

THE SILESIAN ANGEL

THE Silesian Angel, or the Cherubic Wanderer. Under these quaint titles is hidden and forgotten the personal name of one of the most significant, and in manner most original of the seventeenth-century mystics. About the time that a Welsh doctor—the Silurist, Henry Vaughan—published a volume of devotional poetry, of which the thought and feeling are steeped in mysticism, the expression of quaintest beauty, a German doctor newly converted from Lutheranism to the Church, John Scheffler, also published a volume of poetry, more directly mystical in substance and whose style, though of another manner, possesses equal charm and quaintness. In the old-world herb garden of seventeenth-century mystical literature with the rosemary of “*Silex Scintillans*” we may gather the thyme of the Cherubinischer Wandersman. This latter work consists not of poems but of rhymed couplets, in all 1675, divided into six books. Each couplet (occasionally there are quatrains and two or three longer pieces) sums up with a concision, which rivals the Latin collect, a maxim of mystical theology, of Catholic dogma viewed from the mystical standpoint, or some ascetical rule preparatory to mystical experience. Certainly the doctrine is not original. But we can hardly look for substantial originality in the description of man’s experience of eternal truth. Nor even is the standpoint original. Every utterance can be paralleled from previous mystical writers, either of the German-Flemish or the later Spanish school. Indeed the writer is eager to insist on this in his preface. But the teachings gathered from books explain and confirm the content of a living personal experience. The poet relates what his own eyes have seen of the Word of Life. The fundamental facts of mystical experience, and of Christian revelation in their mutual support and interpretation, have been seen so clearly by his spiritual vision that he must needs reiterate them in a series of short disconnected utterances, each of which penetrates to the heart of one or other of these facts, so few after all in number, so inexhaustible in content, and presents it in a brief, compact sentence most literally telling and striking.

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No elaborate description, no scientific exposition either psychological or theological—but lightning flashes which reveal God's Infinite Reality present though hidden in His creation. If one flash reveals nothing to a particular soul perhaps the next will.

The poet presumes in his readers a notional knowledge of Christian truth. But that notional knowledge he would transform into real knowledge, would make us realize with him what with him we profess. Hence a love of paradoxical and startling forms of expression, even at times scandalous and shocking to the average Christian. Angelus wants to shock us, to administer a series of short but sharp shocks, as from an electric battery (so he might have said had he known of electricity), if only he *can* shock us out of our sleepy acquiescence in the most momentous, the most stupendous facts, which, if realized in the least, must turn our entire lives inside out and break in pieces our accepted standard of values. But we must not read too many couplets at once. Repetition lessens the force of the shocks. Read one or two at a time and try to realize their meaning. That is the only way to read the book.

And what are these startling, shocking, shattering facts that form the burden of the Wanderer's rhyming? God and the Soul—Eternity and Time—Spiritual Reality—Worldly Appearance—the double choice to be made now for ever in these brief years—the choice of God to become a god by union with God. Angelus, like the early fathers, is not shy of the language of deification, or of Nothingness to become comparatively a Nonentity, a Beast, a Devil.

Central is the experience of Eternity—for Eternity is the Divine Life ever present in the human soul—the soul itself almost infinite because of its capacity for experience of the Infinite.

Eternity—present here and now—the Absolute Reality in and behind the time series and its events is a favourite thought of our poet. "Man, if thy spirit rise above Time and Space, each moment canst thou be in eternity" (1.12). "Thou art not in space, but space in thee; cast out space, and eternity is already present" (1.185). "The man devoted to God shares the Divine Rest, and passes beyond

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Time and Space every moment" (2.119). "The soul an eternal spirit is above all time. Even in the world it lives already in eternity" (5.127).

