*Victorian Literature and Culture* (2003), 43–66. Printed in the United States of America.
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# MORTAL PROJECTIONS: THOMAS HARDY'S DISSOLVING VIEWS OF GOD

*By Jon Roberts*

One shape of many names
— P. B. Shelley,"The Revolt of Islam"

OF THE GOD that appears in so many of Thomas Hardy's lyrics as so many shapes of *one* name, of the God that appears to defy common description because each of his many shapes is unique, this may be said: He easily entertains the supposition of his own disappearance. That this peculiar claim so closely echoes one made by Emerson about the disappearance of literature is intentional; in rendering the prospect of divine dissolution, Hardy reveals profound misgivings about the efficacy of poetry as a symbolic means for coming to terms with the painful and toilsome experience of living, *and* about the continued adequacy of poetic efforts to provide "a frame of acceptance" for suffering humanity (Burke, *Attitudes* 5).[1] That this claim probably elicits less surprise and uneasiness than ironic acknowledgement in readers already familiar with Hardy's lyrics, that it rings vaguely true even before they turn back to the poems themselves may indicate how inured these same readers have grown to even the most extravagant instances of Hardy's "unrelieved pessimism."[2]

Consider "A Plaint to Man" (306) in which God remarks, almost casually, "I dwindle day by day / Beneath the deicide eyes of seers / In a light that will not let me stay" (22–24). The weary alliteration of the first line combined with the grimace-producing assonance of the next smack somewhat of the sour resignation that troubles, though only slightly, the ocular allusion to earthly inquirers after divinity-denying truth, that wholly intellectual "light" that outshines even God. And yet, the imperiled deity's tone never descends into bitterness. Under the circumstances, we would have to say that he is holding up rather well. Even as he faces sure demise, his voice registers neither sorrow nor dread: "And to-morrow the whole of me disappears" (25). Some readers hear or think they hear a moaning lament emerging from the conjunction of "to-morrow" and "whole," but the long vowel in "me" and the consonantal stop in "disappears" shorten the duration of the line and quickly put an end to the opening strains of whatever dirge these readers might hear. There will be no wailing or gnashing of teeth, God seems to say; my utterance will not betray *me* into a mundane and typically human response to dissolution.

God attests to his ephemeral nature early in the poem when he unveils himself through an image borrowed from that popular Victorian entertainment, the magic-lantern show: "One



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150303000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thin as a phasm on a lantern-slide / Shown forth in the dark upon some dim sheet, / And by none but its showman vivified"(10–12).[3] The magic lantern, powerfully illuminated from within by limelight, serially projected images from painted slides onto a suspended sheet while a "showman" supplied dramatic narration. In Hardy's poem, "showman" may be taken in its usual theatrical sense or as one who literally "shows" or projects ghostly images of his own making. Alternately, it may stand for credulous humanity or even for the poet himself. Both, after all, work ingeniously and incessantly to create and vivify the phantom image of divinity.

"A Plaint to Man," it should be said, was published only a few years after the appearance of the first nickelodeons put an end to the magic-lantern show's mass appeal. In fact, by 1910, the year of the poem's composition, there were already ten thousand of these early motion picture houses operating in Europe and America. The counterfeit "phasm" with which God identifies himself, however, is associated with the earlier projection technology, an essential component of the wildly popular horror-shows known as phantasmagoria. These diabolical entertainments – in one eighteenth-century Danish print, *Den sonder brudte Lanterna = Magica,* a tiny devil emerges from an overturned projector – used the magic lantern to throw what were, by current Hollywood standards, only modestly terrifying images onto a translucent screen from behind or even onto smoke for a ghostlier effect. Of particular relevance for "A Plaint to Man" is the invention of the "dissolving view," a primitive animation technique that enabled the showman to fade back and forth between slides depicting the same demonic figure in a variety of attitudes.

God's efforts to evoke his own sense of dissolution, then, results in his recalling a virtually obsolete projection technique also known as a "dissolve set." Though innocent enough with respect to good and evil, God's self-identification with this outmoded technology is nevertheless troubling. By comparing himself to a worn-out ghost-show illusion fortunate even to have been relegated to the "variety" circuit, he confirms his evanescence, his nearly comic superficiality. We must thank the showman, his human creator, for what little life the divine projection possesses, since he alone, through his deft handling of the slides that comprise the "dissolve set," projects and animates, however feebly, the phasm-God that appears (only) to disappear. Insofar as Hardy is a "showman," this "set" is composed of those lyrics that present God in different attitudes. Insofar as the God of "A Plaint to Man" and similar poems can be said to exist at all, he exists as a "dissolving view," as an ever-shifting projection subject to the aesthetic whims of his mortal projectionist.

Hardy's sense that this phantom divinity was fast losing its already diminished capacity to compel modern imaginations is further underscored by his ingenious adoption of a "dissolving" metaphor for a dissolving God at the very moment when the magic-lantern show was giving way to motion pictures. The new cinematic technologies mesmerized audiences in ways that the most imaginative showman could never hope to with his primitive animation efforts. Thus God can so easily imagine his own dissolution because he can, via analogy, make only the most impoverished claims for his own existence. In "A Plaint to Man," he becomes the poem's projection, what Shelley tagged, in "The Revolt of Islam," as "the shade from [our own souls] upthrown" (VIII.vi.3245).[4] Yet Hardy, never one to leave impoverished enough alone, does Shelley one better. Unlike his Romantic precursor who granted the shade a degree of relative stability, a measure of continuity through time, Hardy denies the phasm-God anything more than momentary status. One projection disintegrates into another in accordance with the showman's dramatic needs. The divine illusion lasts no longer than the poem fostering that illusion lasts.

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In his preface to *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, Hardy writes, "The pieces are in a large degree dramatic or personative in conception; and this even where they are not obviously so" (3). I tend to agree with William Buckler that the phrase "in a large degree" represents "a significant provision" (64) insofar as it communicates Hardy's doubts that a poet's own feelings can be entirely absent from the work. Yet Hardy nevertheless feels strongly enough about distinguishing himself from his speakers to make this sentence its own paragraph. Insisting on such a distinction, of course, transforms Hardy into "Hardy," a misleadingly christened "sequence of disconnected evanescent persons" who address us from inside the poems they inhabit; "[e]ach is called into being by the impression of the moment, then 'recorded' in a poem that personifies the impression. Each person then vanishes, never to return except when the poem is reread, or when the past impression is remembered" (Miller 281). Given the ghostly impermanence of such "persons" in Hardy's lyrics, there is no sense in which Hardy's phasm-God – seen here as the verbal projection of a poem's speaker whether that speaker is one of the faithful or a nonbeliever or God himself – may be thought to possess a stable identity from lyric to lyric.

It is with good reason, then, that readers approaching Hardy's poems of religious doubt soon come to expect the discouraging notes nearly always struck within them. "Everybody who has read a volume of Thomas Hardy's verse," R. P. Blackmur once remarked, "retains a secure impression, like the smart of a blow, of what it was like"(2). If we do not experience this same smart on subsequent readings, it is not because the blow no longer stings, but because we know it is coming and are thus better able to steel ourselves against its force. When the first blow came without warning, we could merely react with the anguished surprise of one caught with his guard down; it stunned as well as hurt us. Now, whenever it comes again, we wince a little, flash a wry compensatory smile, draw breath sharply against momentary pain, yet, on the whole, the smart arising from Hardy's "full look at the Worst" ("In Tenebris II" 154, l. 14) quickly dissipates; the blow is absorbed.

Taking a cue from Blackmur, I figure the experience of reading Hardy's agnostic lyrics as the experience of enduring bodily pain because all too often the readers most familiar with Hardy's poetry are the least liable to recognize that these lyrics arise equally out of an extraordinary sensitivity to human suffering and a just as extraordinary awareness of the inadequacy of the myths that evolved to render this suffering bearable. In the next section, I locate vestiges of this intense awareness of suffering and the poetic practice that issues from it in Hardy's preface to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, one of his very few attempts to set down his views on poetry. I propose then to listen to what happens in several lyrics in which the speaker, sometimes a human presence, though more often God himself, challenges conventional formulations of the divine. I will thereby show that even as these poems foster explicit claims about God's dissolution, they also make implicit claims about the growing inadequacy of poetic language to address the problem of human suffering symbolically when it cannot be treated by more pragmatic means. They do so, moreover, by means of the analogical extension of a sacred myth deprived of its power to explain that suffering.

