The Hiddenness of the Spirit: The Disappearance of God from the English Cultural Framework

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I take it that the hiddenness of God can mean two things. The term may refer to that absolute unknowability of God which only he can undo by the grace of revelation. Or it may refer to a contingent unknowability, the unknowability consequent on the human rejection of revelation by way of sin. So in the case of the Father we must distinguish between His hiddenness as the unknowable source of all that is knowable and the hiddenness, for example, that has been imposed on Him over the last few centuries in Europe by the rejection of the notions of creation and providence and the substitution for these of various forms of evolutionary physics. In the case of the Son we must distinguish between the hiddenness of God in Man that we call His Incarnation and the hiddenness, again for example, that has been imposed on Him over the last few centuries in Europe by the regrowth of various forms of Arianism in historical and biblical scholarship, which have treated Jesus Christ as a purely human figure, historically conditioned or even historically unknowable. And in the case of the Spirit we must distinguish between the necessary hiddenness in ourselves of the Spirit who gives life to us individually and collectively and has no face but our own, and the hiddenness, once more for example, that has been imposed on the Spirit in those same centuries by the idolatrous substitution for It of different supposititious sources of life, such as selfhood or nationhood, and, in more recent years, by the collapse of that idolatry into nihilism.

I propose to talk today about the last of these forms of the hiddenness of God: the hiddenness of the Spirit in the last five centuries of English political and cultural history thanks to the operation of human sin. For two reasons, one theological, the other cultural, I start with a form of cultural production which reached its pinnacle in the late fifteenth century, which was essentially English, and was known throughout Europe as such, for it was made, literally, from English substance, and yet to which the concept of England is wholly irrelevant.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has the world's best collection of medieval English alabaster carvings. Among the most

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popular themes for the carvings is the Trinity, and the Museum has a particularly fine, late fifteenth-century example, with particularly well preserved colouring, of an interesting variant of the motif[1]. God the Father, his hands raised in blessing, looks down on God the Son, who is held between his knees and whose redeeming blood is being collected by angels in chalices – Holy Grails – as it flows from his hands and his feet. It is a familiar and moving image which alone would certainly repay an hour's contemplation. But it becomes more interesting and more rewarding still if we ask: but where in this representation of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit? The answer strictly speaking is: in a hole. The Spirit has disappeared for It was separately carved and secured by a dowel to the main panel from which presumably it protruded considerably. The dowel was inserted into a hole that can still be seen in the centre of God the Father's chest just above what looks like a basket of fruit hanging over the thorn-crowned head of the Saviour. That little harvest is the distinguishing feature of this sub-group of Holy Trinities: the napkin, as the art-historians call it, hanging from the Father's palms, contains only metaphorical fruit: the little human heads, as closer inspection will reveal them to be, are representations of the souls of the blessed, of those saved by the sacrificial action depicted below them. In very few of the English alabaster Trinities does any representation of the Spirit survive. That in itself too might be the material for a meditation. But the first point I ask you to ponder is that in a particularly interesting subgroup of this variant of the Trinity theme there is no dowel-hole, for there never was a representation of the Spirit at all. Whether for practical or theological reasons the place of the Spirit was taken by the Souls of the redeemed. But perhaps we might say that in that case the Spirit was represented after all, represented in Its effects or actions, in the many spirits of the redeemed, in the redemption enacted in human lives.

Such an image or set of images has then – at least – two theological meanings for us now. It is an image of the hiddenness of the Holy Spirit, of God's presence-in-absence – for that, I take it is what 'hiddenness' means – in human lives and human eternal destinies, and in two distinct ways. In the cases where the napkin of souls substitutes, by the artist's intention, for a representation of the Holy Spirit it is an image of the intrinsic hiddenness of the Spirit in our lives. In the cases where the Holy Spirit is absent by historical accident, by the deliberate or chance dislodging of the image of the Spirit from the place designed for it, we have a picture of my theme today: the disappearance of God from the framework of public discourse in which political, social and cultural issues are nowadays

[1] Francis Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters* (Oxford: Phaidon. Christie's, 1984), 38, 302. Examples without the Spirit, pp. 300, 303.

