

A Tragic Optimism: The Existential Vacuum and God in the Poetic Vision

Barbara A. Heavilin and Charles W. Heavilin

Barbara A. Heavilin, Associate Professor of English, Taylor University and
Charles W. Heavilin, Recorded Minister, Western Yearly Meeting of Friends

Abstract

In *Man's Search for Meaning* psychiatrist Viktor Frankl diagnoses the malaise of humankind as an “existential vacuum,” a sense of meaninglessness. He suggests that help for this malaise may be found in creativity, love, and the freedom of moral choice. Whether acknowledged or not, these human gifts are reflections of God, of a higher way—or what Frankl calls “another dimension, ...the capacity to rise above conditions.”² But how and where is help to be sought and found if God Himself seems absent, thus compounding the perceived emptiness and lack of meaning?

This feeling that God is absent manifests itself in literature by a shift from a recognized spiritual dimension to one that focused primarily on the social. After Milton's 1667 publication of *Paradise Lost* with its lofty intent “to justify the ways of God to men,” an age of satire ensued, with the aim of bringing about social reform by using a metaphorical mirror to reflect and illuminate the foibles of humankind, often with the hope of reform but sometimes with the fatalistic view that humankind is beyond redemption. This shift in focus from considering the mind of God to contemporary social ills resulted in a body of poetry wherein God largely disappears from the scene—a reflection of a shifting scientific and philosophical bent towards empirical verification of “truth” and a skeptical view of faith and mystery. Nevertheless, the poetic vision still celebrates God's presence in its portrayal of the human capacity for creativity, love, and the freedom of moral choice even in the harshest circumstances.

Introduction

And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.¹
—Gerard Manley Hopkins

On a hot August Sunday in 2006, the minister at St. Paul's Cathedral began his message with a quotation from a young man he had been counseling: “Modern life is trash.” In the ensuing sermon he enumerated the reasons underlying this observation: environmental pollution, war, poverty, boredom, sexual excess, addiction, alienation, loneliness—a sad list that could go further. But he also talked about the alleviation of these woes. In love, in creative problem solving, in the freedom to make moral choices lie the means by which this despondent young man, and indeed all of us, can approach, clean up, and clear away the trash of modern life.

In *Man's Search for Meaning* psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, too, deals with the discouraging perception that “modern life is trash,” diagnosing the present malaise of humankind as an “existential vacuum,” a sense of meaninglessness. Like St. Paul's minister, Frankl suggests help for the ailment: creativity, love, and the freedom of moral choice. Whether acknowledged or not, all of these are reflections of God, of a higher way—or what Frankl calls “another dimension, ...the capacity to rise above conditions.”² But how and where is help to be sought and found if God Himself seems absent, thus compounding the perceived emptiness and lack of meaning?

This feeling that God is absent manifests itself in literature by a shift from a recognized spiritual dimension to one that focused primarily on the social—often approaching a narcissistic self-absorption. After Milton's 1667 publication of *Paradise Lost* with its lofty intent “to justify the ways of God to men,” an age of satire ensued, with the aim of bringing about social reform by using

a metaphorical mirror to reflect and illuminate the foibles of humankind, often with the hope of reform but sometimes with the fatalistic view that humankind is beyond redemption. This shift in focus from considering the mind of God to contemporary social ills resulted in a body of poetry wherein God largely disappears from the scene—a reflection of a shifting scientific and philosophical bent towards empirical verification of “truth” and a skeptical view of faith and mystery.

This skepticism may be traced as least as far back as the sixteenth century when attempts were made to explain everything in rational, even mechanist terms, referring to God as watchmaker or Supreme Engineer, who had set the universe in order but did not concern Himself with ordinary human activity. Later René Descartes also advocated a spirit of skepticism: “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” Even when the American colonists maintained in their *Declaration of Independence* that God human beings were created equal and had been endowed inalienable rights, there is no acknowledgment of His participation in ordinary life. Thus, in the eighteenth century, God is most often conspicuous by His absence from the poetic vision, with a resulting sense of meaninglessness, at times approaching despair.

