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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphanie Bernard. The Shadow of God in Poems of the Past and the Present. Thomas Hardy, Poet: New Perspectives, 2015. hal-02360217

HAL Id: hal-02360217

<https://hal-normandie-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02360217>

Submitted on 12 Nov 2019

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THE SHADOW OF GOD IN *POEMS OF THE PAST AND THE PRESENT*

STÉPHANIE BERNARD

In his Preface to *Poems of the Past and The Present*¹ published in 1901, Thomas Hardy explains that the volume gathers “a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances, and at various dates. It will probably be found, therefore, to possess little cohesion of thought or harmony of colouring” (CP 84).

To Hardy, though, this is no defect. Conversely, it allows for a wider expression of the thoughts and sentiments of the poet. The contradictions inherent in such a loose mode of writing and publishing give way to the rich and varied rendering of life: “I do not greatly regret this. Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change” (CP 84). Philip Larkin seemed to share this point of view for he wrote: “One can read him for years and years and still be surprised”.²

Hardy’s poetry is characterized indeed by “its resistance to belongingness”.³ There is “a sense of the lyric’s placelessness in his poetry, of its ability to unsettle and disorient both its speakers and readers, and to achieve [...] a music of wondrous strangeness”.⁴

Hardy’s treatment of the question of faith and religious belief contributes to the unsettling strangeness of the writing. As Timothy Hands puts it in his work entitled *Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher?*: “Though stridently anti-Christian on the one hand, Hardy’s religious impulse is also a more complex mixture of conflicting viewpoints, a war between intellect and emotion which necessitates an artistically fructifying indecision.”⁵ A metaphorical war takes

place under the reader's eyes as soon as he or she tries to trace a coherent system of ideas in Hardy's thought as it is expressed in the poems, especially in *Poems of the Past and the Present*.

The collection creates a feeling of indeterminacy, not only in so far as style, form and subject-matter are concerned – Hardy's "little cohesion of thought or harmony of colouring" – but also as regards the notion of the passing of time, of the now and then contained in the title. The conjoined evocation of the past and the present suggests a blurring of limits and a need to turn towards the past in order to be, or speak, in the present. Is the past the origin, the cause that gives life to the present? Or is it the shadow that darkens the present and tints every moment with the hues of loss and withering?

These questions are also those Hardy seems to ask about God. Is he the Creator, the Cause? Or the Destructor? Is God really God? In asking such questions, Hardy baffles the Victorian reader, challenges religious dogmas and undermines the notion of sacredness. But how daring is the poet? How far does he travel on that road of human self-reliance in a rejection of transcendence?

The refusal of the sacred

The themes of the poems inside the collection confirm the impression of strangeness and tension which is characteristic of Hardy's poetry: some texts are about the disasters of war ("Embarcation", "The Colonel's Soliloquy"), others about the disillusion of lovers ("The Well-Beloved", "A Broken Appointment", "The Supplanter"). Others at last, like "The Mother Mourns", "The Subalterns", "To an Unborn Pauper Child", tend to evoke a bleak vision of life in general, and to convey a disenchanting philosophical outlook, derived from a loss of faith.

The reading of most poems begets an overall impression of nostalgia, i.e. a feeling that the text insists on what is lost but still longed for (whereas elegy would notify the loss as irrecoverable and definitive). In the very same manner, Thomas Hardy's loss of faith when he was a young man in London was never a thing of the past, so that most of his writings are haunted by the Scriptures and the question of belief. As Claire Tomalin explains: "He could no longer believe, but he cherished the memory of belief [...]." ⁶

Brought up in a Christian family, Hardy read the Bible and sang Christian hymns. He went to church regularly and was well aware of the differences that existed within the Anglican Church. Indeed, the parish of Stinsford to which Hardy belonged was High Church, so that he was accustomed to the ceremonial of the service there. But the rest of Dorset was chiefly Low Church, that is to say Evangelical: this meant a close reading of the Scriptures and rituals being brought to a minimum. As an apprentice in architecture in Dorchester, Hardy met Henry Robert Bastow who was a staunch Evangelical; the correspondence they kept with each other allowed for discussions on Christian dogmas, and rites such as baptism.