## *1. "Apology" Not Accepted*

THE SACRED MYTH HARDY so mercilessly interrogates is that of a God who suffers *with* and, perhaps more significantly, *for* us. This myth's career and fate in Hardy's lyrics in particular and its implications for poetry in general invite preliminary summary: God once represented a

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powerful *supernatural* means of explaining human suffering. By a complex set of analogies, the origin of which I will presently trace to the interdependence of theological and poetic discourse, poetic language came to represent a powerful *symbolic* means for adapting to those pains and trials of living that could not be successfully addressed or "solved" by more pragmatic means – that is, by strong measures which have the capacity to alter literally the conditions that give rise to these same pains and trials.

Turning to poetry at the very moment in European intellectual history when evolutionary theory and positivism were threatening to overturn all but the most empirically-grounded "truths," Hardy sensed that the sacred myth was fast losing its explanatory power.[5] As a maker born too late to enjoy the poetic benefits of a sustaining myth, he must have wondered if he could do anything more than attest stoically to a spiritual crisis – one precipitated by Darwin and Comte – with austere lyrics that dramatize the supposition of God's disappearance. At times, Hardy even seems to have convinced himself that a poetry stripped of its forming and informing mythic narrative could no longer act as a symbolic means of reconciling suffering mortals to their bruising and exhausting labors, so much so that the religious doubt from which these lyrics emerge subsumes the deepest mistrust of all poetic attempts to restore the dying myth's curative power. The spiritual crisis occasioned by evolutionary theory and positivism amounted to a poetic crisis as well, one which might result in the greatly diminished cultural status of poetry itself or even in its disappearance altogether.

Hardy's suspicions about poetry, however, derive more from his heightened sense of the linguistic interdependence of poetic and theological discourse than from his sense of poetry's ineffectiveness in combating the positivist rejection of theological accounts of human suffering and redemption. Perhaps he merely accepted this ineffectiveness as an unavoidable consequence of what Mill, following Wordsworth, describes as the strict logical opposition between poetry and science. I am suggesting that the rather sophisticated awareness, present in the lyrics, of a sacred myth deprived of its analgesic function comprehends a collateral awareness of the failure of poetic discourse to aid the poet in his symbolic efforts to construct "a frame of acceptance."[6] So fully implicated is literary discourse in the divine fiction, moreover, that it is no exaggeration to say that one of the only reasons we can speak or write at all about divinity is that poetic language has been successfully extended by analogy in ways that allow us to do so.[7]

Even so, the readers most familiar with Hardy's agnostic poems are more inclined to trace the poems' "unrelieved pessimism" to Hardy's ideas about existence than to what might be called his working knowledge of how poetic language captures or fails to capture the felt quality of our lived experience.[8] This knowledge, the product of physical or mental exertion, is a privileged kind of knowing arising from the individual poet's characteristic way of writing his poems. Ironically, it is the wholly contingent status of this kind of knowledge in Hardy's lyrics on which the poet bases his slim hopes that poetry's genius for consolation might be able to survive the death of God. We must not be too quick, then, to accept Hardy's "Apology" as a conventional defense of poetry. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to regard his "Apology" as anything other than a strategic explanation of his lyric practice aimed at quelling the potentially damaging charges of pessimism so frequently leveled against his art.

And yet, the conclusion that Hardy's ideas about life are the primary source of his skepticism seems initially justified. Consider the poet's impatient rejoinder to the frequent complaint by "so-called optimists" and "good Panglossians" that his poems embody what he sardonically refers to as "strange and disrespectful conceptions of this best of all possible

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worlds" ("Apology" 528). He testily proposes that literary critics direct their attention toward more properly aesthetic questions. Writing as if Prospero were speaking of poetry rather than appraising human life, Hardy asks – though it sounds more like exhortation than inquiry – whether the modern poet should ignore convention and adopt instead a rigorous program of applying "ideas" to experience. "After all," he imparts in a tone at once defensive and querulous,

> the serious and truly literary inquiry in this connection is: Should a shaper of such stuff as dreams are made on disregard considerations of what is customary and expected, and apply himself to the real function of poetry, the application of ideas to life (in Matthew Arnold's familiar phrase)? This bears more particularly on what has been called the "philosophy" of these poems – usually reproved as "queer." Whoever the author may be that undertakes such application of ideas in this "philosophic" direction – where it is specially required – glacial judgments must inevitably fall upon him amid opinion whose arbiters largely decry individuality, to whom *ideas* are oddities to smile at, who are moved by a yearning the reverse of that of the Athenian inquirers on Mars Hill; and stiffen their features not only at sound of a new thing, but at a restatement of old things in new terms. (528)

I have quoted a longer excerpt from "Apology" than is perhaps necessary to indicate that Hardy himself seems to believe that his ideas about life inform his poetic practice. His touchstone, after all, is a crucial sentence from Arnold's essay "Wordsworth," though echoes of this sentence may be found throughout Arnold's criticism: "It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, – to the question: How to live" (Roe 459).

Ideas for Arnold are *moral* ideas, though he broadens the range of possible meanings attached to his adjective by adding that "a large sense is of course to be given to the term *moral*. Whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live,' comes under it" (Roe 458). Thus Buckler can describe Arnold's conception of "idea" as an "imaginative impression, transformed into action, structure, and language, of how a persona with certain lineaments would *act* (feel, think, talk, devise a personal fiction) under the pressure of a representative human realization" (65). And yet, perhaps we should not conclude too quickly that Hardy's nearly perfect echoing of Arnold's phrase signals the younger poet's unqualified acceptance of Arnold's critical program as an intellectually rigorous alternative to the uninspired practice of embracing "what is customary and expected." Hardy, after all, drops the original phrase's modifiers "powerful" and "beautiful" as if to make room in his aesthetic for more ordinary, more homely applications, for the "poetry of the unpoetic," as Mill appreciatively described Wordsworth's more rustic endeavors. Though we should not infer solely on the basis of a minor omission that Hardy's conception of "idea" fundamentally differs from Arnold's, this deviation from the original invites us to ask whether the younger poet harbors any other reservations about the Arnoldian aesthetic program.

There are, in fact, additional grounds for *not* supposing that Hardy views ideas as Arnold does or even as Hardy himself claims Hardy does. We could assume with Blackmur, for example, that Hardy uses "ideas" in a less distinctly moral or "how to live" sense "to represent a pattern of behavior, judgment, or significance" – let "pattern" here stand for "the matrix of experience" from which "everything else follows" (3). Blackmur's commentary is suggestive not so much because the distinction between moral and non-moral ideas is crucial to an

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understanding of Hardy's poetics – it seems not to be – but because it shrewdly points to an ostensible effort on Hardy's part to promote ways of knowing consistent with the rational contemplation of experience. As Blackmur readily acknowledges, these "patterns of behavior" are little more than "rigid frames to limit experience so far as possible and to substitute for what they could not enclose" (3). In other words, even if Hardy wants us to think of ideas in this non-Arnoldian sense, his new conception might betray a desire to suppress the less straightforwardly rational, more experiential modes of knowing suggested by the seemingly unintended consequences of a New Testament allusion that appears late in the passage. Yet, as we will now see, Hardy not only intends these consequences, but he uses this allusion strategically to draw a potentially disruptive analogy between poetry and revelation, an analogy that undermines his positivist "faith" in reason and its role in the poetic process.

To the extent that Hardy tried to imagine a purely discursive poetics, he may have wondered if reason assisted by scientific knowledge could arrive at a set of propositions that adequately and accurately describe what experience feels like. It is hardly surprising, then, that he seems to equate poetic activity with the casting off of the "customary and expected" generally associated with more philosophic efforts. So commonly, in fact, is this skeptical activity associated with the origins of philosophy in ancient Athens that we easily take in stride his mention of "the Athenian inquirers on Mars Hill." In purely argumentative terms, this allusion makes for an unfavorable comparison between the broad-minded intelligentsia of that ancient city and modern critics who invariably display a parochial unwillingness to hear out "new things" or "even old things in new terms." More specifically, the allusion admiringly recalls *both* the pagan philosophers who invited Paul to preach before the Areopagus, the city's council of elders, asking: "May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringeth certain strange things to our ears" (Acts 17.19–20), *and* Paul's exhortation that the Athenians' "Unknown God" is none other than the "Lord of heaven and earth" himself, "he that made the world and all things therein" (Acts 17.23–24).

"In the British Museum," a lyric that appears in 1914's *Satires of Circumstance*, witnesses the deep impression these early Christian episodes made on Hardy. The first speaker, rational, serene, and almost curatorial in his tones, regards a curious "labouring man" (25) who pauses before one of the museum's Athenian artifacts:

> "What do you see in that time-touched stone,
> When nothing is there
> But ashen blankness, although you give it
> A rigid stare? (1–4)

The second speaker, the worker himself, is convinced that the unmarked and unremarkable stone – actually "the base of a pillar" (9) brought to the museum from the "the far old hill men used to name / Areopagus" (11–12) – once echoed Paul's words "in all their intimate accents" (21). Yet even as he strains to hear traces of that distant echo, he disparages himself as one who knows "but little, / or nothing at all" (25–26), as one who knows "no art" (13).

