Religion in Literature

by

Stopford A. Brooke[1]

Annotated by
Tod E. Jones, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Maryland, College Park
© 2003

It is well, when we talk of literature, to know what we mean by the term. It is often used to mean any kind of clever writing on almost any subject. Men talk of scientific, critical, theological, economic, journalistic literature, of historical and philosophical literature. They ought to say "writing," not "literature," else the word literature has too universal a meaning. When men speak of French, German, or English literature, they do not include under these titles all that is written in these several nations. They only include writings which possess certain excellent qualities which differentiate them from the rest. The first of these is that the subject should be noble, and the matter weighty with thought and feeling. The second is that the manner should be graceful, temperate, and beautiful; and that the shaping of the subject—that is, the form given to it—should be so composed into a harmony of the parts with the whole, and of the whole with the parts, that it gives to the reader something of the pleasure of an unspoilt growth of nature. If that be so, if the form is good, then the writing will have a certain divine clearness; a pleasant individual note, charged with the character of the writer; a happy choice of words; an "ornament" that exactly fits its place, and such surprising turns of thought and expression as suggests flexibility of thought, rapidity of fancy, and self-enjoyment in the writer. In one word, he will have style.

Above all, the imagination must be at work in any writing which deserves the name of literature. Imagination, the "shaping spirit," has much to do with the *form* of which I have spoken, perhaps as much as steady and slow-ordered thought, for it runs and spreads through all such thought as the blood runs through the body. It is the life of literature. But its main power is the power of creation—the power by which man draws nearest to the power of God—the making of a new thing in the

---

1. Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832-1916). This lecture is the first of two delivered in November 1899, by arrangement with the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, at Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, and subsequently published as *Religion in Literature and Religion in Life: Two Lectures* (London: Philip Green, 1900). *Vide* Lawrence Pearsall Jacks, *Life and Letters of Stopford Brooke*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917): 2:496-97.

world for the pleasure and praise of all the spirits of the universe. It is not the making of a new thing out of nothing, as "creation" used to be defined; but it is the making out of existing elements, by re-combining them afresh, of a complete and rounded thing which did not exist before.[2] This is what imagination does in literature, sitting alone, like Prometheus, by the sea of human life, and in her hands turning old material into shapes as yet unknown.[3] And she does this moved by the passions; her blood, as she works, thrilling with sorrow or indignation, with love, joy, or pity, with awe or hope, according to her material; but chiefly with that passion of loving and divine joy which always accompanies, in noble excitement and intensity, the act of creation when accomplished either by God or man.

But the imagination, when it is not diseased, works in accordance with the laws of the universe; and the result is that its creation possesses truth. What it paints, or builds, or carves, or sings, or writes, is true; goes down to the bottom rock of all its varied material in the natural world, and to the mother elements of the heart of man.

---

2. Cf. S. T. Coleridge: "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former . . . . It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (*Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols; vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983], 1:304). Brooke's perspective on the work of the Imagination is, essentially, that of Coleridge in regard to the secondary Imagination.

3. Brooke's theory of *poesis* (creation) is pantheistic and neo-platonic. God, as expressive Love and Life, necessarily creates out of himself, not *ex nihilo*, and the poet, like Prometheus, who partakes of the divine nature, participates in deity by giving form to that which is already implicit within Nature or is extant in the mind of God. The thing created takes its place within a descending scale from the Good and the True, and to the degree that the thing created is in accord with God or Nature—that is, honors the eternal laws of harmony and symmetry—it partakes of immortality. Ovid tells the story of mankind's creation:

> Then man was born. Either the Architect
> of All, the author of the universe,
> in order to beget a better world,
> created man from seed divine–or else
> Prometheus, son of Iapetus, made man
> by mixing new-made earth with fresh rainwater,
> . . . .
> and when he fashioned man, his mold recalled
> the masters of all things, the gods.
>
> (*Metamorphosis*, bk. 1; trans. Allen Mandelbaum)

Then, out of the whole of this work of the imagination, out of the constant love which the writer has felt for the ideas he has to shape, and for the mould into which he has thrown them; out of the joy with which he has been thrilled while he wrote them into a creation—emerges beauty, the outward form of love and joy. The thing is made, and beautifully made.

The last result is life. Life beats in the book, the poem, the drama, like a tide; its force is always young, and passes from it like a spirit into men, pleasing and kindling them, bearing witness to truth and beauty. Age after age, like a living voice, it loves to inspire and exalt, to console and bless. The thing repels decay: it is as fresh this year as it was when first it spoke to man, it may be, centuries ago.

These are the qualities, some of which at least, in varying degrees of excellence, but in sameness of kind, must belong to all writing worthy of the name of fine literature. The books, reviews, articles, in which none of these appear, may be useful or amusing, but they are not literature. There are hosts of these, like the stars for multitude, but not for light and fire. They are born, twinkle for a day, and die. The book in which even one of them appears is verging towards literature. It may last a year or two, and then it falls into the waste-paper basket of the universe. Between this fleeting thing, which barely shares in one quality of true literature, and the books in which all the noble qualities of literature breathe and burn there is an ascending series of writings, more and more worthy of the great name of literature, till we come to noble poetry. Except in good poetry, the combination of all these qualities is rarely found. Whatever we may think of other kinds of writing, fine poetry stands at the head of literature.[4] No other kind of writing is to be named along with it, and if I am to discuss religion in literature in an hour's time (when the full treatment of such a subject would require a hundred hours), I will keep myself to religion as it appears during the last eighty years in poetry. . . .

Then as to the term religion, what I shall mean by that in this lecture also needs definition. It cannot mean in this subject the inward spiritual life which man lives with God in the depths of his soul. That is different in every writer of literature, if the writer have it at all; and we are speaking here, under the term religion, of something

---

4. Cf. Plotinus: "All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine Reason-Principle. . . . But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into co-operation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may" (*Enneads*, 1.6, trans. Stephen MacKenna [New York: Larson, 1992], 66).

which belongs to classes of men; a generic, not an individual thing; a set of ideas, held by many in common, and expressed and represented by the poet. Nor do I take it to mean the congeries of doctrines and ritual adopted by any church or sect or generally by a nation, such as we mean when we speak of the Protestant or the Roman Catholic religion.

I mean by it here that set of ideas, or that one idea, which a great writer, speaking as the mouthpiece of thousands of men, puts forward as the highest aim of life, as the expression of that which he desires to worship in thought and with passion, to which he desires to conform his own life, which he urges on others, and for the promotion of which he and all who think and feel with him bind themselves together into one body. Such a set of ideas, or such a single idea is expressed in varied forms of writing, and breathes like a spirit through all the literature written by persons who have these ideas; but it is expressed in the closest, the most penetrative, and the most universal way in poetry. Such an idea or set of ideas is not always expressed in poetry in clear intellectual form, for poetry does not proceed by logical demonstration, but it is a pervasive spirit in the poetry of those who live by these ideas, and they steal with more power, creeping into the study of imagination, into the hearts and lives of men, than they do by any philosophic or argumentative treatment of them in prose.[5]

What, then, does the poetry of the last eighty years tell us about the religion or the religions of the land? How does religion, as defined, appear in this highest form of literature? Religion, as defined, but sometimes religion as mere theology, played

