

# When the Soul Had Hips: Six Animadversions on Psyche and Gender in 19th-Century Poetry

Tucker, Herbert F.

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## *About the Print Version*

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Robert Browning's *Men and Women* (1855) furnishes two epigraphs it would be hard to improve on for apologetic purposes:

Your business is to paint the souls of men--  
Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke. . . no, it's not. . .  
It's vapour done up like a new-born babe--  
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)  
It's. . . well, what matters talking, it's the soul!  
--"Fra Lippo Lippi" ll. 183-88

And I have written three books on the soul,  
Proving absurd all written hitherto,  
And putting us to ignorance again.  
--"Cleon" ll. 57-59[1]

My topic, stated with all the bravado of an unrealizable ambition, is the physical representation of the human soul in the nineteenth-century imagination. My authorities are the British Romantic and Victorian poets, on whom it was particularly incumbent to carry out Fra Lippo Lippi's impossible mission: Find the soul a body. Supposing that body to be female--a fairly uncontroversial supposition, although my authorities sometimes confirm it in unpredicted ways--I have proceeded to ask how the dialectic of body and soul may correlate on one hand with the dialectic of feminine and masculine gender, and on the other with the dialectic of figural and literal representation. My finding, that they correlate every which way, is disorienting if heady; and it leaves me somewhere between Browning's gloomy Cleon and his manic Rabbi Ben Ezra. The best is yet to be: while I have not always known how to find it, I remain convinced that the topic tentatively explored below has much to disclose about gender, imagination, and their mutual bearings during the nineteenth century. So what follows is less the pursuit of a thesis than a set of *animadversions*, in the older, nonpejorative sense of that term: attempts to turn the mind towards certain aspects of the embodied form in which Romantic and Victorian poets figured the soul.

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William Blake wanted to make one thing clear. Bound across the brow of his first masterpiece, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), gleams a proposition that not only exemplifies the clarity with which he saw everything but arguably grounds that clarity:

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.[2]

In perceptual terms--for Blake the only terms that mattered--the soul and the body were functionally identical. Whatever reduction or proportioning might be entailed upon the soul in any given "age," at that perceptual and historical moment the imaginative form of the soul *was* the human body. Or, rather, it was *man's* body, "Man" being adopted more or less for granted as an Enlightenment universal by Blake, his mentor Emanuel Swedenborg, and everybody else.

I dined in Eternity with Blake the other night, and asked him about the gender bias in this passage. He frankly acknowledged it a piece of eighteenth-century astigmatism, but then hastened to show how neatly it illustrated his manifesto's main point: that ideology places limits on even the most discerning of us; and that it is the task of art in every age to make these limits apprehensible and thus expose them to evaluation and critique. The masculinization of the Enlightenment soul was a mistake, and so was the feminization of the Victorian soul.[3] Yet each of these, Blake concluded, was the right kind of mistake to make, for he had no doubt that the besetting error of his age lay in its refusal really to imagine the soul at all. The trouble with "all Bibles or sacred codes," from Mosaic scripture to Lockean associationism to Freudian psychoanalysis, was that they sought to *conceive* the soul but failed to *perceive* it, sequestering it instead with abstractions like "Reason" and "Good" that were disembodied and therefore, in Blake's view, did not exist. So pervasive were these idealist errors of his day that, as the very exuberance of *The Marriage* seems to foretell, in the defense of his own counter-theses Blake would find a life's work cut out for him. Rewriting the sacred codes would commit him to the epic intricacies of a homemade psychomachia working out the permutations of a single contest: the

struggle between a geometer's plan to secure the soul in a realm of thought, and a smith's hands-on labors to rescue the soul by recreating the senses.

Among nineteenth-century poets Blake's incarnationist psychotheology had no conscious adherents, although Swinburne and D. G. Rossetti, leading poets of the first generation to hail Blake as a master, worked along lines that were similar to his and nearly as systematic. The force of Blake's radical identification of soul with body resides instead, for my purposes, with the ancient truth it declares about poetic imagery. Metaphysicians and theologians may dispute the soul's properties, substance, and accidents; and so they vigorously did across the nineteenth century. The century's poets, however, were its major *imaginers* of soul, and their most important thinking on the topic was done in tropes. Inasmuch as their figurations and myths bestowed on the soul an imagined form, they were of Blake's party, with or without knowing it and whatever their theological bent.

Next to Blake's, most nineteenth-century poets' representations of the soul look casual or furtive, reluctant or opportunistic. Yet the comparatively ad hoc character of those representations makes them apt inspection sites for evidence of cultural contestation. Whenever poetry catches the soul in a physical manifestation there occurs, as Blake realized there must, at least a tremor *within* sacred codes, and at best a collision *between* them. The soul being officially immaterial, its poetic embodiment is ipso facto irregular, and potentially subversive. Any image of the soul will have a way of lifting into consciousness the suppressed imaginary on which the official dogmas of psychic immaterialism may be seen to depend--an effect that is if anything strongest where the image in question is most impeccably conventional: the butterfly, say, on the tombstone. A strikingly original image for the soul, in contrast, will highlight sacred codes by transgressing them. Take for example "The rank saliva of her soul" from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1860 poem "Bianca Among the Nightingales" (l. 107).<sup>[4]</sup> Such an image does not just infringe the taboo on unsanctioned soul-representation but virtually jeers at it. What is most shocking is the breach such an image makes in the wall between ideologically distinct discourses, discourses whose unconscious coexistence may prop the general order pretty well as long as it remains unconscious, but whose logical incompatibility a transgressive trope can throw into sudden relief. Showing the soul in public, if only by glimpses, poets might force the hand of the culture within which they wrote: limn its prejudices, expose its naturalized constructions, and above all anatomize its inconsistencies.<sup>[5]</sup>

Much was at stake, then, when nineteenth-century poets obeyed Fra Lippo Lippi's boss and put souls in bodies. During an epoch of rapid change in biological and medical knowledge, and in attitudes towards the authority of scriptural and ecclesiastical traditions, when the contests of idealism with materialism among the learned were increasingly open debates conducted in journals of general circulation, and when spiritualist vogues arose within a public culture of equally conspicuous bodily consumption and bodily squalor--in such times the poet who brought soul to its senses was playing with fire. The cultural friction was if anything heightened when, during the hundred years or so from Wollstonecraft to Wilde, the physical imagination of the soul tangled with gender and sexuality. This happened with great regularity in the nineteenth century, and not only as an afterthought to the soul's embodiment, I believe, but as a precondition. With bodies comes sex, of course (witness Blake's gaffe): a poet committed to rendering the soul in a corporeal image will sooner or later find gender and sexuality entailed by that commitment--and will also, if a nineteenth-century poet, often stave off that entailment or contrive its suppression in interesting ways. But sexuality lurked thus at the end of the psychical-physical line because it haunted the beginning. The century's fundamental irresolution over the semantics (and priorities) of body and soul occupied an unsteady but unavoidable relation to the symbols (and hierarchies) of masculinity and femininity.

To ask which came first in the order of signification, the soul or the body--a question always implicit in poetic imagery that represents either one of them in terms of the other--was to call into play correlative orders of value. Among these cultural coordinates gender came to have pride of place in the nineteenth century, if not absolutely then at least where the embodied soul was concerned, and at least in Britain. For within British public discourse gender was the most conspicuous and least debatable among several cultural categories that were held to be lodged in bodily properties. This preeminence was due to the influence of sporadic but unignorable feminist agitation, and also to a combination of influences that diminished the prestige of those categories which might have rivaled gender: the notorious liability of ethnic or criminal insignia to dissimulation or disguise; the comparative subsidence of race as either a demographic or political issue once slavery had been abolished. Without this last development, the imagination of the soul in Britain might have focussed more sharply, as one could argue it did in America, upon the racialized body. Blake had raised the issue on English soil in 1789 with the literally soul-blenching start of "The Little Black Boy": "My mother bore me in the southern wild, / And I am black, but O! my soul is white" (ll. 1-2). Half a century later, and after much liberal legislation, Barrett Browning's infanticidal "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1850) also conceived the politics of black and white in terms of body and soul, seeing in her baby boy's face "The *master's* look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lash" (ll. 143-44). Only now the scene was not English but American, as was the place of first publication.<sup>[6]</sup>

Pretend, for the sake of argument, that there is discovered in a Yorkshire attic a variant *Songs of Innocence*. This unique copy contains a new plate entitled "The Little Tom Boy," ornamentally illuminated with doll, thimble, football, and stick, and engraved with a quatrain poem whose first two lines run: "My father raised me on the northern moors: / I am a girl, but O! my soul is male." It would be interesting to debate where Blake might have taken such a premise: the line that ends "The Little Black Boy" certainly bristles with new possibilities: "And be like him, and he will then love me." But never mind: it's the thought that counts here, because it is a thought that would have awakened echoes across the nineteenth century, from Grasmere to Wuthering Heights and the banks of the river Floss--echoes more responsive and insistent than awoke after 1800 to "The Little Black Boy." To the eye of reason the gender of the soul may be no more than a special case of the soul's embodiment; but to the eye of history surveying nineteenth-century Britain, it can seem the generic case, the thing itself. As the aesthetic problem of representing the soul became, with the advance of the decades, an allegory of the ontological problem of the soul's very existence, gender and sexuality set the terms in which it seemed most natural for that allegory to be framed.

