

Thomas Hardy and the Consequences of Agnosticism

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis reassesses the claim that Thomas Hardy was an agnostic, looking closely at the meanings of agnosticism (in terms of nineteenth-century usage of the word) and how Hardy's reinterpretation of agnosticism manifested itself in his work. By exploring his novels and poetry as they intersect with the intellectual development of agnosticism, it is shown that at the centre of Hardy's work, as at the centre of agnosticism, is an insistence upon final epistemological uncertainty and a rejection of dogmatism. For Hardy, this had application beyond theological questions to broader aspects of human existence.

Chapter One examines Hardy's engagement with the agnosticism of Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley and Leslie Stephen. Chapter Two discusses Hardy's exploration of knowledge, through its obscuration by means of secrets, trickery and concealment, in his 'Novels of Ingenuity' (*Desperate Remedies*, *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *A Laodicean*). Chapter Three investigates Hardy's critical reinterpretation of two of Leslie Stephen's agnostic essays in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Return of the Native*. Chapter Four considers *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders* as Hardy's attempts to contextualise philosophical debates concerning the consequences of non-commitment. Chapters Five and Six discuss *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, respectively, as Hardy's most thorough explorations of the consequences of agnosticism for morality, through the portrayal of the agnostic heroes, Angel Clare and Jude Fawley. Chapter Seven considers Hardy's poetry as a medium through which he was able to express and explore his version of agnosticism.

The claim of this thesis is that, Hardy, as an artist, was able to take agnosticism further than the Victorian agnostics. As such, his work can be read as a critical reinterpretation of the rationalist principles of agnostic thought within the domain of art.

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I am grateful to the British Library for allowing me to work with the autograph manuscript of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and to the Dorset County Museum for allowing me to examine the books in Hardy's Max Gate Library. The Bodleian, British and Oxford English Faculty Libraries have provided me with access to their invaluable and seemingly inexhaustible collections. I am also obliged to Victoria Osborne of the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery for inspecting the manuscript of *Wessex Poems* when I was unable to do so myself.

I am indebted to Michael Millgate who has been generous in answering my queries as to the probable extent of Hardy's knowledge of agnosticism in the early-1870s, and to Phillip Mallett for his useful comments regarding my reading of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

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EXPLANATORY NOTES AND ABBREVIATIONS

This thesis has been formatted according to *The Oxford Manual of Style*, ed. and comp. R. M. Ritter (London: BCA, 2002).

The following abbreviations are used to refer to Hardy's works. Bibliographic details of editions are included in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

AL	<i>A Laodicean</i>
CEF	<i>Candour in English Fiction</i>
CP	<i>Complete Poems</i>
DR	<i>Desperate Remedies</i>
FFMC	<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>
GP	<i>General Preface to the Novels and Poems</i> , 'Wessex Edition', 1912 (see note below)
HE	<i>The Hand of Ethelberta</i>
JO	<i>Jude the Obscure</i>
L	<i>Letters</i>
LN	<i>Literary Notebooks</i>
LW	<i>The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy</i>
MC	<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>
PBE	<i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i> (Oxford University Press, 1985)
PBE (serial)	<i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i> (serial version)
PRF	<i>The Profitable Reading of Fiction</i>
PWB	<i>The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved</i>
RN	<i>The Return of the Native</i>
SF	<i>The Science of Fiction</i>
TD	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> (Oxford University Press, 1988)
TD (MS)	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> (manuscript)
TD (serial)	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> (serial version)
TD (1st edn.)	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> (three-volume first edition)
TD (5th edn.)	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> (one-volume fifth edition)
TM	<i>The Trumpet-Major</i>
TT	<i>Two on a Tower</i>
UGT	<i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>
W	<i>The Woodlanders</i>

WB

The Well-Beloved

Poetry: references to Hardy's poetry are abbreviated as *CP*, followed by the poem number and line reference where appropriate: thus, *CP* 4 ll.3-4 indicates *Collected Poems*, poem number 4 ('Hap'), lines 3-4.

Autobiography: this work was originally attributed to Hardy's second wife, Florence Emily Hardy, and first published under her name in two volumes *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1891* (1928) and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy 1892-1928* (1930). It is commonly accepted that Thomas Hardy had a much greater part in this biography than the third-person narrative and the credited author might suggest, and is generally considered more appropriate to refer to the work as Hardy's autobiography. For conciseness, references to this work in the main text of the thesis will usually appear as 'the *Life*'.

General Preface: the *General Preface to the Novels and Poems* can be found in any New Wessex Edition of Hardy's novels (published by Macmillan). In this thesis, references are to the version reprinted in Peter Widdowson (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry and Non-Fictional Prose* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 232-233.

Letters: references to Hardy's letters are to the edition by Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978-88).

Notebooks: *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Lennart Björk, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1985). As far as possible, all notes have been reproduced faithfully from Björk's text; thus, wherever underlining, italics or any other formatting has been applied or omitted it is intentional and not an oversight in the formatting of this thesis.

Other abbreviations:

- | | |
|-----|---|
| CH | <i>Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage</i> , ed. R. G. Cox (Critical Heritage Series; London: Routledge, 1970). |
| DCM | Dorset County Museum |
| THJ | <i>Thomas Hardy Journal</i> |

TEXTUAL NOTE

Chapter Five of this thesis includes transcriptions of the manuscript of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. It was not practical to provide a photocopy because of the fragility of the document; therefore, standard keyboard symbols have been used to represent the markings made by Hardy when editing the document. As far as possible, I have based my transcription markings on those described in J. T. Laird, 'Note on Method of Transcribing Manuscript Passages', in id. *The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), xi.

Text deleted in the manuscript is shown: ~~deleted~~.

Interlinear amendments (substitutions or interpolations) are italicised and rendered in superscript following the caret mark [^]: ^{*insertion*}. (Such substitutions inevitably alter the line-spacing of the transcribed text.)

Substitutions made immediately after the original text and on the same line are shown: ~~deleted~~ inserted.

Text deleted using blue pencil (to indicate that it was to be restored for volume publication) is shown: restore to volume.

Undecipherable words are shown: ———.

Where text is difficult to decipher, the presumed text is enclosed in square brackets and followed by a question mark: [presumed text?].

INTRODUCTION

On 13 December 1920 Thomas Hardy wrote a stern letter to his friend and fellow poet, Alfred Noyes, objecting to a lecture in which Noyes had told his audience that Hardy believed that ‘the Power behind the Universe was an imbecile jester.’ Hardy explained that he had been sent a copy of an article from the 9 December edition of *The Morning Post* entitled ‘Poetry and Religion’ in which Noyes’s lecture was quoted. The author assured Noyes that he ‘h[e]ld no such “philosophy”, and, to the best of [his] recollection, never could have done so’.¹ He did not elaborate further on what philosophy he did hold. This objection to being misrepresented, accompanied by refusal to give an explicit corrective account of himself, was typical of Hardy. In the face of persistent challenges and requests to describe his ecclesiastical and philosophical sympathies, Hardy worked hard to avoid becoming embroiled in discussion, and eluded attempts to label his own beliefs or systems of thought.

Numerous attempts have been made to identify and analyse the trajectory of Hardy’s religious beliefs.² The broad biographical trajectory is clear. It is known that as a boy he attended Sunday school regularly and that later he contemplated entering the Anglican ministry, that he flirted briefly with Baptism in his late thirties, and oscillated between High and Low Church Christianity until he began to express doubts about religion in the mid-1860s.³ These doubts, he records, were such as to stop him taking a ‘pass-

¹ L vi 52. Hardy does not identify the sender of the article. Eight years later, Noyes wrote *The Guardian* report on Hardy’s Westminster Abbey burial. In it he pointed out the irony of the ceremony, an irony of which, he felt, Hardy would have approved: ‘Outside the Abbey there was a bleak drizzle which was in harmony with the mental atmosphere. Yet from the point of view of the religion which did him the honour there was something majestic in its utter indifference to his own words and his own philosophy. It was an indifference that would have appealed to Hardy himself. In the very face of all that he had written and of all the Agnostics gathered around him there were uttered once again the sublimest words in the English language: “I am the resurrection and the life.”’ Alfred Noyes, ‘The Burial of Thomas Hardy’, *The Guardian*, 17 Jan. 1928, published online <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/classics/story/0,,109735,00.html>>, accessed 29 Jun. 2006.

² One of the most thorough investigations of this sort can be found in the Introduction to Timothy Hands, *Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher?: Hardy’s Religious Biography and Its Influence on His Novels* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 1-4.

³ Timothy Hands, ‘Religion’, in Norman Page (ed.), *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Thomas Hardy*, (New York: OUP, 2000), 360-5.

degree': 'he could not conscientiously carry out his idea of entering the church.'⁴ For the rest of his life, Hardy maintained an ambivalent relationship with Christianity, struggling with the extent and kind of his commitment—attending church and even offering his opinion on the proper format of religious ceremony but also expressing reservations and uncertainty on matters of belief.

Pinpointing his philosophical allegiances has proved, if anything, more problematic.⁵ Hardy seems to have been even less eager to commit to a particular philosophical standpoint than to a religious one. In July 1899 he was approached by the Rationalist Press Association (a group with whom he might have been expected to have some sympathy) inviting him to take up membership, and in early 1920 Joseph McCabe asked permission to include the author in his forthcoming *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Rationalists*. Hardy declined both offers.⁶ Moreover, whilst he expressed a strong interest in Positivism, he was (like George Eliot before him) always quick to point out that he did not wholly subscribe to the Positivists' philosophy. On 25 February 1903 Hardy wrote to Lady Grove, the daughter of his friends General and Mrs. Pitt-Rivers, 'I am not a Positivist, as you know, but I agree with Anatole France when he says, as he did the other day (though he is not one either) that no person of serious thought in these times could be said to stand aloof from Positivist teaching & ideals.'⁷ Hardy even went so far as to suggest, light-heartedly, that '[i]f Comte had introduced Christ among the worthies in his calendar it would have made Positivism tolerable to thousands who...now decry what in their heart of hearts they hold to contain the germs of a true system.'⁸

⁴ LW 390.

⁵ For a useful discussion of the philosophies in which Hardy showed interest see Timothy Hands, '“A Bewildered Child and His Conjurors”: Hardy and the Ideas of His Time', in Charles P. C. Pettit (ed.), *New Perspectives on Thomas Hardy* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1994), 137-55.

⁶ See LW 327 and L vii 162. With regard to the latter, it is clear from the names that do appear in this dictionary that had Hardy not been alive to reject the offer McCabe would have included him. Many of Hardy's contemporaries, friends, mentors and authors with whom he was compared have an entry, including: Thomas Carlyle, Edward Clodd, Auguste Comte, Charles Darwin, George Eliot, Frederic Harrison, T. H. Huxley, F. W. Maitland, George Meredith, Herbert Spencer, and Leslie Stephen. See Joseph McCabe, *A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Rationalists* (London: Watts, 1920).

⁷ L iii 53.

⁸ LW 150-1.

Another school of thought with which Hardy was (and is) often identified was that of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. But Hardy was again anxious to distance him from such identification. On the contents page of his copy of Helen Garwood's PhD thesis, *Thomas Hardy: An Illustration of the Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (1911), Hardy underlined the title of her fourth chapter as follows: 'Lack of Similarity of the Views of Schopenhauer and Hardy'.⁹ In June 1924, after he had read Ernest Brennecke's *Thomas Hardy's Universe: A Study of a Poet's Mind* (1924), in which Brennecke argued that Hardy owed a great philosophical debt to Schopenhauer, Hardy wrote to Brennecke to contest these claims, listing several thinkers who had influenced him more than Schopenhauer:

I saw a criticism which remarked that [the book] was a little too much like a treatise on Schopenhauer with notes on Hardy, and though that was a humorous exaggeration, what the critic meant, I suppose, was that Schopenhauer's was too largely dwelt upon to the exclusion of other philosophies apparent in my writings to represent me truly—that, as my pages show harmony of view with Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Comte, Hume, Mill, and others (all of whom, as a matter of fact, I used to read more than Sch.) my kinship with them should have been mentioned as well with him. Personally I have nothing to say on this point, though I share their opinion to some extent.¹⁰

Copious and detailed corrections in Hardy's copy of Brennecke's book show that he had read it in some detail, and comments written throughout demonstrate the strength of his reaction to it, proving that it was not merely the 'critic' who thought Brennecke had relied too heavily on Schopenhauer. On the inside front cover Hardy wrote, 'Too much Schopenhauer for truth-' and in the margin of page 15, the word 'Wrong'. On page 75, an entire paragraph concerning 'Schopenhauerian doctrine' has been underlined with 'All this is absurd' written next to it in the margin.¹¹ On the inside back cover Hardy wrote what was presumably a draft of his letter to Brennecke.¹²

⁹ LN ii 2051n. The note is transcribed from Hardy's copy of Helen Garwood, *Thomas Hardy: An Illustration of the Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1911). The book is part of Hardy's Max Gate Library, held in the DCM.

¹⁰ L vi 259. See Ernest Brennecke, *Thomas Hardy's Universe: A Study of a Poet's Mind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924). The book is part of Hardy's Max Gate Library, held in the DCM.

¹¹ Page 15 of Brennecke's book includes the claim that 'the "Overworld" scenes of *The Dynasts* could not possibly have been composed if Schopenhauer had not previously written *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.'

Much has been written concerning the apparent influence Schopenhauer's philosophy had upon Hardy's writing.¹³ Michael Millgate points out that it is more than likely that early comparisons (notably one in the *Spectator* on 8 February 1879, which Millgate believes to be 'almost certainly Richard Holt Hutton') were misdirected because Hardy appears not to have been familiar with Schopenhauer until at least the early- to mid-1880s.¹⁴ In fact, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Idea*) was not available in English translation until 1883, and Hardy's command of the German language was never great enough to have read it in the original. The similarities drawn between Hardy and Schopenhauer have generally been with regard to Hardy's later work, notably *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and *The Dynasts* (1904-8), and critics

The underlined paragraph of page 75 reads: "Throughout *The Dynasts* there is emphasised the Schopenhauerian doctrine that while history unfolds before our eyes the spectacle of uninterrupted change and teaches us that at all times there was something different, philosophy maintains that this change is non-essential and that at all times there was the same. The whole epic-drama is but an illustration of the statement of the Spirit of the Years in the Fore-Scene—

*But old laws operate yet; and phase and phase
Of men's dynastic and imperial moils
Shape on accustomed lines.*

History is an unbroken, uniform, and unchanging concatenation of events bound together by the mysterious workings of the Immanent Will.'

¹² The draft of Hardy's letter reads as follows:

Fault of book:

In tracing resemblances between T.H. & Schopenhauer the author, perhaps with ^{unintentionally,} leads to the inference that T.H. has derived these similarities from Sch.

—
Hobbes
Spinoza
Hume
Mill
Comte
Lewe's Hist of Phil?
Spencer
Darwin
Huxley

The above were studied by T.H. as much as Sch.

¹³ Space restricts me from providing an exhaustive list; however, for other examples of criticism that examine Schopenhauer's influence on Hardy see Joanna Gibson, 'Thomas Hardy: A Borrowing from Schopenhauer', *Notes and Queries*, NS 40 (1993), 492-3; Mary Ann Kelly, 'Schopenhauer's Influence on Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*', in Eric von der Luft (ed.), *Schopenhauer: New Essays in Honor of His 200th Birthday* (Studies in German Thought and History, 10; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988), 232-46; and William J. Scheick, 'Schopenhauerian Compassion, Fictional Structure, and the Reader: The Example of Hardy and Conrad', in O. M. Brack (ed.), *Twilight of Dawn: Studies in English Literature in Transition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 45-67.

¹⁴ Michael Millgate, *A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 199. There is no mention of Schopenhauer in the early notebooks. See Anon. 'The Return of the Native', *Spectator*, 8 Feb. 1879, 181-2 (182).

have focused their comparisons on Hardy's pessimism, his apparent conviction that suffering is a fact of life, and his phraseology, particularly regarding his concept of the Immanent Will.¹⁵ Hardy never denied that he was interested in Schopenhauer's work, and it is true that these later works appear to show some influence. But Schopenhauer's solution to suffering through an ascetic life, for example, is not something that was taken up by Hardy; indeed, he did not, especially in later life, entertain the possibility of minimising suffering at all. It is beyond the remit of this thesis to discuss in detail where the philosophies of Hardy and Schopenhauer align and differ. However, it is worthwhile to identify Schopenhauer's as one of the many philosophies that emerge from Hardy's writing.

It is impossible to know whether Hardy was expecting his personal library to become part of his intellectual legacy and, therefore, impossible to know to what extent markings such as those in his copy of Brennecke's book and Garwood's thesis were contrived—though it seems unlikely that they were as writing in one's own books was standard practice in the period. It is unusual that he referred to himself in the third person, creating an intermediary that distanced the author from a categorical assertion of his influences while, at the same time, ensuring that there was no doubt concerning the identity of 'T.H.' should the library not be preserved intact. Whether or not these annotations were written with an eye to posterity, it is evident that public perception of his philosophical influences was of some importance to him.

In the *Life* he transcribed the following note written on New Year's Eve 1901:

After reading various philosophical systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this:—*Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience.* He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseology from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories if he values his own mental life.¹⁶ (emphasis in original)

¹⁵ For useful concise accounts of Schopenhauer's philosophy see Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (1946; London: Routledge, 2000), 722-7; Awet Moges, 'Schopenhauer's Philosophy' *The Galilean Library* 2006 <<http://www.galilean-library.org/schopenhauer.html>>, accessed 19 Jul. 2006; and Robert Wicks, 'Arthur Schopenhauer', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (12 May 2003) <<http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/schopenhauer/index.html>>, accessed 19 Jul. 2006.

¹⁶ *LW* 333.

Though this note firmly eschews adoption of the theories of ‘earlier philosophers’, it encourages the formation of an individual philosophy by ‘*every man*’, which, presumably, must include the author himself. It is important to clarify here that there is, of course, a difference between philosophy and *a* philosophy, and between subscribing to one philosophy and being inclined towards philosophical reflection. Crucial to Hardy’s position was that each man’s philosophy ought to be derived ‘*for himself out of his own experience*’. He was not advocating that man should formalise a philosophical position, but that, when looking for a principle by which to live his life he should be guided by his experience of the world, and when, more grandly, attempting to reach possible conclusions about the origin of things, he ought to be guided by his own intelligence and not be excessively influenced by existing philosophical systems and ideologies.

Yet it seems that Hardy was in practice reluctant to leave ‘*every man*’ to reach his own philosophical conclusions and that he could not resist the urge to share those he had reached himself, however vague he claimed they were. In December 1920, he wrote the following letter to an unidentified correspondent:

A friend of mine writes objecting to what he calls my “philosophy” (though I have no philosophy—merely what I have often explained to be only a confused heap of impressions, like those of a bewildered child at a conjuring show.) He says he has never been able to conceive a Cause of Things that could be less in any respect than the thing caused. This apparent impossibility to him, and to so many, has been long ago proved non-existent by philosophers, and is very likely owing to his running his head against a *Single* Cause, and perceiving no possible other. But if he would discern that what we call the First Cause should be called First Causes, his difficulty would be lessened. Assume a thousand unconscious causes—lumped together in poetry as one Cause, or God—and bear in mind that a coloured liquid can be produced by the mixture of colourless ones, a noise by the juxtaposition of silences, etc., etc., and you see that the assumption that intelligent beings arise from the combined action of unintelligent forces is sufficiently probable for imaginative writing, and I have never attempted scientific. It is my misfortune that people *will* treat all my mood-dictated writing as a single scientific theory.¹⁷ (emphasis in original)

¹⁷ L vi 48.

According to Millgate and Purdy, the compilers of Hardy's correspondence, this letter was actually not a letter at all, 'but a set of self-justifying arguments cast into epistolary form for purposes of publication in *Later Years*.'¹⁸ Apparently contrived to silence speculation, the letter-that-is-not-a-letter raises many more questions than it answers, not least because it is one in a series of contradictory statements on such matters. It is, on the surface, a defensive justification of Hardy's art, a careful response to those who would seek to place a label upon him—yet its very existence risks contradicting the message that it conveys. He dismisses the charges against his philosophy by stating that he has 'no philosophy', and diminishing the importance of what he does have with the words 'merely', 'only' and 'sufficiently probable'. His writing, he argues, was never intended to show a philosophy at all; it was simply an array of impressions and thoughts that had crossed his mind throughout the period of its composition. But by pretending that this letter was a piece of private correspondence, whilst always intending to have it published in a biography, Hardy silently acknowledged that this was not a trivial matter.

Rather than take the letter at face value and see it as a rejection of his claim to be seen as philosophical, we should see the letter as itself a model of the philosophy that Hardy sought to delineate. He throws a barrage of disparate images at his reader—the 'bewildered child at a conjuring show', the aggregation of 'unconscious causes', the colour and noise similes—moving in one short paragraph from childish recreation through metaphysics to science.¹⁹ The subject matter is equally heterogenous. He begins by contemplating philosophy, slips into considering poetry, and concludes with a hybrid of the two, referring both to the poetic fiction of a single Cause and to a God. This non-philosophy develops through three stages. First, he asserts that his view of the world is made up of a set of sensory experiences that are fascinating to observe and interesting to

¹⁸ *L* vi 48n.

¹⁹ Similarities in phraseology have been noted between the 'bewildered child at a conjuring show' image and Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism*. The word 'impressions' may owe a debt to Hume. Hardy does not use either the image or the word in the same way as Schopenhauer or Hume. See Gibson, 'Borrowing from Schopenhauer', 492-3 and, for a lucid account of Hume's 'impressions', see Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 634-47.

record, but impossible to fathom, and over which he has no control. Secondly, he implies that the world itself is merely an amalgamation of disparate causes that in isolation have no innate significance. Finally, he argues that, because his works are ‘imaginative’ and ‘mood-dictated’, and not scientific, the reader should not attempt to discern a system of philosophy because there is none to find. For Hardy, the object of interest should be the resulting literary work, and, by analogy, the world, and not its constituent parts or ‘Causes’, which are nothing more than accidental contributors to the whole. It is this last point that seems most disingenuous. Having asserted that he has no system of philosophy, Hardy intimates that he might have such a thing were he attempting a scientific explanation as opposed to an imaginative one. He draws a line between science and literature, aligning himself exclusively with the latter. Is he implying that, were he to be encouraged into that other domain, a systematic philosophy that has no place in fiction would become apparent?—that with the right tools and knowledge, it would be possible to unravel the mystery of First Causes?

There is something very slippery about the way in which Hardy treated these matters: he wrote (if Millgate and Purdy are right) a letter that was not a letter, to appear in an autobiography that he would not put his own name to, about a philosophy that he denied having (for what else can we call this explanation of First Causes if not philosophy?). Indeed, it seems that most of Hardy’s private papers were subject to manipulation in some way: famously, he took care to burn several of his private letters; many of his notebooks were destroyed, and those left were not intended for publication.²⁰ In early 1920 Hardy admitted his ‘inconsistencies’ to Joseph McCabe in the letter already mentioned, turning down the offer of an entry in the *Biographical Dictionary*.²¹ Due to illness Hardy authorised his wife Florence to respond on his behalf:

²⁰ See Lennart A. Björk’s ‘Textual Introduction’ in *LN xxxi* and Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 110-74.

²¹ *L vii* 162.

He says he thinks he is rather an irrationalist than a rationalist, on account of his inconsistencies. He has, in fact, declared as much in prefaces to some of his poems where he explains his views as being mere impressions that frequently change. Moreover, he thinks he could show that no man is a rationalist, and that human actions are not ruled by reason at all in the last resort. But this, of course, is outside the question.²²

This confession supports Hardy's proclaimed non-philosophy of chaotic 'impressions', yet there is a self-awareness here that, combined with all we know of his biographical stage-management, is impossible to ignore.

Interesting comparisons can be drawn between the 'confused heap of impressions' of the non-letter and Hardy's prefaces and notes to both *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. In the 1891 'Explanatory Note to the First Edition' of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy claimed to have attempted to give an 'artistic form to a true sequence of things'.²³ But in the 1892 'Preface to the Fifth and Later Editions' he withdraws any suggestion of a straightforward truth to be registered. He declares that the novel was 'oftener charged with impressions than with convictions' and that it 'is an impression, not an argument'.²⁴ '*Jude the Obscure*', he states in the 1895 'Preface to the First Edition', 'is simply an endeavour to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions'.²⁵ But when he writes the non-letter in 1920, his perception of philosophy has changed again, from a 'series' with 'shape and coherence' into a 'confused heap of impressions'. His efforts to elude any suggestion that there was a system or pre-existing philosophy grow more and more strenuous. He refuses either to concede that the impressions had innate meaning, or that he intended them to convey specific meanings.

In his response to the Rationalist Press Association's offer of membership in 1899 (mentioned previously), Hardy declared:

Though I am interested in the Society I feel it to be one which would naturally compose itself rather of writers on philosophy, science, and history, than of

²² L vii 162.

²³ Hardy, 'Explanatory Note to the First Edition', in TD 3.

²⁴ Hardy, 'Preface to the Fifth and Later Editions', in TD 4-7.

²⁵ Hardy, 'Preface to the First Edition', in JO xxxv-xxxix (xxxv-xxxvi).

writers of imaginative works, whose effect depends largely on detachment. By belonging to a philosophical association, imaginative writers place themselves in this difficulty, that they are misread as propagandist when they mean to be simply artistic and delineative.²⁶

Hardy suggests that his role as an artist comes into conflict with any straightforward public avowals of belief or unbelief: literature is a space for speculation, experimentation and entertainment. The author's role is simply to present the myriad of impressions as they occur to him then to step back and allow the reader to infer what he will—he claims no access to higher truths.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AGNOSTICISM: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO HARDY

There is, however, one philosophical stance with which Hardy has been loosely and—I shall argue—should be more particularly identified. Refusal, on principle, to subscribe to statements of belief about First Causes was the defining characteristic of late nineteenth-century agnosticism. The word entered the English language in the 1870s via a group of nineteenth-century liberal thinkers known, subsequently, as the agnostics. The word 'agnostic' was coined in 1869 by T. H. Huxley in order to give a name to the principle of rational unbelief in a divine being. Derived from the Greek *gnōsis* ('knowledge'), a-gnosis means, literally, 'without knowledge'. Its origins are, however, less clear than this brief account suggests. Loosely emerging out of Humean scepticism, the term itself eludes clear definition, and does not readily yield a neat historical narrative of development from the first conception of the term through its period of greatest influence to its observable decline or dilution.

The agnostics did not constitute a clearly defined group, nor is it apparent that their ideas were sufficiently similar to allow them to be retrospectively termed a movement.

²⁶ LW 327.

Agnostic thinkers such as T. H. Huxley, Leslie Stephen, W. K. Clifford and Herbert Spencer each had their own slightly different interpretations of what agnosticism meant. Spencer's definition was expounded before the term itself was even coined. In *First Principles* (1862) he argued that all belief systems, religious and scientific, were equally valid (and equally invalid) because they could all be traced back to the same single point, and that the contradictory elements of these systems were not necessarily derived from misinterpretation, but from the undiscoverable nature of the foundation itself.²⁷ Huxley and Clifford were primarily concerned with evidence, and sought to replace the unknowable object of religious worship, God, with one that could be more easily understood: the scientific laws of nature and the physical world. However, definitions of science varied. Huxley was an adherent of Newtonian physics and shied away from new statistical sciences that sought to examine the world on an unobservable atomic level.²⁸ Clifford, the youngest of Huxley's agnostic disciples, embraced the advances of the atomic sciences and argued that they did not undermine agnosticism; in fact, as they served to illustrate the limits of human cognition to an even greater extent, they actually provided agnosticism with one of its best defences.²⁹ Leslie Stephen treated agnosticism on a more human level, considering what it could offer the ordinary man. His essay 'An Agnostic's Apology' (1876) illustrates that, as far as Stephen was concerned, agnosticism provided a useful and more positive option for those who would have described themselves as atheist but really meant that they just could not know. He declared that agnosticism 'seem[ed] to imply a fairly accurate appreciation of a form of creed already common and daily spreading'; indeed, because ultimate truths cannot be located in any field of metaphysical

²⁷ Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862).

²⁸ Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 170-2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

enquiry, agnosticism is an inevitable state for all men, whatever creed they choose to follow.³⁰

The fluid nature of agnosticism is mirrored in Hardy's analysis of his own philosophy in several ways. First, both elude absolute definition in terms of the content of belief. Hardy categorically declares that he has 'no philosophy' before going on to outline an account, albeit a perplexing one, of his philosophy. Agnosticism cannot be defined in any positive sense because it did not have an easily recognisable set of codes by which its adherents must live. Secondly, Hardy took pains to rationalise his stance of non-commitment in his writings about aesthetics. The agnostics, too, were concerned to explain the rational grounds for their refusal of commitment, and held up that refusal as a point of principle for science and for life. Most importantly, Hardy shared the agnostics' view that it is futile to attempt to locate a First Cause for the world and our existence in it. On that point, he and they said, we have only our impressions—phenomena, not noumena. Hardy does not deny the possibility that there might be an unexplained enigma behind the world, but in referring to 'bewildered children' he echoes the agnostics' claim that there is a cognitive barrier that will prevent any arrival at ultimate knowledge. The basic premise of both Hardy and the agnostics is that, whether by design or by coincidence, ultimate truths are unavailable to us: mankind, as Stephen proposed, must necessarily be agnostic.

Aligning Hardy with agnosticism is not in itself new. Indeed, Hardy himself, in a rare moment of philosophical candour, wrote in the *Life* of his move to poetry:

Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing or cruel—which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries—will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I

³⁰ Leslie Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology', in id., *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays* (1876; New Delhi: Rupa, 2003), 1-39 (1). See my Chapter Three for a fuller analysis of 'An Agnostic's Apology'.

were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing.³¹

The two most recent studies to consider Hardy's agnosticism are Timothy Hands' *Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher?* (1989) and Deborah L. Collins' *Thomas Hardy and His God: A Liturgy of Unbelief* (1990).³² While both are significant works, neither fully tackles the matter of agnosticism itself—too readily characterising Hardy as an agnostic without investigating thoroughly what such a label might imply before moving on to discuss his religious and philosophical beliefs more generally. As shown below, the approaches adopted by both Hands and Collins are rather different from that undertaken in this thesis, in which agnosticism itself is the focus and its definition and consequences discussed in detail.

Timothy Hands argues that '[t]he nineteenth-century term "agnostic" is certainly the most suitable word for describing Hardy's views'.³³ A thorough examination of the author's 'religious biography', he claims, yields 'an appreciation of Hardy's fictional career which is... cogent and lucid'.³⁴ Tracing this 'religious biography', and examining the plethora of biblical allusions throughout Hardy's writings, Hands concludes that: 'Hardy almost seems to see his art as a kind of explanation of religion to himself, as part of a search for God. A concern with religion, an analysis of the relationship of man with what the nineteenth-century mind still regarded as man's maker, is fundamental to Thomas Hardy's art'.³⁵ Hands treats Hardy's agnosticism as a consequence of religious doubt, characterising the author as a 'not-knower' rather than an agnostic in the spirit of Huxley, and contrasting Huxley's 'clearly defined limits to his beliefs and doubts' with Hardy's 'artist[ic]' inability to do the same: 'Where there were no limits to his possible beliefs, there

³¹ LW 302.

³² Hands, *Distracted Preacher* and Deborah L. Collins, *Thomas Hardy and His God: A Liturgy of Unbelief* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

³³ Hands, *Distracted Preacher*, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 134.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 133.

were equally no limits to his doubts. Although there were few things which he could not believe, there were likewise few things that he could.³⁶

Although I broadly concur with much of what Hands argues—that Hardy embraces both belief and doubt—there is much more to be said about Hardy’s approach to nineteenth-century agnosticism. While Hands comes closer than any other commentator to considering the meaning of Hardy’s agnosticism, he misses the mark by expressing it in terms of a negative position (Hardy is, for him, a ‘not-knower’). Where Hands insists on Hardy’s uncertainty and equivocality, I propose that Hardy was, in fact, clear—and grew more so over time—about his philosophical outlook, and that the religious and philosophical ambiguities that characterise his novels, poetry and non-fictional writings do not indicate a conflict between belief and doubt, but rather follow from Hardy’s conclusion that knowledge was impossible (and therefore ambiguities were inevitable). Hardy’s position was one that embraced religious, philosophical and even political uncertainty as a positive standpoint. Thus, his claim in 1920 that he was an ‘irrationalist’ was not simply a negation of the rationalist position, but a principled position in itself; indeed, he claimed that ‘he could show that no man is a rationalist, and that human actions are not ruled by reason at all in the last resort’. This is a fully considered position not a dismissal. Hardy qualified the idea in his autobiography:

My own interest lies largely in non-rationalistic subjects, since non-rationality seems, so far as one can perceive, to be the principle of the Universe. By which I do not mean foolishness, but rather a principle for which there is no exact name, lying at the indifference-point between rationality and irrationality.³⁷

Hardy’s philosophical beliefs and what he says about the role of art come together here. Scientific writing must ultimately bow down to rationality, and rationalism can play no part in assessing the ‘principle of the Universe.’ The best way to undertake such an assessment is through a non-rational medium: art (specifically, in Hardy’s case, literature). Crucially,

³⁶ *Ibid.* 35-6.

³⁷ *LW* 332.

though, Hardy was not taking the opportunity to stake a special claim for literature—along the lines that it could provide the explanations and the principles that science could not access; rather, literature, as he saw it, by blending invention and reality (and, presumably, without stepping into the irrational realms of the fantastic), could best do justice to the human predicament of unknowingness by moving beyond rationality to explore the ‘indifference-point’ between rationality and irrationality. There is more to this world, Hardy argues, than reason can discover.

Deborah L. Collins addresses the matter of Hardy’s fragmented philosophy, saying that it ‘may appear to be a logicless, senseless *discordia* of ideas and beliefs...adding to the disorder in the universe’.³⁸ Taking a Bakhtinian approach, she counters such claims by arguing that ‘Hardy’s art emerges...as a polyphonic recapitulation and reinterpretation of his discovery that at the centre of man’s growing despair and confusion is his inability to fathom the nature of God.’³⁹ Collins attributes Hardy’s ‘polyphony’ to the ‘spirit of the age into which he was born, the incongruent circumstances of his birth and childhood, and the irreconcilable public and private experiences of his life’, suggesting that these factors were so influential upon him both as a man and as an artist that it was impossible for him not to register the discordance in his writings.⁴⁰

Recognising that Hardy would probably have been irritated by her endeavour, Collins breaks down Hardy’s polyphony into constituent voices in an effort to identify the various theories that informed his work, reminding her reader that her aim is not to ‘reveal that grand, forbidden philosophy nor to fabricate what cannot be found’, but to glean an ‘understanding of his canon.’⁴¹ The voices Collins examines are: first, one that argues that ‘God does not exist’; secondly, the voice of ‘full-blown Darwinism’; and, finally, the voice

³⁸ Collins, *Thomas Hardy and His God*, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 11, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 15.

of the 'heart'.⁴² She concludes that through the combination and interaction of these voices Hardy demonstrated that

In [his] temporal world, redemption is gained through an introspective progression toward self-discovery and self-forgiveness, and it is necessarily the result of that self-acceptance transformed into action by the compassionate exercise of freewill. If a man denies his brotherhood, extorts sympathy or profiteers grace, despises his own identity or seeks easy absolution in another's, he has unequivocally damned himself...⁴³

It is my contention that, while it is true that Hardy offered the solution of 'brotherhood' and 'self-acceptance' as ways of coping in a possibly Godless world, he did not offer the solution without a proviso: though there might be a way of coping with the world, it is nonetheless important to continue to speculate about its unfathomable origin and direction; indeed, in Collins's comment that by denying 'brotherhood' man 'unequivocally damn[s] himself', she reintroduces the language of religion and, along with it, the possibility of a God. A pull towards theological, philosophical and epistemological speculation remains at the forefront of Hardy's work. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Seven, Hardy's 'intractable commitment to non-commitment' (as Collins puts it) is what most significantly characterises his writings, rather than any answers to moral or epistemological problems he might have preferred.⁴⁴

This thesis seeks to assess critically the claim that Hardy was an agnostic—a claim which has not yet been satisfactorily investigated in the critical literature—looking closely at the meanings of agnosticism (in terms of the nineteenth-century usage of the word) and how Hardy's understanding of agnosticism manifests itself in his work. Rather than conceive of agnosticism as a doctrine with a set of clearly formulated codes and beliefs, it is necessary to treat it as a flexible cultural concept that comes out of intellectual debates in late nineteenth-century Britain. It is also necessary to clarify that nineteenth-century agnosticism was subtly different from agnosticism today. Agnosticism has come to mean,

⁴² Ibid. 15, 32, 97.

⁴³ Ibid. 170-1.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 169.

in general non-scholarly usage, an almost passive admission that one does not know whether there is a God—a verbal shrug of the shoulders, characterising what Hands refers to as adopting the posture of a ‘not-knower’. Nineteenth-century agnosticism was, by contrast, an *active* refusal to subscribe to theological systems, a principled stance of non-commitment. It was not simply saying nothing; it was a carefully reasoned declaration of the limits of human cognition. Finally, agnosticism is usually considered primarily with regard to religious belief; however, the concept of rational knowledge and the consequent problems of commitment that emerge from consideration of agnosticism can, I believe, reasonably be extended to incorporate other facets of human existence. Therefore, this thesis seeks also to expand upon traditional perceptions of agnosticism to view it as a stance not solely concerned with religion and belief in God, but with much broader implications for our ability to know quite basic things about other people and the world around us, including—pertinently for Hardy—the trustworthiness of love and the value of art.

It is not my aim to pin a label, or series of labels, on Hardy’s beliefs or philosophy, nor do I seek to offer a complete history of agnosticism. Rather, by exploring the novels and poetry as they intersect with the intellectual development of agnosticism, I show that at the centre of Hardy’s work, as at the centre of agnosticism, is an insistence upon final epistemological uncertainty, and that in everything he wrote Hardy applied the rational, but, more importantly for him, the artistic necessity of non-dogmatism. In addition, it will be demonstrated that Hardy’s opinion of agnosticism was not uncritical. In his later novels, he addressed the problems of applying agnostic principles in the real world and pessimistically illustrated both the impracticality and, finally, the undesirability of such exacting rationality. As such, his work can be read as a critical reinterpretation of the rationalist principles of agnostic thought within the domain of art.

Chapter One locates Hardy within the historical context of nineteenth-century agnosticism by examining his relationships with the agnostic thinkers, Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and Leslie Stephen. It demonstrates, largely through close examination of his letters, notes and diary entries, that Hardy was engaging with agnosticism at a crucial point in its historical development. Although not 'Agnostic', Hardy's epistemology is best understood as a critical reinterpretation of the agnosticism of his contemporaries, and new insights into his work can be gained by reading it as the testing ground for this epistemology. This chapter clarifies the distinction between Hardy's agnosticism and that of his contemporaries. Where many agnostics used their agnosticism as a defence for rational unbelief, Hardy was aware that once one acknowledged that absolute truths cannot be known, it was equally illogical to use this principle to insist upon absolute refusal of belief. It will be shown that Hardy's agnosticism was, in many senses, a purer form than that of his contemporaries, and more intellectually robust and consistent than most critics have been willing to concede. Charles A. Watts, writing in the 1885 edition of *The Agnostic Annual*, explained the beneficent diversity of properly-understood agnosticism:

The Agnostic, burdened with no supernatural predilections, and free from the trammels of superstition, can roam where he lists and pluck the blossoms of every creed of every country. He can accept of the poetry and simplicity of Christianity; he can partake of the beauty and majesty of Buddhism; he can welcome that which is true and useful in Mohammedanism. For underlying every system which has been promulgated by the various races of mankind there is a scintilla of truth, and he who would participate in the hopes and strivings of mankind, who revels in their joys and sorrows, who has no closed door to that which is wise and just, must have a catholic heart and a cosmopolitan mind. Agnosticism is eclecticism *in excelsis*, and herein lies its superiority over all other systems of religion and philosophy.⁴⁵

While Huxley and Stephen especially were using their agnosticism to rail against theism, Hardy restricted himself to a more literal interpretation, resisting the temptation to use it to reach a philosophical or theological standpoint, even a position of non-belief.⁴⁶ His

⁴⁵ Charles A. Watts, 'Agnosticism and Atheism', *The Agnostic Annual*, (1885), 3-4 (4).

⁴⁶ Huxley wrote two poems that were straightforwardly critical of theology and the Church: 'Altr' Arno, Florence' and 'Westminster Abbey'. These were published after his death in a volume of his wife's poetry.

insistence on epistemological uncertainty was an agnostic position in terms of its recourse to not-knowingness, but not one that can be labelled 'Agnostic'. Indeed, Hardy's agnosticism took the idea of not-knowingness beyond anything that the agnostics themselves achieved. Its proper application (which I refer to as 'pure agnosticism') was liberating: not closing the doors on philosophical possibilities, but throwing them open.

Chapter Two explores the novels that Hardy retrospectively believed to be his weakest and referred to disparagingly as 'Novels of Ingenuity' (*Desperate Remedies* (1871), *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) and *A Laodicean* (1881)). I argue that the simplistic narratives and sensational plot devices for which Hardy was criticised nevertheless offer important insights into how the author was engaging with questions of knowledge and commitment in this early period, and demonstrate his natural sympathies with agnosticism. Written over the first ten years of his career, these three experimental novels show the progress of Hardy's skills as an author as well as his developing views on the limits of knowledge, illustrating an apparent shift from a desperate need to locate the truth to a stance of resignation concerning the possibility of attaining that truth. By the end of this formative era, Hardy was beginning to depict the pursuit for knowledge or truth as essentially hopeless. In these three novels, he provides an artistic account of the history of the agnostic struggle and offers a justification for the stance of non-commitment.