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expressed and addressed. One might of course ask: Is it really true that God has disappeared from the framework? The conflict dominating the global consciousness in this year of our Lord 2003 has after all been a conflict between two parties whose leaders on both sides have had no qualms about claiming God for their cause and for whom the struggle has either been explicitly a holy war or, if only by way of *lapsus linguae*, a crusade. But of course we know what our President meant when he assigned me this topic because from a European perspective the world does seem less describable in God-language than it did, and more important still we in Europe have a feeling that those for whom it is still describable that way have not got to the bottom of matters, matters in which they may well be more directly engaged than we are. The churchgoing Republican masses in America and the dictatorial clerics in beards and turbans in Asia seem to us to belong to another age, but to us it does not look like the future, it does not look like somewhere we have not been before. I think we in Europe are right to feel that our empty churches, our relentlessly secularist media, our constitution in which God is unmentionable even as a preamble, and our politicians so bewildered by their own materialism that they cannot tell right from left, all represent a truth about the present and future human condition that is obscured by the resurgence of religious language and religious hatred in other parts of the world. But the reason why I think we are right will have to wait till the end of this talk. For the present I shall just assume that we, and our President, are right and that the disappearance of God from the public framework is not an optical illusion consequent on a Eurocentric viewpoint.

Even if we grant that God has disappeared from the framework, however, it is still incumbent on us to be clear what we mean by saying he has disappeared. Have we, let us say, a counter-example of what it was like for God not to have disappeared? And this is when I come to the cultural reason for discussing these alabaster images. For they are the counter-example. They are the material manifestation of a public world of which it could clearly be said that God was not hidden in it, the material manifestation of the Spirit as present at every turn in a shared framework for living and thinking, and if the Spirit now seems absent from our framework that is only because of the damage done by the lapse of centuries. If in our historical imaginations we can retrace and undo that damage we may be able to understand how and why our situation is different from that in which those alabasters came into being, were circulated, used and venerated – what, in other words, it means to say that God has disappeared.

Hegel tells us, when talking of the Spirit, to distinguish between subjective, objective, and absolute Spirit. Whether or not we accept the systematic context in which this distinction is made, we can

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recognize in it a truth about the operation of the Holy Spirit. For firstly – the subjective moment – the Holy Spirit is the Lord who gives life to every one of us individually, confirms us, and speaks as God with our unique tongue; secondly, however, – the objective moment – the Holy Spirit speaks to individual human subjects in the words of others, manifesting Itself as God in the plurality of human languages, inspiring human collective life with all its institutions and societies, above all the human society of the Church, and working out in all human history the divine purpose enunciated by sibylls and prophets; and thirdly – the absolute moment, that is, both subjective and objective together – the Holy Spirit speaks of and as the triune Godhead in the teaching of the apostolic Church, the Church which is not just a human society but the source and object of faith. There need therefore be nothing unorthodox about our considering from Hegel's three distinct viewpoints the Spirit that animates the English alabasters.

First of all, then, these carvings are physical manifestations of God's operation in and as subjective Spirit. The image of the redeemed souls in the centre of the panel, in the place assigned to the Spirit, and even in some cases substituting for It altogether, is an image of the men and women who looked on this panel in the hope and trust that at this point on its surface they were looking into a mirror. But there is also the world of objective spirit – the world of human society and institutions, including, crucially, their economic base. One of the most characteristic features of the English alabasters is that apart from the intrinsic attractiveness of the materials their aesthetic appeal is limited and their artistic quality is low. But, as I have said, the work was very popular, and not by any means only in England. Alabaster, crude and worked, was one of England's major exports in the fifteenth century, panels and whole altarpieces have survived as far apart as Iceland and Dubrovnik, Lisbon and Königsberg- Kaliningrad, and over 2,000 panels and figures are still preserved on the European continent. They were, in short, mass-produced. The production of English alabasters, like the production of visual images today, whether on paper, celluloid or digitalized disc, was an industry of major economic importance for numerous English communities, including some large towns, and even, given its export value, for the country as a whole. And it was all done in the name of God. A medieval English alabaster panel is not only the concrete form of a subjective spiritual movement towards redemption – an expression of loving hope in God – it is also the concrete evidence of objective economic and social relations, of *English* activity ordered towards God. For let us be honest about England and English culture: what the English have always excelled at is the mass-production of cheap and cheerful goods for the unsophisticated markets of the world. Eighteenth-century Wedgwood, nineteenth-century printed

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cottons, twentieth-century pop music. English alabasters were the Brummagem ware of the fifteenth century. They were hugely successful because then as now the world needed its Brummagem ware. What makes the difference between the medieval alabasters and what comes later in England is their unashamed and unreflective intimacy with the truths of the Christian religion, what Hegel calls absolute spirit.

The alabasters could be part of an economic network as wide as the continent of Europe because they spoke a language that was recognized across the continent. Their economic importance, their equivalence, that is, to the daily bread of those who produced them and those who bought them, was dependent on their being recognized by all parties as showing something absolutely true and ultimately important. When that ceased to be the case, when one of the parties denounced devotion to the saints as unchristian, for example, the role of the images in the objective life of the Spirit – their economic value that is – was destroyed as well. Until that moment of sundering these objects were part of a world – more, they helped to constitute a world – in which God, though hidden in Himself, was by grace revealed.

