

# OUT OF THE GARDEN: THE NATURE OF REVELATION IN ROMANTICISM, NATURALISM, AND MODERNISM

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One of the defining preoccupations of the Romanticists—and of the Romantic poets in particular—is the idea that God reveals himself to the human most palpably in a natural setting: to experience the natural world in its wildness is to experience God in his wildness.

Naturalism is in some ways a radical, rationalist extension of Romanticism: natural space is sacred space, but not, as for the Romantics, because it brings the human subject into contact with the divine; rather, in nature the subject confronts itself, faces the limitations, as Jack London most often has it, of its own imagination, or of its intelligence, ability, preparation, or talent. Without guile, without meanness, and without—so far as we know—awareness, nature strips us of pretense.

By my reckoning, then, the naturalists were both stoic Romantics for whom nature—not necessarily bereft of the voluptuousness the Romantics worshipped—was an austere and insensible goddess and elemental modernists, not ready to despair. Naturalism thus becomes an essential link between the Romantics and the modernists, who would find in the urban, the hyper-industrial, the hyper-material, and the war-torn the wildness and austerity their predecessors encountered on the prairies, in the woods, on the seas, and above the tree line.

Already pronounced in the reverential apocalyptic of Romanticism is a growing disappointment in the institutions that had so long safeguarded and, more often than not, dictated the terms of humankind's

fragile relationship with God-as-image. I suppose this follows rationally from the long chain of disruptions that started with the Renaissance and carried on through the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the political and social tumults of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Latter-day Saint tradition seems to be one of those disruptions, or at least a consequence of them: early Mormonism is arguably the paternal twin of transcendentalism, the love child of Puritan and American exceptionalisms.

Besides Ralph Waldo Emerson and Joseph Smith, other figures were pushing back against the limits of traditional Christianity, claiming for themselves a right to, if not an actual experience of, direct, revelatory perception and speech. William Blake stands out, of course. Coleridge's forays into mythic spaces are well known.

But there are further variations. Keats was less mystically inclined, much more taken with a classical aesthetic, and his equation of truth with beauty, and beauty with truth, and his assertion that this equation was all we know and need to know tells us that his apocalyptic was already one of the world to itself. Shelley's gothic romance revealed a seamy horror on the underside of the science that was otherwise bringing the world into the light, and it did so without an overreliance on religious cosmology: Frankenstein's monster was both more than a creature of darkness and less than a created human, but perhaps only because the terms of his being in the world were set by the assumption that he wasn't, and couldn't be, wholly human or, in Mormon theological terms, a soul.

And even Wordsworth leaves out the traditional theology that was so important in the metaphysical poets two hundred years before him, or that would be again a century on, even if sometimes ironically. To be fair, much of Western literature had already only a passing, arguably cultural, connection with traditional belief: it was part of the setting, a fact of life, but not a major preoccupation in the novel or in dramatic works. Indeed, it would become much more a preoccupation in modernism than it had been for quite some time. And maybe that's wrong;

maybe that's a function of canon formation, and of the choices we've made in selecting and preserving texts that feel more comfortably secular. But my point here is that even Wordsworth, who steeped in inspiration, seems less concerned with a Christological experience in nature than a more intimately and abstractly religious one: the God he encounters in meadows and at lakesides, or before his hearth in a snug cottage, is *the idea* of God as creative force, as artist, and of natural beauty as truth—pagan, almost; and poetry its prophet—or prophecy its poetics.

Even Wordsworth, that is, seems less interested in communication than in communion, and less communion with a creative deity than with the creative impulse in himself.

If this is the case, then my thesis is more precise than it ought to be: maybe naturalism is only marginally distinct from Romanticism and modernism, less a particular step or stage and more a “natural” extension of the hippified indifference that had already characterized letters for a long time.

That sloppiness in the margins extends forward, too. Chris Beyers's entry in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, a chapter titled “Naturalism and Poetry,” offers the somewhat surprising observation that while twentieth-century poetry, at least in its intellectual and aesthetic aspirations, nearly opposes naturalist poetry, there is, in fact, a deeply naturalist current in modern poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Beyers interests himself specifically in the poetry of Crane, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Robinson Jeffers, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Sharon Olds. Other than Crane, that's a surprising list because it includes some figures who come quite late in the twentieth century: more properly classified as postmodernist in some cases, but even when temperamentally and aesthetically modernist,

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1. Chris Beyers, “Naturalism and Poetry,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, edited by Keith Newlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 445–62.

far removed from the naturalist fictionists that typically spring to mind when we think of a moment, a movement, or a disposition.