---

5. For the purposes of this lecture, Brooke dispenses with both the extreme Protestant and Catholic poles of religious theory. On the one hand, it is not what Schleiermacher defines as consisting of "inward emotions and dispositions" or "a sense and taste for the Infinite" (*On Religion*, trans. John Oman [Westminster: John Knox, 1994], pp. 18, 39); on the other hand, it is not to be conflated with dogma or the set of beliefs developed and transmitted through apostolic tradition. Instead, Brooke adopts what J. C. Shairp—afterwards, Professor of Poetry at Oxford (1877-87)—had defined as the Cultural theory of religion, the idea "that men's lives and characters are determined mainly by their ideal, that is, by the thing they lay to heart and live by, often without themselves being aware of it, by that which they in their inmost souls love, desire, aim at, as the best possibility for themselves and others." These ideals are, according to Shairp, manifold: "there is the ideal poetical, the ideal political, the ideal philanthropic" (*Culture and Religion in Some of Their Relations*, 3rd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1872], 21-3). For Brooke, religion—insofar as it is expressed in literature—consists in the shaping ideal that is largely the product of culture and determines a person's judgments and highest aspirations.

a great part in the new poetry which arose in Scotland and England about 1780. A good deal of the poetry of Burns was due to the impassioned revolt in him of the "religion of nature" and of the human heart, against the terrible religion of Calvinism. He established the spirit of humanity in poetry. All the out-goings of love were divine, and nothing which was not loving could belong to God, or ought to belong to man. In this warm air of lovingness Burns wrapt the whole universe, from the lowest animal to the highest man, from the devil whom he pitied to God, who, he thought, shared his pity. It was a great revelation, and it has never, since his day, ceased to live in fine literature. It is now part of the religion of all high poets, and is alive, in fire and light, in all literature which is destined to continue and to grow.[6]

This religion in poetry was well fitted to absorb the main and undegraded ideas of the French Revolution—the freedom, equality, and fraternity of man, and the return to a simple life lived close to nature—and it did absorb them. Wordsworth took up this religion, worked it out, and made it the master spirit of his song. Full of the love which Burns had preached; extending that love by the impassioned spirit he gained from France to all mankind; citizen and lover not of one country but of the country of humanity; he shed on the life of the peasant and the unknown poor the light of heaven and of imagination, and made musical all the natural and simple life of the human heart in sorrow and joy by the glory and tenderness of song.[7] And then he added to nature a human heart, loved it, and said that it loved us. And this, embodied by him, and varied through a hundred forms, has had a power on us which resembles that which the religion of Christ has on the heart and life of man. It has healed and comforted, exalted, impelled, and dignified our love of one another and

---

6. Robert Burns (1759-96), author of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), the poet referred to by Henry Mackenzie as "a Heaven-taught ploughman." In contradistinction to the Calvinism predominant in the presbyterian Church of Scotland, Burns gives expression to a religion that is *natural* (as opposed to supernaturally *revealed* or logically deduced). His is the religion revealed through feelings, moral sensibilities, and intimations or intuitions, by which he discerns a God of indiscriminate love. This, says Brooke (and he cannot sufficiently emphasize it), is the religion that pervades the highest literature.

7. William Wordsworth (1770-1850), in the autobiographical *Prelude*, reflects, "'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced, / France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again" (1805; VI.352-54). The principal object of the poet, in the selection published under the title *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), "was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them . . . the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen because," among other reasons listed by the author, "in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity" (Preface, 1800 edition).

our love of our country. It has penetrated the religion of church and sect; it has poured into the individual religion of thousands a spirit of beauty and tenderness. It has entered into the life of nature, and we worship God in nature with a new reverence and a new joy.[8]

Then a change took place. The enthusiasm of spirit, the joy in a new life of the imagination, which accompanied this development of pure literature, faded away after 1815. The increase of wealth, the development of the industrial revolution, the materialism of the country, the corruption and luxury which ate into the "upper classes" of society, overwhelmed the ideal life and the simple religiousness of the poetry of Wordsworth; and the cynicism and self-consideration of Byron expressed only too clearly how little of the religion of love and joy was left in this country. There was a religion, but it was worship of self. The binding power of men was self-interest; the gods of the country were hypocrisy and Mammon and sensual pleasure; and Byron, who, as a poet, could not altogether belong to this slavish crew, added to his religion of self-worship the mockery, contempt, and slashing of the base gods of his people. Like Elijah on Carmel, he satirized the worshippers of Baalim, and on the whole, though his manner of doing this was bad, he stood for truth and honesty against lies in society, church, and state. To know what Britain was then, and to know the fury with which all high-hearted men regarded its spiritual condition, read the satirical poems of Byron.[9] If he, who was himself a sinner, felt in that way, how did others, nobler of spirit, feel?

---

8. The impact that Wordsworth had upon Christian thought during the nineteenth century is considered at length by Stephen Prickett in *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

9. Brooke's argument—that the melancholy and contempt of Lord Byron (1788-1824) toward the vulgarly commercial and self-serving interests of industrial post-war England is representative of "high-hearted" persons—finds support from John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873; chap. 5). Having, in 1828, read through Byron's poems with the intent of finding relief from mental depression, Mill discovers, "The poet's state of mind was too like my own. His was the lament of a man who had worn out all pleasures, and who seemed to think that life, to all who possess the good things of it, must necessarily be the vapid, uninteresting thing which I found it." Out of curiosity, Mill then turns, for the first time, to the poetry of Wordsworth. Mill's subsequent analysis is *apropos*: "What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings" (*Autobiography of John Stuart Mill: Published for the First Time without*

Nevertheless, he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and the materialism of life, the corruption in the state, and the worthless conventionality of religion, accompanied, as it always is, with cruel doctrines and with the image of a God who thinks that injustice is a form of love, went steadily on. Its doom had not yet come. But poetry was not voiceless, and by Shelley's lips the religion which is the masterhood of love was again revealed to the world.[10] Love was, in his thought, the Being of the Universe, the source, the life, the end of all things. All that contradicted love was doomed to perish. This was the root of Shelley's religion, and it is the root of all true religion; the essence of the true idea of God; the thought which rules all the doings of God with man, to which all the thoughts and feelings which bind man to God and God to man must conform; the foundation of Christianity; the idea which never ceases to protest against the material, selfish, and sensual life; the mighty power which stands, embattled, against those who worship self-interest as the master of human life—and Shelley, in a world which had forgotten self-forgetfulness, called on it as the prophet called on the four winds, and bade it blow over the plains of our country and awake the dead. And he joined with this two other ideas which are its children—the idea of infinite forgiveness of wrong and the idea of the future regeneration of the human race—both of them vital conceptions in the wider religion which has of late taken substance among mankind.

Curious that one called an atheist should do this—and it sheds a lurid light on the theology of that day that churches and sects alike combined to force one, who proclaimed, in all that related to man, the ideas of Jesus Christ, into the realm of atheism. But if priests and presbyters will set up, as they did in Palestine when Jesus was alive, as for centuries they have done, in order to keep their tyranny over the souls and thoughts of men, a god of unforgiveness, a god who dooms his children to everlasting torture, a god who loves, for his own self-glory, only a few out of the millions he hates, what is a man to do? He must say, "It is a hateful lie," and take the consequences. Theology has changed since then, but England was not fit for this

---

Alterations or Omissions from the Original Manuscript [New York: Columbia University Press, 1924], 103-04).

10. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) is widely known as the poet who, as an Oxford undergraduate, was expelled for having co-authored and circulated a pamphlet titled *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). Brooke, knowing that the reputation of Shelley as a religious thinker is generally based on this trifling piece of historical information, delivers in quick succession a series of stunning, but corrective, critical remarks. In the Broad Church tradition, Brooke challenges the popular conception of "atheism." F. D. Maurice (1805-72), following Thomas Erskine, often remarked that, where "the living God" is not worshiped, a rigid orthodoxy is often employed as a mask for atheism. (I elaborate in *The Broad Church: A Biography of a Movement* [Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003], 204.)

prophet, and she had sunk so low into a worldly life and an intolerant and lazy imitation of religion, that she drove him out of her borders in the name of religion.