Let us turn by way of contrast to twentieth-century England and to the quintessence – or should it be the *caput mortuum?* – of twentieth-century English manhood, a Cambridge phenomenon, of course, the beautiful and brilliant but actually not very nice Rupert Brooke. At the very end of 1914, after he had returned from the expedition of Antwerp, on which he almost saw action, he wrote to Jacques Raverat:

> 'Did you hear of the British private who had been through the fighting from Mons to Ypres, and was asked what he thought of all his experiences? He said "What I don't like about this 'ere b___ Europe is all these b___ pictures of Jesus Christ and His relations, behind b___ bits of glawss." It seems to me to express perfectly that insularity and cheerful atheism which are the chief characteristics of my race.
>
> All the same, though myself cheerful, insular, and an atheist, I'm largely dissatisfied with the English just now. . . . I really think large numbers of male people don't want to die. Which is odd. I've been praying for a German raid . . .'[2]

Clearly something has changed since England was the purveyor to Europe of cheap but charming and orthodoxly Trinitarian alabasters, and as things were so different only 400 years previously Brooke is unlikely to be right in interpreting what he has heard as evidence of a permanent characteristic of his race. I do not, by the way, wish to enter on the question whether this story correctly represents the attitude of the early twentieth-century English working-class towards Europe, the Christian religion, and Christian art – it is enough for my purposes that

[2] *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1933), cxxxiv.

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Brooke, as a member and icon of the officer class of English society, was pleased to think that it did. Whether the story is true or false, whether it is about uneducated Cockney privates or about Darwins and Cornfords and other joyfully indecorous bathers in Byron's Pool, something about England has changed fundamentally since the days of the alabasters for it to be possible to tell such a story, or invent it, if that is what happened, or repeat it, or enjoy it. What could it be?

In a sense, what has changed are the gardens. Think, for example, of Stowe House, built at the midpoint of the period separating the alabasters from Rupert Brooke, and a monument to the English Enlightenment. Stowe Gardens, together with a few other parallel creations, mostly of Capability Brown's, are by far the most significant and influential English contribution to European visual and plastic arts since the medieval alabasters. From them and one or two others like them, notably Claremont and Stourhead, an inspiration went out all over Europe to create landscapes in the English style, in which Nature, though 'improved', seemingly had her way, falling of her own accord and without artifice or regularity into vistas from which the hand of Man was seemingly absent, but in which the occasional gentle emphasis of a well-placed structure suggested an Arcadian harmony of the human and the natural, as in a painting by Claude. Before I return to Rupert Brooke let us consider the nature of the inspiration for this most English of arts, so English in fact that the national epithet has been attached not only to the style but to individual examples of it, such as the 'English garden', i.e. park, in Munich.

If we take first the subjective spirit moving in a major eighteenth-century landscape garden such as Stowe, it is at once clear that it has taken on a central and commanding role: 'central' indeed is a crucial term for the entire garden is constructed round its appearance to a single observer, who wanders through it and whose shifting view-point realizes the drama of the seen and the not-seen for which the script has been written by the designer. The success of a design, according to Pope, whose garden at Twickenham was as significant a contribution to European culture as his poetry, lies in 'the contrasts, the management of surprises, and the concealment of the bounds'[3] – all of them terms (unlike, for example, 'drainage' or 'ecosystem' or 'utility') which treat the garden as an object appearing, and appearing in constantly changing guises, to a single unchanging subject. And what is it that this all-important subject experiences in the garden, what is the object that it meets? It meets a landscape in which the distinction between garden and nature has been effaced. Thanks above all to the ha-ha – which Horace Walpole called 'the

[3] Joseph Spence, *Anecdotes, Observations and Characters of Books and Men*... ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1964) (Section VII, 1742–43), 159. Pope here alludes to his own *Epistle IV*, ll. 55–6.

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capital stroke, the leading step to all that followed'[4] – the 'bounds' as Pope required are concealed and the garden flows without perceptible interruption into the terrain beyond it. And as a result that terrain too is incorporated into the garden – everything the eye can see is now part of an arrangement for its delight, for the arousal of emotions, whether tender or sublime. The garden is a hymn to subjective individualism, not an object that represents a source of redemption and consolation beyond the self but an object – an entire world – completely subordinated to the experiencing self and its need for self-enjoyment.