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What makes the imagination of the soul so unstable an affair is an inescapable contradiction at the root of its conception, where a monistic self-identity confronts an originary duality. It should go without saying--although thanks to phonetic coincidence and the expediency of rhyme poets say it all the time--that the soul is whole and sole: unitary, essential, and indivisible, the atom of life itself.<sup>[7]</sup> The trouble with this idea is that it evidently can *only* go without saying: once put into play as a proposition in an argument, a figure in a tale, or a trope in a stanza, the soul comes apart.<sup>[8]</sup> This basic dilemma, which the poetic discourse of the soul rehearses over and over during the nineteenth century, may be approached along lines laid down by two writers seldom compared, Blake and Herbert Spencer. In the terms of Blake's critique of orthodoxy, as we have seen, the soul is regarded as a "real existing principle" only through the definitive act which sunders it from its equally real opposite the body. Thus defined, the soul can have no proper embodiment or objective correlative that is not hopelessly arbitrary.<sup>[9]</sup> Spencer's estimable *Principles of Psychology* indexes "feeling," "instinct," and "will" but has no use for "soul," which

receives its due instead, along with other religious phenomena, under *Principles of Sociology*, Spencer nonetheless propounds the unknowability of "Mind" in terms that resonate with the psychopoetic dilemmas of his contemporaries:

The substance of Mind escapes into some new form in recognizing some form under which it has just existed. . . . The expression 'substance of Mind,' if we use it in any way other than as the *x* of our equation, inevitably betrays us into errors; for we cannot think of substance save in terms that imply material properties. Our only course is to recognize our symbols as symbols only; and to rest content with that duality of them which our constitution necessitates. [10]

With this last advice no poet can be content who is not ready to follow Matthew Arnold, close up shop, and hang out a critic's shingle. [11] But the epistemological slipknot Spencer ties around the mind's bid to grasp itself finds a poetic analogy in the Romantic and Victorian commonplace that declared the soul the seat of poetic creativity. For reasons much like those Spencer propounded, the poetic imagination of the soul was a nineteenth-century quest doomed to infinite recursivity—or, as the lesser of two creative evils, doomed to ambiguity and self-contradiction. So, while the *concept* of the soul elicited from poets images of oneness and singularity, the process of the soul's *conception* bedeviled them and their images into cloven duplicities. Much that is strangest in a variety of nineteenth-century poetic representations of the soul may be ascribed to poets' athletic attempts to honor both the integrity of the soul and the impossibility of imagining it otherwise than in division. If the soul was the atom of spirit, it was an atom that kept getting split. Its ideational wholeness salved scars from the rift that had produced it in the first place as an object for consciousness; conversely the dipsychic or polypsychic complexities of the soul's difference from itself registered a certain bad conscience over the unforgotten dynamics of idealization.

Consider, for example, two passages on the soul composed circa 1800. One of them has never to my knowledge attracted scholarly notice, while the other has powered dissertations; yet each occurs at a climactic juncture within a long poem celebrating the soul, and each seems to undermine its celebration by perforating the soul into a riddle. First, from one of the last stanzas of Mary Tighe's neo-Spenserian allegory *Psyche* (1805), the epithalamial clinch everybody has been waiting for:

Thus, in her lover's circling arms embraced,  
The fainting Psyche's soul, by sudden flight,  
With his its subtlest essence interlaced;  
Oh! bliss too vast for thought! by words how poorly traced! [12]

Even making due allowance for the amorous decorums constraining a poetess of her day, one may find extraordinary Tighe's vaporizing of her given psychic allegory into what is in effect a higher, steamier power of itself. That Psyche *is* the soul constitutes the whole point of her fable, expressly underscored in a stanza-length gloss (VI.46) just a few pages previously. What then can it mean for Psyche to *have* a soul as well, and a neutered soul at that? Not only the aroused heroine but the poem itself has soared out of its skin, in a soulful communion which the reader is invited to join, somewhere beyond what "words" or even consistency of "thought" can trace. And yet no reader will fail to imagine the soul-interlacings of Psyche with Cupid every bit as physically as the arm-embracings Tighe rhymes them with. Much as Shelley will do years later in his soul-riving, language-bankrupting *Epipsychidion* (1821), Tighe solves two enigmatic problems for representation, the sublimed soul and the impassioned body, by making each the other's solution. The juxtaposition "his its"—a gender asymmetry evoking the excluded term "her"—gives Psyche

back her female body without so much as mentioning the fact. The "subtlest essence" within the "soul" proves a kind of superfine carnality: the sex, as it were, that lies on the other side of gender, and is no less sexy for that. [\[13\]](#)

Soul gender also came to the poetic rescue of the least sexy Romantic, William Wordsworth, during his long-reconsidered negotiation of the Simplon Pass in the sixth book of *The Prelude* (1850; ll. 592–616). At this famous traverse--the theophany of an Imagination hitherto but a ghost in the epic machinery--Wordsworth like Tighe is expressively stymied, "halted" at the limits of language, the "sad incompetence of human speech." [\[14\]](#) For Wordsworth like Tighe here confronts the bootstrap dilemma that comes with the representation of the soul: how to speak *of* the inspiration he speaks *by*. A first recourse is to divide himself into subject and object, or rather speaker and addressee: "But to my conscious soul I now can say--/ 'I recognise thy glory.'" This effusion beats being aphasically "lost" and "halted," but not by much. For it may be said of recognition, as Blake said of pity, that it divides the soul, introducing here a temporal abyss between a past of glorious imagination and a present "now" of mere commemoration. The belated poet can only chronicle the heroic mind that once was his and "recognise" there the "glory" of a majesty since alienated. Everything in the passage underscores this fractured subjectivity: lineation, punctuation, and most of all the rift that opens between "I" and "my soul," then cracks again into "I" and "thou."

The great writing that follows this breakdown draws energy from the poet's rival impulses to mend it and to live with it. And the field on which he plays this rivalry out to stalemate is the field of gender. "Our destiny, our being's heart and home" sounds like a quite proper place for the domesticated (feminized) soul. Yet this place proves in the next line to be "with infinitude, and only there," that is, in a strenuous (masculinized) utopia of "Effort, and expectation, and desire." As if to acknowledge and cover for the tensions here displayed, Wordsworth goes on in a much revised passage to emphasize the gender implications of what has come before, as a means of conflict resolution that will let both sides claim victory. I reproduce for comparison the 1805 version, which is neuter-minded; and the version of 1850, which is unmistakably soul-sexed:

The mind beneath such banners militant  
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught  
That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts  
That are their own perfection and reward--  
Strong in itself, and in the access of joy  
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.....

Under such banners militant, the soul  
Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils  
That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts  
That are their own perfection and reward,  
Strong in herself and in beatitude  
That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile  
Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds  
To fertilize the whole Egyptian plain.

In its revised form this magnificent passage gives both the militant and the quietist in Wordsworth their due. But it does so only through a decisive subordination of the now expressly feminine soul,

which begins in repose under chivalric banners, ends whelmed under a fecundating flood, and lies throughout under an implied injunction to accept a woman's part and count her blessings with a lady's grace. The same soul that was recognized in glory, ten lines above, is now bid to cultivate her intrinsic self-perfection--an end which Wordsworth cherishes with high Arnoldian suaveness, but only after issuing some coercive prohibitions first. "No trophies," thank you, "no spoils": the soul's is a secret glory that can do without merit badges. Meanwhile, her puny consort the chronicling "I" has been usurped by a potent "he": the else gratuitously masculine personification of the seminal, imperial (and not long since Napoleonic) river Nile. Thus in the course of a virtuoso verse paragraph Wordsworth transforms writer's block into fluency, and revalues belatedness as originality: a trademark feat which no poet ever performed oftener or more cogently, yet which in this instance is built on the back of the gendered soul.[\[15\]](#)

In these passages Wordsworth and Tighe pursue different aims, but each addresses a writing problem through the same two-step process. The narrative interpretation of an event that is manifestly climactic within the larger poem places the normative concept of the unitary soul under high enough imaginative pressure to break it down. The soul divides into distinctly realized figures, which are then reorganized--not fused, but coordinated--under the aegis of sexuality. In each case the soul's gender finds ultimate expression in imagery of heterosexual union, which (perhaps because it is heterosexual, certainly because it is imagery) represents the soul's reintegration with itself on terms of hierarchically structured difference rather than conceptual identity. Furthermore, because the ultimate referent of all this process is none other than the processing agent itself, the creative soul, the resolution thus achieved represents metapoetically a negotiated settlement between the claims of ideas and of images as such: a settlement quite favorable to the imagination trade that is poetry. So favorable that even a Mary Tighe, and much more a William Wordsworth, consented for its sake to sanction the social relations of dominance and submission which attached during the nineteenth century to imagery of heterosexual union. We have just seen how Wordsworth's passage actively invokes sexual politics in reclamation of the poet's creativity; Tighe, likewise, purchases closure by depicting at the last minute a "fainting Psyche," whose "sudden flight" suggests the violence of rapture as well as its bliss, a flying but also a fleeing from circumstances which Psyche can no more escape than Tighe can. If imagining the soul meant putting it into a body, then by the same token embodying it meant putting it into a system of cultural power.

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No nineteenth-century poet saw this logic more directly than Emily Bronte, or came to a starker perception of its consequences. Bronte's best poems center firmly on inspiration; and the organ of inspiration she, like her contemporaries, assumes to be the pure and virtuous soul. What gives the religious orthodoxy behind these poems such original force is the integrity of purpose with which they seek to bestow imaginative integrity on the soul. The holistic ideal of psychic purity is one which these poems repeatedly circle and probe--until, at the end of her poetic career, Bronte decides that the soul is contaminated past reclaim and throws the notion out. In "Aye, There It Is!" (1841), for example, the free pronoun "It" stands for inspiration itself:

Aye, there it is! It wakes to-night  
Sweet thoughts that will not die  
And feeling's fires flash all as bright  
As in the years gone by!  
(ll. 1-4)[\[16\]](#)

"It" having neither a grammatical referent in the poem nor a physical site in experience, Bronte fills the discursive void with a plethora of exhilarated tropes for a psychic ecstasy that is literally out of this world: "that glorious wind" (9), "a spirit" (13), "The essence of the Tempest" (15), which "Has swept the world aside" (10).