Hardy fluctuated between the edges of Anglicanism: in London, he would "attend a strangely polarized mixture of churches allied to established religious extremes" ⁷. It may have been a foreshadowing of his later abandonment of faith and church attendance. Yet, at the same time, the hesitation can signal renewed attempts to find a suitable church and show how significant religion was to him; it suggests what impact the rejection of belief could have on his life and art – what a void it could have left.

As for the writings, they are imbued with contradictory feelings of rejection and nostalgia as regards Christian belief. Indeterminacy pervades the whole of Hardy's creation. His lyrics notably oscillate between a rendering of prosaic reality and epiphanic "moments of vision", ⁸ between the despondency of loss and the joy of past regained.

An example of that oscillation can be found in the poem “The Self-Unseeing”. The first stanza emphatically opposes the past and the present, to underline what used to be in the place described and consequently what has been lost.

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in. (CP 166)

Yet this vision of death allows for a revival of the past, a nostalgic re-enactment of youth’s innocence and joy in the rest of the poem:

She sat there in her chair,
Smiling into the fire;
He who played stood there,
Bowing it higher and higher

Childlike, I danced in a dream;
Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam;
Yet we were looking away! (CP 166-167)

This revival can be interpreted as a moment of vision. The “dream” gives life to phantoms of the past: we see a smile, a dancing child, a violin player. Suddenly, through the melodious rhythm of the first two lines in the last stanza, one can *hear* the music, the footsteps of the child (/t/, /d/ and /b/ sounds), and the vibrations of the violin (/s/ sound): “Childlike, I danced in a dream; / Blessings emblazoned that day”.⁹ The plain reality depicted – the floor, the fireplace – allows for some sort of revelation and almost preternatural recreation of what no longer exists.

Hardy’s vision, therefore, does not exclude the spiritual or the supernatural. The short story “The Withered Arm”, for instance, illustrates the intrusion of the supernatural into the harsh reality of plain rural life. Several poems, too, evoke the manifestation of something that is normally invisible or ungraspable. However those manifestations are emptied of any sacredness: they have to do with “A Dream” (in “The Dream-Follower” CP 143) or a “Shape”

(in “The Well-Beloved” CP 96), with “Shades” (in “I have lived with Shades” CP 184) and “Memory” (in “Memory and I” CP 185), but not with God’s presence or faith.

What exists beyond grasp and beyond sight resurfaces in Hardy’s writing. The movements in nature, the coming and passing of life, the presence of light and shade, the recurrent evocation of the past and memory, constitute means of representing, or at least suggesting, that not all that exists can be seen, touched or depicted. But to Hardy the ungraspable is not of God, it is of nature rather. It is not transcendent but immanent.

The consequence of immanence rather than transcendence as the origin of life is that death is no hope at all. In the poem entitled “To Life”, nothing is to be expected outside life itself. There is no hope to foster on any account, except the illusory one “That Earth is Paradise” (CP 118). The dead therefore haunt those who survive. They haunt the only space that can be haunted. This could be the reason why the figure of the spectre is recurrent in Hardy’s writing.¹⁰

In the poem “The Self-Unseeing” quoted above, “the mind’s ear hears the absent footfall at the end, the last, emphatic, ghostly tread”¹¹ through the evocation of the “dead feet” in the first stanza. In the poem “The Well-Beloved”, the speaker falls in love with a sprite who is the very ghost of his bride. When he meets the latter again, it seems that “her soul had shrunk and died, / And left a waste within.” (CP 135) She has become the unsubstantial spectre.

Paul Volsik stresses that ghosts are central to the poetry of Thomas Hardy. He argues that on the one hand the ghost shows that Hardy belongs to the nineteenth century, his art appearing under the influence of the Romantics. But “the ghost is powerful also in that he – or especially she – gives direct access to the psychological, the dimension that the twentieth century will insist upon in several ways”.¹²

This psychological approach to the spectre can be traced in the poem entitled “His Immortality”. Here, the poet envisions after-life as the continuation of a man’s existence through the traits and memory of those he has left:

I saw a dead man’s finer part
Shining within each faithful heart
Of those bereft: Then I said: “This must be
His immortality.” (CP 143)

But as the descendants grow old and die, the man disappears into oblivion, which could be the true meaning of death in Hardy’s sense,¹³ his own version of “the second death” mentioned in the Book of Revelation (2:11; 20:6,14; 21:8), but here emptied of its sacred, Christian meaning.