In Chapter Three I look at *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) and *The Return of the Native* (1878), considering them as artistic (and critical) reinterpretations of two of Leslie Stephen's agnostic essays. This chapter illustrates the influence (professional and philosophical) Stephen had upon the novelist and demonstrates Hardy's efforts to interpret the philosophical ideas of his editor and recast and interrogate them in an artistic framework. The famous cliff scene in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* has been compared with Stephen's essay 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' (1872), and it has been acknowledged that Hardy

Though discussion of these poems falls outside the remit of this thesis, it is, nonetheless, interesting to see how Huxley treated his unbelief in poetry. See T. H. Huxley, 'Altr' Arno, Florence: In View of Michael Angelo's David and Galileo's Tower' and 'Westminster Abbey', in Henrietta A. Huxley, *Poems of Henrietta A. Huxley: With Three of Thomas Henry Huxley* (London: Duckworth, 1913), 2, 3-4.

used Stephen's essay as the model for the scene: to date, however, no one has explored the wider implications of Hardy's 'borrowing' for gaining an understanding of his philosophical viewpoint. By examining the similarities and differences between the two pieces, I consider what these might reveal about Hardy's early relationship with nineteenth-century agnosticism. *The Return of the Native* demonstrates both Hardy's increasingly critical response to his former editor's philosophy, particularly in 'An Agnostic's Apology' (1876), and a burgeoning independence with regard to his own approach to questions of metaphysics and epistemology. In contrast to the eternal pessimism of Stephen's staunchly agnostic position in his 'Apology', at the close of Hardy's novel, the hero, Clym, discovers, not happiness, but a peace that can only be achieved by flexibility and tolerance, indicating the author's agnosticism was not the inevitable and inflexible position that Stephen would have it be.

Written when agnosticism was well-established, if not popular, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *The Woodlanders* (1887) constitute Hardy's artistic contribution to the agnostic debates of the mid-1880s. In Chapter Four I consider Hardy's attempts to address what he saw as a fundamental problem with intellectual debate—that philosophers had a tendency to scientific detachment, failing to give due attention to the human subjects of their debates. Hardy saw the opportunities that his art, with its special focus on rural life, afforded to contextualise the debates, especially those about the human predicament, and to make them more pertinent to the common man. In these novels Hardy developed his consideration of the impossibility of knowledge into an exploration of the problems of commitment that follow from this impossibility, looking not, as the agnostics did, at theology, but at the implications of unknowingness for simpler matters, such as human relationships. For Hardy, there was an absurdity in dogmatism of any kind, but he also recognised that society places certain demands on the individual to make commitments to people and principles. Moderate (as opposed to strict) rationalism is upheld as one way of

addressing this paradox, but the increasing pessimism of these novels demonstrates that such an approach can only assuage suffering rather than prevent it.

In Chapter Five, I examine *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) as a philosophical thought-experiment, looking at the novel's textual development, from manuscript through serialisation to volume publication. Regarding Tess herself as the subject of Hardy's experiment, I examine the effects of the different moral codes to which she is subjected throughout the novel, particularly that of the (in the initial conception of the story) overtly agnostic Angel Clare. I demonstrate that what began as a simple tale of a ruined woman grew into a critical exploration of the effects of religious unbelief on the moral life. The manuscript and subsequent volume editions were subject to numerous revisions, and it can be seen that Hardy revised Angel's character towards more pronounced agnosticism, before later choosing to make that agnosticism less explicit and the character less sympathetic. Originally, Angel was to have experienced the struggle between logic and belief, and his original justification for rejecting Tess was to have been, unrelatedly, based on simple jealousy. But with the revisions Hardy chose to make Angel's agnosticism more problematic and Angel's attitude towards it hypocritical: it is a position he claims, but his rationalism is limited to theology and he does not, until it is too late, recognise the need to extend his philosophy to reassess his conservative Christian morality. *Tess* opens out further Hardy's consideration of agnosticism, demonstrating that the liberalism that should follow was rarely satisfactorily recognised by its traditional adherents. With Clare, Hardy illustrates one of the main problems faced by the agnostics: through the scrupulous application of rationality, all traditional arguments for the external basis of our moral codes are lost; how, then, can the agnostic justify his own moral instincts? This is not a matter that the novel answers, but it poses the question in a troublingly acute form.

Chapter Six proposes that Hardy's philosophical reflection on agnosticism's implications for morality was extended and revised in *Jude the Obscure* (1895). In this novel, though it is explicitly set before agnosticism was well known, Hardy looked ever more

critically at the consequences of Jude's proto-agnosticism, advocating again the non-dogmatic approach, but demonstrating it to be ultimately unfeasible in a society that is not yet ready for it. Focusing the narrative on an aspirational man of low social class, Hardy shows that philosophical speculation in general and agnosticism in particular are luxuries available only to the richer, more educated men in society. Unlike these privileged men, Jude is inextricably immersed in the human struggle, and, while he aspires to a philosophical life, he repeatedly makes decisions based on his understanding of what it feels like to be human rather than on philosophical and speculative abstractions. The rational position of the agnostics provides little help for moral and emotional life. Jude eventually chooses to live agnostically, in the Hardyian non-rational sense, but the tragic mode of this novel demonstrates Hardy's growing conviction that suffering is an inevitable part of being human, regardless of one's beliefs or moral standards. It is clear from Jude's efforts to extricate himself from the prescriptive values of society that his purer application of agnostic values (values which are governed only by the principle of loving-kindness and are entirely flexible beyond that imperative) cannot exist in isolation: loving-kindness cannot successfully be a guiding principle if there is nobody willing to reciprocate. Jude's tragedy, he realises, stems from the fact that the world is not ready for this new system of non-rationality and that he alone recognises its worth.

In Chapter Seven I argue that Hardy's rejection of novel-writing in favour of poetry-writing demonstrates, amongst other things, a desire to concentrate on a medium better suited to the relativist, non-committed, loosely agnostic outlook he had come to identify as appropriate to art and to life. Prose tends, as Hardy acknowledged, to be read as didactic, whereas poetry can hope to be understood as more impressionistic. I suggest that poetry gives a readier literary voice to Hardy's agnosticism, and was, for Hardy, a release from the constraints of narrative fiction. Poetry, as Hardy saw it, is more provisional, more partial and does not try to form a complete picture of society or of life. Moreover, the way in which the reading public consumes poetry is very different from the necessarily linear

way in which a novel is read, and the different conventions of reading allow it to function impressionistically. It is one of the strengths of poetry that it finally neither confirms nor disproves Hardy's allegiance to agnosticism, nor to any other philosophical standpoint. The principle of loving-kindness is again offered as the only possible strategy for coping in a world without God; however, the poetry demonstrates the persistent tug still towards the bigger questions of metaphysics and epistemology. Despite their diversity, the lyrics are all similar in that even when answers appear to have been reached, there is an inability and a reluctance on his part to leave off questioning.

CHAPTER ONE

AN ARTIST AMONG THE AGNOSTICS

In his letter to Ernest Brennecke in June 1924 (quoted above), Hardy said that his work showed ‘harmony of view’ with the philosophies of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Comte, Hume, Mill and others, and referred to his ‘kinship’ with them. Not all of the men named were identified with nineteenth-century agnosticism, but the inclusion of Huxley, Spencer and Darwin sufficiently weights the list in that direction to evidence Hardy’s intellectual engagement with agnostics. Moreover, both Huxley’s and Spencer’s agnosticism grew out of Humean scepticism.¹

Hardy was not personally acquainted with all those he named in his letter, and some of the agnostics he did not name were barely referred to in his private writings. For example, John Tyndall and W. K. Clifford are mentioned a number of times in Hardy’s *Literary Notebooks*, but there is no evidence to show that Hardy ever corresponded with or about them, and he made no published diary entries pertaining to either of them.² James Knowles is alluded to once in the *Life*, in a brief diary entry of 15 April 1893 where Hardy notes that he met Knowles at the Savile Club when dining there.³

However, Hardy did make several allusions in his private writings to three of the most prominent names in nineteenth-century agnosticism—Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley and Leslie Stephen—each of whom, Hardy claimed, had a great influence on him.⁴ This

¹ Darwin wrote in response to a letter asking him to declare whether or not he believed in God: ‘I think that generally (and more and more as I grow older), but not always, that an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind.’ Letter quoted in Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), 636.

² Tyndall is mentioned at *LN* i 855-60 and iii 2496. Entries on Clifford are at *LN* i 1215, i 1218, i 1282, i 1383, i 1452-3; ii 2049, ii 2090 and ii 2278.

³ *LW* 269. Hardy was a member of the Savile Club from 1878 until 1909. During this time Herbert Spencer was also a member, though Hardy makes no note of ever having met Spencer there. For a list of members of the Club, including the dates they were elected, see Anon., *The Savile Club: 1868-1923* (London, privately printed by the Committee of the Savile Club, 1923).

⁴ For further biographical data on Spencer, Huxley and Stephen, see *DNB* online edition: ‘Herbert Spencer’ *DNB Online*. Oxford University Press. <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/article/36208?docPos=2>> accessed 17 Jul. 2006; ‘Thomas Henry Huxley’ *DNB Online*. Oxford University Press. <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/article/14320>> accessed 17 Jul. 2006; and ‘Leslie Stephen’ *DNB Online*.

chapter explores the nature of Hardy's 'kinship' with nineteenth-century agnosticism, with reference to his philosophical and, where relevant, personal and professional relationships with these three agnostic thinkers. Largely through close examination of his letters, notes and diary entries, I demonstrate that Hardy was engaging with agnosticism at a crucial point in both his career and agnosticism's historical development. By knowing what he read, to whom he spoke, and what he deemed worthy of note and contemplation, it is possible to see the relevance of this philosophical debate to Hardy's repeated insistence on offering only a 'confused heap of impressions'.⁵ It will be shown that Hardy saw agnosticism as having broader consequences than most of his contemporaries recognised, going beyond its immediate applications to theology and rationalism: Hardy saw in agnosticism an opportunity to understand better human relationships, psychology and even the world itself, and his work is (among much else) a testing ground for his exploration of these ideas.

In his *Literary Notebooks*, under the heading 'Essence of Herbert Spencer', Hardy transcribed and annotated the following passage from an article by Spencer entitled 'Last Words about Agnosticism and the Religion of Humanity' that had appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* in November 1884.

The imbecility of human intelligence when brought to bear on the ultimate question. Phenomenon <[app^{ec}]> without noumenon <[reality]> is unthinkable; & yet noumenon cannot be thought of in the true sense of thinking. We are at once obliged to be conscious of a reality behind appearance, & yet can neither bring this consciousness of reality into any shape, nor can bring into any shape its connection with appearance. The forms of our thought, moulded on experiences of phenomena, as well as the connotations of our words formed to express the relations of phenomena, involve us in contradictions when we try to think of that which is beyond phenomena; & yet the existence of that which is beyond phenomena is a

Oxford University Press. <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/article/36271>> accessed 17 Jul. 2006. Leslie Stephen was the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* from 1881-1891.

⁵ Mentioned in my Introduction, p.6.

necessary datum alike of our thoughts & our words. We have no choice but to accept a formless consciousness of the inscrutable.⁶

Spencer argued that man seeks to make sense of the world as it appears to him by supposing that there must be some ultimate reality behind what he sees. Referring to this pursuit of fundamental truths as an example of human ‘imbecility’, Spencer described the paradox the pursuit presents: we attempt to delineate reality (noumena), but the only way we can access or describe reality is through and by using language and thought derived from appearance (phenomena). Spencer resolved this dilemma by accepting that the ‘real’ is necessarily ‘formless’ and ‘inscrutable’. Hardy clearly had sympathy with this theory, consistently presenting the world as composed of appearances and ‘impressions’ as opposed to noumena.

There is no evidence that Hardy ever met Herbert Spencer, but on more than one occasion Hardy cited him as one of his chief intellectual mentors and recommended his work to those seeking answers to philosophical questions. Hardy owned a number of Spencer’s works, and most have been marked and annotated to some degree. The earliest of these is Spencer’s three-volume *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative* (1868-78).⁷

Hardy’s notebooks are full of references to Spencer; indeed, he is one of the thinkers most cited by Hardy who, throughout his life, copied and annotated sections from a wide range

⁶ LN i 1335. See Herbert Spencer, ‘Last Words about Agnosticism and the Religion of Humanity’, *Nineteenth Century*, 16 (1884), 826-39 (835). This article was part of Spencer’s attack on the Positivists, a group towards which Hardy was greatly attracted.

⁷ Herbert Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, 3 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1868-78). See also Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy’s Library at Max Gate: Catalogue of an Attempted Reconstruction*, <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/fisher/hardy/>> accessed 29 Jun. 2006. In his introduction to the website, Millgate is careful to point out that his online reconstruction of the Max Gate Library is an ‘attempt’ to record the contents of the library that will, ‘inevitably, remain incomplete’. The reconstruction is a consolidation of lists from various sales and donations, and also includes—as far as possible—records of the current locations of the texts. There were no comprehensive records kept while Florence remained alive or between the date of her death in October 1937 and the ‘Max Gate sale’ at Hodgson & Co. (a London auction house) on 26 May 1938, and it is known that some books were donated to hospitals and given to family and friends after Hardy’s own death in January 1928. In addition, Millgate points out that Hardy ‘also borrowed from Mudie’s and other circulating libraries (e.g., The Times Book Club), and that he spent much time in libraries both locally (e.g., the Dorset County Museum) and in London (e.g., at the Athenaeum Club and the British Museum)’. Hardy owned a copy of both the fourth edition of *First Principles* (1880) and a two volume edition published in 1910, as well as Spencer’s two-volume *An Autobiography* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904). Also in the Max Gate Library, was a copy of Spencer’s *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1905), though this has the signature and bookplate of ‘Mrs. Hardy’, which Millgate presumes to be Florence rather than Emma as the latter ‘seems never to have had a personal bookplate.’

of Spencer's works on theology, politics, psychology and evolution.⁸ It is clear from the quantity of references to matters of belief that Hardy's main interest was in Spencer's thoughts in that area, chiefly those expressed in *First Principles*, which Hardy first read in the 1870s.⁹

First Principles is now acknowledged to be scientifically misinformed and—even in its own day—was often criticised as pretentious. Hardy was much more tolerant. In July 1893 he wrote in praise and defence of Spencer in an oft-cited letter to Lena Milman, the daughter of a family friend:

I promised myself the pleasure of answering your letter on Spencer, &c. as soon as I could get into a quiet corner of the world, which I have at last done. I am glad to find that you are interested in "First Principles"—a book which acts, or used to act, upon me as a sort of patent expander when I had been particularly narrowed down by the events of life. Whether the theories are true or false, their effect upon the imagination is unquestionable, and I think beneficial. You will soon get hold of the phraseology, for which he has been ridiculed by some critics; the fact being that it is a style of writing from which he could hardly escape in handling such subjects.¹⁰

For Spencer, all ways of interpreting the world are derived from the same single point but that point itself cannot be discovered: thus, the principles of theology and science (and, for Hardy, art) are based on the same central point, the Unknowable, and each school of thought diverges only through its interpretation of the Unknowable. Hardy summarised the essence of Spencer's theory into his notebook in the following terms: 'All things known to us are manifestations of the Unknowable'.¹¹ As the letter above shows, it did not finally matter to Hardy whether Spencer's theories were 'true or false'; this theory of the Unknowable broadened his imagination (after it had been 'narrowed...by the events of life'), providing Hardy with important philosophical support for his principled stance of

⁸ For notes taken on Spencer's views of politics, biology and psychology see LN i 495; i 882-96; i 1216; i 1221-7; i 1328-9; i 1465; and ii 2243. LN iii 2510 is a pasted cutting of 'Spencer and the Abbey', *Daily Chronicle*, 14 Sep. 1906, 3, a piece which discusses the appropriateness of the Dean of Westminster's refusal to allow a memorial plaque to Herbert Spencer to be placed in the Abbey. See also L iv 26.

⁹ See Lightman's chapter on 'Herbert Spencer and the Worship of the Unknowable', in *The Origins of Agnosticism*, 68-90.

¹⁰ L ii 24-5.

¹¹ LN ii 2087. For a fuller account of Spencer's agnosticism, see A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Unbelievers: English Agnostic Thought: 1840-1890* (London: Collins, 1964), 73-85.

non-commitment in philosophy and motivated him to explore that non-commitment within his art, both as the implicit subject matter of his work and in the paradigm of this stance that his body of work, so full of unresolved ideas, came to represent.

Spencer's views contrasted with those of another central figure in nineteenth-century agnosticism, the founder of the term 'agnostic' and the great defender and populariser of scientific naturalism, Thomas Henry Huxley, though the two men were friends. With his 'cutting tongue and a chip on his shoulder', Huxley was the chief popular advocate of Darwinism and carried evolutionary theory beyond what Darwin had written in *The Origin of Species* (1859) to its implicit conclusions regarding the origin of the human species.¹² As Huxley's biographer Adrian Desmond reminds us, it was Huxley and not Darwin 'who enraptured and outraged audiences in the 1860s with talk of our ape ancestors and cave men.'¹³

Huxley, although he coined the word 'agnostic' in 1869 to describe himself, did not publish his interpretation of agnosticism until 1889 in his essay 'Agnosticism' in the February edition of the *Nineteenth Century*.¹⁴ As Bernard Lightman explains:

Huxley's relationship with the form of unbelief for which he supplied a name is... complicated. Not only was he reluctant to identify himself unambiguously as an agnostic in public until 1883, his restricted rhetorical use of agnostic concepts during the 1870s and 1880s was also compromised when other unbelievers, with different agendas, sought to capitalize on the polemical advantages of referring to themselves as agnostics. As a result, he was not always associated with agnosticism in the public mind and his original conception of it was modified by others to the point where he felt compelled to intervene in 1889 to set the record straight.¹⁵

In the twenty years since Huxley had first described himself as agnostic, such divergence had been created in the definitions of the word by those (including Spencer) who sought to apply it to themselves that Huxley decided to reclaim the word and to speak out for his

¹² Adrian Desmond, *Huxley: From Devil's Disciple to Evolution's High Priest* (1997; London: Penguin, 1998), xv.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ T. H. Huxley, 'Agnosticism', *Nineteenth Century*, 25 (1889), 169-94.

¹⁵ Bernard Lightman, 'Huxley and Scientific Agnosticism: The Strange History of a Failed Rhetorical Strategy', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 35 (2002), 271-89 (273).

own version of agnosticism, writing that ‘Not only are the three accounts of the agnostic position sadly out of harmony with one another, but I propose to show cause for my belief that all three must be seriously questioned by anyone who employs the term “agnostic” in the sense in which it was originally used.’¹⁶ Huxley’s agnosticism was very much a critical and negative attitude: he refused to adopt propositions unless they were based upon adequate evidence. Theism, for example, was not based on evidence, whereas evolution and science, for Huxley, were sufficiently so to warrant acceptance. Spencer was less narrowly empirical in his concerns. Where for Huxley the unknowable was just that, Spencer approached the issue with a philosophical interest in metaphysics, holding that the existence of the Unknowable could be positively known, albeit in an indefinite and extralogical way. For Huxley, this went against his view of what agnosticism meant. Not mincing his words, he described it as ‘merely the Absolute “redivivus”, a sort of ghost of an extinct philosophy, the name of a negation hocus-pocussed into a sham thing’.¹⁷

Hardy met Huxley for the first time in the summer of 1879 at Knapdale, the South London residence of Alexander Macmillan, a publisher who more than a decade earlier had offered encouragement for Hardy’s first (unpublished) novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*.¹⁸ Over that summer, Knapdale hosted Hardy and his first wife, Emma, on a number of occasions, and it was there that he encountered many of what Gittings describes as his ‘fruitful London contacts’, both old and new.¹⁹ Already armed with a passion for Darwin’s works, Hardy had read and admired Huxley’s work (though apparently did not himself own

¹⁶ Huxley, ‘Agnosticism’, 169. The three men whose understanding of agnosticism Huxley sought to disprove were Henry Wace, Samuel Laing and Frederic Harrison. Lightman also names Tyndall, Clifford, Spencer and Stephen among the men who claimed to be—and reinterpreted Huxley’s definition of—agnostic. See Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism*, 141.

¹⁷ Huxley’s reply to a letter from Frederick Gould of 23 December 1889 in which Gould had asked Huxley to explain the gap that Gould perceived between Huxley’s agnosticism and Spencer’s following publication of Huxley’s ‘Agnosticism’ in the *Nineteenth Century* of February that year. Huxley’s reply is quoted in Lightman, ‘Huxley and Scientific Agnosticism’, 287. For a full account of Huxley’s agnosticism, see Cockshut, *Unbelievers*, 86-98.

¹⁸ Robert Gittings, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Penguin, 2001), 392-3. See also Millgate, *A Biography*, 196. *The Poor Man and the Lady* was never published as a novel, although in 1878 it appeared in the *New Quarterly Magazine*, reworked into a short story entitled ‘An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress’.

¹⁹ Gittings, *Thomas Hardy*, 392.

any books written by Huxley), and meeting the scientist fortified this high regard.²⁰ Of course, by this date, Huxley had not yet expounded his theories of agnosticism, and so the works that Hardy admired cannot have been Huxley's agnostic essays, and were probably his work on *The Origin of Species*. In his autobiography, Hardy writes, 'For Huxley Hardy had a liking which grew with knowledge of him—though that was never great—speaking of him as a man who united a fearless mind with the warmest of hearts and the most modest of manners', and he lists Huxley as one of the London contacts with whom he 'became friendly' in the first half of 1880.²¹ Their association seems to have been one formed through mutual acquaintances and official gatherings, although little can be gleaned of particular encounters between them. In his private writing Hardy refers to a number of social events at which both men were present, such as the Royal Academy's annual dinner in July 1887 and Tennyson's funeral in October 1892.²² In November 1881 Hardy named Huxley as one of his referees on an application to visit the Observation Department of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich.²³

The earliest of Hardy's notebook entries pertaining to Huxley are quotations and annotations from the latter's 1880 essay, 'The Coming of Age of *The Origin of Species*'.²⁴ One of the notes Hardy made highlights the problems facing the founding of any new theory: 'It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions.'²⁵

Although Huxley was primarily referring to Darwin's theory of evolution here, the sentiment could be appropriately applied to Huxley's later view of what agnosticism had become since he first used the word in 1869. Huxley, as we have seen, wanted to reclaim

²⁰ Millgate, *Thomas Hardy's Library*.

²¹ LW 125, 140. Huxley is unique in Hardy's list in having a comment parenthetically appended to his name: 'met before'.

²² LW 207 and L i 287.

²³ L i 96. Hardy was visiting the Observatory as part of his research for *Two on a Tower* (1882).

²⁴ The essay was later published in the *Science and Culture and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1881). Hardy's notes on Huxley can be found at: LN i 1269-71; i 1386; i 1399; ii 2051; ii 2052; ii 2430. The notes are from the following Huxley texts: 'Scientific and Pseudo-Scientific Realism' (1887; *Collected Essays by T. H. Huxley*, vol. 5; London: Macmillan, 1894), 90-125; *Hume: With Helps to the Study of Berkeley* (1878; *Collected Essays by T. H. Huxley*, vol. 6; London: Macmillan, 1894); 'Science and Morals' (1886; *Collected Essays by T. H. Huxley*, vol. 9; London: Macmillan, 1894), 117-46; and other miscellaneous and unidentified, sections of *Collected Essays by T. H. Huxley*, 9 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1894).

²⁵ LN i 1269.

agnosticism and to distance the term from the superstitions of other thinkers who sought to interpret the theory themselves. His version of agnosticism did not allow room for theology or any other school of thought that was not provable through scientific investigation and evidence. Hardy, attracted by the philosophical liberty that he saw emerging from Spencer's agnosticism, would have found Huxley's methodology overly restricting. Though he realised that answers to philosophical questions were ultimately unprovable, Hardy did not believe that fact to be justification enough to cease the questioning. So, where Huxley used his agnosticism to dismiss theology and other non-empirical schools of thought, Hardy used his to contemplate the possibilities that these philosophies might offer.

Leslie Stephen took an equally hard-headed approach to agnosticism. For him (as it had been for Huxley), agnosticism was a way of distancing oneself from the heretical inheritors of the Gnostic creed, the orthodox Church, certain factions of which claimed to have special knowledge of God. In his 1876 essay, 'An Agnostic's Apology' he draws attention to (although does not name) a recent paper that had outlined an exact relationship between the parts of the Trinity and attempted to define the nature of God; such a publication would have been damnable had a scientist claimed to have similar knowledge of the workings of the universe.²⁶ He declared, with characteristic bullishness, that '[i]f Agnosticism is the frame of mind which summarily rejects these imbecilities, and would restrain the human intellect from wasting its powers on the attempt to galvanise into sham activity this *caput mortuum* of old theology, nobody need be afraid of the name.'²⁷ Stephen asserted that whatever one called oneself on an individual level, and however one chose to worship, collectively human beings must be agnostic. Those who denied this simply covered up the agnostic parts of their creed with 'whisper[s]... or technical jargon'.²⁸

²⁶ Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology', 4-5.

²⁷ Ibid. 7.

²⁸ Ibid. 38.

In his autobiography Hardy acknowledged a philosophical debt to the self-proclaimed agnostic Stephen, declaring him to be ‘the man whose philosophy was to influence his own for many years, indeed, more than that of any other contemporary’.²⁹ But Hardy did not accept Stephen’s version of agnosticism without question: Stephen’s interpretation was overly inflexible for Hardy and did not recognise the opportunities that a stance of non-commitment on claims of absolute truth could offer. Hardy’s critical interpretation of Stephen’s philosophy is the focus of Chapter Three.

Nonetheless, Stephen was clearly a central figure in Hardy’s life. He played a crucial role in Hardy’s career and, in contrast to both Huxley and Spencer, Hardy’s relationship with Stephen grew into one of close friendship. Hardy took a profound interest in the character of his friend and mentor, even writing a sonnet about him in later years (discussed below). Hardy’s biography, letters and notebooks contain frequent references to him, although it seems that his library contained only *Some Early Impressions* (1924), a work published twenty years after Stephen’s death in 1904.³⁰ An early passage in the *Life* draws attention to links that existed between them even before Hardy had embarked upon his literary career. In 1862, by strange coincidence, they frequented the same London address (8 St. Martin’s Place), home both to the drawing rooms of Arthur Blomfield (who employed Hardy as his assistant architect) and to the Alpine Club, of which Stephen was a member.³¹ They never met, but looking back on his life, Hardy saw fit to mention this ‘linking coincidence’ in his memoirs—an indication that his relationship with Stephen was to be one of great import.³² In addition, the inclusion of this seemingly inconsequential incident seems to be an example of the ‘unintelligent forces’ he referred to in his 1920 non-letter: a coincidence that later takes on the pleasing, though illusory, appearance of fate.³³ It was more than ten years later, in December 1872, that Stephen wrote to Hardy expressing

²⁹ LW 102.

³⁰ Leslie Stephen, *Some Early Impressions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924). See L vi 255 and Millgate, *Thomas Hardy’s Library*.

³¹ LW 42.

³² Ibid.

³³ For full discussion of the non-letter, see my Introduction, p.6.

his admiration for *Under the Greenwood Tree*, at that time appearing anonymously in *Tinsley's Magazine*, and requested that Hardy write something for the *Cornhill Magazine* of which Stephen was editor.³⁴ At the time, Hardy was already contracted to write his next novel (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*) for Tinsley, but he offered Stephen an idea for a rural tale about a lady farmer, and Stephen, although sorry that the contribution would be delayed, agreed.³⁵ In January 1874, the first part of *Far from the Madding Crowd* appeared under Stephen's editorship.

Between 1873 and 1876 both *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Hand of Ethelberta* were serialised in the *Cornhill*, and it is clear from correspondence between the two men that Stephen kept a watchful eye on Hardy's writing. The latter appreciated and heeded the advice of his mentor, at least in the early days of the relationship. In a letter to Stephen in February 1874, Hardy conceded several editorial points recommended by Stephen, writing:

The truth is that I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers. Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of a completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial.³⁶

One of Hardy's biographers, Robert Gittings, attributes the 'mature quality' of *Far from the Madding Crowd* to Stephen's critical input, suggesting that the editor 'shap[ed] the luxuriant and often poetic material that Hardy presented to him, without losing its fullness and strength.'³⁷ Hardy later remarked that Stephen's critical approval was only expressed as 'disapproval minimised', although it is notable that many of the alterations suggested were not artistic, but rather related to appropriateness for a genteel magazine, such as the

³⁴ In his letter, Stephen explains that he had traced Hardy through their mutual friend, Horace Moule, who had written a favourable review of *Under the Greenwood Tree* for the *Saturday Review*. However, according to Michael Millgate, 'Frederick Greenwood [journalist, man-of-letters and the editor of the *Cornhill* from 1864-8] subsequently claimed to have been the first to draw the book to Stephen's attention.' See Millgate, *A Biography*, 147.

³⁵ LW 98.

³⁶ L i 28.

³⁷ Gittings, *Thomas Hardy*, 270.

excising of the scene describing the corpse of Fanny Robin's illegitimate child.³⁸ Stephen was concerned that Hardy should recognise the difficulties faced by an editor of a magazine like the *Cornhill* and wrote apologetically about the dominance of Grundyism and the prudish attitudes of many of his readers.³⁹

Their professional relationship developed into a friendship as Hardy realised the prudence of Stephen's mindfulness of the Grundyist critics. As Harold Orel notes, Hardy 'benefited from the coolly pragmatic advice - relating to the concoction of commercially-acceptable fiction - that Stephen provided over a period of years.'⁴⁰ However, as Hardy's literary career progressed, his attitude towards censorship became less flexible (as he had predicted in his letter of February 1874), and the value of writing frankly about human existence, particularly sexuality, grew more important to him. When Stephen expressed his concerns over publishing *The Return of the Native* because he believed the complex relationships between Eustacia, Thomasin and Wildeve would be 'dangerous' in a magazine, Hardy proved less willing to bend than in the earlier years of his career, and in 1877 their author-editor relationship (though not their friendship) came to an end.⁴¹

After Stephen's death in 1904, Frederic Maitland invited Hardy, as a friend of Stephen, to make a contribution to the forthcoming biography *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*.⁴² In it, Hardy provides a valuable account of their relationship, both professional and social. He describes Stephen's regret at not being offered *The Trumpet-Major* in 1880 (despite reservations he had earlier expressed as to its historical subject-matter) and remarks

³⁸ LW 178 and Millgate, *A Biography*, 160.

³⁹ Leslie Stephen, letter to Thomas Hardy, 12 March 1874, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study*, ed. Richard Little Purdy (1954; Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 338-9. See LW 101-2. For a thorough study of the amendments and bowdlerisations Hardy was required to make while writing for Stephen, see Rosemarie Morgan, *Cancelled Words: Rediscovering Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴⁰ Harold Orel, 'The Literary Friendships of Thomas Hardy', *English Literature in Transition*, 24 (1981), 131-45 (139).

⁴¹ LW 112. *The Return of the Native* was subsequently serialised in *Belgravia* from January to December 1878.

⁴² Frederic William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth, 1906). Hardy's contribution is reproduced in Michael Millgate (ed.), *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257-65.

that the editor believed the heroine had married the wrong man.⁴³ Hardy had developed a heightened artistic independence by this time and, rather than concede the point to his mentor, he responded that in his experience heroines usually did. Stephen, who had long suspected that Hardy did not fully appreciate the constraints on a magazine editor, replied bluntly, 'Not in magazines'.⁴⁴ Hardy tells of the decline in their relationship following this correspondence: 'a ten years' chasm of silence came between us in our pilgrimage—a silence which I shall always regret.'⁴⁵

In Maitland's *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, Hardy describes a moment in 1875 that is a strong indication of their closeness until that point, and of Stephen's sense of their intellectual kinship:

One day [March 23, 1875], I received from Stephen a mysterious note asking me to call in the evening, as late as I liked. I went, and found him alone, wandering up and down his library in slippers; his tall thin figure wrapt in a heath-coloured dressing-gown. After a few remarks on our magazine arrangements, he said he wanted me to witness his signature to what, for a moment, I thought was his will; but it turned out to be a deed renunciatory of holy orders, under the Act of 1870. He said grimly that he was really a reverend gentleman still, little as he might look it, and that he thought it as well to cut himself adrift of a calling for which, to say the least, he had always been utterly unfit. The deed was executed with due formality. Our conversation then turned upon theologies decayed and defunct, the origin of things, the constitution of matter, the unreality of time and kindred subjects. He told me that he had "wasted" much time on systems of religion and metaphysics, and that a new theory of vortex rings had a "staggering fascination" for him.⁴⁶

There is something strangely gothic about this scene: Hardy, who had only really known Stephen in a professional capacity until this point, is summoned to his home in the dead of night to witness an irreligious confirmation. Stephen, somewhat melodramatically, paces up

⁴³ LW 131 and Noel Gilroy Annan, *Leslie Stephen: His Thought and Career in Relation to his Time* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1951), 66. *The Trumpet-Major* was eventually accepted by William Isbister and Revd. Dr. Donald Macleod, respectively the publisher and editor of *Good Works*, and it was serialised in twelve monthly instalments from January to December 1880. It was also serialised in the American journal *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* from January 1880 to January 1881 without the excisions required by Macleod in Britain.

⁴⁴ Maitland, *Leslie Stephen*, 277. Earlier in the piece, at 275, Hardy recounts an incident in 1873 involving his pride at *The Times*' positive reception of a contentious part of a serial (unspecified, but most probably, given the date, *Far from the Madding Crowd*) about which Stephen had expressed regret for not omitting. Hardy writes, 'I suppose my manner was slightly triumphant; at any rate, he said, "I spoke as editor, not as man. You have no more consciousness of these things than a child."'

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 277.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 263-4. The square brackets are reproduced from the original.

and down his library in his nightclothes in anticipation of this strange act, which is approached ‘grimly’ and executed with ‘formality’. That, out of all of his contemporaries (many of whom had declared themselves agnostic), Stephen should choose Hardy to witness this deed is significant. Perhaps, though, Hardy was the obvious choice for providing a witness’s signature to this particular act: he had, after all, made the conscious decision in his youth not to take these vows himself, thus relinquishing his chance to take a degree. Could it be that Stephen was anxious to match, belatedly, his friend’s principled stance of non-commitment in matters of religion? In his rather comical rendering of the scene, however, Hardy illuminates the problematic nature of agnosticism. Stephen’s scene of refusal of his earlier irrational faith is tacitly also a scene of declaration of faith in agnosticism. There is a certain comedy in Stephen’s need to document his commitment to non-commitment. A proper stance of agnosticism, it seems, could only be achieved by following Hardy’s example and making no act of allegiance in the first place. In Stephen’s case, the closest he could come was to retract his earlier commitment.

In his autobiography, Hardy describes a letter sent to him in February 1888 by the Rev. Dr. A. B. Grosart who sought Hardy’s advice on how one might reconcile the horrors and pains in the world with the concept of ‘absolute goodness and non-limitation of God’:

The Rev. Dr A. B. Grosart ventures to address Mr Hardy on a problem that is of life and death; personally, and in relation to young eager intellects for whom he is responsible.... Dr Grosart finds abundant evidence that the facts and mysteries of nature and human nature have come urgently before Mr Hardy’s penetrative brain.⁴⁷

Hardy responded that ‘[p]erhaps Dr. Grosart might be helped to a provisional view of the universe by the recently published *Life of Darwin*, and the works of Herbert Spencer and other agnostics’.⁴⁸ Stephen was the recipient of a similar letter from Grosart and, Hardy recorded, was less tactful and helpful than Hardy himself had been, saying that ‘as the reverend doctor was a professor of theology, and he himself only a layman, he should have

⁴⁷ LW 213-4

⁴⁸ LW 214.

thought it was the doctor's business to explain the difficulty to his correspondent, and not his to explain it to the doctor.'⁴⁹ Hardy, unlike his agnostic contemporaries, did not treat the conflict between theology and agnosticism as a battle in which one must take sides. Whereas Stephen treated the reverend's appeal with contempt, Hardy used it as an opportunity to introduce Grosart to a new set of ideas. That a man of Grosart's standing chose to write to Hardy about such matters suggests that the writer was considered a respectable voice in the nineteenth-century dialogue about the problem of belief.

Hardy's lasting personal impression of Stephen was expressed in a sonnet written in the Swiss Alps in June 1897. An avid and experienced climber, in 1861 Stephen had become the first person to scale the Alpine Peak, the Schreckhorn. When Hardy travelled in the region several years later he saw in the peak a fitting symbol of his friend's character. Hardy had intended to send the sonnet to Stephen, but changed his mind and in the end Stephen never read it. However, Stephen's daughter, Virginia Woolf, read it and approved, writing that 'this poem was incomparably the truest and most imaginative portrait of her father.'⁵⁰

The Schreckhorn
(*With thoughts of Leslie Stephen*)
(*June 1897*)

ALOOOF, as if a thing of mood and whim;
Now that its spare and desolate figure gleams
Upon my nearing vision, less it seems
A looming Alp-height than a guise of him
Who scaled its horn with ventured life and limb,
Drawn on by vague imaginings, maybe,
Of semblance to his personality
In its quaint glooms, keen lights, and rugged trim.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Incidentally, Grosart's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* had proved problematic for Stephen in his early days as the *Dictionary's* editor. See 'Stephen', *DNB Online*.

⁵⁰ Gittings, *Thomas Hardy*, 266. See also John Halperin, 'Leslie Stephen, Thomas Hardy, and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*', *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), 738-45.

At his last change, when life's dull coils unwind,
 Will he, in old love, hitherward escape,
 And the eternal essence of his mind
 Enter this silent adamantine shape,
 And his low voicing haunt its slipping snows
 When dawn that calls the climber dyes them rose?⁵¹

It perhaps says something about Woolf's relationship with her father that she considered this the most accurate depiction ever given of him. The most striking thing about the piece is how little it says, and how much it implies, about Stephen. The delineation of Hardy's mentor is almost entirely in the subjunctive, conditional and interrogative rather than the indicative mood. Hardy opens the sonnet by declaring the remoteness of the mountain. It is 'Aloof... spare and desolate'—but everything else in this opening stanza works to convey unknowability, not certainty: 'mood and whim', 'vision', 'vague imaginings'. As Hardy approaches the Schreckhorn, a 'near[er] vision' emerges in which the mountain becomes a likeness of, and substitute for, Stephen, and the speaker begins speculatively to articulate Stephen's personality. There is an analogy, but not a complete one, between Hardy's cast of mind in seeking to understand Stephen, and the cast of mind that may have drawn Stephen to want to scale the mountain, as if the mountain itself is helping the poet to understand his old friend. What had seemed 'looming' and hard emerges, with 'nearing vision', as less desolate, but also less clear. It is available now to Hardy's vision, as he imagines it was to Stephen's. But the poet also clearly does not identify with this hardy, venturesome man, risking 'life and limb'.

In the second stanza, Hardy begins to romanticise Stephen's imagined future death as an 'escape' from life, and he heralds a new rose-coloured dawn in which the dying Stephen will enter the 'silent adamantine shape' of the mountain 'in old love', and become part of its allure to other climbers. At the last, the 'essence' of Stephen will be freed from 'life's dull coil', and he will be able to unite eternally with the mountain that he loved, suggesting a secular compensation for the lost consolations of the religion he had

⁵¹ CP 264.

renounced. The mountain, and Stephen immanent in it, has become 'adamantine', although an air of tentativeness is maintained with indefinite words like 'shape' and 'haunt', as if there were still something ungraspable about his subject. Significantly, Hardy eschews the usual idea of reaching the summit of the mountain, an age-old symbol of the pursuit of knowledge. He emulates the agnostic's withholding of final clarities, ending the poem, appropriately, with a question mark.

Stephen, Huxley and Spencer all appear in the afore-mentioned *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Rationalists* because each of them, in one way or another, had obviously subscribed to a rationalist philosophy.⁵² In the letter to decline McCabe's offer to include Hardy in the dictionary (mentioned previously), Florence wrote on behalf of her husband that 'he cannot honestly claim to belong to the honourable body you are including in your dictionary, whom he admires for their straightforward sincerity and permanent convictions, though he does not quite think he can claim their title'.⁵³ Unlike his agnostic friends, Hardy could not commit to any one stance, even that of rational withholding of belief, with 'straightforward sincerity and permanent convictions'. He continued throughout his life, right up until his death in January 1928, to interrogate new systems of philosophy, and, whilst he would never commit, he still allowed them to contribute to the 'confused mass of impressions' that made up his view of the world. Thus, Hardy proved himself to be in an important sense more strictly agnostic than the self-proclaimed agnostics themselves. He never fully committed himself philosophically, not even to non-commitment.

Hardy appreciated that this stance of non-commitment was not straightforward. He copied the following note from an unidentified article by Spencer into one of his literary notebooks:

⁵² See my Introduction, p.2.

⁵³ L vii 162. Also, see Introduction.

To the mass of people nothing is so costly as thought. The fact that, taking the world over, ninety-nine people out of a hundred accept the creed to which they were born, exemplifies their mental attitude towards things at large. Nearly all of them pursue mechanically the routine to which they have been accustomed, and are not only blind to its defects, but will not recognize them as defects when they are pointed out.⁵⁴

This note appears to show a measure of intellectual snobbery. However, Hardy did not understand Spencer to imply that the laziness or stupidity of these ‘ninety-nine people out of a hundred’ were the factors that deterred them from ‘thought’. He realised that, in rejecting an ingrained system of belief, the individual risked losing a lot: principally the familiarity and the sustaining comfort of its creeds. In 1903 Hardy saw this natural apprehension as a limiting factor for Comte’s Positivism (see Introduction): though people may have perceived the value of Positivism as a moral and humane system, its distance from Christianity was for them uncomfortable.⁵⁵ Hardy recognised that philosophical re-education involves the difficult process of shedding embedded beliefs, emptying the mind of all presuppositions before opening oneself up to a host of new modes of thought. But this purge provides only temporary relief from the burden of false dogma. It is in man’s nature to look for a way of understanding his world, and, inevitably, alternative systems will be established, ‘revised beliefs [that] are but partially true’, Hardy wrote in his notebook.⁵⁶ What replaces the original principles might seem more logical and more fitting, but ultimately any new system of dogma will be just as ‘erroneous’ as the old.⁵⁷ Therefore, the shedding of beliefs is only the first step in reaching Hardy’s purer agnostic standpoint. The second step is refusing to commit to any new position that would usurp the old: the mind must be left open to all possibilities.