Is the worker's claim to artlessness meant to suggest his ignorance of Arnoldian ideas about beauty, to his want of that cultivation necessary for offering learned judgments about classical artifacts, or merely to his simplicity, to his credulous nature? Certainly, he does not

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possess the intellectual sophistication, the refined air of discrimination that we find in the first speaker's slightly condescending description of the reverent laborer "parting [his] lips, and treading softly / As mouse or bird" (7–8). Or is the worker's admission meant to attest to his status as an *unskilled* worker who cannot therefore appreciate the resonant qualities of marble carved, inscribed, and polished for the Temple of Mars by ancient craftsmen? In this event, the laborer's status would undermine any claims, however humble, to the privileged understanding we attribute only to skilled workers in stone.

Fortunately, there is no need to choose between these responses to the laborer's impression. Both are embraced by the poem's dialectical movement between purely discursive knowledge, represented by the knowing first speaker, and more experiential modes of knowledge, somewhat less perfectly epitomized by the worker. Even so, the poem eulogizes the latter's way of knowing; in spite of his shortcomings, the speaker seems poetically right in thinking that "that stone once echoed / The voice of Paul" (27–28). Christ's teaching, in other words, is revealed to this common laborer on a visit to the British Museum's Hellenic Wing precisely because to him the effaced and broken pillar is not the mere artifact it represents to the poem's first speaker. To him, the blank stone still retains, even after so many centuries, the faintest impression of a powerful human voice endlessly recounting the miracles of God.

The ironies of "Apology" and "In the British Museum" will not be lost on readers who see that both works' allusions to the evangelist's Athenian visit encourage us to view the poet as an anti-type of Paul. Yet Hardy is Paul's anti-type not merely because the "new doctrine" he spreads meets with "stiffened" resistance and "glacial judgements" rather than interested inquiries, but because he speaks of a *new* "new dispensation" based on reason and science, which, at least as far as divine matters are concerned, amounts to a categorical denial of the *old* "new dispensation" based on revelation alone. Of course, it would not be very surprising, given the charges of pessimism that rankled with him throughout his life, if Hardy wanted readers to consider the positivist-inspired account of the poetic process ostensibly approved in his "Apology" as a thoroughly modern, wholly natural, and even optimistic counterpart to an ancient, supernatural, and even optimistic account of poetic creation as a lesser kind of divination.

On the other hand, it would be very surprising if Hardy did not recognize, indeed, it *is* very surprising that he does not *seem* to recognize that the analogy by which he likens his ideas with Paul's revelation of sacred truths sanctions a kind of knowledge strictly opposed to that produced through the exercise of reason. It is surprising because the poet has seemingly grounded his secular apologetics or defense of his poetic practice on a positivist rejection of the nonrational, even irrational, and experiential process by which the poet achieves, through the difficult and intensive labor of making poems, a rounded vision of his world, or, at least, of the part or parts of it that are his. Why, after all, would Hardy banish experiential ways of knowing from the poetry wing of the palace of art if he were merely going to readmit them through an analogical back door later on? Our growing sense that Hardy is blind to the troublesome consequences of his Pauline analogy seems to emerge paradoxically from the very unreasonableness of using an allusion-based analogy born of revelation to defend a poetics founded on reason. Thus while Hardy ostensibly associates poetic creation with the philosophical or purely discursive production of knowledge, his analogy clearly suggests that poetry represents a radically different way of knowing. Indeed, his use, in the passage from "Apology" quoted at some length above, of quotation marks around *philosophy* and

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*philosophic* may reveal his unwillingness to identify ideas strictly with those developed through rational inquiry.

Since Hardy's analogy betrays – here I use *betray* in the sense of disclosing something unintentionally – the passage's major claim about the "real function of poetry," we may be tempted to conclude, even on the basis of a relatively brief look at his "Apology," that Hardy lacked an adequate understanding of his own poetic method. We may, moreover, come to believe that this limited awareness extends both to the ways his poems produce knowing as well as to the ways of knowing his poems produce. Whether Hardy's poems witness these limitations in his *professed* ways of thinking about them is a matter I take up in the close readings of individual lyrics below. Yet, at this point, I submit that whatever Hardy says about his poetic practice in "Apology" might best be understood as part of a larger strategic effort to rescue his poems from the distorting and damaging charges of pessimism that dogged Hardy perpetually.

Throughout his long career – he was 82 when he wrote "Apology" – Hardy sought to allay the force of accusations like those by Frederick Harrison, who, in a 1920 review of *Collected Poems*, wrote that Hardy's "monotony of gloom, with all its poetry, is not social, not human, is not true" (qtd. in Seymour-Smith 572). By ostensibly aligning his own aesthetic so closely with Arnold's early in his "Apology," Hardy may have hoped to assume a poetic posture more in keeping what Martin Seymour-Smith has called the "obligatory optimism" (330) of the late Victorian age. And, in fact, Hardy's stance on poetry does reveal a certain optimism, though not one that draws on the quasi-religious aesthetic enthusiasm of Arnold's *Preface to Poems, 1853*: "it is not enough that the poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness" (Roe 419).

While Hardy was always deeply suspicious of human projects, especially poetic ones, that promised anything more than fleeting happiness, he never seems to have abandoned completely his hope that a poetry fully aware of its ties to a dying myth of humanized divinity and the consequences for poetry of being fastened to it might bring some measure of relief to those who toil and suffer. Near the end of "Apology," he confesses that he harbors "a forlorn hope" for "an alliance between religion . . . and complete rationality" (531). Poetry, he continues, will play the central role in creating this alliance by virtue of its "interfusing effect" (531). Seen strategically, then, Hardy's Pauline allusion reveals his belief that poetry still partakes of a kind of revelation, however diminished and imperfect and exhausted of its divinity. Clearly, such a belief cannot be squared with the scientific or positivist aesthetic to which Hardy ostensibly subscribes in "Apology." And yet, because decidedly few of Hardy's contemporary readers would have taken the time to trace the implications of his allusion for poetry, even if they were aware of its source, his allusion does not threaten his ostensible affiliations with the rationalist and empiricist projects of the late nineteenth century, affiliations which go a long way, at least in Hardy's mind, toward rescuing his poetry from irrelevance.

Of course it would be impossible on the basis of "Apology" alone to conclude that what Hardy says he is doing is consistent with what he actually does; to determine whether this is the case, we must read "Apology" against the lyrics themselves. Even so, Hardy's singular blindness about his poetic practice has become a cliché in the criticism of the lyrics. Sixty years ago, Blackmur remarked that "Hardy is the great example of *a sensibility violated by ideas*; and perhaps the unique example, since Swift, of a sensibility great enough – *locked enough in life* – to survive the violation" (31, my emphasis). In light of the present discussion,

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it might be more precise, though unfortunately no more accurate, to say that Hardy is the great example of a sensibility violated by ideas *about ideas*. And yet, Blackmur also suggests, while describing Hardy's poetics of learned ignorance, that the poet inadvertently arrived at an experiential way of knowing the world out of the work of writing a poem:

> It is simply that Hardy was unaware of the nature of poetic work, or of how much he did in spite of himself, or of how vastly much more was done for him in those remote, impressionable, germinal areas of sensibility – that work which transpires, almost without invocation and often beyond control, to show as both fresh and permanent in what we choose to call our works of imagination. The final skill of the poet lies in his so conducting the work he does deliberately do, that the other work – the hidden work, the inspiration, the genius – becomes increasingly available not only in new poems but in old poems reread. (13)

Blackmur describes the "hidden work" of the poet in terms more mysterious than any I would use to characterize Hardy's poetic "conduct," since this conduct probably owes less to "inspiration" or "genius" than to the poet's felt, though perhaps not consciously or consistently acknowledged, sense of being "locked enough in life." Thus, I think, Blackmur misses the point when he calls Hardy's an "extraordinary poetry" produced *in spite of* "a lifetime of devoted bad or inadequate practice" (31).

More recent interpreters of the poems are somewhat less direct than Blackmur in ascribing to Hardy an ignorance about his own methods, but their affiliations with the earlier critic are obvious.[9] Against these interpretations that treat Hardy, favorably or unfavorably, as a thinker or critic who saved his best ideas for his poetry, I propose that Hardy's poetic practice is consistent with his irrationalist stance toward religious questions. As I argue in the next section, Hardy produced an "extraordinary poetry" not *in spite of* but *because of* his poetic practice, one that keeps our experience, our felt sense of living in the world, before us at all times, and, even more significantly, one that captures the complex ways in which our language about that experience reflects the endless interplay between worldly and next-worldly discourses.