The death of God

Hardy empties the Christian religion of its message of hope. He often discredits or mocks the priests who may appear in his texts: to him they cannot cure the soul. Religion cannot soothe suffering mankind because it is cut off from the reality of human life. In fact, Hardy negates the foundation of Christian theology: Jesus-Christ, the Son of God. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* first defines Christianity as “stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God)”, then adding that:

[f]ew Christians, however, would be content to keep this reference merely historical. Although their faith tradition is historical – i.e., they believe that transactions with the divine do not occur in the realm of timeless ideas but among ordinary humans through the ages – the vast majority of Christians focus their faith in Jesus Christ as someone who is also a present reality¹⁴.

Accordingly the Church of England insists on the relationship with Jesus Christ in its definition of “Being a Christian”:

Christian life is lived in relationship with God through Jesus Christ and, in common with other Christians, seeking to deepen that relationship and to follow the way that Jesus taught. [...].

How do we know that ‘God is for us’? Because Jesus Christ, the one human being who is completely in tune with God – with what God wants and what God is doing – has carried the burden of our human betrayals of God and running away from goodness. He has let himself be betrayed and rejected, executed in a humiliating and agonising way, and yet has not turned his back on us. *Death did not succeed in silencing him or removing him from the world. He is alive;* and that means that his love is alive, having survived the worst we can do¹⁵.” (my italics)

In his approach to religion, Hardy does seem to silence Jesus Christ by not mentioning the Resurrection and by obliterating the notions of hope, life, and communion that are characteristics of Christian faith. As an example, “The Bedridden Peasant” (CP 124), who is agonizing on his death bed, addresses God, “the Maker”. He sounds submissive and reverent in the end: “I’ll praise Thee as were shown to me / The mercies Thou wouldst show” (CP 125). However he does not mention the very core of orthodox Christian faith, never alluding to Jesus, the Saviour.

He praises “an Unknowing God”, as the subtitle indicates, which heightens the tragedy and hopelessness of his situation:

But Thou, Lord, giv’st us men our day
In helpless bondage thus
To time and Chance, and seem’st straightaway
To think no more of us! (CP 125)

There are indirect echoes of the Gospel in the poem. “But Thou, Lord, giv’st us men our day” recalls Jesus’s prayer in Luke 11.3: “Give us day by day our daily bread”. The expression “For Thou art mild of heart” that appears line 16 alludes to Matthew 11.29: “I am gentle and humble in heart”. But these occurrences tend to heighten the subversive and even provocative irony of the painful whimper. The poor peasant seems culturally imbued with Christian teachings without being personally convinced or truly grasped by the essence of the belief, so that his conventional Christianity makes him feel abandoned by the powerful God who should be all-loving and all-knowing.

Similarly, “The Respectable Burgher” who decides to “sit on Sundays in [his] chair, / And read that moderate man Voltaire” (CP 159), rejects the contents of the Old and New Testaments: he expresses doubts about the veracity of the stories of several prophets and Biblical characters; more strikingly he refuses to name Jesus Christ. Although the speaker pretends to omit the name for the sake of respect (“but for shame I must forbear” CP 160), the effect of the two long dashes that signal the place left vacant by the omission is to empty the Biblical message of its substance. Christianity is hollowed out of its gospel of love: the absence of the moment when God offers his son to save humanity (John 3:16) – in other words, the negation of incarnation – means depriving the Gospel of its meaning and denying its historical and human dimension.

Logically, therefore, God appears as a distant and potentially cruel entity, cut off from the humanity he has made. In the last line of the poem entitled “The Sick Battle-God” the poet declares: “The Battle-god is god no more” (CP 99). On first reading, the “Deity” may recall the God of the Old Testament, especially in the first stanza:

In days when men found joy in war,
A God of Battle sped each mortal jar;
The peoples pledged him heart and hand,
From Israel’s land to isles afar. (CP 97)

This last line, however, shows that Hardy does not refer narrowly to a Judeo-Christian context. The “isles afar” designate other religious traditions and Hardy’s thought underlines the universality of the urge to oppose, destroy and dominate. The author denounces man’s idolatry more than the god in question.