Look now at this island of ours in and about 1820. No high emotion of any kind, such as lifts a nation above itself, pervaded it: there was no ideal aim before society, little care for the welfare of fellow-citizens among employers or landlords, no forward hope or faith in the bettering of the world. A few desired higher things, but they were fewer even than those eight thousand who had not bowed in Israel the knee to Baal.[11] There was plenty of intellectual discussion, of analysis of human nature by philosophers, but scarcely any new literature, moved by love of human nature, arose at this time, nor was there any new form of imaginative penetration into the passionate aspirations of mankind. What literature of this kind existed was in the writings of men who, like Scott, had lived on from the last generation into this period.[12] Criticism, also, which proved everyone wrong but the critic and his crew, was indeed plentiful, but there was little or no creation, and what there was, was thought to be a revolting birth. When Keats did begin to create, the critics howled, as if they had seen a monster.[13] Scarcely anything is more amusing or more sad in

---

11. "And [Elijah] said, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts, because the children of Israel have forsaken thy Covenant, thrown down thine Altars, and slain thy Prophets with the sword, and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.' And the Lord said unto him, '. . . I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him'" (1 Kngs. 19:14-15a,18).

12. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), who first became a celebrity of Scotland as a poet of border ballads (1802-03), afterwards turned his literary talents to patriotic and historical novel writing. Among his well-known novels are *Waverley* (1814), *Old Mortality* (1816), *Rob Roy* (1817), *Ivanhoe* (1819), and *The Monastery* and *The Abbot* (both 1820).

13. Keats's first published poems, in the *Examiner*, were highly praised by Leigh Hunt, the editor of the paper, who, while noting that the poems were not without fault, yet recognized that their "beauties . . . outnumber the faults hundred fold." Encouraged, Keats published *Poems* (1817) and *Endymion, a Poetic Romance* (1818). The first volume went unnoticed, and the second was attacked in the pages of *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*. Keats was identified as a member of the "Cockney School" of poets led by Hunt, and in Keats's poetry the critics found all the faults and excesses expected in any "art" produced by a member of his social class. As late as 1875, A. C. Swinburne wrote for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "In his first book there was little foretaste of anything greatly or even genuinely good. . . . The style was frequently detestable—a mixture of sham Spenserian and mock Wordsworthian, alternately florid and arid. His second book, *Endymion*, rises in its best passages to the highest level of Barnfield and of Lodge, the two previous poets with whom, had he published nothing more, he might most properly have been classed. . . . His third book raised him at once to a foremost rank in the highest class of English poets." This third volume is *Lamia, Isabella, the Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820). In September 1820, two

literary history than the critics' reception of Keats, the creator. Beauty rose before them in his poetry, like Aphrodite, and the apes turned from her with a malicious sneer. Then Byron, sick of this world of critical reasoning on premises invented as truths by the philosophers and critics themselves, sick of his own sensualities, sick of a materialized world, fled to Greece to die for liberty.[14] Shelley was driven to Italy; his name and work were blackened by Edinburgh and London; and the religion of the day screamed at the man who, alone in a loveless world, proclaimed the essentials of Christianity as the foundation of life.[15]

It was no wonder that Keats, gazing on this world barren of passion, hope, and aspiration, where the bones and remnants of the noble ideas which had enkindled the poetic outburst of the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, lay dry and strewn on the desert, like a caravan overwhelmed by thirst, cried, in the sonnet which preceded the poems of 1817—

> "Glory and loveliness have passed away."

"How," he thought, "shall I redeem men from this death and misery which they think life and happiness? With what shall I bind them together again? What religion shall I proclaim?" And he answered his question by preaching the religion of beauty.

> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
> We know on earth, and all we need to know."

---

months after its publication, he accepted Shelley's invitation to join him in Pisa. However, Keats went first to Rome, where he succumbed to tuberculosis in February 1821.

14. Byron left England in 1816 and, after living for several months with the Shelleys on Lake Geneva, where he wrote parts of *Childe Harold*, he journeyed to Rome and Venice. In Venice, in 1818, he began *Don Juan*, which he worked on intermittently for the remainder of his life. After moving to Pisa in 1821, he worked with Leigh Hunt on the publication of a literary magazine, *The Liberal* (1822-24). Feeling strongly that Greece should be liberated from the Turks, he decided to aid the Greek insurgents. However, in April 1824, three months after arriving at Missolonghi, he died of fever.

15. As a zealous and outspoken democrat, believing in and practicing communal living and "free-love," Shelley attracted much opposition—on political, moral, and religious grounds. After separating from his first wife, Harriet, in 1814, Shelley lived near London with Mary Godwin and her stepsister. After Harriet's suicide in 1816, Shelley quickly married Mary as part of a vain attempt to gain legal custody of his children. That summer, after joining Byron on Lake Geneva, Shelley wrote the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and Mary wrote *Frankenstein*. In 1818, Shelley left England permanently, living a nomadic existence in Italy for the next year, until he settled in Pisa. During this difficult year, he wrote "Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Skylark." In 1821, after hearing of the death of Keats, he wrote *Adonais*, and upon the arrival of Byron and Leigh Hunt, began making arrangements for the production of a literary magazine. In early 1822, Shelley moved to a beach-house on the bay of Lerici. In August, while returning across the bay during a storm, the poet's boat sank and he drowned.

"Then how shall I make men know and feel what beauty is, and awake the worship of her? There is nothing in my country, nor in the present time, to stir the love of beauty in a single soul; there is nothing, except the beauty of the natural world, which moves me. Therefore I go back to the past. I will paint the loveliness, the passion, the heroism of the Greek world, and of the days of chivalry and romance; and the forest full of elves; Saturn lying among the green senators of the woods; Apollo singing in Delos; Endymion embraced on Latmos; Isabella weeping sore for her slain lover; Madeline flying on St. Agnes' Eve with Porphyro; and all the sights and sounds of eternal Nature in her youth and loveliness."

And this he gave to us, but the revelation of beauty fell dead on the world to which he spoke. Keats prophesied, but no ear could hear his prophecy. Nor indeed, standing alone, unmixed with mighty moral aims, unaccompanied with the deep interests of mankind, without joining loveliness to its immortal fountain in the duties of man and in the love of God, having no vital roots in the present, only replanted, like cut flowers, from the past, could his prophecy or his religion of beauty kindle the world in which he lived, or engender new poets in that world. This was his own opinion. Both in his letters and in some of his last poems, he spoke of the necessity of getting into inspiring touch, not only with the past, but with the present humanity. "I have not been human enough," he thought. "I need another and a deeper emotion from sympathy with the living." And had he lived, he would have attained this end, and won even a loftier seat on Parnassus than that he holds. And this experience of Keats' adds another proof to the truth that, in every age, the highest, the imperial poetry, must find its motive and its passion in the existing thoughts and passions, acts and aspirations of the world in which the poet lives. Poetry about the past, poetry not vitally connected with the present human life, as the nerves are with the muscles, is pleasant, lovely, if a great poet like Keats write it, but if small poets write it, it becomes mere melodious words, with a false semblance of passion in it; and finally ends in thin and ghostly verse, faint and fainter, till it disappears. If, again, a great poet, like Keats, write it, his work is finally taken up into the whole body of song, but then it has no children during the poet's lifetime. Similar conditions of society may in the future produce a similar kind of poetry in the hands of a future master of song, but whenever such poetry is written—only about the beauty and glory of the past—it ends with itself. Its religion of mere beauty breathes and burns and charms—and dies; and the ten years which followed the death of Keats were years in which poetry faded into mere sentimentalism and melody; and literature blossomed into a plenteous crop of the crab-apples of sour and foolish criticism. Criticism sat in the throne of Creation, and the throne must have longed for its rightful lord.