## 2. *How To Do Things with Words about God*

HARDY'S "IRRATIONALIST POETICS" EMBODIES the dual convictions that God does not share human ideas about God – if God can be said to exist at all – *and* that God's ideas about himself cannot be grasped through the rational theology so prevalent in his day. At the same time, this poetics reflects the felt awareness, dramatized throughout these lyrics, that as long as the ways of writing poetry are mediated by "rational" ways of talking about divinity, poets are doomed to fail in their attempts to provide a "frame of acceptance" for suffering humanity. By applying "rational" to theological discourse, I mean to recall those ways of thinking about God that ostensibly proceed along the lines of reason and take their force from a propositional content grounded in and accepted on revelation's authority. Of course, secular rationalists would insist that a faith based on such propositions is rationally incoherent.

In light of Hardy's sympathies for experiential ways of knowing, I propose we take seriously his self-characterization of his "'view' [of life] as really a series of fugitive impressions which [he] never tried to coordinate" ( "Apology" 527) and extend it to his "view"

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of faith. Accordingly, we might ask if Hardy's poems of religious doubt are "impressions" directed toward an "uncoordinated" and dissociative aesthetic in which poetic language is loosed from the constraints of a theological discourse directed toward theodicy: the rational justification of the ways of God to men. If it should turn out, on the other hand, that Hardy's lyric discourse cannot be dissociated from rational theology – I will presently show why this is probably the case as well as why Hardy might have come to see this as the case – then may we conclude that Hardy's poems not only entertain the possibility of God's dissolution but the dissolution of poetry itself? Does Hardy think we should turn our energies as readers and writers away from literature and toward the search for some new technology whereby we might find a more suitable and effective "frame of acceptance" for symbolically adapting to the vexations and struggles attending our lives?

To begin answering these questions – though given what I have already described as the thoroughly unprogrammatic aesthetic underlying Hardy's poetic practice, our answers must be considered wholly provisional – we might look briefly at the nature of the mediation of poetic by theological discourse in the lyrics. A particularly persuasive and dramatic account of this mediation appears in Kenneth Burke's consideration of what Burke himself calls the "logological" relationship **"**between 'words' (lower case) and 'The Word' (in capitals)" (*Rhetoric* 11) or more precisely, "between words about words and words about The Word" (*Rhetoric* 33). (Throughout my discussion, I adopt the convention, sometimes used by Burke, of referring to the "master term" for divinity as *God* and to the divine entity as God. Burke also refers to the former as "God.") The roots of this analogy rest not surprisingly in the opening verse of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word or *Logos*, though generally understood as divine Reason, also points dramatically to the divine utterance as the agent of creation not only of the universe but of utterance itself. If we acknowledge "this strongly verbal connotation in the word Logos," then may we also acknowledge, with Burke, that "[w]hat we say about *words*, in the empirical realm, will bear a notable likeness to what is said about *God*, in theology" (*Rhetoric* 13–14)? May we also conclude on the basis of this connotation that what many Christians say, and have almost always said, about God might not only "bear a notable likeness to what is said" about *words* in general but also implicate the poetic language used by Hardy and his contemporaries in the inadequacies of a theological discourse barely if at all able to comfort the faithful? In asking you to consider these possibilities, I would not also ask you to make a linguistic leap of faith in accepting them without evidence derived from a glance at the implications of Burke's rather elabo logological scheme for Hardy's agnostic lyrics that makes up the remainder of this section *and* from the logologically-inspired readings of these poems – that is, these poems considered as words about words perceived in their formal relation to words about God – that make up the next.

For Burke, words refer *either* to the material conditions and processes we generally term "the natural" *or* to social and political relations – think of citizen, family, justice, democracy – *or* to words themselves as studied in such disciplines as grammar, rhetoric, poetics, philology, and literary criticism *or* to words about the divine. Since Burke's "dramatistically"-unfolding conception of human history obliges him to stress the diachronic nature of language, he asserts that the last of these linguistic orders arose out of the other three. The next-worldy words we use to talk about God, then, are intelligible primarily because they originate in familiar worldly discourses (*Rhetoric* 14–15). The otherwise ineffable "Kingdom of God," for example, is knowable because it draws on the socio-political *kingdom* as a hierarchical order governed by a monarch.

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So what can Burke's account of how theological discourse emerged out of secular discourses tell us about the nature of poetic language in general and Hardy's poetic language in particular? While Burke does not address the interrelatedness of the language of poems and theological discourses at length in either *The Rhetoric of Religion* or "Theology and Logology," in the latter summary effort he does briefly reflect upon the logological activity in the poetry of Hopkins, Hardy's contemporary. He begins by citing some remarks by J. Hillis Miller on Hopkins's successful interweaving of poetry and theological reflection. For Hopkins, "poetry may explore or express the solitary adventures of the self in its wrestle with God or . . . poetry may explore the intricate relationships among words" (Miller 249). Moreover, since nature for Hopkins is "words, expression, news of God," and since God has inscribed himself in nature, the "structure of nature in its relation to God is like the structure of language in relation to the *Logos*, the divine word" (Miller 249). Hardy, of course, would almost certainly have responded to Hopkins's natural supernaturalistic account of the physical world by asserting that humanity has merely inscribed the master term *God* and words about *God* in Nature.

Burke, then, provocatively extends Miller's insights by adding that the poet "let the word '*Logos*' think for him by refusing to distinguish between its *secular* meaning as a word for 'word' and its meaning in *Christian theology*, where the New Testament word for Christ was the 'Word"' ("Theology and Logology" 160). "Hopkins's refusal," Burke writes, "to 'desynonymize' the two usages [of '*Logos*'] keeps the study of the 'linguistic moment' constantly infused with the theological implications of Hopkins's poetics" ("Theology and Logology"160). This conception strengthens our sense of the formal relation between words about words and words about *God* since it discloses the structural analogy that underlies and connects verbal and theological discourse, namely that "the *thought* that leads to utterance [relates] to the *uttered word* that expresses the thought [in the same way that] the first and second persons of the Trinity [relate to each other]" (*Rhetoric* 13).

Though I had not invoked Burke's logological scheme before now, I have been indirectly suggesting all along that Hardy, like Hopkins, refuses to dissociate the secular meaning of *Logos* from its theological meaning. Unlike Hopkins, however, for whom *Logos* refers not just to words about *God* but to the all-creating Word itself, Hardy assumes that while *Logos* bears its traditional theological sense, it does not refer, even indirectly, to God himself. Is *God* then an empty signifier to Hardy? For now, it must suffice to say that words like *Logos* and *God* "refuse comment" on God's ontological status. Insofar as the language of theology provides us with a powerful tool for analyzing secular linguistic discourse, to speak of theological discourse as if God actually existed is to forego a remarkable opportunity for learning what "statements about 'God"' can tell us about the nature of language in general and specifically about poetic language.[10]

Thus, while the objects of poetic reflection, for both Hopkins and Hardy, have the power to generate the words that describe them "just as the first person of the Trinity [has the power] to 'generate' the second" (*Rhetoric* 29), for Hardy, this power derives merely from the poetic imagination's competence at calling upon words to embody its illusions. In this regard we might recollect Theseus' discovery of fancy's "tricks" in the last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name. (5.1.14–17)

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To extend the Athenian Duke's point in ways that Hardy would probably approve, poetic language can be said draw on the all-creating power of the Word only insofar as words about words are interfused with words about *God* with respect to both form and meaning. Moreover, since words about *God* can tell us nothing about the existence of God, the "ontological emptiness" of words about *God* exhausts whatever verbal power poetry may have once had to inspire greater faith in the faithful, to restore faith in the faithless, or to console both in their suffering.

The doubt that characterizes Hardy's religious lyrics thus seems to follow less from ideas about God than from a sophisticated sense that a poetic language emptied of its symbolic power – by virtue of its dependence on a theological discourse without a transcendental referent – must inevitably fail the poet in his efforts to comfort the living. While it remains for me to show that Hardy conceived of the relation between poetry and religion in his lyrics in the way that Burke conceives of it in his logological analysis of human discourses, it can be demonstrated, with yet another passage from "Apology," that Hardy shares Burke's sense of the interrelatedness of poetic and theological discourse. "Poetry," so Hardy begins his list of vital and "visible" signs, "pure literature in general, religion – I include religion, in its essential and undogmatic sense, because poetry and religion touch each other, or rather modulate into each other; are, indeed, often but different names for the same thing – these I say, the visible signs of mental and emotional life, must like all other things keep moving, becoming" (530–31). The confident tone here, conveyed paradoxically by Hardy's oddly self-assured qualifications and refinements as well as by the combined force of "indeed" and "must," nearly defeats the reader's impulse to ask what the poet means by "religion in its essential and undogmatic sense" or to consider too precisely what those conditions might be under which poetry and religion are "but different names for the same thing." And yet, however vague with regard to particulars, Hardy's sense of the modulation that occurs between poetic and theological discourse anticipates the dialectic between words and the Word described by Burke.