This diversity of windy figurations in the poem meets a matching diversity of grammatical persons. The opening stanza's scene of Wordsworthian recognition of and by the conscious soul yields in the second stanza to an I/thou scenario, which splits into distinct selves the duality implicit in re-cognition as such. This device situates the "I" of the poem somewhere between vicarious participation and clinical detachment, describing another's rapture by sympathetic inference from its symptoms: "And I can tell by thine altered cheek. . ." (l. 5). Although Bronte keeps this scenario pronominally neutral, the distinctness of its subject and object positions marks the "thou" as functionally feminine, the "I" as masculine. That the disposition to feminize Bronte's enraptured medium was as strong in her day as in ours appears from the gloss this poem drew from her sister Charlotte: "In these stanzas a louder gale has roused the sleeper on *her* pillow: the wakened soul struggles to blend with the storm by which *it* is swayed" (p. 165, emphasis added). This gendered comment suggests that, while Charlotte Bronte read "Aye, There It Is!" as a dialogue of the mind with itself--an I's extended apostrophe to the thou in a rhetorical mirror--it was second nature for her to code that observed mirror image female. Addressing the soul was of course a common device in nineteenth-century poetry, one that ranged from ornate invocation (O thou soul) to sotto voce aside (Be still, my soul), and that I suspect owed some of its popularity to the grammatical second person's capacity to mask gender. But to mask gender is not to do away with it, and this poem does not pretend otherwise. For in sustaining her apostrophe, in dramatizing the situation at such length, Emily invokes a social setting and a cultural context that in effect de-neutralize the imagined soul: Charlotte's "it," and the "It" of the title too.[\[17\]](#) Under a scrutiny whereby to be observed is to be patronized, the soul falls from subject into object position, and falls as a woman into natural place as a bit of rough weather: Ay, Ay, Sir, There She Blows. The "Aye" of corroborative outside witness assumes cultural as well as syntactical priority over the "I" of self-identity.

Bronte's studied paean to singleness of being thus proves to be structured at levels of trope and address by self-division instead. In the final two stanzas the already fragile ideality of soul disintegrates further:

A universal influence  
From Thine own influence free;  
A principle of life, intense,  
Lost to mortality.

Thus truly when that breast is cold  
Thy prisoned soul shall rise,  
The dungeon mingle with the mould--  
The captive with the skies.  
(ll. 17-24)

On the construction friendliest to Bronte's orthodoxy, the last stanza declares that the soul which is now imprisoned shall one day rise, that with the decomposition of its bodily dungeon the present captive shall go free. Yet the harder the poem tries to name its ineffable topic, the farther it strays, so that by the end Bronte seems to be declaring the opposite of what she means. "Lost to mortality" cuts both ways, against eternal life as well as for it; and the final line implies that the



"prisoned soul" may have to look forward on its release only to another captivity, this time behind what D. G. Rossetti would soon be calling "the gold bar of Heaven." [18] Securing the poem against these subversions requires us to force prolepsis to a crisis point: not only to abjure the corrupt body in the fallen present, but also to refuse the body of the text, what its images literally present.

To force this crisis--to dare double or nothing--may well have been Bronte's aim as a Protestant daughter of Milton. But we should appreciate how much is at stake in her poetics of disembodiment: even as the soul, in submitting to be imagined, shatters on the world, Bronte's iconoclasm turns away from imagination altogether and into a place beyond art. [19] The very late "Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle" (1845) features a female prisoner who, while in one sense she spins out more fully the feminine symbolism implicit in the "prisoned soul" from "Aye, There It Is!" in another sense lodges a vivid critique of ensoulment itself as merely thralldom by another name. For this speaker reports that her extremities of hardship have brought her to liminal experiences exceeding not just the body but the soul as well: experiences, we might guess, of what lies beyond the primal division which discriminates soul from body to begin with. "My outward sense is gone," the prisoner declares of these remembered threshold moments, "my inward essence feels" (82)--only to relapse from that pure essentiality back into the soul, which is but a version of the fallen body repeated in a finer tone. The soul is now the first cell of the prison that is life: "dreadful is the check" (85) to the prisoner's desire when the inevitable hour returns and it is time for (in bitter, crisp analogy) "The soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain!" (88). [20]

At the end of this iconoclastic direction stands "No Coward Soul Is Mine" (1846), a most decisively terminal poem, which should invite here an interpretation stressing not the adjective in its title but the noun. For the logic we have been tracing across Bronte's poems suggests that at last she is not so much asserting the bravery of her soul as forswearing the cowardly thing *per se*. "No coward soul is mine / No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere" (1-2): the trouble with the soul in Bronte's poetry hitherto has been precisely its vacillation, its crazy trembling between subject and object, its habit of temporizing with a world whose ephemera are so much frippery, "Worthless as withered weeds / Or idlest froth amid the boundless main" (11-12). Enough of such dithering slosh; if soul is to have any place at all in Bronte's austere final vision of "Immortality" (16), let it be no nominal image but have force instead in the divine power she knows she shares:

With wide-embracing love  
Thy spirit animates eternal years  
Pervades and broods above,  
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears.  
(ll. 17-20)

Bronte's God who is the Word is clearly a verb. Half the words in this stanza are verbs, and the most prominent, "animates," derives from the Latin word for soul (*anima*). This affirmative mode, and this alone, is finally spared by Bronte's severe eliminations: where "There is not room for Death / Nor atom that his might could render void" (25-26), that essential yet unstable atom the soul can survive only as dynamic "animation," pure willed energy. [21] Bronte thus undoes the compact we saw Tighe and Wordsworth making between the needs of imagination and the politics of sexual difference. For a poet of her rare and earnest lights, the gendered game of hierogamy was not worth the candle.

Each poetic text we have looked at thus far has fundamentally assumed--for all the world as if its author had never read Blake--that soul and body do not mix. Even Tighe, whose agenda is least apparent, finds she must power-eject the soul from the body, albeit a body already allegorical, before it will serve her turn and be troped. More nineteenth-century British poets than not subscribe to some version of this dualistic assumption, thanks partly to its prominence within the Protestant tradition and partly to an unwritten but undying tenet of the Romantic tradition. This tenet identified the poet's cultural work with feats of representational prowess: first, with representation of the heretofore unrepresented (merging the appeals of creative originalism and political revolution); then, by later extension, with representation of the downright unrepresentable (a Romantic quest that led on to Decadence at the fin de siècle). So squarely did the immaterial soul fall into this latter category that, while the century was still young, and certainly by 1840, common opinion held that matters of the soul were the peculiar province of poetry--bodies being left to natural science, political economy, and, of course, the novel.

This division of literary labor reflected a prevalent dualism concerning the nature of the soul, which we might call the *pneumatic* perspective and which, with the bracing clarifications of Emily Bronte just behind us, we might summarize as follows. The human soul is a spirit trapped in an animal body: a *pneuma*, a *spiritus*. Its inaccessibility to imaginative representation constitutes a parallel in human psychology to the theological concept of divine transcendence; in this sense Coleridge's definition of Primary Imagination from *Biographia Literaria* (1817) reads as an apposite comment on the soul as well. [22] When the soul thus conceived appears not in a treatise but in a poetically imagined form, that form as we have seen tends to extremes: either it will be a conservatively allegorical form, along conventional lines laid down by received tradition (per Fra Lippo's instructions), or else it will be a form defiantly idiosyncratic. Both extremes are so highly eligible, and the middle ground between them so vacant, because within the structure of the sign the soul can only be a signified, to which its signifiers can have at best the arbitrary relationship which Coleridge called allegorical. In other words, the pneumatic soul may be indicated but never embodied; only by some sleight of hand can it be gotten, as I have suggested Mary Tighe gets it, to signify anything beside itself.

This is the majority position on the soul; but it is no more than that, as may be seen by contrast with a distinct minority position that adjoined it. This second view of the soul, which also boasts a distinguished pedigree and which we might call the *psuchic* perspective, runs as follows. The soul is an indwelling principle within organized life: a *psuche*, an *anima*. It is the self-realizing purpose that was known to the Aristotelian school philosophy as entelechy; or, in terms that were current among the disciples of Coleridge, the shaping agency of *forma formans*. [23] Within this conception the human soul, while divine in nature, is no less inherently enmattered than living matter is inherently ensouled. The soul's connection with the animal body it informs is no accident but is essential to its function. As the *pneuma* soul belongs with theological transcendence, the *psuche* soul belongs with immanence and has, especially in the age of Browning, Newman, and Hopkins, close relation to Christian incarnationist ideas. These associations keep the human body, and by extension the world's body or cosmos, legible in principle as signs for the soul that are not arbitrary but natural. [24] Having been informed by soul in the first place, material objects may signify soul in an organic or participatory fashion--according to the logic of the Coleridgean symbol, as opposed to the allegoresis of *pneuma*. Therefore the *psuchic* conception of the soul is as hospitable to imagination as the *pneumatic* is hostile.

I have dropped the name of Coleridge into both of the foregoing synopses, in order to suggest that incompatible ideas about the soul could coexist in a modern mind of immense sophistication. In Coleridge they could even thrive together, to produce such finely tangled poetic effects as appear in the enigmatic fragments exacted by his darker years. Despite its name his epigram

"Psyche" (1817) takes not *psuche* but *pneuma* as its muse: to valorize "the soul, escaped the slavish trade / Of mortal life" (ll. 3–4), is to imagine flesh and soul as antagonists, and the caterpillar and butterfly as phases sharply discontinuous. [25] Save for the fine last line "But to deform and kill the things whereon we feed" (which Oscar Wilde recalled in the Coleridgean soul-searchings of his *Ballad of Reading Gaol* [1898]), this lyric is of interest here chiefly as a reminder that the Psyche myth, having elements alike of incarceration and of erotic fulfillment, stayed current by remaining available to both parties. [26] But another vividly troubled epigram, entitled "Phantom" (1805; pub. 1834), tells a richer tale of the soul:

All look and likeness caught from earth,  
All accident of kin and birth,  
Had pass'd away. There was no trace  
Of aught on that illumined face,  
Uprais'd beneath the rifted stone  
But of one spirit all her own;--  
She, she herself, and only she,  
Shone through her body visibly.