The Battle-God, who is “god no more”, announces “the Monarch” of “God’s Funeral” in the later collection of poems entitled *Satires of Circumstances*. The said Monarch is a “man-projected Figure” described as “jealous, fierce, at first” and who was then given “justice as the ages rolled” (CP 327). The story of that god is in reality the history of humanity. Hence, each

poem deprives its god of any sacredness or grandeur, and suggests that men are the creators of the divinity, urged by a need to revere and believe.

On the one hand, both poems could be read as daring, revolutionary, even blasphemous pieces. On the other hand, the displacement of the focus onto man and his idolatry undermines the argument and relocates the core of the subject: the absence of transcendence results in human tragedy. Man is mistaken and errs in a universe that surpasses him. The poet himself is mistaken: the hope for a better world and for the weakening of the war spirit expressed in “The Sick Battle-God” acquires a tragic and pessimistic dimension in the light of later events, such as the two World Wars. The irony which is so typical of Hardy now turns against the poet himself.

These several aspects could leave the reader with the impression of a desperate philosophical thought, of a nihilistic and pessimistic vision of life. The impact of Nietzsche’s thought can be discerned in the description of a crowd weeping over the death of God as well as in the title “God’s Funeral”. The poem could be read as a rewriting of the so-called “parable of the madman” in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* published in 1882:

“Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly: “I am looking for God! I am looking for God!” As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter.

“Have you lost him, then?” said one.

“Did he lose his way like a child?” said another.

“Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?”

Thus they shouted and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

“Where has God gone?” he cried.

“I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. We are his murderers.”¹⁶

Both texts enact the death of God and denounce man’s foolishness in revering an idol. They also express man’s distress after losing his way and his points of reference with the disappearance of God. Indeed, the parable ends up with a series of questions: “Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward,

forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?"¹⁷ These questions are echoed by stanza XII in Hardy's poem:

"And who or what shall fill his place?
Wither will wanderers turn distracted eyes
For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?"... (CP 328)

Nevertheless the feeling of disillusion and disorientation is not equivalent in both texts. While in Nietzsche's story the laughter of the people standing in the market-place resounds, deriding the madman and stressing the ridicule of the situation, Hardy's speaker insists on the memory of what has been lost and cannot be regained. There is no notion of radical nihilism¹⁸ in Hardy who found him "incoherent"¹⁹ and had "an unfavorable opinion of Nietzsche, which paralleled that of a greater part of the English community in the early twentieth century".²⁰ So that, even in "God's Funeral", a feeling of doubt and sadness gradually replaces the intimation of blasphemy that can be derived from the reading at first, for the speaker eventually joins the procession of mourners, "'twixt the gleam and gloom" (CP 329).

Blasphemy or disenchantment?

This movement that takes poet and reader away from philosophical considerations and cold irony, and closer to the condition and moods of man, appears clearly in the poem entitled "The Church-BUILDER" (CP 170) published in *Poems of the Past and the Present*. The vision is no longer that of an anonymous "I", but of the dismayed church-builder, arousing and encouraging the reader's empathy.

The denunciation of religion is conveyed through the personal testimony, the intimate story of pain and failure of one particular man. The general effect is much closer to blasphemy than in the two previous poems. The *mise en scène* of his suicide in this place of communal worship – suicide being condemned by the church and Christianity at large as a transgression

of the sixth commandment “Thou shalt not kill” – is “mockery” (CP 172) in the face of society and religion.

