

In the end, then, Arnold faces toward the future, not toward the past. Like the Scholar Gipsy he is waiting, in a purity and emptiness carefully preserved by criticism, for the return of God, for the “fugitive and gracious light . . . , shy to illumine” (p. 268). Arnold’s final orienta-

tion is toward the return of the divine spirit, a return which, as in "Obermann Once More," he can almost see, or can even see at a distance, as he waits in passive tension, rejecting everything here and now for the sake of something which is never, while he lives, quite actual and present.

II

The starting place for Robert Browning is a typically romantic one: a sense of the inexhaustible potentiality of his inner life, and of the way this potentiality cannot be fulfilled in any finite human existence. So, for example, the hero of *Pauline* finds in himself "a principle of restlessness/Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all."¹⁹ Since the infinity of the actual outer world is an exact match for the infinity of the potential inner world, Browning wants to know all the universe at once, from an absolute point of view. But only God has this totality and simultaneity of experience. Browning's early Promethean heroes therefore try to identify themselves with God, to see things from God's point of view.

But when Browning's early heroes try to escape from the "clay prisons" of themselves, and reach divine knowledge and experience, they merely dissolve into a murky emptiness which is the absence of any experience at all. So Paracelsus "sickens" at last "on a dead gulf streaked with light/From its own putrefying depths alone" (*Works*, p. 21). The expansiveness of Browning's early heroes leads not to fulfillment of potentiality, but rather to just the opposite, a rarefaction, a volatilization, a dissipation of immense energies into the opaque inane, leaving the hero back where he started, still in a condition of unrealized potentiality.

This failure of romantic Prometheanism causes Browning to make a radical transformation in his poetry. After *Sordello*, instead of writing poetry which is disguised autobiography, the autobiography of Prometheus in search of the divine fire, Browning writes dramatic monologues, that is, as he said, "poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine" (p. 1). The dramatic monologue presupposes a double awareness on the part of its author, an awareness which is the very essence of historicism. On the one hand the dramatic monologist is aware of the relativity of any

¹⁹ *The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Boston, 1895), p. 5.

single life or way of looking at the world. He sees each one from the outside as merely one possible life, and yields himself with a certain irony or detachment to one after another of these imagined selves. But on the other hand the monologist is also aware that reality, for us human beings, lies only in a life which is immersed in a material and social world, and living with all its energy the life appropriate to that situation. The only sin is the refusal to act or make choices, for "a crime will do/As well . . . to serve for a test,/As a virtue golden through and through," and man must above all avoid "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin" (p. 286). Reality for man is the inexhaustible multiplicity of all the lives which have ever been lived or could be lived, and it is these which the modern poet, the poet of historicism, must describe.

So we get the great gallery of idiosyncratic individuals in Browning's most famous poems: scoundrels, quacks, hypocrites, cowards, casuists, heroes, adulterers, artists, Bishop Blougram, Mr. Sludge the Medium, the Bishop ordering his tomb. The reality of each of these lives lies in its limitation, its narrowness. It is one special way of living in the world chosen out of all the infinite possibilities. Browning seems to have committed himself wholeheartedly, like Nietzsche or Gide, to a life of perspectivism or role-playing.

This is not quite the case, however, for behind the great crowd of grotesques and idealists there lies one constant factor linking them all together: the consciousness of Browning himself. Browning has found in the poetry of the dramatic monologue a covert way to actualize all the infinite possibilities which at the time of *Pauline* lay dormant within him, each a "universe in germ" (p. 991), potential, not actual, and seemingly with no way to be made real. In *Pauline* all these living germs existed simply as "impulses," "tendencies," "desires," which all bubbled together within his mind. There seemed no way "to trust/All feelings equally, to hear all sides" (p. 7). But now, when Browning has accepted the perspectivism of the dramatic monologue, all these living forms, all these feelings, all these viewpoints, will be incarnated in the lives of the multitudinous variety of men and women who speak in his poems.