A nightmare? Or an apocalypse of joy? Essence of ghost story, this piece balances between the horror and the beauty of a vision of soul embodiment; in so doing it balances, too, between the perspectives of *pneuma* and of *psuche*. The opening lines burn all the bridges to nature, à la Emily Brontë; and, although the source of illumination in line 4 cannot be specified as either inward light or celestial glory, the imagery of breakthrough clearly affiliates the poem with the pneumatic tradition. Yet the final couplet, which is where the poetic magic transpires, feels instead like a beatific revelation of *psuche*, the lucent apocalypse of a soul that has finally enteleshized body, through and through, into a full image of its truth. *Pneuma* would shine "through" a body as across a visor or costume; *psuche* would shine "throughout" the body as a shaping energy now transformed to light--as if to make "visibly" literal the phrase "she herself," whose appositive redundancy is here at a stroke highlighted and abolished. [27]

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With what unsettling power these contrasted views of the soul might bear on questions of gender during the nineteenth century is revealed in a letter Charles Kingsley wrote at its midpoint. Something of a Pauline epistle or position paper, this homiletic communique sent to an unidentified correspondent (and clearly intended for wider circulation) discriminates two "anthropological" definitions of humanity which will have, for us, a familiar ring:

Now, there are two great views of men. One as a spirit embodied in flesh and blood, with certain relations, namely, those of father, child, husband, wife, brother, as necessary properties of his existence. . . . Those of them who are spiritually enlightened, have learnt to believe that these relations to man are the symbols of relations to God. . . .

The second class. . . hold an entirely different anthropology. In their eyes man is not a spirit necessarily embodied in, and expressed by an animal; but a spirit accidentally connected with, and burdened by, an animal. . . . The ideal of man, therefore, is to deny, not himself, but the animal part which is not himself, and to strive after a non-human or angelic state. And this angelic state is supposed, of course, to be single and self-sustained, without relations, except to God alone. [28]

Even the casual passer-by at Kingsley's single combat with John Henry Newman a decade later will recognize the forging of the sex-tempered weaponry that champions bluff *psuche* against the epicene heresy of *pneuma* (which Kingsley not inaptly terms "popular manichaeism or gnosticism" [1:256]). By 1865 Kingsley will be denouncing the medieval monastics, in a university sermon, for "their unnatural attempt to be wiser than God, and to unsex themselves" (2:212). The same argument is already implicit here, and it becomes as explicit as could be wished before the letter is out. Citing with derision--and italics, and exclamation point--"Frank Newman's Unitarian book, 'The Soul, *her* sorrows and aspirations!" Kingsley goes on: "You are as aware as I, that the soul is talked of as a bride--as feminine by nature, whatever be the sex of its possessor. This is indeed only another form of the desire to be an angel. For if you analyse the common conception of an angel, what is it, as the pictures consistently enough represent it, but a woman, unsexed?" (1:259).

Much might be said about this impassioned and ambitious letter, but its value here lies in Kingsley's exasperated insight that the soul in flight from its proper bodily and social "relations" was in his day clearly coded--imagined, "pictured"--as *feminine*; and that this feminine soul had the capacity to return out of the symbolic realm into social and institutional realms where it could do real damage. As Kingsley knew very well, the pronoun in Frank Newman's title might be satisfactorily explained by reference to convention or mere etymology, since both the Greek *psuche* and the Latin *anima* were feminine nouns. But Kingsley would never have been the cultural gladiator he was, had he not stood ready to insist that a great deal more was at stake than conventions; Coleridge's bloodhound and Maurice's bulldog in one, he sought the spoor whereby conventions led to vital social meanings. Whither led the feminization of soul Kingsley's letter leaves small doubt: straight to Mariolatry, priestly celibacy, and (chief of ills) erosion of the heterosexual, communally integrated clerisy's mission within the Anglican Church and so within the national life. Christ was the Bridegroom of the Church, in a relation symbolized for Kingsley by the physical conjugality of believers, and most particularly of clergymen. To regard Christ instead as "Bridegroom of each individual soul," in another phrase the letter disgustingly quotes (1:259), was to make the Savior a polygamist. Just as bad, it was to break the social authority of the Church in pieces. To Kingsley the feminization of the soul portended mutiny in the twin citadels of Home and Church, for it was at bottom a figuration of individual protest against collective control. "Woman, unsexed" was a phrase that said it all: this paradoxical caption of Kingsley's for the picture of the gendered soul signified trouble in the works, not least because it highlighted unfinished business within the very camp of liberal individualism.

With Kingsley it is never wise to discount merely personal obsession too quickly, yet in all this admonishment he discerned much that was truly there. At least as the poets imagined it, the nineteenth-century soul did consistently exhibit feminized traits, which did tend toward the disaffected alienation that Kingsley prophesied. The soul was far less acquainted with satisfactions and duties than with what Frank Newman had named "sorrows and aspirations." Better yet, pangs and yearnings; best of all, torments and ecstasies.<sup>[29]</sup> To judge from the epithets favored in Romantic and Victorian poetry, the daily fare of the embodied soul was a diet of violent superlatives. When not torn, pierced, chained, seamed, and scarred, it was quivering or scalding (naked or nearly so) in ice or fire. And yet things might look up, too: the soul could kindle, then glow; taking fire or wing, it could soar and exult, laved in bliss, trilling rhapsodies of joy as often as it shrieked out litanies of pain. Now, in all this metaphorical extremity there was doubtless some overcompensation for the immateriality which we have seen to be constitutive of the soul: a soul that by definition could not be perceived must as it were meet the reader more than halfway. There was as well, behind this rhetorical violence, some straining to retrieve and fix within the this-worldly imagination receding certainties about the actuality of Hell and Heaven.<sup>[30]</sup> Still, to a literary estimation, the fortunes of the soul recall nobody's so much as those of the Gothic heroine. And it is she whom I would nominate as *the* prototype for the poetical

pneumatics of the nineteenth century. Incarcerated within an alien structure, a stranger rudely bruised but unbowed by incessant episodes of containment, strife, and escape, the soul thus employed may have been normatively feminine because its counterpart in Gothic fiction was. Living under siege, it lived under protest too; and, as Kingsley saw with alarm, that protest was accounted not as bad behavior but as righteousness. An ideal to begin with, the pneumatically imagined soul was an idealist, and was nothing if not critical, since its very conception implied a critique of the body and the material world. Perfect in itself, yet ever liable to the corruptions of compromise with its jailer, the soul as poetic heroine of what we might call Psychic Gothic rehearsed--nay, practiced as virtues--the very habits of contrariety, refusal, and individual assertiveness which made Kingsley the husband and priest so nervous, and with such good cause.<sup>[31]</sup> Kingsley's bullish genius let him understand that even the ascetic, iconophobic *pneuma* was gendered: not sexed, indeed "unsexed"; and yet, in its very unsexedness, a force for protest against the Victorian configurations that aligned biological determinants with the proprieties of power. The pneumatic soul may indeed, in its melodramatic sufferings, have been the first of the suffragettes.

Kingsley's remedy was a lifelong campaign on behalf of more and heartier *psuche*, which is not a bad alternative description of the nickname which that campaign acquired: "muscular Christianity" preached a soulful frame, spirituality at home (and at peace) in a body.<sup>[32]</sup> The laureate of this endeavor was the Victorian poet now least in favor, Coventry Patmore; its manual the often-cited and most-maligned among Victorian poems nobody reads any more, *The Angel in the House* (1856). The poem's very title croons a countercharm to the Damsel-in-the-Dungeon, Madwoman-in-the-Attic plot we have just been considering. Strictly speaking, Love or Eros is the poem's angel of domestic blessing, not the figurine of a perfect wife Patmore is widely misprised for installing there. And yet, as with the invincible namesake "Frankenstein," the misprision is more right than wrong. For if Eros dwells in the house that Patmore built, it is only because Psyche dwells there too: one of the emblematic changes that can be rung on the titular allegory produces "The Soul in the Body," where the soul is a woman and the woman is at home.

As cordial in his Christianity as Kingsley was muscular, Patmore finds *psuche* a place within the bourgeois sanctuary of a countryside courtship and marriage, where beauty, desire, and comfort reconcile body with soul in a prosperous decency. The poet's demonstration that "No fruit can come of that man's faith / Who is to Nature infidel" (I, p. 161) makes constant appeal to the fruits of the body: physical pleasure and the bounty of children.<sup>[33]</sup> Through these natural evidences--symbols literally organic, in the tradition of Burke and Coleridge--Patmore intuits a heterosexualized physics running from micro-to macro-cosmology:

Nature, with endless being rife,  
Parts each thing into "him" and "her,"  
And, in the arithmetic of life,  
The smallest unit is a pair.  
(II, p. 183)

Our lifted lives at last should touch  
That lofty goal to which they move;  
Until we find, as darkness rolls  
Far off, and fleshly mists dissolve,  
That nuptial contrasts are the poles  
On which the heavenly spheres revolve.  
(I, p. 41)

The worlds and the atoms, like the spouses, revolve in a mutual attraction that perpetuates Nature's original assignment of sexual "parts."

This lovingly preserved polarity is worth pausing over as an anomaly among Victorian poems. The more ordinary course was to use marital union as a trope for one of the very few things Victorian writers held more sacred even than marriage: viz., the dialectical synthesis of opposites whereby present strife was accommodated as a developmental stage within a reassuringly unitary process. Witness the case of Victoria's hierophant of the ordinary, Tennyson. During the decade before Patmore wrote his poem Tennyson had ended both *The Princess* (1847) and *In Memoriam* (1850) with spectacularly synthetic projections of marriage. In each of these the imminent union of an emblematic, procreant couple resolves on a symbolic level any number of contemporary conflicts, which are discounted as growing pains that, when rightly interpreted, will be seen to have bequeathed blessings to posterity. When the Epilogue to *In Memoriam* foretells how, with the conception of a new child, "a soul / Shall strike his being into bounds / . . . a closer link / Betwixt us and the crowning race / . . . No longer half-akin to brute" (ll. 124–33), Tennyson in effect merges the individual soul into the collective oversoul or zeitgeist.<sup>[34]</sup> This Victorian absorption of present difference into eventual unity the heterosexual metaphysic of *The Angel in the House* declines to sponsor. Apparently that fulsomely charming uxoriousness of his let Patmore see how the *psuche* principle, if granted a sweeping historical charter and an evolutionary scale, would reduce to instrumentally provisional status a sexual difference which he deemed the axis of creation and an ultimate value in itself.