It is no accident that the creators of Stowe Gardens were one of England's greatest dynasties of Whigs. The spirit of the Gardens is not just subjective Whiggery, sentimentalism and individualism, it is objective Whiggery too. The gardens express a myth – the myth that we are all independent subjects of experience and that to each of us the whole world is available as an object – and that myth has not just a psychological and emotional dimension, it has a social and political dimension too. The bounds that the ha-ha conceals are not just the bounds between subject and object, Nature and Art, they are also the bounds of property, and the boundaries between social and economic functions. A garden like Stowe is not only one of the largest works of art in existence: it is also one of the most expensive. Unlike our Brummagem alabasters such a toy can be afforded by very few individuals indeed. But as we have seen, the gardens are intended to create the illusion that the world, all the world, is there for the individual, any and every individual, to enjoy. The illusion is political: this landscape which stretches in an unbroken sweep from horizon to horizon and by implication beyond, and which therefore is synonymous with all England, is open to be experienced by any and every one, and the difference between work and wealth, between social sub- and super-ordination, which in reality prevents any but a few from being such all-important and omnipotent selves, is either concealed from view completely or reduced to a picturesque element in the total composition, like the farm-animals grazing beyond the ha-ha, the only visible evidence of the economic process of labour and production. The hollowness of the socio-political myth is revealed in the structures which crowd the gardens at Stowe and which even contemporaries found excessive. For although these suggest a human and social presence in the garden – they *look* like useful and purposeful constructions – they are, virtually all, uninhabitable or useless: hermitages that never saw a hermit, bridges over artificial lakes, temples never used for worship, even of Mammon. They are the fragmentary social furniture of an imaginary existence floating

[4] Horace Walpole, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, with an introduction by John Dixon Hunt, (New York: Ursus, 1995), 42.

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disjointedly in the medium of the garden like the components of the design on a willow-pattern plate.

But the buildings at Stowe not only reveal the deceitfulness of the garden myth in respect of social relations, they are also the expression, the deliberate expression, of what the garden designers understood to be truth. They are vessels of absolute spirit in that they tell us, and were designed to tell us, what the Temples and English Whiggery thought was ultimately and absolutely true – they tell us to what God these gardens are the altar. The God worshipped here is called Britain. Sometimes it is called England, but Britain is the truer name because Britain is the name for England in Imperial mode, setting out as Britannia to rule the waves, to create an Empire that will be called British, not English, and to satisfy the illusion that the landscape that begins here, centred on one all-experiencing individual, extends over the horizon forever, never ceasing, however many invisible ha-has may be crossed into other climate zones or other time zones, to set wider still and wider its always concealed bounds, never ceasing to be the realm of the free, and never ceasing to be their property. 'England' is this gentle pastoral landscape, this damp and temperate Claude Lorrain, the picturesque illusion; 'Britain' its unseen but real projection across the world in slavers, traders, and ships of the line. Whether under its true name of 'Britain', or under its mythical name of 'England', however, Stowe knows no other God. The ideological culmination of Stowe's garden architecture is a British Pantheon built in an emphatically pagan setting: the Temple of British Worthies in the section of the Garden laid out as the Elysian Fields along the waters of the River Styx. In this parody of an altarpiece – technically known as an exedra and modelled on a Roman wayside shrine – sixteen emanations of the Whig divinity are presented in bust and inscription, eight heroes of contemplation, eight of action. An unabashed naturalism prevails in all the literary and philosophical encomiums: Bacon, Locke – 'best of all Philosophers . . . [who] . . . refuted the slavish systems of usurp'd authority over the Rights, the Consciences or the Reason of Mankind' – and Newton – 'whom the God of Nature made to Comprehend his Work'. The heroes of action reflect the relations of this tribal deity to the world beyond his immediate bailiwick and include the adventurers Sir Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, the original missionaries of the British Empire. The most interesting monument of all is to the man who, according to this Whig theology, first put into practical effect the gospel of global trade, carried on under British auspices,: Sir Thomas Gresham, 'Who by the honourable Profession of Merchant having enrich'd himself and his country [the shamelessness is positively endearing], for carrying on the Commerce of the World, built the Royal Exchange'. If we want to know how it came about that England gave up the continental trade in pious alabasters

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and defined itself, at least in the eyes of its intellectual elite, by its cheerful insular contempt for bloody Europe, with its bloody Christianity and bloody art here is our answer. England, an important but secondary power in the medieval European order, was seduced (in the person of its monarch) by the prospect of nationhood and national autonomy, shook off its entanglement in mere Europe, a Christendom enmired in the worship of false gods, and turned instead to a wider world on which it could more easily impress its own divine image. England became Britain, the benevolent patron of the global market, 'the commerce of the world', the source and centre of the British Empire. Only the name of England remained, the myth of the little damp green loveable country at the origin of it all, the garden at the heart of the world and in the hearts of all of Britain's far-flung emissaries, the England in which all true-born Englishmen were at home, their heaven, their God. In Stowe Gardens, in the depths of Buckinghamshire's improved countryside, is the material the sacramental realization of that myth, and at its heart is the material, the sacramental realization of its source: the lichen-covered bust of a banker.