Browning carries his use of the dramatic monologue even further than this, however. In his masterpiece, *The Ring and the Book*, what appears at first an acceptance of perspectivism turns out to be an heroic attempt to escape the falsifications of point of view. The philosophical and aesthetic moral of *The Ring and the Book* is: "By multiplying points of view you may transcend point of view, and reach at last God's own infinite perspective." Slowly, bit by bit, the different versions of the

story, like the distancing of the facts in the depths of the historical past, liberate the poem from being a “false show of things,” and make of the eccentric interpretations an elaborate oblique incantation which evokes the truth, that divine truth at the center of each finite person or event which, in Browning’s view, can never be faced directly or said directly. “Truth, nowhere,” he says, “lies yet everywhere in these — /Not absolutely in a portion, yet/Evolvable from the whole” (pp. 555–556). All the retellings of the story, the multiplication of perspectives on it, the contradictory versions of what happened — all have as their goal by a kind of mutual negation to make something else appear, something which can never be said directly in words. The “something” is at once the central truth of this particular story, the central truth of the human condition, and the transcendental truth which underlies all the particular human facts that ever were or could be. So at the very end of *The Ring and the Book* Browning makes his great boast for the power of perspectivist art to go beyond the tragic situation of the unavailability of God:

— Art may tell a truth
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
 So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall, —
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
 Deeper than ever e’en Beethoven dived, —
 So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside. (p. 601)

But this way of dealing with the absence of God ultimately fails. Even though we may agree that each finite human perspective is an authentic version of the world, even though we may agree that it contains one spark of the divine plenitude, nevertheless, however many of these fragmentary glimpses of God we may add up, we shall be no closer to the whole, or to a face to face confrontation with God. A very large number is not an infinite number, and only an infinite number would do. Browning’s unconscious recognition of this may be revealed by the inclusion of the monologue of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*. The Pope is somehow beyond the limitations and distortions of the other monologuists. He speaks for Browning. He speaks for God himself. To include such a character is to betray the aesthetic presuppositions of the poem, and implicitly to admit its failure to accomplish its end.

It turns out, however, that in this failure lies unsuspected success. For man’s perpetual striving is his most God-like attribute. Only if Browning closes himself off is he finished for good, and excluded

forever from God. As long as he keeps moving he is in God's grace, and imitates in little the very life of God. The uncouth, half-finished statues of Michelangelo are more in correspondence to the deity than any smooth perfection (pp. 333, 713, 771), and the form of Browning's poetry, in its internal contradictions, its rough-hewn quality, its open-endedness, is the very image of infinity, and of the limitless perfection of God. God himself constantly transcends himself, and moves into ever-new spheres of being. On earth we are in a sense already in heaven, for in heaven we shall exist in the same dynamic motion as on earth, continually going beyond ourselves even as here. Though God is not temporal, the driving motion of time is a perfect image of his explosive eternity.

Browning always remains faithful to this intuition of the relation between the creator and the creation, and in "Fust and His Friends" he devises a brilliant and definitive metaphor to describe it. In this metaphor the creation is seen as one of those mathematical lines, like the tangent curve, which approaches always closer and closer to a straight line, its asymptote, which it will touch only at infinity. Though man can never, it may be, reach God's plenitude, he can maintain a "continual," however distant, "approximation to it" (p. 1010), and in this approximation lies the fullness of life Browning has sought from the beginning:

Why, onward through ignorance! Dare and deserve!
As still to its asymptote speedeth the curve,

So approximates Man — Thee, who, reachable not,
Hast formed him to yearningly follow Thy whole
Sole and single omniscience! (p. 985)

III

All sense of Time
And Being and Place was swallowed up and lost
Within a victory of boundless thought.
I was a part of the Unchangeable,
A scintillation of Eternal Mind,
Remix'd and burning with its parent fire.²⁰

In these hyperbolic terms the young Tennyson describes his experience of union with God. All limitations of time, place, and finite

²⁰ Alfred Tennyson, *Unpublished Early Poems*, ed. Charles Tennyson (London, 1931), p. 12.

selfhood are transcended in an expansion of the soul “even to Infinitude” (*Early Poems*, p. 12), and the self is melted in God’s holy fire. To worship God is to worship the self, for the two are identical, and Tennyson can say: “Yea! in that hour I could have fallen down/Before my own strong soul and worshipp’d it” (*Early Poems*, p. 12). But though passages describing such experiences recur throughout Tennyson’s work (as in “The Ancient Sage” and in the ninety-fifth lyric of *In Memoriam*) and may be said to form its center, nevertheless this ecstasy is always spoken of in the past tense. When it is present it cannot be described. To know it is to have lost it. For Tennyson the suffering caused by loss of an infinite plenitude determines the essential quality of the present, and the refrain of all his poetry is “Far — Far — Away.”²¹ Like other Victorian poets he believes in God, but his God too is “a Power/That is not seen and rules from far away,”²² and for him we are all now in a situation of “believing where we cannot prove” (*Works*, p. 163). Loss of the intimate presence of God generates the anguish of “The Two Voices” and the “Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind,” and Tennyson’s characteristic poetry expresses a sense of being “void,/Dark, formless, utterly destroyed” (*Works*, p. 6) because abandoned by the divine power.