Rather than trade sex for progress, with its nobler race of Hallam-typed superhumans and its dream of gender transcendence, Coventry Patmore clove to the Psyche he knew. Yet—as even those who have never read his bestseller will roundly confirm—just this loyalty to the familiar became in due time the great stumbling block between *The Angel in the House* and any imaginable post-Victorian readership. Eros would not be penned in a connubial nook, and so the Angel abandoned Patmore's house long ago. Having espoused an appealing theory of cosmic heterosexuality, the bard of Victorian marriage then made a fatal mistake: he hitched his theory so confidently to prevailing social arrangements between the sexes that it could not weather any but the most superficial change in those arrangements.<sup>[35]</sup> Worse, given what the social face of normative heterosexuality was in the middle of the nineteenth century, cultural complacency on Patmore's scale had the effect of reintroducing into *The Angel in the House* the same unwholesome dualism that he, like Kingsley, had hoped to exorcise.

"Man misdeserves his sweet ally: / Where she succeeds. . . / He fails, in spite of prayer and vow, / And agonies of faith and force" (I, p. 79). Patmore's praise of woman's soul more than once hinges on denigration of man's, as it does in the continuation of this passage:

Her spirit, compact of gentleness,  
If Heaven postpones or grants her pray'r,  
Conceives no pride in its success,  
And in its failure no despair;  
But his, enamour'd of its hurt,  
Baffled, blasphemes, or, not denied,  
Crows from the dunghill of desert,  
And wags its ugly wings for pride.  
(I, p. 80)

Our topic obliges us, not for the first time, to follow the pronouns. Division into His and Hers

constituted the nature of things, Patmore testified in a passage just quoted; but when he comes to imagine the soul, an interloping *Its* breaks in and wags some ugly wings. Whether purposely or by the tact of an instinctual chivalry, Patmore's core sense that the *psuche* soul must be female sheds a delicate gender ambiguity across the first quatrain above. Is the antecedent of "her" in the second line the same as that of "Her" in the first, or is it not rather "spirit" instead? "Its" in the next two lines may refer to her "spirit," but it need not: "prayer" is a closer referent, drawing off the "its" and keeping the lady spirit intact. It is as if, the beloved being eternally feminine, her soul should be so too. No such niceties respect the soul of man, however, in the unequivocal quatrain that follows. Man's soul is a thoroughgoing "it"--but not from any sex neutrality in its behaviors. These are so grossly male that Patmore's calling the cock-of-the-walk in the last line an "it" constitutes a virtual confession that the soul of man, unless redeemed by the true soul that is woman, is a brute of a sprite and less than human. [\[36\]](#)

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In 1863 Robert Browning looked back on his experimental fiasco *Sordello* (1840) and described it as "incidents in the development of a soul," adding, "little else is worth study" (1:150). Defensive as ever, Browning was also being characteristically canny about what kind of "development" he meant to defend. Did "the development of a soul" name a psychic entelechy that art was to render, or the processes of art itself? Probably both, given the reflexivities of *Sordello*, a (failed) poem about a (failed) poet. If so, then we may see Browning's career of poetic psychologizing as the gigantic elaboration of a theory Keats had hazarded once in a family letter:

Call the world if you Please 'The vale of Soul-making' Then you will find out the use of the world. . . . I[n]telligences are atoms of perception--they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God--how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them--so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? [\[37\]](#)

"The medium of a world," "the development of a soul": the poets' phrases are legible equally in terms of life and of art. Especially for the author of *Men and Women* soul-making--the project of building modern character--was at least as much a technical as an ethical challenge; and in fact he typically enlisted the latter challenge in addressing the former. [\[38\]](#) Not only did Browning patent the dramatic monologue as a conscience-baited reader trap, through the moral outrageousness of "Porphyria's Lover," "My Last Duchess," and other early *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). Even within poems of a quite different genre, the self-editorializing narrative we find variously elaborated in *Pauline* (1833), *Sordello*, *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), and *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (1873), moral riddles of body and soul repeatedly top the discursive agenda. These riddles are never solved; in fact, when the poet for once forthrightly proposed solutions in *La Saisiaz* (1878), he wrote a dull poem. Browning at his best made generic Victorian discourse about the soul into a medium for a particularized soul-portraiture in which, as in the new art of photography, what counted was how things developed on paper.

Soul talk is particularly prominent among the dozen poems that Browning gathered under the rubric "Men, and Women" when reordering his work for the collected edition of 1863. Nearly all of these favored monologues--including my two epigraph texts--contain flashpoints at which talk about the soul, generally inconclusive in itself, develops the talker's own soul and brings it out with vivid distinctness. Karshish the physician, professionally pledged to keep souls in bodies, can hardly keep his own from bubbling forth over the Christian gospel; the Pictor Ignotus and Andrea del Sarto pay lip-service to the springings of the soul in Rafaelesque art but play their own so

close to the chest that their doing so becomes a revelation in itself; the Bishop at St. Praxed's exposes his venality of soul through lavish fantasies of a perennial body of stone. To recur to a distinction introduced above: Browning's speakers are pneumatists all, yet he turns their pneumatism *psuche*'s way, which is to say that he implants it in the body of the text, saying to each of his monologists, "Thy soul is in thy face" ("Any Wife to Any Husband" [1855] l. 12).

To invoke "Any Wife" is to see something else about this inner circle of Browning's 1863 poems: that its ring of speakers does not have any wife in it, or any woman for that matter. So what did Browning mean by calling a collection that comprised eleven men, plus the emphatically maiden goddess Artemis, "Men, and Women"? The 1863 comma inserted into his already established 1855 title scores, with a pause of deadpan timing, an ironic recognition: that the soul talk going around his select male circle must, sooner or later, entail the feminine. No matter how gynophobic the Browning men's club, or how panicky their flights to a compensatory pneumatic "Transcendentalism" (the first title in the group), their dramatically and bodily contexted discourse is of woman born, and to her they must return.

Maybe any wife would have known as much; that Robert Browning's wife did is past question. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was as notable a contortionist of soul as her husband: his *Pauline* and her *Aurora Leigh* (1856) between them must boast half the freakish tropes for the soul in the Victorian canon. Furthermore, nearly from the beginning of her career the forms into which she twisted soul may be read as attempts to turn poetry loose from fixed constructions of gender. The *Essay on Mind* she published at twenty (1826) gives fascinating illustration of the impediments to freedom that a young woman of spirit had to confront in her day, even under ideally privileged circumstances, and even on purely intellectual terms. This confident Popean verse essay repeatedly divides and conquers along gender lines: Book I subordinates a feminized Nature to the generalizing power of the neuter Mind; Book II, moving from physics to metaphysics, locates the highest exercise of Mind in the "Fancy" of the poet, who replaces feminine nature with "Nature's ideal form" (l. 1045), and whom Barrett Browning here as throughout her poetry types male. Yet the nascent poetic here is not so much masculine or even androgyne as it is Minervan. The chief dialectic of Barrett Browning's long first phase was negative, not synthetic: if the poetry repeatedly crosses gender lines, it does so in the sense of crossing gender out.<sup>[39]</sup> For the poet associates freedom--freedom from the female "nature" that is among her culture's regnant tropes--with the denial or incapacitation of the body. Writing as an abstracted mind let Barrett Browning trump the abjected body; but, as she realized by flashes even in the early *Essay on Mind*, this was a merely ideal victory gained on terms effectively complicit with the patriarchal ideology that sponsored sexual abjection in the first place. Trumping the pseudo-neutrality of mind would require stronger measures. Accordingly, Barrett Browning came to invoke what the *Essay on Mind* left out but the rest of her oeuvre made central: the wild card of the soul.

Writing and publishing from 1833 until nearly 1850 in the ladylike character of the disembodied soul hardly freed Barrett Browning from the constraints of gender--not for nothing was this invalid crowned the most famous *poetess* of her era. But it did give her fresh purchase on those constraints. It extended the range of her art beyond the bounds of domestic and familial propriety hitherto set to women's poetry: the angelic eroticism of the Morning Star's love-chant to Lucifer in *A Drama of Exile* (1844; ll. 810-95), for example, is work that might have taught Tighe if not Shelley a thing or two about out-of-body sex. More important, her ambition to write from and as the soul focussed Barrett Browning's attention upon issues in poetic representation that were vital to the age. "The Soul's Travelling" (1838) cicerones the soul on a Victorian tour of town and country scenery that issues in a surprise confrontation with the soul's own maculate essence:



the place is full  
Of silences, which when you cull  
By any word, it thrills you so  
That presently you let them grow  
To meditation's fullest length  
Across your soul with a soul's strength:  
And as they touch your soul, they borrow  
Both of its grandeur and its sorrow,  
That deathly odor which the clay  
Leaves on its deathlessness always.  
(ll. 167–76)

The soul is to the body as silence is to language, and the passage sets highest worth on the mildly but firmly sexualized fullness of quiet meditation. Yet this choice interval is framed by what it blocks out: the "word" as both prompting and recording device, and especially the pervasive sense of the body, the unforgettable "clay" that tinges all. The larger subject of this interesting passage is not the abstracted soul's rapt communion, then, but the process of soul-abstraction itself, an elective spiritual exercise which the passage as a whole marks as temporary, heuristic, and--like Barrett Browning's soulful early persona within the full arc of her career--provisional.