Hardy’s unconventional intellectual training, Millgate suggests, made taking these steps towards an agnostic standpoint easier than for many, particularly in comparison with Hardy’s more sophisticated contemporaries:

⁵⁴ *LN* ii 2166. Source: unidentified cutting.

⁵⁵ *LW* 150-1.

⁵⁶ *LN* ii 2179. Source: unidentified cutting.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

[I]t is apparent that in the late 1860s and early 1870s Hardy was himself attempting to reconcile a whole series of radically opposed philosophies and creeds, his lack of a formal and traditional education no doubt making the transition from belief to unbelief a good deal smoother for him than for many of his more sophisticated contemporaries. Long experience of having to find his own intellectual way had made him an habitual eclectic, and he thus found little difficulty in ranging ideas newly derived from Darwin and Huxley alongside the necessitarian views already instilled in him by both the peasant fatalism of his upbringing and the tragic patterns of the Greek dramatists.⁵⁸

Millgate here provides some explanation for Hardy's affinity with agnosticism. As a largely self-taught intellectual, he was able to remain relatively free from the entrenched prejudices of many of his contemporaries. Agnosticism's appeal for him was not hard to see. It gave its adherents rational and principled reasons for accepting their own ignorance, not as a limitation, but as a necessary condition of—a necessary limit on—knowledge.

Hardy was conscious that one of the problems with agnosticism was that it would (and eventually did) tend to quietism. At first agnosticism had appeared to threaten the Church and was condemned as heretical. However, it eventually became clear that the challenges it presented were limited because it did not seek to replace religion with any solid set of principles. Frederic Harrison, the English Positivist and a close friend of Hardy, voiced one of the most common cries against agnosticism in his article 'The Future of Agnosticism' (1889); whilst it had successfully freed its followers from what Hardy called the '[t]heological lumber[...]allowed to discredit religion', it 'd[id] not replace' what it 'destroy[ed]'.⁵⁹ This theological freedom proved too vague for the majority of people who had been accustomed to following a clear set of religious codes. As the nineteenth century rolled into the twentieth, and agnosticism's original champions were either dead or too old and frail to defend and sustain their opposition to belief, agnosticism began to decline. It became diluted: no longer a *principled* stance of non-commitment, but a way of dismissing or avoiding theological and philosophical questions by saying, 'I don't know'. For Hardy,

⁵⁸ Millgate, *A Biography*, 132.

⁵⁹ L iii 5 and Frederic Harrison, 'The Future of Agnosticism', *Fortnightly Review*, NS 45 (Feb. 1889), 144-56 (156).

though, the nebulousness of agnosticism gave rise to its usefulness as a way to describe what he had always felt. Not weighed down by 'theological lumber', he was quite comfortable with this new doctrine of non-commitment. Correctly interpreted, it allowed him to articulate his multifaceted, 'unintelligent', and unsystematic non-philosophy.

CHAPTER TWO

SECRETS, TRICKERY AND CONCEALMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF INGENUITY

In the 'General Preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912', Hardy divided his fictional prose into three categories: 'Novels of Character and Experience', 'Romances and Fantasies' and 'Novels of Ingenuity'. In the latter group, he placed his three least known and least respected novels: *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876), and *A Laodicean* (1881), describing them as follows:

The third class – 'Novels of Ingenuity' – show a not infrequent disregard of the probable in the chain of events, and depend for their interest mainly on the incidents themselves. They might also be characterised as 'Experiments', and were written for the nonce simply; though despite the artificiality of their fable some of their scenes are not without fidelity to life.¹

By placing these novels in a 'third class' Hardy set up a hierarchy of his prose leading one to suppose that this group, the smallest of the three, contains those novels of which he was least proud.² Characterising them as primarily plot-driven suggests that they are in some way less complex and less accomplished than the others in terms of character, tone, theme or language. Until relatively recently, they have indeed been received in this way. Early criticism of all three novels ranged from the lukewarm to the scathing. An unsigned review of *Desperate Remedies* in the *Spectator* in April 1871 maintained that it had been wise for the author to maintain anonymity, saying, 'By all means let him bury the secret in the profoundest depths of his own heart, out of reach, if possible, of his own consciousness. The law is hardly just which prevents Tinsley Brothers from concealing their participation

¹ GP 233.

² According to P. N. Furbank, the general editor of the Macmillan New Wessex Edition, the novels are distributed as follows: Novels of Character and Environment: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the Obscure*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Life's Little Ironies* and *A Few Crusted Characters*, and *Wessex Tales*; Romances and Fantasies: *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *The Trumpet-Major*, *Two on a Tower*, *The Well-Beloved*, and *A Group of Noble Dames*; Novels of Ingenuity: *Desperate Remedies*, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, and *A Laodicean*. (HE 425. NB. Furbank's note can be found at the back of all New Wessex Edition novels.)

also.³ Coventry Patmore dismissed *The Hand of Ethelberta* as ‘signally below his [Hardy’s] true mark’, and J. M. Barrie, in an otherwise positive review of the Wessex novels, disparagingly wrote, ‘*A Laodicean* and *Two on a Tower* are not comedies, but they may be classed among Society novels. They are both dull books: here and there, nasty as well, and the besom of oblivion will soon pass over them.’⁴ Barrie’s words proved prophetic. Shortly after publication and apathetic reception, the three novels were largely ignored, and interest has only recently been revived, resulting in a spattering of articles seeking to defend the three novels by offering new critical approaches to interpreting them.⁵

While the first two of this triptych were written at too early a stage in Hardy’s career to be fully representative of his philosophy (a term I use hesitantly in light of previous discussion), the third novel, *A Laodicean*, is much closer in its outlook to his later writings. However, the familiar issues of class and gender, and (importantly for this thesis) commitment and the pursuit of knowledge, that emerge in a more developed form in *A Laodicean* might trace their roots back through these earlier novels. Hardy’s recurring use of secrets, trickery and concealments as principal plot devices unites the Novels of Ingenuity and reveals a thread of concerns that develops through all three and survives them. As such, this trio of ‘Experiments’ provides a valuable insight into the artistic and professional development of an author in training, as well as highlighting the likely genesis of the interests that came to permeate Hardy’s later fiction.

While many, if not all, of Hardy’s novels in some way deal with secrets, trickery and concealments, this triptych is of particular interest for several reasons. The first is the rather minor one that Hardy clustered them together himself and, therefore, offered the modern critic justification for doing likewise. Secondly, each was written experimentally (as Hardy’s brief analysis in the 1912 ‘Preface’ establishes). *Desperate Remedies* was an experiment at

³ Anon., Review of *Desperate Remedies*, *Spectator*, 22 Apr. 1871, 481-3; rpt. in *CH* 3-5 (3).

⁴ Coventry Patmore, Review of Hardy’s work, *St. James’s Gazette*, 2 Apr. 1887; rpt. in *CH* 146-9 (148) and J. M. Barrie, ‘Thomas Hardy: the Historian of Wessex’, *Contemporary Review*, 55 (1889), 57; rpt. in *CH* 156-66 (159).

⁵ See, for example, Penny Boumelha, ‘“A Complicated Position for a Woman”: *The Hand of Ethelberta*’, in Margaret Higonnet (ed.), *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 242-59 and Roger Ebbatson, *Hardy: The Margin of the Unexpressed* (Writing on Writing; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

writing a primarily plot-driven novel and is a fairly straightforward exercise in sensationalism. *The Hand of Ethelberta* was an experiment at writing a comic society novel and an attempt to take a new direction while under Leslie Stephen's editorship and tutelage. *A Laodicean*, certainly the most accomplished of the three, was written under the unique circumstances of a prolonged illness that forced the bedridden Hardy to dictate the majority of the novel to his wife, Emma. The genre of *A Laodicean* is difficult to define. It is not sensational enough to be a sensation novel, nor comic enough to be a society novel, yet incorporates elements of both. It might be called a love story, but for the rather tepid quality of the romances in its pages. J. H. Stape claims a little too much for it that its 'main thematic interest is the exploration of the awkward and stressful transition to modernism'.⁶ That said, critics, such as Geoffrey Harvey, have pointed to the elements of the New Woman apparent in the character of Paula, whom he believes to be a forerunner of Sue Bridehead, 'feeling her way towards a self-conscious identity and political awareness.'⁷ The narrative presence, which in later fiction serves to highlight the concerns of the particular novel and so locate it in an approximate group, is not as strongly felt in *A Laodicean*. Both in the circumstances of its composition and in its indefinability, it is arguably the most experimental of Hardy's Novels of Ingenuity.

Not significantly revised for publication in the Wessex edition, the three novels come to us now almost in their raw state, showing Hardy's concerns at the time he wrote them more clearly than do any of the other Wessex texts.⁸ Throughout, and despite the diversities of genre, attention to the problematic nature of knowledge remains a common thread. The much-lamented deficiencies in characterisation, narrative complexity, tone and (in some cases) theme in the Novels of Ingenuity provide us with pared-down versions of stories, the simplicity of which enables the reader to examine the driving force of plot

⁶ J. H. Stape, 'A Laodicean', in Page (ed.), *Reader's Companion*, 228-33 (230).

⁷ Geoffrey Harvey, *The Complete Critical Guide to Thomas Hardy* (The Complete Critical Guide to English Literature; London: Routledge, 2003), 105.

⁸ Stape, 'A Laodicean', 228-33.

without the sophistications of style presented by the more esteemed *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

The three novels take in approximately the ten-year period during which Hardy's religious faith was, reportedly, dwindling.⁹ As Pamela Dalziel has observed, surviving private documentation, notebooks and letters from this period (the 1870s) are notably thin, and, therefore, the causes and the path of his perceived decline in faith cannot be easily gleaned. Indeed, Dalziel maintains (somewhat controversially) that there is more evidence to suggest that Hardy remained 'churchy' throughout his life than otherwise.¹⁰

Of course, our lack of a really detailed picture of Hardy's religious thinking also extends to his familiarity, or otherwise, in these years with agnosticism. The earliest 'agnostic' works in Hardy's Max Gate Library were Spencer's three-volume *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, which was published 1868-78 (mentioned previously).¹¹ Michael Millgate writes:

I know of no other Spencer volume or allusion that could reasonably be dated back to the period of composition of *Desperate Remedies*. Nothing in the *Literary Notebooks*, of course, goes back that far, and allusions to Spencer in *Life and Work* all date from after 1880. On the other hand it is clear from, e.g., his letter to Grosart of 1888 (*Collected Letters*, i. 174), that he had for some time thought of Spencer (reasonably enough!) as a leading agnostic figure.¹²

While it is possible—from the date of publication of the first volume of the aforementioned writings (1868)—that Hardy had encountered Spencer by the time he wrote *Desperate Remedies*, there is no firm evidence that he had read *First Principles* by then and it is not inconceivable that he wrote the novel with little or no knowledge of Spencer's theories concerning the Unknowable. It may be, therefore, that Hardy was tentatively and independently moving towards similar conclusions to Spencer's. Indeed, the lack of reference to Spencer in the notebooks during this period might even indicate that Hardy

⁹ Hands, 'Religion', 360-5.

¹⁰ Pamela Dalziel, 'The Gospel According to Hardy: From Theology to Apology', unpublished paper given at the 16th International Thomas Hardy Conference and Festival, United Church, Dorchester, 5 Aug. 2004.

¹¹ See my Chapter One, p.26 and Millgate, *Thomas Hardy's Library*.

¹² Michael Millgate, 'Re: Spencer's First Principles', personal communication (email), 7 Oct. 2004.

did not seriously contemplate Spencer until the 1880s, by which time he had also written the middle book of the triptych, *The Hand of Ethelberta*.

These are matters about which we can finally only speculate. Nonetheless, the ‘Experiments’ carried out in these novels are, in all probability, closely related to, and so indicative of, Hardy’s thinking about the nature of reality, truth and knowledge throughout this under-documented period, whether that thinking was strongly influenced by his reading or whether it was, essentially, unguided. In these novels there is a clear loss of confidence in the attainability of knowledge on the part of the characters and on the part of the narrative—from that which is deliberately kept silent to that which is simply left unsaid. These three (by common consent) inferior works, evenly spaced across the decade, offer important insights into the ways in which Hardy first engaged in print with the questions of knowledge and commitment that were central to nineteenth-century agnosticism.

DESPERATE REMEDIES

In 1863, eight years before the publication of his first novel, the 23-year-old Thomas Hardy was pondering how he could unite his current profession as an architect with his passion for literature, and considering the possibility of becoming an art-critic.¹³ Two years later, he began writing verse and delivering poetry lectures to the pupils and assistants of his employer, Arthur Blomfield, and, in 1866, he started sending some of his work to various magazines, by which it was invariably rejected. His first prose writing, ‘How I Built Myself a House’, was published in *Chambers’s Journal* in May 1865, but it was not until the end of the summer 1867 that he ‘resolv[ed] to send no more [verse] to magazines whose editors probably did not know good poetry from bad’, and began instead to write prose fiction with greater seriousness, composing the unpublished (and subsequently destroyed) novel

¹³ *LW* 49-50.

The Poor Man and the Lady.¹⁴ Following a rejection from Macmillan, Hardy submitted the novel to Chapman and Hall, whose reader was George Meredith. Meredith offered Hardy critical but encouraging advice. While he did not deem *The Poor Man and the Lady* to be of a suitable nature to publish as a first novel, he recognised the talent of its author and suggested Hardy try to write something that would be less likely to pigeonhole him as a writer of social criticism and politically motivated fiction—something ‘with a purely artistic purpose, giving it a more complicated “plot”...’¹⁵

Complying with Meredith’s advice, Hardy set about writing *Desperate Remedies*, an experiment in the sensation genre. In the 1860s, sensation novels were widely and avidly consumed by the novel-reading public; but, by 1871, the genre had lost something of its former glory and its popularity was beginning to dwindle. In its heyday the works of Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, M. E. Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood had excited intense criticism from literary critics and religious, social and moral commentators on account of the novels’ ‘trashy’ content and questionable literary worth.¹⁶ The Dean of St. Paul’s, Henry Longueville Mansel (incidentally one of the foremost critics of agnosticism and a notorious adversary of Huxley¹⁷) writing in the *Quarterly Review* in April 1863, made the bold assertion that sensation fiction was ‘usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher’s office’.¹⁸ He went on to say that ‘works of this class’ were ‘indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply.’¹⁹ Mansel’s primary concern was that these ‘diseased’ works were so widely available. He calls periodicals, circulating libraries and railway bookstalls to task for their contribution to the

¹⁴ LW 51. [Thomas Hardy], ‘How I Built Myself a House’, *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art*, 4th series (1865), 161-4.

¹⁵ LW 65.

¹⁶ Mrs. Oliphant was one of the most vehement critics of the sensation genre. See Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel: From ‘The Woman in White’ to ‘The Moonstone’* (Writers and Their Work; Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), 7.

¹⁷ Lightman, *Origins of Agnosticism*, 6-31.

¹⁸ Henry Longueville Mansel, ‘Sensation Novels’, *Quarterly Review*, 113 (Apr. 1863), 481-514 (482).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 482-3.

ease with which the public was able to get hold of this type of fiction when publishers maintained a high retail price on novels in general, charging usually '£1 11s 6d for a standard three-volume work.'²⁰ Mansel, perhaps with foresight, pointed out that the unsavoury aspects of the sensation novel were a necessary result of the fact that they were written to satisfy only 'an ephemeral demand' and 'aspir[ed] only to an ephemeral existence'; a novel of this nature need only provide brief entertainment in short, sharp, affordable bursts, and could be rapidly disposable.²¹

The feature of sensation fiction that created the most discord was the unsettling ordinariness of the worlds, though not the events, it represented. The peaceful drawing rooms in which these stories were consumed became stage and set; the sensation novelists took their readers' world and infused the quiet and comfortable scene of domesticity with intrigue, danger, and horror. Mansel observed that

Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting.²²

Merging the literary world with the real world was further achieved by the use of precisely recorded timing (often noted in chapter headings) as well as (fictional) documentary evidence, such as letters, journals and train timetables, to suggest more convincingly an accurate depiction of reality. This meticulous attention to realistic detail sat uncomfortably with the unsavoury subject matter, the excess of which provided a challenge to traditional definitions of realism.

With *Desperate Remedies* Hardy gently reinterpreted the sensation novel. As Mansel had pointed out in 1862, the distribution for the novels was usually via the serial; *Desperate Remedies*, however, was published as a three-volume novel, which was unusual because of

²⁰ David Skilton (ed.), *The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel* (Critical Approach Series; London: Routledge, 1993), 75.

²¹ Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', 485.

²² *Ibid.* 488-9.

the higher expense both to publisher and purchaser. The subject matter—bigamy, murder and forgery—is standard enough, but there are subtle differences from the norm; for example, Manston, unusually for a villain of a sensation novel, has some redeeming features such as his regret for and suffering over his crimes. The novel's time-specific chapter headings are customary practices in the genre, but internally there are instances in which time becomes confused, for example, when Manston misreads the train timetable and Cytherea, his reluctant fiancée, miscalculates the proposed day of their wedding.

Describing the story as a 'long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance', Hardy opens *Desperate Remedies* with the prefatory narrative of Cytherea Aldclyffe (at this point, Cytherea Bradleigh) and her thwarted suitor, Ambrose Graye.²³ The lovers meet, Graye falls in love, Cytherea inexplicably ends their relationship, and Graye is left disappointed and confused. He is unable to fathom the cause of Cytherea's sudden rejection of him and what little knowledge he is able to acquire is 'filtered through a friend.'²⁴ The narrator remarks that 'without admitting her reason as valid, [Cytherea's parents] knew what the reason was, and did not intend to reveal it.'²⁵ And so begins a tale in which secrets and barriers to knowledge are at the fore.

The driving force of the sensation novel is, of course, mystery. In *Desperate Remedies* there are two main mysteries from which arise multiple sub-mysteries. The prompt of all of the novel's action is the fact that Manston is the illegitimate son of Miss Aldclyffe. This piece of information, withheld by the narrative, ultimately provides the explanation for many of the novel's smaller secrets. It explains why Miss Aldclyffe could not enter into a relationship with Ambrose Graye and the great lengths she goes to in order to employ the unqualified Manston as her steward. It also accounts for Manston's wife blackmailing Miss Aldclyffe and it explains why Miss Aldclyffe takes such an interest in bringing about the later marriage of Manston and Cytherea Graye. The truth behind the second, more sordid

²³ DR 7.

²⁴ DR 9.

²⁵ Ibid.

mystery is that Manston (accidentally) killed his first wife. The discovery of this secret explains its own consequent mysteries: why no body was found at the scene of the fire; why Manston disingenuously engages in an active search for his wife at the first hint that she may not have perished; and why he hires Anne Seaway as an impersonator.

Unearthing these secrets is not easily done. When a little piece of knowledge is gained by a character it is either through a circuitous and often (as in the case of Graye) ‘filtered’ route which leads the protagonist to doubt his discovery, or it is uncovered slowly and with difficulty, squeezed in tiny drops from its bearer until getting at the truth seems not worth the effort. Typically, knowledge is partial, each character acquiring a part of the story, but rarely, if ever, the whole. The truth behind a secret must be pieced together slowly before the new knowledge can be exploited to move the plot onwards to a point where, inevitably, it sticks once more and the whole process begins again.

Take, for example, the way in which Cytherea Graye pieces together the enigma of Miss Aldclyffe’s history. Owen reveals the first tantalising discovery after his delayed return from Humdon Castle. Owen’s host blames a restless night’s sleep on a strange and disturbing dream in which he recalls something that happened in his inn several years earlier. This tale, related to Owen in the morning, turns out to be Miss Aldclyffe’s peculiar history prior to her doomed relationship with Cytherea and Owen’s father. Cytherea comments:

“And how strangely knowledge comes to us. We might have searched for a clue to her secret half the world over, and never found one. If we had really had any motive for trying to discover more of the sad history than papa told us, we should have gone to Bloomsbury; but not caring to do so, we go two hundred miles in the opposite direction, and there find information waiting to be told us. What could have been the secret, Owen?”²⁶

It is indeed strange the way knowledge comes to the characters in *Desperate Remedies*. The next piece of the jigsaw is slotted into place when, on her first night as a lady’s maid at Knapwater House, Cytherea spots Miss Aldclyffe ‘concealing her neck’ in a curious manner

²⁶ DR 40.

while she helps her mistress to prepare for bed.²⁷ Eventually it is revealed that the reason for this strange behaviour is because Miss Aldclyffe was examining a locket containing a picture of Cytherea's own father, Ambrose Graye. Even then Miss Aldclyffe does not quite make the familial connection between her new maid and Ambrose Graye and it is some pages before more of the truth seeps out. The two women live on together, knowing fragments of the tale—the younger Cytherea trying not to divulge all she knows about the strange circumstances of Miss Aldclyffe's relationship with her father; Miss Aldclyffe not revealing what those strange circumstances were. But 'every detail of her father's history' is systematically wrung out of the younger Cytherea, 'fragment by fragment', suggesting an active (if protracted) pursuit of knowledge.²⁸

Searching for knowledge in *Desperate Remedies* is a thankless task and there is no case of a deliberate pursuit of facts being successful—they must be volunteered by the keeper of the secret to those who seek to know the truth. The available clues are minimal. An anonymous contributor to the *British Quarterly Review* in 1881 was dissatisfied with this aspect of the novel, writing, "The hint of the *dénoûment* is given, and the *dénoûment* itself hangs on, not a lock of hair, but a single hair, a thread so minute that in real life no one would see it, much less would it play the part it here plays."²⁹ I suggest that the barely visible clues are an important part of the knowledge 'Experiment' of *Desperate Remedies*. An entire lock of hair would not only be an unrealistic thing to leave behind, but would offer the investigator too much. The death of Eunice Manston is discovered accidentally when three witnesses see Manston furtively removing her body from its temporary coffin.³⁰ Even then the truth is not known and can only be supposed. Superficially, it appears that Manston is a murderer, yet we learn from his suicide note that her death was unintentional, the result of Eunice unexpectedly turning her head as he impulsively moved to strike her.³¹ The truth is

²⁷ DR 73.

²⁸ DR 116.

²⁹ Anon., 'Survey', *British Quarterly Review*, 73 (1881), 342-60; rpt. in CH 78-96 (83).

³⁰ DR 373-8.

³¹ DR 388-94.

revealed at the whim of its bearer, authenticated only by the fact of its being his last testimony; the success of the detective is dependent on his subject's whim.

Hardy plays with knowledge and ways of knowing throughout the entire novel, establishing a great gulf between the truth and what can be discovered. Before the younger Cytherea ever meets Edward Springrove, she extracts information about him from her brother through a process of interrogation. Owen's first allusion to his new acquaintance innocently interrupts his sister's reverie about 'who and what He [her future husband] will be' with the news of Mr. Gradfield's head-clerk.³² What follows is a comic account of Cytherea falling in love with a man she has never met, in which the young girl carefully constructs a picture of Springrove from the snippets of information she manages to elicit from Owen. In fact, Cytherea's vision of Springrove is imagined so clearly that she overlooks the fact that all of her knowledge is vicarious:

"... Indeed he's a poet himself in a small way."
 "How delicious!" she said, "I have never known a poet."
 "And you don't know him," said Owen, drily.
 She reddened. "Of course I don't. I know that."³³

This complicated (though, at this stage, amusing) treatment of knowledge is continued into Cytherea and Springrove's first meeting. When Owen is unable to return by foot to the steamer where his sister anxiously awaits him, Springrove goes in his place. Boarding the steamer, Cytherea has her back to the approaching footsteps, which she assumes to be those of her brother. As she turns she notes 'unknown trousers; unknown waistcoat; unknown face. The man was not her brother, but a total stranger.'³⁴ Only a few lines later, once the stranger's identity has been revealed, Cytherea 'tr[ies] not to look guilty of a surreptitious knowledge of him.'³⁵ The situation is almost farcical. The stranger is at this point both known and not known, and, it turns out, the same is true of Springrove's

³² DR 23.

³³ DR 27.

³⁴ DR 32.

³⁵ Ibid.

knowledge of Cytherea, as ‘Owen had talked to the head clerk of his sister as freely as to Cytherea of the head clerk.’³⁶ Like the steamer paddles, which ‘started, stopped, backed, pattered in confusion, then revolved decisively, and the boat passed out into deep water’, Cytherea falters into confused recognition before decisively engaging and passing into metaphorical ‘deep water’.³⁷

Hardy is careful to make the reader an active participant (or sufferer) in this confusing pursuit of knowledge, not least by creating two Cythereas. Nothing is revealed to the audience before it is revealed to the main protagonists of the novel: we learn with them. One of the points on which Hardy was and is rather heavily criticised with *Desperate Remedies* is the apparent shallowness of characterisation. However, this is an important aspect of the erection of barriers to knowledge. If we were to see inside the heads of the characters, we would be undermining a fundamental element in the struggle for (and with) knowledge that is the primary interest of the novel. We are helpless and must be led to or volunteered each new fact by the events (rather than through narrative disclosures) before we too are able to see the whole truth. This is a model that is not carried through into Hardy’s later novels. On the contrary, in these the reader is well aware of the facts of a particular case: we know who sends the Valentine to Boldwood, for whom Elfride is anxiously looking through her telescope on the Cliff without a Name, and why Tess is reluctant to make a commitment to Angel.³⁸ The use of dramatic irony that evolves as the novels progress is, I suggest, a symptom of Hardy’s growing sophistication in representing epistemological uncertainty. Unlike *Desperate Remedies*, the later novels allow the reader to see what is about to happen, but the characters themselves are in the dark and completely unable to prevent the bitter consequences of their actions.

Even as early as *Desperate Remedies*—and perhaps in anticipation of this later pessimism—knowledge is equated with suffering for those few who have it. Miss Aldclyffe

³⁶ DR 33.

³⁷ DR 32.

³⁸ See *FFMC* 100, *PBE* 199-201, and *TD* 94-5.

has the unique and unenviable privilege of being the only character to know the whole story; while most of her secret history is eventually unravelled, we never find out for certain under what circumstances Manston came to be conceived. Miss Aldclyffe, the keeper of secrets, is certainly the character who suffers the most, and for all her flaws, does not seem to merit that suffering. Through holding the key to the secrets of the novel Miss Aldclyffe is doomed to a solitary existence, she is blackmailed and forced to blackmail, and when the mysteries are finally solved and it is known that she is Manston's mother and that he is the perpetrator of heinous crimes, she dies. There is pain in keeping a secret, and pain is also the inevitable result of unveiling it. As each fragment of knowledge seeps into the open, what is discovered is not simply unpleasant, but is usually, in some way, damaging to the discoverer. In fact, nothing truly pleasant is ever found out and even those incidents in which what is learnt might be considered agreeable are laced with discomfort. Cytherea's first encounter with Springgrove is ostensibly a pleasant experience for both, yet their happiness is clouded by the news of Owen's lameness. The characters, nonetheless, do not shy away from the pursuit of knowledge—they continue to search and to endure the attendant pain. Knowledge is, at this point in Hardy's career, a commodity inextricably linked to suffering, but, crucially, it appears to be a suffering worth enduring.

THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA

In Robert Gittings' introduction to the New Wessex edition of *The Hand of Ethelberta*, he calls the novel 'the joker in the pack.'³⁹ This is apt, not only because Hardy intended *Ethelberta* to be 'A Comedy in Chapters', but because tricks and hoaxes are its principal theme. The joker is the card that does not quite fit into the pack, but, at the same time, is a fundamental part of it. In some games, the joker is used as a substitute for another and so,

³⁹ Robert Gittings, 'Introduction', in *HE* 15.

as Andrew Clinton says of the novel, ‘creates a clear division between outward appearances and inward reality.’⁴⁰ In *The Hand of Ethelberta* misfits, masquerades, façade and artifice govern the plot, and it is sometimes difficult to tell what is real and to be trusted and what is not. Even the curious title of the novel contributes to its enigma. The ‘hand’ is variously understood to refer to Ethelberta’s winning hand in a metaphorical game of cards; her four-times coveted ‘hand in marriage’; and, obliquely, the maiden name of Hardy’s mother (of which more below). Through the novel, Hardy turned preconceptions about, for example, class and gender, on their heads and consequently invited his readers to reconsider the relationship between appearance and reality.

With *The Hand of Ethelberta* Hardy departs from the sensational concealments of *Desperate Remedies* and embarks on a different ‘Experiment’ with knowledge. The barriers to knowledge in this novel are not cunning individuals anxious to preserve their own sordid histories, but the skilful manipulations of a clever actress attempting to penetrate higher society. There is nothing particularly desperate in Ethelberta’s quest. While it would be relatively easy for her to provide for her family by marrying an aristocrat, she is an educated woman who could also make a living as a schoolmistress or, of course, as a writer. The secrets are not quite so secret in *Ethelberta* either. Whereas secrets are very rarely (and never easily) shared in *Desperate Remedies*, here about as many people are party to the secret as are left in the dark. The tone, as befits a comedy, is much more frivolous and even when Ethelberta’s true identity is disclosed, there is no serious impact to the revelation.

The opening chapter of the novel introduces the heroine, ‘Young Mrs Petherwin’, and in two paragraphs provides a rather dismissive summary of the first eighteen years of her life.⁴¹ From the start we are made aware that appearances cannot be trusted. While ‘[b]y her look and carriage she appeared to belong to that gentle order of society which has no worldly sorrow except when its jewellery gets stolen’, in fact

⁴⁰ Andrew Clinton, ‘“She Stopped Like a Clock”: Science and Artificiality in *The Hand of Ethelberta* and the *Cornhill Magazine*’, *THJ*, 18/2 (2002), 77-86 (77-8).

⁴¹ *HE* 33.

She was the daughter of a gentleman who lived in a large house *not* his own, and she began life as a baby christened Ethelberta after an infant of title who does *not* come into the story at all, having merely furnished Ethelberta's mother with a subject of contemplation.⁴² (emphasis added)

Her origins are delineated by negatives, and at first we can only be sure of what she is not. Hardy constructs a picture of Ethelberta that emphasises unnatural performativity, comparing her to a 'bear [that] may be taught to dance' and stating that she could 'carelessly overthrow...her dignity'.⁴³ After the death of her young husband, Ethelberta's mother-in-law agrees to take care of her and mould her into a young aristocratic lady on the condition that Ethelberta 'never openly...recognise her relations'.⁴⁴ In short, the introduction to the heroine of the novel does little more than provide the reader with a portrait of a social actress.

Hardy again plays about with the concept of knowledge and secrets, this time having Ethelberta earn her living as a storyteller, which she all but acknowledges to be a career in professional lying. She explains her talents to Christopher, 'I am going to tell my tales before a London public. As a child, I had a considerable power in arresting the attention of other children by recounting adventures which had never happened'.⁴⁵ Ethelberta not only enters the London public by masquerading as someone she is not, but builds an additional barrier between herself and the truth through her storytelling in order to earn enough money to pay for the humble family with whom she cannot associate in elegant society. The truth is buried under several layers, but there is nothing sinister to be discovered at the bottom. Knowledge is a fairly harmless commodity here. Those who are completely in the dark in *The Hand of Ethelberta* are subjects of ridicule, and sympathy is directed towards the heroine and her family who must strive to keep the secret.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ HE 34.

⁴⁴ HE 33.

⁴⁵ HE 117.

When Ethelberta finally reveals the truth to her suitor, Lord Mountclere, she decides to do it by means of another story. This time she recounts the tale of her own life in front of an audience gathered by her fiancé and the scene that follows is a complicated blend of secrets, lies and confessions.⁴⁶ Ethelberta, adopting the persona of a lady of society, tells a tale that is assumed to be fictional, but is actually a true account of her own life. To complicate the matter further, Ethelberta recounts the tale in the first person, and so it seems as if she is only pretending to be its heroine. Lord Mountclere, unbeknown to Ethelberta, already knows her secret; the reading audience also knows; the fictional audience does not. Before Ethelberta can finish her tale, Lord Mountclere interrupts to save her the indignity of confessing in public. In short, the confession scene, which should clear up all of the mysteries, actually proves to be the most complex management of knowledge in the whole novel.

The central mystery of the novel is Ethelberta's class status. It is not after all a terrible secret, as Mr. Chickerel reflects after his daughter's identity is discovered by her society friends, the Doncastles: 'there was in it neither murder, robbery, illness, accident, fire, or any other of the tragic and legitimate shakers of human nerves'.⁴⁷ Yet, it is managed almost as carefully, and the truth received with as much horror, as if it were one of those sensational depravities. The sordid secrets of *Desperate Remedies*, of which one is inevitably reminded by Mr. Chickerel's brief musing, caused less anxiety than Ethelberta's white lie. In Hardy's first novel, there is always awareness that there is more to learn and this is the driving force of the narrative. Both protagonist and reader are involved in unravelling the mystery and when it is finally uncovered, the reaction is less severe because they, and we, have always believed that at the heart of it there must be something unpleasant, and what we discover is considerably less significant than might be imagined. It is the contrasting complacency and lack of suspicion in *The Hand of Ethelberta* that make the horrified reactions at the point of discovery seem unjustified. This is, of course, a necessary result of

⁴⁶ HE 307.

⁴⁷ HE 343.

its genre. With the sensation novel one expects the most unsavoury of secrets to emerge and with the comic novel one looks forward to the deflation of problems and their easy resolution.

Like its sister novels *The Hand of Ethelberta* has often been considered defective in terms of characterisation. Andrew Radford defends the novel, arguing that this weakness is intentional on the part of the writer: 'What has long been considered...as a grave flaw in the novel – the lack of fully realised inner life to Ethelberta – may actually be one of Hardy's boldest tactics: we experience the protagonist in so many 'disguises', that not one can be identified unequivocally as the "real" Ethelberta.'⁴⁸ Radford suggests that *The Hand of Ethelberta* (like *A Laodicean*) may be a semi-autobiographical novel. Relatively poor and unaccustomed to city life, Hardy found himself mixing with London society and 'had anxieties about his social background.'⁴⁹ Peter Widdowson argues that Hardy wrote the novel partly as a response to these feelings of inferiority:

It seems likely...that Hardy was self-consciously re-presenting himself as Ethelberta, and producing an immense irony which only he could savour: his most open and accurate account of himself and his real social relations presented as a fiction in which his heroine does the same, only for both 'true stories' to be received as fictions and, in the case of the novel itself, to be criticized for being 'impossible'.⁵⁰

It has been suggested that the 'Hand' of the title may be a sly reference to Hardy's mother's maiden name, offering a clue to the true identity of this rural storyteller. If this is the case—and the similarities between Ethelberta's and Hardy's immersion in London life are striking—then the truth is even more thickly veiled than Radford suggests: a story-teller masquerading as an aristocrat within a story by a stonemason's son 'masquerading' as a London intellectual.

⁴⁸ Andrew Radford, 'Hardy's Subversion of Social Comedy in *The Hand of Ethelberta*', *THJ*, 16/2 (2000), 63-70 (68).

⁴⁹ Toru Sasaki, 'The Hand of Ethelberta', in Page (ed.), *Reader's Companion*, 148-53 (151).

⁵⁰ Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1989), 159.

While secrets, trickery, artifice and masquerade drive the plot, there is, as I have said, a sense that these barriers to knowledge are not severe and that the knowledge they disguise is not sordid or unpleasant. Discovering the truth is not an arduous task, but neither is keeping a secret. No one suffers to any great extent either by keeping, telling or hearing a secret. The audience can contentedly follow the tale and be amused by its irony, but we are not yet met with the pessimistic sense of man's helplessness that permeates the later fiction.

A LAODICEAN

A prolonged and intense illness, during which Hardy was confined to his bed and forced to dictate most of *A Laodicean* to his wife, meant that the writer was not able to research extensively, as was his custom, and was therefore restricted to writing about only what he already knew or could imagine.⁵¹ The unusual genesis of *A Laodicean* helps to explain the treatment of knowledge within the novel. Whereas Hardy was prevented from researching knowledge, the characters display a certain unwillingness to expand their knowledge and apathy about uncovering mysteries and speaking of what they know. This odd reluctance or inability to pursue the truth when it is known to be hidden characterises the narrative. Ostensibly important secrets exist in *A Laodicean*, but they are neither actively investigated nor particularly well hidden.

The opening of the novel focuses on George Somerset who is engrossed in sketching the doorway of a village church. The vibrant colour of the setting sun produces a fiery glow on the stonework he is studying, but Somerset is too intent on his task to notice the 'warp of gold threads' surrounding and altering himself and his environment so strikingly:

⁵¹ LW 149-50.

He was so absorbed in his pursuit that he did not mark the brilliant chromatic effect of which he composed the central feature, till it was brought home to his intelligence by the warmth of the moulded stonework under his touch when measuring; which led him at length to turn his head and gaze on its cause.⁵²

While facts, like Somerset's sunset, stare the characters hard in their faces, it is usually necessary for them to be 'awoke[n] to realities' and forced into making a decision to act upon the newly acquired knowledge.⁵³ An air of comfortable laziness pervades the opening chapter, with its ruminations on the sleepy August environment, its casual wanderings into mythology, history and poetry, before the reader is gently drawn back to the story.

Somerset is described as being 'enveloped in the lingering aureate haze' before, on a whim, 'leisurely' following a boy out of the churchyard.⁵⁴ There is no urgency in the narrative.

Somerset goes where the mood takes him, never consciously decisive and at the end of the chapter he chooses to wander to another church not out of any particular desire to see it but because he was '[w]illing to be interested in anything which would keep him out-of-doors'.⁵⁵

The novel's principal 'Laodicean' is Paula Power, the orphaned daughter of a wealthy railway contractor and inheritor of the ancient Stancy Castle. This unusual appellation is conferred on Paula by an incensed Baptist minister following the heroine's last-minute refusal to comply with her late father's wishes and commit, through full bodily immersion in a baptismal pool, to the Baptist Church. (This is the scene that Somerset finds himself witnessing.) Once Paula has returned to the vestry, the minister, Mr.

Woodwell, proceeds to deliver a scathing sermon—that he knows Paula can overhear—opening with Christ's address to the angel of the Church in Laodicea from Revelation 3:

15-17:

⁵² AL 3.

⁵³ AL 5.

⁵⁴ AL 4-5.

⁵⁵ AL 8.

*'I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.... Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.'*⁵⁶

After invoking this biblical precedent, the minister launches into a polemic, 'no less forcible than the text', while his chastened victim flees the chapel and returns to her castle.⁵⁷

Paula's inability to make the commitment to the Baptist Church is at first accounted for by her sex: the narrator explains that the minister 'did not know the illimitable caprice of a woman's mind.'⁵⁸ However, it is clear that there is more to Paula's 'lukewarmness' than this blithe generalisation implies. The baptism itself was pressed upon her under the terms of her father's will and the distress she feels following the incident indicates that her refusal was no mere whim but a conscientious realisation that she could not properly and wholeheartedly commit to the Baptist Church. Given that Hardy in the 1860s had made a similar refusal to commit to the Anglican Church, the narrator's reference to capricious femininity is even less likely to be the full or true explanation of Paula's refusal.⁵⁹ It has been proposed that *A Laodicean* draws upon Hardy's own experiences, including his hesitance in matters of theology. John Schad, for example, asserts that there is a 'bizarre biographical logic' to the novel.⁶⁰ Indeed, a lover of puzzles might speculate that the heroine's initials are a cryptic clue to Paula's representative capacity. 'P.P.' is a common abbreviation of the Latin phrase, *per procurationem* (through the agency of), still commonly used when signing a letter on behalf of someone else.

Paula's lukewarmness extends beyond religion. In fact, there is almost no subject or aspect of life about which the heroine's feelings could be described as categorical or fervent. The romance between Paula and George Somerset is repeatedly thwarted or stalled by the machinations of the novel's villain, William Dare, but Dare's successes in his

⁵⁶ *AL* 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *LW* 390.

⁶⁰ John Schad, 'Introduction', in *AL* xvii-xxxi (xviii). See also Collins, *Thomas Hardy and His God*, 3; Hands, *Distracted Preacher*, 117; and Millgate, *A Biography*, 220.

schemes are made easier by Paula's unwillingness (or inability) to declare her feelings for Somerset. While sheltering from the rain in the summer-house during the garden-party, Somerset confesses his love for Paula, and asks whether his feelings are reciprocated. There follows an exchange that highlights the heroine's characteristic elusiveness:

“And will you love me?”

Paula did not reply.

“Will you, Paula?” he repeated.

“You may love me.”

“But you don't love me in return?”

“I love you to love me.”

“Won't you say anything more explicit?”

“Not a single word!”

Somerset emitted half a sigh: he wished she had been more demonstrative, yet felt that this passive way of assenting was as much as he could hope for. Had there been anything cold in her passivity he might have felt repressed; but her stillness suggested the stillness of motion imperceptible from its intensity.⁶¹

It is important that Somerset sees that Paula is not 'cold' despite his inability to obtain proof of her precise emotions. Despite this initial sympathy, Somerset almost fails in his attempts to capture Paula because he cannot understand her lukewarmness, mistaking it for rejection. Captain De Stancy is, however, more astute than Somerset and recognises Paula's character, tempering his approach to her accordingly. He explains to his son, “This lady is of a reticent, independent, complicated disposition, and any sudden proceeding would put her on her mettle... I proceed slowly; I know better than to do otherwise. Thank God there is plenty of time.”⁶²

Paula is equally aware of her own innate ambivalence, which is not restricted to religion or romance. One of the main strands of the novel's plot is the restoration of the dilapidated Stancy Castle. Paula plans to turn the quadrangle into a Greek court and (with typical indirectness) has Charlotte, her companion, introduce the idea to Somerset, who is one of the prospective architects. Later, while touring the castle with Somerset, Paula asks 'tentatively' whether her plans will be allowed and the architect responds by questioning

⁶¹ *AL* 106.