The Church-Builder’s abandonment of faith is complete and definitive, but it also has undertones of tragedy. The man spent all his money, neglected his family, and wasted his strength in order to realise the dream of his life. But, like the dream of Jude the Obscure, “[...] the whole scheme had burst up, like an iridescent soap-bubble, under the touch of a reasoned inquiry”.²¹ The new awareness has undertones of the absurd:

My gift to God seems futile, quite;
The world moves as erstwhile;
And powerful Wrong on feeble Right
Tramples in olden style.
My faith burns down,
I see no crown;
But Cares, and Griefs, and Guile. (CP 171)

The story of that man turns out to be a tale of self-destruction. The irony of the situation is extreme as all his efforts and “stintless pains” (stanza I) to build an incredible edifice of “ashlared masonry” (stanza II) and “ivoried Rood” (stanza IV), “emblazoned glass” and “jewels” (stanza III) attract the others’ scorn and deprive him of all hope and faith. The last stanza, dramatizing the probable reactions of those who will find the dead man’s body in the church, sums up his predicament in poignant terms:

Well: Here at morn they’ll light on one
Dangling in mockery
Of what he spent his substance on
Blindly and uselessly!...
“He might,” they’ll say,
“Have built, some way,
A cheaper gallows-tree!” (CP 172)

The ending of the poem is all the more ironical as the church-builder turns the mockery against those who used to laugh at him. He is now the one to “sneer and smirk” (stanza VII), very like the Conrad character of Kayerts who, in *An Outpost of Progress*, “was hanging by a leather strap from the cross” and “irreverently [...] putting out a swollen tongue”.²² By

writing his own end in advance, he defies God, becoming the creator of his own story. Yet the denunciation targets men and society again, as much as it targets God who is not addressed directly but appears to be absent and uncaring.

The individualization of the outlook humanizes the rebellion and de-rationalizes the argument. The doubt so common in Hardy's texts and which recalls his agnosticism, the insistence on the particularity of an individual's vision, as well as the numerous versions of the representation of God in the poetry, do not allow for a systematic discourse on religion, or for a clear-cut and methodical denunciation of God on scientific grounds.

So, the poet continues his quest. He does not announce, after all, the death of God but the disappearance of man's belief in God or in a man-created image of God. He asserts the coming of a new, godless and disenchanting age, in an orphan world. Hardy's writings, in other words, resist the diktats of philosophy, relying more on impressions and intimations that emphasize the tragedy of loss and endow the poems with nostalgia.

The absent keeps returning in Hardy's texts through the memory of those who are still present – often through the voice and gaze of a solitary figure that can be that of the poet himself. "The dominant figure for his art is the voice of the absent person, lost or dead",²³ and so is it with God whose absence is enigmatic and does not allow for a final answer to the question of his existence and his attributes.

Is God absent or unconscious? Is he malevolent or simply not caring? Senseless or merely clumsy? The obsession with the question of God, of the origin of life, of suffering, makes it impossible for Hardy to be satisfied with a monolithic answer. This accounts for what could appear as incoherence in the discourse but allows for the never-ending quest of the poet whose imagination seems to be inhabited by the spectre of the ungraspable divine.

One of the answers offered by the poet in response to this endless questioning is that humanity has been abandoned and is now "God-forgotten" (CP 123):

–“The Earth, sayest thou? The human race?
By Me created? Sad its lot?
Nay: I have no remembrance of such place:
Such world I fashioned not.” – (CP 123)

In the poem God’s forgetfulness is almost wish-fulfillment. The poet’s hope for a creator who would suddenly remember his creatures is but a “childish thought” (CP 124), for God remains, as in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails²⁴”.

The absent creator in Joyce’s meaning is God, but also the artist himself. Irony surges if we apply the quotation to Hardy, for while he reproaches God with creating a world he abandons, he does the same in his fiction from which he seems absent and in which the characters are the victims of fate. The narrator is what Nathalie Bantz calls “a figure of the absent” in the short stories.²⁵

In the novels, the narrator is more intrusive, often infusing the text with his own view of event and character. Yet the narrative voice fades further away with each new novel. In the poems, the first person is more present, revealing itself through a mosaic of personae and stances, making the ambivalence of the position toward God even more blatant. A doubt remains, which is inscribed in the fluctuating narrative standpoint in the various works and in the artistic commitment of the author.

This suggests that Hardy cannot go as far as Joyce in his denunciation of God. Hardy’s craft largely amounts to counter the disappearance of meaning and the absence of form that characterize the universe and human existence in his eyes, and to make up for that loss through artistic creation. While Joyce or Conrad attempt to say the unspeakable, Hardy depicts what can be represented in order to suggest what is hidden and ungraspable.

Hesitating between the Victorian age and the dawn of modernity, he offers a multiple vision that gives birth to numerous images of God in *Poems of the Past and the Present*.