As a Christian, Barrett Browning knew the soul for a certainty. As a poet, though, she used it as an hypothesis, and with a recklessness that probably only so certain a faith could have made good. If there seems something wanton about the following image from "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (1844), there is supposed to be: "From my brain the soul-wings budded, waved a flame about my body, / Whence conventions coiled to ashes" (ll. 269–70). A mixed metaphor in the first line, to say the least: the soul might traditionally be winged *or* aflame; but its own bellows, growing organically for good measure out of the brain and around the body? The friction struck between such conventional images incinerates them, and the second line all but says so. Parading the conventionality of the images neutralizes their subliminal power, in a gesture that epitomizes the poem's class-defying plot. Again, "The Forced Recruit" (1860) commemorates a patriot who, impressed into the Austrian infantry, has willingly sought out friendly fire for Italia's sake: "His soul kissed the lips of her guns" (l. 40). This is quite as startling as the image (quoted above) of the soul's "saliva," and for quite the same reason: Barrett Browning has grasped, and pushed to a breaking point of imaginative literality, the oral implications that are contained, but ordinarily suppressed, within that conventional trope the voice of the soul.

Passages like these abound in the poetry Barrett Browning published in 1850 and after, where they are the extroverted counterparts to the introversion that governs her work through 1844. Yet what the later abandon would trumpet, the earlier reserve had also implied, albeit from the safe side of decorum where Barrett Browning's readers always preferred to gather: even then, to dramatize the soul's inexpressibility was potentially to mount a political demonstration. The 1844 *Poems* include a sequence of twenty-eight sonnets--a structural double-sonnet in itself--strategically framed by two examinations of the limits of psychic representation. "The Soul's Expression" not only explains in advance that the struggle to "deliver right / That music of my nature" (ll. 2–3) through "portals of the sense" (l. 10) is doomed by the "sensual ground" (l. 8) of nature, but warns that total self-expression even if possible would be lethal, killing the body, and presumably poetry too, "Before that dread apocalypse of soul" (l. 14). The concluding sonnet "Insufficiency" continues the same theme, protesting against "the curse / Which breathes through Nature" (ll. 8–9). As in *An Essay on Mind* and "The Soul's Travelling," Nature here is not the physical world but "reality" in its culturally foreordained, sex-normed givenness. "Nature" thus conceived, as the crucial (and for EBB deeply gendered) word "curse" implies, owes to the cultural

order of language its charter to define the real. From this worldly charter Barrett Browning's vision of the heavenly future dissents; hence the libertarian urgency of her imagined afterlife, in which the soul now "yearning to be free" (l. 3) will resume and perfect its expressive fashioning, "seek / Fit peroration without let or thrall" (ll. 13–14).

Even the staunchest opponent of the biographical fallacy must concede that the poetry Barrett Browning wrote after her marriage repossessed the bodiliness that *An Essay on Mind* had put away. The newly exaggerated physicality of her soul imagery after 1850 is one sign of this change. Another, subtler but equally pervasive, is a redoubled willingness to *enact* the soul through the technical and material resources of poetry. If by elopement, financial independence and motherhood the poet had gotten her body back, by the same token she seems after 1845 readier than before to entrust soul to the embodiments of prosodic textuality--not as a trope or image but as a *psuchic* energy coursing the turnings of verse. This adventure in soul-enactment, which on one level gives to *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) its plot, on another level suffuses its texture. Sonnet 7, for example, consistently proves the intimacies of poet-lovers with the in-jokes of its versification. "I heard the footsteps of thy soul / Move still, oh, still, beside me" (ll. 2–3): this must be scanned if a reader is to understand how literally the poet "Was caught up into love, and taught the whole / Of life in a new rhythm" (ll. 6–7), and what it means prosodically to say, "thy name moves right" (l. 14). Responding to the spondees can show us how poetic feet may be "footsteps of the soul" in a sense that is at once more and less intimately physical than the sense of concrete images. [\[40\]](#)

Sharp conflicts between Barrett Browning's earlier transcendental protest and her new commitment to a human and earthly lover are mediated in the performance space of the *Sonnets*, where poetic form becomes the soul's record and rehearsal at once. Moving from metrical to syntactical prosody, consider what time it is, earthly or heavenly, in the opening clauses of sonnet 22:

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,  
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,  
Until the lengthening wings break into fire  
At either curved point,--what bitter wrong  
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long  
Be here contented? Think.  
(ll. 1–6)

The sexual ardor of this imagery speaks for itself, but it is worth pointing out that the rapprochement Barrett Browning effects between souls and bodies is abetted by an ambiguity in her verb tenses. The suspension of the "When" and "Until" clauses between an habitual present and a proleptic future permits a bold conflation of arousal with resurrection that answers her rhetorical question in advance. Where can souls "not long"--as did the soul of an earlier sonnet, "yearning to be free"--but instead "Be here contented," as the dynamic *content*, the living entelechy, of a flexible protean form? Where but in the poem? And when but now? [\[41\]](#)

For all their manifest disparity, then, the psychopoetics of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning converge. Both writers are centrally concerned with the soul, yet respect for its resistance to direct imaginative embodiment leads them to oblique and differential means of rendering it. The grotesque proliferation of the many images they find for the soul conveys a general implication that *any* image must be a travesty--a situation only made worse by the inertia of custom. At the same time, for both Brownings a series or conjugation of soul images can reveal, through the cracks between discourses, what the single-minded discourse of the self-consistent image

cannot: the distinctive soul of the imaginer. In this way the Romantic dilemma of depicting poetically the source of poetic depiction itself is finessed, if not resolved, by being expressly staged. And the stage for performance is the poetic text, which rightly apprehended becomes the unique soul image which this Nonconforming couple are prepared to swear by.

Let who says  
"The soul's a clean white paper," rather say,  
A palimpsest, a prophet's holograph  
Defiled, erased and covered by a monk's;--  
The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on  
Which obscene text, we may discern perhaps  
Some fair, fine trace of what was written once,  
Some upstroke of an alpha and omega  
Expressing the old scripture.  
(*Aurora Leigh* 1.824-32)

"That dread apocalypse of soul," the pure fusion of intention with articulation which Barrett Browning formerly posited as an ideal in "The Soul's Expression," is here carnivalized into monkish parody, vandalized by the contingencies of circumstance. For Aurora Leigh it is not the holograph that can copy fair the soul, but the palimpsest, in all the rich and messy process of its accretion. By this process the soul is contained within the only body that can hold it, the body of a text in history--vulnerable, mutable, but thereby legible as the "obscene" scene or record of its coming to be.

It was to this same palimpsest image that Robert Browning had his most soulful heroine turn at a climactic, profoundly metapoetic juncture from *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69). At her dying hour Pompilia ascribes to her beloved Caponsacchi

a sense  
That reads, as only such can read, the mark  
God sets on woman, signifying so  
She should--shall peradventure--be divine;  
Yet 'ware, the while, how weakness mars the print  
And makes confusion, leaves the thing men see,  
--Not this man sees,--who from his soul, re-writes  
The obliterated charter,--love and strength  
Mending what's marred.  
(VII.1482-90)[42]

Marked, marred or emendated, the soul for Robert as for Elizabeth is an historically produced text, which lives only as it is read in the present and in the context of human relationship. Here that context is anything but ideal, and is far from innocent of oppression: the illiterate Pompilia's assumption that reading and writing belong to men exemplifies pointedly the historical gendering of cultural power (already implicit in Aurora's figure of the "monk"). Yet Pompilia's words also counter that power, and in ways that epitomize the refractorily gendered character of the unrepresentable nineteenth-century soul. God's authorship is masculine, yet in marking woman as "divine" God signifies a female godhead that "shall" be manifest in time because it is inherently woman's already. For the time being, which is the time not of apocalypse but interpretation, it is hers in the form of the feminized human soul. This is why, when the man of letters undertakes a recension of "the obliterated charter," he finds his copy-text precisely in the soul, *his* soul, as the

place where God's image takes the textual form of woman.

The interpreter known as Giovanni Caponsacchi (or Robert Browning) "re-writes" the lost soul that shall be divine--overwrites it, yet also writes it over again--a double movement richly reprised in Robert's allusion to Elizabeth's original textual image. What Aurora Leigh called "the upstroke of an alpha and omega," sylleptically conflating first with last, indicates at once the soul's latest news and the oldest scripture on its tablet. The secular development of literary study, during the twentieth century, has imported the problematics of the soul from ecclesiastical holy ground onto the neutral premises of linguistics, anthropology, and of course psychology--the same premises which, during the nineteenth century, did so much to erode scriptural orthodoxy in the name of scientific philology and enlightened hermeneutics. It is salutary to let the Brownings remind us that whenever we distinguish between the expression and the meaning of a text, its letter and its spirit, we are recapitulating an old psychic dilemma. The end of the hermeneutic circle is its beginning: the androgynous "love and strength" of the upstroke, the jointly read and written soul.

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## Notes

[1] For their responses to earlier drafts I thank James Eli Adams, J. Daniel Kinney, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and especially Susan J. Wolfson, whose forthcoming essay on soul gender (see n. 22 below) and mine are zeitgeist twins mischievously separated at birth.

Robert Browning, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).]

[2] *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 34 (plate 4).

[3] The change from masculine to feminine norms for the soul which occurred in Blake's lifetime is narrated in Marilyn Chapin Massey's *Feminine Soul: The Fate of an Ideal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985). Massey draws her evidence from German examples, but her argument has broad implications for anglophone Romanticism as well.

[4] I cite from *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Harriet Waters Preston (1900; rptd Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

[5] "The modern 'soul,'" for Michel Foucault, is "the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body. . . . On this reality-reference, various concepts have been constructed and domains of analysis carved out: psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness, etc." (*Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan [New York: Pantheon, 1977], p. 29). Foucault's Wildean *mot* "The soul is the prison of the body" (p. 30) inverts Blake's view of the matter without invalidating its

emancipatory hope: viz., that poets' efforts to embody the soul may punch a hole in the power loop and install a circuit breaker within the discursive system.

[6] Compare the American instance of Margaret Fuller, whose 1844 poem "Double Triangle, Serpent and Rays" describes the mysterious logo she would use for her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) in terms that suggest both gender and race: "When the perfect two embrace, / Male & female, black & white, / Soul is justified in space, / Dark made fruitful by the light" (ll. 5–8, in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, ed. Jeffrey Steele [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992], p. 233).

