



EDITED BY
THOMAS J. COLLINS
& VIVIENNE J. RUNDLE

ASSITANT EDITORS: WAI YING LEE & KIRSTEN MUNRO

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*Caliban upon Setebos;
or, Natural Theology in the Island*¹

"Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself."

[Will sprawl, now that the heat of day is best,
Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire,
With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin.
And, while he kicks both feet in the cool slush,
5 And feels about his spine small eft-things² course,
Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh:
And while above his head a pompion³-plant,
Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye,
Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard,
10 And now a flower drops with a bee inside,
And now a fruit to snap at, catch and crunch,—
He looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross
And recross till they weave a spider-web
(Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times)
15 And talks to his own self, howe'er he please,
Touching that other, whom his dam⁴ called God.

¹ It is generally believed that the poem was to some extent triggered by Darwin's *Origin of Species* (November, 1859). Browning was interested in the furore that followed the appearance of Darwin's book, and the topical appeal of an example of the "missing link" is evident. Browning's hero is the man-monster of *The Tempest* turned theologian—at the end of the play Caliban resolves to "seek for grace" (5.1.296), and the resolve might have sparked Browning's imagination; the original Caliban's character, situation, and pronouncements lie behind almost everything in Browning's characterization. Setebos was the god of Caliban's dam, Sycorax (1.2.373); the Quiet may derive in part from the Unitarian conception of God. The "Natural Theology" of the title is Theology based on natural evidence, without revelation. The poem has generated much excellent discussion. One topic has been the poem's use of the third person (Caliban's first word—"Will"—means "he will," which means "I will") and the shifts from the third to first person. The prevailing view is that Browning had Caliban normally use the third person essentially to stress his primitiveness. The Quiet is neuter [*it*]; Setebos is third person with a capital [*He*]; Caliban, though he sometimes uses the first person, is generally third person without the capital [*he*], and frequently without the pronoun at all [*Thinketh*].

² newts or similar creatures.

³ pumpkin.

⁴ Sycorax in *The Tempest* 1.2.373; there her God is Setebos.

Because to talk about Him, vexes—ha,
Could He but know! and time to vex is now,
When talk is safer than in winter-time.
20 Moreover Prosper and Miranda⁵ sleep
In confidence he drudges at their task,
And it is good to cheat the pair, and gibe,
Letting the rank⁶ tongue blossom into speech.]

Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos!

25 "Thinketh, He dwelleth i' the cold o' the moon.

"Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,
But not the stars;⁷ the stars came otherwise;
Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that:
Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,
30 And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.

"Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:
He hated that He cannot change His cold,
Nor cure its ache. 'Hath spied an icy fish
That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she
lived,

35 And thaw herself within the lukewarm brine
O' the lazy sea her stream thrusts far amid,
A crystal spike 'twixt two warm walls of wave;
Only, she ever sickened, found repulse
At the other kind of water, not her life,
40 (Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun)
Flounced back from bliss she was not born to
breathe,
And in her old bounds buried her despair,
5 Hating and loving warmth alike: so He.

"Thinketh, He made thereat the sun, this isle,
45 Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing.
Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;

⁵ the protagonist of *The Tempest* (and Caliban's master) and his daughter. In the play Prospero naps in the afternoon.

⁶ rebellious.

⁷ The stars are the realm of the Quiet, we learn later.

Yon auk,¹ one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown
He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge
eye

By moonlight; and the pie² with the long tongue
That pricks deep into oakwarts³ for a worm,
And says a plain word when she finds her prize,
But will not eat the ants; the ants themselves
That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks
About their hole—He made all these and more,
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?
He could not, Himself, make a second self
To be His mate; as well have made Himself:
He would not make what he mislikes or slights,
An eyesore to Him, or not worth His pains:
But did, in envy, listlessness or sport,
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be—
Weaker in most points, stronger in a few,
Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while,
Things He admires and mocks too,—that is it,
Because, so brave, so better though they be,
It nothing skills⁴ if He begin to plague.

Look now, I⁵ melt a gourd-fruit into mash,
Add honeycomb and pods, I have perceived,
Which bite like finches when they bill and kiss,—
Then, when froth rises bladdery,⁶ drink up all,
Quick, quick, till maggots⁷ scamper through my
brain;

Last, throw me on my back i' the seeded thyme,
And wanton, wishing I were born a bird.
Put case, unable to be what I wish,
I yet could make a live bird out of clay:

¹ a kind of sea bird.

² magpie or the pied woodpecker (?).

³ oak galls.

⁴ avails.

⁵ Caliban's first shift to the first person.

⁶ bubbly.

⁷ fancies.