Yet this emerging modern and postmodern perspective is not entirely bleak or vacuous; for some writers celebrate God’s presence and the resulting creativity, love, and freedom. There is an irrepressible spirit that haunts the human mind and remains dissatisfied with the myth of a totally absent God. Therein lies the hope for informing global conflict with what Frankl has termed “a tragic optimism”—an outlook that opposes the “existential vacuum” of the times, looking outward on a bleak world with hope for its redemption.³ We find both this optimism and this malaise in the poetic vision, which provides us with an honest reflection of who are are—warts and all—but also provides a vision of who we might be, with potential to participate in sainthood.

The Poetic Vision

Frankl describes those people caught in the existential vacuum as lacking “the awareness of a meaning worth living for,...haunted by the experience of inner hollowness, a void within themselves.”⁴ While poets do not provide answers for these human woes, they do provide mirrors reflecting human vacuity and also the human capacity for transcendence and irrepressible hope. Their vision shows us the emptiness and loss of meaning resulting from a perceived absence of God, creativity, love, and freedom. Alexander Pope, to illustrate, portrays stagnation and decline in *Dunciad: Book the Fourth*. In this poem of miscreation and destruction, the creation that God originally pronounced good is undone, social structure abolished, chaos and darkness restored:

Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,
And unawares Morality expires.
Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine;
Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! Is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! Lets the curtain fall;
And Universal Darkness buries All.⁵ (lines 648-56)

In “Dover Beach,” the Victorian Matthew Arnold portrays a similar destruction; faith withdraws, leaving behind a vacuum in which there is

. . . neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.⁶ (lines 33-37)

Arnold here adds to the melancholy picture the angst of war—a dread as current for us today as it was for him some 157 years ago.

William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming” is similarly bleak, again with a feeling of dread as chaos, confusion and the dreadful destruction of war loom large:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.⁷ (lines 1-8)

There is here a stasis, an inertia as the center, innocence, and goodness cannot stem the tide of violence and wickedness. “Things fall apart”; all meaning is lost; there is no promise of a Savior; and humankind is prey to its own worst instincts—a fatalistic view in which no redeeming action is possible.

In *The Waste Land* the modern T. S. Eliot, too, struggles with this vacuum. Meaning is lost and becomes surreal as civilizations collapse:

Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal.⁸ (lines 374-77)

Similarly in “The Hollow Men,” Eliot hears defeated whisperings that are as

... quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar.⁹ (lines 7-10)

In both excerpts the very absence of punctuation speaks of loss; there are no decorous boundaries showing distinctions among words, sentences, stanzas—giving each its own proper slot. Here a leveling of meaning parallels the towers that are falling, leveling.

At the conclusion of Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” the plaintive refrains “For Thine is the Kingdom” and “Life is very long” are finally choked off. The fragmented brain can no longer think in a linear fashion; the sentences are truncated and forced in an impotent attempt to create meaning and recover a lost spirituality:

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the¹⁰ (lines 92-94)

The final refrain is a chilling parody of a child’s nursery rhyme, a commentary on the futility and worthlessness of it all:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends

*This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*¹¹ (lines 95-98)

The words are italicized and pale, decaying like a vanishing whisper on the air. Other than the concluding period, again there is no definitive punctuation to set apart and give grace and distinction to the words. For this refrain pictures a pathetic ending to a life and culture empty of any hope or meaning. There are no connections to self, to other human beings, or to God and no hint of any alternative to despair—a condition Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn later underscores in his 1978 Harvard address: “We have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility.”¹² Solzhenitsyn’s world, like Eliot’s and our own, is isolated and pathetic, shrinking and diminishing.

This absence of meaning and of God has dire results, leading Frankl to categorize human beings as saints or swine, based on moral choices. While we may disagree with these extreme categories, his observation is well taken. Purpose, fulfillment, actualization, and love may be matters of choice that lead human beings to something higher than themselves—like Frankl’s “saints,” whereas their absence may result in self-absorption, boredom, excess, or worse.

In Paul Tillich’s terms, when human beings view God as an abstraction and an impersonal “Ultimate Concern” —bearing little or no resemblance to the God of any religion—they lose a sense of His identity and personhood—and the void is replaced with countless substitute quasi-deities. As Etienne Gilson observes, “our modern world is ‘full of gods,’” leading to humankind’s being “doomed to live more and more under the spell of a new...mythology...Millions of men are starving and bleeding to death because two or three of these...deified abstractions are now at war. For when gods fight among themselves, men have to die.”¹³ On a global level, this “God void” may lead to social violence and wars that seemingly have no end, leaving no clear notion of what peace or harmony should or might be, with human beings trying to annihilate one another in an attempt to eliminate all perceived “enemies”—thus behaving like Frankl’s “swine” and leading to a world, which Arnold describes as “a darkling plain” where there is no “love, ...light, ...certitude, ...peace.”