And this eternity is the living God. Angelus's doctrine of God is the venerable Dionysian doctrine inexpressible save by a series of paradoxes, of verbal contradictions. God possesses all names and none (5.196), all names, for the positive reality of all things is in Him, none for He does not even exist *in the same sense* that creatures possess existence. He is thus at once all and nothing (4.38). Often does Angelus return to the thought of God's utter transcendence of created being. "God is sheer Nothingness, untouched by Now or Here; the more thou wouldst comprehend Him, the more He escapes thee" (1.25). In what is practically a rhymed paraphrase from Dionysius' "Divine Names," Angelus writes, "What God is, no man knows. He is neither light nor spirit, nor bliss nor unity, nor what we call Godhead, nor wisdom, nor understanding, nor love, nor will, nor goodness, nothing but also not nothing, no essence, no consciousness" (4.21). God neither lives nor loves as we understand life and love (2.33) and He has no will, only an eternal rest. He has no providence, for all the events of time to Him are eternally present (5.92)—nor can He make anything new (5.179). Creation is *in Him* eternal (4.156), created outside time in the Divine eternity (5.146). Hence also God cannot enter into union with the sinner (5.93) nor turn from him (5.94). Sin and its final end damnation are in us, who alone can change and so turn from God Who in Himself abides eternally the Same. "God speaks for ever only Yes, the Devil says No. Therefore he cannot be with God Yes and One" (2.4). The nature and operation of evil as negation of the Absolute Good, of the Whole, and in consequence the intrinsic necessity of eternal damnation in its final choice, have never found more concise or more pregnant expression.

Our modern world, intoxicated with change and relativity, sorely needs these reminders of an Absolute and therefore Unchangeable Reality as the ground and centre of all created movement. Turn to the Now of God's eternity, cries Angelus (4.200). The soul has two eyes—one for the

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vision of time, the other for the vision of eternity (3,228). We must open the eye that looks on eternity. Eternity, the Kingdom of God, heaven, the new Jerusalem, God Himself are eternally present outside time and place, everywhere and nowhere, yet because of its innate capacity to transcend time and place present especially in the central depths of the human soul. To apprehend this is to apprehend the fundamental doctrine of Angelus.

Angelus has been accused of pantheism. Indeed several of his utterances, if taken apart from the body of his work and interpreted too literally without regard to their theological background, would undoubtedly be pantheistic. The German mind displays a marked tendency towards pantheism. The one great Catholic who slipped into a pantheistic formulation of his experience was the German Eckhart. Many of the leading German philosophers have been pantheists, e.g. Hegel, Schopenhauer, Von Hartmann. The lower form of pantheism, materialistic monism, has found its most influential popular exponent in Haeckel. This tendency reveals, I believe, an oriental strain in the German character, an element more or less powerful in different periods but always present. To-day the works of the Indian Tagore, who, however, blends with his orientalism elements borrowed from the West, are displayed in every bookseller's window in Germany. And there is at present an enormous demand for mystical writings, but particularly for the most negative, and world denying. This orientalism is a peculiar receptivity to the experience of the absolute and Eternal Reality, and therefore of the comparative unreality, so easily misinterpreted as the sheer unreality or illusion, of the relative and finite and temporal objects of every day experience. When this misinterpretation is made, as it normally will be made, unless the experience of the Absolute is complemented by a creed or an understanding of the value and in their degrees the reality of creatures is a cosmic pantheism in which the reality of God destroys or absorbs the reality of creatures.* Since, however, mysticism

* *N.B.* Monism, e.g. Haeckel's, is the reception of mechanical naturalism or positivism by a soul or culture naturally disposed to pantheism.

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is the experience of the Absolute Eternal Godhead, we should expect even the most orthodox Catholic mystics to emphasize the Absolute Being of God as the ground and truest reality of all things, and therefore the aspect of Catholic truth nearest to pantheism. And if the German mind has a natural tendency in this direction, we should expect German mystics, however Catholic, to be peculiarly inclined to the most "pantheistical" formulations possible within the limits of orthodoxy. But they are not therefore pantheists.

Where one extreme prevails, then the other is often strongest. If in Germany the East first meets the West, there we may expect to find exaggerations of Western and Eastern thought with corresponding conflicts and reactions. Ecclesiastical or "orthodox" Protestantism as opposed to the more or less underground current of spiritual or mystical Protestantism errs in the opposite direction to pantheism. From Luther onwards (who, however, in his earlier years moved for a while in the direction of an even one-sided mysticism) official Protestant theology has favoured a limited, even an anthropomorphic, conception of God, as if He were but the supreme Being in a universe of Beings equally real with Himself, limited therefore by their existence and comprehensible. As Max Scheler, a modern Catholic convert and philosopher, points out, pantheism for all its untenability does represent a reaction against this anthropomorphism, does admit and rest upon the religious experience of Absolute Unlimited Godhead utterly transcendent of created being. And in this, Catholicism is nearer to pantheism than to the all too human deity of Protestantism. No doubt it was precisely this characteristic of Catholic theology that converted Angelus to the Church from his native Lutheranism, by way it would appear of the spiritual or mystical school so frowned upon and even persecuted by the official Lutheran theologians.