Would not I take clay, pinch my Caliban
Able to fly?—for, there, see, he hath wings,
And great comb like the hoopoe's⁸ to admire,
80 And there, a sting to do his foes offence,
There, and I will that he begin to live,
Fly to yon rock-top, nip me off the horns
Of grigs⁹ high up that make the merry din,
Saucy through their veined wings, and mind me not.
85 In which feat, if his leg snapped, brittle clay,
And he lay stupid-like,—why, I should laugh;
And if he, spying me, should fall to weep,
Beseech me to be good, repair his wrong,
Bid his poor leg smart less or grow again,—
90 Well, as the chance were, this might take or else
Not take my fancy: I might hear his cry,
And give the mankin three sound legs for one,
Or pluck the other off, leave him like an egg,
And lessoned¹⁰ he was mine and merely clay.
95 Were this no pleasure, lying in the thyme,
Drinking the mash, with brain become alive,
Making and marring clay at will? So He.

'Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,
Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord.
100 'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs
That march now from the mountain to the sea,
'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.¹¹
'Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots
105 Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;
'Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
And two worms he whose nippers end in red;
As it likes me each time, I do: so He.

Well then, 'supposeth He is good i' the main,
110 Placable if His mind and ways were guessed,

⁸ a crested colourful bird.

⁹ grasshoppers or crickets.

¹⁰ having been taught a lesson.

¹¹ a clear hit at doctrines of predestination.

ROBERT BROWNING

But rougher than His handiwork, be sure!
 Oh, He hath made things worthier than Himself,
 And envieth that, so helped, such things do more
 Than He who made them! What consoles but this?
 115 That they, unless through Him, do naught at all,
 And must submit: what other use in things?
 'Hath cut a pipe of pithless elder-joint
 That, blown through, gives exact the scream o' the
 jay
 When from her wing you twitch the feathers blue:
 120 Sound this, and little birds that hate the jay
 Flock within stone's throw, glad their foe is hurt:
 Put case such pipe could prattle and boast forsooth
 "I catch the birds, I am the crafty thing,
 I make the cry my maker cannot make
 125 With his great round mouth; he must blow
 through mine!"
 Would not I smash it with my foot? So He.

But wherefore rough, why cold and ill at ease?
 Aha, that is a question! Ask, for that,
 What knows,—the something over Setebos
 130 That made Him, or He, may be, found and fought,
 Worsted, drove off and did to nothing, perchance.
 There may be something quiet o'er His head,
 Out of His reach, that feels nor joy nor grief,
 Since both derive from weakness in some way.
 135 I joy because the quails come; would not joy
 Could I bring quails here when I have a mind:
 This Quiet, all it hath a mind to, doth.
 'Esteemeth stars the outposts of its couch,
 But never spends much thought nor care that way.
 140 It may look up, work up,—the worse for those
 It works on! 'Careth but for Setebos
 The many-handed as a cuttle-fish,
 Who, making Himself feared through what He does,
 Looks up, first, and perceives he cannot soar
 145 To what is quiet and hath happy life;
 Next looks down here, and out of very spite
 Makes this a bauble-world to ape yon real,

These good things to match those as hips¹ do grapes.
 'Tis solace making baubles, ay, and sport.
 150 Himself peeped late, eyed Prosper at his books
 Careless and lofty, lord now of the isle:
 Vexed, 'stitched a book of broad leaves, arrow-
 shaped,
 Wrote thereon, he knows what, prodigious words;
 Has peeled a wand and called it by a name;
 155 Weareth at whiles for an enchanter's robe
 The eyed skin of a supple oncelot;²
 And hath an ounce³ sleeker than youngling mole,
 A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,
 Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye,
 160 And saith she is Miranda and my wife:
 'Keeps for his Ariel⁴ a tall pouch-bill crane
 He bids go wade for fish and straight disgorge;
 Also a sea-beast, lumpish, which he snared,
 Blinded the eyes of, and brought somewhat tame,
 165 And split its toe-webs, and now pens the drudge
 In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;
 A bitter heart that bides its time and bites.
 'Plays thus at being Prosper in a way,
 Taketh his mirth with make-believes: so He.
 170 His dam held that the Quiet made all things
 Which Setebos vexed only: 'holds not so.
 Who made them weak, meant weakness He might
 vex.
 Had He meant other, while His hand was in,
 Why not make horny eyes no thorn could prick,
 175 Or plate my scalp with bone against the snow,
 Or overscale my flesh 'neath joint and joint,
 Like an orc's⁵ armour? Ay,—so spoil His sport!
 He is the One now: only He doth all.

¹ fruit of the wild rose.

² ocelot or jaguar.

³ lynx or snow-leopard or cheetah.

⁴ Prospero's airy servant in *The Tempest*.

⁵ probably sea monster.