⁶² *AL* 183.

whether they will not undermine ‘the genius of the place’, Paula retorts, ‘ “I am not a mediævalist: I am an eclectic.” ’⁶³ The outright refusal of historical purity is almost uncharacteristic in its straightforwardness. Paula is, indeed, ‘eclectic’ in what is usually a pejorative sense but is here marked out for us as perhaps not after all bad. She has no strong adherences, a sentiment that is reaffirmed in her readiness to abandon the Greek court scheme. Following a critical comment printed anonymously (we later discover the critic to be the disgruntled Havill who had suspected that he was to lose the commission—promised him by Paula’s father—to restore the castle), Paula gives up the notion with little resistance.

We are encouraged, not least by Paula herself, to see Paula’s Laodiceanism as a consequence of her education, social position, and gender. She is the modern educated daughter of a man of science and a woman of independent means; but she finds the notion of noble ancestry romantic, admires the ancients, and is, despite her avowed independence, susceptible to the men who pursue her. Paula’s dilemma is highlighted in an exchange with Somerset:

“You represent science rather than art, perhaps.”

“How?” she asked quickly, glancing from under her hat.

“I mean,” he answered quietly, “that you represent the march of mind – the steamship, and the railway, and the thoughts that shake mankind.”

She weighed his words, and said slowly: “Ah, yes: you allude to my father. My father was a great man; but I am more and more forgetting his greatness: that kind of greatness is what a woman can never truly enter into. I am less and less his daughter every day that goes by.”⁶⁴

Paula is very much a symbol of the transition between ancient and modern that characterises an age of prolific technological advance, changing attitudes towards women’s rights, and the greater mutability of social status. Uncomfortably caught between several roles and conflicting obligations, Paula’s response is to withdraw into a position of ambivalence and refuse to commit to any of them.

⁶³ *AL* 78.

⁶⁴ *AL* 79.

An inability to commit is, I wish to argue here, an almost inevitable consequence of living in a society in which so much is becoming known that was unimaginable until very recently—or so Hardy, by the end of 1880, was clearly coming to feel. *A Laodicean* is subtitled ‘A Story of To-day’ and this points to Hardy’s intention that it would provide a comment on, or at least an illustration of, the implications of the fast-changing world. Swift advances in science and technology, alongside improvements in education, meant that there was a greater understanding of how the world works. The more that was known, however, the more questions needed to be asked, particularly concerning the implications of Darwinism for religion. ‘Higher’ education was no longer as restricted as it had been to the educated male upper classes; men of industry were more likely to be from simple backgrounds, and women were beginning to gain in financial, legal—thought not yet political—independence. With class and gender barriers narrowing, the opportunities for knowledge and for specialisation were considerably greater than they had been even twenty years earlier. The appetite for scientific enquiry was seeping into the general population and disproving—or at least triggering doubts with regard to—the tenets of the Church concerning First Causes, and an important result of this burden of knowledge was the resultant competition of choices available to explain matters ranging from the existence of the universe down to questions concerning how one should live one’s life from day to day. Too much knowledge and choice could prompt a feeling of reluctance to locate oneself in any philosophical or ethical system. Without ultimate knowledge, the germs of both truth and doubt might be seen in many epistemological and metaphysical explanations and there is an inevitable sense of dissatisfaction in accepting any doctrine without question and in abandoning any alternative theories. Thus, it is my contention that the growth of knowledge led almost inevitably to disinclination on the part of many educated men and women to commit to religious or philosophical positions and, in subsequent decades, had a part to play in the emergence of agnosticism. It certainly seems that Hardy’s thinking about

such matters, and, by this point, his reading in philosophy, prepared the way for his own version of agnosticism.

Instability of genre in *A Laodicean* is one manifestation of this phenomenon of knowledge-overload. As the novelist experimented with various genres—sensation, comic, romance—he grew more adept at manipulating them. With this growth in proficiency came the desire to produce texts of a less recognisable style. The confusions of genre in *A Laodicean* demonstrate the author's refusal to commit to one particular way of coding the world. This is further underlined by the novel's repeated meandering through a variety of geographical locations: life speeded up for the Victorians as a result of the increased availability of easy transportation. Indeed, the clash between modern and ancient is echoed in their journeys. For example, while the act of travelling is a symbol of movement in the modern world, the destinations are, in the main, influenced by a pursuit of history: at every destination the travellers visit a site of historical and, typically, architectural interest.

Hardy's treatment of knowledge in the novel is particularly interesting in relation to the notion of knowledge-overload. The characters in the novel are generally and strongly averse to the pursuit of knowledge—there is an apathetic approach to discovering secrets or unveiling the trickster. The narrative style also partakes of this apathy: there are very few instances in which the narrator reveals anything directly to his audience. Thus, while we easily infer that Dare is Captain De Stancy's illegitimate son, the fact is not confirmed immediately. As might be expected from such a 'lazy' novel, the reverse of this is also true and there is no notable attempt to keep anything hidden. *A Laodicean* eventually yields up its secrets to the reader without any sense of danger or importance in doing so.

The pursuit of knowledge is viewed as malevolent in so far as it is personified in the character of Dare. Dare erects the principal barriers to knowledge in *A Laodicean*, and always with self-serving intent. He is a particularly tricky figure because his true character and motivations are disguised from the other protagonists. Invariably, his actions are fraudulent, and his crimes justified as a good turn to his blackmailed co-conspirators. For

example, Dare ostensibly helps to bring about the marriage of Captain De Stancy with Paula Power, but he controls De Stancy with the threat that he could at any time reveal that the Captain is his father. He also blackmails Havill—threatening to reveal the architect as the anonymous critic of Paula’s plans for her castle—in order to help Dare cheat Somerset. Dare is the keeper of knowledge and also, through his cunning manipulations, the controller of knowledge both in the sense that he determines who should know what and also that he manipulates reality to his own end (Dare makes a photographic forgery of a picture of Somerset in order to convince Paula that Somerset is a drunkard and a gambler, thereby giving De Stancy an advantage in his attempt to win her affections). Eventually Dare’s blackmail victims admit their part in his crimes. Though they are not punished as such for their involvement, both Havill and De Stancy suffer in the place of the true perpetrator who always, even when his own involvement is uncovered, escapes unscathed.

Hardy’s use of the photograph provides an interesting marker for the development of his relationship with and treatment of knowledge through the Novels of Ingenuity. The forged photograph motif appears in both *Desperate Remedies* and *A Laodicean*, with quite different effects. In the earlier novel, Manston intercepts a photograph of his first wife as it passes from Springrove, the self-appointed detective, to Cytherea and Owen Graye. In order to preserve the secret substitution of his dead wife for Anne Seaway, Manston swaps the photograph before sending it on again to its rightful recipients. His plot, however, is frustrated by the arrival of a second letter from Springrove containing a poem about the now dead woman in which he describes her eyes as ‘azure’. Cytherea has already learned that Anne’s eyes are black and thus an investigation into the true identity of the impostor ensues.

Photographic forgery occurs twice in *A Laodicean*. The first time is when De Stancy swaps the photograph of his son for an unidentified substitute in order to protect the boy’s identity from the police constable. Despite the clumsiness of the manoeuvre (De Stancy pretends he has picked up the wrong picture and goes to another room to obtain the

'correct' one), the substitution is accepted without question.⁶⁵ The second instance of forgery is that of the altered image of Somerset that tricks Paula into believing that he is a degenerate.⁶⁶ Again, there is no thorough examination of the evidence, and the lie is accepted readily. Unquestioning ignorance is the norm in *A Laodicean*, and that is why Dare achieves so much. Havill and De Stancy are too ready to be cajoled into complying with his demands, and the other characters have too little suspicion and make too little effort to uncover the crimes. They accept uncritically the evidence of their own eyes and, as Linda Austin points out, readily 'submit to illusion. Only Dare, a photographer, is aware of the deception of distance and can manipulate appearances to control knowledge.'⁶⁷

A similar comparison might be observed in the pilgrimage motif that is repeated in all three novels. Journeys are in part a metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge. Each book depicts a journey of some sort, but overall there is a decreasing sense of anxiety in each until virtual complacency is reached in *A Laodicean*. In *Desperate Remedies*, the pilgrimage takes place shortly after the marriage of Cytherea and Manston. Believing that the heroine has unwittingly entered a bigamist marriage, both Owen and Springrove set out determined to enlighten her to the possibility and to bring her home to avoid scandal. So desperate is the pursuit that letters and messengers are dispatched immediately. Springrove, fortuitously, boards a delayed train and Owen follows him the next morning. Nothing is left to chance; the heroes are resolute in pursuing their goal.

In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, four men pursue the heroine in order to stop her marriage to Lord Mountclere. There is a similar sense of urgency, but the way in which the journeys are depicted is slightly altered here. Hardy put more emphasis on the details of the journey itself and also placed many more obstacles in the path of his pilgrims. Whereas Owen and Springrove are successful in their efforts to locate Cytherea, Ethelberta's pursuers fail, arriving too late to stop the wedding. In the middle of the decade, Hardy seemed to be

⁶⁵ *AL* 137.

⁶⁶ *AL* 281.

⁶⁷ Linda M. Austin, 'Hardy's Laodicean Narrative', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35 (1989), 211-22 (217).

losing faith in the efficacy of the pursuit for knowledge, emphasising not only its obstacles, but also its futility and its irrelevance. Whereas saving Cytherea from Manston is worth the trial, the anxiety over Ethelberta's fate is seen to be unnecessary, for she triumphs in the end.

By 1881, the journey had become the most important aspect of the pilgrimage. Both Somerset and Paula are depicted chasing each other through Europe. The journeys are long, complicated and troublesome, and their goals are, in both cases, thwarted. When Somerset finally locates Paula, he is met with her typical lukewarmness because, unbeknown to him, she believes him to be a drunken gambler. When Paula locates Somerset and they marry, she undermines the happy ending by wishing that things could have turned out differently, saying, ‘‘I wish my castle wasn't burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy!’’⁶⁸

Something of Hardy's progress—both artistic and philosophical—can be traced through these three minor novels and their common motifs of secrecy, trickery and concealment. As access to knowledge increases so does apathy, while the practical importance of that knowledge correspondingly decreases. In addition, more knowledge brings with it perplexities of choice and an inability to make choices. By the time he wrote *A Laodicean* Hardy had reached the conclusion that the search for knowledge was more important than its discovery. Considering the novel's interest in science and technology and the amount of newly-discovered knowledge it contains, it is not surprising that the process became more important than any goal. As science advanced, the possibility of reaching any final conclusions grew increasingly remote. The most important development in Hardy's philosophy was his apparent shift from a desperate need to locate the truth to a stance of passivity, a shift that he translated into his writing not just with regard to the pursuit of

⁶⁸ *AL* 379.

First Causes but the pursuit of any facts. Though we cannot make a proven link to Hardy's familiarity with agnostic writings, it is evident that by the end of this formative era he was moving towards a similar position as the proclaimed agnostics and had grown more consciously sceptical about the viability of reaching a cohesive position of knowledge on anything.

CHAPTER THREE

HARDY, LESLIE STEPHEN, AND THE LIFE WITHOUT FIXED PRINCIPLES

Hardy's professional relationship with Leslie Stephen, detailed in Chapter One, was relatively short, lasting only three years of a literary career that stretched over more than half a century. Both *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Hand of Ethelberta* were written for the *Cornhill Magazine* (then under Stephen's editorship) and the two men corresponded regularly between 1873 and 1876 about the composition and publication of the novels. Stephen nurtured the then fairly inexperienced author, giving him advice on style and content, and particularly on what material was considered appropriate for publication in a genteel magazine. They seemed to share a dislike of Grundyism, but, Stephen, as an editor, was more mindful of public taste than Hardy.¹ On 2 February 1877, Hardy sent the incomplete manuscript of *The Return of the Native* to Stephen for consideration. As Hardy later recorded in his contribution to Maitland's *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, the editor was wary of the novel's complicated love-triangle, which he considered potentially '“dangerous” for a family magazine', and insisted that he would need to see the completed novel before making a decision.² In his biography of Stephen, Noel Gilroy Annan questions the veracity of Stephen's professed regret. It is true that, as a matter of business sense, Stephen would have been foolish to compromise the *Cornhill*—a magazine consumed primarily by respectable upper-middle-class families—and that he did complain, on taking over the editorship from Thackeray (his father-in-law), because it 'exclude[d] the only subjects in which reasonable men can take any critical interest: politics and religion'.³ Yet, Annan points out, Stephen's 'taste often coincided with that of his public'.⁴ In truth, he was partial to a 'thoroughly sentimental novel', detested the sexual explicitness of French novelists, and 'it is clear that the many rejections and excisions which he excused on

¹ See my Chapter One, p.34.

² Maitland, *Leslie Stephen*, 276-7.

³ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 66.

⁴ *Ibid.* 67.

editorial grounds, were agreeable to him for personal reasons.⁵ But, in 1877, Hardy was unwilling to make the necessary compromises with the plotting of *The Return of the Native*—compromises that he would so readily have undertaken two or three years earlier—and he took his new serial elsewhere, severing the working relationship.⁶ The two men remained good friends.

It is evident that Stephen's influence on Hardy extended beyond the artistic guidance offered to a writer by his editor. In his autobiography, Hardy named Stephen as 'the man whose philosophy was to influence his own for many years, indeed, more than that of any other contemporary'.⁷ It is perhaps surprising that Stephen's philosophical influence is more evident in novels that were not written under his editorship; *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) and *The Return of the Native* (1878), the novels immediately preceding and following those written under Stephen's editorship, more fully corroborate Hardy's declaration of his editor's philosophical influence than the two whose composition the editor so carefully oversaw.

Why Hardy did not investigate his editor's philosophy during the period in which he wrote for the *Cornhill* is open to speculation. Perhaps he did not feel confident enough to subject his superior's views to scrutiny while working so closely with him. It is easier to enter into an artistic dialogue when the subject with whom you intend to argue is not the same person who will determine which aspects of your work will be published. Moreover, Stephen was a difficult character: 'ironical, sceptical [and] moody' in Stefan Collini's description.⁸ Noel Annan summarises Stephen's approach to his family as 'insensitive, egotistical and, in a subtle way, tyrannical' and, in an account included in Maitland's biography, Stephen assessed his own character as "skinless," over-sensitive and nervously

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Return of the Native* was serialised in *Belgravia* ('a far less prestigious journal than the *Cornhill*, according to Millgate, *A Biography*, 188) between January and December 1878, at that time edited by the sensation writer Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

⁷ LW 102.

⁸ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 174.

irritable.⁹ Mr. Ramsay, the unpleasant father in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), was famously based on Stephen, her father.¹⁰ While both Annan and Maitland insist on his unswerving loyalty and respect for his friends,¹¹ it is clear that Stephen was a formidable character, one whom an author might well shrink from offending, especially an author in Hardy's position—inexperienced and reliant on the editor for the successful continuance of his career.

Less cynically, we might also recall that Hardy held his editor in sincere and high regard. In his autobiography Hardy describes two coincidences that suggested that he and his future editor were in some way destined to meet. The first 'linking coincidence', as Hardy describes it, was the afore-mentioned shared address of Hardy's first London employer and Stephen's Alpine Club.¹² The second twist of fate was that the letter Stephen wrote to Hardy in December 1872 inviting him to contribute to the *Cornhill* only reached its intended recipient by lucky accident. Hardy records:

It was, indeed, by the merest chance that he ever got the *Cornhill* letter at all. The postal arrangements in Dorset were still so primitive at this date that the only delivery of letters at Hardy's father's house was by the hands of some friendly neighbour who had come from the next village; and Mr Stephen's request for a story had been picked up in the mud of the lane by a labouring man, the schoolchildren to whom it had been entrusted having dropped it on the way.¹³

Stephen had been obliged to make a concerted effort to identify the author. *Under the Greenwood Tree*, the novel that had given him such 'pleasure', was published anonymously in *Tinsley's Magazine* in 1872 and it is likely that Stephen discovered the name of the author by contacting Horace Moule, the author of a favourable review of the novel for the *Saturday*

⁹ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 94 and Maitland, *Leslie Stephen*, 433.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Stella McNichol with an intro. and notes by Hermione Lee (1927; London: Penguin, 1992).

¹¹ For a more thorough analysis of Leslie Stephen's character, see Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 94-109 and Maitland, *Leslie Stephen*, 433-4, 476-7 and 494-5.

¹² LW 42.

¹³ LW 98.

Review and (fortunately for both author and editor) a mutual friend.¹⁴ That Hardy chose to highlight the role that chance played in his relationship with Stephen indicates not only that he felt that their friendship was important enough to warrant relaying its strange history, but also that he felt their lives were somehow meant to intersect. To criticise the work of his friend and editor would be to risk undoing the good work that ‘fate’ had done in bringing them together. As will be shown, Hardy’s treatment of Stephen’s work and philosophy in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, prior to their working relationship, is both more imitative and less critical than that in *The Return of the Native* when the working relationship was complete and the friendship firmly founded.

Lastly, Stephen, as we know, was very particular about what material he deemed suitable for publication in his magazine. He did not, for example, publish his own controversial essays on agnosticism in the *Cornhill*, choosing instead to publish them in *Fraser’s Magazine* and, later, in the *Fortnightly Review*, which Stephen found ‘sufficiently radical to suit his taste’ after its editorship had passed to John Morley.¹⁵ It is almost certainly the case that Hardy was conscientiously steered away from writing anything that might adversely affect the non-contentious reputation of the *Cornhill*.

A Pair of Blue Eyes, the earlier of the two novels, was written before Hardy had met Stephen, but borrows heavily—more so than has hitherto been realised—from an essay Stephen wrote in 1872 entitled ‘A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps’.¹⁶ The cliff scene may have been written as a tribute to his prospective editor; certainly, it responds to new areas of thought that Stephen’s work had helped to open up to Hardy. It is clear that he had read and digested Stephen’s essay. Less obvious is the influence that Stephen’s ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’ (1876) had on the philosophical concerns of *The Return of the Native*.¹⁷ The predominant themes of both Hardy’s novel and Stephen’s essay—fate, free-will, justice, the

¹⁴ LW 97. See Horace Moule, Review of Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Saturday Review*, 34 (28 Sep. 1872), 417; rpt. In CH 11-14.

¹⁵ Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 52.

¹⁶ Leslie Stephen, ‘A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, NS 6 (1872), 545-61.

¹⁷ Stephen, ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’, 1-39.

problem of evil and undeserved suffering—permeate most of Hardy's later fiction, and the pessimism of which he was accused (notably by his close friend Frederic Harrison) first becomes visible in *The Return of the Native*.¹⁸ By the time Hardy wrote *The Return of the Native* he was a much more experienced and successful novelist, and as a result his approach to Stephen's work is both more subtle and more critical than it had been five years earlier. This chapter explores the links between Stephen's agnostic essays and the two novels, illustrating the acknowledged philosophical influence Stephen had upon the novelist and demonstrating Hardy's efforts to interpret the philosophical ideas of his editor and recast and interrogate them in an artistic framework.

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES AND 'A BAD FIVE MINUTES IN THE ALPS'

For years it was believed that Hardy's inspiration for Henry Knight's (literal) cliffhanger in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was an event in his own life involving a walk with Emma, his first wife.¹⁹ The story goes that Emma lost an earring on their walk and asked Hardy to retrieve it for her—a venture that involved leaning precariously over the edge of a cliff. But more recently critics have observed the conspicuous parallels between the scene and Leslie Stephen's essay, 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps', published in 1872 in *Fraser's Magazine*, edited by a friend of Stephen, J. A. Froude.

John Halperin, for example, has demonstrated that the timing of the two pieces corresponds so closely as to make it quite possible that Hardy borrowed from his future

¹⁸ See Millgate, *A Biography*, 529 and Frederic Harrison, 'Novissima Verba.—II', *Fortnightly Review*, NS 107 (1920), 180-4.

¹⁹ Incidentally, the first recorded use of the word 'cliffhanger' was in the American journal, *American Speech*, in 1937, and the first time it was used in Britain was in 1938 in *The Times*—and on both occasions it was used to describe a cinematic cliffhanger. Thus, it seems that Hardy was anticipatory in using the medium of serial publication to literalise the cliffhanger sixty-five years before the term itself existed. See OED online edition: 'cliff-hanger' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50041475>>, accessed 26 Jun. 2006.

mentor's essay—but the timing is tight.²⁰ 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in November 1872. Henry Knight was left hanging from the Cliff without a Name between parts six and seven of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which appeared in February and March 1873 in *Tinsley's Magazine*. Hardy, according to Halperin, was writing only a matter of six weeks ahead of each number and therefore would have had around a month in which to read, digest and appropriate Stephen's essay. Indeed, it looks as if Hardy read Stephen's essay shortly after—and probably in response to—receiving the letter requesting a contribution to the *Cornhill Magazine*, and we can speculate that it was this letter that led him to read Stephen's essay and borrow the idea of the cliffhanger. Robert Gittings, Lawrence Jones and Virginia Hyman have also discussed the similarities between *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps.'²¹ None of them has explored the wider implications of Hardy's 'borrowing' for understanding his philosophical viewpoint.

The details of the pieces are strikingly similar. 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' is a fictional narrative written in the first person. It begins in a walkers' hostel in which the hero is a prisoner of the inclement weather. He complains of the frustration of his confinement, and describes how an enthusiastic and eloquent Anglican preacher enjoys an unusually enlarged audience for his Sunday sermon, taking full advantage of their captivity to lecture on the 'poor old Athanasian Creed', towards which Stephen was again derisive in a later essay entitled 'Are We Christians?' (1873).²² Certain of the 'utter unreality of his [the preacher's] sentiments', Stephen is disappointed that such rhetorical talent should be wasted on 'these dry husks of obsolete speculation'.²³ In order to escape the preaching, he moves to a reading room where the only literature he can find is a 'respectable periodical'

²⁰ Halperin further explains that Hardy regularly appropriated material from primary sources to add to his own work and, as a consequence, has often been accused of plagiarism; it is, therefore, no surprise that no acknowledgement is made to Stephen for the cliff scene in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. See Halperin, 'Leslie Stephen, Thomas Hardy', 738.

²¹ Gittings, *Thomas Hardy*, 265-8. Lawrence Jones, 'Leslie Stephen and "Nature's Questioning"', *Thomas Hardy Society Review*, 1 (1980), 191; and Virginia R. Hyman, *Ethical Perspectives in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (Literary Criticism Series; New York: Kennikat, 1975).

²² Stephen, 'A Bad Five Minutes', 545. See also Leslie Stephen, 'Are We Christians?' *Fortnightly Review*, NS 13 (1873), 281-303.

²³ Stephen, 'A Bad Five Minutes', 545.

reporting on a ‘very energetic controversy...raging as to the efficacy of prayer.’²⁴ It is likely that the piece to which Stephen’s protagonist refers is an article by Francis Galton, the scientific naturalist and agnostic sympathiser, entitled ‘Statistical Inquiries into the Efficacy of Prayer’, which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in August 1872.²⁵ There Galton argued that the efficacy of prayer ‘is a perfectly appropriate and legitimate subject of scientific inquiry.’²⁶ While he is unable to reach any resolution concerning the nature or, indeed, the existence of God, Galton admits that prayer, for those who truly believe that they are in ‘communion with God’, is efficacious in its ability to ‘strengthen the heart, and divert it from petty cares’.²⁷ He concludes, however, that a similar strength can be felt by those sceptical about God and religion, but who believe the Humanist or Positivist notion that life’s meaning can be found in one’s genetic contribution to the human race: ‘brotherhood with all that is, and...responsibility in the parentage of an endless future’ is, according to Galton, ‘quite as powerful in ennobling the resolves, and it is found to give serenity during the trials of life and in the shadow of approaching death.’²⁸

As we shall see, the subject of this debate is recalled to Stephen’s hero’s mind when, later, he faces imminent death. For now though, without this threat, he is frustrated by the ‘spectacle of sincere and religious people hunting painfully for some proof that the God whom they professed to adore was something more than a mere name.’²⁹ He observes that the ‘unsophisticated natives’ of the Alpine district have not yet been touched by this wave of religious scepticism and their unquestioning belief is, to him, less absurd than the ‘straining and special pleading of sincere believers to prove that the central article of their faith had really some kind of intelligible meaning’.³⁰ The debate brings on a feeling of claustrophobia in the hero. He likens the sensation to that of reading works by long-dead

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Francis Galton, ‘Statistical Inquiries into the Efficacy of Prayer’, *Fortnightly Review*, NS 12 (1872), 125-35.

²⁶ Ibid. 125.

²⁷ Ibid. 135.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Stephen, ‘A Bad Five Minutes’, 545.

³⁰ Ibid. 545-6.

authors in a library, only here his claustrophobia is heightened by the fact that the authors are not dead at all—they are present and vibrant. Feeling the need to escape and reaffirm the reality of his own existence, he decides to go for a walk. He loses the path, slips and falls over the edge of a cliff, and is left hanging by his fingertips with no apparent means of escape. With wry humour, he does not curse the God who would allow such a personal disaster, remarking instead that '[a]t times, nature itself became an object of antipathy, and I felt a kind of personal dislike to gravitation and the laws of motion.'³¹ He muses that the eloquent young clergyman back in the hostel would use his death as a lesson in Providence.³²

At the moment he falls, the hero has 'space for only one thought...—"at last!"'³³ He explains that during his many dangerous Alpine adventures he had often, after a minor slip, wondered about this moment. He describes his thought—or feeling—now that the moment has finally arrived as an 'electric shock of colourless expectation. I call it colourless', he further elaborates, 'for the space was too brief to allow even of conscious alarm or horror.'³⁴ Stephen used the word 'colourless' again in 1876 in 'An Agnostic's Apology' to describe the emotion with which the agnostic typically views the world. Evidently, despite his convinced agnosticism, Stephen realised that there was something unappealing about the life without faith in an afterlife.³⁵ When the hero discovers that he has a few more minutes to live before the final plunge to the rocks below, he begins to ruminate on his philosophy and how a moment of crisis such as this inevitably affects one's system of belief. Despite his earlier derision of Christianity, he admits that in this predicament he understands that recourse to religion, as in the form of the last rites, cannot be easily dismissed or ridiculed because of the support it might offer in one's dying hours.

³¹ Ibid. 549.

³² Ibid. 551-2.

³³ Ibid. 547.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Stephen, 'An Agnostic's Apology', 15-17.

The performance itself, he explains, may be ‘automatically’ executed by the ‘[b]ewildered’ victim as a distraction from his immediate crisis.³⁶

Hanging from the cliff and waiting for a seemingly-inevitable death, the hero’s mind reviews his own philosophical history: ‘Forgotten frames of mind reproduced themselves in quick succession and in a brief space. I had retraced stages of intellectual development through which I had passed in former days.’³⁷ ‘But’, he reports, ‘of the thoughts which occurred to me I may say generally that I do not report them as creditable or orthodox, but merely as characteristic of a mind without fixed principles.’³⁸ He entertains and rejects many possible systems of belief, including atheism, Positivism and humanism, and concludes by saying that ‘a believer in any creed would have been highly uncomfortable in [his] position.’³⁹ Realising that he has nothing to lose because without action he will certainly die, he attempts to propel himself upwards, but falls, only to find that he has landed on a previously-unnoticed ledge ten feet below. He locates a path and makes his way safely back to the hostel to dine with his fellow walkers.

By the end of the essay the hero has grown more tolerant of belief in and worship of a divine being, and the derision with which he views believers has in a small measure subsided. He has been forced to acknowledge that his own philosophy reduces the individual to insignificance, a reduction more palatable in the abstract than when one is suspended hundreds of feet in the air staring death in the face. Religion counters nihilism with the promise that there is something beyond life. So, while the moment of crisis does not kindle belief in the hero, it does teach him to appreciate its emotional (if illusory) uses. His scepticism remains emphatically there, but tempered now by a tolerance that is, at root, psychological.

³⁶ Stephen, ‘A Bad Five Minutes’, 552.

³⁷ Ibid. 553.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. 553, 560. The full list of religions and philosophical guides given is: ‘Protestants, Catholics, Positivists, Broad Churchmen, Pantheists, and a vast variety of sects... St. Paul, Spinoza, Marcus Aurelius, Dr. Newman, Epicurus, Comte, Thomas à Kempis, Luther, Dr. Cumming, and others.’

In Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* the cliffhanger scene occurs when Henry Knight and Elfride meet walking near the Cliff without a Name. Knight—always keen to prove his intellect—drops his hat over the edge in order to demonstrate the unusual air currents around the cliff. On attempting to retrieve the dropped hat, he finds himself unable to re-ascend. Elfride tries to help him back to safety and not only becomes trapped herself, but makes the predicament more precarious for both of them. Using Knight as a human ladder she climbs to safety, but as she does so Knight slips further from the edge. Elfride disappears in search of help, leaving Knight to meditate on his position and on his place in the world. Just as he has given up all hope, Elfride returns and rescues him with a rope fashioned out of her underclothes.

Critics have noted detailed points of similarity in the dramatic predicament, though the differences are perhaps more interesting. Each man clings to a root as he is left suspended from the cliff and each maintains a precarious foothold on a stray piece of quartz protruding from the cliff-face. They both undertake a dangerous upwards leap in order to propel themselves to safety. Whereas Knight, aided by Elfride, is successful, Stephen's hero falls further down and is saved by the fortuitous position of an hitherto invisible ledge. The narrator of 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' contemplates his place in the world, and how insignificant his loss to it would be: 'I cannot affect to think that I have been more to the world than an ant to a mountain. . . Humanity was too big and too distant, and too indistinctly related to me, to lift me for one minute above the sense of that awful personal crash which was approaching so speedily.'⁴⁰ He develops this thought further to consider the Materialist philosophy that would reconcile him to death by proposing that the individual is not in himself significant and that the crucial factor is what he has added to humanity. He is not at ease with the idea that his own existence can be

⁴⁰ Ibid. 559.

dismissed in this way and admits that he can find no more solace in Materialism than in the ‘diabolical witchcraft’ of Christianity.⁴¹

Knight also speculates on his place in the world, but reaches a different conclusion. He cannot help thinking—with an echo of Stephen’s hero’s wryness, ‘that his death would be a deliberate loss to earth of good material; that such an experiment in killing might have been practised upon some less developed life.’⁴² Each blames nature as the agent of his predicament and each is indignant about the sport nature appears to enjoy by placing his life in peril. Stephen’s hero’s comedic dislike of Newtonian physics resonates in Knight’s reference to ‘Pitiless Nature’.⁴³ He argues:

We are mostly accustomed to look upon all opposition which is not animate, as that of the stolid, inexorable hand of indifference, which wears out the patience more than the strength. Here, at any rate, hostility did not assume that slow sickening form. It was a cosmic agency, active, lashing, eager for conquest: determination; not an insensate standing in the way.⁴⁴

With these similarities established, it is of interest to examine what Hardy did *not* appropriate from Stephen and consider what this might imply about his burgeoning relationship with nineteenth-century agnosticism.

In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* Hardy allows Knight’s contemplation of life and death to move through very similar stages; however, whereas Stephen’s hero’s mind wanders through many alternative modes of philosophising about what his life and death might mean to the world, in Knight’s cliffhanger Hardy seizes control of the narrative and explicitly declines to tell us what his protagonist’s speculations on these matters might be: ‘Knight gave up thoughts of life utterly and entirely, and turned to contemplate the Dark Valley and the unknown future beyond. Into the solemn depths of these reflections we will

⁴¹ Ibid. 560.

⁴² *PBE (serial)* 124. (NB. With the exception of those regarding the cliff-scene, all references to *A Pair of Blue Eyes* are from the Oxford University Press 1985 edition. This decision was made based on the fact that the serial and the novel do not differ greatly in the other scenes discussed here, as well as the convenience of using a single volume relative to using the many instalments of the serial.)

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 123.

not pry.⁴⁵ No space is offered to reflect on what Knight might go on to imagine. At this moment, Elfride reappears on the horizon, the rescue begins, and the focalisation of the narrative shifts away from Knight.

The reader is, therefore, suspended in a literary cliffhanger, *avant la lettre*, analogous to Knight's situation. What are we to assume he imagines in these last few seconds before his rescue? I suggest that whereas Stephen explicitly details his hero's thoughts, Hardy, apparently dodging metaphysical speculation, in fact relocates it within the wider narrative. The text of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* becomes a comparatively freer space in which to deliberate the alternatives to belief.

Hardy's answer to Knight's metaphysical contemplation is, apparently, Elfride. The narrative speculates that Knight places his faith in her and in love: 'Knight perseveringly held on. Had he any faith in Elfride? Perhaps. Love is faith, and faith, like a gathered flower, will live on a long time after nutriment has ceased'.⁴⁶ Hardy thus takes the theological speculations of Stephen's essay and secularises them, swapping the language of metaphysics for the language of romance, but a language that Knight does not fully endorse. This may be a sign of an inexperienced author wanting to keep up the narrative drive and wary of alienating his audience by openly interrogating these big ideas, except that we know Hardy remained, throughout his life, unwilling to nail his philosophical colours to the mast. Though the scene is not quite an allegory, it nevertheless shows Hardy's attempt to give novelistic form to his questions about faith that were addressed in Stephen's essay. By juxtaposing the languages of love and theology here, Hardy subtly leaves his more philosophical readers free to speculate on the latter. Faith can survive without 'nutriment', he declares. Faith is an empirically unverifiable conviction, but Hardy implies here that there is a fundamental absurdity in faith. Without any logical justification, the lover clings blindly to the hope that salvation will be brought about by the object of his worship. We should, of course, be wary of straining the allegory, but given the theological

⁴⁵ Ibid. 124.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

language and the fact that Stephen's essay is undoubtedly the model for this scene, a consideration of faith in its religious sense is perhaps not too great a leap. Moreover, as is demonstrated in Chapter Seven, blending the languages of love and religion was not an unusual practice for Hardy.

Knight finds himself in a position where he must trust in that which, to him, is unknown: this woman. It is here that Hardy departed from the philosophy of Stephen's 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps'. Stephen's hero, before undertaking his dangerous leap to safety, concludes that his situation is hopeless. The leap is not, like Knight's, one fortified by faith, but the action of a man who believes he has nothing to lose either way. Knight on the other hand re-evaluates his principles. Having no alternative he puts his faith in Elfride.

By way of underlining the remarkable nature of Knight's conversion, his salvation is actually accomplished through the use of Elfride's underclothes:

Elfride had absolutely nothing between her and the weather but her diaphanous exterior or 'costume.' The door had been made upon a woman's wit, and it had found its way out. Behind the bank, while Knight reclined upon the dizzy slope waiting for death, she had taken off her whole clothing, and replaced only her outer robe and skirt. Every thread of the remainder lay upon the ground in the form of a woollen and cotton rope.⁴⁷

The instant Knight is pulled to safety, '[m]oved by an impulse neither could resist, they ran together and into each other's arms.'⁴⁸ This is a surprisingly risqué gesture for one such as Knight who has no experience of women and strict standards of propriety. The physical contact and the use of Elfride's underclothes go against his principles, emphasising the extreme alterations in character that a moment of anxiety can initiate and echoing the softening of Stephen's protagonist's principles in 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps'.

Throughout the novel, Elfride is depicted as close to or associated with God. Stephen Smith's lingering image of Elfride is of her playing the piano by candlelight, the candle casting a glow that 'forms the accidentally frizzled hair into a nebulous haze of light,

⁴⁷ Ibid. 127.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 126.

surrounding her crown like an aureola.⁴⁹ When her father, the town rector, reads his sermons in church, the words are Elfride's. On her journey to Endelstow Church the narrator hints at her omnipresence: she is 'nowhere in particular, yet everywhere'.⁵⁰ At the close of the novel, after her death, she becomes an object of worship, so much so that Smith and Knight effectively undertake a pilgrimage in her name.⁵¹ Of course, these associations are predominantly ironic and some of them even comic, serving as evidence more of masculine folly than of Elfride's essential divinity. In Hardy's delineation of Elfride, it is apparent that the most noticeable thing about her is her indefinableness. Though hers are the 'Blue Eyes' of the title and she is the focus of the tale, it is impossible fully to understand or even see her:

Personally she was the combination of very interesting particulars, whose rarity, however, lay in the combination itself rather than in the individual elements combined. As a matter of fact you did not see the form and substance of her features when conversing with her... One point in her, however, you did notice: that was her eyes. In them was seen a sublimation of all of her; it was not necessary to look further: there she lived... As to her Presence; it was not powerful; it was weak.⁵²

Elfride cannot be understood in and of herself; it is necessary to look at her disparate attributes and how they are brought together in a strange fusion. Though, as we have seen, Hardy may not have encountered Spencer's *First Principles* by the time he wrote *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Elfride's fundamentally unfathomable nature parallels Spencer's Unknowable, again suggesting that Hardy was reaching similar conclusions in his thinking about philosophy and metaphysics as did his agnostic contemporaries. Because she cannot be definitively known Elfride is open to interpretation by her respective suitors—crudely put, Smith sees her as a lover, Knight as a virgin. These different interpretations echo Spencer's theory that seemingly diverse ways of understanding the world (that is, science and theology) could in fact be traced back to a unitary centre, which he calls the Unknowable.

⁴⁹ *PBE* 22.

⁵⁰ *PBE* 30-1.

⁵¹ Chapter 38 of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (*PBE* 345-63).

⁵² *PBE* 7.

Elfride's 'Presence', with significant capitalisation, is 'weak'; she is not absent, but is also not fully present, like the Unknowable.⁵³

When Smith and Knight unwittingly accompany Elfride's coffin, they overhear a conversation between the two men charged with the task of reattaching its carriage to the train after it has been mistakenly uncoupled:

'The carriage is light enough,' said one in a grim tone. 'Light as vanity; full o' nothing.'

'Nothing in size, but a good deal in signification,' said the other, a man of brighter mind and manners.⁵⁴

'[F]ull o' nothing', is the assumption of the first man, an apt judgment to pass upon Elfride in light of the way in which her character has been construed by her two would-be suitors. Their worship of her has been based upon an image that they have themselves constructed. Elfride is allowed little opportunity to assert her own character and is at the end of the novel, therefore, 'nothing'. The second man states that her carriage is a 'good deal in signification', summing up the role that Elfride has played for her suitors—she has been nothing more than a sign, a representation of their desires. In terms of religious allegory, the worshipped object does not—or cannot—assert itself and make itself known. The devotees create and impose a character upon it. In the poem, 'A Plaint to Man', discussed in Chapter Seven, Hardy dramatised God's own complaint about this very matter.⁵⁵ The criticism of the agnostics was that it was meaningless to worship an unknowable object, a God whose character had been constructed only according to the beliefs of its followers. Ultimately, Elfride is reduced to 'nothing'—is this also the fate of the unknowable God?

Returned to secure ground, Knight's faith in Elfride does not last. He discovers the truth of her past (that she has had two other lovers) and rejects her as an unworthy object for his devotion. He realises that he has not found his ideal: Elfride is tainted and manifestly human. Just as Stephen's hero finds that one cannot unwaveringly reject the

⁵³ *PBE* 28.

⁵⁴ *PBE* 358.

⁵⁵ *CP* 266.

possibility of a divine grace, or at least the comforts that such a belief may bring, Knight learns that he must, for the first time in his life, rely on someone other than himself. Stephen's hero is saved by natural coincidence, and Knight (in his view) by a flawed woman. Ultimately, while neither is required to alter radically his system of belief, they both subtly modify the strenuousness of their former unbelief.

Written later in 1873 (and after *A Pair of Blue Eyes*), Stephen's 'An Apology for Plainspeaking' makes a fitting companion piece to Henry Knight's crisis. In it Stephen considers the emotional effects of a crisis of faith:

Many believers have described the terrible agony with which they had at one period of their lives listened to the first whisperings of scepticism. The horror with which they speak of the gulf after managing to struggle back to the right side is supposed to illustrate the cruelty of encouraging others to take the plunge. That such sufferings are at times very real and very acute, is undeniable; and yet I imagine that few who have undergone them would have missed the experience. I venture even to think that the recollection is one of unmixed pain only in those cases in which the sufferer has a half-consciousness that he has not escaped by legitimate means. If in his despair he has clutched at a lie in order to extricate himself as quickly as possible and at any price, it is no wonder that he looks back with a shudder.⁵⁶

This passage—in which Stephen shows noticeably less tolerance towards the desperate believer than in his 1872 essay—accurately describes Knight's philosophical journey. As he struggles to cling on to the cliff-face, he comes face to face with the fossil of an ancient and lowly life-form and contemplates with horror the fact that his life has come to this moment—his death is of no more consequence than this prehistoric organism. Importantly, Knight's observation of this fossil, which has been much discussed by critics, puts his crisis of faith in the context of evolutionary theory and its impact on religious belief.⁵⁷ Like the chastened sceptic of Stephen's essay who escapes by illegitimate means, Knight escaped (with the aid of Elfride's underclothes) only by a breach of his own

⁵⁶ Leslie Stephen, 'An Apology for Plainspeaking', *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1873), 326-62 (330-1).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), especially 253-4; Peter W. L. Clough, 'Hardy's Trilobite', *THJ*, 4/2 (1988), 29-31; and Paul Ward, "'A Pair of Blue Eyes" and the Descent of Man', *The Thomas Hardy Year Book*, 5 (1975), 47-55.

principles of purity and propriety. Thus, when he further contemplates the object of his new-found faith in love and in woman, Knight grows uncomfortable and restless until he turns his back on Elfride and allegorically reverts to his former state of unbelief. His love, or faith, is only revived once its object is dead and beyond the realm of human blemish—when it has become profoundly unknowable.