It was this recognition that enabled me to propose in the opening paragraphs that when Hardy's speakers, including God, make explicit claims about divinity, they also harbor implicit claims about poetic language. Yet I also suggested a corollary, namely that when Hardy's speakers, including God, make claims about the disappearance of God – in these lyrics, God is prey to his own arguments – they likewise make claims about the disappearance of poetic language. While both proposition and corollary await additional proof in the close readings of the poems in question, I have tried to show, on the basis of Hardy's only extended meditation on lyric practice, how the experiential ways of understanding human suffering offered by these poems are finally incompatible with a theological discourse that purports to explain this suffering through an essentially rational theodicy. And since the success or failure of poetry can be traced, at least in part, to the success or failure of God's own arguments, the divine logic will be the focus of the next section.

### *3. Hardy's Argumentative God*

SO INCLINED ARE WE TO REGARD the theology of Athanasian monotheism, whether we grant it truth-status or not, as a totalizing religious perspective or system that we rarely consider the possibility that the divinity at the center of this perspective might nourish a point of view not wholly congruent with it. Yet it is this possibility that haunts each poem in which Hardy

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ostensibly treats the nature of God. Whether we are pondering God's existence or his attributes or his role in human affairs, our thinking about divinity generally reflects an unwillingness to admit any distinction between the perspective *of* God and the orthodox Christian perspective *on* God, the conceptual frame that comprehends not only what God knows or sees but also how he acts and manifests himself to the world. This unwillingness may, in turn, be traced to a tendency to conceive of Christian theology as a dialectical accretion of human efforts, rational, mystical, and imaginative, to articulate the divine point of view.

The epistemological pitfalls attending this conception of theology, however, outweigh its advantages. On the one hand, it readily enables us to identify the divinely omniscient point of view with the all-encompassing perspective aimed at by orthodox theological discourse. This perspective optimistically holds that human beings, through a centuries-long process of dialectical refinement that may comprehend revelation as well as reason, may ultimately arrive at a near-total vision of the divine vision. On the other hand, any visionary scheme modeled by theological speculation necessarily depends upon the vagaries of human arguments about God. Even if we admit revelation as a way of knowing side by side with reason, at some point we must acknowledge that there are limits to human knowledge. An orthodox Christian might even go so far as to maintain that *all* efforts at a dialectical understanding of divinity must fail by virtue of the deterioration of reason that began with the Fall and that has continued to burden us as one of the wages of original sin. From this perspective, equating the divine perspective with the speculative achievement of a totalizing Christian theological system suggests a particularly rationalist brand of spiritual arrogance or at least a serious underestimation of the devastating consequences for reason brought about by the Fall. Presumably the more discriminating among the faithful would want to maintain a firm distinction between what God sees and what the theologian thinks God sees.

Yet even if we reject the orthodox position as incompatible with some of the more skeptical Victorian stances toward revelation and questions of faith, the distinction between the divine perspective and the sum of all human efforts to understand it *is* wholly compatible with the positivist insistence on the necessary separation of the spiritual and the temporal. Accordingly, I will presently argue that while Hardy's poems of religious doubt tend to honor this positivist distinction, quite significantly they tend not to dissociate the *languages* of the spiritual and the temporal. My use of the phrase "argumentative God" in the heading of this section aims at restoring an awareness of this distinction among believers and non-believers alike, even as it suggests that competing conceptions of God that question his ways are continually at work in Hardy's lyrics.

The first conception looks back to Walter Bagehot's observation – one that Hardy uses as epigraph to one of his lyrics of religious doubt – that "Milton . . . made God argue" (853). In other words, the God of *Paradise Lost* contributes mightily to the poem's theodicy, powerfully justifying his own ways to men. Hardy made God argue too, though Hardy's God has a perspective on his own being and his role in human misfortunes radically different from that held by Milton's Heavenly Father. Since it presupposes that God reasons with himself and others, this first conception may be said to anticipate my argument that insofar as Hardy's God argues at all, he argues both for the inadequacy of theological attempts at describing his nature and for the inadequacy of poetic efforts to explain human suffering in theological terms.

The second conception suggested by the epithet "argumentative" confers upon God a primarily rhetorical status. God, in this view, is an argument that paradoxically justifies and repudiates itself at the same time. Framed, among many other reasons, as a way of explaining

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human suffering and misfortune, the sequential propositions to which Hardy collectively refers to as *God* suggest that the premise from which they derive – God's all-knowing and all-powerful management of human affairs – is false. And yet, if Hardy's theodical lyrics, as I will call these poems of ostensible justification, amount to a poetic denial of God's omniscience and omnipotence and perhaps even of his existence, they also amount to a redefinition of these attributes as *formal* linguistic principles.

To the extent that these principles are grounded in an orthodox theological discourse which itself, as Burke contends, is reciprocally grounded in verbal or symbolic discourse, they mediate all poetic efforts to describe our experience of the world. To the extent, however, that these same principles also arise out of an orthodox theological discourse that poets like Hardy found increasingly inadequate for explaining human suffering, they also presuppose the inadequacy of poetic and symbolic efforts to compensate for their pain those who feel pain. Both inadequacies, as I have suggested, follow directly from an apparent lack of continuity, dramatized in Hardy's lyrics, between perspectives on the divine and the divine perspective itself.

"A Drizzling Easter Morning" (623) reveals how language about divinity can act as language about poetic language itself. It is here that we can begin to trace more clearly Hardy's radical reduction of God to a self-defeating argument that in its failure indicts the poetic act as well. While God does not argue in this poem – actually God says nothing at all – the poem nevertheless displays Hardy's skill at interweaving verbal and theological discourse as it contrasts the painful contingencies of living with the theological "certainties" of Christianity. The lyric's first line, which begins with an accusation disguised as a question and ends with an ellipsis of bitter resignation, introduces a speaker responding with pained apprehension to the spectacle of seemingly endless human toil, a visible consequence of the Fall. More precisely, the speaker's opening question is an ironic recasting of the traditional Easter *Monday* greeting: "Christ is risen," to which the appropriate response is "He is risen indeed" rather than the dreary reply with which the poem begins. Christ's promise of redemption from sin and death, of which Easter Sunday is meant to serve as temporal reminder, strikes the speaker as unsatisfactory insofar as it falls short of redeeming us from a life of toil and pain:

> And he is risen? Well, be it so . . .
> And still the pensive lands complain,
> And dead men wait as long ago,
> As if, much doubting, they would know
> What they are ransomed from, before
> They pass again their sheltering door.
>
> I stand amid them in the rain,
> While blusters vex the yew and vane;
> And on the road the weary wain,
> Plods forward, laden heavily;
> And toilers with their aches are fain
> For endless rest – though risen is he.

The startling opening line makes up the first third of a construction in which each verse begins with "And." This is only the first instance in the poem of how skillfully Hardy can

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adjust the syntax to convey tone. Perhaps the most significant construction of this kind occurs in the poem's final phrase where Hardy's telling inversion of the greeting "He is risen" carries within it all the disappointment, all the bitterness, and all the barely masked anger of one surrounded by pain and death. Yet what makes this first instance so remarkable is that it also evinces a contrast between human time and eternity once again through syntax alone. Human narratives, the anaphoric repetition of "And" suggests, unfold in time. This Easter morning narrative, however, presents only the barest summary: It is raining *and* Christ is risen or is at least said to have risen *and* the nations of the earth still lament *and* the dead still wait. How easily could "but" have been substituted for the poem's second "and" without changing the literal sense of the lines. Lost, however, would have been our palpable sense of a narrative unfolding in time, supplanting, if only for a moment, the theologically "timeless" narrative of the Resurrection.