But the Master of Mankind did not let our country continue in this state. A wind of the spirit, bearing with it new ideas and their native emotions, began to blow. Men in the richer classes grew tired of mere material comfort and of only living for wealth

they had not earned. They dimly longed for the ideal, and the things which were not to be had for money. The rage of the oppressed poor deepened; the indignation of the middle class, who made the wealth of the country but had no voice in the use of it by Parliament, rose steadily; till at last a cry was raised, full of passion and hope, and charged with the desire to better the conditions of government and of the people, which almost gave birth to a violent revolution.[16] At the same time, a new theological and religious movement, with a host of new emotions, and divided into two rivers of thought, stirred the hearts of men, and especially towards the improvement of the condition of the poor. The Oxford movement and the Liberal movement in theology were born at the same time as the political movement for reform.[17] A tidal wave of

---

16. It was widely supposed, following the French Revolution, that the lower social classes in England would also rise up against the government. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, no European country had as marked a contrast between the social conditions of the privileged class or aristocracy and the lower orders. The industrial revolution, resulting in the unprecedented migration and concentration of the poor within inadequately developed manufacturing cities, greatly exacerbated the social discontent and would, undoubtedly, have resulted in a violent uprising had not other factors intervened. First, as workers gradually acquired a share in control over the means of production, they also acquired some measure of independence, and thus a middle class developed. The Reform Bill of 1832, by providing middle-class males with political representation, not only reduced the size and power of the working class, but also defused much of their unrest, as it encouraged the vain expectation of indirect representation. Second, the poor of England, even though otherwise uneducated, were predominantly religious and, despite their many hardships and privations, remained susceptible to an ideology that taught them "to do their duty in that station wherein God, in his infinite wisdom, had seen fit to place them." Third, by the late 1840s, when the national organization and numerical strength of the working class under the banner of Chartism had made a workers' uprising a real possibility, the infusion of socialist ideas into their ranks generated confusion and disunion.

17. Dissent from the Established Church of England had been most pervasive among the middle class, who tended to become affiliated with Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Unitarians, and Quakers. At the time of the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832, clergymen widely feared that middle class representation within Parliament would affect the Church of England either by making the State the arbiter of Church doctrine (Erastianism) or by severing the political and financial ties uniting Church and State (disestablishment). The churchmen who feared Erastianism sought to uphold the high dignity and spiritual grace of the episcopal office and, on this ground, fought against every political and judicial intrusion into ecclesiastical affairs. J. H. Newman (1801-90) and R. H. Froude (1803-36), the initial leaders of the Oxford Movement, sought to organize the clergy so as to protect the purity of Church doctrine and resist Erastianism and the theological liberalism that fosters it, even though such resistance might result in disestablishment. On the other hand, the churchmen who feared disestablishment sought to reform the Church liturgy, eliminate all narrow or one-sided

emotion from these three centres flowed over the land, and out of it emerged a crowd of fresh ideas, fresh forms of action, new modes of art and new ideas about art, born not directly of the political and theological stir, but of the stir itself. No contrast could be greater than that between this condition of Great Britain, thrilling with ideal life and feeling, and the condition of ten years before. It was sure to give birth to poets, and Tennyson and Browning were born, as poets, in those years within a year of one another, and began to prophesy.[18] For sixty years they worked for the good and progress of mankind, on different lines and in diverse manners. They preached the religious idea of freedom, of the individual soul alone with God, of the man realizing and doing his duty to his fellow-man. They preached the religion of love, the love of God and the love of man, and the eternity of love in God. They preached, with Wordsworth, the loss of self in admiration of nature as the visible form of the beauty of God. They maintained, with Keats, the religion of beauty, but they added to it the beauty of noble conduct. They looked forward, with Shelley, to the new birth of man, and bid the world strive for it. They preached, and especially Browning, endless aspiration after unreached, even unconceived perfection, and mingled with this cry of uncontent with anything that earth can give a stern demand to do our duty here on earth, within the limitations which earth imposes. "Live in, and for, the present," they cried, "but never be satisfied with it. Follow the ever-retreating gleam; pursue ideals which can only be realized in immortal life. We are not creatures of a day, not destined to death, but to endless progress." This was the religion they sang, and it has profoundly influenced mankind. Browning never wavered in it; Tennyson, less individual than his brother, more sensitive to the changes of thought that arose and fell during those sixty years, wavered somewhat with those changes, and expressed his shifting; but at the end he settled into quiet faith.

---

interpretations of Church doctrine, and arouse the social conscience of the clergy, so as to make the Church of England more truly representative of the Christian consciousness of the nation.

18. Alfred Tennyson (1809-92), arguably the Victorian poet most representative of his time, published *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* in 1830 and *Poems* in 1832. After a decade of silence following the death of A. H. Hallam in 1833, a more mature Tennyson published a revised selection of poems. Afterwards appeared *The Princess* (1847), *In Memoriam* (1850), *Maud, and Other Poems* (1855), *Idylls of the King* (1859), *Enoch Arden* (1864), *The Holy Grail* (1869), and *Gareth and Lynette* (1872). He succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate in 1850. Robert Browning (1812-89) published his first volume of poetry, *Pauline*, in 1833. He went on to publish numerous collections of verse, culminating (but not ending) with *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69). From 1846 to 1861 Browning lived in Italy with his wife, neé Elizabeth Barrett (1806-61).

It is to the poetry which, in other hands than Tennyson's or Browning's, emerged during those changes of thought, that I now turn; and the poets who were influenced by them have their own interest, and reflect their own world. Before 1850 had arrived, the excitement of the resurrection of emotional and intellectual life in our country, of which the political and theological movements were phases, had cast into the arena of discussion and battle a host of questions, from the existence of God to the sanitation of a village. The passions with which the solution of these questions was sought was remarkable enough, but what was even more remarkable was, that while a vast number of books, each of which boldly claimed to have settled for ever the question to which it had addressed itself, were written and read with eagerness—there was also a general consensus that nothing could be settled, that man could come to no conclusion, that he practically knew nothing about God or himself or the world in which he lived, that the more he strove the blinder he was, and that the best thing he could do was to confess with humility his ignorance and his incapacity. Our world, long before the term *agnostic* was invented, was agnostic; and the waves of that disturbance are still, with diminishing force, breaking on the shore of society.[19] Nevertheless, the discussion never ceased, as if men still believed that they could find, by argument, a solution of which they had no hope. They went round and round their subjects like a horse in a mill, and they ground out nothing, for the most part, but chaff. They analyzed, dissected, vivisected God and humanity and nature; and in these years were born, not only the philosophies which ticket and put into a museum, like fossils, all the passions, thoughts, and acts of men, but also the psychological novel, the novel of analysis, which, at first pleased with the dissection of health, now loves to dabble in disease. In the theological world matters were just as bad. The

---

19. Leslie Stephen notes, "The name Agnostic, originally coined by Professor [T. H.] Huxley about 1869, has gained general acceptance. . . . The Agnostic is one who asserts—what no one denies—that there are limits to the sphere of human intelligence. He asserts, further, what many theologians have expressly maintained, that those limits are such as to exclude at least what [G. H.] Lewes called 'metempirical' knowledge. But he goes further, and asserts, in opposition to theologians, that theology lies within this forbidden sphere" (*An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays* [London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1893], 1-2). H. L. Mansel, in his Bampton Lectures of 1858, *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined*, argued that, aside from miraculous revelation, we can have no positive knowledge of God, only a recognition that God is not subject to human limitations. According to Mansel, the proper subject of intellectual inquiry is not God, but the human mind in its relation to God. In opposition, F. D. Maurice argued, in *What Is Revelation?* (1859), that the nature of God is made manifest in the person of Christ and is revealed by appealing to the deepest sensibilities of every person. Stopford Brooke takes this Coleridgean-Mauricean position, believing that the greatest poets are those most receptive to the divine voice that speaks to them from within.

various parties lost sight of the great truths in which man believes without proof, if he believe at all, and argued incessantly about their views of truth; and the quicker, subtler, and more analytic their intellectual play, the further they got from the great truths. Things beyond the realm of science, beyond phenomena, were to be settled, it was said, by the reasoning understanding—that enormous error under whose tyranny we are suffering so heavily.[20]

The result of all this activity of the understanding, employed only on the surface of things, naturally unable to penetrate below the surface, ever arguing and never arriving, yet absurdly proud of its ability and earning the punishment of pride, was a dreadful weariness among those who retained any imagination, any passion for the unknown, any desire for beauty or the infinite world, for the impalpable, the unproveable; for something to love, to lose one's self in, to pursue for ever and to worship. In fact, the soul gave in, and life became to many a boundless weariness. The soul had not reached then the state of active wrath and rebellion it is at present reaching against the despotism of the understanding. It lay down helpless, tired out by analytic chatter; was exhausted by the dryness and ugliness of a world from which all things were excluded which could not be clearly judged and arranged by logical argument.