Which leads me to this further revision: naturalism seems to articulate an assumption about the cosmos—openly and without apology—that previous generations of writers may have decently and politely skirted, even if they themselves operated on that same assumption. Naturalism makes its subject the idea of godlessness matter-of-factly, without petulance, and in some ways celebrating the austere fragility of the human condition, the delicateness of being in a world insensible or even inimical to our existence. And the next generation or two of writers would shift the locus of that particular revelation sharply back to the philosophical, sociological, and political grounds of being in society: confronting what it means that we live godlessly, even when we claim belief in God.

In the time that remains, I'm going to take you on a whirlwind tour of poems from British Romanticism (1780s to 1830s) through to late modernism (1960s) that I believe represent at once the change and continuity I've been speaking about. I work with poetry because it's efficient, and all of the poems I've chosen here are heavily anthologized: you'll recognize them, and that serves both your interest in the material and my interest in canon formation as at least one of the forces that characterizes our literary inheritances, so we should both be happy.

Though Blake's first run of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) is far less radical in its theology than his Swedenborgian *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which he composed in the early 1790s and published in the next decade, it points to perhaps the most overtly Christian sensibility in Romantic poetry. Take "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" as examples:

Little Lamb who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed  
By the stream & o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,

Softest clothing wooly bright;  
 Gave thee such a tender voice,  
 Making all the vales rejoice!  
     Little Lamb, who made thee?  
     Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
 He is called by thy name,  
 For he calls himself a Lamb:  
 He is meek & he is mild,  
 He became a little child:  
 I a child & thou a lamb,  
 We are called by his name.  
     Little Lamb God bless thee.  
     Little Lamb God bless thee.<sup>2</sup>

And

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night;  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dare seize the fire?<sup>3</sup> (lines 1–8)

“The Lamb” is clearly and openly Christological and catechistic. It is traditional in its purpose and in its theology. Jesus is all over it. Then again, it’s a song of innocence. But “The Tyger”—as a song of experience—leaves the identity of the Creator, and of the Creator’s motive

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2. William Blake, “The Lamb,” in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, edited by David Price (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1901), 6. Originally published 1789.

3. William Blake, “The Tyger,” in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, edited by David Price (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1901), 51. Originally published 1794.

and character, in question. Not “who,” but “*what* immortal hand or eye” (line 3, my emphasis). And the poem is structured to leave us without closure or rest: there are only six stanzas, not seven. Further, even when Blake obliquely acknowledges the creator in the fifth stanza, he raises significant questions about the nature of a creative force capable of making something at once so beautiful and so terrifying: as the stars wept, Blake wonders, “did *he* smile, his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (lines 19–20). And if he did, then what does this say about him?

But there aren’t many Romantic poems that raise openly theological questions. Not really. Wordsworth ducks them in “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” which is presented in nearly every introduction to Romanticism that I’ve ever read as *the* movement-making, or at least consolidating, text of Romanticism—its manifesto or mission statement—and this, so far as I can see, is as close as he comes:

... with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (lines 47–49)

... For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods

And mountains; and of all that we behold  
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,  
 And what perceive; . . .<sup>4</sup> (lines 88–107)

Of course, this poem is at least Wordsworth's best articulation of his own theory of *poiesis*, among other things. But it is also the clearest articulation of the impulse we recognize as Romantic: the worship of God in the cathedral of nature, and better, the experience of a divine presence and intention in its wildness. But it is telling that in this sturdiest and staidest of Romantic poets, and in a poem of more than 160 lines, whatever there is of God is relegated to ten of those lines at best: "And I have felt . . ."—but then whatever testimony is being offered there, however intelligent the design Wordsworth worships, he immediately observes that the human eye and ear only "half perceive" and "half create" the world. There are two truths, in other words, about the natural beauty Wordsworth reveres: that God is wild, unruly, and knowable only in wildness *and* that we half create that world in our imaginations, and thus we half create God himself.

In two of his sonnets, Wordsworth comes at this doctrine more directly, expressing his skepticism at traditional modes of believing, or organizing the world around an image of God as clerk or accountant. In "The World is Too Much With Us," he laments our performed and fell devotion, our tendency to worship God with inside voices and not joyously, openly, confessionally; that we have given over the wildness and unpredictability of a natural god for an institutional one of rigid, cold practicality; that we have traded *aesthesis* for *legis*; have traded Genesis for Leviticus:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

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4. William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," in *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (London: Longman, 1798), 201ff.