The apparent pantheism of Angelus Silesius may be summed up in three propositions. The soul was God. The soul is necessary to God. The soul can become God. Startling though these statements are, it should be evident at first sight that they rather exclude than teach pantheism

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in the strict sense. If the soul is simply God or part of Him there can be no question of its *becoming* God, still less of a possibility that it may not do so. But examination of the verses in which one or more of these three propositions is affirmed proves that they are statements of doctrines long canonized by Catholic mystical theology. They rest partly on the natural relation that must exist between God and the soul (more strictly the relation of the soul to God) and partly on the supernatural relation established through and in Christ by the free gift of sanctifying grace. The soul was God, not *as* a created existence, but as Angelus is careful to explain, before its created existence, in its idea or essence as a possible nature in the Divine Word (1.73, 2.108, 9, 4.134). This thought was dear to Rusybroek, and to the German mediæval mystics before him. We may think it unreal, even fantastic. We must, however, remember that the idea of a creature in God is more, not less, real than the creature when created, and further that the ideal nature of the human soul is regarded as the model of its final destiny as fulfilled in the union of that soul with the God in whom its idea exists from eternity. This is the eternal day, I lived in God before my creation (3.48), when I was God in God (5.233), because in God all is God (2.143), and all were one in the Divine Unity (5.1 *sqq*). The creature as existent outside God is distinct from him by its comparative nonentity. Hence 10, the number composed of the unit and zero, is the symbol of God and His Creation (5.7). And as numbers from the unit all creatures flow from God (5.2). To this ideal pre-existence in God must be referred a number of verses in which Angelus draws conclusions which, though justifiable, when so understood, are expressed with a paradox easily *mis*-understood as sheer pantheism. "God cannot live a moment without me" (1.8). "God's bliss depends on me" (1.9). "I am as great as God, He as small as I" (1.10). "Without me God cannot create a worm or keep it in existence" (1.96). "Without me God would be too small" (1.204). "If God is my end, I am His beginning" (1.276). "If the creature did not exist, God would no longer be God" (2.178). The last of these paradoxes may also mean that since God has eternally decreed the existence of

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His creatures, that existence receives thereby the necessity of His Being. But elsewhere Angelus is explicit that neither our existence nor our salvation can affect the Godhead (4.126, 5.16). And the purpose of these "shocking" utterances is no childish desire to make the flesh of the pious reader creep, but to bring home the worth of the soul as involved in its idea and essence, though not in its separate existence, in the very being of the Godhead.

Angelus's third "pantheistic" proposition, that the soul can become God, rests on a different basis and has a longer and wider history. It is the doctrine of the deification of the human soul by a supernatural union with God through grace and its fulfilment glory. Deification is implicit in the Biblical teaching that the regenerate soul is born the child of God, and is a partaker of the Divine Nature. It is explicitly taught by the fathers and also, though less emphatically, by the schoolmen. To the mystic the language of deification is naturally dear. He wishes to express as strongly as possible the intimacy of his union with God. But to father, schoolman, and mystic deification is union not transubstantiation. When mystics write treatises they insist on this, and Angelus takes the precaution to explain himself in the preface, sometimes also in marginal notes. But he is too good a poet to make qualifications in his text. And he intended his book to be read not by esoteric Buddhists, Theosophists, or vague undenominational mystics, but by Catholic Christians.

Angelus Silesius understands by deification a union with God so intimate that the life and action of the soul become receptacle and instrument of the Divine Life and Action that are God Himself. God is in the soul as the ocean in a drop (4.153), or in a sponge (4.156), more intimately than the soul in the body (4.155). But He is also outside the soul (4.154), as the ocean surrounds a bather, and the soul is the vessel into which the Godhead pours itself (4.157). It is, perhaps, uncertain whether Silesius refers here to the natural presence of God, or to His supernatural presence in virtue of grace and its flower the mystical union. Since God is immovable, the former presence is substantially the same as the latter, of which it is therefore the ground.