A great deal of that weariness still lasts, still waits, and sometimes whines, in society and literature. When it first arose in this century—it has made its appearance again and again in history—it was manlier than it is now, and it was expressed by two poets with courage, with something of a tragic dignity, and with a conclusion which, for the time being, was practical, of lasting worth to the progress of man. Clough and Arnold were these poets, and they have both written some of the saddest verses in the world; verses steeped in a bewildered weariness of thought, ever inquiring and only touching with blind hands an impassable wall; longing but unable to find either order, or love, or calm in the universe, but always, like some noble Greek caught in the net or inexorable fate, holding to the duties which were yet clear, and resolved to die unsubdued by fear, or meanness, or the world. If we wish to know what the

---

20. According to Coleridge, who adopts the Kantian distinction between the Reason and the Understanding, the province of the Understanding is the sensory realm, having to do with "quantities, qualities, and relations of *particulars* in time and space" (*The Statesman's Manual* ed. R. W. White, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972], Appendix C, 59). For human beings, the Understanding is also discursive—that is, it involves the capacities of reflection and generalization that are acquired by the use of language. It is not the Understanding, but the Reason that unites humanity with the Eternal and facilitates spiritual revelation (*Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer, vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993], 218-24).

age was to men of a high temper and a love of truth, we should read the two books published in 1849 by Clough and Arnold; and then read—observing how the bewilderment and weariness deepened, and how desperate men struggled to get to some life and light—the poems which Arnold published in 1853.[21] To these poets, save for vague hopes, expressed now and again with vague passion, there was no religion left but the religion of duty. "Do what lies before you, and leave the rest in other hands, if there are any; and bear the dry trouble of a life which has lost its stars as well and bravely as you can. If there be a God in whom we shall live in love, if He cares for us, it is well; but if not, we will act honourably to the end of the tragedy, and make the best of it." This was the temper of the time in noble literature, this the religion; and it was the only gospel which Carlyle and many others who had passed through those weary years, could give to us.[22] It lasts still; it is one of the elements

---

21. Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-61), in collaboration with Thomas Burbidge, published a collection of poems under the title *Ambarvalia*, which appeared in January 1849. In poems such as "The New Sinai" Clough expresses both his dissatisfaction in regard to current religious thought and his faith in the greater truth that underlies religion:

Lo, here is God, and there is God!
  Believe it not, O Man;
In such vain sort to this and that
  The ancient heathen ran:
Though old Religion shake her head,
  And say in bitter grief,
The day behold, at first foretold,
  Of atheist unbelief:
Take better part, with manly heart,
  Thine adult spirit can;
Receive it not, believe it not,
  Believe it not, O Man!

. . . .
Take better part, with manlier heart,
  Thine adult spirit can;
No God, no Truth, receive it ne'er—
  Believe it ne'er—O Man!
But turn not then to seek again
  What first the ill began;
No God, it saith; ah, wait in faith
  God's self-completing plan;
Receive it not, but leave it not,
  And wait it out, O Man!
(1-12, 95-104)

Matthew Arnold (1822-88) in the same year published *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems*, a volume that offers, in the absence of religious certitude, the stoic advice of "Resignation" and the promise, not of joy, but of peace. In 1852, Arnold published *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*, and in the following year, *Poems: A New Edition*. In such poems as "Self-Dependence" and "Memorial Verses," we hear an anguish that is absent from the earlier volume, a sense of great loss and struggle against despair, and in "Empedocles on Etna," we witness a triumph of despair that the poet himself, afterwards, in his Preface to *Poems* (1853), would denounce as improper to poetry, which should "inspirit and rejoice the reader."

22. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)—in such works as *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), *The French Revolution* (1837), *Chartism* (1839), his 1840 London lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (publ. 1841), and *Past and Present* (1843)—profoundly

which are at the root of those merely ethical religions of which so many desire our suffrages to-day, religion which, being devoid of the pursuit of the perfection which reaches beyond duty, can never produce, in a world like ours, which has learnt something of the illimitable and felt its passion, the spirit which creates the noblest literature. The ethical religions consecrate finality. Art of every kind, like Christianity, abhors it.

Now, while all this weary discussion had brought poets to the point where Arnold and Clough are found—science had also been at work and had dispersed, in the midst of endless disputes, a host of the old and venerable landmarks of thought and belief. An example or two may show what it did to the ancient religion and therefore to religion in literature. Geology destroyed belief in the orthodox doctrine of creation, in the plenary inspiration of the Bible, and before long in the separate creation of man, and in the Fall as told in Genesis.[23] Not only did that make a mighty

---

influenced the young Clough and Arnold in their Rugby and Balliol College days. According to Carlyle, "The end of Man is an Action, and not a Thought," and he who would find his happiness must first find his duty and his work.

23. William Buckland, Oxford's first lecturer in geology, published in 1823 his *Reliquiæ Diluvianæ*, in which he argues that the geological evidence for an ice age supports the biblical account of the Noahtic Deluge. After the publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), catastrophism (hypotheses of global cataclysm that account for successive acts of creation and sudden changes in the earth's crust) was supplanted by uniformitarianism (hypotheses of natural, ongoing processes that account for the origin and demise of species and geological transformations). In Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise of 1836, *Geology and Mineralogy considered with Reference to Natural Theology*, he discounts Bishop Ussher's dating of creation at 4004 B.C. on the grounds that the world has been inhabited by living creations for countless ages. He suggests, instead, that the "days" of creation may indicate epochs instead of periods of twenty-four hours, but that—in any case—we have no reason to expect science from the Bible. Genesis tells us not *how* the world was made, but *by whom* it was made (John Hunt, *Religious Thought in England in the Nineteenth Century* [London: Gibbings & Co, 1896], 51-2; Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* [New York: Longman, 1993], 118-20; *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone [New York: Oxford University Press, 1974]). While many clergymen insisted on the scientific accuracy of Genesis, and some shifted their interpretation of Scripture in order to arrive at a plausible agreement with science, a few clergymen argued that the Bible had only to do with questions of faith and morality, not with science. Thomas Arnold, in his *Essay on the Right Interpretation and Understanding of the Scriptures* (1831), argued a theory of accommodation or gradual revelation, which keeps pace with the intellectual and cultural development of humanity. Coleridge, in his Letters on Inspiration (1824, posthumously published as *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, 1835), had anticipated Arnold by arguing

change in theology; it wrought also—by blotting out a number of old authorities, emotional motives, and maps of thought—a great change in literature. Then,

---

an "actuation by the Holy Spirit" that appeals to the Reason of humanity. William Godwin, in his essay on "The Mosaic Cosmogony," published in *Essays and Reviews* (1860), denounces as futile and foolish all attempts to harmonize Genesis with science.