A ghostly presence

Sometimes God is presented as a careless weaver or clumsy mother. The effect is that God is repeatedly feminized and deprived of the unlimited power conferred to him by the traditional view of an omniscient, all-powerful masculine presence. The poem “The Sleep-Worker”, for instance, delineates a mother-god who has “unwittingly” (CP 121) blundered in her creative gesture. The world she has created is a mixture of joy and pain, of “right enmeshed with wrong”, “of ache and ecstasy” (CP 121), that seems beyond all comprehension. The poet’s perplexity is reinforced by the absence of an answer, the silence of the “Sleep-Worker”.

The same idea of the unconsciousness of God informs the poem “Doom and She”, in which the creator is represented as a blind “Matron”: “Unlit with sight is she” (CP 119). Deprived of one of her senses, she is nonetheless full of empathy for her “clay-made creatures” and wishes she could see what she has done. She addresses her male companion, who personifies the very Hardyian concept of “Doom”, asking him to be her vision:

“The fate of those I bear, Dear Lord, pray turn and view,
And notify me true;
Shapings that eyelessly I dare
Maybe I would undo.

Sometimes from lairs of life
Methinks I catch a groan,
Or multitudinous moan,
As though I had schemed a world of strife,
Working by touch alone.”

“World-Weaver!” he replies,
“I scan all thy domain;
But since nor joy nor pain
It lies in me to recognize,
Thy questionings are vain.” (CP 119)

Unfortunately “Doom” is blind *at heart*: “Vacant of feeling he” reads the text. This heartless lord cannot fulfil the “World-Weaver”’s wish:

– Unanswered, curious, meek,
She broods in sad surmise....
– Some say they have heard her sighs
On Alpine height or Polar peak
When the night tempests rise. (CP 120)

The last stanza with the repetition of the sound /ai/ allows us to hear her sincere and heart-breaking “sighs” as they are echoed by the “Alpine height” and the tempests that “rise”.

The pair here depicted give a strange image of the creator and this undermines the notion of a powerful and omniscient God. This tale of a blind, vulnerable mother and a heartless, unfeeling father as the origin and cause of humanity leaves an impression of powerlessness and, indeed, doom. The image of the couple is all the more sarcastic as one may think of Hardy’s conception of marriage as a mere contract rather than as a sacred union or at least a love match²⁶.

In the last one of the *Poems of the Past and The Present*, whose Greek title is “ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩΙ ΘΕΩΙ”, the character named “Doom” is echoed by the “Willer masked and dumb”,

Who makest Life become, –
As though by labouring all-unknowingly,
Like one whom reveries numb.

How much of consciousness informs Thy will,
Thy biddings, as if blind,
Of death-inducing kind,
Nought shows to us ephemeral ones who fill
But moments in Thy mind. (CP 186)

These personae lead us back to the notion of immanence for they are alternative versions of the universal cause that, in the later poem “The Convergence of the Twain”, Hardy will reduce to the senselessness of the “Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything” (CP 306).

²⁷ The Will is initially alluded to in the opening of *the Dynasts*, Hardy’s epic drama about the Napoleonic Wars (1904-1908). One character of the tragic chorus says:

[...] like a knitter drowsed,
Whose fingers play in skilled unmindfulness,
The Will has woven with an absent heed
Since life first was; and ever will so weave.

To counter this “skilled unmindfulness” that gives birth to a cruel reality torn apart by antagonistic forces, Hardy uses his own artistic will, his visionary power to shape a sensible rather than a senseless world. The life he creates becomes meaningful in an artistic way, as opposed to the meaninglessness of real life. So that through writing Hardy infuses consciousness and form into creation – at least into his creations, and more particularly in the poetry, with its insistence on sound, rhythm and structure. For, to him, “[t]o find beauty in ugliness is the province of the poet”.²⁸

The fabric of the universe has been loosely knitted, while it should have been the work of a delicate embroiderer. This is what Joseph Conrad will suggest some years later in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham in which he develops the concept of the knitting machine:

There is – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. [...] And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened...
It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted space, time, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters.²⁹

The echoes between this quotation and the extract from *The Dynasts* hint at the modernity of Thomas Hardy. The terms chosen by each writer suggest a strange connection with Joseph Conrad, one of the fathers of modern fiction. Besides, the correlation highlights the fact that Hardy’s stance, as stated above, is that of the poet and not that of the philosopher. If Schopenhauer’s influence can be traced in the notion of the Will, it is the never-ending quest and the need to turn it into words and worlds that prevails – the need for the poet and novelist to “embroider” where the senseless machine “knits”.