What can the poet do in this state of abandonment? Two opposing motions of the spirit dominate Tennyson’s poetry. One is a movement of withdrawal, circumscription, and concentration. As in Arnold’s poetry this movement is justified by a sense that deep within itself the self is always flowing from fountains of divine being:

If thou would’st hear the Nameless, and wilt dive
 Into the temple-cave of thine own self,
 There, brooding by the central altar, thou
 Mayst haply learn the Nameless hath a voice,
 By which thou wilt abide, if thou be wise. (p. 498)

There is an absolute incompatibility between this divine center of the self and the modern world of railroads and ugly cities. The deep fountains of being, which are also the fountains of poetic inspiration, must be carefully walled around and guarded from intrusion. In “The Poet’s Mind” and, more successfully, in “The Hesperides,” Tennyson expresses the effort of self-seclusion by which the poet can remain in

²¹ *The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. W. J. Rolfe (Boston, 1898), p. 555.

²² *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (London, 1906), p. 882.

ever-enduring possession of the sources of power deep within himself and within nature.

But inside the enclosure of the poet's carefully protected solitude the holy well gradually dries up, in spite of all his attempts to preserve it by the magic charm of verse. There is a progressive deadening, a withdrawal of the springs of being, and the poet finds himself at last in total isolation. Passivity and circumscription can then become the guilty self-enclosure in aesthetic beauty of "The Palace of Art," or the desire for complete relaxation and drifting of "The Lotos-Eaters," or the endless suffering of "Tithonus." Stagnant self-enclosure can generate that state of being so poignantly expressed in "Mariana" and in the fiftieth section of *In Memoriam* — a mere passive waiting for the return of the divine spirit, a waiting without hope, in utter desolation and dryness of soul. In this imprisonment of the self within itself life, deprived of all impetus, slows down almost to a stop, and the sufferer becomes painfully sensitive to the tiniest motions which remain. In this state "the blood creeps, and the nerves prick/And tingle; . . ./And all the wheels of being [are] slow" (p. 175). Without being able to die the self hovers interminably at the very brink of death:

All day within the dreamy house,
 The doors upon their hinges creak'd;
 The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
 Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,
 Or from the crevice peer'd about. . . .
 She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!" (p. 8)

Centripetal withdrawal only leads Tennyson to a more exacerbated experience of the absence of God. The alternative motion of expansion begins with the poet's sense of his heaven-sent mission. Possessing unique access to the divine power, the poet should let his poems flow forth in all directions to vivify the world, as the "great vine of Fable," in "Timbuctoo," is filled with a "permeating life" and reaches "to every corner under heaven,/Deep-rooted in the living soil of truth" (p. 780). If he deploys his energies in this way the poet will be a new mediator through whom God will once again become present in the world. Having access to the source of all truth and wisdom the poet can, as for Shelley, be a legislator, giving new authenticity to civilization. The poet is a fructifying river flowing from the fountains of being, or, in the metaphor of "The Poet," the bard is like a dandelion

which showers forth seeds of wisdom until “truth [is] multiplied on truth, the world/Like one great garden show[s]” (p. 14). This notion of the poet’s mission leads Tennyson to write poems of action and social commitment. It is the source of the didactic side of his poetry, his urge to take part in the progress and amelioration of the world.

But ultimately expansion of the self works no better than contraction. Centrifugal diffusion coincides with progressive evaporation and thinning out of the self. It gets too far away from the fountains of being, and eventually all connection is lost. The poet enters the realm of the superficial and inauthentic: received opinions, false patriotism, sycophancy, jingoism, empty optimism, blind commitment to motion and action as escape from painful self-consciousness. Like Arnold, Tennyson cannot believe that the divine truth can be embodied in society without being gradually corrupted. The *Idylls of the King* is an elaborate expression of this view of history as the inevitable degradation of an original revelation.