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE AND 'AN AGNOSTIC'S APOLOGY'

Hardy's summons to witness Stephen's deed renunciatory of holy orders (described above in Chapter One) took place in March 1875—that is, between the composition of *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Hand of Ethelberta*. Following this unusual ritual, the two men talked late into the night about 'theologies decayed and defunct, the origin of things, the constitution of matter, the unreality of time and kindred subjects.'⁵⁸ Certainly, then, Hardy was exposed to Stephen's philosophy during the period in which he was writing for the *Cornhill*. Indeed, we might surmise that Stephen's choosing of Hardy to sign his deed of renunciation indicates that in matters of theology there was some measure of sympathy between the men.

As in the case of 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the time between publication of Stephen's 'An Agnostic's Apology' and Hardy's *The Return of the Native* is short—'An Agnostic's Apology' first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in June 1876 and Hardy began to write *The Return of the Native* in late 1876—but it is likely that Hardy read Stephen's 'Apology' prior to or during composition of the novel. Hardy was certainly a reader of, if not a subscriber to, the *Fortnightly Review* in the mid-seventies: Millgate notes that in this period Emma was assisting her husband with his notebooks and made records from a variety of books, newspapers and magazines, including the 'Saturday

⁵⁸ Maitland, *Leslie Stephen*, 263-4.

Review, Spectator, and Fortnightly.⁵⁹ Given that the two men had enjoyed a professional relationship for more than three years, it is also possible (though we can only speculate) that Stephen offered Hardy the manuscript of his essay prior to its publication or that it had been the topic of some informal discussion.

Hardy had completed only part of his new novel when, in February 1877, Stephen expressed hesitancy about its suitability for the *Cornhill*. The philosophical concerns of Stephen's 'Apology' regarding free-will, the absence of a provable divine presence shaping men's fate, and unjust suffering are principally echoed in the middle and later stages of the novel, suggesting that the novel's rejection by Stephen offered Hardy a chance to ruminate more fully on Stephen's philosophy than he was able to while his writing was subject to the editor's scrupulous eye. The melancholy tone of the novel—which I argue is greatly influenced by Stephen's essay—does not become all-pervasive until the fourth book of six.

Stephen's 'Apology' is a discursive piece and not a fictional narrative, so Hardy could not have translated it easily into his novel even if that were his wish. The ideas of Stephen's later essay (mentioned above) are, however, clearly woven into *The Return of the Native*; yet, while these ideas form the large concerns of the novel, Hardy chose not to treat them in the way that his former editor had done. In 1877, well into the sixth book and sixth year of his literary career and the professional link with his editor broken, Hardy had achieved greater independence and confidence. It is only natural, then, that Hardy was less susceptible to Stephen's arguments and more willing to subject them to scrutiny, and his treatment of 'An Agnostic's Apology' is both less imitative and more critical than that he gave to Stephen's 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' in 1872.

'An Agnostic's Apology' is a lengthy defence of agnosticism that stresses the inevitability of the agnostic standpoint. In contrast to the tolerance that Stephen's hero acquired throughout his 'Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' in 1872, 'An Agnostic's Apology' is surprisingly dogmatic in its insistence that agnosticism is the only logical approach to

⁵⁹ Millgate, *A Biography*, 189.

matters of belief and metaphysics. Stephen begins by declaring the rarity of ‘Dogmatic Atheism’ and states that agnosticism is ‘a fairly accurate appreciation of a form of creed already common and daily spreading.’⁶⁰ He validates this argument by setting agnosticism up as the antithesis of gnosticism, a term cleverly chosen to evoke the notion of the heretical group known as the Gnostics, who claimed to have absolute knowledge of God. The ‘Gnostics’ of Stephen’s treatise are not, though, the heretics of the early Church, but nineteenth-century Christians. Stephen draws his reader’s attention to the ‘pain, folly, and helplessness, . . . the jarring discords which run through the vast harmony of the universe’ causing the individual to question his faith in God.⁶¹ He scathingly rebukes the Church for attempting to justify human suffering by asserting the existence of God as the omniscient ‘harmony’ behind our temporary pain. He describes Christianity’s reassuring optimism as the ‘bitterest of mockeries’, arguing that man is obliged to adapt his life to cope with his predicament, and that the fact is that religious words of comfort are now known to be unverifiable.⁶²

Stephen’s argument is emotive, polemical and somewhat tendentious in parts. He seeks to demonstrate that every system of belief or philosophy leads logically to agnosticism. The orthodox, the deist, the pantheist, even the atheist: none of these can provide an argument to convince the agnostic that he is in error. Stephen’s primary concern in this essay is the problem of evil and undeserved suffering. Theology provides many answers to justify the existence of pain in the world, but no religion, he argues, can provide an answer that would satisfy or refute the claims of the pessimist or the agnostic:

Theology, if logical, leads straight to Pantheism. The Infinite God is everything. All things are bound together as cause and effect. God, the first cause, is the cause of all effects down to the most remote. In one form or other, that is the conclusion to which all theology approximates as it is pushed to its legitimate result. . . . A Pantheist is, as a rule, one who looks upon the universe through his feelings instead of his reason, and who regards it with love because his habitual frame of mind is amiable. But he has no logical

⁶⁰ Stephen, ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 2.

⁶² *Ibid.* 3.

argument as against the Pessimist, who regards it with dread unqualified by love, or the Agnostic, who finds it impossible to regard it with any but a colourless emotion.⁶³

Stephen's charge of illogicality against the pantheist might be more accurately levelled against himself. The first stage of his argument—the sweeping statement that theology leads to pantheism—cites no supporting evidence or argument and fails to address inconvenient counter-arguments. Stephen's bald statement that the pantheist's 'habitual frame of mind is amiable' ironically undermines his appeal to logic: it is a loose and subjective characterisation rather than an empirical fact. Indeed, this is a remarkable dismissal of the complex systems of theology of which Stephen appears to speak so authoritatively throughout his 'Apology'.⁶⁴

As in 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps', Stephen chooses the word 'colourless' to express the emotions of the agnostic. Stephen's interpretation of agnosticism (by no means a standard one) falls into the trap subsequently described by Frederic Harrison when he condemned agnosticism as a system without any hope of survival: 'negative', 'sterile', 'immoral', 'isolated', 'destroy[ing]' and 'paralys[ing]'.⁶⁵ Harrison's Positivism sought to replace God with a belief in humanity, giving meaning to life and bringing back its 'colour', to use Stephen's analogy.

Stephen explains that free-will is too often blamed for all immorality and this leads to the pessimist's (and, we may assume, the agnostic's) difficulty in accepting, and consequently worshipping, an absentee creator, a God who created Nature and man and then sat back and allowed His creations to run amok. Stephen goes on to argue that the resulting depravity, 'the sight of which leads some of us to Atheism, some to blank despair, and some to epicurean indifference', is—if one accepts the concept of free-will—an

⁶³ Ibid. 15-17.

⁶⁴ A deist, for instance, would argue against the pantheist that God is not immanent but transcends the universe he created.

⁶⁵ Harrison, 'The Future of Agnosticism', 143-56.

unfortunate ‘accident.’⁶⁶ Having presented this scenario as a criticism of theologians, Stephen then offers agnosticism to his rivals as a solution to their dilemma. Stephen suggests that it is possible that God might have been able to predict the results of man’s ostensibly erratic free-will, but that human beings cannot hope to understand this omniscience, which Stephen describes as a ‘facult[y] inconceivable to finite minds’.⁶⁷ This, he argues, ‘is Agnosticism in the highest degree’.⁶⁸ The argument is somewhat sophistic, since it replaces the usual unknowability of God’s existence with the unfathomability of a particular description of God.

Stephen contemplates the injustice of earthly suffering—‘Why do the good so often suffer, and the evil so often flourish?’—and questions the ‘moral poison’ infecting children today.⁶⁹ Presenting the arguments of the determinist and the anti-determinist, he scornfully suggests that the victims of this injustice may eventually be rewarded with some ‘unknowable compensation’ in the afterlife.⁷⁰ He argues that believers in divine justice need, therefore, to fall back on unknowability, the fundamental principle of agnosticism, to help them to come to terms with a cruel world. ‘Justice’, he insists, ‘is not to be found in the *visible* arrangements of the universe’ (emphasis added): agnosticism is, then, inescapable, even for theists.⁷¹

Finally, Stephen develops his argument to illustrate the inevitability of pessimism:

There is a deep sadness in the world. Turn and twist the thought as you may, there is no escape. Optimism would be soothing if it were possible; in fact, it is impossible, and therefore a constant mockery; and of all dogmas that ever were invented, that which has least vitality is the dogma that whatever is, is right... When some random blow out of the dark crushes the pillars round which our life has been entwined as recklessly as a boy sweeps away a cobweb, when at a single step we plunge through the flimsy crust of happiness into the deep gulfs beneath, we are tempted to turn to Pessimism. Who shall decide, and how? Of all questions that can be asked, the most important is surely this: Is the tangled web of this world composed chiefly of happiness or of misery? And of all

⁶⁶ Stephen, ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’, 19, 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 19.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 23.

⁷¹ Ibid.

questions that can be asked, it is surely the most unanswerable. For in no other problem is the difficulty of discarding the illusions arising from our own experience, of eliminating “the personal error” and gaining an outside standing-point, so hopeless.⁷²

Stephen’s pessimism is rooted in the hopelessness of finding a satisfactory solution to life’s mysteries. Agnosticism is the necessary condition of man who can know ‘nothing of the Infinite and Absolute’.⁷³ He cannot know that his suffering will be rewarded, or that his persecutors will be punished. Indeed, all that is certain is his misery. He concludes his essay by rebuking those who would deny the logic of agnosticism, drawing attention to their hypocrisy because, however they hide it in their public lives, privately every man is necessarily agnostic and must accept the obvious truth that ‘the ancient secret is a secret still’.⁷⁴

Stephen’s conclusions in this essay are inflexible. He insists that there is no escape from agnosticism and that, eventually, it will be acknowledged as the only rational position. In contrast with the relative tolerance gained by the hero in ‘A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps’, here we witness the unbending Stephen that his biographers and his daughter allude to in their writing. Stefan Collini argues in *Political Moralists* that Stephen embodied ‘the cultivation of all that is masculine and the expulsion of all that is effeminate, un-English, and excessively intellectual’ in English thought.⁷⁵ He is dogmatically rationalist here. The harrowing moment of crisis over, Stephen reverts to his former intolerance. There is no need for feminine uncertainty—the facts are there in black and white to be accepted. Only a fool would give any further thought to the matter. Agnosticism is the only option and that is the end of the story.

The agnosticism Stephen advocated in 1876 had grown from its earlier incarnation as a rational conviction of the unknowability of God and undecidability of First Causes,

⁷² Ibid. 33-5.

⁷³ Ibid. 38.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Collini, *Public Moralists*, 188-9. These are the ‘constitutive qualities of “muscular Christianity”’, as given in David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (London: John Murray, 1961), 216.

and incorporated not only the epistemological conclusion but also the further conclusion that belief without proof (that is, faith) is not sufficiently nourishing. He thus went beyond describing what can be known to prescribing agnosticism as the most satisfying position for life. The allying of agnosticism with pessimism shows Stephen's recognition of an unpalatable attitude to be taken and leaves the reader in no doubt as to Stephen's own stance. Stephen, at least by the time of 'An Agnostic's Apology', had chosen logical uncertainty over optimism and hope, knowing that the price he paid for his choice was lack of 'colour' in his spiritual life.

The Return of the Native demonstrates both Hardy's increasingly critical response to his former editor's philosophy (particularly in 'An Agnostic's Apology') and a burgeoning independence with regards to his own approach to metaphysical questions. While for Stephen agnosticism was the necessary response to all questions concerning theology or philosophy, Hardy approached the matter from the opposite end: agnosticism is not the point to which all systems can be reduced, it is the point from which to begin, a declaration of the freedom to contemplate and experiment. Hardy saw the basic irony of Stephen's approach to agnosticism, that in declaring its superiority over all other systems, agnosticism itself becomes a system, a dogma (and not a very satisfying one at that). By discrediting all other philosophies and theologies, Stephen claimed a level of absolute certainty—albeit negative certainty. Hardy, with a purer approach to agnosticism than that of his former editor, did not feel the need to disprove or discount any theory. For Hardy, matters of religion were not straightforward. In many ways, with *The Return of the Native*, the writer presented his readers with the novelistic equivalent of Stephen's 'Apology'. Hardy picked up the threads of concern from the essay and, like his former editor, examined various (although less formalised) philosophical approaches to the existence of pain and the question of metaphysics. Using the drama of the novel to illustrate the problem of how an omniscient and benign God could permit unjustified suffering, he examined the diverse responses to it through the emotions and experiences of its characters. Unjustified

suffering was only too apparent to Hardy, but could not be as easily dismissed as his former editor held. In his 'Apology' Stephen listed his grudges against the design of the universe then gleefully uses their inexplicability as proof of the logicity of agnosticism and the irrationality and unsatisfactoriness of other belief systems. Hardy's approach was less deductive than that of Stephen. No system of belief—religious, pagan or secular—is dismissed in *The Return of the Native*. Each is explored, but none is rejected with the easy offhandness of Stephen. For Hardy, it was the natural world and not a particular system (or systems) of belief, that was flawed. Irrespective of one's philosophical or theological approach, suffering is guaranteed.

Egdon Heath, the expansive yet peculiarly claustrophobic setting of the novel, accommodates many metaphysical systems. Its inhabitants are vaguely aware that something controls their destiny, but they struggle to name it and are reluctant to trust it. Humphrey, one of the heathfolk, declares that there is no point in attending church on a Sunday because ' 'tis such a mortal poor chance that you'll be chose for up above, when so many bain't... ', and, at the start of the novel, when the heathfolk light their bonfires, the reader is offered many alternative justifications for the ceremony:

Festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground and duly had their day. Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendents from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot.

Moreover to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. Black chaos comes, and the fettered gods of the earth say, Let there be light.⁷⁶

Hardy used Egdon's inhabitants to explore theology, humanism, paganism and superstition as alternative systems of belief: this description moves from Norse gods, through Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies, to the conflict between Protestant and Catholic churches (that is, the 'Gunpowder Plot'), then from the laws of Nature, through Greek mythology and

⁷⁶ RN 28, 25.

concludes with words from Genesis. The systems are themselves ‘jumbled’ and, while they may have been influenced by the rites and ceremonies, they do not appear to have evolved in any direct sense, despite the narrator’s claims to their ‘lineal descen[t]’: indeed, ‘[b]lack chaos’ seems the most appropriate description of this metaphysical jumble. No system of belief is given precedence and none is dismissed outright. Occurring in the early chapters of the novel, this passage would have been a part of the manuscript sent to Stephen with the hopes that, like its two predecessors, it would be published in the *Cornhill*. Yet Hardy was not risking much at this stage: the scene takes place before the introduction of any of the principal characters and describes the actions of the seemingly simple-minded heathfolk, which makes any initial challenge to Stephen’s ‘Apology’ here relatively trivial.

More significant challenges are made from Book Third onwards, with the introduction of the main protagonists, particularly Eustacia and Clym. The third book and the fifth instalment of the serial begin at the same point and, therefore, would almost certainly not have been included in the manuscript sent to Stephen.⁷⁷ Eustacia is educated and thoughtful, and yet she, like her fellow heath-dwellers, is unable to pinpoint the cause of her suffering. She is sure that there is something guiding the course of her life and that, whatever that thing is, it is malign and unjust. She bewails her undeserved lot, but is unable to give a name to its cause: indeed, Eustacia’s anger is directed towards many different supposed causes. In discussing her views on Clym’s philanthropic ambitions, Eustacia declares of ‘Nature’ that she ‘hate[s] her already.’⁷⁸ Later, after Clym discovers that she (inadvertently) refused his dying mother admission to their home, she passionately directs her condemnation at an array of differing—indeed incompatible—forces:

‘How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me!...I do not deserve my lot!’ she cried in a frenzy of bitter revolt. ‘O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control!’

⁷⁷ See Millgate, *A Biography*, 187-8.

⁷⁸ RN 187.

O, how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all!⁷⁹

In a few lines, Eustacia blames both ‘destiny’ and ‘Heaven’, implies that she has a pre-determined ‘lot’, describes the world as ‘ill-conceived’ (implying that there is a conceiver behind it all), and finds herself unable to name her persecutors, designating them simply ‘things beyond [her] control’. Her complaint voices a philosophical confusion that is echoed throughout the novel. There is a general sense that someone must be blamed for suffering, but perplexity as to who or what the object of complaint should be. In Stephen’s ‘Apology’ the object was God and, with this established, he embarked on a reductionist criticism, seeking to oust theology with logic, and insisting upon the necessity of agnosticism. Hardy avoided binding himself to the first premise of Stephen’s argument against theology—that if God gave us free-will then He is responsible for its consequences—offering instead a variety of metaphysical explanations, none of which appear to be dependent on a monotheistic divinity.

As if to provide an answer to the questions raised by Eustacia’s lament, the narrative immediately shifts to describe Susan Nunsuch’s sinister pagan ritual that is intended to bring harm—or death—to Eustacia. Susan, unlike her fellow protagonists, is sure of the source of her suffering (or more precisely that of her children), believing it to be Eustacia’s witchcraft. The animosity Susan feels towards Eustacia is evident from the very early stages of the novel. During one of Eustacia’s rare visits to church she is made, as Clym later remarks, a ‘romantic martyr to superstition’ when Susan stabs her with a stocking needle ‘so as to draw her blood and put an end to the bewitching of [her] children’.⁸⁰ Eustacia’s lament takes place within sight of Susan’s cottage in which one of her children moans in pain. Sure that ‘Eustacia’s propinquity’ is the cause of her child’s illness, Susan models a wax representation of her enemy and stabs it all over with pins before

⁷⁹ RN 345-6.

⁸⁰ RN 181, 178.

melting it over the fire.⁸¹ While carrying out this ‘ghastly invention of superstition, calculated to bring powerlessness, atrophy, and annihilation on any human being against whom it was directed’, she murmurs the Lord’s Prayer backwards while flame ‘curl[s] its tongue’ around the effigy and slowly devours it.⁸² Within a few pages, Eustacia falls (or jumps) into the swollen river and dies.

The narrative pulls the reader in several directions in its attempt to find a solution to the mystery of the unjust suffering of both Eustacia and Susan Nunsuch’s sick child. Eustacia’s proximity to the cottage at the very moment Susan’s child complains of illness provides the reproachful mother with an explanation for his suffering. Then, by juxtaposing Susan’s pagan ritual with Eustacia’s confusion about the ‘things’ that conspire to injure, blight and crush her, the reader is invited to contemplate whether in fact paganism might provide an answer. A relatively large amount of narrative space is offered to Susan’s suspicions and to the ritual she practices. Hardy, though, avoided passing judgment on the validity of her primitive superstition; it is neither endorsed nor dismissed. At the time Eustacia dies, many possibilities have been suggested regarding the agent of her demise: ‘Nature’ (the weather) is unforgiving; Susan has performed her strange ritual; Eustacia has already contemplated taking her own life; and we have been exposed to her complaints against ‘destiny’, ‘Heaven’ and the ‘ill-conceived world.’ All that the narrative makes clear is that there is a human need to think in terms of an agency guiding the misfortune, but whether that agency is natural, supernatural or simply human is open to speculation.

Towards the end of the novel, Clym reflects on the adversity he has faced, and speculates on the nature of the agent of his suffering:

He did sometimes think he had been ill-used by fortune, so far as to say that to be born is a palpable dilemma, and that instead of men aiming to advance in life with glory they should calculate how to retreat out of it without shame. But that he and his had been sarcastically and pitilessly handled in having such

⁸¹ RN 346.

⁸² RN 346-8.

irons thrust into their souls he did not maintain long. It is usually so, except with the sternest of men. Human beings, in their generous endeavour to construct a hypothesis that shall not degrade a First Cause, have always hesitated to conceive a dominant power of lower moral quality than their own; and, even while they sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon, invent excuses for the oppression which prompts their tears.⁸³

Clym's thoughts initially show a similar pattern of confusion to Eustacia's, and, indeed, to that illustrated throughout the novel. He too is unable to attach a name to the guiding force he imagines in the universe, calling it variously 'fortune', a 'First Cause', and a 'dominant power' and conceiving of it as an agent of 'oppression.' At times he is pessimistic, thinking that the nameless force is malign and has been purposefully 'ill-us[ing]' both him and his loved ones. But he cannot 'maintain' this position. His darker moments clearly retrace the same argumentative ground as Stephen in his 'Apology' and are reminiscent of the rational pessimism Stephen had expressed; but the narrator quickly tells us that this is not a sustainable position, 'except with the sternest of men'. Clym's generosity of mind is, Hardy asserts, the common tendency of human nature: it is intolerable to reject the idea of causality entirely, or to believe that the First Cause would be a malign force 'sarcastically and pitilessly' toying with his creations. Perhaps Hardy was levelling a criticism at his former editor with his reference to the 'sternest of men'. While the narrative voice does not affirm or deny Clym's magnanimity towards the First Cause (indeed, the tone used to describe the human beings' 'generous... hypothesis' is rather more ironic than sincere, phrased in such a way as to appear to comment on the habits of a species from which the voice stands somewhat apart), it does suggest that the inflexible position of the 'sternest of men' though it may be logical, is not, in practice, feasible.

Clym is the earliest example of Hardy's agnostic hero, a figure that re-emerges in later novels in increasingly distinct forms in the characters of Edred Fitzpiers, Angel Clare and, more complicatedly, Jude Fawley. Like these characters, Clym is *The Return of the Native's* main representative of reason, and probably the only character in the novel with

⁸³ RN 372.

whom Leslie Stephen would have had even marginal sympathy. Clym is a modern man: an intellectual in training, an 'artist and scholar', worldly (at least in comparison with his fellow protagonists) and, to a degree, ambitious.⁸⁴ He is (famously) introduced to the reader as having a face in which 'could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future.'⁸⁵

The observer's eye was arrested, not by his face as a picture, but by his face as a page; not by what it was, but by what it recorded. His features were attractive in the light of symbols, as sounds intrinsically common become attractive in language, and as shapes intrinsically simple become interesting in writing.⁸⁶

This description of Clym is decidedly philosophical, using abstract images and language that link him to a more contemplative and intellectual world than his fellow heathfolk. Despite this, he is presented as an integral part of Egdon Heath: 'Clym had been so inwoven with the heath in his boyhood that hardly anybody could look upon it without thinking of him.'⁸⁷ His plan to stay on the heath and start a school reveals him as man animated by learning and the pursuit of knowledge, and he justifies his proposal by drawing attention to the 'effeminate' nature of his former occupation as a diamond trader.⁸⁸ Thus far, Clym is not dissimilar to the rational and fiercely masculine Stephen. However, his project, which he describes as a 'rational occupation', is nothing but a dream.⁸⁹ Having returned from Paris steeped in the city's intellectualism, Clym fails to note that the heath is not ready to be advanced in the way that he desires. 'The rural world', the narrator explains, 'was not ripe for him. A man should be only partially before his time: to be completely to the vanward in aspirations is fatal to fame.'⁹⁰

For all his modernity, Clym is hopelessly romantic, showing himself susceptible to Eustacia, although he refuses to succumb to her pleas to abandon his goal and the heath. He insists that he will not pursue an irrational occupation based on vanity, but the goal he

⁸⁴ RN 170.

⁸⁵ RN 169.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ RN 170.

⁸⁸ RN 173.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ RN 174.

chooses to pursue in its place is hardly less ephemeral. It is no coincidence that his Parisian occupation was trading diamonds, one of the hardest materials on earth, and that he exchanges this for an intangible ideal, education. He admits that his idea is not to improve the economic well-being of his students, but to open their minds.

Ultimately, Clym's dream is defeated not by the reluctance of his students, but by his own human frailty. Studying to prepare himself to carry out this grand plan, Clym overstrains his eyes and is reduced to working as a furze-cutter. He is absorbed into the heath by his new trade, no longer an individual, barely even a human being:

This man from Paris was now so disguised by his leather accoutrements, and by the goggles he was obliged to wear over his eyes, that his closest friend might have passed by without recognising him. He was a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and nothing more... His daily life was of a curious microscopic sort, his whole world being limited to a circuit of a few feet from his person. His familiars were creeping and winged things, and they seemed to enroll him in their band... The monotony of his occupation soothed him, and was in itself a pleasure. A forced limitation of effort offered a justification of homely courses to an unambitious man, whose conscience would hardly have allowed him to remain in such obscurity while his powers were unimpeded.⁹¹

Through his physical blindness, Clym is symbolically forced to close his eyes to the purely intellectual world in which he has been hitherto immersed. Without the means by which to study, he becomes less than a man and sinks into his surroundings almost without question or regret. His thoughts are not bitter and, in fact, he is content with his lot. There is, for Clym now, greater tranquillity in ignorance than in the unrelenting pursuit of knowledge and truth, and in this Hardy revealed a tolerance for the man who chooses not to inquire strenuously into causes of things. Again, Hardy showed a greater understanding of human nature than did his former editor. He did not deny that there is a logical path to be taken and that knowledge could be pursued to its limits, but made a case for deliberately choosing not to follow that path, it is more 'sooth[ing]'—but also more pleasurable—for a

⁹¹ RN 248-9.

man to accept his lot and to turn his back on the search for answers to the world's great mysteries.

Caught between strenuous rationality and 'homely' acceptance, between the mindsets of the city and the country, between the demands of philosophy and the humane and pleasurable attractions of art Hardy depicted, in Clym, his own dilemma. For Stephen, the intellect was paramount, and it was a priority with him to pursue philosophy to its logical conclusion, as he saw it, in agnosticism. His upbringing was unequivocally religious—his family were devoted Christians and the young Stephen was, according to Noel Gilroy Annan, 'no exception.'⁹² He was elected to a fellowship at Trinity Hall, Cambridge for which he was first required to take Holy Orders and he did this willingly enough. When Stephen decided to turn his back on Christianity, he had only to consider the rights and wrongs of a single system. Once it was determined that this system had inherent flaws, it was a relatively simple step to reject it altogether. He was well-financed, so could afford to voice his controversial opinions in the appropriate monthly periodicals without fear that he may end up destitute by defying public taste. Hardy, on the other hand, was from a poor rural family whose religious sentiments were not dissimilar to those of the rural characters in his novels (although perhaps not extending as far as the superstitious practices of Susan Nunsuch). His education was delayed due to ill health until the age of eight and he was almost entirely self-educated in languages and the classics. Disavowing the very different systems of belief that had informed him throughout his intellectual development was a far more complicated task than that facing Stephen and it was this that led Hardy to the more tolerant relativist approach to philosophy.

This tolerance is expressed in the characters' responses to imminent death: Mrs. Yeobright sits on the path and contemplates the natural world about her, the simple and predictable movements of her surroundings soothing her mind:

⁹² Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 13-14.

In front of her a colony of ants had established a thoroughfare across the way, where they toiled a never-ending and heavy-laden throng... She remembered that this bustle of ants had been in progress for years at the same spot – doubtless those of the old times were the ancestors of these which walked there now. She leant back to obtain more thorough rest, and the soft eastern portion of the sky was as great a relief to her eyes as the thyme was to her head. While she looked a heron rose on that side of the sky and flew on with his face towards the sun... Up in the zenith where he was seemed a free and happy place, away from all contact with the earthly ball to which she was pinioned; and she wished that she could arise uncrushed from its surface and fly as he flew then.

But, being a mother, it was inevitable that she should soon cease to ruminate upon her own condition. Had the track of her next thought been marked by a streak in the air, like the path of a meteor, it would have shown a direction contrary to the heron's, and have descended eastward upon the roof of Clym's house.⁹³

As she sits for the last time, Mrs. Yeobright begins to be absorbed into her surroundings.

Her senses calmed by the heath, she reflects on the historical continuity of the natural world, and we see that there is little difference between these generations of insignificant bustling insects and the humans who inhabit the heath along with them. Her thoughts then go to her son, and through the juxtaposition of her memory of Clym with the image of the ants, the reader remembers that he is nothing more than the next in line in an endless history. These thoughts echo those voiced by Stephen's hero as he clings to the ledge in 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' and understands that his life is insignificant apart from that which he has added to the continuing race, and by Henry Knight who realises that his life is no more nor less important than that of the fossil that stares at him as he holds on to the Cliff Without a Name. The two men, both rational thinkers, resist the idea that their lives have amounted to such insignificance, but Mrs. Yeobright is calm; she, it seems, finds some measure of solace in the idea that the natural world will continue regardless as she waits to be absorbed back into it. But, even here, Hardy invited further speculation on the mysterious universe. Mrs. Yeobright thinks of herself as 'pinioned' and yearns to fly 'uncrushed' from the world, suggesting that, despite her acceptance of Nature's heedlessness of individual life and her lack of sustained interest in theorising, she retains a

⁹³ RN 283-4.

perception that there is an active force in the world that has been the cause of her suffering. That force is Nature and the 'earthly ball' to which she is 'pinioned' is a remark not simply about the world itself but about her deteriorating, frail, old body from which she wishes to 'arise uncrushed'.

The cause of suffering for Mrs. Yeobright is (implicitly) the condition of being on earth. Considering the novel as an imagined earth, it might be argued that the author is its First Cause and, if that is the case, then it is clear that the fate of the characters is inescapable; while they apparently have choices, it is the author who will determine the outcome. Given the privileged position of authorial vision, but without the author's ability to intervene and alter the course of destiny, the reader is forced to watch helplessly as the plot takes its victims from disaster to disaster, and trusts that in the end a resolution will be found. Gillian Beer points out that

In the *Return of the Native* Hardy grippingly combines and satirises many of the extended hopes that people reading invest in fiction. Fiction seems to offer a teleological future, in which hidden plans will declare themselves and all that is jostled and awry will prove to have been held within the cognisance of the great (or even the lesser) author.⁹⁴

Inevitably God-like, it is almost impossible for the author to be 'not-knowing' in his fiction, even if he has not planned the shape the novel's events will take in any definite form before writing. The fact that he controls the pen threatens to confound Hardy's desire to remain aloof from his fiction—acting as the recorder of impressions, rather than the deviser of plans. The footnote to the end of the third chapter of Book Sixth goes some way towards revealing that Hardy was not in absolute control of the plot. In it he wrote that his original intention was to have ended on a more tragic note. In the original conception of the plot, there was no marriage between Venn and Thomasin; Venn was to disappear back into the heath and Thomasin remained a widow. But 'certain circumstances

⁹⁴ Gillian Beer, 'The Reader's Wager: Lots, Sorts and Futures', F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture, Oxford, 14 Feb. 1990, *Essays in Criticism*, 40 (1990), 99-123 (118).

of serial publication' meant that Hardy was unable to carry out his plan.⁹⁵ This footnote serves to remind us that there are other forces than him alone shaping the novel— public opinion and the editor of the serial.⁹⁶ Hardy was, in other words, not in absolute control of his fiction. Drawing our attention to this fact, to some extent, assisted him in maintaining openness on the question of causality that characterises his narrative throughout.

But the most effective way in which Hardy achieved this openness was through his constant refusal to advocate or criticise any system of theology, philosophy or superstition. Throwing an array of explanations and beliefs into his fiction, and making a great mixture of religion, philosophy, history and folklore, he then underwrote no one system of explanation. If he could not escape the fact of his authorial power, he could nevertheless disavow his responsibility to play the philosopher.

At the end of the novel, Clym gives up his ambition to run a school and becomes instead an 'itinerant open-air preacher and lecturer on morally unimpeachable subjects'.⁹⁷ The style and content of his speaking have much in common with Hardy's own system of writing:

He stated that his discourses to people were to be sometimes secular, and sometimes religious, but never dogmatic; and that his texts would be taken from all kinds of books... *He left alone creeds and systems of philosophy, finding enough and more than enough to occupy his tongue in the opinions and actions common to all good men. Some believed him, and some believed not; some said that his words were commonplace, others complained of his want of theological doctrine; while others again remarked that it was well enough for a man to take to preaching who could not see to do anything else. But everywhere he was kindly received, for the story of his life had become generally known.*⁹⁸ (emphasis added)

Never wandering further than the Wessex border, Clym is at once restrained by geography and committed to the obligation he feels to promote a moral subject, free to roam and to

⁹⁵ RN 387. In 1880, Hardy altered the ending of the forthcoming first edition of *The Trumpet-Major*, which had been serialised in *Good Works*, 'effect[ing] a profound change of mood by explicitly forecasting the trumpet-major's death'. See Millgate, *A Biography*, 210.

⁹⁶ In this case, M. E. Braddon was the editor of *Belgravia*, on behalf of Chatto and Windus, though American serialisation was running concurrently in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Both contain the happier ending.

⁹⁷ RN 396.

⁹⁸ RN 396-7.

ruminate within those boundaries. He chooses his subject matter, gives no indication of his own beliefs, and is non-dogmatic, not expecting or asking his audience to accept his conclusions. With Clym, Hardy provides the first conscious representation of his ‘non’-philosophy in a novel, an embodiment of his non-dogmatic ‘series of seemings’. In *The Return of the Native* the move to this philosophy is the conclusion of the novel and the end of Clym’s suffering—a doctrineless humanism reached through his trials.

Perhaps as an ironic gesture to Stephen’s ‘Apology’ (but more likely because Hardy was conscious of his predominantly Anglican audience), Clym’s final words are taken from the Bible:

“And the king rose up to meet her, and bowed himself unto her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a seat to be set for the king’s mother; and she sat on his right hand. Then she said, I desire one small petition of thee; I pray thee say me not nay. And the king said unto her, Ask on, my mother; for I will not say thee nay.”⁹⁹

It is fitting that Clym’s history, as recorded in the novel, should end with this piece in which Solomon agrees to grant his mother her ‘one small petition’. In fact, Solomon ultimately denies her request and has his brother, for whom she was interceding, killed. There are, of course, links between Clym’s guilt at his mother’s death and the story he here tells. But the significance of this story is the appeal to the emotions as opposed to reason. Solomon agreed to grant his mother’s petition based on his emotional attachment to her. Even the wisest of men, it seems, must finally bow down to emotion: reason is simply not enough.

Hardy made no claim for Clym’s success in his career as a preacher—his audience receives him ‘kindly’ on account of his tragic history not for what he says. At the close of the novel, Clym has not found happiness, but he has found the nearest thing possible in Hardy’s blighted universe: the peace that can only be achieved by flexibility and tolerance of view. In later novels (notably *Jude the Obscure*), Hardy decided that this non-commitment

⁹⁹ RN 396. Clym quotes from I Kings 21: 19-20.

was itself problematic and could be the cause rather than the reward of suffering. But for now he was almost optimistic about the opportunities of agnosticism.

CHAPTER FOUR

*THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE AND THE WOODLANDERS: THE PARADOX OF
DETACHMENT*

By the end of the 1870s, agnosticism had reached the peak of its Victorian intellectual development. Many of its key figures (notably, Leslie Stephen, Herbert Spencer, W. K. Clifford and John Tyndall) had made their principal contributions to the canon of agnostic writing either during the 1870s or earlier.¹ The 1880s proved a struggle for the agnostics as a group (in so far as they can be termed one).² The first death among their number occurred in 1879 when W. K. Clifford died of consumption at the age of 34. In 1880 the Metaphysical Society stopped meeting. *The Agnostic Annual* announced in 1885 that an attempt was being made to found an agnostic temple. Bernard Lightman suggests that the temple was an effort to make agnosticism 'respectable' by 'pattern[ing it] after the familiar forms of Christian institutions':³

THE AGNOSTIC TEMPLE

The first attempt at organisation on avowedly Agnostic principles is about to be made in the South of London, where several gentlemen are endeavouring to establish what they purpose calling THE AGNOSTIC TEMPLE. The object of the organisation will be to disseminate a knowledge of the teachings of Agnosticism by the distribution of literature, the holding of meetings, etc. It is hoped that shortly premises will be engaged where regular meetings may be held, the programme to consist of music, readings, and a short address. Friends who are willing to assist in furthering the proposed movement, pecuniarily or otherwise, are invited to communicate with Mr. Charles A. Watts, 17, Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, London, E.C.⁴

This proposal anticipated later criticism, most notably expressed by Frederic Harrison, that although agnosticism was rationally coherent, it was destined to fail because it did not replace that which it took away. The Agnostic Temple sought to offer agnostics the

¹ Stephen's *Essays on Free-thinking and Plainspeaking* was published in 1873, followed by his 'Agnostic's Apology' in 1876; in 1874, Tyndall gave his 'Belfast Address'; Clifford's *Lectures and Essays* were gathered throughout the decade by Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock and finally published in 1879.

² See my Introduction for fuller discussion of this point.

³ Lightman, *Origins of Agnosticism*, 116.

⁴ Anon., 'The Agnostic Temple', *The Agnostic Annual*, ed. Charles A. Watts, (1885), 54. In 1908 *The Agnostic Annual and Ethical Review* (as *The Agnostic Annual* was officially named by then) became *The Rationalist Press Association Annual and Ethical Review*.

advantages of a church or other organised society, and give them the opportunity to be more actively agnostic. Agnosticism was, for some, too abstract, too easily reducible to nothing more than a stance of rational scepticism, ignoring the common human need for an object, and a formal system, of belief.

By 1889 many of the original agnostic thinkers were growing too old or too ill to defend it effectively and as a result agnosticism, as defined in its first serious manifestation, began a slow decline that approached virtual annihilation when the last of their number, Leslie Stephen, died in 1904.⁵ Though Huxley's most direct contribution to agnosticism (other than the coining of the word) did not appear until 1889, both Bernard Lightman and D. W. Dockrill assert that the contribution probably came too late, both with regard to Huxley's attempt to reclaim agnosticism and to salvaging its place in serious intellectual debate.⁶ In the mid-1880s, however, agnosticism was, if not widely popular, at least well-known in English culture. The fervour and creativity of its advocates in the previous decade had brought agnostic thought to the attention of middle-class intellectuals and it enjoyed a prominent place in philosophical and theological debate until the end of the decade. By this time, Hardy was a firmly established voice in literature. He had published nine novels—over half of the total number he would write. From the mid-1880s, Hardy became less bluntly experimental in his use of genres and his writing from this period onwards is generally acknowledged to be of a more consistently high quality than his earlier works.⁷ As a mature and successful author he was able to be more independent than before and the novels of this period show an increasing disregard for social niceties and the censoriousness of some publishers. As Peter Easingwood remarks, Hardy 'had reached a position to reflect on his allegiance to middle-class, professional codes of conduct and, specifically, on his function as a novelist. From now on his writing increasingly defined

⁵ For a fuller account of the decline of agnosticism, see Lightman, *Origins of Agnosticism*, 116-45.

⁶ See Lightman, 'Huxley and Scientific Agnosticism', 271-89 and D. W. Dockrill, 'T. H. Huxley and the Meaning of "Agnosticism"', *Theology*, 74 (1971), 461-77.

⁷ Ian Gregor, for example, classes four of Hardy's last five novels among his six greatest. The six are: *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). See Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

itself in opposition to orthodox opinion.⁸ The greater independence afforded him by experience and success meant that he was also more at liberty to reflect critically on unorthodox opinions, including agnosticism.

In June 1881, the Hardys left London and moved to the town of Wimborne in Dorset where they lived until the completion of Max Gate—the house on the outskirts of Dorchester that Hardy designed and lived in until his death in 1928. As will be shown, their departure from the city coincided with (and perhaps initiated) Hardy taking a new approach to his fiction and had an impact upon the concerns evident in it. While Hardy had enjoyed life in London, the prolonged illness from which he had suffered when writing *A Laodicean* seemed to confirm ‘that he could not for any extended period live in London and remain healthy’,⁹ and he also felt that city life adversely affected his work:

During the latter part of May [1881] they searched in Dorset, having concluded that it would be better to make London a place of sojourn for a few months only in each year, and establish their home in the country, both for reasons of health and for mental inspiration, Hardy finding, or thinking he found, that residence in or near a city tended to force mechanical and ordinary productions from his pen, concerning ordinary society-life and habits.¹⁰

Two years later, Max Gate was complete and the Hardys moved to Dorchester (Wessex’s Casterbridge), but not before spending much of the preceding few months in London. Indeed, according to Millgate, Hardy had no intention of severing his ties with the city:

Though Hardy was not the most clubbable of men, and sometimes entertained doubts as to the wisdom of mixing too much with other workers in the same craft, he clearly did not envisage an absolute seclusion from London and its overlapping social and artistic worlds. Nor would Dorchester be regarded as a place of impregnable retirement: [Edmund] Gosse himself—a quintessential representative of the London literary scene—was, on 21 July 1883, one of the first visitors to the house in the county town to which the Hardys had moved at the end of June.¹¹

⁸ Peter Easingwood, ‘The Mayor of Casterbridge and the Irony of Literary Production’, *THJ*, 9/3 (1993), 56–75 (74).

⁹ Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 205.

¹⁰ *LW* 153–4.

¹¹ Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, 222. Hardy was, in fact, a member of the Rabelais Club, the Savile Club and the Athenaeum Club.

For the next few years, the Hardys continued to spend the 'season' in London. In December 1881, six months after leaving the city, he wrote to Mrs. Sutherland Orr: 'curiously enough I seem to see more of London now than when we lived in the suburbs. I very frequently run up, & enjoy those very commonplaces of town life which used to be a weariness.'¹² Nonetheless, without the direct and constant influence of his London contemporaries, the author was able to achieve a social and, more importantly, an intellectual independence that was less easy for him without geographical distance.

From this point, the focus of Hardy's novels is almost exclusively on the lives of his Wessex rurals: rarely does the narrative stray far beyond the Wessex boundaries or overly concern itself with non-pastoral life. Millgate explains that after returning to Dorset, Hardy developed 'a deeper, or perhaps more directly expressed, concern for the rural working class'. Millgate further suggests that Hardy's renewed interest in 'regional materials' can partly be explained by their ability to provide 'distinctive particularizations of general themes and universal phenomena'.¹³ His rural characters usefully illustrate the ways in which everyday people cope with the world, and the illustration was achieved without intruding questions of metaphysics too overtly (and unrealistically) encroaching into the stories. He expressed the opinion that the 'Unknown'—by which he meant the force or forces shaping the world and perhaps directing human lives—more distinctly touches the ordinary inhabitants of the rural environment than it does their urban counterparts. In August 1887, Hardy noted his observation of 'the difference between children who grow up in solitary country places and those who grow up in towns—the former being imaginative, dreamy, and credulous of vague mysteries, giving as the reason that "The Unknown comes within so short a radius from themselves by comparison with the city-bred"'.¹⁴ The farmers, timber merchants, dairymen and cider-makers of Wessex are at the mercy of the seasons, their livelihoods dependent on the success of crops and livestock and

¹² L vii 94.