Moreover, it is necessary to bear in mind that, at the time of the writing of *Poems of the Past and the Present*, the notion of the Immanent Will was not yet defined. Several texts give rise to philosophical or metaphysical questions. Nevertheless, most poems in the collection convey an impression rather than assert a theory: they convey the impression that something

is happening beyond the veil of words, outside the reality described or the story told, as if word after word the vision “is turning ghost” (CP 115).

The texts are inhabited by an indefinable force that seems to infuse every line. Most poems reveal an invisible but powerful presence, the ghostly shadow of God. In “God-Forgotten” (CP 123), for instance, the speaker is addressing God while denying His existence. The poem even opens on the image of the narrator standing “within / The presence of the Lord Most High”. The image may well be a mirage; it nevertheless initiates a dialogue between himself and his creator. The latter’s answers are imagined only and unheard in reality; however they are printed on the page.

In the same way, the three sad and meditative poems that make up “In Tenebris” are headed by quotations from the Book of Psalms. Each of the three extracts from the Psalms expresses alienation and despair, instead of offering hope and relief. The epigraph to “In Tenebris III” reads: “Heu mihi, quia incolatus meus prolongatus est! Habitavi cum habitantibus Cedar. Multum incola fuit anima mea.” (Psalm 120:5, CP 169) The translation in the King’s James Version is the following: “Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar! My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace.”

The verse casts a gloomy and woeful shadow on every remembered scene in the poem, in the very same manner as the repeated evocation of “the ending” that might “have come” places the spectre of death at the heart of the text. The reader, therefore, seems to be the witness of inverted moments of vision. The potentially blissful episodes turn out to be sad and pale; the atmosphere is growing darker as on “a winter-wild night” (CP 169): those moments blind rather than reveal. God’s words quoted in the epigraph no longer bring light, yet they remain “Written indelibly”, as the Lord says in “By the Earth’s Corpse” (CP 126).

In that poem the irony becomes tragic nostalgia: the creator repents too late of what he has done. Life on earth has disappeared and he regrets

[...] all the wrongs endured
By Earth's poor patient kind,
Which my too oft unconscious hand
Let enter undersigned. (CP 126)

Hardy reverses the traditional notion of hell: it is God who now repents for the wrongs he has done ("it still repenteth me!" CP 127). His own version of Christianity is subversive: because of his "eternal mind", God is doomed to remember and regret "that late earthly scene" – what used to be and is no more.

God becomes tragic. He is paradoxically presented in a very human way: the uncaring maker is now torn by a feeling of shame and regret. This strangely recalls Hardy's own experience after the loss of his wife Emma. The mixture of regret and desire that Hardy felt for the wife from whom he had been estranged so many years is quite similar to the nostalgia expressed in the poems about God. Besides, just as the *Poems of 1912-13* are infused by Emma's ghost-like presence, so the *Poems of the Past and Present* – and many other poems too – are imbued with the ghost-like presence of God.

The reader, therefore, is invited to go beyond appearances. God's silence does not mean he *is* actually absent. On the contrary, most texts that seem to mock or at least question religion lead to "an irrefutable experience of transcendence even though the poet refuses to credit belief in any transcendent domain".³⁰ This is true of the poems that give voice to God in spite of Hardy's loss of faith, or that let the dead speak although nothing seems to be expected after this earthly life. This is true of other texts, as is suggested notably by the short story "The Withered Arm", in which the irrational and the supernatural gradually overpower the characters, the diegesis, and the text as a whole.