Neither expansion nor contraction of the self will recover the lost immanence of God, and between these two sad alternatives Tennyson vibrates helplessly. Perhaps his deepest insight into the spiritual condition of his age, as well as his most successful poetry, is in those passages where, as in “Demeter and Persephone,” “Tears, Idle Tears,” and “The Ancient Sage,” he uses oxymorons, transitional states, and images of broken, evanescent, or far-off things to express a peculiar apprehension of the totality of things as self-divided, and in despair over this self-division. In the end, for Tennyson, man, nature, and God himself are to be defined as transcending themselves, as riven by “a gulf that ever shuts and gapes” (p. 179). Both man and God are essentially creatures of distance, “far off . . . but ever nigh” (p. 196), and all things express the paradoxical combination of presence and absence which is at the heart of being:

The first gray streak of earliest summer-dawn,
The last long stripe of waning crimson gloom,
As if the late and early were but one —
A height, a broken grange, a grove, a flower
Had murmurs, “Lost and gone, and lost and gone!”
A breath, a whisper — some divine farewell —
Desolate sweetness — far and far away — (p. 500)

In this situation there is only one hope — the “far-off divine event” (p. 198) which will reconcile height and depth, God and man, heaven and earth, until “all the Shadow die into the Light” (p. 530). Or, it may be, we shall reach all we have lost only in death, and see our

Pilot face to face, when we have crossed the bar. For these consummations the poet can only wait in patience.

IV

God, though to Thee our psalm we raise
No answering voice comes from the skies.²³

Gerard Manley Hopkins' early poetry, the poetry he burned in the "slaughter of the innocents" after his conversion, is a consistent expression of the situation of a man who finds himself isolated in the midst of an alien universe, a universe which "rebuffs him with blank unlikeness."²⁴ Such a universe has a double emptiness. On the one hand there is nothing in it which shows any kinship to man himself. And on the other hand there is nothing in it which reveals any sign of its creator. It is "like a lighted empty hall/Where stands no host at door or hearth" (*Poems*, p. 43). Distance, vacancy, silence — these are the keynotes of Hopkins' early poetry. To read it is to enter a universe of "abysses infinite," where we gaze in vain "On being's dread and vacant maze," where "Vacant creation's lamps appal," and where "Our prayer seems lost in desert ways,/Our hymn in the vast silence dies" (*Poems*, pp. 44, 43).

Within this vacant creation the self is imprisoned in its own immobile self-consciousness. The mind is "the unchanging register of change" (*Poems*, p. 147), and all things swirl in dynamic flux around it. Though Hopkins' tutor at Oxford, Walter Pater, could make a satisfactory philosophy out of such a situation, Hopkins found it intolerable, and all his career, as Jesuit and poet, might be defined as an attempt to escape from the prison to which Paterian phenomenism had condemned him.

The escape takes place through an exploration of one of Hopkins' two definitions of the self. Both of these definitions are derived from the poet's sense that man is isolated from the rest of the creation by his higher degree of particularization. "I find myself," he says, "both as a man and as myself something most determined and distinctive, at pitch, more distinctive and higher pitched than anything else I see"

²³ *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 3rd ed., ed. W. H. Gardner (New York, 1956), p. 43.

²⁴ *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S. J. (London, 1959), p. 123.

(*Sermons*, p. 122). This peculiar mode of isolation is the basis of Hopkins' proof of the existence of God. For him an individuated being "can have been developed, evolved, condensed, from the vastness of the world not anyhow or by the working of common powers but only by one of finer or higher pitch and determination than itself" (*Sermons*, pp. 122-123). If man were one of the lesser creatures, a stone or a kingfisher, there would be no problem. He could see in the creation many things of higher determination than himself, and could thus imagine them to be his source. But man, the highest pitched of all, looks in vain throughout the creation for anything which could have made him. Therefore he must have been made by some being more highly pitched than himself — some being outside the creation, who exists as an "extrinsic power" (*Sermons*, p. 128). This being is God himself, the creator of all.

God is defined by Hopkins as a most "exquisite determining, selfmaking, power" (*Sermons*, p. 125). God's pattern is infinitely complex, and therefore he contains in himself the matrices for all possible and actual creatures, including man. God vibrates simultaneously at all possible pitches. But there is an apparent contradiction in Hopkins' thinking about the nature of selfhood. The contradiction about the self is also a contradiction about the nature of God. This contradiction lies at the heart of the poet's spiritual experience.

On the one hand individuality is a matter of complexity and fineness of pattern. If this is the case then the higher and more elaborate patterns as it were recapitulate all the lower ones, and God, the most complex pattern of all, contains in himself the archetypes of all things. God is the master key which opens all doors, and God the Son, Christ, is the model on which all things are created. Each thing repeats, not God's whole infinitely complex pattern, but some portion of it or simplified version of it. Man too, if we take this view of individuality, though he is not God, does contain in himself all the creatures lower than he in the scale of being. He too is created in the image of Christ. He need not feel alone in the universe, and can, if he is a poet, express his own inscape at the same time as he expresses the inscapes of nature. Beginning with the idea that "any two things however unlike are in something like" (*Sermons*, p. 123), Hopkins explores the realm of words and the realm of nature and finds everywhere proof that all things rhyme. The Parmenidean idea of the univocity of Being is fulfilled in the Scotist doctrine of Christ as the common nature on whom all the creation is modeled, and ultimately Hopkins sees the universe as a vast interlocking harmony, full of fraternal echoes and resonances. All things

resemble one another because they resemble the God who has fathered them forth in pied beauty.