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
 It moves us not. (lines 1–9)

And then this rather startling admission:

Great God! I'd rather be  
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.<sup>5</sup> (lines 9–14)

And in “Surprised by Joy,” just eight years later, he bewrays a very human doubt even in the structure of the metaphysical world we insist gives this one meaning.

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind  
 I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom  
 But Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb,  
 That spot which no vicissitude can find?<sup>6</sup> (lines 1–4)

What that fourth line means I am not entirely sure, but it expresses what all true griefs do: the finality and absoluteness of the loss, the darkness of the unknown, and the unknowable silence and insensibility of death, whatever consolations we may seek for ourselves or others, whatever certainties of something more we claim. And this, too, is natural. My point here is that Wordsworth's Christianity—his faith in general—takes a backseat to something more profound in his experience of nature and his experience of his experience of nature, and that profundity merely *implies* God's participation, merely *suggests* some deeper experience of a

5. William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us,” in *Poems*, Vol. II (London: Longman, 1815), 183.

6. William Wordsworth, “Surprised by Joy,” in *Poems*, Vol. II (London: Longman, 1815), 191.



creative divinity, because Wordsworth wants to re-divert our gaze from the heavens to the earth's own surface, to the swell of sea and hill, the pulse of tide and wash of wind, to water and flower and leaf and soil: to see this place as not merely paradise but as the very heaven, green to its door, that we are told to seek elsewhere.

Even Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a poem that unmistakably uses the backdrop of a wedding feast and, on my reading, laments the human complicity in the slaying of the Son of God, seems to want to say more about that complicity, hypocrisy, and darkness than it does the god who is, in the person of the albatross, sent to augur and redeem through suffering. At the heart of Romanticism, in other words, is the human heart, and maybe the encounter of the divine in nature, for good or ill, is therefore less about understanding the divine than seeing ourselves as at once blessed and cursed by the encounter, at once small and yet also grand in the seascapes and landscapes in which we wander; and that wandering, for good or ill, is worship.

We wander, of course, most in our own minds. Wordsworth knew that—that he half created God in his own thinking: put God's intention into scrub and pasture, meadow and fire smoke—and Elizabeth Barrett Browning knew it as well. These lines from *Aurora Leigh* suggest that maybe reverence is the problem, maybe awe and a too-quick genuflection or a reflexive sacred-making causes us to miss the truth of nature's wildness and our own: dims both our sight and our sense of possibility, dazzles us into submission to an idea of our smallness.

In those days, though, I never analysed  
Myself even. All analysis comes late.  
You catch a sight of Nature, earliest,  
In full front sun-face, and your eyelids wink  
And drop before the wonder of 't; you miss  
The form, through seeing the light. I lived, those days,  
And wrote because I lived—unlicensed else:  
My heart beat in my brain. Life's violent flood  
Abolished bounds,—and, which my neighbour's field,

Which mine, what mattered? It is so in youth.  
 We play at leap-frog over the god Term;  
 The love within us and the love without  
 Are mixed, confounded; if we are loved or love,  
 We scarce distinguish. So, with other power.  
 Being acted on and acting seem the same:  
 In that first onrush of life's chariot-wheels,  
 We know not if the forests move or we.  
 And so, like most young poets, in a flush  
 Of individual life, I poured myself  
 Along the veins of others, and achieved  
 Mere lifeless imitations of life verse,  
 And made the living answer for the dead,  
 Profaning nature. 'Touch not, do not taste,  
 Nor handle,'—we're too legal, who write young:  
 We beat the phorminx till we hurt our thumbs,  
 As if still ignorant of counterpoint;  
 We call the Muse . . . 'O Muse, benignant Muse!'  
 As if we had seen her purple-braided head. (lines 1–28)

As if we had seen! And then we miss the true, mundane delights, joys,  
 and fragile wonders of the world: the trees for the forest. She continues:

With the eyes in it start between the boughs  
 As often as a stag's. What make-believe,  
 With so much earnest! what effete results,  
 From virile efforts! what cold wire-drawn odes  
 From such white heats!—bucolics, where the cows  
 Would scare the writer if they splashed the mud  
 In lashing off the flies,—didactics, driven  
 Against the heels of what the master said;  
 And counterfeiting epics, shrill with trumps  
 A babe might blow between two straining cheeks  
 Of bubbled rose, to make his mother laugh;  
 And elegiac griefs, and songs of love,  
 Like cast-off nosebags picked up on the road,  
 The worse for being warm: all these things, writ  
 On happy mornings, with a morning heart,

That leaps for love, is active for resolve,  
Weak for art only. (lines 29–45)

That last bit feels like Emerson to me: a celebration of the active human, the poet who also digs and runs and climbs and weaves and chops and cooks and invents and investigates. We create only when we allow ourselves to be subsumed, immersed, claimed *in* a world creative, a world generative:

Or perhaps, again,  
In order to discover the Muse-Sphinx,  
The melancholy desert must sweep round,  
Behind you, as before.<sup>7</sup> (lines 67–70)

And later, as Aurora Leigh grows into her own, comes to understand herself, the revelation is of her organic connection and belonging to all that swirling brightness around her:

My soul was singing at a work apart  
Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm  
As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight,  
In vortices of glory and blue air. (lines 103–06)

Baptismal, that. And the deal seems to be that we ought to worry more about being comprehended and less about comprehending: that the revelation in nature isn't its creative hand, not directly, but of our belonging.

For Matthew Arnold, that belonging is bitter: that our political and violent natures half create a world not bent to us at all, not made for us, but whose darker instincts we have magnified and perfected. In "Dover Beach," the "Sea of Faith," once full (but when, he doesn't say) "withdraw[s]," "retreat[s]," "roar[s]" its distant way, and reveals "the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world" (lines 21–28). For

... the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,

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7. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book I (1857).

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;<sup>8</sup> (lines 30–34)

This is a general revelation. And Arnold—being a bit of a Dickie Downer on his honeymoon, as the story goes—sees the only refuge from all of that in human love.

I'd like to talk about Whitman here, and Dickinson: the first finding life biological or physiological itself miraculous, electric, and beautiful; the second, in her relief or in pursuit of relief from the stark, joyless, Godward doctrines of her youth, seeing beauty even in decay and death. I'd like to leap forward to Plath or Adrienne Rich and talk about naturalism as sociology, something akin to what Bruce Young gestured at last night in discussing the social and spiritual ecologies in *Heart of Africa*: that the most fragile ecology of all is that between persons, in the connections that bind and fray, that we deliberately and necessarily nourish or sever, or that are used to encircle or ensnare us in solace or in slavery: that lift or drag us. But my time is running short, and that's perhaps another pair of sleeves, as the Italians say. So let me, briefly, skip to Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, and Philip Larkin.

Hopkins we know best through his celebratory verse: his accounts of a nature and a language gushing with glory and vortices of every color, and in which the creative God is writ both great and small. This is evident in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"—

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: *thát* keeps all his goings graces;

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8. Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840–1867* (London: Oxford University Press, 1909), retrieved from <https://www.bartleby.com/br/254.html>.

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
 Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>9</sup> (lines 5–14)

—and in “The Windhover”:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
 Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!<sup>10</sup> (lines 1–8)

But in his terrible sonnets, even the celebrant not merely of intelligent but glorious design, who sees or tries to see the hand of God even in the tragedy he writes about in “The Wreck of the Deutschland” in terms familiar to us and our temple soteriology, waivers and is forced to confront the darkness of that world: its coldness and emptiness; its shrug of the shoulder. And the terms ring familiar, too, as Joseph-in-jail. In “No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,” his *de profundis*, he cries out

Comforter, where, where is your comforting?  
 Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?  
 My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief  
 Woe, wórl-d-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing —  
 Then lull, then leave off.<sup>11</sup> (lines 3–7)

9. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 54.

10. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Windhover,” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 29.

11. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 63.

He sees in this the workings of the mind: a mind God-made, though, for him, and therein the weighty revelatory experience. Hopkins confronts himself, and thus confronts his maker's darker intention, and finds no explanation for it:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
 Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
 May who ne'er hung there. (lines 9–11)

And in another poem, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," in what is a stark contradiction to Kingfishers, selving, and a playful Christ, the shine is off creation, and all there is is the savor and the stink of mortality:

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
 Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
 Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.  
 Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see  
 The lost are like this, and their scourge to be  
 As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.<sup>12</sup> (lines 9–14)

I love that, of course: I am heartburn sometimes, too, and cast ironic eyes heavenward and wonder why this body that is meant to be temple and offering to God's creative genius and love—and this mind meant to be God's viceroy, as Donne called it—betrays us all at once or by degrees, the Judas-things. But I still love it: I think because it shows us to ourselves.