180 'Saith, He may like, perchance, what profits Him.
 Ay, himself loves what does him good; but why?
 'Gets good no otherwise. This blinded beast
 Loves whose places flesh-meat on his nose,
 But, had he eyes, would want no help, but hate
 Or love, just as it liked him: He hath eyes.
 185 Also it pleaseth Setebos to work,
 Use all His hands, and exercise much craft,
 By no means for the love of what is worked.
 'Tasteth, himself, no finer good i' the world
 When all goes right, in this safe-summer-time,
 190 And he wants little, hungers, aches not much,
 Than trying what to do with wit and strength.
 'Falls to make something: 'piled yon pile of turfs,
 And squared and stuck there squares of soft white
 chalk,
 And, with a fish-tooth, scratched a moon on each,
 195 And set up endwise certain spikes of tree,
 And crowned the whole with a sloth's skull a-top,
 Found dead i' the woods, too hard for one to kill.
 No use at all i' the work, for work's sole sake;
 'Shall some day knock it down again: so He.
 200 'Saith He is terrible: watch His feats in proof!
 One hurricane will spoil six good months' hope.
 He hath a spite against me, that I know,
 Just as He favours Prosper, who knows why?
 So it is, all the same, as well I find.
 205 'Wove wattles¹ half the winter, fenced them firm
 With stone and stake to stop she-tortoises
 Crawling to lay their eggs here: well, one wave,
 Feeling the foot of Him upon its neck,
 Gaped as a snake does, lolled out its large tongue,
 210 And licked the whole labour flat: so much for spite.
 'Saw a ball² flame down late (yonder it lies)
 Where, half an hour before, I slept i' the shade:
 Often they scatter sparkles: there is force!
 'Dug up a newt He may have envied once

¹ twigs.² meteor (fire ball).

215 And turned to stone, shut up inside a stone.
 Please Him and hinder this?—What Prosper does?
 Aha, if He would tell me how! Not He!
 There is the sport: discover how or die!
 All need not die, for of the things o' the isle
 220 Some flee afar, some dive, some run up trees;
 Those at His mercy,—why, they please Him most
 When...when...well, never try the same way twice!
 Repeat what act has pleas'd, He may grow wroth.
 You must not know His ways, and play Him off,
 225 Sure of the issue. 'Doth the like himself:
 'Spareth a squirrel that it nothing fears
 But steals the nut from underneath my thumb,
 And when I threat, bites stoutly in defence:
 'Spareth an urchin³ that contrariwise,
 230 Curls up into a ball, pretending death
 For fright at my approach: the two ways please.
 But what would move my choler more than this,
 That either creature counted on its life
 Tomorrow and next day and all days to come,
 235 Saying, forsooth, in the inmost of its heart,
 "Because he did so yesterday with me,
 And otherwise with such another brute,
 So must he do henceforth and always."—Ay?
 Would teach the reasoning couple what "must"
 means!
 240 'Doth as he likes, or wherefore Lord? So He.
 'Conceiveth all things will continue thus,
 And we shall have to live in fear of Him
 So long as He lives, keeps His strength: no change,
 If He have done His best, make no new world
 245 To please Him more, so leave off watching this,—
 If He surprise not even the Quiet's self
 Some strange day,—or, suppose, grow into it
 As grubs grow butterflies: else, here are we,
 And there is He, and nowhere help at all.

³ hedgehog.

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250 'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop.
 His dam held different, that after death
 He both plagued enemies and feasted friends:
 Idly! He doth His worst in this our life,
 Giving just respite lest we die through pain,
 255 Saving last pain for worst,—with which, an end.
 Meanwhile, the best way to escape His ire
 Is, not to seem too happy. 'Sees, himself,
 Yonder two flies, with purple films¹ and pink,
 Bask on the pompion-bell above: kills both.
 260 'Sees two black painful² beetles roll their ball
 On head and tail as if to save their lives:
 Moves them the stick away they strive to clear.

Even so, 'would have Him misconceive, suppose
 This Caliban strives hard and ails no less,
 265 And always, above all else, envies Him;
 Wherefore he mainly dances on dark nights,
 Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh,
 And never speaks his mind save housed as now:
 Outside, 'groans, curses. If He caught me here,
 270 O'erheard this speech, and asked "What chucklest
 at?"

'Would, to appease Him, cut a finger off,
 Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best,
 Or let the toothsome apples rot on tree,
 Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste:
 275 While myself lit a fire, and made a song

And sung it, "*What I hate, be consecrate
 To celebrate Thee and Thy state, no mate
 For Thee; what see for envy in poor me?*"
 Hoping the while, since evils sometimes mend,
 280 Warts rub away and sores are cured with slime,
 That some strange day, will either the Quiet catch
 And conquer Setebos, or likelier He
 Decrepit may doze, doze, as good as die.
 [What, what? A curtain³ o'er the world at once!
 285 Crickets stop hissing; not a bird—or, yes,
 There scuds His raven that has told Him all!
 It was fool's play, this prattling! Ha! The wind
 Shoulders the pillared dust, death's house o' the
 move,⁴
 And fast invading fires begin! White blaze—
 290 A tree's head snaps—and there, there, there, there,
 there,
 His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him!
 Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
 'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
 Will let those quails fly; will not eat this month
 295 One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!]
 —1864

¹ wings.

² taking pains.

³ thundercloud.

⁴ a whirlwind that has picked up dust.