For Rupert Brooke the picturesque myth of England has completely displaced any talk of the reality that is – or rather was – Britain and the British Empire. In the sonnet finished at Christmastime 1914, which is surely his best-known poem, England is named six times, but there is no mention of Britain or of the British Empire or indeed of the alien Empires which disputed its global reach and with which it was engaged in a fight to the death. There is certainly no mention of that altogether other, post-Imperial, Empire, spawned by eighteenth-century Whiggery, and the true vessel of the gospel of global commerce, which in the second half of the twentieth century was to inherit the spoils left on the empty battlefields of the first half, the USA (which, like Germany, Brooke had visited and enjoyed more than he cared to admit). But 'The Soldier' is not a stupid poem, it is moving, as a poem must be which tries to think seriously about death and what its author died for, and theologically speaking it is of considerable interest. The process of replacing God by England – as the ultimate truth about human life which gives a transcendent validation to the historical contingency of the British Empire – a process which can be seen in full career in Stowe Gardens, has here almost reached its terminus. The hiddenness of God is here almost complete. Almost, but not quite. The term 'England' in this poem acquires its transcendent power by putting on clothes borrowed from the older theology, and the slightly ludicrous sense that they are a size or so too big for it betrays that they belong to someone else. In each mode of its presence in the poem the spirit can be identified as England – or rather England can be identified as the spirit – only by an uncomfortable catachresis, inspiration one might say, has become inflation.

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The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:
  That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
  In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
  Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
  Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
  A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
  Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
  And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
  In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.[5]

Subjectively, the poem announces a complete identification – 'think *only* this' it says – of the self and England. As a result the poem shows us oddly little of the poet's feelings about England: England is not so much the object of emotion as its source. The first person pronoun is used only in the first line, and is thereafter replaced by references to the activity of England: the octet shows us England making the poet's body, the sestet England making his heart. England, through its four elements, earth, air, sun, and water – the water of the rivers, 1.8, in which Brooke's circle bathed – has made this body in a process as natural and material as anything envisaged by Bacon or Locke or Newton, the British Worthies of Stowe. England too has given him his immaterial parts, his thoughts and perceptions and moral attitudes, all derived from the world which has nurtured him and which, with its flowers and paths (1.6) and the laughter of daydreaming friends, outdoors and unoccupied, (11. 12–13) appears to be an Edwardian version of the boundless landscape garden projected by the leisured Whig self beyond the horizons visible from Stowe's South Lawn. The conceit in ll. 2 and 3 is the nucleus of the entire sonnet: the assertion that even as a corpse he is England is carried through with a consistent materialism that probably few of the poem's readers, at the time of its first enormous fame, or since, have shared. But at one point this systematic Anglo-Lucretianism wavers and we become aware that the poet does not quite believe that he is simply the product of a shaping deity, a *Natura naturans*, which bears the name of England. There is a rather odd relative pronoun in 1.5, 'A dust whom England bore' – why 'whom'? 'Which' would have been more correct and natural after the common noun 'dust' referrng to an inanimate object. But of course the poet does not think of himself as an inanimate object, even though that is

[5] Brooke, *Collected Poems*, 148.

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what he says he is – dust moulded by England as Jeremiah's potter moulds the clay. His use of 'whom' is an admission that he does think of himself as a person in his own right, independently of this God who makes him, and *that*, independent, personality is left totally undefined by the poem. The pronoun makes us faintly aware that behind the poem is a young man striking an attitude, reciting a myth, but who he, who that 'whom', might be, what his relation is with the real historical and international world that is about to kill him he not merely does not tell us, he cannot tell us, and perhaps cannot even tell himself, so completely has he allowed the myth of England to take over his mind.

Absurdly, objective spirit appears in this poem as almost exclusively England: once again it is the 'almost', the tiny exception or contradiction, that reveals the absurdity. In the poem taken as a whole, England might seem to be the only human society, the only nation that exists. No other nation – not even any ancient nation – is presented in the poem as engaged in any kind of equal relation with England, either as a parallel case, or as an ally, or even as an adversary. England is not even presented as the only place in the world that matters – it is presented as all but coterminous with the world. 'All but' – there is of course an exception, an exception which is part of the poem's nucleus in those first 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ lines that everyone remembers. All the world of this poem is England but for a tiny exception – one little piece of the world is alluded to that is not England, a 'corner of a foreign field'. And it is alluded to precisely in order to be colonized, to be turned into England after all: the only specific allusion to a non-English part of the world is colonial and Imperialist. This preposterous unrealism, which disregards the existence of almost the entire non-English world, is possible because England itself, as here presented, is not objective spirit at all – the objective spiritual reality which is engaging in war and for which Brooke will die, which has made him and of which his thoughts are part, is not his mythical England but Britain and the British Empire. And that has no role in the poem except in that unacknowledged moment of Imperial acquisition when reality is briefly revealed and the last little corner of foreignness in the world is appropriated for the myth. That last instinctive twitch or grab, the residual, dying, reflex clutch of Empire, is the poem's one moment of realism, the one moment at which it touches the real world in which God works, and the source of its only, and utterly, memorable lines.