And yet, the remainder of the poem mirrors the rhetorical action of contradiction suggested by "but." Christ may be risen, *but* the living labor ceaselessly and wait and ruminate darkly upon his promise of redemption. Unlike the "much doubting" dead, the living seem not to dispute that Christ will make good on his promise to ransom them from sin and the grave. They nevertheless protest, through the speaker's agency, against the earthly conditions under which the promise will be kept: a seemingly pointless existence filled with pain and work. The poem's earthy reminders of the grave's "sheltering door" and death's "endless rest," moreover, seem to hold out as much comfort for the living as Christ's "saving" narrative does. After all, the grave offers permanent relief from the Sisyphusian toil they must endure even on Sunday. The merest glimpse of the unending drudgery to which they are subjected is provided by a "weary wain" (8), the metonymic extension of the agricultural laborer's exhausted frame that "plods forward, laden heavily" (9). While the temptation is great to see in this image a Bunyan-like parallel in which the Christian carries the burden of sin upon his back, the severity of the local weather conditions, the vexing wind and rain that trouble the wood and spin the vane, insists that this unpoetic narrative does not unfold in the virtually weatherless precincts of allegory. The last two lines offer little hope of reaching the Celestial City by nightfall or any time soon: "And toilers with their aches are fain / For endless rest – though risen is he" (11–12).

Despite the poem's bleak prospects for an end to human toil – this dashed hope of course need not argue against other, less worldly forms of redemption by Christ – the poem is not without its consolations. The sentiment contained in Marvell's coy observation that "the grave's a fine and private place" finds its less sardonic equivalent here. According to the speaker, the dead are not terribly inclined to pass through the grave's "sheltering door" again and their reluctance may suggest a condition of relative ease. At other times, the speaker almost seems to invoke a reassuring sense of collective Christian identity, a comforting reminder to believers that they are all "in it" together. He "stand[s] amid" his deceased fellows in Christ, though they may be a little "out" with Christ as well given their misgivings about his promise. He takes his place among the vast numbers awaiting "endless rest" in heaven or *in* earth and his depiction of unremitting toil points to our common condition.

And yet, any suggestion that his account points beyond a secular community that labors toward a spiritual community in God is tempered by the poem's restrictive design: the only community rendered literally is that of the dead of the first stanza. Besides the speaker – the abstract "lands" and "toilers" do not count – the one living presence in the poem moves, only metonymically of course, down the road alone with his wain at the heart of the second

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stanza. Since the speaker remains among the dead, may we say that the poem encourages us to associate his utterance more with the symbolic language of the departed who wait, though perhaps not in vain, to learn what awaits them than with the nonverbal and nonsymbolic language of the living, a language whose "terms" include literal blood, sweat, toil, and most of all perhaps, tears?

Are the speaker's terms merely terms of negation? Are his words dead words? The poem certainly appears to deny human labor a meaningful place in the theological scheme of original sin and redemption. So palpable is its bitter presentation of seemingly endless earthly toil that the reader cannot help but ask whether a truly merciful God would have made this body-breaking and mind-numbing work a necessary consequence of the Fall. To the degree that Christ's sacrifice ransoms no one from hard labor, "A Drizzling Easter Morning" repudiates the redemption narrative as a suitable "frame of acceptance" for suffering humanity. Just as significantly, the poem may dramatize Hardy's refusal of the conventional "literary" stance that poetic discourse grants the pain and discomforts associated with existence a meaning beyond the purely physical.

A particularly charming restatement of this stance appears in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Early in the Second Act, the banished Duke heartens the members of his exiled court by drawing their attention to the mildness of the season with elegant lines of stoic resignation even as his loyal followers poetically cleanses them of original sin:

> Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
> The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
> And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
> Which when it bites and blows upon my body
> Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say,
> "This is no flattery: these are counsellors
> That feelingly persuade me what I am."
> (2.1.5–11)

Here "the penalty of Adam" is reduced to something no more alarming than the seasonal changes that commenced in Eden after the Fall. And even when the Duke imagines the harsh winter ahead, he allays its severity by personifying the cold winds as grave mentors tendering sage instruction; here nature becomes nurture.

Not so sweet, however, are the uses of adversity in Hardy's lyric where poetic language augments rather than frames or blunts the reader's perception of physical affliction and hardship. Thus Jean Brooks, though she conflates too readily perhaps the poem's speaker with the poet, is at least half-correct when she remarks that the speaker "both observes and suffers the assaults of a physical world that has lost hope of Christian salvation, while his mind reaches back to the lost belief that would give meaning to suffering" (41). Brooks is right to stress the poem-world's physical character since, in spite of the speaker's theological frame of mind, the experiences of the living and of the dead are cast exclusively in material terms. The wind and the rain haunt the speaker's every word just as the onset of winter haunts the Duke's speech in *As You Like It*.

What does not follow from the speaker's words, however, is the supposition that his world has lost its faith in the Christian doctrine of salvation. It is just this sort of unwarranted inference that led Hardy's critics to charge him with "pessimism." Even though the speaker

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perceives "feelingly," as the Duke might say, that the pain of living must overwhelm the redemption narrative's capacity to comfort the suffering, we cannot conclude on the basis of this perception that the speaker rejects Christian doctrine. Full of doubt and seemingly unable, as the speaker is, to imagine a life, even an afterlife, free of pain and toil, the dead may indeed be waiting for one really good reason to leave their clayey lodgings when called on the earth's last day. Yet the poem never says that the dead wait *in vain* even though the proliferation of words that rhyme with it – complain, rain, vane, wain, fain – may trick us in believing that the phrase *in vain* does appear.

This gentle ruse answers Hardy's ends flawlessly since readers newly alert to the poet's ingenious sleight-of-ear and mildly surprised at their own participation in the creation of this auditory illusion – this phrasal phasm is only experienced by those who unwittingly insert *in vain* or its equivalent into the poem – are now in a position to see why it does not follow merely from the speaker's bewilderment at the sight of all this earthly pain that Christ's promise with regard to sin and death is empty. Though the alternative may be consistent with other views espoused by other speakers in other poems by Hardy, at no point in "A Drizzling Easter Morning" does this speaker seriously entertain it. In fact, his line of argument runs in another direction altogether; he says in effect: "Christ is risen, well and good, and he redeems us from sin and death by his sacrifice, even better, but our lives here on earth are not a whit less painful for his having gone before us in suffering." Theology, in effect, misses the point: there just isn't that much comfort, the speaker seems to say, to be had from learning that the pains we suffer here on earth will not last beyond death if we have made our reckonings well.

If a theology built upon God's suffering fails in the speaker's view to provide a suitable "frame of acceptance" for *our* suffering, the poetry that testifies to this failure fares no better. Mediated by the very theological discourse to which it helped give rise, poetic discourse partakes "logologically," as Burke would say, of the inadequacy of its mediating discourse. The poet, once again, must fall short in his efforts to comfort the living because the poetic language that he uses is thoroughly "interfused" with a theological discourse deprived of its transcendental referent. And yet, as we have seen, this deprivation has nothing to do with *ideas* about God. Though Hardy's poems powerfully dramatize the possibility of God's disappearance, this possibility interests him mainly as a metaphor for the growing inadequacy of both theological and poetic discourse in the face of positivist skepticism.

Rather, this impoverishment arises out of "a linguistic moment," to use Miller's phrase, shared by the theodical lyrics, a verbal situation that perfectly captures the quality of language's struggle against its own limits. While these poems tend not to dissociate words about words from words about *God* – recall in this regard how Hardy and Hopkins refuse to sever the secular meaning of *Logos* from its theological meaning – they do tend to emphasize the incapacity of words about *God* to say anything about God. Thus these lyrics, read as words about *God*, do not point to God but merely back to the word *God*. Given Hardy's sense of the "ontological emptiness" of theological discourse, reference, as a philosopher of language might say, collapses into meaning. Once again, this "emptiness" implies nothing about God's existence since it merely alludes to theological language's incapacity to say anything of "ontological" significance about God. The poem renders judgment *only* on the relative capacities of theological and poetic discourse to provide a "frame of acceptance" for human suffering; it makes no claims about the substantive "fullness" or "hollowness" of Christ's promise to humankind even if it comments indirectly on the promise's content.

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Thus "A Drizzling Easter Morning," a poem which resonates so powerfully with the theological discourse from which it derives much of its language, partakes fully of the same "ontological emptiness" that haunts that discourse. In one of his more characteristic moods, Burke maintains that "poetry is produced for purposes of comfort, as part of the consolation philosophiae. It is undertaken as equipment for living, as a ritualistic way of arming us to confront perplexities and risks. It would protect us" (*Philosophy* 61). In one of *his* more characteristic moods, Hardy anticipates another of Burke's formulations by powerfully demonstrating how a poetic language mediated by theological discourse must necessarily fail to "make sense" of, to provide a "frame of acceptance" for earthly pain and toil.