¹³ Millgate, *A Biography Revisited*, 219, 231.

¹⁴ LW 211.

the ability to travel on crude tracks in all weathers. Urban life—its economics, transportation and communication—is not so governed by the fickleness of the natural world. The inhabitants of the city are controlled to a much greater extent by man-made rules and social conventions, and more quickly and directly benefit from advances in technology. The protagonists of Hardy's later fiction are rarely of distinguished social descent (and if they are, they have not retained the wealth and position of their ancestors). They are ordinary people, and are, as such, a more direct gauge of man's struggle with forces greater than himself. With these ordinary characters, Hardy in effect, though not necessarily by conscious intent, recontextualised the abstract philosophical arguments of his contemporaries. Robert Schweik points out that '*The Woodlanders* does not simply reflect the structure of contemporary ethical thought: Hardy's vision of the condition of man was, at its best, a searching one, and unlike those comforting abstractions of ethicists' debates'.¹⁵

Hardy had been aware from early in his career that a more accurate portrayal of life could be achieved outside 'fashionable life'. Reflecting on his attempt at writing a society novel in *The Hand of Ethelberta*, Hardy wrote in the *Life* of the dissatisfaction of producing 'pictures of modern customs and observances' in order to 'sustain the interest of the circulating library subscriber':

He perceived that he was "up against" the position of having to carry on his life not as an emotion, but as a scientific game; that he was committed by circumstances to novel-writing as a regular trade, as much as he had formerly been to architecture; and that hence he would, he deemed, have to look for material in manners—in ordinary social and fashionable life as other novelists did. Yet he took no interest in manners, but in the substance of life only.¹⁶

¹⁵ Robert C. Schweik, 'The Ethical Structure of Hardy's "*The Woodlanders*"', *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 211 (1974), 31-44 (34-5).

¹⁶ LW 107. Earlier in the autobiography, Hardy describes, in almost identical terms, his feelings after he mistakenly believed *Under the Greenwood Tree* had been rejected outright by 'the Messrs Macmillan' in autumn 1871. In fact, Macmillan were interested, but wanted to defer publication. Hardy was disheartened by the supposed rejection and conscious of the need to improve his financial standing if he was ever to be able to afford to marry Emma Gifford. He threw the novel to one side (temporarily as it turned out), and resolved to abandon literature to pursue a career as an architect, 'determined to stifle his constitutional tendency to care for life only as an emotion and not as a scientific game'. See LW 88-9.

This 'scientific game' specifically concerned the limiting of emotionally-driven creativity in deference to popular trends. However, it is significant that science, the city and an inability to show the 'substance of life' are here aligned, especially in the light of Hardy's subsequent conviction that city living itself placed a limit on his creativity. A 'scientific' approach to life, for Hardy, worked against an emotional approach, and in so doing lost something of the essence of humanity.

As was discussed in the Introduction, for scientific agnostics W. K. Clifford and T. H. Huxley, the natural world replaced God as a more rational object of worship. Huxley, for example, insisted that the only thing that man can rely on to comprehend the world around him is the evidence of his experience in that world. By that experience we can discover that what had appeared to be great mysteries are in fact evidences of the laws of nature. These laws, he argued, were worthy of worship.¹⁷ But the fact that these arguments were by necessity conducted in the abstract meant that the agnostics often neglected to consider normal human experience. It was all very well to speculate about the unknowability of God and the irrationality of commitment to a single system of belief, but speculation conducted at such a high level was incomprehensible to most people. For Hardy, nature was not itself the worshipful object; rather, the forces at work in the natural world provided a tangible and uncontrolled (indeed uncontrollable) means of illustrating the questions that troubled rationalist thinkers, and, for him, it was a more valid undertaking to bring these abstract questions back down to a human level and examine how man copes with the world he lives in, rather than to insist upon the life of rational scepticism. Through an emotional (rather than a detached scientific) approach to the lives of men and women whose lives are closely responsive to natural forces, Hardy could more accurately demonstrate the 'substance of life'.

Like Eustacia Vye and Susan Nunsuch of *The Return of the Native*, the inhabitants of Hardy's pastoral settings had available to them a wider array of options when selecting

¹⁷ Lightman, *Origins of Agnosticism*, 153-9.

among systems of belief and philosophy than the educated classes of an urban setting.¹⁸

While Hardy's 'sophisticated contemporaries' may have had a more disciplined and thoughtful awareness of philosophical and religious systems, their experience of faith was primarily restricted to the institutions of their, usually religious (and, more often than not, Anglican), upbringing. Typically this would take the course of first attending a distinguished public school, then an Oxbridge college, before joining London society, in one capacity or another, as a well-provided-for gentleman. Although most of these educated men would have known the country through holidays or summer homes, their interaction with this world was less frequent and less close than that of the rural poor. The inhabitants of Wessex are, as Hardy was himself according to Millgate, 'habitually eclectic' through direct exposure to diverse ways of interpreting the world: not just Christian belief but a more immediate and dependent relationship with nature, pagan beliefs and superstition. While the formally educated man might be aware of these concepts, he would have been unlikely to encounter them directly and even less likely to adopt them.¹⁹

Conversely, and because of this plurality, the Wessex locals have a pragmatic approach to the institutions that are of such importance to the inhabitants of the city. Religion infiltrates their world, but is regarded as only one among many influences upon their lives and as such is neither dismissed nor embraced, but treated with the same mixture of ready acceptance and distance as local traditions or superstitions. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example, even the 'steady church-goers' discuss the week's sermon in the Three Mariners inn with a 'general tendency...to regard it as a scientific feat or performance which ha[s] no relation to their own lives except as between critics and the thing criticized.'²⁰ A sermon is, for them, not spiritual in itself, but merely the minister's interpretation of the Bible or religious doctrine; as such it is liable to critical analysis just as an interpretation of any other literature might be. In *The Woodlanders*, Giles Winterborne

¹⁸ See my Chapter Three, pp.94-97.

¹⁹ See Millgate, *A Biography*, 132.

²⁰ MC 197-8.

keeps his Bible 'at hand mainly for the convenience of whetting his penknife upon its leather covers.'²¹ Only the boarding-school educated Grace Melbury demonstrates any sincere regard for religious customs when she insists that her marriage to Fitzpiers take place in a church.²² Even so, once she is re-immersed into the pastoral life of Little Hintock, Grace absorbs the natives' apathy towards the Church, an apathy from which her urbanised self recoils upon recognition.²³

While it must not be forgotten that the production of literary romance was Hardy's principal objective, in the mid-1880s fiction also served as a forum in which he could introduce and meditate upon larger metaphysical and psychological questions, recast as human stories. As Hardy saw it, one of the fundamental problems of philosophical thinking was that speculation generally took place in the abstract and was approached with an objectionable level of scientific detachment from the subjects of that speculation, absurdly neglecting to consider how a particular system—which may appear workable in theory—might operate in the real world. Hardy felt that philosophical speculation was more justifiable in literature, at least, if it were grounded in imagined, though lifelike, human predicaments. In the Wessex rurals, whose ready plurality of outlook prevents them from becoming dogmatic, Hardy created a human cast that enabled him to address his interest in philosophy, specifically his version of agnosticism, without resorting to what Schweik succinctly calls the 'comforting abstractions of ethicists' debates'.²⁴ It should be stressed that these are not treatises on agnosticism nor am I making a claim for Hardy's direct reinterpretation of agnostic principles (not least because it is impossible to know with which of these principles he was familiar at the time). Rather, it will be shown that Hardy was extending his own version of agnosticism—a version that he may well have derived independently—into his consideration of the consequences of withholding belief in

²¹ *W* 303.

²² *W* 161.

²³ When Grace remembers her marriage contract, she is 'quite appalled at her recent off-handedness, when she rediscovered what awfully solemn promises she had made him at Hintock chancel steps not so very long ago.' (*W* 332.)

²⁴ *W* 332 and Schweik, 'Ethical Structure', 35.

any one firm set of principles for broader human experience. Because the medium of expression was artistic and made no claims to be anything more profound than that, Hardy's philosophical speculations form a part of what we read, but do not dictate the purpose of the novels, which remain first and foremost works of literature.

Hardy was not unique in attempting to address the matter of philosophic detachment. Indeed, scientific detachment and abstractionism were major concerns among many Victorian thinkers, including George Eliot. In *The Powers of Distance*, Amanda Anderson explains that the pressures of modernity tended to push theorists, artists, scholars and scientists to cultivate an ideal of 'distance and abstraction' in their work, pressures which were felt with trepidation by many:

An ideal of critical distance, itself deriving from the project of the Enlightenment, lies behind many Victorian aesthetic and intellectual projects... Yet at the same time many Victorians were wary of certain distancing effects of modernity, including the overvaluing and misapplication of scientific method as well as the forms of alienation and rootlessness that accompanied modern disenchantment, industrialisation and the globalization of commerce. As a result, many writers displayed a complex ambivalence towards the powers of modern distance...²⁵

Anderson points out that many Victorian writers were concerned to recognise both the 'limits' and the 'virtues' of critical detachment in science, philosophy and aesthetics.²⁶ In her discussion of George Eliot's 1856 essay, 'The Natural History of German Life', Anderson explains that 'Eliot's critique of abstraction and valuing of rootedness ambiguously coexists with a certain promotion of cultivated detachment, which is placed in the service of a broader historical consciousness and an ever-widening aspiration towards cosmopolitanism.'²⁷ Eliot was concerned with the distorting powers of distance, Anderson argues, and particularly on the 'underdevelopment of...the faculty of sympathy' through

²⁵ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-4.

²⁶ Ibid. 5.

²⁷ Ibid. 14. See [George Eliot], 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, NS 19 (1856), 51-79.

idealisation of a social group.²⁸ However, she also recognised that it was necessary to cultivate a certain measure of detachment in order to observe these groups properly. For Eliot the best approach was one that mediated ‘between sympathetic immersion and detached analysis and judgment.’²⁹

It cannot be demonstrated that Hardy ever read Eliot’s essay: certainly—given his age at the time—it is unlikely that he would have encountered it in 1856 when it was first published; whether he read it in later years is not recorded. Much has been written about Hardy’s perceived debt to Eliot, both during his lifetime and since.³⁰ Though he professed to be flattered by the comparisons, he came to find the repeated association of his work with hers, as Millgate notes, ‘irritating’.³¹ Hardy claimed that he did not feel that their ideas or methods were sufficiently similar to warrant the comparisons, and he accounted for any similarities by the fact that they had both been influenced by Comte rather than that Hardy had been directly influenced by Eliot. Following R. H. Hutton’s review of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in the *Spectator* in which he had argued that Hardy’s writing was an ‘exaggeration of George Eliot’s’, Hardy explained that he had recently been reading Comte’s *Positive Philosophy* and other Positivist works, and that it was possible that some of the ‘expressions had thus passed into his vocabulary, expressions which were also common to George Eliot.’³² Moreover, in regard to specific concerns of this chapter, Hardy did not believe that Eliot treated rural life in quite the same manner as he did himself, claiming that in her work ‘she had never touched the life of the fields: her country-people having seemed to him, too, more like small townsfolk than rustics; and as evidencing a woman’s wit cast in

²⁸ Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, 11.

²⁹ Ibid. 15.

³⁰ Space restricts me from providing an exhaustive list. For examples of criticism that has compared Hardy with Eliot, see Lance St. John Butler, ‘“Bosh”’, in Pettit (ed.), *New Perspectives*, 101-16; Nicola Harris, ‘Thomas Hardy and George Eliot: The Eye of Narcissus’ Looking Glass’, *George Eliot Review*, 28 (1997), 49-58; David McIntosh, ‘George Eliot’s Debt to Hardy?’, *George Eliot Review*, 33 (2002), 72-3; Millgate, *A Biography*, 111, 181 and 225n; Toru Sasaki and Nicola Harris, ‘An Exchange of Views on Hardy and Eliot’, *George Eliot Review*, 29 (1998), 71-3; Toru Sasaki, ‘On Boldwood’s Retina: A “Moment of Vision” in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and its Possible Relation to *Middlemarch*’, *THJ*, 8/3 (1992), 57-60.

³¹ Millgate, *A Biography*, 181.

³² R. H. Hutton, Review of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Spectator*, 19 Dec. 1874, 1,597-9; rpt. in *CH* 21-7 and *LW* 100.

country dialogue rather than real country humour'.³³ While it is beyond the remit of this thesis to examine the influence or otherwise of Eliot's ideas on Hardy, it is nonetheless valuable to recognise that his investigation into the idea of detachment formed part of a broader intellectual framework in which Eliot was a major precursor.

Having taken the country as his home and made it the focus of his writing, Hardy continued into the mid-1880s to develop his artistic contribution to the agnostic debate in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *The Woodlanders* (1887). It bears repeating that while the agnostics were interested principally in metaphysics, Hardy's agnosticism was more general and manifested itself in his attitudes to simpler human matters. In Chapter Two it was shown that Hardy's scepticism about the possibility of reaching a cohesive position of knowledge, was rendered not in a consideration of theological matters but of human experience more generally, such as knowledge of a person's character, history or opinions. In this chapter I explore the problems of commitment that follow from these conclusions as to the impossibility of full or ultimate knowledge. Where the agnostics justified their stance of unbelief by asserting the irrationality of committing to a god that could not be scientifically proven to exist (that is, could not be known), Hardy, through his own scepticism, reached similar conclusions concerning the problem of commitment in non-theological matters. For Hardy, there was a fundamental absurdity in dogmatism of any kind, whether in principles or in human relationships: without the possibility of knowledge, all that can properly be advocated is non-dogmatic relativism based on intuition. Relativism, that is, not of the kind we have come to associate with (especially Rortyan) pragmatism, but of a less belligerent kind—and one accompanied by a strongly felt need for (though not a 'belief' in) certain key moral values, above all loving-kindness.

As set out above, the investigation is two-fold. First, I explore Hardy's attempts to address the problem of scientific detachment; in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* this was achieved, as will be shown, by highlighting the difference that perspective can have on interpreting

³³ Ibid.

the human predicament, and in *The Woodlanders* the problem was dramatised in the novel's philosopher, Fitzpiers. Secondly, I look at Hardy's examination of commitment and dogmatism, considering the different types and levels of commitment (in various domains) exhibited by the characters in each novel, and the consequences of the positions they adopt, and, finally, asking whether any of these positions could be considered ideal. In order to demonstrate that Hardy's treatment of these matters developed from one novel to the next, I have chosen to look at the two novels in chronological order.

THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

The Mayor of Casterbridge was the first novel Hardy wrote on his return to Dorchester. He had spent a few years dabbling with different types of story, attempting to assert 'both his competence and independence' and to counter the critics' claims of his 'excessive indebtedness to George Eliot': in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* he revived wholeheartedly the pastoralism of his earlier fiction and because of this revival it is considered a match for the greater literary achievements of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*.³⁴ Unlike *The Return of the Native* or *A Laodicean*, it offers no particularly well-educated characters. The narrative rarely meditates explicitly on philosophy or metaphysics in the way that many of Hardy's other works do. Nonetheless, the novel as a whole—through, for instance, the skilful delineation of its eponymous hero—provides the reader with an insight into the author's understanding of human psychology. More broadly, by setting the novel in Casterbridge and focusing on the working-class locals, Hardy had returned to a world and a people that he both understood and cared about, and through his sympathetic handling of their experiences and preoccupations we get a clear sense of his own concerns

³⁴ Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, 231-2.

and his thoughts about how these unsophisticated people encounter and cope with the world about them.

Hardy drew attention to Casterbridge's peculiarity as a location that is both rural and urban and, through simple alterations of perspective, quietly invited the reader to consider the impact that distance can have on one's interpretation of the world, showing that there is a significant difference between how things appear from a distance and how they actually are. Hardy demonstrates the vital importance of moving speculation of any sort into the arena about which one seeks to speculate. At first, the narrator describes the town from a distance: it is 'a place deposited in the block upon a corn-field. There was no suburb in the modern sense, or transitional intermixture of town and down. It stood, with regard to the wide fertile land adjoining, clean-cut and distinct, like a chess-board on a green table-cloth.'³⁵ However, he immediately shifts the focus of the narration to the centre of the town to describe a place in which the division between rural and urban is much more blurred. Casterbridge is 'the complement of the rural life around; not its urban opposite.'³⁶ This almost cinematic alteration in focus is a typically Hardy (and well-recognised) device: his scenes move from the panoramic to the specific, simultaneously reminding the reader of the relative smallness of human existence and also of the importance of the individual story. Twice the narrator likens the town to a game (first dominoes, then chess³⁷), ostensibly to emphasise the neat regularity of its appearance, but also implying that Casterbridge is the stage for some cosmic game and that its inhabitants are governed by rules and a consciousness much larger than themselves. But closer up any suggestion of a larger plan is undermined by the unruly behaviour of the creatures that inhabit it: not simply the human players, but also the '[b]ees and butterflies in the cornfields at the top of the town, who desired to get to the meads at the bottom, took no circuitous

³⁵ *MC* 78. The reference to the 'green table-cloth' is, we must assume, a precursor to the oft-quoted description of Tess Durbeyfield as 'a fly on a billiard table', a comment which ostensibly reduces Tess's significance, but, in so doing, also draws attention to her uniqueness. (*TD* 110.)

³⁶ *MC* 50.

³⁷ *MC* 24, 78.

course, but flew straight down High Street without any apparent consciousness that they were traversing strange latitudes.³⁸ The narrative consciousness, if there is one, is merely that of a spectator and not a player. To really understand the game or the novel (and, by analogy, human life), it is necessary to move closer and get involved.

The complexity of the belief systems evident in Casterbridge is used by Hardy to demonstrate how basic metaphysical questioning operates in the real world. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the townsfolk's general attitude towards Mr. Fall—a 'man of curious repute as a forecaster or weather-prophet.'³⁹ Persistent credulity in him underlines the clash between rationalism and irrationalism that pervades the town. Because Fall's wisdom is ostensibly instinctual and non-provable, the townsfolk, influenced by rationality, find themselves unable to trust (or, rather, to admit to trusting) him. Fall is dismayed by their professed scepticism and compares it to the greater irrationality of their professed faith in the Church:

He would have preferred more honesty in his clients, and less sham ridicule; but fundamental belief consoled him for superficial irony. As stated, he was enabled to live; people supported him with their backs turned. He was sometimes astonished that men could profess so little and believe so much at his house, when at church they professed so much and believed so little.⁴⁰

Rationality has entered Casterbridge and has brought with it a degree of private scepticism about religion, but it is not so far advanced as to make the natives openly question their beliefs in the Church. Fall's 'astonishment' is emphasised through the symmetrical aphorism: it is equally as inexplicable to believe in God and the Church as it is to believe in Fall's mysterious ability to predict the weather. Moreso, Fall holds. He bases his predictions partly on empirical evidence discoverable in the natural world: 'I've worked it out already', he explains to Henchard, 'By the sun, moon, and stars, by the clouds, the winds, the trees, and grass, the candleflame and swallows, the smell of the herbs; likewise by the cats' eyes,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *MC* 158.

⁴⁰ *MC* 159.

the ravens, the leeches, the spiders, and the dung-mixen, the last fortnight in August will be – rain and tempest.⁴¹ Although it reads like a witch's brew, Fall's technique does have some foundation in scientific meteorological forecasting, which is partly accomplished through examination of the wind and clouds. Also, migration times and plant growth are accepted gauges of the weather by those who can read them. Because of the hocus-pocus elements, however, the townsfolk are less likely to profess any trust in Fall than they are in the Church.

Hardy was sympathetic towards the inclination to maintain a belief in the Church, recognising—in a way that perhaps his agnostic contemporaries did not—that rejecting something that has played a formative role in one's development goes against natural instincts. Indeed, he saw belief in the Church as no more or less irrational than belief in superstition. News of George Eliot's death in the winter of 1880 'set him thinking about Positivism' and, more particularly, its limitations. (In fact, George Eliot was, like him, an interested reader of Positivism but not a paid-up follower.) Hardy wrote a note (mentioned previously) that subsequently appeared in the *Life*:

If Comte had introduced Christ among the worthies in his calendar it would have made Positivism tolerable to thousands who, from position, family connection, or early education, now decry what in their heart of hearts they hold to contain the germs of a true system. It would have enabled them to modulate gently into the new religion by deceiving themselves with the sophistry that they still continued one-quarter Christians, or one-eighth, or one-twentieth, as the case might be: This is a matter of *policy*, without which no religion succeeds in making way.⁴² (emphasis in original)

So, in Casterbridge, Hardy depicted what he believed to be a real human predicament. Caught between conflicting positions—neither of which is necessarily the right one—it is inevitable that some of the culturally acquired (though irrational) beliefs will be impossible to dispense with entirely. Plurality is, therefore, inevitable, and more so in the rural world in which superstitions and pagan practices take place and are accepted, the attitude towards

⁴¹ *MC* 160.

⁴² *LW* 150-1.

religion is ambivalent, and the natural world is of utmost importance. For Hardy, it was not *simply* a ‘matter of *policy*’. The acceptance of all creeds was a positive feature of his interpretation of agnosticism (and that described by Charles Watts in *The Agnostic Annual* in 1885⁴³): non-dogmatism meant not only refusing to pledge allegiance to a position but also refusing to reject it, allowing agnostics the freedom to choose the best of everything.

The most thorough exploration of the problem of dogmatism can be seen in the portrayal of Michael Henchard, whose deeply obsessive personality illustrates the destructiveness a dogmatic approach to relationships, business and even one’s own history creates. Henchard vacillates absurdly between absolute enthusiasm and absolute antipathy for people and principles, dogmatically binding himself to each extreme regardless of former emotions. A ‘man of moods, glooms, and superstitions’, he struggles with immoderate passions.⁴⁴ As Mark Asquith summarises: ‘He is a man with no middle ground, his massive emotions emerging in a series of impulsive acts of increasing moral repugnance.’⁴⁵ Henchard admits, ‘I am the most distant fellow in the world when I don’t care for a man ... But when a man takes my fancy he takes it strong.’⁴⁶ He lacks emotional balance and is always determined to commit wholly to the object of his passion. Farfrae, Elizabeth-Jane and Lucetta all fall victim to the wildly-fluctuating pendulum of his obsessions. When Henchard hires Farfrae as his manager, he immediately trusts him with the secrets of his unsavoury history and is seen to ‘lay his arm familiarly on his manager’s shoulder, as if Farfrae were a younger brother’.⁴⁷ As soon as Farfrae falls out of favour, he becomes the enemy, and Henchard resolves to crush his budding business.⁴⁸ Similarly, after Susan’s death, Henchard insists that Elizabeth-Jane announce that she is henceforth to be known by the name ‘Henchard’ and he resolves to dedicate his life to her well-being:

⁴³ Watts, ‘Agnosticism and Atheism’, 4. See my Introduction, p.18.

⁴⁴ MC 214.

⁴⁵ Mark Asquith, ‘*The Mayor of Casterbridge*: Hardy’s Story of a “Man of Character”’, *THJ*, 20/1 (2004), 50-5 (50).

⁴⁶ MC 56.

⁴⁷ MC 77.

⁴⁸ MC 96-7.

‘Elizabeth was his at last, and she was a girl of such good sense and kind heart that she would be sure to like him. He was the kind of man to whom some human object for pouring out his heat upon – were it emotive or were it choleric – was almost a necessity.’⁴⁹

But only a few pages later, after discovering that he is not Elizabeth-Jane’s biological father, his emotions reverse entirely, and ‘from the next morning onwards his manner was constrained as she had never seen it before.’⁵⁰

Henchard’s actions are correspondingly extreme. After the notorious wife-sale, he decides to abstain from alcohol for a period of time equivalent to the length of time he has already lived (the strange time stipulation is a typically extravagant response to his misdemeanour). For Henchard it is not enough simply to make the decision to abstain, and so he feverishly searches for a church in which to solemnise his vow: ‘he resolved to register an oath, a greater oath than he had ever sworn before: and to do it properly he required a fit place and imagery; for there was something fetichistic in this man’s beliefs.’⁵¹ He makes his oath in the ‘sacrarium’ while leaning on a clamped Bible and kisses it, as if to finalise the transaction.⁵² He atones for a bad contract by making what he thinks to be a good one.

Jane Adamson argues that ‘Hardy conceives Henchard’s character as fluid, provisional, always liable to be erased and rescripted’.⁵³ But ‘fluid’ suggests a continuous scale of temperament flowing between extremes: Henchard’s emotions—as can be seen in his ardent and antithetic feelings towards Farfrae and Elizabeth—are binary, ricocheting from one extreme of the spectrum to the other, by-passing intermediary stages of moderation or apathy. This unbending approach to relationships (whether displayed positively or negatively) is destructive, both for Henchard and for those with whom he emotionally engages.

⁴⁹ MC 106.

⁵⁰ MC 110.

⁵¹ MC 16.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jane Adamson, ‘Who and What is Henchard? – Hardy, Character and Moral Inquiry’, *The Critical Review* (Canberra), 31 (1991), 47-74 (51).

Henchard's inflexibility is also shown in his inability to untangle himself from the events of his past. Despite frequent efforts to move on with his life, he repeatedly allows himself to be drawn back to the obligations (though, unfortunately, never the lessons) of his own history. This sets him apart from the other characters in the novel who, by and large, attempt to move forwards (Susan's return to Henchard being the obvious exception to this generalisation). Indeed, there is a constant effort to advance in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: Susan starts a new life with Newson; Farfrae introduces new modes of business and farming; Elizabeth-Jane privately educates herself; Lucetta disregards her past indiscretion with Henchard by marrying Farfrae; Elizabeth-Jane determines to withdraw from Henchard and start again with Farfrae. The danger of reviving history is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the 'skimmington-' or 'skimmity-ride', which, even by the time the novel was set, was an almost-extinct local tradition intended to expose and ridicule adulterers by parading effigies of the adulterous couple through the streets on the back of a donkey.⁵⁴ The shock of seeing the images of herself and Henchard throws Lucetta into an 'epileptic seizure', from which she never recovers.⁵⁵ In this scene, the past is evoked two-fold, in the revival of the old tradition and in the skimmity-ride's parody of the old love affair. Those who are able to disentangle themselves from the past and can adapt and move forwards are, it seems, better able to deal with what the world throws at them. And just as, according to Darwinism, mutability and evolution are the secrets to survival, tenacity and the opposite urge to undo or relive the past are here shown to be destructive. Susan dies shortly after her reunion with Henchard; Lucetta dies after her past is revived in front of her; and all of Henchard's woes can be traced back to his obsessive compulsion to atone for the past.

In a persuasive article linking *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to Hardy's notebook entry regarding Comtean 'looped orbits', J. Gerard Dollar suggests that the narrative structure of

⁵⁴ MC 221. The action of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* takes place 'before the nineteenth century had reached one-third of its span'—that is, approximately 50 years before Hardy wrote it. (MC 3.)

⁵⁵ MC 239.

the novel appears to move through precisely these orbits.⁵⁶ Hardy sketched a diagram in his notebook to represent these 'looped orbits' and noted that they represent the movement of society, which is continually drawn forwards despite its tendency to appear to be moving backwards at regular intervals.⁵⁷ These backward movements, represented by smaller loops that make up the larger orbit, are necessary to achieve the momentum to propel the body (in this case society) forward with renewed vigour. Dollar argues that Henchard's emotional progress reflects Comte's 'looped orbits':

In a pattern repeated throughout the novel, Henchard finds his onward movement checked by the pull of another character; he succumbs to the attraction, only to reach a point at which he feels threatened by the power that the other exerts on him. Henchard thereupon severs the tie and attempts once again to move forward centrifugally.⁵⁸

As Dollar explains, Henchard first becomes obsessed with another person and then —just as obsessively—pushes them away. I would add that it is not only Henchard's attraction towards people, but also his inability to let go of the past that hooks him into this cycle of obsession and repulsion. The cycle is always initiated when he sees an opportunity to atone for his misdemeanours, and this is the guiding principle for his cyclical relationships with Susan, Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane. Dollar further proposes that Henchard's demise demonstrates a reinterpretation of and challenge to the Comtean view because, in Henchard's case, the 'life which is "sometimes apparently forwards" is really always "backwards."' ⁵⁹ Rather than challenging Comte's notion, however, Hardy actually presents it as both natural and ideal: human instinct should be to learn from the failures of the past and use them, as Comte's diagram suggests, to learn and to propel oneself forward. Henchard's obsession with history is an aberration of this ideal, however. For Hardy, the appropriate approach to history is a non-dogmatic one: the past may build who we are, but

⁵⁶ J. Gerard Dollar. 'The "Looped Orbit" of the Mayor of Casterbridge', *PLL*, 19 (1983), 293-308.

⁵⁷ *LN* i 78.

⁵⁸ Dollar, ' "Looped Orbit" ', 296.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 308.

it should not be allowed to dictate the actions of the future, a philosophy that is harmonious with the relativism that emerges in his later fiction.

The advantages of non-dogmatism are played out through the character of Elizabeth-Jane. She is the main survivor of the novel and this survival is a clear result of her ability to be both adaptable and restrained. Despite her (assumed) father's cruelty and the fickleness of her suitor, Farfrae (whose affections transferred to Lucetta as easily as Henchard's had vanished when he discovered Elizabeth-Jane's real parentage), Elizabeth-Jane remains calm throughout the novel, coping by refusing to become bound to a particular situation and continually shifting her goals and emotions to suit her surroundings and position. She is at once steadfast and non-committal, embodying the seemingly conflicting characteristics of an unrefined country girl (as shown in her persistent and, for Henchard, frustrating use of dialect) and an astute self-educated woman.⁶⁰ Her flexibility is emphasised by her unclear parentage and ever-changing name (first Henchard, then Newson, then Henchard again, and finally Farfrae). Elizabeth-Jane's age is also unsettled. Henchard never notices that had the original Elizabeth-Jane survived she would have been at least one year older than the second incarnation.

That Elizabeth-Jane is not only the principal survivor of the novel, but also (in many critics' views) the only character to hold the reader's sympathy, is an indication that her mutability (without the irrational extremes of Henchard) was, for Hardy, the most admirable and practical position. Elizabeth-Jane has learned the harsh lessons of the world and repeated disappointments have taught her to remain open to whatever may befall her. After her mother's re-marriage to Henchard, Elizabeth-Jane feels the time to be a 'triumphant' one; their new financial and emotional security offers her previously unattainable opportunities, particularly the affordance of education. But Elizabeth-Jane maintains a cautious level of composure taught her by the trying experiences of her life:

⁶⁰ *MC* 110, 113.

Perhaps, too, her grey, thoughtful eyes revealed an arch gaiety sometimes; but this was infrequent; the sort of wisdom which looked from their pupils did not readily keep company with these lighter moods. Like all people who have known rough times, light-heartedness seemed to her too irrational and inconsequent to be indulged in except as a reckless dram now and then; for she had been too early habituated to anxious reasoning to drop the habit suddenly. She felt none of those ups and downs of spirit which beset so many people without cause; never – to paraphrase a recent poet – never came a gloom in Elizabeth-Jane's soul but she well knew how it came there; and her present cheerfulness was fairly proportionate to her solid guarantees for the same.⁶¹

Thus, when she discovers the relationship between Lucetta and Farfrae, Elizabeth-Jane is rational, immediately recognising the situation as simply another adversity to be met and philosophically dealt with:

She had learnt the lesson of renunciation, and was as familiar with the wreck of each day's wishes as with the diurnal setting of the sun. If her earthly career had taught her few book philosophies it had at least well practised her in this. Yet her experience had consisted less in a series of pure disappointments than in a series of substitutions. Continually it had happened that what she had desired had not been granted her, and that what had been granted her she had not desired. So she viewed with an approach to equanimity the now cancelled days when Donald had been her undeclared lover, and wondered what unwished-for thing Heaven might send her in place of him.⁶²

The agnostic point of view—particularly that expounded by Leslie Stephen—shared this type of realistic pessimism. In both 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps' and 'An Agnostic's Apology', as we have seen, Stephen used the word 'colourless' to describe the emotion with which the agnostic typically views the world, a colourlessness that matches Elizabeth-Jane's emotionally-dissatisfying rationalised 'equanimity'.⁶³ Indeed, Elizabeth-Jane is the nearest the novel approaches to offering a representative for the rationalist viewpoint, though this rationalism is tempered slightly by her 'natural insight' and her conviction that a 'too gay' outlook might 'tempt[...] Providence'.⁶⁴ And, of course, 'pessimism' does not describe a strictly rational position; though it may make appeals to rationality through its association with experiential evidence, it is based on an interpretation of the world that is at centre

⁶¹ *MC* 74-5.

⁶² *MC* 153.

⁶³ See Stephen, 'A Bad Five Minutes', 547 and 'An Agnostic's Apology', 17.

⁶⁴ *MC* 75.

emotional, albeit, as Stephen put it, a ‘colourless emotion’.⁶⁵ Once the world is considered through individual experience, pure rationality is compromised.

Michael Millgate suggests that Elizabeth-Jane

[R]epresents the novel’s nearest approach to the distinctively Hardy voice and point of view—not just because she is endowed with much of the inconspicuous ubiquity characteristic of Hardy’s authorial narrators, but because she alone steadily learns and grows in the course of the narrative and achieves through quiet suffering a kind of disillusioned yet compassionate understanding that the reader comes to recognize and accept as wisdom.⁶⁶

Though Elizabeth-Jane is Hardy’s expression of the ‘wisdom’ of mutability (and, by inference, non-dogmatism), what is also made plain is that she does not really achieve happiness, nor does she believe happiness to be achievable. So, while the destructive side of dogmatism and obsession are shown through Henchard, Hardy eschews the opposite conclusion that non-dogmatism and calmness are positively constructive by painting Elizabeth-Jane as a ‘quiet[ly] suffering’ and ‘disillusioned’ pessimist who can deal with her problems stoically but not quite cheerfully.

Hardy’s pessimism has been much dwelt on since his own time to the present day; indeed, he was famously criticised by his good friend (until that point), Frederic Harrison in the latter’s review of *Moments of Vision* in which he argued that a man in Hardy’s situation of relatively good health, finance and public regard had no recourse to express such unadulterated gloom.⁶⁷ But Hardy did not accept that pessimism was a point of view over which he could be taken to task because, according to him, he was simply presenting the world as it appeared to him in the voice that was most natural for him to present it. In the ‘General Preface to the Novels and Poems’ he wrote of his ‘imaginative writings’:

That these impressions have been condemned as “pessimistic” – as if that were a very wicked adjective – shows a curious muddle-mindedness. It must be

⁶⁵ Stephen, ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’, 17.

⁶⁶ Millgate, *A Biography*, 253-4.

⁶⁷ Harrison, ‘Novissima Verba.—II’, 180-4. For more recent commentaries on Hardy’s pessimism see Peter Casagrande, ‘Pessimism’, in Page (ed.), *Reader’s Companion*, 306-7 and G. W. Sherman, *The Pessimism of Thomas Hardy* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1976).

obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics – which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize...

Differing natures find their tongue in the presence of differing spectacles. Some natures become vocal at tragedy, some are made vocal by comedy, and it seems to me that to whichever of these aspects of life a writer's instinct for expression the more readily responds, to that he should allow it to respond. That before a contrasting side of things he remains undemonstrative need not be assumed to mean that he remains unperceiving.⁶⁸

Hardy's pessimism was, as Peter Casagrande puts it, 'not an end in itself but an instrument for exposure of his highly refined sense of reality—a sense better captured by the phrase "tragic realism" than the word "pessimism"'.⁶⁹ Casagrande goes on to argue that the phrase 'full look at the Worst' from Hardy's poetic trilogy 'In Tenebris' is too-often only partially cited by critics of his pessimism, and the full line, 'if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst', more properly expresses Hardy's position.⁷⁰ The speaker of 'In Tenebris II' (1895-6), from which this line comes, states that his outlook 'disturbs the order' of a world that is primarily composed of 'stout upstanders' of optimism. But what the speaker and, ten years earlier, Elizabeth-Jane, recognised, that the 'stout upstanders' and Hardy's critics did not, was that the 'Better' can only be achieved by acknowledging and accepting the 'Worst'. Casagrande understands Hardy's 'Better' to be a form of happiness or peace, the existence of which Hardy does not question but the path to which he could not find.⁷¹ However, it seems more likely that the use of the word 'Better' as opposed to 'Best' (which would align more symmetrically with 'Worst') indicated nothing more positive than the tolerable position of 'equanimity' occupied by the 'colourless' pessimists, like himself, Leslie Stephen and Elizabeth-Jane. The pessimist, expecting nothing, is never disappointed. Elizabeth-Jane's pessimistic 'equanimity' may help her to survive in a world where '[c]ontinually it had happened that what she had desired had not

⁶⁸ GP 236.

⁶⁹ Casagrande, 'Pessimism', 306.

⁷⁰ Ibid., CP 136-8, CP 137 l.14.

⁷¹ Casagrande, 'Pessimism', 306.

been granted her, and that what had been granted her she had not desired', but basic survival—and not happiness—was as much as Hardy would offer.

THE WOODLANDERS

Hardy's next novel, *The Woodlanders*, reveals similar concerns to those explored in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and there is a clear interest in the two main principles discussed above (that is, first, in the inappropriateness of an abstract approach to the human predicament and, secondly, in problems of rational commitment). These concerns are expressed in *The Woodlanders* more directly but also with greater complexity. The problem of detachment from human concerns is now dramatised in the character of Edred Fitzpiers, and the problems of commitment and non-dogmatism are principally explored here not through a character who is obsessive and dogmatic, but through one who is (at first) emphatically not so. The novel records the trajectory of Fitzpiers's development from being a detached philosopher who intrudes upon the tranquillity of the woodland with his outlandish notions and his reluctance to make the commitments expected by society (to either fixed principles or his wife) to becoming a loyal husband who relinquishes his 'abstruse studies' to concentrate on a medical career in which (we assume) he has no passionate interest.⁷² In *Marty South*, the author explored a character who, though compassionate towards her fellow man and in harmony with the natural environment, is somehow detached from the rest of the woodlanders. Her detachment manifests itself particularly in her unsettlingly intense devotion to Giles after his death. Through these characters, Hardy reveals the paradox of trying to live with fixed principles, especially with regard to human relationships: though society demands some clarity to these principles, obsessive devotion to them is potentially destructive. Crucially, Hardy does not attempt to provide any

⁷² W 323.

resolution in this novel: Elizabeth-Jane's curiously sustaining pessimism is missing from *The Woodlanders*, intensifying the bleakness of the novel's depiction of the human predicament.

Fitzpiers is the most interesting character in *The Woodlanders* with respect to agnosticism, and is the first in a run of characters who at some stage in their development are explicitly aligned with agnosticism—or very close to being so explicitly aligned. Fitzpiers is unable to make commitments because he thinks in terms of abstract principles: he cannot (at first) recognise the value of individual philosophical standpoints or, more importantly, of individual personalities (seeing them principally as subjects worthy of research). Marty's detachment from her fellow man ultimately forms an integral part of her spiritual commitment to Giles. Therefore, rather than endeavour to discuss separately Hardy's exploration of dogmatism and the problem of divorcing one's beliefs from real circumstances and the needs of real people, I have chosen instead to discuss how these ideas manifest themselves in and are investigated through these two key characters, starting with Fitzpiers.

In an article about Hardy's 'returning native' motif, Peter Casagrande refers to Hardy's recurring use of the 'alien'—Casagrande's word to describe a character who intrudes into the pastoral setting of the novel with unfortunate consequences for its natives.⁷³ *The Woodlanders* was first conceived while Hardy was working under Leslie Stephen's editorship, perhaps as early as 1875. After completing *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy had thought to continue writing in a similar vein, but then decided to try his hand at a society novel instead. The result of this new direction was *The Hand of Ethelberta*. So he put to one side his plans for the novel that ten years later, in 1886, he would work into *The Woodlanders*. Casagrande believes that it is appropriate to read *The Woodlanders* as the middle third of Hardy's 'returning native' triptych, the other two thirds being *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Return of the Native* (1878), using the timing of its initial conception to

⁷³ Peter Casagrande, "The Shifted "Centre of Altruism" in *The Woodlanders*: Thomas Hardy's Third "Return of the Native" ", *ELH*, 38 (1971), 104-25.

substantiate his claim.⁷⁴ He identifies these aliens as Parson Maybold of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Eustacia Vye of *The Return of the Native*, and Edred Fitzpiers of *The Woodlanders*.⁷⁵ The infiltration of the outside world, in the shape of these people, disturbs the rural world. They bring with them abstract notions, which disturb the less formal and more earthly sensibilities of the natives. The ‘aliens’ are usually educated natives who have spent time in an urban environment and, while they are often portrayed as passionate, they lack sensitivity towards their fellow human beings, often acting rashly and cruelly in the pursuit of their own desires.

Edred Fitzpiers is at the root of all the tragedy in *The Woodlanders*. His unfamiliar ways upset the harmony of the woodland. His scientific practices and outlandish views on morality and love are startling to the inhabitants of the rural world, and he is absolutely unable to penetrate their society until he has rejected his ‘abstruse studies’ and accepted that he must make an absolute commitment to his wife.⁷⁶ It is my contention that Hardy employed Fitzpiers as the outsider as a means of demonstrating the absurdity of decontextualising human concerns. Unlike Maybold and Eustacia, his predecessors, who refuse to modify their passions and become like natives (Maybold remains unbending and Eustacia, it is assumed, commits suicide), Fitzpiers is eventually compelled to adapt his morals for the sake of his wife, Grace. Moreover, in Fitzpiers, Hardy introduced the voice of the rationalist to his presentation of the outsider, thereby creating a figure whose principles are even further removed from the natives than either Eustacia’s or Maybold’s. The novel follows the trajectory of Fitzpiers’s progress from the bizarre intruder who initially disturbs the sensibilities of Little Hintock with his curious ideals and detached rationality to becoming, according to the inhabitants of the village, a more acceptable man.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 106. See also Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, 160.