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When grace removes the barrier of the natural self-life, the soul finds and feels and obeys the Godhead ever present in its depths and in which also it is as a creature enclosed and embraced. God is a fire burning in the soul, and the soul a light shining from that Divine Fire into the world outside (1.11). He is the soul's life (2.207), who loves (5.296, 7) and prays (1.235, 6), in our love and prayer. He tunes the strings, He sings and plays in the Divine Praises of spiritual worship (3.216). In us God blossoms (1.81) and bears fruit (1.79). He is a Divine Spring in us unless our evil will dam it (1.55), the wick and the oil in the soul's lamp (1.161). He does all things in the holy soul (5.177). In several verses Angelus explains the Divine union and life in the deified soul, the process indeed of deification, by the symbolism of alchemy. Alchemical symbolism was fashionable in the seventeenth century, and particularly dear to German mysticism. In Boehme it darkens counsel, with Angelus its sober use gives light. God is the Tincture, the Philosopher's stone that transmutes the dross of our earthly nature into the pure gold of participated Divinity (1.246 *sqq.*, 5.119).

The Divine Tincture is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Divine Word. Here enters the specifically Christian element of Angelus's mysticism. Mystical union, deification, is the birth of the Word in us, the mystical counterpart and continuation of His physical Incarnation and Birth.

As the Word, the Son, is the manifestation of the Father, begotten in the eternal now, so when the soul becomes an instrument of Divine manifestation, the Word is begotten in that soul, as of old physically in the womb of Mary, and born to a new supernatural life God-filled and God-moved. The soul is thus Mary, the mother of God (1.23, 3.23, 3.238, 4.116, 4.206). Or it is the child-bed where the Word is born (1.151). The new-born Christ-soul, the soul in whom the Word is mystically incarnate in the sense explained above, must experience spiritually the death, resurrection and ascension of the historical Jesus (5.325, 4.55, 56). Unless Christ is thus mystically born, and dies and rises again, His historical birth, death, and resurrection avail the soul

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nothing (1.61, 62, 2.102, 2.257). This mystical repetition in the Christian soul of the mysteries of the historical incarnation was a favourite conception with the Protestant spirituals from whom Angelus came but, though of rarer occurrence among Catholic mystics, is entirely orthodox. The third Mass of Christmas is traditionally appropriated to the celebration of Christ's mystical birth in souls. But Catholics, from St. Paul to the present day, have preferably contemplated the participation of the Christian soul in Christ and His redeeming mysteries. By union with the World the Person of Jesus, and by reception of the Holy Ghost, His Spirit in sanctifying grace, a union closer and fuller in mystical union, we enter into a supernatural solidarity with the Word Incarnate, as members of that mystical Body of which He is the Head. There is only One Son of God, writes Angelus with his usual boldness, therefore by union with the Word be born of God, as His only Son (6.131-134). So should you share His Godhead (*ibid.*). But this is the sheer logic of the Incarnation. The Head is by hypostatic union one Person with the Eternal Son, His members in and through Him are one with that Son, not personally indeed, but by supernatural union and solidarity. "The first and the last man is alone Christ Himself, since all come from Him and all in Him are enclosed" (5.155). "The true Son of God is Christ alone, hence must every Christian be Himself Christ" (5.9) (cf. 1.220, 2.21, 23, 93, 6.45, 46). This is the fundamental Pauline gospel "in Christ," in "Jesus Christ." "Whom Jesus shall save from Devil, Death and Torment, must be made Jesus, 'Jesused' (*eingeset*)" (3.19). This untranslatable verb *einjesen*, coined by Angelus, sums up Christian mysticism. For Christian mysticism is deification through the Incarnation, participation in the Divine life of the body of the Incarnate Word. Hence Christ is the only saint (5.122). He was slain first in Abel (5.7, 113) and His Passion is yet incomplete (5.159).