Mindful of how lyrics like "A Drizzling Easter Morning" keep the inadequacies of poetic language ever before us, we turn to a poem in which God's self-justifying argument is initially undermined by an almost diffident admission of negligence. At the start of "God-Forgotten" (112–13) – the hyphenated adjective denotes *an* ignoring God but may suggest ignoring God as well – a human speaker, "sent thither by the sons of Earth, to win / Some answer to their cry" (3–4), stands before "the Lord Most High" (2). God, however, will not own up to the Creation at first; he professes to have forgotten making the Earth and then, after much hemming and hawing, confesses to remembering though only "dimly," vaguely, "some tiny sphere I built long back . . . so named" (13, 15), one with no special place "mid millions of such shapes of mine" (14). His initial conjecture that the Earth's inhabitants have long since perished, perhaps, he surmises aloud, "of doing as it durst" (19) reveals *either* a genuine lack of knowledge, in which case the omniscience traditionally ascribed to God is not one of this God's attributes, *or* an unwillingness to accept the pervasive role in human affairs that Christian theology has always assigned him. What humankind "durst" the poem does not say – "durst" here takes the sense of not dreading or shunning to do something out of fear – though, as the Creator explains, the effect of all this daring was "severance, self-entailed" (26) of our only means of appeal: "Of [humanity's] own act the threads were snapt whereby / Its plaints had reached mine ear" (23–24).

In keeping with my earlier speculations about Hardy's imaginative use of a technological metaphor – that of the magic lantern – in "A Plaint to Man," I now venture that the telephone's growing availability at the turn of the twentieth century suggested the mode of auditory communication – "threads" or lines – imagined in "God-Forgotten." In diction that disquietingly recalls an AT&T advertising slogan of the 1980s, God most nearly resembles an elderly parent longing to send his "too-busy-to-call" adult children on a guilt-trip: "All other orbs have kept in touch. / Their voicings reach me speedily" (28–29). He firmly places blame for the broken contact on Earth's human inhabitants with their propensity for wickedness: "Thy people took upon them overmuch / In sundering them from me!" (31–32). These lines, taken by themselves, make for compelling theodicy: humanity's decision to reject its Maker and follow its own daring was a monumental act of spiritual arrogance. What right has it, now that its prospects seem blasted for good, to look for succor from God?

We should not expect to find the pattern of this argument in the New Testament with its message of mercy and forgiveness – recall the Prodigal Son – nor even in the most punitive Old Testament take on humankind's abominations unto God. Jehovah may be hard, but he is generally extraordinarily attentive. Yet in "God-Forgotten," long before the deity blames humankind for the break, he admits that it was *his* indifference toward Earth that frustrated the divine plan: the planet and its inhabitants "lost my interest from the first, / My aims therefor

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succeeding ill" (17–18). We may waver for a moment before concluding that "ill" is an adverb rather than a noun, though once we take "therefor" as "for that reason," the sense becomes "My plans for Earth failed because my attention waned." In other words, while humanity's disregard for God's will may have led to the final break, this indifference finds its original in God's apathy, one that dates almost from the moment of the Creation, toward human affairs. (Construing "ill" as a noun does in fact raise the interesting interpretive possibility that the clause commemorates God's supplanting of Chaos or perhaps even some darker, more fatal design, even though this reading ignores the logical force of the clause that precedes it.)

Thus while God's closing statement suggests that our sinful obduracy alone led to the break: "Thou shouldst have learnt that *Not to Mend* / For Me could mean but *Not to Know*" (41–42), his premature exit from the earthly scene makes this explanation sound like so much special pleading aimed at reversing his earlier self-indictment. After all, would a just God – the same questions that haunt readers of *Paradise Lost* haunt readers of this poem – insist that humankind learn on its own that knowing good "means" forbearing evil? It is remarkable that so few critics have noticed the poem's self-contradicting theodicy, one laid out in one part of the poem only to be challenged in another. James Southworth is not alone in accepting God's explanation: "Man was to blame, however; not He, . . . even though God should not let man continue to suffer" (107). Katherine Kearney Maynard too sides with God: "If there is a cause for human suffering, it lies with humanity for cutting itself off from God in the mistaken thought that it could live without divine assistance" (147–48).

Yet judgments like these ignore Hardy's care to establish rival chronologies of the communicative break between God and humankind. Once again, God says early in the poem that he lost interest "from the first," that is, only moments after the Creation was complete. The poem implies, moreover, that it was only after Earth's cries had gone unanswered by him for some time, that "sudden silence on [our] side ensued" (27). God's revision of providential history as a narrative in which humankind abandons the deity does not efface the earlier divine account of the break. As theodicy, then, "God-Forgotten" is unsatisfying since it not only turns on conflicting chronologies but also on a severely limiting conception of God as an indifferent Creator whose untrammeled productivity virtually dooms us, by virtue of his neglect, to disobedience.

As we have come to expect by now, the poem's emphasis on failed communication with the divine also comprehends the failure of poetic communication as well. This parallel between theological and secular failures at communication, moreover, suggests another refusal not very different in character from Hardy's earlier refusal to "desynonymize" theological and secular meanings of *Logos*. Yet, once again, Hardy's reluctance to distinguish between these failures must not be taken as a sign of faith. For Hardy's theodical lyrics invariably insist that the linguistic contact necessary for meaningful interchange between the human and the divine, or, for that matter, between the human and the human is always already broken. As linguistic fate would have it, the phrase "always already" acts as shorthand that captures precisely our experience of the poem's ambiguous chronology. After all, as we read "God-Forgotten," do we not come to recognize that in the poem divinity and humanity are *always* in the process of mutually abandoning one another even as the rival recognition gradually emerges that either God or humankind has *already* abandoned the other?

Formally speaking, this ambiguity results from the superimposition, occasioned by the interfusing of theological and poetic discourse, of the timeless upon the temporal. Within the timeless order of *Logos*, Burke explains, "each [polar opposite] *implies* the other, their

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relationship doesn't involve a temporal step *from* one *to* the other" ("Theology and Logology" 169). Thus "communion," which may stand for both "spiritual fellowship with God" and "verbal fellowship with man" or "communication," implies its opposite "disunion," which may stand for both "spiritual apostasy" and "verbal estrangement." These "negative" implications may be suppressed somewhat whenever a text's narrative function so powerfully establishes the temporal relationship between polar terms – imagine a particularly dramatic account of a believer's transformation into nonbeliever – that only one term may emerge at a time.

I would argue, however, that this temporalizing effect is itself suppressed wherever the power and the immediacy of poetic utterance overwhelm the poem's narrative function. Insofar as the polarizing lyric function by which the "communication" with the divine initiated by the speaker immediately suggests its opposite – the subject of this communication, after all, is the end of communication – is powerfully at work in "God-Forgotten," the temporalizing narrative function is correspondingly weakened. In this regard, we might recall the chronological ambiguity attending the break itself. In fact, Hardy's awareness that a temporally-bound poetic discourse is mediated throughout the poem by a "timeless" discourse of theology sharpens our dramatic sense of this break even as it blurs, for the reasons just stated, our narrative sense of how and why this break occurred. Thus if "God-Forgotten" offers little or no hope for genuine communion with God, it is not Hardy's "pessimistic" ideas that doom it as an effort at consolation, but rather his sophisticated comprehension of the poem's discursive and linguistic genealogy.

No comparable sophistication is discernible in the response of an uncomprehending God when the mortal speaker of "New Year's Eve" (260–61) asks him on behalf of all humankind: "Why shaped you us, 'who in / This tabernacle groan' [?]" (9–10). The God who duly but dully answers this question as if by rote is neither the God of Job angrily questioning his servant from out of the whirlwind, nor is he Milton's God of infinite knowledge revealing his "eternal purpose" with aplomb in *Paradise Lost*'s Book III. Rather, he appears almost comically as a divine party guest on New Year's Eve 1906, as a new God for a godless new century, one who can drearily size up his own accomplishments for the calendar year fast drawing to a close even as he paradoxically attempts to justify himself by arguing that he cannot justify himself:

> "My labours – logicless –
> You may explain; not I:
> Sense-sealed I have wrought, without a guess
> That I evolved a Consciousness
> To ask for reasons why.
> (13–17)

The senses of "sense-sealed," these lines' most potent adjective, proliferate suggestively. God is sealed *from* sense; he is at once wholly impervious to human attempts to understand him and wholly incapable of understanding himself. His "shortness of view" (20) hints at another connotation of "sense-sealed"; he is sealed *within* sense, strangely unable to move beyond the immediate objects of perception toward a divine consciousness of his role in the cosmic drama that has been unfolding through his mindless agency.