The sonnet does of course purport to have a theology, it does claim to rise to a vision of absolute spirit, 'the eternal mind'. But even at this culmination God is occluded, concealed by the ideological mask that is 'England' – again, all but for one last, perhaps saving moment, one last remaining flicker of solar fire at the point of total eclipse. The one merit of the myth of divine England is that it cannot

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ultimately be taken completely seriously and the poem's last, perhaps saving, moment is a moment of at least possible humour. Just as the reader is adjured to think of Brooke's English body as performing a last Imperial action, so in the sestet she, or more probably he, is told to think of Brooke's English heart as appropriating a corner of eternity. Only in a remote and indefinite 'somewhere', but at least there, Englishness, the having been formed as a sentient, thinking, ethical being by *Deus-sive-Anglia*, has an eternal value, and, as in the octet of the sonnet, that process of Anglification is the only process in which Divinity is said to engage: just as in the octet England is the sole acknowledged occupant of this world, so in the sestet she is the sole acknowledged occupant of the next, the world in which we give back to the spirit what we have received in the flesh. Not even assumption into the eternal mind reveals an alternative to – let alone an improvement on – this English heaven, or even it seems the English weather. Except perhaps for those last words themselves. They are a witty conceit, like the corner of the field that is forever England with which the sonnet begins. At its end Brooke gives us that immaterial equivalent – a corner of heaven that is forever an English sky, overarching the leisured life of an Edwardian country house. In the moment of wit, by which the word 'heaven' is transferred from its temporal to its eternal meaning, and in the possibly humorous, possibly self deprecating indefinite article – 'an English heaven', as if it is fleetingly acknowledged that this 'heaven' is but a corner of all that eternally is – there is perhaps a saving recognition that England is a myth after all. Otherwise we would have to interpret the last gesture of the poem as colonizing heaven in the same way that it began with a gesture of colonizing the earth, and for not sharing in the smile that the last line has to raise, Brooke would become its object.

Rupert Brooke's sonnet just, but only just, leaves open the possibility that by recognizing 'England' as a myth we may glimpse beyond it the reality that the myth, over the centuries, has grown up to obscure: the growth of the British Empire. That is: the growth in the islands of the Atlantic archipelago, once they had thrown off the shackles that bound them into European Christendom and into its economic, social, spiritual and ecclesiastical order, of a political and military structure almost, but not quite, capable of providing the framework for the growing global market, the commerce of the world. Because that myth obscured the reality of the subjective personal and objective social life, it obscured the absolute truth as well. Those who choose not to see themselves or their fellows as they are will not see God either, however insistent or gentle His revelation. God, the God shown to us in Jesus Christ and his relations and pictured behind bloody bits of glass, was hidden from Britain by the shadow of Empire. His place was taken by 'England'; and the

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religion of this substitute deity functioned as false religion always does, as an opiate deadening the senses to economic, social and political reality. Since Brooke wrote his sonnet the reality concealed by the cult of that mythical deity 'England' has been swept away in a war of 75 years duration, the war that in turn destroyed the German, Austrian, Turkish, Italian, Japanese, Belgian, Dutch, French, British and finally, largely, the Russian Empires. (The Chinese remains, for the present, but may be allowed to be a special case.) The energy that powered and sustained this most destructive war in the history of humanity was no other than the energy that had put together the empires in the first place, the power of world commerce, the relentless drive to the globalization of economic activity. Deprived of the administrative and military structures that maintained and defended their more and less world-wide economic bliss and gave political and cultural coherence not only to their colonial dependencies but to the metropolitan states themselves, the post-Imperial nations have faced a crisis of identity – some since 1918, some since 1945, and since 1989 not only Russia but all those states, if states they can still be called, which had invested their self-understanding, whether as free, socialist, or neutral, in the global confrontation of the Cold War.