⁷⁵ Casagrande, ‘Shifted “Centre of Altruism”’, 106.

⁷⁶ W 323.

Hardy's construction of and attitude towards Fitzpiers is complex and ambiguous, as can be seen by this introductory portrait. Although the piece is lengthy, it is worth reproducing in full to demonstrate the irony with which the narrator delineates the doctor:

Edred Fitzpiers was, on the whole, a finely formed, handsome man. His eyes were dark and impressive, and beamed with the light either of energy or susceptibility – it was difficult to say which; it might have been chiefly the latter. That quick, glittering, empirical eye, sharp for the surface of things if for nothing beneath, he had not. But whether his apparent depth of vision were real, or only an artistic accident of his corporeal moulding, nothing but his deeds could reveal.

His face was rather soft than stern, charming than grand, pale than flushed; his nose – if a sketch of his features be *de rigueur* for a person of his pretensions – was artistically beautiful enough to be worth modelling by any sculptor not over busy, and was hence devoid of those knotty irregularities which often mean power; while the classical curve of his mouth was not without a looseness in its close. Either from his readily appreciative mien, or his reflective manner, his presence bespoke the philosopher rather than the dandy – an effect which was helped by the absence of trinkets or other trivialities from his attire, though this was more finished and up to date than is usually the case among rural practitioners.

Strict people of the highly respectable class, knowing a little about him by report, said that he seemed likely to err rather in the possession of too many ideas than too few; to be a dreamy 'ist of some sort, or too deeply steeped in some kind of false 'ism. However this may be, it will be seen that he was undoubtedly a somewhat rare kind of gentleman and doctor to have descended, as from the clouds, upon Little Hintock.⁷⁷

This equivocal portrait is remarkably Chaucerian: the narrator is repeatedly superficially complimentary about Fitzpiers's physical features and personality, and then comically undermines the praise with an irreverent aside or a suggestion of a less than flattering alternative interpretation. With phrases such as 'on the whole', 'apparent', 'artistic accident' and 'not over busy', the narrator chips away at the ostensible praise to make it almost wholly insincere. The description of Fitzpiers's eyes, in particular, is syntactically awkward. If we unravel the rhetoric, we find that he does not have a 'quick, glittering, empirical eye, sharp for the surface of things if for nothing beneath'. This assertion is then qualified; the apparent absence of an 'empirical eye'—the mark of the rationalist, specifically the scientific rationalist—may simply be 'an artistic accident of his corporeal moulding'. Hardy was, then, mischievously suggesting that Fitzpiers, though his face does not exhibit it, has a

⁷⁷ W 96.

tendency towards cool empiricism. The portrait, when untangled, leaves us with a picture of a moderately handsome man, whose eyes appear to have a depth of vision that he does not necessarily possess, with a loose mouth and a pale, pretty and delicate face (not really worth modelling), and a tendency towards abstract philosophising and dandyism.

Even before Fitzpiers appears in person, the narrator implies that he is a troublesome presence. He is first introduced as an anonymous disturbance in the natural world. On her first night back in Little Hintock, Grace is fascinated by a changing and colourful light shining from a house on the hill-side, which was 'sufficient to excite attention anywhere, [and] was no less than a marvel in Hintock.'⁷⁸ It is clear from the start that Fitzpiers is not a natural inhabitant of this rural dwelling and his presence disrupts the order of things: 'Almost every diurnal and nocturnal effect in that woodland place had hitherto been the direct result of the regular terrestrial roll which produced the season's changes; but here was something dissociated from these normal sequences, and foreign to local knowledge.'⁷⁹ When Grace seeks further information about this interesting interloper, Grammer Oliver explains that he is a doctor with a 'scattered' and unprofitable practice who complains of a 'melancholy mad[ness]' brought on by the tedium of life in Little Hintock.⁸⁰ While this otherness is appealing to Grace (and to Grammer Oliver who agrees, initially, to his gruesome request to buy her brain), the narrator implies an element of danger in Fitzpiers's oddity and his 'dissociat[ion] from...normal sequences'.

Fitzpiers moves from being an intriguing outsider to becoming offensive and cruel, and is finally tamed (or subdued) by Grace. This 'poor unpractical lofty-notioned dreamer', is at ease contemplating abstract philosophical questions, but inept at forming relationships and almost entirely immune to human sensitivities.⁸¹ This obtuseness leads him to dismiss quickly the fatal error of judgment in his instruction to chop down the tree that plagues the mind of Marty's father. Shocked by the sight of the empty space occupying the place

⁷⁸ W 46.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ W 47.

⁸¹ W 214.

where, throughout his entire life, has stood his sylvan antagonist, John South is ‘paralysed by amazement’ and dies before the end of the day. In response to this, Fitzpiers can only murmur, ‘Damned if my remedy hasn’t killed him!’ before ‘[d]ismissing the subject’, leaving the household—and the subsequently evicted residents of Winterborne’s lifehold properties—to contemplate their losses.⁸² After Fitzpiers purchases Grammer Oliver’s ‘large organ of a brain’, which will be his to experiment upon after her death, Grammer Oliver attempts to retreat from their bargain.⁸³ Fitzpiers can only be persuaded out of it by the intervention of Grace, who quickly becomes the next unlucky object of his capricious passions.

The voice of rationality, tempered in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Elizabeth-Jane’s recourse to the non-rationalist position of pessimism, is not so moderated in *The Woodlanders*. Indeed, Fitzpiers’s more extreme rationalism is comically portrayed in his tendency to reduce all values and attachments, including love, to scientific abstraction. John Hughes explains that ‘Fitzpiers’s interest in love is primarily scientific and philosophical, while his own heart is described as a new kind of instrument, or gadget, one possessing a new-fangled specification for the new requirements of modernity.’⁸⁴ But, while Hardy repeatedly criticises Fitzpiers’s excessive scientific rationalism, he does not construct an absolute caricature. The unfeeling scientist who indirectly kills John South is capable of changing and, with the onset of his interest in Grace, Fitzpiers is depicted gazing ‘musingly’ at her, treating her as a confounding experiment for which he must ‘overthr[o]w all his deductions from previous experience.’⁸⁵ The language of science is maintained (perhaps for comedy value), but it is apparent that Fitzpiers has been obliged to rethink his principles and to see the possibility that Little Hintock has at least one interesting inhabitant, something that he had hitherto assumed to be impossible.

⁸² W 98.

⁸³ W 113-4.

⁸⁴ John Hughes, ‘“For Old Association’s Sake”: Narrative, History and Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*’, *THJ*, 18/2 (2002), 57-64 (61).

⁸⁵ W 324, 320.

Despite this small step towards a more humane manner, Fitzpiers's progression from insensitive scientist to a feeling human being is slow and stilted, and with every movement forward, there is an incident or thought that threatens to pull him back to where he started from, his philandering mind constantly undermining his ability to make the transition smoothly. His marriage to Grace is damaged first by his dalliances with Suke Damson and then by his relationship with Mrs. Charmond. The latter relationship, while distressing for Grace, is Fitzpiers's first serious interest in a human being, albeit his attraction is towards the wrong woman. His trajectory from unfeeling philanderer to committed husband is complete when Grace ultimately wins him back and, importantly, succeeds in controlling him. He moves, at a stuttering pace, from being cold and arrogant to being a 'tame' husband.⁸⁶

His commitment to his profession is shown to be no less problematic than his commitment to Grace, and Fitzpiers's movement from a disinterested to a (perhaps grudgingly) dedicated doctor is subject to the same slow and stumbling progression as his movement from philandering to faithful husband. Hardy never denies that Fitzpiers is an excellent doctor, suggesting that, with respect to his profession, '[h]ad his persistence equalled his insight instead of being the spasmodic and fitful thing it was, fame and fortune need never have remained a wish with him.'⁸⁷ At the start of the novel his practice is small and by the time he leaves Little Hintock it is non-existent. He is undoubtedly skilled, but, as Grace declares when his medicine saves her life, it is unclear whether his talent is employed out of humanity or as a means to satisfy his ego:

'How clever he is!' she said regretfully. 'Why could he not have had more principle, so as to turn his great talents to good account! Perhaps he has saved my useless life. But he doesn't know it, and doesn't care whether he has saved it or not; and on that account will never be told by me. Probably he only gave it to me in the arrogance of his skill, to show the greatness of his resources beside mine, as Elijah drew down fire from Heaven!'⁸⁸

⁸⁶ W 343.

⁸⁷ W 295.

⁸⁸ W 308.

At the end of the novel, Fitzpiers buys a 'beautiful practice', to which we suppose—given his miraculous transformation from philanderer to dedicated husband—he will be more dedicated than formerly.⁸⁹ As part of the taming process, Grace forces him to give up his 'strange studies', which he agrees to do, permitting her to burn or get rid of his philosophical literature.⁹⁰ In his scientific and philosophical studies he had begun as 'a man of too many hobbies... [whose] mind was accustomed to pass in a grand solar sweep throughout the zodiac of the intellectual heaven.'⁹¹ Only through a renunciation of his 'abstruse studies' can Fitzpiers begin to function as a respectable human being.⁹²

However, Hardy makes it clear that Fitzpiers's transformation is not necessarily desirable, revealing a fundamental paradox in the human predicament: philandering and a tendency towards having too many ideas is not socially acceptable, but dedication to one thing is detrimental to the individual. Though Hardy was not anti-monogamous, he notoriously held modern views on the institution of marriage.⁹³ While Grace has 'tamed' Fitzpiers's errant ways, there is a sense that neither partner can be content with this new arrangement. Mr. Upjohn, the hollow-turner, describes the new relationship between Fitzpiers and Grace:

'At present Mrs Fitzpiers can lead the doctor as your mis'ess could lead you,' the hollow-turner remarked. 'She's got him quite tame. But how long 'twill last I can't say. I happened to be setting a wire on the top of my garden one night when he met her on the other side of the hedge; and the way she queened it, and fenced, and kept that poor feller at a distance was enough to freeze yer blood. I should never have supposed it of such a girl.'⁹⁴

⁸⁹ W 340.

⁹⁰ W 323.

⁹¹ W 116.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ In *Jude the Obscure*, Sue responds to Jude's suggestion they should marry, 'I think I should begin to be afraid of you, Jude, the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp and I was licensed to be loved on the premises—Ugh, how horrible and sordid!' (JO 271.) In the 'Postscript' to the 'Preface to the First Edition' of *Jude*, Hardy wrote: My opinion at that time, if I remember rightly, was what it is now, that a marriage should be dissolvable as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties—being then essentially and morally no marriage...' (JO xxxvii.)

⁹⁴ W 343.

The image of Grace ‘queen[ing] it’ over her husband is an uncomfortable one. Grace keeps him ‘at a distance’, simultaneously denying him the right to be free and refusing him the right to connect with her. Further, their reunion was facilitated through their adventure with a mantrap set by Tim Tangs (Suke Damson’s husband) to torture Fitzpiers, but which merely caught Grace’s dress in its teeth. This incident brings Grace and Fitzpiers back together, but the symbolism of the mantrap can hardly be ignored. Indeed, earlier in the novel, Mrs. Charmond humorously points out to Grace that ‘[m]an-traps are of rather ominous significance where a person of our sex lives’.⁹⁵ And so they are, for Grace does succeed in trapping her man. Robbed of his previous passions, we wonder what is left of Fitzpiers now that he has been forced to commit to a wife who has become so aloof and manipulative, leaving us contemplating where our sympathies lie: with the ultimately victorious Grace or with her trapped husband.

In truth, Grace has shown herself to be only slightly more morally upright and steadfast than her husband. Although it is made clear that no sexual relationship existed between Grace and Giles, her interest repeatedly swings between Giles and Fitzpiers throughout the novel. Indeed, Grace’s philandering mind is perhaps more harmful than Fitzpiers’s: her impulsive flight leads to Giles sacrificing himself for her honour. Aloof enough to ‘freeze yer blood’, in the end Grace seems almost repellent. Fitzpiers succeeds in transforming himself into a more admirable (though surely less happy) individual, but Grace never does.

Marty South is, in many respects, the antithesis of Fitzpiers. She is the novel’s representative of unswerving commitment, remaining steadfast in her devotion to Giles even after his death—perhaps especially so. She does not, like Fitzpiers, change in any noticeable sense over the course of the novel; however, by drawing significant parallels between Marty and Fitzpiers, Hardy opened out his investigation to include a quite

⁹⁵ W 56.

different version of detachment and alternative problems with dogmatism than those he explored through Fitzpiers.

Robert Schweik suggests that Hardy sets up the character of Marty South as the philosophical opposite of Fitzpiers, drawing attention to their differences by illustrating their similarities.

Of course Fitzpiers and Marty are the two most “philosophical” characters in the novel — Fitzpiers obviously so with his readings in German idealism and quotations from Schleiermacher, but Marty perhaps more memorably in her thoughtful observations on the common fate of rich and poor alike and her sensitive reflections on the animals and the trees. And both Fitzpiers and Marty express — in very nearly identical terms — their common perception that the inevitable end of love is pain and sorrow; but their responses to this common view of the human condition diverge toward the same extremes that Victorian ethicists described in the terms “egoism” and “altruism”.⁹⁶

Quite the opposite from Fitzpiers’s smooth dandyism, Marty’s philosophical contemplation is derived from observations made through her interaction with the world. Locked away in his unnatural laboratory, but disturbing the peacefulness of Little Hintock, Fitzpiers’s knowledge is derived from strange scientific experiments and reading theories in books, and his feelings are expressed in a voice of rationalism that is incongruous with the emotions that he attempts to express. Marty, in contrast, is adept at interpreting both the natural world and human nature, and voices her findings in more emotive terms. When riding by the driver on Mrs. Charmond’s carriage, Marty hears that refined lady yawn, a yawn that expresses ennui, and the young girl astutely notes that this yawn reveals that there is little difference between this rich lady and a person of Marty’s own class: “So rich and so powerful, and yet to yawn!” the girl murmured. “Then things don’t fay with her any more than with we!”⁹⁷ Later, when she points out Giles and Grace to Mrs. Charmond, Marty is again shown to be curiously wise for someone of her age, although her knowledge is instinctive and, far from being expressed rationally, is inexpressible. Seeing Grace and Giles ‘thrown back’ together following Fitzpiers’s departure, she ‘could not possibly explain

⁹⁶ Schweik, ‘Ethical Structure’, 41.

⁹⁷ *W* 39.

the complications of her thought on this matter – a thought nothing less than one of extraordinary acuteness for a girl so young and inexperienced – namely, that she saw danger to two hearts'.⁹⁸

Unlike Fitzpiers, whose medical work and scientific experiments attempt to control or manipulate nature, Marty has a 'level of intelligent intercourse with Nature' equalled only by that of Giles:

The casual glimpses which the ordinary population bestowed upon that wondrous world of sap and leaves called the Hintock woods had been with these two, Giles and Marty, a clear gaze. They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge; had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing; to them the sights and sounds of night, winter, wind, storm, amid those dense boughs, which had to Grace a touch of the uncanny, and even of the supernatural, were simple occurrences whose origin, continuance, and laws they foreknew.⁹⁹

Marty is, then, the other side of philosophy. She is practical and naturally astute where Fitzpiers is theoretical with a carefully trained mind. However, though her philosophy and practicality are derived from her interaction with the real world, it is clear that Marty is almost as problematic a subject as Fitzpiers. Despite her astuteness, her capacity for emotion, and her intimacy with the natural world, Marty never makes any significant connection with human beings and is rarely depicted interacting with anyone else. She is, perhaps in a more profound sense than Fitzpiers, an outsider.

Marty's devotion to Giles is unreciprocated. Despite this fact (or because of it), she worships him without question. Indeed, the essentially spiritual nature of her commitment to Giles is demonstrated by the fact that it only grows stronger after Giles' death. This non-physicality is directly referred to at the end of the novel: as Marty enters the churchyard to place flowers on Giles' grave, Hardy describes her figure as sexless and indefinable, 'almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of

⁹⁸ W 222.

⁹⁹ W 309.

abstract humanism.¹⁰⁰ Marty's tendency to live in her head is more acute than that of Fitzpiers. The latter, though he initially fails to treat those around him as individuals, eventually learns to interact with other people until he overcomes this scientific detachment. Marty, however, moves the other way: absolute impossibility of engagement is, for her, attractive.

Marty's unwavering devotion to Giles is far more extreme than the level of commitment to Grace eventually achieved by Fitzpiers, and it is, in many ways, more alarming and obsessive than anything demonstrated by Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In the closing scene of *The Woodlanders*, Marty enters the churchyard, clears the old flowers from Giles's grave and replaces them with her own fresh flowers:

'Now, my own, own love,' she whispered, 'you are mine, and only mine; for she has forgot 'ee at last, although for her you died! But I – whenever I get up I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee again. Whenever I plant the young larches I'll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring, I'll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven!... But no, no, my love, I never can forget 'ee; for you was a good man, and did good things!¹⁰¹

The litany-like quality of this speech hints at a latent but growing madness, and it can hardly be supposed that Marty's selfless devotion is beneficial. Schweik argues that 'what is extreme and aberrant about Marty's gratification of her suppressed love for Giles even the touching quality of her final tribute to him does not entirely disguise, and we are left with the impression that Marty has sacrificed much for the peace she has gained.'¹⁰² I would go further than Schweik and say that 'the touching quality of her final tribute' *in no way* disguises 'what is extreme and aberrant' about her devotion. Her absolute devotion to an object that can only ever be imagined is not in any way presented as desirable. In as much as Fitzpiers's initial fickleness is harmful to his fellow human beings, Marty's devotion is indicative of an unhealthy mind.

¹⁰⁰ W 344.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Schweik, 'Ethical Structure', 44.

Even the analogous notion of religious faith in a divine being is rationalised and fortified by the belief that such a being is in some way present in the world and, for Christians, the expectation that Christ will return. But there is no such recourse, however slight, to rationality for Marty. Her devotion to Giles is not fortified by such expectation; though she does mention heaven, her worship is essentially focused on this life, specifically the woodland—planting larches, splitting gads and wringing the cider—and not to any hopes of reunion in the afterlife. It seems, in retrospect, ironic that almost three decades later Hardy would himself show the same devotion to the dead. Emma's death on 27 November 1912 was the inspiration for the most prolific period of Hardy's poetry writing up to that date, and in his grief he produced some of his most moving verse. As he explains in the *Life*: "To adopt Walpole's words concerning Gray, Hardy was "in flower" in these days, and, like Gray's, his flower was sad-coloured."¹⁰³ J. Hillis Miller points out that

The law which governs the ending of love in Hardy's world is stated with admirable brevity in a notebook entry of 1889: "Love lives on propinquity, but dies of contact". Love vanishes as soon as the goal of love is obtained. It exists only so long as that goal is close enough to be seen, but has not yet been reached... With contact love dies.¹⁰⁴

With the distance between lover and beloved restored through death, love lives again. Indeed, many of Hardy's lovers are most devoted when the beloved has been rendered eternally inaccessible in death: for example, Stephen Smith, Henry Knight, Sergeant Troy, Angel Clare, and Jocelyn Pierston. The dead beloved can be idealised without risk of any now-forgotten imperfections intruding. Of course, Hardy could hardly have anticipated his reaction to Emma's death; indeed, their marriage was famously not a happy one after the first few years (regret for which has often been supposed to have inspired the poetry and

¹⁰³ *LW* 389. Hardy referred here to the author, Horace Walpole (1717-97), and the poet, Thomas Gray (1716-71).

¹⁰⁴ J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1970), 176.

was the reason for the intensity of his grief).¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, Marty's unconditional (though alarming) worship of Giles and his own retrospective adoration of Emma suggest that absolute devotion can only be attained through absolute distance from the object of worship. Commitment to this intensity is necessarily abstract and, though it inspired creativity in Hardy, is ultimately futile for the devotee.

In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy appeared to be still less hopeful than in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* with regard to the possibility of achieving the ideal position between rational and emotional principles: the novel offers no equivalent to the pessimistic but admirable stoicism of Elizabeth-Jane. Though Fitzpiers moves from one end to the other through the spectrum of available positions, from scientific detachment to eventual commitment in his relationships with his fellow man, he never apparently passes through a position which might in any respect be called ideal. Marty's devotion, after Giles's death, is too ethereal and too closely approaches obsession to be considered ideal. The fact that Elizabeth-Jane's equivalent does not exist in *The Woodlanders* indicates a more thorough pessimism on the part of the author: he had, for now at least, come to the conclusion that man simply could not achieve her position of relative comfort.

More accurately, Elizabeth-Jane's was a position in which discomfort is minimised: her point of view was, after all, not presented as a happy one. Society's demand for some clarity of principles (as shown by Fitzpiers's development into an acceptable member of society) comes at the expense of happiness and the ability to exercise choice. Henchard's vacillation between principles and emotions is destructive, both to himself and to those who get caught up in the swing between his obsessions. At the furthest extreme, Marty, the representative of idealisation and devotion to one object, loses something of herself, existing only to worship Giles. What Hardy demonstrated in these two novels was that the predicament is both unavoidable and unsolvable: absolute commitment to one idea is

¹⁰⁵ Four days after Emma's death, Hardy wrote to his friend, Florence Henniker, that 'it would be affectation to deny' the 'differences between' him and Emma. For an account of Hardy's response to Emma's death and his subsequent regret at their unhappy marriage see Millgate, *A Biography*, 487.

harmful (as in the case of Marty); but those who seek to resist the demand for clarity may be bludgeoned into doing so (like Fitzpiers). The least harmful position (that is, Elizabeth-Jane's) may serve to assuage suffering but can never lead to complete happiness.

CHAPTER FIVE

HARDY'S LITERARY THOUGHT-EXPERIMENTS PART I: TESS DURBEYFIELD AND HER
'CLOUD OF MORAL HOBGOBLINS'

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) Hardy referred more explicitly than in any of his other fiction before that point to the debates at the heart of agnosticism. In the next two chapters I argue that these novels can be read as a duo of experimental fiction: not experiments in literary technique (like the 'Novels of Ingenuity'), but experiments in and with philosophy. In these later novels Hardy explored the effects of evaluating the central characters according to various schools of thought, showing particular concern for the consequences of unbelief and rational thinking on morality.¹

In this chapter, I consider *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a literary thought-experiment and demonstrate that what began as a simple tale of a ruined woman grew into a critical exploration of morality, with special focus on the effects of unbelief on moral behaviour. While it must be acknowledged that Hardy never claimed that the novel was an experiment, certain comments in his 'Explanatory Note' of November 1891 and the 'Preface' of July 1892 do justify such a reading. In the former, Hardy wrote that the novel was 'an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things', and in the latter that it 'was intended to be neither didactic nor aggressive, but in the scenic parts to be representative simply, and in the contemplative to be oftener charged with impressions than with convictions'.² What Hardy thought he was doing, then, was presenting a version of reality as he saw it, and showing 'that there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the

¹ For one example of the long-running debate on religion's relation to questions of morals, see the *Westminster Review*, 1 (1852), 182-226, an anonymous article entitled 'The Ethics of Christianity', especially the discussion of William Fitzgerald's 1851 sermon on *The Connection of Morals with Religion*, arguing that, with regard to morals, religion 'assumes their obligation, appeals to their authority, and in its mode of reconciling the human will with the Divine, raises them to eternal sanctities.' (182). Fitzgerald was Professor of Moral Philosophy in Dublin. There are, as we might expect, no clear conclusions drawn from Hardy's inquiries. See also Amber Blanco-White, *Ethics for Unbelievers* (London: Routledge, 1948).

² Hardy, 'Explanatory Note' and 'Preface', *TD* 3, 4.

shaded side of a well-known catastrophe.³ Hardy sought to bring Tess's tragedy out into the open and to depict, without judgment, the various ways in which this tragedy might be interpreted morally.

The subject of the experiment is Tess Durbeyfield, a violated woman whose predicament is viewed through the lenses of several philosophical and theological systems with differing degrees of sympathy. The novel puts forward clearly characterised representatives of these different modes of philosophical and theological thought: Christianity, represented by the Anglican Clare family and the Marlott vicar who cannot give Tess's child a Christian burial; Alec d'Urberville, the amoral hedonist and sometime-atheist; and Angel Clare, the agnostic. The moral principles of each of these groups are offered as alternative standards by which Tess might be judged. The diverse moral threads are held together by the narrator, who—usually with an air of scepticism—moves between and comments upon them and their effects on the heroine.

This investigation is conducted in three parts. First, I consider Tess and show how her conspicuous tractability, vulnerability and instinctive but unexpressed intellectualism make her a suitable subject for Hardy's thought-experiment. Next, I look in turn at the representatives of the schools of thought previously mentioned and explain how each of these interprets and judges Tess's predicament. Finally (though related to the second part of this investigation), I consider the novel's agnostic hero, Angel Clare, and question where agnosticism leaves its adherents in terms of assessing moral behaviour. Because the character of Angel Clare was significantly revised during the composition of the novel, an examination of its textual development will form an important part of this section of the chapter. Indeed, the stages of the novel's development from manuscript to serial and then through its various volume editions are valuable to the chapter in general and, therefore, it is prudent first to provide a brief review of the novel's interesting textual history.

³ Hardy, 'Preface', *TD* 4.

Simon Gatrell writes of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that 'no other of Hardy's novels has so complex a textual history.'⁴ The novel was one of Hardy's most heavily revised texts, evidenced by the various formats in which it has survived: the original manuscript, the serial version in the *Graphic*, and several volume formats. Now widely considered to be among the finest works in Hardy's canon, *Tess* was not given a warm welcome by the first three publication venues to which it was offered, W. F. Tillotson & Son, *Murray's Magazine* and *Macmillan's Magazine*. Hardy had, in fact, signed a contract with Tillotson in June 1887, almost four years prior to *Tess's* eventual serialisation in the *Graphic*, but the illegitimate child and the secular baptism 'frightened [the] Christian publisher.'⁵ After an exchange of letters, the contract was cancelled in 1889 and, on 21 November that year, Hardy eventually agreed terms for an 'unnamed serial' with Arthur Locker, editor of the weekly illustrated newspaper, the *Graphic*.⁶ Aware from Tillotson's reaction that changes would need to be made to the serial to satisfy 'the general spirit of Grundyism still abroad in genteel society of the day', Hardy set about simultaneously preparing both a delicate serial version and a slightly more explicit version for publication in volume format.⁷ The task, he later complained in the *Life*, was 'sheer drudgery, the modified passages having to be written in coloured ink, that the originals might be easily restored, and he frequently asserted that it would have been almost easier for him to write a new story altogether.'⁸

⁴ Simon Gatrell, 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles', in Page (ed.), *Reader's Companion*, 412.

⁵ Harvey, *Complete Critical Guide*, 35.

⁶ Gatrell believes that Hardy had decided to offer the *Graphic* what he described in the *Life* as a 'mutilated' version of the novel before writing to either *Murray's* or *Macmillan's*: his motivation for offering the serial to them was simply to obtain material for his contribution to a symposium in the January 1890 edition of the *New Review*, entitled 'Candour in English Fiction' in which Hardy denounced the censorious behaviour of magazine editors and circulating libraries who, he argued, were attempting to mask the truth of human behaviour. See *LW* 232 and Simon Gatrell, 'Note on the Text', in *TD* xxv-xxx.

⁷ J. T. Laird, *The Shaping of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 4. The two most controversial scenes, Tess's seduction (or rape) and Sorrow's baptism, subsequently appeared in the a Special Literary Supplement in the *National Observer* on 14 November 1891 as 'Saturday Night in Arcady' and in the liberal *Fortnightly Review* in May 1891 as 'The Midnight Baptism: A Study in Christianity', respectively. To minimise the scandal of Tess's sexual relation with d'Urberville, Hardy wrote a mock-marriage for the *Graphic*, by which Alec tricks Tess into believing that they are man and wife.

⁸ *LW* 232.

As J. T. Laird states, in his invaluable book *The Shaping of 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles'*, the 'earliest extant version of the complete novel is the author's holograph manuscript deposited in the British Museum in 1911.'⁹ This manuscript was the copy used by the typesetters at the *Graphic*, and was written, as Hardy explained, in different colours (black ink to indicate material for volume publication, with alterations and additions made in blue pencil or ink to indicate text for the serial). The *Graphic* published the novel in weekly instalments (with rare exceptions) between 4 July and 26 December 1891. The three-volume English first edition was published in November 1891 by James R. Osgoode, McIlvaine & Co., and this text is largely faithful to the planned volume version of the manuscript, with the notable addition of the 'Explanatory Note to the First Edition'.¹⁰ The first English one-volume edition was published in September 1892, again by Osgoode, McIlvaine & Co., and it was to this edition that Hardy appended his famous 'Preface' of July 1892. Osgoode, McIlvaine & Co. produced one further edition of the novel in their 'Wessex Novels' in 1895, which included an addendum to the 'Preface', dated January of that year. In 1912, Macmillan published their 'Wessex Edition', which was largely the same as the previous editions, apart from Hardy's final supplementary note to the 'Preface', dated March 1912.

Where Hardy's revisions are relevant to this discussion, it is made clear to which version or edition I refer. Generally, however, I have used the 1988 Oxford University Press edition (based on the 1983 Clarendon edition, edited by Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell): first, for the minor purpose of making the references more easily accessible to my reader (copies of the early editions being, obviously, more difficult to access), and secondly, because this edition has been primarily based on the manuscript while also taking into

⁹ Laird, *Shaping*, 5.

¹⁰ The American edition, published by Harpers and Brothers in 1892, appears to be almost identical to the serial version that appeared in *Harper's Bazar* at the same time the novel was being serialised in England. Laird states that subsequent American editions were based on this edition. From examination of the two-volume Tauchnitz editions (1908, 1923 and 1928), it appears that the alterations Hardy had intended to be incorporated into the volumes did find their way into European editions.

account the substantive revisions made by Hardy at each stage. It is, therefore, probably the closest that we can realistically come to Hardy's final vision for the novel.¹¹

In *Tess Durbeyfield*, Hardy created a particularly suitable subject for a literary thought-experiment. She is exceptional among Hardy's heroines in her combination of unassertiveness, vulnerability and sensitivity (though it might be argued that Thomasin Yeobright exhibits similar traits), and, as a result of these characteristics, her inability to resist the intense scrutiny of those who seek to define her. A number of Hardy's heroines might be viewed as forerunners of Tess: the victims of the love-triangle plots (Cytherea Graye, Elfride Swancourt and Grace Melbury to name a few) and those deemed to have had an immoral past (Cytherea Aldclyffe, Viviette Constantine and, again, Elfride Swancourt).¹² The author's treatment of Tess differs, however, from his depiction of her literary predecessors because she is the constant object of intense narrative scrutiny in a way that none of the other heroines is. From the contentious title-page, on which Hardy declares *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to be his faithful presentation of 'a pure woman', to the black flag at the end of the novel, the focus of the novel rarely shifts from its eponymous heroine.¹³ There are no sub-plots that do not involve Tess and no evaluation can be made of any other character without reference to his or her interaction with the heroine.

In a surprisingly astute summation of their daughter's character, John and Joan Durbeyfield unwittingly pinpoint what it is about Tess that renders her particularly vulnerable to the cruelty of two lovers and an appropriate the subject for the novel's philosophical experiment:

"Tess is queer."

¹¹ For fuller discussion of the text's history, see the afore-mentioned *The Shaping of 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* by J. T. Laird; Gatrell's 'Note on the Text', xxv-xxx; and Gatrell's '*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*', 409-416.

¹² See *DR*, *PBE*, *W*, *DR*, *TT*, and *PBE*.

¹³ *TD* 1, 384. See also Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 117.

“But she’s tractable at bottom...”¹⁴

Tess’s queerness originates in the problematic dualities of her character: girl and woman; peasant and supposed descendant of an aristocratic line; ignorant and educated. Though she feels the pull of each of these threads of her character, towards womanhood, mannered gentility and intellectualism, she is at the same time rooted in their opposites (childhood, peasantry and natural simplicity). When she returns home after her seduction (or rape), Tess pleads that her age, education and class were all responsible for her illegitimate pregnancy:

“O mother, my mother!” cried the agonized girl, turning passionately upon her parent as if her poor heart would break. “How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn’t you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn’t you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o’ learning in that way, and you did not help me.”¹⁵

These pleas are plausible, but the peculiar complexity of Tess is that she is also old enough, educated enough and aware enough of social standards of impropriety to be unable to forgive herself. These dichotomies are never resolved and, by complicating her identity in this way, Hardy laid Tess bare to whatever identity others impose on her. Too young, inexperienced and from a class in which, as Joan Durbeyfield suggests, ‘it sometimes happens’, Tess is not able to resist Alec’s advances; but she also appears to Angel to be of an age and type who can be expected to be virginal.¹⁶ She is, therefore, liable to be persuaded, manipulated or coerced to perform in any of the roles urged upon her.

In an essay examining the consequences of Hardy’s many revisions of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* for the novel’s portrayal of gender, Mary Jacobus discusses the differences between Hardy’s original and revised storylines. Tess was always to have been a descendant of an aristocratic line; however, originally her heritage was not to play the important role in

¹⁴ TD 32.

¹⁵ TD 87.

¹⁶ TD 229.

her tragedy that it ultimately did and, in fact, it was not something newly-discovered but something of which she had always been aware. Jacobus explains that when Hardy altered the novel to make the discovery of Tess's ancestry the catalyst of her tragedy he also altered her character, making her more refined and dignified:

In Hardy's original scheme, Tess becomes exceptional precisely through the experience she undergoes. She starts as a village girl distinguished from others only by her freshness, her ancestry, and the fecklessness of her parents. The gap between herself and her mother seems less great and, importantly, she has known of her pedigree 'ever since her infancy'... Originally, her seduction had sprung from a realistic combination of circumstances – her mother's simple-mindedness (seeing Alec's attentions as Tess's chance to marry a gentleman), her father's irresponsibility (getting too drunk to drive the loaded cart to market, and hence throwing on Tess the guilt of Prince's death), and her own inexperience. In the revised manuscript, her entire tragedy springs from th[e] opening encounter with an antiquarian parson, and can now be blamed on a peculiarly malign chain of events. With this development of the heroine's ancestry into the main-spring of her tragedy goes the endowing of Tess herself with special qualities of dignity and refinement.¹⁷

Tess, in Hardy's final conception, feels the pull of her father's genteel lineage against the pull of her mother's working-class one. In the discussion that follows her wedding-night confession, Angel reasons that their different social backgrounds caused Tess to misapprehend his standards of morality, to which she replies, 'I am only a peasant by position, not by nature', showing some awareness of—and some pride in—the complexity of her status.¹⁸ As recast from the original conception, with the introduction of characteristics that authenticate her lineage, Tess can no longer be categorically pigeonholed as a simple village girl, either by herself or by others. Tess's opposing characterisation means that she can be read as part of a much broader social sphere and, in terms of the philosophical experiment, can be made a vehicle for much deeper social and philosophical questions.

Tess's capacity for intellectualising is no more clearly defined than her social position. Though she is described as 'a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience',

¹⁷ Mary Jacobus, 'Tess: The Making of a Pure Woman', in *Tearing the Veil: Essays on Femininity*, ed. Susan Lipshitz (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 75-92 (81).

¹⁸ TD 229.

at the start of the novel she appears to have something of a natural intellectual bent and her understanding of the world's injustices is rather more lucid before she has suffered them firsthand. She is readier to philosophise before she really suffers; her 'experience' turns her from a relatively articulate, thinking being into a more simply feeling one.

Tess's early ability to speculate about the state of the world and the human predicament is first shown in an exchange with her brother, Abraham, as they ride in place of their drunken father to deliver beehives to market:

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"

"Yes."

"All like ours?"

"I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted."

"Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?"

"A blighted one."

"'Tis very unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one, when there were so many more of 'em!"

"Yes."

"Is it like that *really*, Tess?" said Abraham, turning to her much impressed, on reconsideration of this rare information. "How would it have been if we had pitched on a sound one?"

"Well, father wouldn't have coughed and creeped about as he does, and wouldn't have got too tipsy to go this journey; and mother wouldn't have been always washing, and never getting finished."¹⁹

Tess's ideas here are quite lucid and show evidence that she has given the matter some consideration. Her perspective is a detached one: she is not, at this stage, personally implicated as a sufferer, but she sees the suffering of (and that caused by) her parents and draws her own conclusions. Later, when suffering more directly affects her, Tess is unable to maintain the distance necessary for such generalisations.

At each stage of revision Hardy increased the eloquence and clarity of Tess's early philosophical position. Her opinion of her mother's thoughtlessness and simple-mindedness, for example, was revised between editions to align Tess ultimately with a fairly sophisticated school of thought, as shown here (serial first, followed by the first edition and, finally, the fifth edition):

¹⁹ TD 35-6.

As Tess grew older, and began to see how matters stood, she felt somewhat vexed with her mother for thoughtlessly giving her so many little sisters and brothers. Her mother's intelligence was that of a happy child: Joan Durbeyfield was simply an additional one, and that not the eldest, to her own long family of seven.²⁰

As Tess grew older, and began to see how matters stood, she felt a Malthusian vexation with her mother for thoughtlessly giving her so many little sisters and brothers, when it was such a trouble to nurse those that had already come. Her mother's intelligence was that of a happy child: Joan Durbeyfield was simply an additional one, and that not the eldest, to her own long family of nine when they were all living.²¹

As Tess grew older, and began to see how matters stood, she felt quite Malthusian towards her mother for thoughtlessly giving her so many little sisters and brothers, when it was such a trouble to nurse and provide for them. Her mother's intelligence was that of a happy child: Joan Durbeyfield was simply an additional one, and that not the eldest, to her own long family of waiters on Providence.²²

In the volume versions, Hardy developed Tess's position to a more specific standpoint.

The serial-Tess's 'somewhat vexed' was revised to the 'Malthusian vexation' of the volume-

Tess of 1891. In the fifth edition, the Malthusianism became more than simply a

descriptive term applied to her; it was something that 'she felt', suggesting it was a more

considered position. Of course, it is unlikely that Tess would have heard of Malthus;

however, rather than ironising her (which would be one possibility) the reference

represents a problem that she is not quite able to voice and the association lends the

volume-Tess intellectual weight, even if only as an instinctive philosopher. The fifth

edition's 'waiters on Providence' shows a Tess that had been developed by Hardy to reveal

her attempts to reach even firmer conclusions on the position in which she and her six

siblings find themselves. That Hardy revised the fifth edition away from the implicit but

emotive reference to the dead children of the first edition suggests that he was interested in

the intellectual more than the emotional angle to Tess's Malthusianism.

²⁰ TD (*serial*) 76.

²¹ TD (*1st edn.*) 65.

²² TD (*5th edn.*) 42-3.

As an observer of life's injustices, then, Tess has strength to comment, with increased eloquence as the novel developed, on the 'blighted' world. At the beginning of the novel, though life's injustices affect her, Tess is aware that she is not to blame and can think about their causes in the abstract and with some stoicism. After her seduction, the eloquence of Tess's instinctive philosophy crumbles: she steps back from any intellectualisation of suffering, perhaps feeling that her personal guilt bans her from blaming an external force. Her philosophy from this point seems to become nebulous and largely imitative, though there is some evidence that she retains a little of her instinct for speculation. In an exchange with Alec (during his convert phase) regarding Tess's theological scepticism, Tess mimics Angel, both in the content of the ideas (which she does not fully understand) and in her delivery:

"What used he to say? He must have said something."

She reflected; and with her acute memory for the letter of Angel Clare's remarks, even when she did not comprehend their spirit, she recalled a merciless polemical syllogism that she had heard him use when, as it occasionally happened, he indulged in a species of thinking aloud with her at his side. In delivering it she gave also Clare's accent and manner with reverential faithfulness.

"Say that again," asked d'Urberville, who had listened with the greatest attention.

She repeated the argument, and d'Urberville thoughtfully murmured the words after her. "Anything else?" he presently asked.

"He said at another time something like his"; and she gave another, which might possibly have been paralleled in many a work of the pedigree ranging from the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* to Huxley's *Essays*.

"Ah. . . ha. How do you remember them?"

"I wanted to believe what he believed, though he didn't wish me to; and I managed to coax him to tell me a few of his thoughts. I can't say I quite understand that one; but I know it is right."²³

The narrator later describes Tess's difficulty in clarifying the distinction between theology and morality to Alec: 'But owing to Angel Clare's reticence, to her absolute want of training, and to her being a vessel of emotions rather than reasons, she could not get on.'²⁴ Tess's confusion regarding this distinction may be less because of Angel's 'reticence' and

²³ TD 311-12.

²⁴ TD 320.

more attributable to the fact that he, like Alec, ‘had mixed in his dull brain two matters, theology and morals, which in the primitive days of mankind had been quite distinct.’²⁵ It seems unlikely that Tess’s ‘acute memory for the letter of Angel Clare’s remarks’ would have let her down in her efforts to reproduce whatever he had said on this matter: she can, for example, reproduce the sophisticated arguments of Huxley without much hesitation. Moreover, that theology and morals had ‘been quite distinct’ in ‘primitive days’—days with which Tess is more closely aligned than either Angel or Alec—further substantiates the possibility that the intellectual deficiency is not entirely hers. If that is the case, then Tess, though she has lost her eloquence and must rely on the narrator to express what she feels to be right, has retained something of her instinctiveness with regard to philosophy. She sees, for example, that Alec’s brain is ‘dull’ because he cannot recognise what she is intuitively aware of. Tess is, then, not entirely a ‘vessel of emotions rather than reasons’, but has a submerged intellectual instinct: her brain is not ‘dull’. However, her primary expressive register is emotional and her training is inadequate so her philosophy remains under-defined.