The link between geology and evolutionary biology was first made apparent in Robert Chambers's anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). Chambers recognized that all organic life is governed by natural processes of development, by which it evolves from simple to complex organisms. Chambers's theory annihilated the idea of "Special Creation," the notion that God created humanity *ex nihilo* and fully developed. Adam Sedgwick, Professor of Geology at Cambridge, in a letter (9 April 1845) to Charles Lyell, referred to *Vestiges* as "Gross credulity and rank infidelity joined in unlawful marriage, and breeding a deformed progeny of unnatural conclusions!" Of its author, he continues, "I cannot but think the work is from a woman's pen. . . . In all that belongs to tact and feeling I would trust her before a thousand breeches-wearing monkeys; but petticoats are not fitted for the steps of a ladder. And 'tis only by ladder- steps we are allowed to climb to the high platforms of natural truth" (John Willis Clark and Thomas McKenny Hughes, *Life and Letters of the Reverend Adam Sedgwick*, 2 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890], 2:83, 85; Gilmour, 121-24). Unlike Sedgwick, the poet Tennyson accepted Chambers's conclusions (*vide* Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1956], chapt. 2). God had been shown not only as careless of the individual life, but careless of the species, even of humanity. Tennyson, in *In Memoriam*, stanza LV, (1850), responds:

> I falter where I firmly trod,
> And falling with my weight of cares
> Upon the great world's altar-stairs
>
> That slope thro' darkness up to God,
>
> I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
> And gather dust and chaff, and call
> To what I feel is Lord of all,
> And faintly trust the larger hope.

Although French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was, among scientists, winning converts to his theory of a purposive, "transformist" process of evolution, Chambers paved the way for Darwin by presenting the idea of evolution in a manner that was understandable to the general reader. He gave clergymen and theologians fifteen years to contemplate the implications of the new theory. When Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859, it not only substantiated evolution as a mechanism of nature, but also provided a particular theory of evolution—that is, evolution by means of "natural selection." Not all clergymen resented Darwin's book. Some, like Charles Kingsley, found that Darwin's conclusions threatened only the idea of "an interfering God—a master-magician," not the "living, immanent, ever-working God" (*Letters and Memories of Charles Kingsley*, ed. F. E. Kingsley, 2 vols. [London: Co-operative Publication Society, 1899], 2:175).

Physiology, or a certain type of it, groping among the brain and nerves, found no trace, no proof of what we called the immortal soul. Thought, passions, imagination, worship—many said, were nothing more than changes of matter in the brain.[24] "See, I press my fingers, here in a certain place behind the ears, and the soul, the immortal soul, is gone." And a heated argument of support and denial sprang up, which yet goes on, concerning a matter which is at the roots of religion. The ideas of God, of our being vitally connected with Him, of moral right, of a spiritual life, of immortality, were not given to us from without by a Being who loved and judged us, but evolved in the growth of man, by man himself. Think of all the literary motives and emotions which perished—for those who believed this—in that cataclysm.

Political economy, getting more and more scientific, and talking of laws, based on the single premiss that self-interest was the only guide of life, gave us to understand that all the Christian ministry to the poor was merely sentimental, of no real use.[25] A mass of motives, hitherto largely used in poetry and fiction, vanished for all those who believed in economical laws of this type. Then, the microscope revealed to us infinite worlds of the infinitely little, peopled by million myriads of living beings: the telescope revealed to us infinite worlds of the infinitely vast; inconceivable distances, inconceivable ages, in which time and space seemed merely names—and between these two enormous universes were we—a mere, despicable speck, a mote which flickered in the infinite; we who thought ourselves the centre of

---

24. Whereas many contended that evolutionary theory could only account for animal instincts, not the discursive human intellect, Alexander Bain (1818-1903) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) proposed that evolution could also account for the intellectual development of human beings. Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) exhibits all mental phenomena in connection with the nervous system, so that the intellect and will are both composite structures comprised of sensory and motor experiences. Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* appeared in the same year as Bain's work and endeavored to establish the essential identity of animal and human intellect. According to Spencer, the experience of the species is "organized in the brain by a process of gradual deposition and accretion" and constitutes an inherited experience passed from one generation to another. Such a theory disposed of such hypotheses as innate truth or the spiritual revelation made possible by a special connection with the divine (A. W. Benn, *The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. [1906; New York: Russell & Russell, 1962], 2:167-74).

25. The early nineteenth century political economists, such as Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus, generally argued upon utilitarian principles that the greatest good for the community is attained by each person pursuing his or her own best interests, and so they were suspicious of state interference and reluctant to disturb the delicate economic balance by initiating commercial reform on behalf of adults (*vide* Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform: England, 1815-1870* [1938; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962], bk. 4, chapt. 1).

all things, the special care of the Godhead! Then, to make our position still more contemptible, a scientific theory declared that everything we did and thought and loved was merely automatic, caused by things which had occurred at the very beginning of what was called life. Men drew then the conclusion that there was no freewill, no real sin, no real righteousness, no struggle for goodness: we were bound in an iron net.[26] And for those who believed this, whole worlds of literature ceased to exist. Then came the doctrine of the conservation of energy,[27] and then about 1860 came the doctrine of Darwin; and all the supernatural—miracles, creation, the divine essence in man and beyond man—went overboard in the night for those who accepted, as explanations of the whole universe, these two doctrines. It was a terrible upturning.

Historical Criticism then took up the play, and it was not long before it was applied to the Bible, first to the Old and then inevitably to the New Testament. Beneath its scalpel, the great Protestant authority, the practical infallibility of our Book, was dissected away.[28] That too wrought a great change in literature. It forced

---

26. Various theories of determinism (both "hard" and "soft"), along with theories of indeterminism or self-determination, have been current in philosophical and theological discussion since the pre-Socratics. Brooke is, no doubt, merely noting the increase in the popular acceptance of determinism during the Victorian period.

27. William Thomson Kelvin (1824-1907) propounded the Second Law of Thermodynamics, by which law energy or heat is in a constant process of diffusion. In an article titled "On the Age of the Sun's Heat" (1862), he concluded, "As for the future, we may say . . . that inhabitants of the earth cannot continue to enjoy the light and heat essential to their life, for many millions of years longer, unless sources now unknown to us are prepared in the great storehouse of creation" (Gilmour, 136-37). Kelvin's theory endowed Byron's nightmarish poem "Darkness" with a prophetic quality and inspired H. G. Well's vision of the distant future in *The Time Machine* (1895).

28. The historical or *higher criticism* of the Bible—that is, the critical study of the literary devices and sources used by the biblical authors, as opposed to the textual or *lower criticism* that is concerned with recovering, as far as possible, the original text of the various books of the Bible—had its development primarily in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany. Essentially, the idea of the higher criticism is to bring to the study of the biblical texts the same critical methods and tools that are used to analyze and interpret any other historical text. No distinction is made between "secular" and "sacred" literature. John J. Conybeare warned Oxford students against its encroachment into England in his Bampton Lectures of 1824, and in the following year Hugh J. Rose warned Cambridge students against its noxious influence in his lectures on *The State of Protestantism in Germany, Described*. Even so, Coleridge, who had attended J. G. Eichhorn's lectures at Göttingen in 1799, later incorporated the basic principles of higher criticism into his "Letters on Inspiration," Herbert Marsh, the Professor of Divinity at Cambridge who had studied under J. D. Michaelis at

more than half of the writers of fine literature to change their front. Tennyson, as I said, was much affected by these things, but he saved himself by his penetrating intelligence and spiritual imagination from thinking that because these things were true in physical science and in criticism, there was no other world for man that they displayed. As to Browning, he was quite unaffected by all this wonderful discovery. He disliked the whole business. "It had nothing to do," he said, "with my world. These are questions and answers which belong to mere phenomena: and I do not breathe in that world"; and he did not change a single belief, nor alter a single judgment. This then was the state of the world, and we have not got out of it yet. To the weariness which came of incessant arguments and discussion of all intellectual subjects, was now added a state of mind made by the habit of not even looking into things incapable of demonstration; which had no care for beauty, or for the forms of art under which beauty is represented; which tried to ignore the passions; which refused to look at ideals; and which ceased to have pleasure in Art or Nature except as phenomena to be subjected to investigation. What Darwin said of himself—that he had lost all care for poetry—was true of a multitude of persons who filled their lives with nothing but science. They had lost what I mean by the soul—that part of us which loves beauty, outreaches into the unknown, imagines new forms of loveliness, rejoices in simplicities of feeling, stirs into worship of God, paints the restitution of all things, cares for feeling more than knowledge, for the old as much as the new, and for romance more than investigating.