Vladimir Solovieff will express Christianity as theandrisms, the perfect incarnation of Godhead in humanity, the fulfilment of His historic Incarnation by the formation of the Church body of Jesus, as opposed to all manner of human

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self-deification. He could have found this Christian philosophy, at once the philosophy of Christianity, of mysticism, and of history, in these trenchant little verses, simple as nursery rhymes, haunting as a clever *memoria technica*, I had almost said, as the comic rhymes of Mr. Hilaire Belloc.

If the process of mystical union is thus a progressive reception of the Divine Life, and that life is immutable Godhead in Its eternal Act, the human disposition to that union must be a radical attitude of passive receptivity, of self-abandonment to the Deity present and operative in the soul. Transcending all particular concepts, and partial activities the soul must abandon itself wholly to the influx of timeless and incomprehensible Deity. The prayer of silence is thus the highest prayer (I.19, I.237, 240, 4.11, 5.330), Rest the supreme good (I.49, 28, 32, 68, 3.15, 4.144). "How blessed is the man without will or knowledge who (understand me aright) gives no praise to God" (2.19). And this silent prayer of receptive waiting on God, beyond thoughts and limited aims is entire self-abandonment, an abandonment that will accept even damnation be it the Divine Will (I.37, I.125, I.215, 2.92, 2.133, 2.141, 2.148, 3.220, 5.194, 227, 367). In his insistence on abandonment, especially in this self-contradictory paradox of abandonment to damnation, Angelus is unguarded and misleading. He wrote before the excesses of Quietism had revealed the danger and misunderstanding contained in this line of thought when pursued too exclusively. But his fundamental principle is not Quietism but the logic of all mysticism. Since God is God the soul's final and central attitude can only be utter self-abandonment to a Will it cannot hope to comprehend, its highest prayer the intuition of His incomprehensible Godhead, an intuition therefore beyond distinct concepts, without distinct petitions. That devotion and spiritual life, should therefore be confined to this central attitude and to this supreme experience—of such folly Angelus is altogether innocent. Against his praises of a will-less rest in God must be set other verses in which he insists on the necessity for active co-operation by the soul in the work of salvation and therefore of mystical union (I.211, 217, 2.174, 5.116, 364, 6.74).

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On the other hand, we dare not minimize Angelus's insistence on absolute detachment. St. John of the Cross prefaced his *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* by a diagram of the mystical mountain. The straight path to its summit is inscribed *nada, nada, nada* (nothing, nothing, nothing). This awful *nada* is the burden of many couplets. "Go whither thou canst not, see where thou seest not, Hearken where nought sounds, so art thou where God speaks" (I.199). Who desires nothing, has nothing, knows nothing, loves nothing, wills nothing, *he* ever has, knows, desires, and loves much" (I.45). This is no milk for spiritual babes, but the strong meat of the Carmelite saint. That the soul may be wholly freed from the bondage of the natural self-life limited and conditioned by affections for creatures in themselves, it must abandon all attachment to creatures and most possession of them. Then God the All, the positive Worth of all creatures, fills that soul to overflowing. Whether Angelus was wise in putting a doctrine, applicable in its fullness only to those who have reached already an advanced stage, on the way to God, into popular verses to be scattered broadcast may be doubted. But unless we are to reject the foundations of mystical theology we cannot deny its truth.

It is not surprising that of all the virtues Angelus prefers the poverty which kills desire for created goods, and the virginal chastity which cuts away the very root of the sensual life impulse common to man and mortal beasts. Childhood is particularly dear to Angelus. No doubt he idealizes children. Most children display a very strong possessive instinct and though ignorant of sex are greedy for food. But childhood is humble and sincere. Children receive with simple docility the instruction of persons and objects without forcing on experience their own narrow interpretation. And they reflect the truth of their own souls.

Becomest thou not a child thou enterest nevermore.
Where God's dear children are, too tiny is the door.

I.153.

Wisdom is gladly there where children live and play.
Why is't? Admire the cause. She is a child as they (I.165).

The soul as God's child, the soul as God's bride,

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these are Angelus's favourite translations of the mystical union between God and the soul. After his insistence on purity and spiritual childhood only the coarsest and blindest criticism will object to his fondness for the symbolism of marriage. He works it out in the boldest detail in one unusually long stanza (3.79) and returns to it often. I am reminded here of Coventry Patmore who also found wedded love the most fitting expression for the intimacies of the Divine Union.