Separated now by the 75 Years' War from Rupert Brooke's Edwardian substitute religion we have woken up to reality, to a reality that is completely changed. British culture however has kept pace with this change and originated a cheap, or at any rate mass-produced, and cheerful icon of it that has once again achieved world-wide circulation and influence – I mean the detective novel, in the broadest of senses, and it is from this genre that I take my last example. The detective novel has risen as the Empires have declined. After a long prehistory, the defining moment of the genre, its inauguration through the huge public success of Conan Doyle, coincided with the apogee of the British Empire, and from about 1920 to about 1950, during the Empire's sunset years, it enjoyed its golden age. Indeed the conventions of an entire sub-genre – what Raymond Chandler in his famous essay of 1950, 'The Simple Art of Murder'[6], calls the English formula – requires a setting in that period with its usually country-houses, its servants and its dressing for dinner, in clear continuity with the England celebrated by Rupert Brooke. However repellent in itself, the social archaism was necessary for the genre, for it established the background of a moral order against which it was possible to measure two crucial deviations from it: the initial deviation represented by the crime itself and behind the crime the corruption of motive that had made the criminal; and more subtly and significantly the later deviation from the norm represented by the always somehow eccentric detective through whose intervention the

[6] *The Second Chandler Omnibus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973), 3–15, p. 3.

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order is restored. The detective represents as an individual the values which his or her society at some level professes but which its institutions are – as the crime demonstrates – too corrupt, too weak, or too incompetent to put into effect. In the American context the detective will represent attitudes or behaviour that are felt to be part of the American way of life, of the founding vision or even of the founding documents of the nation, but that are negated or inadequately reflected in the nation's institutions thanks to its explosive economic development. In the British context the detective embodies in his or her own individualistic or eccentric way the true values of the declining Empire's ruling class which in the book are represented as betrayed either by degenerate members of the class or by its well-meaning but hidebound official agents. Around 1950, however, a new variant of the detective story began to achieve popularity as the end of Empire was publicly acknowledged and the Cold War created a new framework for international relations that was both highly formal and heavily moral. The spy story, which achieved its own Golden Age in the years after the building of the Berlin Wall, at first maintained the fundamental moral structure of the detective novel. The free world now was in the role of self-betraying repository of ultimate values and the spy was the eccentric loner who in his own unorthodox way restores what the institutions have compromised, whether through excessive scrupulousness or through treachery. In the earlier novels of Len Deighton, for example, the agent is still recognisable as a variant on Chandler's famous definition of the detective – 'down those mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid'. Tarnished and afraid he may be, and deception and double dealing may be all around him, but he remains the book's centre of gravity by remaining truer than anybody else, if not to the British national interest, then to whatever England is held ultimately to stand for. England may now be no more than a partner in the Western Alliance, though it is probably the most, perhaps the only, reliable partner in it, and certainly provides the most reliable articulation of its ideals, but it is still the England of Rupert Brooke's myth. Like the hero of the detective story, the hero of the spy story may be, indeed must be, a solitary, his behaviour may be morally questionable or downright illegal, but that is shown to be less significant than his ultimate loyalty to the one clearly good cause, and that in turn enables him to light a candle in the dark places of the world, to show 'honour', as Chandler has it, in those mean streets, and so to achieve that redemption which Chandler also thinks essential to all art. The answer to the question, 'who is the hero, the detective, the spy?' is simply that he or she is the individual who has become the locus, perhaps the only visible locus, of the collective, social, national, perhaps even international belief about what is good. As the genre of the spy story grew older and more sophisticated, as

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espionage came to be treated as a job like any other and the rival secret services as little more than rival corporations, as double-agency ceased to be synonymous with treachery and became just a psychological complication, so that individual locus of the good was lost and with it the rationale of the genre itself, which faded back into the novel of Graham Greene-land, from which it had in part arisen. But, in the mass-culture of the film, English art combined with American resources to maintain the earliest conventions of the spy-story genre and to create out of them a twentieth-century equivalent of the international commercial success of the medieval alabasters. The novels of Ian Fleming provided a formula which proved as irresistible as the small-format panel combining pure stone and rich decoration – the life of the individual, James Bond, in which every *subjective* need seemed to be fulfilled, indeed outrageously indulged; a totally clear and unproblematic *objective* social world, consisting simply of the national secret services and their enemies, whose roles were firmly fixed by the background or foreground presence of the Cold War confrontation; and an *absolute* good, never itself embodied in a specific character or institution, but always implied behind immediate figures of authority, such as M or political ministers, namely the England for which Bond worked. England provided the end to which all his personal indulgences were means, and thereby justified them; England provided his distinguishing identity among his fellow secret servicemen and the style with which he negotiated the social world, determining equally his taste in drink and his need to adjust his tie while driving a tank. This formula created by Fleming could be repeated, to the point of self-parody once the repetition could no more be left unacknowledged – long after Fleming's supply of storylines had dried up. Far more serious for the scriptwriters than the limited number of Fleming's novels was the end of the confrontation with the Soviet Union. Not simply because a simple structure of them and us was no longer available to provide the framework for secret service activity. The end of the Cold War in 1989 meant an end to the process of dissolution of the empires which had begun 75 years before and so it meant the end even of the vestigial function of the myth of England. In the 1990s, at a time when England itself started to become publicly anxious about its identity, the Bond scriptwriters became increasingly embarrassed by the need to explain the controlling, absolute, function of Bond's Englishness. In 1995 they addressed the issue specifically in *GoldenEye*, a film which begins by contrasting an episode from the Cold War with the world after the collapse of the USSR. At the end the villain, a double-dealer from that golden age of moral clarity, is dispatched by Bond who drops him from a gantry suspended hundreds of feet above a concrete bowl. In their final exchange the villain, seeing his death in the eyes of his former colleague, asks 'For England, James?' and gets the reply 'No – for me'.