The shadowy, spectre-like presence of God haunts Hardy's writing. Even in his re-writing of the creation, he can never entirely get rid of the Biblical intertext. Hence, in "The Lacking Sense" which conjures up again the image of the blind mother weaving "her world-webs", the

reference to an “angel fallen from grace” (CP 116) shows that the writer cannot get free of the influence of the Christian religion. The priest in “The Lost Pyx” *must* answer the call he has received and *must* look for the pyx he has lost. Similarly, Hardy *must* return incessantly to that call he received in his youth but rejected when he lost faith.

Religion is inescapable as Hardy himself knew. In the “Apology” he wrote in 1922 on the occasion of the publication of *Late Lyrics*, he contends that “[...] poetry and religion touch each other, or rather modulate into each other; are, indeed, often but different names for the same thing” (CP 561). The amount of poems written suggests therefore their author’s never-ending quest for form and reasons to believe – recalling the enduring hope of the narrator of “The Oxen” (CP 468) in spite of “the gloom” –, and this until “He Resolve[d] to Say No More” (CP 929).

¹ *The Complete Poems*, 83-187. *The Complete Poems* will hereafter be referred to as CP.

² Philip Larkin is quoted by James Gibbon in his “Introduction” to *The Complete Poems*, CP xxxv.

³ DeSales Harrison, in Rosemary Morgan (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy* (Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 403.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁵ Timothy Hands, *Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher?* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989), 117.

⁶ Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy: The Time-torn Man* (London: Penguin, 2006), 78.

⁷ Timothy Hands, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 203.

⁸ *Moments of Vision* is the title of a collection of poems by Thomas Hardy (CP 427).

⁹ /t/, /d/ and /b/ sounds are underlined and /s/ sounds appear in italics in the quotation.

¹⁰ Already in the novels several characters are ghost-like: Jude who continues to be present in the text through Arabella’s words about him after his death, or Tess who reappears under the features of her sister Liza-Lu.

¹¹ John Hughes, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 280.

¹² Paul Volsik, in *Etudes Anglaises*, 109.

¹³ Following this train of thought, we could then say that Hardy has achieved immortality through his fame. This sheds an interesting and somewhat ironic light on Hardy’s achievement.

¹⁴ “Christianity”, in *Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/115240/Christianity>>, accessed 14 July 2014.

¹⁵ Baron Williams of Oystermouth, “Being a Christian”, <<http://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/being-a-christian.aspx>>, accessed 14 July 2014.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book III, section 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*.

¹⁸ “Rather than argue that God does not exist, Nietzsche claims that “God is dead”. [...] That is, “God is dead” because the timeless and universal standpoint of God has led to “nihilism” – the viewpoint that there is essentially nothing meaningful to our world beyond a set of true facts.” (Adrian Samuel, ‘Nietzsche and God’ (Part I), in *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* 14 (Spring 2007), <http://www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/back_issues/rjp14_samuel.pdf>, accessed 14 July 2014).

¹⁹ Patrick Bridgewater, ‘English writers and Nietzsche’, in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought: a Collection of Essays*, Ed. Malcolm Pasley (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 225.

²⁰ Barbara DeMille, ‘Nietzsche, Conrad, Hardy, and the “Shadowy Ideal”’, in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1990), pp. 697-714, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/450567>>, accessed 14 July 2014.

²¹ *Jude the Obscure*, 138.

²² Joseph Conrad, *An Outpost of Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; first edition, 1898), 34.

²³ DeSales Harrison, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 404.

²⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966; first edition, 1916), 245.

²⁵ Nathalie Bantz, *Les Nouvelles de Thomas Hardy, Stratégies narratives d’une écriture sous contrainte* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 74: “une figure de l’absent”.

²⁶ In the first stanza of the poem entitled “The Conformers”, Hardy’s narrator voices similar disillusion as his wedding with his beloved will inevitably put an end to the couple’s “mad romance”:

Yes; we’ll wed, my little fay,
And you shall write you mine,
And in a villa chastely gray
We’ll house, and sleep, and dine.
But those night-screened, divine,
Stolen trysts of heretofore,
We of choice ecstasies and fine
Shall know no more. (CP 229)

²⁷ The poem entitled “The Convergence of the Twain” was written in 1912 after the loss of the Titanic and was published in 1914 in *Satires of Circumstance*.

²⁸ Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 213.

²⁹ C. T. Watts (ed.), *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 57.

³⁰ John Hughes, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, 272.

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