Hardy doesn't love it. Hardy is, for me, the link between naturalism and modernism. In "Hap" especially, he teeters on the edge between a forthright acceptance of "crass casualty" (line 11) and insensible and "dicing time" (line 12)<sup>13</sup> as mere if not essential facts of being and what's over the knife's edge: what Lukács referred to as a confrontation of a

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12. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 66.

13. Thomas Hardy, "Hap," in *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (London: Macmillan, 1898).

world “abandoned” by God and thus God-haunted.<sup>14</sup> But the darkness and coldness of that world and Hardy’s stubbornness of feeling are best illustrated in “The Darkling Thrush,” where the landscape is “spectre-gray” and “desolate” (lines 2–3), the times a “corpse” (line 6), the sky a “crypt” (line 7), and the soil inert and sterile (lines 9–12). The thrush itself, “[in] a full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited” (lines 15–16), pushes back against the gloom, but Hardy finds “little cause for carolings” in “terrestrial things” (lines 21 and 23).<sup>15</sup> In nature, in other words, Hardy confronts the indifferent, inexorable hopelessness of meaning.

And Frost, that nature-addict, the working man’s Wordsworth, finds at bottom a futility of purpose: we do what we are meant to do: chop wood, mend walls, take this or that road and, later, give it meaning it never had—but not by some divine will, but by nature herself. Frost’s is an evolutionary being, a reckoning of the instinctual, impulsive, practical human being that lives in a world of incidental if nonetheless impressive delights. This is Elizabeth Barrett Browning brought out of contemplation and into ambulation: walking-in-the-world and brooking no bitterness for it is, Frost would tell us, what it is and that is enough. This is a stubbornness not of purpose but of purposiveness, and a resignation to the futility of meaning. In “The Wood-Pile”—

I thought that only  
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
 Could so forget his handiwork on which  
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,  
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.<sup>16</sup> (lines 34–40)

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14. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

15. Thomas Hardy, “The Darkling Thrush,” in *Poems of the Past and Present* (London: Macmillan, 1901).

16. Robert Frost, “The Wood-Pile,” in *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), 133ff.

—and in “Mending Wall,” Frost’s neighbor, the “old-stone savage” (line 40) builds to build in the name of an inherited aphorism and in response to the tides of his own blood and the rhythms of his own muscle and bone.<sup>17</sup>

Which brings me, at last, to Larkin: and a stepping out of nature into *human* nature and a church reclaimed, stone and crux by stone and crux, for something rudimentary and ancient, shorn of the guilt and censer:

When churches fall completely out of use  
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
 Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
 To make their children touch a particular stone;  
 Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
 Advised night see walking a dead one?  
 Power of some sort will go on  
 In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
 But superstition, like belief, must die,  
 And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
 Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,  
 A purpose more obscure. . . .

. . . though I’ve no idea  
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

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17. Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” in *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), 11–13.



Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
 And that much never can be obsolete,  
 Since someone will forever be surprising  
 A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
 And gravitating with it to this ground,  
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
     If only that so many dead lie round.<sup>18</sup> (“Church-Going,” lines 22–38  
 and 52–63)

There is, I suppose, some consolation in the truth that we are food not only for weeds but for worms; and worms are food for other flexing, breathing, loving, eating, thinking things. We can believe in that much, at least. Still. For now.

But what shall we do, we hapless believers, when even the cathedral of nature fails us, ruined by our greed for its wealth of mineral and space? When there is no more a church, no more a sanctuary, no more a whisper of the angel in the wonders and the cruelty reflected to us in the national park, the private copse, the houseplant, the flash of tiger-teeth, the roar uxorious, the predation, the pain, the piss-soaked alley? A glimpse of something sidelong that evades our understanding, and yet thrills the deep poetic heart of us? What rough beast, slouching toward Jerusalem, awaits us then, beyond the recking of our own and feckless rod?

I don’t know. But I imagine there’ll be poets still to worry it, and to discover whatever bitter or surprising truths it bears with it.

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18. Philip Larkin, “Church-going,” in *The Less Deceived* (Hessle, UK: Marvell Press, 1955).

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