[7] Tennyson learned early to work the seemingly redundant phrase "whole soul" as an apotropaic charm against the liability of the Victorian soul to craze and shatter. Whether in erotic ecstasy ("Fatima" [1832, ll. 20, 36]) or in the depths of melancholic grief ("A spirit haunts the year's last hours" [1830, l. 16], "Oh! that 'twere possible" [1837, l. 64]), the "whole soul" grounds its integrity in totalizing, transfixing emotion. This unifying impulse corresponds to an analytic tendency within Tennyson's early work that was no less marked: see "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind Not in Unity with Itself" (1830), "The Palace of Art" (1832), "The Two Voices" (1842). Before long, though, Tennyson's sure detection of cultural danger zones kept his imagery for the soul comparatively low-key: more often than not in his work of 1842 and after "soul" remains a conceptual abstraction balancing "sense": see Lucretius' conception of the soul as "mortal" ("Lucretius" [1868], ll. 262, 273); the revulsion expressed in "Aylmer's Field" (1864) for "the foul adulteries / That saturate soul with body" (ll. 375–76); and, *passim*, *Idylls of the King*. I cite *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969).

[8] This fission in the discourse of the modern soul is of course a blessing in disguise. It has enabled not only much nineteenth-century literature but most twentieth-century psychology, which could not have gotten started without what Freud called *Ichspaltung*. A signal case in point is provided by Freud's most fractious disciple, C. G. Jung, who in *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958) introduces readers to his thought by way of a veritable garden of forking paths. Distinguishing first between the somatic and psychic bases of psychic life, Jung divides these in turn into conscious and unconscious factors; the unconscious self hereupon subdivides further into a personal and a collective psyche, the latter of which finally discloses the two-chambered heart of the matter, Jung's "contrasexual" gendered archetypes the *anima* and *animus* (p. 9). And all within ten pages.

[9] See James Martineau, *A Study of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888): "Of the Soul *as an object* we predicate nothing beyond the bare Space definition of here and there" (1:352). Because "subjective consciousness is incommunicable," the commonest soul images—"a wind, a mist, a flitting outline"—"are selected precisely because they verge upon the very zero of objectivity, and mark the extreme but vain struggle of language to take the final step into the purely subjective" (2:353).

[10] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (1855; 3rd edn New York: Appleton, 1880), 1:147, 161. For Spencer on soul see *The Principles of Sociology* (1876; 3rd edn New York: Appleton: 1888), 1:169–80.

[11] A test case might be D. G. Rossetti's early prose tale "Hand and Soul" (1850), where a gifted young painter is rescued from despair by the vision of a woman who not only represents his own soul but comes right out and says so: "I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee. See me, and know me as I am" (*The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, rev. ed. William M. Rossetti [London: Ellis, 1911], p. 553).

[12] Mary Tighe, *Psyche; or, The Legend of Love* (1805), canto VI, stanza 53; rptd in *Keats and Mary Tighe*, ed. Earle Vonard Weller (New York: MLA, 1928), p. 205. Tighe writes quite freely when displaying Psyche's body in earlier cantos for Cupid's voyeuristic delectation: "In light transparent veil alone arrayed, / Her bosom's opening charms were half revealed, / And scarce the lucid folds her polished limbs concealed" (l.25, p. 21). Such a passage suggests that Tighe's decorum problem at the close of *Psyche* centered not on feminine desirability but on feminine desire. It was obviously crucial to her "legend of love" that Psyche figure as an actively desiring subject. This is why the heroine's last ordeal is by "Indifference" and "Disgust" (p. 178), her most interesting temptation that offered by an allegory of chastity named Castabella: "Congenial souls! they at one glance appear / Linked to each other by a mutual tie" (V.12, p. 151--an image anticipating the final "interlaced" embrace with Cupid). Tighe's myth demanded that these states of neutrality be absorbed into a conjugal norm to whose intimacies her culture offered only a heavily censored discursive access; hence, perhaps, her fondness for imagery of the "ravished soul" (l.45, p. 31; VI.1, p. 179; VI.57, p. 207): a safely worn cliché, but one that this allegory, where the soul has so invitingly beautiful a body, can thrill into strangely sudden life.

[13] Keats, who learned much from Tighe, revived her coy poetics to comparable effect in *Isabella* (1820) when handling the problem of the slain Lorenzo's soul. At first an "it" (ll. 220, 267), the shade of Isabella's lover becomes more manly the more vividly she imagines him during stanzas 35–40 (*Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger [Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1982]). The "it" of line 292 becomes a "he" at line 296, at which point Keats obviates gender by giving the ghost a first-person voice. But passion will out, and what it outs is sexuality; so it is not long before the same trouble recurs: just as the vocal ghost exclaims, "Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel / A greater love through all my essence steal" (319–20), his nascent manhood falls under abrupt censorship and "dissolves" away in two lines. See also, on this same theme, Felicia Hemans' "A Spirit's Return" (1832), where a bereaved speaker tells how once her dead lover, "He, the Departed, stood" before her in the form (to judge from Hemans' discreet rendition) of a talking head. All hair, brow, eyes, and voice, this revenant nonetheless retained the spiritual capacity to move the speaker in unmistakably physical ways, which become expressible for Hemans because their currency is psychic: "the startling thrill / In that low voice, whose breezy tones could fill / My bosom's infinite"; "I sought that lighted eye,-- / From its intense and searching purity / I drank in *soul*!" (*The Poetical Works of Mrs. Hemans* [Philadelphia: Grigg and Elliot, 1835], p. 229). This last image of fluid soul nutriment need not be discounted as a mere trope for a Romantic writer like Hemans. See Massey, *Feminine Soul*, pp. 130–31, on Novalis' belief that soul was a real substance, "a primal cosmic material source of all transforming potential."

[14] This and succeeding quotations are from *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 216–19.

[15] The sexual economy of Wordsworthian Romanticism is discussed by Marlon B. Ross, *The*

***Contours of Masculine Desire*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Anne K. Mellor, ***Romanticism and Gender*** (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 18–19, 145–54. What Massey says about the domestication of feminine soul under German Romanticism (Schleiermacher) seems apt for Wordsworth as well: woman "can have the religious soul as long as she gives up the male desire to forge a second nature out of nothing" (***Feminine Soul*** , p. 146).

[16] I cite ***The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Bronte*** , ed. C. W. Hatfield (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

[17] A comparable poetic device, which met a comparable fate in the era of evolution, was the trope of the soul as child. Despite the advantages of gender–neutrality offered by the vocabulary of infancy and childhood, the sexual latency of this trope inevitably beckoned down a path of maturation whose default destination was female. This problematic helps explain the uncanny longing of Wordsworth's climax in the "Intimations" ode, where "Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / . . . / And see the Children sport upon the shore" (ll. 164–67).

[18] "The Blessed Damozel" (1850), in ***Poems*** , ed. Oswald Doughty (London: Dent, 1961), p. 3.

[19] See Margaret Homans, ***Women Writers and Poetic Identity*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 123–24; Irene Tayer, ***Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Bronte*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 42–45. Tayer's chapter on Emily Bronte's poems (pp. 18–71) provides a biographical and critical discussion to which my remarks here are particularly indebted.

[20] Compare Shelley's rhetorical exhaustion at the finish of ***Epipsychidion*** : "The winged words on which my soul would pierce / Into the height of Love's rare Universe, / Are chains of lead around its flight of fire" (ll. 588–90). I cite ***Shelley's Poetry and Prose*** , ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977).

[21] On the feminist dimension that such an askesis held for some of Bronte's contemporaries, see Janet L. Larson, "Lady–Wrestling for Victorian Soul: Discourse, Gender, and Spirituality in Women's Texts," ***Religion and Literature*** 23 (1991): 43–64.

[22] "A repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (***Biographia Literaria*** , ed. George Watson [1906; rptd London: Dent, 1965] , p. 167). The analogy was alive and well at century's end for Coleridge's Unitarian heir James Martineau: "the Soul is the individual, God the cosmical aspect of the inward principle of existence" (***Study of Religion*** , 2:352). In "Gendering the Soul: A Lesson in Romanticism," forthcoming in ***The Lessons of Romanticism*** , ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert Gleckner (Duke University Press, 1996), Susan J. Wolfson correlates Coleridge's gender orthodoxy with his pivotal, and soul–normed, discussion of poetic imagination in chapter 14 of the ***Biographia*** .

[23] For testimony to the persistent vitality of this concept among philosophers see Martha C. Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, eds, ***Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*** (Oxford: Clarendon,

1992). Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), pp. 493–97, finds in Aristotle a splitting into physical and metaphysical versions of the unitary soul that had come down to him through centuries of unsystematic but consistently holistic ritual practice. This categorical division reappears in nineteenth-century terms within the *religio medici* of the Victorian physician Walter Cooper Dendy, *Psuche: A Discourse on the Birth and Pilgrimage of Thought* (London: Longman, 1853). Any notion that the late twentieth century has outgrown such radical conflicts of gender with sexuality receives a bracing challenge from the phenomenon of transsexual surgery.

[24] For tropes of world and soul see Wordsworth, "The human soul of universal earth" ("Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, in *Poetical Works*, rev. ed. Ernest de Selincourt [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969], p. 590, l. 84); Tennyson, "Thy soul is like a landskip, friend" (written 1830); D. G. Rossetti on the soul's horizon or shore in *The House of Life* (sonnets 10, 27, 40).

[25] Animadversion on the psyche/butterfly topos in the nineteenth century might add the following lyrics to Coleridge's: Wordsworth's "To a Butterfly" and "To H. C. Six Years Old" (1807); Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" (1820), where mournful Psyche meets the death-moth; Robert Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's" (1855) and "Amphibian" (1872); Coventry Patmore's "Eros and Psyche" (1877). Stopping short of Camden Farebrother in *Middlemarch* and his lepidopterist brethren, the list should nevertheless include Emily Brontë's school theme of 1842 "Le Papillon," a highly orthodox exercise in French composition that starts with a nice arch twist: "Dans une de ces dispositions de l'ame ou chacun se trouve quelquefois. . . ." Brontë's essay is printed by Winifred Gerin in *Emily Brontë: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 271–72.