A great part of society took up this position of science with avidity, and though they tired of it in the end if they lived for anything beyond the outward, yet it has only begun quite lately to weary us very much indeed. The poets felt that weariness before we did. Between 1860 and 1870, a certain number of men were bored to death by this dominance in society of the merely scientific ideas, and flashed into rebellion against it. They did not care two straws whether man was descended from the ape or not. It was nothing to them that all forces were interchangeable, and that the sum of energy was constant. The discoveries of science were sometimes entertaining;

Göttingen, translated his four-volume *Introduction to the New Testament* (1809-16), and Connop Thirlwall wrote a lengthy introduction to German methods of biblical criticism, which he appended to his translation of F. D. E. Schleiermacher's *Gospel of St. Luke* and published in 1825. David F. Strauss's more radical *Life of Jesus* (1835), which endeavored to interpret the gospels by applying to them a theory of myth, was translated into English by George Eliot (neé Mary Ann Evans) and published in 1846. This work—together with the influence of the Tübingen School led by F. C. Baur and the Berlin School led by W. G. Hegel, which is apparent in the critical commentaries of Oxford tutors Benjamin Jowett and A. P. Stanley on *St. Paul's Epistles* in 1855—made incredible, for many readers, the historical accuracy or miraculous revelation of the New Testament.

matter for flying reading when they desired some relaxation from the press of the infinite things; sometimes irritating. On the whole they were shadows in comparison with the substantial things of the soul. The real world of these poets was elsewhere, far beyond the realm of science. And when their ears were deafened with the conceited cries of science as it claimed to be the master-key of the universe, they determined (in the hope that a few might yet be able to see beauty and to love it) to image their own world, and to get rid as far as they could of the dry and dreadful noise of argument, the money-making inventions, the dreary quarrels of science and theology, the worry of criticism, the deathful world of the understanding. "Glory and loveliness have passed away," they cried with Keats, only, as it was gross materialism of life which produced the cry of Keats, so now it was intellectual materialism which produced the cry of Rossetti and Morris.[29] I name these two and not Swinburne, whose position towards his time is much more difficult to define.[30] But these two, at a time analogous in many ways to the time of Keats, did the very thing which Keats did. They left behind them, as if they did not exist, the worlds of theology and politics and business and science, all of them engaged in getting on; and

---

29. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) and William Morris (1834-96) were artists and poets, influenced by the lyricism and Greek and Arthurian themes of Keats and Tennyson. Rossetti was a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and made a lasting impact upon the artistic work of Morris after their meeting in 1856. Rossetti's publication, *The Germ* (January-April 1850), was the literary model upon which Morris founded the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856). In 1859, Morris married Jane Burden, one of the Pre-Raphaelite models, and in 1871—ten years after the suicide of Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal—the two poets became joint tenants of Kelmscott Manor, where they notoriously shared the affections of Jane. Several of Rossetti's poems based upon Homeric characters and episodes were buried in the casket with his wife, but were afterwards exhumed and published in *Poems* (1870). Morris's most well-known verse is included in *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858). In 1867 he published his book-length poem set in the world of ancient Greece, *The Life and Death of Jason*, and in the following year he began the four volumes of medieval tales, *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70). Turning to Icelandic sagas, he produced the epic *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876). In his later years, he wrote his most notable prose work, a socialist fantasy, *News from Nowhere* (1891). Much of Morris's poetry, as of D. G. Rossetti's, is now criticized as escapist literature.

30. Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) was early associated with Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite circle and, like Rossetti and Morris, often chose Greek or Arthurian settings and characters for his poetry. By the time Swinburne published his most well-known collection of verse, *Poems and Ballads* (1866), he had clearly established his own voice. His undisguised preoccupation with the literature of the Marquis de Sade, with masochism and *femmes fatales*, together with his boldly proclaimed repudiation of Christianity, at once gave his poetry a public notoriety and made its literary merit difficult to fairly discern.

fled back, as Keats fled, to find the beauty and romance and emotion they could not find in the present in the stories of the Greeks, and the Arthurian times, and the medieval romance, and the Norse sagas. There they found what they loved and worshipped—beauty and heroism, simplicity and passion, and a lovely world, undefiled by invention, undisturbed by intellectual analysis, undissected by science. "To love beauty, that is our religion." It was the cry of Keats, it marks the exhaustion of the poetic impulse of 1832. It marks the replacing of a poetry which once had vitally to do with the present by a poetry which despised and loathed the present; and as such, it was only a literary poetry, as was the poetry of Keats.

Well, I repeat, that, delightful as that poetry is when written by men like Morris, Rossetti, or Keats, and capable of giving a lasting pleasure to the human race, it does not create a school, it does not make creative emotion in a whole people. It is a pleasant backwater, in the full stream of a nation's poetry. Lovely islands, full of trees, fountains of flowers, are formed in it, where men may rest for a time and be happy. But its waters circle round and round upon themselves. They do not flow on, and become a river, or join the main river of song. And in the end they dry up. The religion of beauty, which seeks for its objects of worship only in the past and in a reversion to past loveliness, does not, when mingled with a contempt of the present, create a reproductive literature—a literature with children and grandchildren. It records only a certain mood in a limited society. When we are in that mood we read it with pleasure, but it is no foundation for life. Morris called himself "the idle singer of an empty day." It did not satisfy himself. He felt the call of the present on him. The injustice of things awoke his indignation, the sorrow of the world kindled his pity, and he began to live passionately in the present. He became a warlike socialist. But he did not lose his religious idea, "that in the devotion to beauty was the salvation of society." But now he changed its place and time. He did not bid us look back to find it. He applied it to present life and bid us carry it with us into the future. "I will develop," he thought, "the love of beauty in all things in men; and the proper means for that is to induce men to make things out of their own intelligence and for their own use, and out of their own desire for pleasurable emotion in what they do. Therefore, mere machine work, which must necessarily be unintelligent, must be, except for preparatory purposes, put aside. In their own handiwork men rejoice and love. Therefore, also, men must cease to copy the fine work of the past, for all copying is done without love of the work or joy in it. What we have to do to save the world is to lead men to express their own ideas, no matter how roughly, in handiwork; to get them to create, moved by the impulses of their own time and their own soul; to create in any vehicle whatever. This will so develop their imagination, their soul, and so fill their lives with the greatest joy in the world, the joy of making something out of their own being, that, in the end, they will begin, because they love and rejoice in their work, to add beauty to what they do, and finally to make nothing

which will not be beautiful. Then the base, ugly, mean elements of life will disappear. Buildings, clothing, towns, books, all the doings and means of life, will give joy to the soul, minister to imagination, awaken aspiration, satisfy and charm the heart. Humanity will feel itself content and divine. Nature will give all her impulses to man, and man will love her better than before. Her beauty will be cared for, and the care will react on the inner sense of beauty, and develop it further."[31]

This it was which Morris conceived as the means of saving society, when he found out that to picture the lovely and heroic life of the past was not—as Keats also discovered—enough to kindle society into a new life, or to supply the imagination with sufficient food on which to nourish a new literature.