Frankl’s epiphany of the power of love stands as a beacon standing out against such darkness:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of man is through love and in love...For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, “The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.”¹⁴

This revelation stands in stark contrast to contemporary pop culture twaddle about love. Learning in the school of harsh reality when imprisoned in Nazi prison camps during the Holocaust, this Jewish psychiatrist writes of an “intensification of inner life” there that provided “refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence.”¹⁵ In this “inner life” he discovers that while the image of his wife remains with him in his mind, his love for her goes far beyond her physical being, finding its “deepest meaning” in her “spiritual being”—an “inner self” that even death cannot touch. Although he did not know whether she was alive or dead, he contemplated on her image and conversed with her in his mind, arriving at the conclusion that he did not really need to know whether she lived or not:

There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved...My mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying. "Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death."¹⁶

Such love can fill life's emptiness, raising human beings to a higher level than themselves—a dimension in which they can transcend conditions and circumstances.

The power of such love is seen as well in Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter," written in 1919, the same year that he composed the apocalyptic "The Second Coming" in which "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned."¹⁷ The one poem may serve as an intentional contrast to the other, with a ceremonious creativity set as a foil against chaos and destruction. In this prayer of entreaty, Yeats pleads that his daughter be spared from hatred, praying that she be rooted in innocence and in sweet accordance with "Heaven's will." He concludes with both a prayer and a blessing:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares of the thoroughfares.
How, but in custom and ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?¹⁸ (ll. 73-78)

In "The Second Coming," "the ceremony of innocence is drowned," impossible to recover. In "A Prayer for My Daughter," however, Yeats disputes the idea that "innocence"—a word Diane Kelsey McColley defines as "not-nocence, ...harmlessness toward other creatures"—is an impossibility.¹⁹

McColley maintains that the reparation of such harmless innocence is part of humanity's primary work. Not-nocence is the opposite of naiveté. It requires a sufficiently complex grasp of a complex world of interconnected lives, and of the reverberations of each action and inaction, to render us responsible toward them...Its further, fuller effect is to increase...that complex awareness that enables right action.²⁰

Such innocence, then, is active, not passive—protecting and cherishing those human "ceremonies" that give us what McColley calls "patches of innocence."²¹

Linked with the word "ceremony," innocence gains further dimension, for ceremonies are those occasions that give our lives grace and order, set apart from and in contrast to the mundane and everyday. Some of our ceremonies are sacred—weddings, christenings, Bar Mitzvahs, baptisms (whether of water or of spirit). They may also be public—underscoring our responsibilities to one another and ranging from the inauguration of a President, his hand on a Bible, to the installation of a new local official. They are also private—in those events that serve to punctuate our lives with graciousness: anniversary and birthday parties, family reunions, Christmas dinners. Such are innocent; they do no harm; they fill our lives with joy. Against the darkness of a world gone wrong, Yeats prophesies in a prayer of blessing: "in custom and ceremony" innocence and beauty are born—a glimpse into a future in which another child will carry on "custom and ceremony." In such ceremonies we gain what McColley calls "a patch of innocence."²¹

The first of these poems is a dire prophecy of things to come if the world continues on its present path. The second is a powerful prayer set against such dark times. The first is irrevocably bleak with its return of "mere chaos" and the drowning of innocence; the second expresses an unquenchable human faith in a prayer of blessing for a beloved child. The first is the reality of a world in which hatred, terrorism, and war seem to prevail; the second is a world of transcendence,

faith, love, and hope—one of innocence, not harming. We cannot deny the first, but we can choose to have faith in the second—living with and modeling in our lives an oxymoronic tragic optimism, as Yeats has shown us in his prayer for his daughter.