But on the other hand Hopkins thinks of individuality in another radically different way. Perfection of individuality is not complexity of pattern. It is a matter of pitch, of taste, something so highly tuned and idiosyncratic that it is like nothing else in the world. Hopkins' "selftaste" is what Scotus calls, in a striking phrase, the *ultima solitudo* of man. At the deepest center of selfhood each man is altogether alone. There are no resonances between men. God must now be defined as the most exquisitely tuned of all, the most isolated of all. God is now defined as unity, not as multiplicity. He is the key which fits no finite lock.

The first of these concepts of individuality provides Hopkins with the basis for his gradual integration of all things into one great chorus of creation. It allows him to transcend completely the isolation to which he seems at first condemned. All the positive side of Hopkins' poetry, the hopeful and "hurrahing" side, derives from this idea about selfhood. A man can be saved, so it seems from this point of view, by doing what comes naturally, because he is created naturally in the image of Christ. He can without qualms instress his own inscape.

The other definition of selfhood, however, is no less integral to Hopkins' thought. It leads to the idea that a man has no kinship with anything, not even with God. Man is "the one exception" (*Sermons*, p. 123) to the law that any two things are in something like. A man's selfhood, his stress of pitch, is like nothing else in the world, not even like God. And if this is the case then he can only hope for salvation if in some miraculous way he is transformed out of himself into the image of Christ. This side of Hopkins' thought leads to the analysis of grace in the commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises* and to the somber poetry of his last years. It means a total repudiation of the mood of "Hurrahing in Harvest."

In the end Hopkins feels himself to be utterly dependent on God's grace, for only grace can operate on the *ultima solitudo* and change a man from diabolical idiosyncrasy into a version of Christ, an "AfterChrist" (*Sermons*, p. 100). He need only wait, in patience and hope, for grace to descend. But this is just what does *not* happen. Though Hopkins has isolated experiences of the descent of grace, such as those recorded in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" and "Carrion Comfort," the central religious experience of his last years is the prolonged anguish of spiritual paralysis, dryness of soul, the absence of God, and the failure of grace. It is as if God has withdrawn from the

soul and from the world, leaving Hopkins in a situation strangely like that recorded in his early poems — a situation of abandonment and impotent suffering.

The final stance of Hopkins is rather like that of Matthew Arnold. Hopkins has given up everything positive, everything natural, and lives in complete deprivation of natural growth and productivity, except for brief spasms of poetic creation. He has emptied himself of his nature, and is waiting, so far fruitlessly, for the spark from heaven to fall. Though he seems so different from other nineteenth-century writers who suffered the absence of God, in reality he ends in a similar situation. Though he takes the most extreme measures he does not escape from their plight. The experience recorded in the “terrible sonnets,” and in the late letters and retreat notes, is striking evidence that the nineteenth century was for many writers a time of the no longer and not yet, a time of the absence of God. Hopkins, it might be said, has, beyond all his contemporaries, the most shattering experience of the disappearance of God. He too believes in God, but is unable to reach him. And for him too happiness can come only beyond the gates of death, just as Thomas De Quincey can rise from the depths of spiritual suffering only at the moment of death,²⁵ just as Arnold waits in the vacuum between two worlds, and just as Cathy and Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, must die to be reunited.

Only in Browning, of the poets discussed here, are there hints and anticipations of the recovery of immanence, beyond the dualism of earth and heaven, which was to be the inner drama of twentieth-century literature. Only Browning seems to have glimpsed the fact that the sad alternatives of nihilism, on the one hand, and escape beyond the world, on the other, could be evaded if man would only reject twenty-five hundred years of dualism. If man could do this, twentieth-century writers were to find, he might come to see that being and value lie in *this* world, in what is immediate, tangible, present to man, in earth, sun, sea, the stars in their courses, and in what Yeats was to call “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.” But Browning too, like Tennyson, Arnold, and Hopkins, was stretched on the rack of a dying transcendentalism, and could reach a precarious unity only by the most extravagant stratagems of the spirit.

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²⁵ See “Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow,” in the “Suspiria de Profundis,” *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson (London, 1897), XIII, 362-369.