[26] Besides the Romantic treatments of Tighe (1805), Thomas Love Peacock (*Rhododaphne* [1818]), and Keats ("Ode to Psyche" [1820]), and the well-known retelling of Apuleius' Psyche fable in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), there are extended poetic narratives by William Morris (*The Earthly Paradise* [1868]) and Robert Bridges (*Eros and Psyche* [1898]). Both of these are stories pure and simple, though Morris does once tip the allegorical wink when an embittered Venus derides her captive Psyche as "the well-loved soul of love" (*Earthly Paradise* [1868; rev. ed. London: Longmans, 1905], 2:60). Bridges simplifies Psyche all he can: "to man's purer unsubstantial part / The brightness of her presence was address"; "her soul / Was soft and simple"; "Only of sweet simplicity she fell" (*Poetical Works* [London: Smith, Elder, 1898] 1:77, 125, 213). The myth becomes a backdrop for sexual and spiritual explorations, respectively, in the odes of Coventry Patmore's *The Unknown Eros* (1863–86) and the visionary monologues comprised in Lewis Morris' *The Epic of Hades* (New York and Boston: Crowell, 1897), which finally reveals Psyche as "the soul of man, the deathless soul, / Defeated, struggling, purified, and blest" (p. 173).

[27] Although Shelley would not have known Coleridge's poem, it might aptly introduce a psychical reading of the "Life of Life" lyric from *Prometheus Unbound* (ll.v.48–71), where Asia's "limbs are burning / Thro' the vest which seems to hide them" much as the soul of Coleridge's "She" irradiates her body. Both lyrics realize with exceptional fullness a possibility which most nineteenth-century soul poetry at least touches upon: the dream of pure formal expressivity. Shelley's fascination with this possibility may explain why, despite the gossamer film of his reputation, he treats the soul comparatively seldom, reserving the figure—as with an atheist's reverence—for peak experiences at the thresholds of death and love. On the role played by Eros



and Psyche mythology within the deep structure of Shelley's poetry see Jean H. Hagstrum, *Eros and Vision* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), pp. 85–90.

[28] Letter of 5 February 1851, in Charles Kingsley, *Letters and Memories of His Life* (London: King, 1877), 1:255–56.

[29] Kingsley's 1857 novel *Two Years Ago* incorporates the cautionary tale of a "selfish, vain, irritable" poet (chapter 24), who is named John Briggs but calls himself Elsley Vavasour, who proves maritally incompetent, and who, to crown the list, is the proud author of *A Soul's Agonies and Other Poems* (chapter 3).

[30] See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[31] Kingsley would not be Kingsley were his position on any gender issue quite as consistent as I may have made it look here. So it should be pointed out that in this letter the mischief of gender does obtrude after all when Kingsley denounces the Victorian dehumanization of Jesus, in successive paragraphs, for diametrically opposite reasons: first because it effeminates and enfeebles the Savior, then because it makes the Savior seem hypermasculine and thus uncongenial to sinners' supplication (2:259). Kingsley had himself been sufficiently attracted by the ideal of the feminine soul to compose in youth "a long prose fable called *Psyche*" that narrates the maiden soul's yearning for the love of God: see Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: A Life of Charles Kingsley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), p. 46. On Kingsley's sexual politics see Adrienne Auslander Munich, *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 55–74; John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 104–18.

[32] See in this connection two sermons by Kingsley's mentor F. D. Maurice: "On the Incarnation," in *Theological Essays* (1853; rptd London: Clarke, 1957), pp. 82–100; "The Redemption of the Body" (1856), in *Sermons Preached in Country Churches*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1880), pp. 73–79. From the latter: "When St. Paul recollected his citizenship in Heaven, when he claimed to be a member of Christ's body, and prayed in His name to His Father and our Father, he could not but think how this body, which is so curiously and wonderfully made, has a hidden glory in it" (p. 77).

[33] I cite *The Angel in the House* as initially published in two volumes, *The Betrothal* and *The Espousals* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856).

[34] Compare *The Princess*, VII.281–90. Tennyson would recur years later to this dialectical troping of heterosexuality in his epigram "On One Who Affected an Effeminate Manner" (1889):

While man and woman still are incomplete,

I prize that soul where man and woman meet,  
Which types all Nature's male and female plan,  
But, friend, man–woman is not woman–man.

The androgynous ideal became something of a crux in late-century parapsychological discourses of spiritualism and theosophy. In her prose poem "The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed," Olive Schreiner climactically envisions in heaven "the figure of a woman, but its limbs were the mighty limbs of a man," and reports God's pronouncement that "In the least Heaven sex reigns supreme; in the higher it is not noticed; but in the highest it does not exist" (*Dreams* [Boston: Roberts, 1891], p. 175). For Mary E. Coleridge, on the other hand, gender is essential to the soul: "I think we are separate in soul too, and that a woman's prayer is as different from a man's as a woman's thought or a woman's hand. I cannot think of souls that are not masculine or feminine. . . . it is of the very essence of our nature" (*Gathered Leaves from the Prose of Mary E. Coleridge*, ed. Edith Sichel [1910; rptd Freeport: Books for Libraries, 1971], p. 233).

[35] See Maynard's fine chapter on Patmore in *Victorian Discourses*, pp. 141–270, for what is in effect the best existing monograph on this poet. Maynard treats, among many other things, Patmore's relations with Kingsley, the shortcomings of *The Angel*, and the loftier aims of the Eros and Psyche odes.

[36] Carol Christ, reading the dunghill and ugly wings as images for "achievement and pride," finds them "so repulsive that they suggest a discomfort with the whole sphere of masculine action" ("Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House," in *A Widening Sphere*, ed. Martha Vicinus [Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977], p. 149).

[37] Letter of 21 April 1819 to George and Georgiana Keats, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 249–50.

[38] Concordances suggest that Browning employed "soul" and its cognates twice as often as Tennyson; my experience proposes a versatility ratio twice that again. By the end of their careers, however, both poets had subsided into a fairly predictable sense/soul binarism. This hardening of the categories should be attributed partly to age but more to *the* age, as late-Victorian speculation about the soul became increasingly guarded.

[39] The contest in early Barrett Browning between the transgression and the sublimation of gender, and the triumph of the latter, are evident from her two 1844 sonnets "To George Sand." Both address the unruly and fascinating Sand in the name of a corrective female purity. But where "A Desire" advocates repentance and return to the "stainless" sphere of "child and maiden" (ll. 13–14), "A Recognition" situates purity on the far side at once of gender and of life on earth: "Beat purer, heart, and higher, / Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore / Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!" (ll. 12–14). What Barrett Browning "recognizes" in Sand's transvestism is a protest like her own, but conducted on the unpromising ground of the female body, whose "dishevelled strength in agony" (l. 8) confines protest to the Satanic or Byronic sphere of "vain denial" (l. 5).

[40] Both Brownings' efforts to infuse the soul into, or educe it from, the poetic medium itself were paralleled by the work of a Florence friend and correspondent of theirs, the expatriate

American sculptor Hiram Powers. Powers' theoretical and practical attempts to circumvent "allegorical" by "hieroglyphic" representation of the soul are discussed by Donald M. Reynolds in "The 'Unveiled Soul': Hiram Powers's Embodiment of the Ideal," *Art Bulletin* 3 (1977): 393–414. See also Barrett Browning's 1850 sonnet "Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave* ."

[41] In this formally self-referential aspect Barrett Browning appears to have had a close disciple in Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Across the entire *House of Life* (1881), Rossetti's obsessive, eroticized interplay of soul and body images, in their permuted unions and mitoses, enacts his project of making form and content into mutually convertible artistic components. Thus the title phrase "House of Life" (alluding to Robert Browning's discussion of the poetic symbol in "'Transcendentalism'" [1855, l. 45] ) signifies at once the Body of Soul, the Meaning of Art, the Form of Content, the Monument of Moment. In sonnet 1 ("Bridal Birth") the enfleshed soul is both nurse and child of love; by the final sonnet 101 ("The One Hope") the soul has become the rarefied spirit of a decadent aesthetic, hovering like poetry itself between inscription and voice: "the wan soul in that golden air / Between the scripted petals softly blown / Peers breathless" (ll. 9–11). Between these limits, meanwhile, the soul appears enwrought in dozens of variations on the sensuous body desired and desiring, which is also optionally the living cosmos and is always crucially the frame of the sonnet itself, giving local habitation to "the soul's sphere of infinite images" (62, l. 8). Rossetti criticism, which from the first has conceptualized his art in terms of body and soul, tends to divide like Blake criticism into schools regarding that art as either mystical or visionary. Neither school, however, has paid enough heed to the Blakean reading that Rossetti's reverentially innovative relation to Western iconographic traditions solicits. This relation stems from a radical conviction that the modern soul is *lost*: eschatologically lost, perhaps, in a sense that became the torment of Rossetti's later years; but before that aesthetically lost, as an object requiring perennial reinvention, within strict forms that the poet's conviction of lapsed modernity placed under extraordinary elegiac compression.

[42] Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book* , ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Norton, 1961). I discuss this passage in "Representation and Repristination: Virginité in *The Ring and the Book* ," in *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature* , ed. Lloyd Davis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 77–78. See "The Last Ride Together" (1855): "My soul / Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll / Freshening and fluttering in the wind" (ll. 34–36); also the similar image in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" (1855), ll. 978–79. Further investigation of the soul-as-text in Victorian poetry might include Tennyson's "still garden of the souls" where "many a figured leaf enrolls / The total world" (*In Memoriam* 43, ll. 10–12), and D. G. Rossetti's "A Last Confession": "I have seen pictures where / Souls burned with Latin shriekings in their mouths" (p. 45).