The deity's logic, then, reveals the "logicless[ness]" of his design and, consequently, the mortal questioner can do nothing more than resign himself to the impossibility of a fruitful

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dialogue about divine motives between humanity and a God who lacks a critical consciousness for self-understanding. Of course, we might ask how a noncognizant God could be cognizant of his own noncognizance, though it is hard to imagine that Hardy himself was not deeply and darkly aware of this paradox as well. And yet, "New Year's Eve" is not finally pessimistic, though it is certainly skeptical, about the uses of poetry. Even a witless God, it seems to say, has wit enough to refuse to discount the possible efficacy of human fictions about him; though this same God is quick to dismiss fictions generated through the application of rationality to the irrational:

> "Strange that ephemeral creatures who
> By my own ordering are,
> Should see the shortness of my view,
> Use ethic tests I never knew
> Or made provision for!"
> (21–25)

Despite God's apparent lack of awareness about his own creation, he can nevertheless relish the dark ironies that attend rational efforts by humanity, i.e., "ethic tests," to shape opinions about a divinity whose very irrationality mocks all such efforts. To the extent that the Word mediates words, the senselessness of the divine utterance suggests a lesser, slightly different, but nonetheless palpable senselessness inherent in all poetic language, a powerful resistance to making "sense," if we mean by sense a primarily rational rather than experiential accounting of ourselves and our world.

"New Year's Eve" concludes with a twist on a too-well-known adage about the human incapacity for understanding the mysterious nature of the divine. If God works in "unweeting" or unwitting ways (27), Hardy's Chaucerian diction points less to that old saw than to the reader's growing sense of God's own incapacity for understanding. Yet in "A Plaint of Man," the poem which launched this entire discussion, the view of God as unknowing "dissolves" into a view of God as an all-comprehending but ontologically-challenged being. By refusing to accept his own existence as a fact contingent on no other, the Creator symbolically reverses roles with the Created: "Wherefore, O Man, did there come to you / The unhappy need of creating me – / A form like your own – for praying to?" (4–6). God himself is nothing more than humanity's supreme fiction: "My virtue, power, utility, / Within my maker must all abide, / Since none in myself can ever be" (7–9).

In "A Plaint to Man," then, as in the other poems we have considered, God conceives of himself as an argument, one devised as a symbolic "frame of acceptance" for suffering but ultimately defeated by the gross facts of a painful and pain-filled life amid "the gloomy aisles / of this wailful world" (16–17). In parting, God merely urges us to begin thinking of ourselves once and for all, as Stevens once put it, as "a race completely physical in a physical world" ("Esthétique du Mal," section xv). Only then might we come to understand our suffering as the inevitable consequence of our unalterable earthly condition and start to seek consolation among our fellows, only then might we come to embrace:

> The fact of life with dependence placed
> On the human heart's resource alone,
> In brotherhood bounded close and graced

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> With loving-kindness fully blown,
> And visioned help unsought, unknown.
> (27–32)

Accustomed as we are to the metaphysical trappings and intricate logic of theological arguments, the very simplicity of this advice and the relative artlessness with which it is offered actually make it harder for us to assimilate. Our "grace," whatever grace we might enjoy while we live, is only to be had of others like ourselves and only to be sought in those whom we can see and know with more ordinary vision. Although these lines display exquisite balance – their poise created for the most part by some choice and modest syntactical inversions – the divine counsel rendered by them hints at a radically different relation between theological and poetic language than that ordinarily assumed in traditional theodicy. These lines achieve genuine expressive and affective power because they so calmly reject the authority of what has become for Hardy an intellectually discredited and emotionally inert theological discourse. They even seem to entertain the remotest possibility of a poetic practice severed from the discourse of revealed religion and realigned linguistically with an wholly experiential account of what used to be called "natural religion," though given Hardy's sense of our unwillingness to relinquish conventional theology and its language the prospect must remain a weak one.

Hardy's reduction of God into an argument, a wholly rhetorical version of divine dissolution, might thus be viewed as the first step in an effort to restore a poetry bereft of its power by virtue of its affiliation with an imaginatively exhausted theological discourse. If, on the other hand, the poet's efforts in this vein should fail, if poetry can no longer comfort men and women, if it ceases to be a useful fiction for coming to terms with the pain of living, it must vanish as God vanishes. Its extinction merely waits upon the emergence of some new form, of some new imaginative device for structuring everyday experience in ways that compensate ordinary human beings for their suffering. Thus Hardy's "dissolving views" of God, those lyrics scattered throughout the massive *Collected Poems*, that so freely entertain the possibility of his imminent disappearance likewise offer the prospect of the disappearance of literature.

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## NOTES

I wish to express my gratitude to two colleagues at St. Thomas Aquinas College for their indispensable assistance and moral support during the writing of this paper. Dr. Charles O'Neill first encouraged me to develop certain implications of a talk I delivered at the Northeast Regional Christianity & Literature Conference in November 1999 and brought his considerable skills as a critic to his reading of the penultimate draft. Dr. David Keppler saved my argument from all manner of logical and verbal infelicities. To them, my deepest thanks. I would also like to acknowledge a recent study by Wilson about the decline of faith in the nineteenth century. The book is aptly titled *God's Funeral*, after one of the poems I discuss in this paper. In his brief reading of the lyric, Wilson simply identifies the speaker with Hardy himself. I will argue that Hardy's lyric method works against such identification with important consequences for the question of God's existence.

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1. The original reads "Criticism must be transcendental, that is, must consider literature ephemeral & easily entertain the supposition of its entire disappearance" (qtd. in Poirier, *Renewal* 27).
2. The phrase "unrelieved pessimism" appears in "The Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy" (Blackmur 2). It may derive from Lytton Strachey's 1914 review of Hardy's *Satires and Circumstances, Lyrics and Reveries*: "The desolation is complete. And the gloom is not even relieved by a little elegance of diction" (225).
3. For a discussion of the conventions and terminology of the magic-lantern shows of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Borton and Robinson.
4. For a discussion of how Hardy uses this line as well as the phrase, also from "The Revolt of Islam," that appears as my epigraph, see Miller. Especially illuminating is Miller's observation that Hardy read Shelley as "a Romantic skeptic who saw man as the dupe of self-generated signs, not as the victim of gods either bright or dark" (116).
5. Hardy seems to have read both Darwin and Comte no later than 1870, though as regards the latter's work he seems to have considered himself too much of an irrationalist to embrace the positivist stance. For a discussion of Hardy's encounter with positivism, see Buckler 243–44, Collins 22–23, and Seymour-Smith 318–20.
6. I adopt Burke's conception of a "more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it" (*Attitudes* 5).
7. For Burke's discussion of how fictions are created by "extensions of language by analogy," see "Theology and Logology" 158.
8. For what remains, I think, the most astute discussion of work and experiential ways of knowing, see Poirier, *Robert Frost* 277–313.
9. While writing about those lyrics in which non-human speakers figure significantly, for example, Brooks takes a view of Hardy's poetic practice very similar to that epitomized in Blackmur's phrase "*a sensibility violated by ideas*": "When Hardy rejects the poetic value of the human individual's 'dazed and dramatic ignorance' for discursive argument with and through vague non-human mouthpieces, the poetic impact is often blunted by an overweight of philosophic content that disperses the instigating passion" (34). Brooks, whose estimate of Hardy's lyric achievement is generally quite high, is thinking specifically of poems like "A Plaint to Man" in which God, in her eyes, is nothing more than an "insensitive mindless mouthpiece . . . not qualified to justify the cosmic scheme, to explain or withhold explanation . . . or to give moral advice on man's function in the cosmos" (38).

   And have we really moved very far beyond Blackmur's low estimation of Hardy's capacity for self-knowledge with regard to method when writers as various in their critical preoccupations as Hynes ["in the 'Apology'. . . he spoke as a thinker in defense of his ideas and not as a poet" (35)], Davie [Hardy is notably deficient in "the quality of his attention to experience and the poetic rendering of it" (40)], and Howe ["his poems tend to become vehicles for the rehearsal of settled views" (163)] all agree that Hardy regularly slights what I have described as experiential ways of knowing in favor of purely discursive ones? Even Widdowson, who argues convincingly for a radically "disruptive postmodern Hardy" (11) classifies the poet's aesthetic efforts as part of a primarily intellectual project that succeeds in "challenging and demystifying the limits and conventions of realism and humanist essentialism" (5).
10. Burke makes this same point in his characteristically Aristotelian way:

> [I]nsofar as "God" is a *formal* principle, any thorough statements about 'God' should be expected to reveal the formality underlying their genius as statements . . . Hence, it should be possible to analyze remarks about the "nature of 'God'". . . in their sheer formality as observations about the nature of language. And such a correspondence between the theological and "logological" realms should be there, whether or not "God" actually *exists*. For regardless of whether the entity named "God" exists outside his nature sheerly as key term in a system of terms, words "about him" must reveal their nature as words. (*Rhetoric* 1–2)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150303000032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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