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At this moment, and in every sense, the myth of England falls away. But what does it leave behind? Who is Bond if he is not England? His only identity was his being the fulfilment of all subjective needs in the service of the good *as England* – his only identity was his Englishness. The answer furnished by later Bond films, already apparent well before 1995, was an answer for England too in its futile quest for an identity to replace the one that history had dropped. Bond has become the vehicle for all the top brands in the market, or rather for the brands that can pay most to have him accredit them as top. Bond is no longer the individual who embodies the absolute good as England, he is the individual who uses such and such a shaver, wears such and such a watch, drinks such and such a brand of whisky and, of course, drives such and such a car and makes love to women who remove such and such garments for him. England too, we could say, has become simply a shop for internationally traded products on to which it can hope at best to affix some kind of national branding, seal of approval, or royal warranty. The task of the theologian is to find God here too, after the demise of the God of Englishness who underpinned the deism of the Whigs, the atheism of the Edwardians, and the untheological belief in decency and honour of late twentieth-century popular culture. God revealed in Jesus Christ ceased to be the shaping presence in England's public and cultural life in the sixteenth-century, in the moment of Henry's breach with Rome, and His place was taken by God revealed in England. But how is God revealed now in our public and cultural world? We now look out on to a world as bleak and unstructured as the polar ocean, randomly dotted with variously sized icebergs as likely to be multi-national corporations as states, not certainly stable, a prey to sudden storms and freak tides as the forces of production and consumption, the price of labour and the price of money, unpredictably realign themselves. From one vantage-point it is true the view is held together by a single idea: from the battlements of Washington, the new Rome, it all looks like the gradual extension and confirmation of a world-wide free market. The idea that sponsoring such a process can be the defining mission of a nation is properly called an American idea for it is written into the self-understanding of the American state as it is not and cannot be into the self-understanding of any other. Whether that idea is compatible with the political structures even of the American state, whether it must not create conflict, alienation and illusion even there, are not questions I can go into now. But what is sure is that it is not compatible with the political structures of the older, post-Imperial states, mainly of Europe. Their controlling ideas died as their empires succumbed to the growth of world trade and now, as developed countries, they face the reality of globalized consumerism more directly and consciously than the USA precisely because the post-Imperial state structures have atrophied as their functions have been internationalized. The false deities that ruled the

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hearts and minds of European nations for the five centuries after they resolved, more and less eagerly, to turn their backs on Christendom and live by the sword of world trade, have deserted their votaries. The false gods have died, the gods of the nations, whom we allowed to hide from us the one true God. As a result we now have the opportunity and the task to find again the face and life and deeds of God in the world order or disorder that presents itself to us today – to discern here and now, and freed from the illusions constructed over the last five national and imperial centuries, the Spirit of God in our subjective life, in our shared objective social existence, and in Its own absolute truth. We are able at last to proceed from recognizing the hiddenness of the Holy Spirit in the historical accident of sin that has dislodged It from its dowel-hole, to seeking to understand the Spirit's own intrinsic act of self-concealment in the napkinful of faces and lives, redeemed and in need of redemption, that is the human race. The extreme and progressive secularism of European society has itself to be redeemed: to be transformed from the disillusion and apathy of those whom history has left behind into a dispassionate and inspiriting clarity about God-given human variety and unity. For the citizens of Europe, as they are prematurely called, are privileged to experience the full range of contemporary interactions between the world's single economic system and its multiple religious traditions without the distorting effect of the obsolete illusion that the resulting conflicts can or should be resolved in a nation, a state structure or a state-dependent Empire. As Europeans we are perhaps better placed than anyone else to find the hidden operation of the Holy Spirit in the uncompromising secularity of the world market rather than in some superficially religious clash of civilizations. So let us go out and look for it.[7]

[7] An adapted version of this lecture is to appear in the author's *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature* (University of Notre Dame Press and Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004).

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