Yeats's world of uneasiness following World War I in 1919 is our world today as it is immersed in a seemingly unending war in Iraq, with a U. S. President who has spoken the unutterable words, "Third World War." And the reverberations of Yeats's war with its dangerous divisions among nations continue. The PBS series *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century* maintains that the roots of the Second World War are in the First World War. And even after Germany's second defeat, Jay Winter states that "problems...emerged that are disturbingly similar to those that plagued the world in 1914."²² The problems have not been solved. There has been no war to end all wars. Yeats's experience and our own show that no war can achieve a truly lasting peace, that the solution to human woes must be sought elsewhere—in love for a daughter, a neighbor, nation, world.

Like Yeats, we are even now plagued with a vision of a world falling apart, one with no center. Like him, our hope lies in prayers of blessing and the faith that "custom and ceremony" and "innocence and beauty" may be restored to places like Iraq, taking precedence over violence, hatred, and destruction. If, as Frankl assures us, "love is as strong as death," it is indeed a powerful approach to the problem of the "trash" of modern life.

Also offsetting the sense of the loss of God and meaning is the power of a restorative creativity. As Frankl observes, "An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize the values in creative work."²³ Such restorative creativity may be observed in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur," a poem celebrating God's presence through a mystical view of nature. This sonnet celebrates a world electrified, shining, flaming—infused with the magnificence of Deity. Such glory cannot be contained: "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed." Still, Hopkins laments, humans heed neither God nor nature—trodding it down, searing it with trade, bearing and smearing it with their "toil." As a result, nature "wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod."²⁴

Hopkins might have stopped on such a note, having drawn an apt picture of his times—a scene exacerbated in our own. But Hopkins's faith is as bright as his opening vision. Despite human neglect and abuse, nature is never exhausted because "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things." Bearing witness to Hopkins' vision of a God-infused nature, even in our own asphalt-and-cement times, blades of grass and flowering weeds spring up in the cracks of asphalt roads, cement sidewalks, and the ruins of buildings. Even envisioning the worst outcome for this world—the terrifying image of the possibility of annihilation and the descent of chaotic darkness—Hopkins concludes with a promise, a hope, a tragic optimism:

And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.²⁵

Hopkins recognizes the human penchant to self-destruct. Even in this eventuality, in faith, Hopkins maintains that the warm, healing presence of God will be there, again creating light and morning out of chaos—a tragically optimistic stance.

Like Hopkins, Coleridge sees war's destruction as the backdrop for creation. With a vision of the poet in the role of godlike creator, his "Kubla Khan" celebrates inspired creativity set against the foil of impending destruction. In this poem, Kubla Khan decrees that "a stately pleasure dome" be

constructed in Xanadu—a dome which materializes before the reader’s eyes (much like the account of God’s speaking the world into being in Genesis). It is a “holy and enchanted” place, with “caverns measureless to man,” walls, towers, gardens, brooks, blossoming trees, with “a sacred river” running through it and the pleasure dome shadowed on its surface.²⁶

His creation completed, Kubla Khan hears “from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war.” Like Hopkins, however, Coleridge places faith in creation and re-creation. He remembers a vision he had experienced of “an Abyssinian maid” singing of the first Paradise. If he could only remember “her symphony and song,” he believes he himself could create Kubla Khan’s kingdom with its “stately pleasure dome” and could himself be the inspired poet maker. But Coleridge already is that poet maker, who has created that dome in poetry. Implicit in the poem’s backdrop, with its “ancestral voices prophesying war,” is a world in which the worst may occur.²⁷ As the creative poet-maker, like Hopkins, Coleridge implies a tragically optimistic view both of a world destroyed and of a world restored by a God-inspired re-creation in which human beings may pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and re-create.

God is likewise discovered in the gift of freedom—especially in the power to make moral choices. For Frankl maintains that “a human being is not one thing among others; *things* determine each other, but *man* is ultimately self-determining.”²⁸ Yeats wrote against the backdrop of World War I and Eliot against that of World War II, including his personal observation of the Blitz. Like Yeats, he saw the resulting world as a waste land, which he portrayed in the various fragments that make up his poem by that title, depicting the bleakness of failed or perverted relationships between men and women and of the horror of collapsed civilizations as the towers of “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London” are falling. Nevertheless, acting on his freedom to choose, Eliot’s final stanza has a straightforward declarative sentence, reflecting an act of will, or perhaps of faith: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”²⁹ In effect, he says, whatever else may have fallen, I am still standing, undergirded by art, an aesthetic heritage. Such optimism in the face of impossible circumstances Frankl describes as a person’s last and ultimate freedom: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”³⁰ Eliot concludes *The Waste Land* with a Hindu benediction of peace: “Shantih shantih shantih”—“the Peace which passeth understanding.”³¹ If such an ending may not reveal the presence of God, it does reveal a desire for that presence. Later, in “Little Gidding,” Eliot will attest to that presence.