This idea of his is a real contribution to the religion of humanity, to social religion. It has no force as yet, nor is it possible as yet to realize it over any large surface of society. Great changes will have to take place in the social state before what is really vital and useful in this idea can take form. But some day it will be one of the master thoughts of a religion for life—not, as Morris seemed to think, the only master thought. By itself, the love of beauty and the making of it cannot fulfil the religious wants of man, not even in the practical or possible form in which Morris finally put it. But it will have to become a part of the religious idea and of religious practice. We have too much forgotten that if God be love, He must also be beauty. Indeed, if the capability of conceiving the infinite of righteousness in an infinite Being is that which plainly differentiates us from the brute, the capability of loving beauty, and the desire to make it, as plainly, perhaps even more plainly, differentiate us from the brute. In all other points—in intellect, in conscience, in self-consciousness, in emotions, and the passions—we can find points of contact, similarities, with the lower animals, but in the matters which range themselves under the terms "Christianity" and "Art" there is no resemblance whatsoever, no descent.[32]

The love of love and the love of beauty are one—two sides of the same shield—and the high form of the future religion for man to which we look forward will have to include the latter as well as the former. We shall have to worship God, not only as the Father who loves us all, but as the King in his beauty. Morris has started the conception which will lead us to that, though he did not connect it with a god at all;

---

31. Brooke is here describing the beginning of the Arts and Crafts Movement, for the inception of which Morris and his firm in Red Lion Square were largely responsible.

32. Cf. Coleridge: "The understanding of the higher Brutes has only organs of outward sense, and consequently material objects only; but man's understanding has likewise an organ of inward sense, and therefore the power of acquainting itself with invisible realities or spiritual objects. This organ is his Reason" (*The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke, 2 vols; vol. 4 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969], 1: 156).

and when we mingle it up with the worship of God the Father as the source of beauty because He is the source of love, we shall complete the idea he left incomplete. Incomplete, however, as he left it, it is becoming more and more a power in all fine literature. It is not an idea which ends: it is a living idea which grows, and it will be interesting to watch its development in the new century as a means to a higher religion and a higher society. At present it cannot find itself, and it rarely appears even in poetry. Morris himself did not put it into poetry, only into romances.

Well, we are left, so far as poetic literature is concerned, as we were in the days of Keats, in a world almost destitute of leading ideas, of ideas which have growth in them. Poetry has no captains who give it a steady direction. No master ideas, such as Tennyson and Browning had, urge its course towards a clear end, or fill its sails with a steadfast wind. Nor does it represent, as Arnold and Clough did, or as Morris and Rossetti and Swinburne did after them, the main conditions of the age in which we are living. It only represents (with the exception of the work of a few men who are scarcely read) the helpless wavering of a class in society which has no clear ideas as to what it ought to do with its life, and none with regard to its future. It takes up now one subject and now another, and drops them without finishing them. It tries sensuality, and rebellion, and mysticism, and supernaturalism, and imperialism, and spiritual religion, and nature-poetry, and hospitals, and crude coarseness, and crime, and sentimental love, and pessimism, and it composes hosts of little lyrics about nothing. Everything by turns, and nothing long. It amuses itself with difficult metres, and surprising rhymes, and elaborated phrasing, and painting in words, and scientific tricks of versing. It has no great matter, no fine thinking, and no profound passion, and it is the reverse of simple. And the world is becoming tired of it, and longs for the advent of youth, originality, joy, hope, and the resurrection of vital ideas, in poetry. Along with this, and always accompanying this prolific littleness, is a terrible recrudescence of criticism. Every magazine, all the daily papers, every publishing house, is filled with essays and articles and books about poetry, carping, or denouncing, or satirizing, or praising without knowledge, and in astonishing excess. I cannot tell how often I have lately seen in the papers and in books that a poet, if not superior, then equal to Shakespeare, has appeared on the stage. And all this overwhelming shower-bath of criticism has chilled the world, which wants, nay, hungers, for some warm and living creation. Moreover, we are still, like Arnold, wearied by endless discussions, by the shouting of people who want nothing said which cannot be proved, who replace sentiment by materialism, who will not allow us to love nature except in accordance with science, who, pinning us down to this world only, forbid us to overclimb the flaming walls and go wandering, like gypsies, into the infinites of love and beauty, because we cannot be as certain of such infinites as we are certain that two and two make four. Were these folk to succeed in infecting the

whole world with their theories—fine literature would die of disgust, and poetry be drained of its life-blood.

The first thing we want for the sake of a great literature and a great poetry is a noble religion which will bear, by its immaterial truths, our intellect, conscience, emotions, imagination, and spirit beyond this world; and yet, by those very truths, set us into the keenest activity in the world for the bettering of the world; making every work, and, above all, literature, full of a spiritual and a social passion, weighty and dignified by spiritual and social thought. Such a religion must not contradict any established scientific or historic truth; it must be capable of easily entering into all the honest business of the world as a spirit of life and love; it must be freed from every shred of exclusiveness, so that not one of its doctrines or its rites should shut out any man whatever from union with God; its ideas must be as universal as God Himself, and their application to men as universal; it must claim man as akin to God in a relationship which never can be broken, and is eternal; and it will say to itself, in our hearts, "God has not given to me the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." Such a religion is contained in a few large ideas. Universal fatherhood, universal childhood, therefore universal brotherhood.

God, thus akin to us, our nearest relation, cannot leave us to evil or death. All sin is, therefore, finally, if slowly, rooted out of us, and we are made at one with Him in eternal life. This is universal forgiveness.

Then, too, immortal love destroys all death in us. Our personality is secured for ever. This is universal immortality.

Our life on earth is made up of two duties, our duty to live in harmony with the character of our Father, our duty to love and live for our brothers.

But beyond these duties ranges the infinite love and righteousness of God. And the last and highest idea of religion in life is the struggle towards infinite perfection.

What we want, secondly, along with such a religion, for the sake of a noble literature, and especially for the sake of a lasting school of poetry, is a great social conception, carrying with it strong and enduring emotions, appealing to the universal heart of man and woman—a great social conception of the duties of mankind, of the true aim, end, and foundation of human life; of the future of mankind in a regenerated civilization, with all the hopes and aspirations of this conception like the winds of spring in our hearts; and lastly a clear idea of how man's happiness is to be established. The basis of such a conception is the Brotherhood of Man, and that is made religion when it is founded on belief in the Fatherhood of God.

Such a conception is now struggling into light, labouring by a thousand experiments into its practical and ideal form. We call it by many names, and everyone knows in how many and diverse, even contradictory, shapes it appears. Nevertheless, there are a few common thoughts and feelings underneath its varying sects, and these are growing firmer and securer day by day. Steady thought, well-founded

feeling, collect around them; and in time the right, noble, lucid shape of the conception will be found. Some day the mastering form which will attract all men, will emerge, as it were of itself, and leap forth all-victorious in wisdom, like Athena from the head of Zeus.

That will impassionate the world. The civilization based on self-interest will go down before it. That civilization is really barbarism. The root of that higher civilization will be self-forgetfulness in love, and that is Christ's religion. When these two come together, when such a social idea is married to a universal religion, of which unlimited Love is lord and king, we shall have the greatest of literatures. Its full realization may be far off. But, even at the present time, it is nearer than when we first believed.

One form of that socialist conception, after centuries of travail, was born at the end of last century, and its emotions created a new poetry in our land. Another form of it arose in 1832, and its emotions created again a new poetry. And we are now on the verge of a new and passionate form of it, to be bound up, I trust, with a universal religion. I hope to see it before I die, and then this great country, borne into higher realms of thought and feeling than it can conceive at present, will create out of its fresh excitement an original literature and a poetry, as great, it may even be greater, than any it has yet produced.