So much the bride deserves from God for one fond kiss.
That hireling's work till death such merit still must miss.
The breath of God's free love ! A peasant girl is taught
To win His kiss, so well as thou art shewn the art.

Such verse (pardon the translation) breathes the spirit of the Unknown Eros. With these stammerings from an unutterable Epithalamium, the bridal hymn of the nuptials between man and God, first heard, Patmore will insist, in the "narrow house at Nazareth," and to be completed only with the consummation of God's kingdom and body, we may leave a necessarily over-condensed and imperfect exposition of the mystical theology of this bold singer of love's most intimate secrets, secrets, as he well knew, violated least when most freely revealed.

For conclusion, in hope that the charm and the depth united in Angelus's verse may be suggested, however faintly, to English readers I will translate, as best I may a few verses, chosen, not for any boldness of thought or expression, or as presenting the bases or the summits of Angelus's mystical theology, but as typical of his work at its best. I will give them as they occur in the order of his book. Nor shall any further comment of mine mar their simplicity.

Who sits above the vale, the peaks, the drifting cloud
The lightning heeds no jot, storm wind nor thunder loud.

2.42.

Oh, might thy heart, just that, for Him a crib be made,
Once more on earth would God, an infant there be laid.

2.53.

Poor sinner turn thee round and know thy God so near,
For sure thou soon shalt name thy God thy Father dear.

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"This world dissolves." How so? It passeth not away,
The night that hid its face scatters from God's new day.

2.109.

At creatures thou complain'st "They lead me into woe."
How is't? They should have been your path toward God to go.

2.114.

No fault did Wisdom find in all her creatures fair.
In every time and place they find some fault in her.

2.218.

One only word God spoke to me, to thee, to all—
"Love." If we love through Him, we must fulfil His call.

2.228.

You worry Scripture texts and think by learned skill
To find the Son of God. Pray from your search be still,
And come to Bethlehem's stall, His Very Self to kiss,
So of that Child Divine you'll feel the might and bliss.

3.5.

Heaven sinks to us below and down on earth heaven comes,
When earth to heaven ascends and heaven itself becomes.

3.32.

Blossom then frozen soul; without thy door 'tis May,
For ever art thou dead, wilt thou not bloom to-day?

3.90.

The nobler is the worth, the wider is it spread;
God's sun in sign thereof o'er all its light doth shed.

3.172.

God, since Himself is great, great gifts with joy imparts.
Alas, that needy men possess such tiny hearts,!

3.201.

God's Wisdom is a Spring. The more thereof we drink
With faster, stronger flow it gushes to the brink.

3.213.

Take what the Lord will give, in least the most He gives
In foulest dross is Gold, though we don't think there is.

4.14.

To heaven I'd gladly go, but yet the earth I love.
On earth may I towards God nearer and nearer move.

4.97.

'Tis when the man of prayer turns into Whom he prays
By inner change of heart his prayer of all I praise.

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The loving soul on earth tastes that her God is sweet :
The soul that only fears must want that heavenly meat.

4.142.

Who e'er had deemed that light should spring from night's dark
shade,

Or life from death be born, something from nothing made.

4.163.

God giveth as thou tak'st, thyself thy cup dost fill,
Whate'er thou wilt He'll be, wine suiting vessel still.

5.26.

God prizes not thy deed, how well soe'er 'tis done,
The fruit he passes o'er, regards the seed alone.

5.37.

Wax softens in the sun that mud still hardeneth,
On thee alone depends that God be life or death.

5.58.

Satan and Seraph prove one God to both the same :
But Satan ever turns in hate his back on Him.

5.72.

Who every sense has turned and to the inward brought,
Heareth when no man speaks and seeth in the night.

5.129.

Go, in the centre sit. At once thou seest all—

What was, what passes now, God's heaven, earth's homely ball.

2.183.

Finally, a word to critics,

The cuckoo's note, I'm sure, galls not the nightingale.
If I don't sing thy tune, loud is thy mock and rail.

1.266.

As different voices join and in the singing share,
The song must ever sound more beautiful and rare.

1.268.

To frogs' harsh croak will God with equal pleasure hark,
As to His praise outpoured in music of the lark.

1.269.

EDWARD INGRAM WATKIN.