In 1942, while serving as a nighttime fire-watcher during Germany’s incendiary bombings of London in World War II, Eliot wrote “Little Gidding.”³² In part, the poem concerns two contrasting kinds of fire—the one purifying, the other destroying. A meditation on place and time, the poem opens with a description of a “midwinter spring” on the chapel grounds at Little Gidding—a moment of incandescent beauty, with sun flaming on “ice, on pond and ditches.”³³ This flaming image coalesces with the poet’s allusion to “pentecostal fire,” the “cloven tongues like as of fire” that appear to Christ’s disciples after the resurrection and signal their being filled with the Holy Spirit—the first kind of fire.³⁴ The second image sinisterly echoes the first, with “the dark dove with the flickering tongue” that signals the German dive bombers and the resulting “flame of incandescent terror.”³⁴

The one fire purifies; the other destroys. With destructive fire we are all too familiar. But what is the essence of the purifying fire? Eliot’s conclusion of this poem draws first on his reading of *Revelations of Divine Love* by the medieval mystic Dame Julian of Norwich:

Sin is Behovely [or inevitable], but
All shall be well, and...

All manner of things shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.³⁵ (ll. 166-67; 197-99)

Ruth Casper provides an insightful discussion to illuminate Dame Julian's visionary insight. Caspar illustrates this passage by drawing on Peter Berger's analogy of a child's awakening alone and fearful in the darkness, the mother's comforting words, and the child's return to calm: "'Don't be afraid—everything is in order, everything is all right.' If all goes well, the child will be reassured, his trust in reality recovered, and in the trust he will return to sleep."³⁶ Berger maintains that the answer to the question of whether or not the mother is lying to the child "can be 'no' only if there is some truth in the religious interpretation of human existence...because the reassurance, transcending the immediately present two individuals and their situation, implies a statement about reality as such."³⁷ It is such reassurance that Julian (and Eliot) suggest. The "ground of our beseeching" for peace, for hope, for restoration of a broken world, Julian asserts, must be love—there is no other "ground" —no other place to stand. Such is Eliot's ground in these reassuring words penned while on duty as a nighttime fire-watcher during the blitz.

Eliot draws also on a *Cloud of Unknowing* by an unknown cloistered monk who arrives at a conclusion similar to that of Dame Julian, with an additional note: "With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling"³⁸ (l. 238). Here love is not only the "ground of our beseeching," but also a "Calling" —demanding a commitment to a higher way that can lead to transcendence, even triumph, over circumstance.

Conclusion

As the minister at St. Paul's observed, there are many things that lead to the conclusion that "modern life is trash"—pollution, war, poverty, boredom, excesses of all kinds, addiction, alienation, loneliness. And Frankl's experiences in a German death camp during the Second World War lead him to conclude that there are only two categories of human beings: saints and swine. In the poetic vision, the acts of both saints and swine are evident—in Yeats's celebration of innocence and his depiction of its destruction, in Coleridge's creation of a dome and another earthly paradise, and in *Eliot's Waste Land* and its lament for the falling towers of civilization and his "Little Gidding" and its call to love as a higher way. St. Paul's minister offsets "trash" with hope and transcendence. In the face of insurmountable obstacles, Frankl and our poets have likewise witnessed a higher way—the transforming sense of God's presence that comes with love, creativity, and the exercise of the human freedom to make moral choices. Such offer the only hope for the cessation of global conflict and the healing of the world's wounds. If, as Frankl maintains, "love is as strong as death," it is a powerful approach indeed to such human woes. The weapons of war have failed us; it is time to try a higher way.

Our poets' vision has served well in showing us our human potential both to self-destruct and to creatively preserve our world. What is not in the poet's purview, however, is to tell us specifically what to do or how to approach our problems. That is our responsibility. And there are those who have taken on the mantle of responsibility, who have felt, with the unknown monk, the calling to love and thereby to create "patches of innocence."

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