The letters that Tess writes to Angel during their estrangement are her nearest approaches to fully articulating her own thoughts. The first letter is the most articulate, though evidently inspired by her ‘passionate mood’, and, consequently, more disjointed than it at first appears.²⁶ In it she begins by asserting that she ‘must cry to [Angel] in her trouble’. She begs him to come to her, and then recognises that he cannot because he is ‘far away’, but she follows this flash of clarity by speculating dramatically that she ‘must die’ if he does not come and so repeats her initial plea. She emphatically accepts her guilt: ‘The punishment you have measured out to me is deserved—I do know that—well deserved, and you are right and just to be angry with me.’ But then she moderates this guilt by reminding him that she is still the same woman he fell in love with and insisting, in fairly emotive terms, that for her the past ‘was a dead thing altogether’ when they met. She

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ TD 325-6.

swears her loyalty (she crops her eyebrows and covers her hair because her good looks rightly belong to him), and pleads with him to rescue her from temptation. She closes by asking to live with him as a servant, and stresses that life has no joy without him to share in that joy with her. Despite its length and the fact that it is, in effect, her longest piece of direct speech, it does not reveal much more than can already be inferred by her behaviour. The letter is repetitious and scattered throughout with exclamations and emotional interjections that sometimes detract from the sense of a sentence. It is, then, more properly a lengthy illustration of an emotional (as opposed to a rational) state.

The second letter is even more revealing, ostensibly showing that Tess is a feeling rather than a thinking being:

O why have you treated me so monstrously, Angel! I do not deserve it. I have thought it all over carefully, and I can never, never forgive you! You know that I did not intend to wrong you—why have you so wronged me? You are cruel, cruel indeed! I will try to forget you. It is all injustice I have received at your hands!²⁷

This letter is also repetitive and is largely exclamatory. Its brevity, too, seems to show that it is a short emotional outburst. However, though clearly emotionally-driven, Tess here attempts to return Angel's criticism by making a judgment of her own regarding his behaviour. Again, the line between feeling and reasoning is muddled. Tess appears to intuit the distinctions between right and wrong, but her ability to express herself is curtailed by emotion, guilt and her 'want of training'.²⁸

By making Tess intelligent and intuitive, but not able to express her feelings coherently, Hardy enhanced the effectiveness of his experiment with morality. First, he demonstrated the crippling effects of guilt on the perception of the right to express oneself with regard to morality or in any broader intellectual sense. Secondly, he showed that morality is not to be derived from any external source, such as the Church: morality is instinctive rather than learned. But instinct, as we see from Tess's frustrated efforts to

²⁷ TD 343.

²⁸ TD 320.

express what she feels to be right, is undefended against schools of moral thought that have doctrinal support on their sides to authenticate their claims of legitimacy. Finally, in terms of the experiment itself, the subject, Tess, cannot be allowed to be overly assertive. Her inability to articulate and thus defend her own position leaves her susceptible to the judgment of others. For Tess to be an ideal subject for the thought-experiment she must, as far as possible, remain a non-rationalising being in order to illustrate properly the effects of each philosophical, theological or moral code upon her and to allow the reader space to supply his own response both to her predicament and to those who judge her.

Examination of the manuscript reveals that Hardy made efforts during composition to revise Tess away from a position in which she more clearly articulated her sense of morality. The first instance is when she explains how Dairyman Crick and the milkmaids might separate their souls from their bodies:

“A very easy way to feel ’em go,” continued the ^{soft & fluty} sweet voice Tess, “is to ~~star~~ lie on the grass at night, & look straight up at the sky & think o’ some particular ^{queer big bright} star, ~~you see up there~~; & by fixing your mind upon it you will soon find that ~~your soul is~~ ^{you are} hundreds & hundreds o’ miles away from your body, which you don’t seem to want at all.” ~~so that if anybody were to snatch away your body your soul would still stay floating about up above.~~²²⁹

The ‘soul’ that Hardy deleted would have aligned Tess too closely with a religious—or at least a spiritual—school of thought, thereby articulating too fully what Tess herself might believe, restricting conjecture for those who would seek to judge her, and limiting her potential as the subject of the experiment. The word ‘snatch’ is indicative of Tess’s fears: more specifically it implies that her virginity was not given away with assent. To have her make such a claim—however obliquely—would make her appear more explicitly noralising, and to confirm that the act was rape would largely negate attempts to subject her to moral scrutiny. In no published version does Tess directly makes this claim against Alec, even when she explains her history to Angel. While he admits that she was ‘more

⁹ TD (MS) 169.

sinned against than sinning', it is clear that Tess is still somewhat vague about her own culpability, simply pleading that she was 'a child when it happened' and 'knew nothing of men.'³⁰

Another deleted passage was to show Tess's struggle between the obligation, as she perceives it, to confess her history and the temptation to keep silent in order to safeguard Angel's love. In Hardy's initial plan, Tess was not to have seen the case as one with only two possibilities (that is, either silence and marriage or confession and separation), but to have contemplated a third way, 'another kind of union' with Angel (that is, sexual as opposed to marital):

Yet would it not be a wicked sin against him – sincere, honourable gentleman that he was – to ~~accept him~~ ^{give way, thus,} with sealed lips? But how be frank with him without endangering her ^{very} purpose in ~~accepting him~~ ^{giving way?}
~~As a path out of her trying strait~~ ^{poor Tess might even} she would possibly have ~~accepted another kind of union with him~~ ^{purely} for his own ^{beloved} sake, had he ~~urged it upon her; that he might have retreated if discontented with her on learning her story. To be a cloud in his life was so cruel to him that her~~ ^{own} ~~standing seemed~~ ^{and} ~~career was not important beside it: & yet~~ ^{and} she could not master herself sufficiently to give him up altogether.³¹

Hardy used blue pencil to cross out the large deleted section (shown here by wavy-underlining), which indicates that he originally intended to remove the text from the serial version and to restore it for volume publication. However, this section did not appear in any subsequent editions of the novel. In the end, Hardy chose not to have Tess contemplate such an act. Again, it was too close to an explicitly rational thought process and would too readily lend authority to her moral judges.

Penny Boumelha argues that Tess 'never declares herself as either virginal or sexually available, and yet her experience is bounded by the power that both these images

³⁰ TD 229.

³¹ TD (MS) 252-3.

exercise'.³² I have suggested that Tess's silence is a necessary part of Hardy's experiment; however, it is also the case that a similar effect is achieved in the significant moments of silence in the novel, about which much has been written, particularly in the field of feminist criticism. All of the significant incidents of Tess's life—her rape/seduction, the birth of Sorrow, her confession, her murder of Alec, her death—are conspicuously absent from the text. Indeed, the rape/seduction scene was among the thirty-nine missing leaves when Hardy presented the manuscript to the British Library Museum. (Gatrell points out that the missing leaves have been best explained by the suspicion 'that they bore Hardy's wife's handwriting, and that he removed them, wanting only his own script to appear in public collections; this certainly happened in the case of the manuscript of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*'.³³) Because of Tess's silence and the fact that these crucial scenes are not explicitly described to her critics, Tess is not available for informed judgment, but, importantly, she is also made liable to unjust judgment.

Tess's lack of clear definition is, then, on the one hand a protection for her, but on the other an incitement to speculation. Angel, Alec, the narrator, even the black flag at the end of the novel, each have or symbolise an idea of what Tess is or should be. Margaret Higonnet argues that 'Hardy does not allow Tess to remain a totally passive object of description by his male characters'.³⁴ However, it is also clear that she never fully asserts her own individuality. When Angel teases her by calling her names that she does not understand (Artemis and Demeter) Tess attempts to assert her individuality and thereby dodge Angel's efforts to categorise by appealing to him, 'Call me Tess'.³⁵ (Significantly, she makes this request 'askance' rather than directly.) But, because of the many silences and the narrator's withholding of the significant parts of her story, there is never an instance when it is possible to say categorically what it might mean to be 'Tess'. So, when Angel attempts to identify Tess with a particular theological and philosophical system, she finds it difficult

³² Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women*, 124.

³³ Gatrell, 'Note on the Text', xxv.

³⁴ Margaret R. Higonnet, 'Tess and the Problem of Voice', in Higonnet (ed.), *The Sense of Sex*, 14-31 (18).

³⁵ TD 135.

to resist his imposed labels, both through want of education and because Angel has already filled in the blank parts of her character with his impressions of what she is and is not:

“...Tessy, are you an Evangelical?”

“I don’t know.”

“You go to church very regularly, and our parson here is not very high, they tell me.”

Tess’s ideas on the views of the parish clergyman, whom she heard every week, seemed to be rather more vague than Clare’s, who had never heard him at all. “I wish I could fix my mind on what I hear there more firmly than I do,” she remarked as a safe generality. “It is often a great sorrow to me.”

She spoke so unaffectedly that Angel was sure in his heart that his father could not object to her on religious grounds, even though she did not know whether her principles were High, Low, or Broad. He himself knew that, in reality, the confused beliefs which she held, apparently imbibed in childhood, were, if anything, Tractarian as to phraseology and pantheistic as to essence.³⁶

Angel believes that her traditionalist phraseology, drawing on the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible, will satisfy his parents; however, he also thinks that they might find her wanting in doctrinal rigour. Labelling Tess in this way is for Angel somehow more important than any attempt to understand the woman herself. Despite his summation, though, Tess remains only vaguely defined. If she can, in the end, only be defined by her name (which Angel also attempts to reclaim by calling her ‘Mistress Teresa d’Urberville’), then any other knowledge of her is open to speculation and she becomes a target for the ‘cloud of moral hobgoblins’ that pursues her throughout her story.³⁷

Angel is wrong when he assumes that his parents will take a judgmental view of Tess’s knowledge of church doctrine. The novel makes it clear that, in the eyes of her parents-in-law, Tess would have been a creature worth saving. Mr. Clare, ‘despite his narrowness...had the full gift of charity’ and Tess’s ‘present condition was precisely one which would have enlisted the sympathies of old Mr and Mrs Clare. Their hearts went out of them at a bound towards extreme cases’.³⁸ A more important moment in the text’s investigation into Anglicanism’s effects on the heroine is, however, the scene in which

³⁶ TD 174.

³⁷ TD 190, 91.

³⁸ TD 291.

Tess's local parson refuses her child a Christian burial on account of the child's illegitimacy and unconventional baptism. Through Tess's exchange with the young parson, Hardy tests the morality of the Church in its dealings with Tess and finds it wanting.³⁹

As her baby lies dying, Tess pictures disturbing images of hell learned in her youth and, partly due to confusion brought on by fatigue, she becomes convinced that her unbaptised child will be subjected to the gruesome tortures of which she has been told:

She thought of the child consigned to the nethermost corner of hell as its double doom for lack of baptism and lack of legitimacy; saw the arch-fiend tossing it with his three-pronged fork, like the one they used for heating the oven on baking-days; to which picture she added many other quaint and curious details of torment sometimes taught the young in this Christian country.⁴⁰

The narrative voice is evidently critical of the way in which Christianity is taught to the young, although the passage does not explain how the images came to affect the heroine's psyche in such a distressing manner (whether she picked them up from school, Sunday school, church or her parents). Tess, deeply affected by the weirdness of the late hour, is so convinced that her baby's fate will be pain and torment that she baptises him herself. She goes to see the parson the next day to find out whether the makeshift ceremony would be 'doctrinally sufficient to secure a Christian burial for the child.'⁴¹

"I should like to ask you something, sir."

He expressed his willingness to listen; and she told the story of the baby's illness and the extemporized ordinance. "And now, sir," she added earnestly, "can you tell me this—will it be just the same for him as if you had baptized him?"

Having the natural feelings of a tradesman at finding that a job he should have been called in for had been unskillfully botched by his customers among themselves, he was disposed to say no. Yet the dignity of the girl, the strange tenderness in her voice, combined to affect his nobler impulses—or rather those that he had left in him after ten years of endeavour to graft technical

³⁹ The episode was originally bowdlerised from the serial version (along with all other references to Tess's baby), having been deemed unsuitable for its family readership. In the afore-mentioned *Fortnightly Review* version, 'The Midnight Baptism', the young mother was left nameless. Other than the addition of Tess's name and some references to John Durbeyfield, the section was restored to the first edition intact.

⁴⁰ TD 98.

⁴¹ TD 100.

belief on actual scepticism. The man and the ecclesiastic fought within him, and the victory fell to the man.

“My dear girl,” he said, “it will be just the same.”

“Then will you give him a Christian burial?” she asked quickly.

The vicar felt himself cornered. Hearing of the baby’s illness, he had conscientiously gone to the house after nightfall to perform the rite, and, unaware that the refusal to admit him had come from Tess’s father and not from Tess, he could not allow the plea of necessity for its irregular administration.

“Ah—that’s another matter,” he said.

“Another matter—why?” asked Tess rather warmly.

“Well—I would willingly do so if only we two were concerned. But I must not—for certain reasons.”

“Just for once, sir!”

“Really I must not.”

“O sir!” She seized his hand as she spoke.

He withdrew it, shaking his head.

“Then I don’t like you!” she burst out, “and I’ll never come to your church no more!”

“Don’t talk so rashly.”

“Perhaps it will be just the same to him if you don’t? ... Will it be just the same? Don’t for God’s sake speak as saint to sinner, but as you yourself to me myself—poor me!”

How the Vicar reconciled his answer with the strict notions he supposed himself to hold on these subjects it is beyond a layman’s power to tell, though not to excuse. Somewhat moved, he said in this case also—

“It will be just the same.”⁴²

The portrayal of the unnamed parson is ambiguous. The description of him as a tradesman implies a demotion from his role as God’s representative, and shows a man briefly inclined to be jealous of the practices of his own trade. His rather cagey ‘—for certain reasons’ shows that his refusal of a Christian burial for Tess’s child is not because he does not want to do it, but because he cannot risk scandal and rebuke from other parishioners or his fellow clergy. On the other hand, the narrator also makes it clear that, despite the parson’s pious occupation, he is essentially a kind and decent man. Indeed, Tess’s dignity appeals to his ‘nobler impulses’—the part of him that is still a ‘man’ as opposed to a church functionary. Tess is conscious of this distinction, begging him to speak to her simply as ‘you yourself to me myself’. The narrator undermines the parson’s faith by pointing out that his scepticism is real while his belief has been painstakingly worked at and is merely ‘technical’, and by declaring that he only ‘supposes’ himself to hold ‘strict notions’. The

⁴² TD 100-1.

problem for Hardy lies not with the parson, in whom he reveals an internal struggle, but with the Church that insists that this essentially humane man should behave so unsympathetically towards one of his most needy parishioners, denying her the comfort of its rituals. Although the parson can offer the reassuring promise that '[i]t will be just the same', he cannot, because of the Church and society, offer the rite itself. In refusing Tess a Christian burial for her child the parson is pushed by his role to punish both mother and child for a sin of which neither is properly culpable. The Church, with its harsh moral codes, can offer nothing to Tess and Sorrow, and this failing forces the parson—one of its representatives—to question those codes. In the end it is the man and not the ecclesiastic who is capable of more compassion, highlighting the deficiencies of a moral system governed by inflexible dogma.

Alec d'Urberville questions religion from a different perspective. Rather than concerning himself with its humanitarian deficiencies, he—in his atheist phase—rejects the authority of its moral dogma. Throughout the novel, Alec swings from irreligious hedonism to fervent Evangelicalism and back again. After Tess unintentionally undoes his conversion to Christianity (ironically the conversion was initiated by Angel's father), Alec decides that, having rejected religion, it is only logical to reject the morality it teaches as well. He cannot accept that morality can be distinguished from religious dogma or that a moral code can have any purpose other than to buy, through good deeds, a place in Heaven:

“As for what you said last time, on the strength of your wonderful husband's intelligence—whose name you have never told me—about having what they call an ethical system without any dogma; I don't see my way to that at all.”

“Why, you can have the religion of loving-kindness and purity at least, if you can't have—what do you call it—dogma.”

“O no. I'm a different sort of fellow from that! If there's nobody to say, 'Do this, and it will be a good thing for you after you are dead: do that, and it will be a bad thing for you', I can't warm up. Hang it, I am not going to feel responsible for my deeds and passions if there's nobody to be responsible to; and if I were you, my dear, I wouldn't either.”

She tried to argue, and tell him that he had mixed in his dull brain two matters, theology and morals, which in the primitive days of mankind had been quite distinct.⁴³

Alec's philosophy is hedonism shorn of any grander pretensions: the happiness of the self is primary and it is not important how the end is achieved. The only motivation for what would be perceived as moral behaviour is to ensure that divine judgment will rule in your favour in the afterlife, and so, without the promise of an afterlife there is, Alec reasons, no incentive to modify one's 'deeds and passions'. With the rejection of religion, which Tess inspired through her imitative recital of Angel's agnostic principles, comes the rejection of its moral dogma. There is a curious logic to Alec's principles. There is, of course, no more rationality in committing to moral principles (wherever they might be derived from) than there is in committing to theological doctrine. In Alec, Hardy offers a worrying image of one possible moral outcome for the application of rationality to religious belief. Alec's behaviour and, more importantly, his logic are certainly not condoned: the suffering that his hedonism causes Tess is a clear comment on the perceived wrongfulness of his behaviour and his (ab)use of reason. Pitted against Alec, though she is at expressing herself, is Tess with her instinctive morality.

In as much as Hardy mistrusted Alec's pure rationality, he was also cynical of Angel Clare's self-serving rationalism. But if Alec takes rationalism in a sense too far, Angel does not appear to take it far enough. In his most direct investigation of the consequences of agnosticism on the formation of a moral code, Hardy demonstrated that while it is detrimental to take rationality to its logical conclusions for morality, it is less satisfactory (and more damaging) to limit its application simply to justify a rejection of theology. As we shall see, Hardy originally conceived of Angel not as a man who has to confess on his wedding night that he had in his youth 'plunged into eight-and-forty hours' dissipation with a stranger', but as a man who has to confess that rational inquiry has led him to abandon belief in God. Angel is the hardest judge of Tess and, arguably, has the greatest detrimental

⁴³ TD 319-20.

impact on her because he fails to move his agnosticism beyond theological speculation to reassess morality. Certainly, morality is shown (by Tess) to be distinct from theology, but through his depiction of Angel, Hardy asked his reader to consider with what the unbeliever might replace the moral codes usually provided by religion. If both rationality and limited rationality are insufficient guides, on what foundation are morals to be based?

Angel makes a fleeting appearance at the start of the novel as the passer-by who feels a twinge of regret when he inadvertently disappoints Tess by not choosing to dance with her at the club-walking.⁴⁴ His first appearance illustrates the missed opportunity, the fine line between Tess's only chance of happiness and what actually happens. This brief encounter led Hardy to consider the title *Too Late Beloved* and, later, *Too Late, Beloved*, before rejecting both in favour of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, shifting the focus of the story from one shared between the two lovers to one that concentrated solely on the heroine, and consequently helped to deny Angel the role of hero.

It is clear from examination of the manuscript that in editing the novel, Hardy altered Angel from one type of man into another quite different one. The following extract shows the alterations that were made by the author in the reader's first proper introduction to Angel:

Angel Clare looms^{rises} out of the past not altogether as a distinct figure but mainly^{rather} as a tender voice, & eloquent pair of^{as a long regard of fixed, abstracted} eyes, & a^{small mobility of} mouth, of somewhat too^{small &} delicately cut^{lined} for a man's, though with a^{an unexpectedly firm close of the lower lip} sufficiently humorous turn^{doing} now and then; to do^{doing} enough to do away with any suggestion of ~~wea~~ indecision. Something nebulous, misty^{preoccupied}, vague, aboutⁱⁿ his bearing^{& regard}, nevertheless, showed^{marked} him as one who probably had no very definite aim or concern about his material future. Yet as a lad people had said of him that he was one who might do anything if he tried.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ TD 23.

⁴⁵ TD (MS) 160-1.

Hardy removed from Angel his 'eloquent' eyes, the 'sufficiently humorous turn' to his mouth, and the 'mist[iness]'. He replaced them with 'fixed, abstracted eyes', 'an unexpectedly firm close of the lower lip', and a 'preoccupied' demeanour. In its tendency to qualify and undermine itself, the updated description of Angel is reminiscent of the portrait of Fitzpiers, the implicitly agnostic hero of *The Woodlanders*.⁴⁶ Where Fitzpiers' portrait discloses an uncomfortable blend of worthy doctor and fashionable dandy, Angel is here shown to be superficially liberal, but with an inflexibility at his core. His eyes are, for example, said to be 'fixed' before they are 'abstracted'; his 'mobility of mouth' is offset by the occasional 'firm close of lip', countering any 'suggestion of indecision.'

Simon Gatrell asserts of these manuscript alterations that:

The firm close of the lip and fixed eyes belong to the man who embodies Victorian cultural rigidity, who abandons the other half of his perfect whole because the socio-religious law bred in the bone says he must, and because his internal logic sets love below the law: forgiveness does not enter the case. The tenderness, the eloquence, the humorous twist of the mouth belong to the lover who, idealizing the beloved, cannot bear that she has been invaded by another man.⁴⁷

Hardy's use of '[n]evertheless' suggests that the narrative is at pains to convince his reader that this curiously inflexible agnostic is 'nebulous' and 'vague' in his manner, though that implication is itself unsettled by the 'probably' that follows. It is significant that it is Angel's 'material future' about which he has no definite concerns, rather than his spiritual future: for all Angel's claims to be liberal and his efforts to blend with the the rural workers with whom he lives, his declining to attend church on a Sunday is not enough to establish his own liberalism when it is belied by his response to Tess's confession.

Angel was initially conceived as an agnostic and, as we have seen, the delineation of his character is reminiscent of that of Hardy's earlier agnostic heroes, particularly Fitzpiers. Though Angel is never explicitly referred to as an agnostic, it is clear that Hardy intended him to be aligned with agnosticism. In his first appearance, at the club-walking, Angel stays

⁴⁶ See my Chapter Four, p.133.

⁴⁷ Gatrell, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 414-15.

behind to dance with the girls, declining to join his brothers who are ‘get[ting] through another chapter of *A Counterblast to Agnosticism*’: the brothers ‘reluctantly’ leave him, giving some indication that their purpose in reading the book is to educate their youngest sibling against a school of thought to which he already appears to be inclining.⁴⁸ In the manuscript, the book title is ‘Answers to *Essays and Reviews*’, an oblique reference to J. E. M. Goulburn, *et al*, *Replies to ‘Essays and Reviews’* (1862).⁴⁹ Hardy’s alteration to the book title unambiguously introduced agnosticism into the novel and, along with Angel’s lack of enthusiasm in reading it, sets him up in opposition to this ‘*Counterblast*’. The fact that he is not interested in engaging with the arguments against agnosticism also foreshadows the limitations of his ultimate adoption of that position, as we will see.

Angel claims to be a student of and advocate for the importance of human life, and unsuccessfully attempts to counter his father’s decision to deny him a University education unless it be used for the ‘honour and glory of God’ by arguing that it should be ‘used for the honour and glory of man’.⁵⁰ Finding that his entreaty to his father that he be allowed to attend University is in vain, he resorts to a haphazard self-education:

He spent years and years in desultory studies, undertakings, and meditations; he began to evince considerable indifference to social forms and observances. The material distinctions of rank and wealth he increasingly despised. Even the “good old family”, (to use a favourite phrase of a late local worthy) had no aroma for him unless there were good new resolutions in its representatives. As a balance to these austerities, when he went to London to see what the world was like, and with a view to practising a profession or business there, he was carried off his head and nearly entrapped by a woman much older than himself; though luckily he escaped not greatly the worse for the experience.⁵¹

It is clear that Angel’s ‘indifference’ to ‘social forms and observances’ does not stretch as far as morality, but again only to ‘material distinctions’. This, of course, becomes directly relevant with regard to Angel’s thoughts on Tess’s lineage; however, it also suggests that his

⁴⁸ TD 22.

⁴⁹ TD (MS) 13. Goulburn *et al*, supported by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, were responding to *Essays and Reviews* (1860), a collection of seven heretical essays that used Darwin’s *Origin of Species* as their basis for contesting the legitimacy of Christian doctrine, particularly with regard to miracles.

⁵⁰ TD 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

liberalism and his rationalism are not fully developed. It is striking that the older woman is made, in effect, culpable for his fleeting plunge into immorality: with the word ‘entrapped’—that, through Hardy’s free indirect style, is implicitly Angel’s self-justifying view—the woman is made the active participant in their liaison. This predicts the double standard that Angel will apply to Tess when he hears her confession.

Like Hardy’s other agnostic heroes, Angel removes himself from society, and eventually develops a sense of indifference to it. Like Fitzpiers and, to some extent, Clym, he begins to view human beings as subjects to be studied rather than as individuals with whom to interact and to whom something is owed, ethically. His decision to learn farming is not motivated by a desire to work in the natural world or to mix with ordinary people, but by a desire for ‘intellectual liberty’.⁵² Angel is not really, then, the class-renouncing liberal that he appears to be when he jovially condescends to socialise with Dairyman Crick and the milkmaids.

The following passage traces Angel’s development from a detached observer, very much in the vein of Fitzpiers, to an appreciative observer of the diversity within what he had at first assumed to be an homogeneous social group:

At first he lived up above entirely, reading a good deal... But he soon preferred to read human nature by taking his meals downstairs... Much to his surprise he took, indeed, a real delight in their companionship. The conventional farm-folk of his imagination—personified in the newspaper press by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge—were obliterated after a few days’ residence... Sitting down as a level member of the dairyman’s household seemed, at the outset, an undignified proceeding. The ideas, the modes, the surroundings, appeared retrogressive and unmeaning. But with living on there, day after day, the acute sojourner became conscious of a new aspect in the spectacle. Without any objective change whatever, variety had taken the place of monotonousness. His host and his host’s household, his men and his maids, as they became intimately known to Clare, began to differentiate themselves as in a chemical process... [into] men every one of whom walked in his own individual way the road to dusty death.⁵³

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ TD 122-3.

This passage shows Angel's conversion from detached snobbery to a degree of interest and even sympathy. Ultimately, though, he considers himself not of the same kind with the farming folk: 'read[ing]' them, becoming 'conscious of a new aspect in the spectacle', maintaining the controlled and 'objective' perspective. For all he appears to be integrating, Angel remains aloof, distinguished from the rest by his separate dining and his attic bedroom. While he admits that there is more variety among the farm-folk than he had at first supposed, he still plays the anthropologist, classifying them as varieties of a species rather than as individual human beings. Indeed, when he first notices Tess, he believes 'his preoccupation to be no more than a philosopher's regard of an exceedingly novel, fresh and interesting specimen of womankind', a statement that distinctly echoes Fitzpiers's opinion of Grace. (It is worth noting that Hardy began to plan *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1887, the same year in which he finished serialising *The Woodlanders*.)⁵⁴

While he is at Talbothays, however, life in the natural world begins to appeal to Angel. Indeed, one of the happy consequences of his agnosticism and his decision to turn his back on theology in favour of the 'outdoor life' is that 'he bec[omes] wonderfully free from the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent power.'⁵⁵ At this point, then, Angel's agnosticism has rescued him from the pessimism that (for Stephen and many others) attached itself to unbelief, seeing the possibilities rather than the disadvantages that it holds when compared with either religious belief or atheism. When he visits his family home, the contrast he finds from Talbothays jars. The apprentice farmer appreciates more fully the 'Life' that he has seen there, away from the civilising and restrained vicarage. At the farm, he had 'felt only the great passionate pulse of existence, unwarped, uncontorted, untrammelled by those creeds which futilely attempt to check what wisdom would be content to regulate.'⁵⁶ Angel is aware that Christian creeds are neither appropriate nor required to restrain the 'passionate

⁵⁴ TD 133. See also W 320 and 324, and Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, 177-8.

⁵⁵ TD 123.

⁵⁶ TD 161.

pulse of existence'. However, this does not mean that the natural passions should go unregulated: for him, 'wisdom' fills the place of Christianity. So, while Angel has happily turned his back on Christianity's theological codes, he has not truly disentangled himself from its creeds. All he has really done is strip away the name of Christianity but not its content.

Angel's imperfect rejection of Christianity is seen most clearly in his reverence for Pauline ethics, particularly with regard to moral dogma: during his confession, he quotes St. Paul as a source for his 'good morals'. Indeed on the reverse of the leaf that contains Angel's confession, Hardy drafted some notes in pencil which reveal that Angel's knowledge of St. Paul was, in fact, to have been demonstrably greater than in the final draft. The pencil markings are faint (probably having faded over time) and are not entirely legible; however, what follows is a transcript of what can still be seen:

X I used to want to be a teacher of men.
 X It was a great disappointment to me when I found I could not enter the Church. But

It is the grand work of all religious — Integer vitae, scelerisque purus.. says a Roman poet who is strange company for Paul (in English)

X Well, Tessie, though I believe my poor father ^{brothers} fears that I am one of the eternally damned for my doctrines and beliefs, I am a stickler for good

morals I do love goodness ^{spotlessness} & I do hate impurity, Whatever I
 — I think of the ^{inspiration} — ^{subscribe to} the immortal words of Paul:
 The night is [far?] spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, & let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in [rioting?] & drunkenness; not Let no man despise thy youth; but, (put in strife & envy —)
 Be thou [an example?] in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in [truth?].” This has always been my desire; but I have
 — & that's what I have to confess; for ^{I know} you

He then told her of that time in his life when he was tossed about — doubts & difficulties like a cork on a waves, & he went to London, & how ^{one day} he met with a person there — him in asking.

Happily, I awoke ~~in a ni~~ almost immediately to my folly he ~~said~~ continued “I ~~had~~ could have no more to say to her, & I came home the next morning. I have been sorry ever since; and I have never repeated the offence. But I felt that I should like to treat you ^{my bride} — & I could not do it without

telling you this. Do you forgive me?"

She squeezed his hand lightly for an answer.
Then we will dismiss it at once for it is too painful —
for the occasion — & talk of something lighter.⁵⁷

As compared to the version that was published, this draft shows that a knowledge of scripture was to have been more important to Angel. Some confidence in Pauline ethics is evident in the version that made it to publication, though the quotation is appreciably condensed: 'Whatever one may think of plenary inspiration one must heartily subscribe to these words of Paul: 'Be thou an example—in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.'⁵⁸ By revising Angel away from a demonstrably thorough familiarity with Paul, Hardy prevented Angel from being an overt preacher of Pauline ethics. The less complete association with Paul—offering equal space to the 'Roman Poet' (Horace)—ensures that Angel's agnosticism is not overlaid too heavily by his love of the Bible. It was important that Angel had knowledge of scripture, but the knowledge had to appear to be the vestiges of an old creed and not so obviously a school of thought to which he subscribed: the reader cannot be allowed to doubt Angel's rejection of theology.

Angel's judgment of Tess is more severe than his parents' would have been—strikingly so considering Angel's rejection of Mr. Clare's pious occupation. Hardy explains (as mentioned above) that had Angel's parents known Tess's story they would have taken pity on her. After Tess overhears the two older Clare brothers and Mercy Chant mocking Angel, Hardy points out the bitter irony of Tess judging her parents-in-law by the ungenerous self-righteousness of their sons:

[S]he grieved for the beloved man whose conventional standard of judgment had caused her all these latter sorrows; and she went her way without knowing that the greatest misfortune of her life was this feminine loss of courage at the last and critical moment, through her estimating her father-in-law by his sons... In jumping at publicans and sinners they [Mr. and Mrs. Clare] would forget

⁵⁷ *TD (MS)* recto 320. The first of Angel's incomplete quotations is from Romans 13: 12: 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.' The second is from 1 Timothy 4: 12: 'Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.'

⁵⁸ *TD* 221.

that a word might be said for the worries of scribes and pharisees; and this defect or limitation might have recommended their own daughter-in-law to them at this moment as a fairly choice sort of lost person for their love.⁵⁹

In light of the statement that Angel's 'conventional standard of judgment had caused [Tess] all these latter sorrows', Hardy surely means to implicate Angel in this group of 'scribes and pharisees'. Despite having cast off the 'supernatural' part of the theology he has been nurtured in, Angel is no different from his brothers: he still judges Tess according to its law in a way that his father, ironically, would not. Angel is less justified (and therefore more hypocritical) than his brothers in applying biblical moral doctrine to Tess's case: the older brothers at least have a firm belief in the authority of the Bible to justify their dogmatism. Their father is a more flexible man, willing to uphold the New Testament values of forgiveness in a way that his youngest son cannot. Indeed, Angel openly rejects the New Testament ideal of forgiveness when Tess pleads with him, using words that distinctly echo Gospel phraseology, particularly the Lord's Prayer, 'forgive me, as you are forgiven.'⁶⁰ Angel's are Old Testament standards of retribution, punishment and the casting out of sins.

When preparing the manuscript, Hardy had at first intended Angel's confession to be not about his liaison with a woman in his youth, but about his loss of faith: He was originally to have been more conscious of the potentially problematic nature of agnosticism. The manuscript of the familiar confession (referring to the liaison) is pasted on top of an earlier confession. The most accurate transcript possible (given the difficulty in seeing the original page through the pasted leaf), is as follows:

"Tess, have you noticed that though I am a parson's son, I don't go to church?"
 "I have—occasionally."

⁵⁹ TD 291.

⁶⁰ TD 226. Matthew 6: 9-13: 'After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.' See also Matthew 6: 14, 15 and 18: 35; Mark 11: 25-6; Luke 6: 35-8 and 11: 4.

“Did you ever think why?”

“I thought you did not like the parson of the parish.”

“It was not that, for I don’t know him. Didn’t it strike you as strange that being so mixed up with the church by family ties and traditions I have not entered it but have done the odd thing of learning to be a farmer?”

“It did once or twice, dear Angel.”⁶¹

In Hardy’s initial conception, Angel was to have been a more sympathetic character experiencing a common late-Victorian struggle between reason and belief and whose justification for rejecting Tess was, more forgivably, jealousy.

In the published versions, Angel was altered from a sympathetic lover—who might have earned acknowledgement in the original title, *Too Late, Beloved*—to an ostensibly liberal, but far less sympathetic, philosopher. Through this revised Angel, Hardy demonstrated the moral incoherence that the thinking man may be thrown into after a renunciation of faith. Hardy’s experiment with Angel Clare illustrates the possible consequences of rejecting Christianity for the agnostic’s moral and social code. Stripping away the parts of the creed that more readily seem to be irrational (that is, belief in God) is not enough. Morality is equally as irrational: what is good or bad is not normally determined by reason—though many philosophers have argued that it can and should be. In religion, there is, as Alec d’Urberville argues, reason to follow a moral code: crudely put, acting one way will lead a believer to Heaven, acting another will lead him to Hell. But without religion there is no obvious foundation for the moral codes. Rejecting God on account of rationality means also rejecting His rules for human behaviour; not doing so would be hypocrisy. The original, more sympathetic, Angel would not have been a true reflection of the difficulty of the field of morality for agnosticism. Hardy required a more rigid and abstracted Angel Clare to illustrate the hypocrisy to which the agnostic mind is susceptible if his agnosticism is not followed to its logical conclusions, beyond theology and into morality.

⁶¹ *TD (MS)* 320 (beneath pasted section). This section has also been transcribed in Jacobus, “Tess”, 86-7.

Hardy's account of Angel's loss of faith draws to a remarkable extent on events in his own life. The incident in which a book meant for Angel (thought by Patricia Ingham to be a copy of Mantell's *The Wonders of Geology* (1838)) is misdirected by the bookseller and sent instead to his clergyman father would appear to have been based upon a similar confrontation between Hardy's good friend Horace Moule and his father, who was, like Mr. Clare, a clergyman.⁶² In response to Mr. Clare's shock that his son who, he had assumed, was planning to be ordained should read such irreligious literature, Angel declares:

“I should like to say, once for all, that I should prefer not to take orders. I fear I could not conscientiously do so. I love the Church as one loves a parent. I shall always have the warmest affection for her. There is no institution for whose history I have a deeper admiration; but I cannot honestly be ordained her minister, as my brothers are, while she refuses to liberate her mind from an untenable redemptive theolatriy.”⁶³

Angel's words here echo those used by Hardy in the *Life* when he declared that he had considered taking a 'pass-degree', but found that 'he could not conscientiously carry out his idea of entering the church.'⁶⁴ Hardy had by this time also acted as witness to Leslie Stephen's renunciation of Holy Orders. From these similarities, Hardy might have been expected to be more sympathetic to Angel: he too had undergone the philosophical confusion entailed by the loss of faith and had spent a large portion of his life critically studying the very articles of faith that he finally rejected. However, if anything, Hardy is more unsympathetic towards Angel than towards any other character because of his hypocritical misinterpretation of agnosticism. It is significant that the particular belief with which Angel is at odds is that of redemptive theolatriy—the belief that Christ was sacrificed in order to atone for Original Sin. In the manuscript this was not explicitly to have been his concern, as can be seen in an alternative final clause (subsequently deleted) that reads:

⁶² Patricia Ingham, *Thomas Hardy* (Oxford World's Classics. Authors in Context series; Oxford University Press, 2003), 73.

⁶³ *TD* 120

⁶⁴ *LW* 390.

‘while she adheres to the ^{certain} worn out portions of the teaching.’⁶⁵ In the process of revising, Hardy more firmly ironises Angel’s position: though he clearly aligns himself in opposition to the concept of Original Sin, he cannot find it in himself to forgive Tess’s supposed sin. He has stripped away the idea of theolatriy, but not the need for redemption.

Angel is, then, an intellectual, but one who cannot stretch his intellectualising beyond the question of theology. His brothers are satirically presented as stereotypically pious with unbending and unconsidered principles. Angel is finally not so different. He is able to exercise his liberality only in terms of religion, failing to apply his own principles to the wider needs of the human beings whom he initially wished to study and glorify. It is for this reason that Lascelles Abercrombie, writing during Hardy’s lifetime, declared that Angel ‘is the only one of Hardy’s characters who is genuinely odious... For he is theoretical high-mindedness; and than this there is nothing more disgusting, let alone its cruelty when it gets any actual life in its power.’⁶⁶ Angel’s detachment from real human beings causes him to project the image of a virginal woman onto Tess, and his inability to see beyond that simplified classification confounds him when he discovers that she is, like all human beings, more complicated—and also more flawed—than he had assumed: ‘You were one person: now you are another’, he declares.⁶⁷ The use of the definite article is telling when Angel insists that ‘forgiveness does not apply to *the case*’ (emphasis added): he depersonalises Tess, turning her into nothing more than a case to be studied by the philosophic and judicial mind.

One of the answers that Hardy presents us with has to do with the narrowness of Angel’s social experience. When he deserts Tess, that changes. In Brazil, a stranger convinces him that he has wronged Tess in abandoning her:

⁶⁵ TD (MS) 163. This sentence has been deleted in the manuscript, though is shown without deletion marks here for legibility.

⁶⁶ Lascelles Abercrombie, *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Study* (1912; London: Martin Secker, 1927), 107.

⁶⁷ TD 226.

The stranger had sojourned in many more lands and among many more peoples than Angel; so to his cosmopolitan mind such deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than are the irregularities of vale and mountain-chain to the whole terrestrial curve. He viewed the matter in quite a different light from Angel; thought that what Tess had been was of no importance beside what she would be, and plainly told Clare that he was wrong in coming away from her.

The next day they were drenched in a thunderstorm: Angel's companion was struck down with fever, and died by the week's end. Clare waited a few hours to bury him, and then went on his way.

The cursory remarks of the large-minded stranger, of whom he knew absolutely nothing beyond a commonplace name, were sublimed by his death, and influenced Clare more than all the reasoned ethics of the philosophers. His own parochialism made him ashamed by its contrast. His inconsistencies rushed upon him in a flood. He had persistently elevated Hellenic Paganism at the expense of Christianity; yet in that civilization an illegal surrender was not certain disesteem. Surely then he might have regarded that abhorrence of the un-intact state, which he had inherited with the creed of mysticism, as at least open to correction when the result was due to treachery.⁶⁸

Thus, Angel perceives his own hypocrisy. Abandonment of the Church and of theology was straightforward; abandonment of an ethical code in which his society is steeped was practically impossible. Reaching a new conclusion on morality is not the same as disavowing theology. The latter, for Angel, was simple matter of removing himself from the company and influence of the institutions of the Church, the building, its texts and so on. To reappraise morality, Angel has to remove himself from a society that was, as much as any church building, so infused with its codes of behaviour that it was no easy matter to know where to begin to ascertain their validity or otherwise. In Brazil, and in the company of the large-minded stranger, Angel finally achieves the necessary awareness that his morality, no less than his theology, must be reassessed.

Angel is thus a representative of a later stage of the development of the agnostic hero, through whom Hardy investigated the consequences of ignoring the question of morality when using rationality to dispense with belief in God. Until it is too late, Angel embraces his agnosticism only in terms of theology and does not extend his rational thinking to considering morality. Tess, with her instinctive intellect, sees that there is another way, one to which Hardy himself would later claim to subscribe: between ,Alec's

⁶⁸ TD 329-30.

self-serving rationality and Angel's limited rationality lies non-rationality, an approach based on a blend of reason and intuition.⁶⁹ But, because of her gender and the sense of guilt that stands between her and self-expression, Tess can 'not get on'.⁷⁰ For Hardy, agnosticism could usefully be taken beyond Angel's understanding of it, but he could not demonstrate this with the character of Tess. In *Jude the Obscure*, by placing a man at the centre of his experiment, Hardy offered a much fuller reassessment of all social, moral and theological codes in the wake of disavowal of religion. The achievements of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, though, cannot be ignored: through his careful reworking of Tess's potential for serious philosophical reflection and Angel's flawed rationalism, Hardy encouraged agnostic thinkers to think harder about the consequences of their agnosticism on morality.

⁶⁹ See *LW* 332 and my Introduction, p.14.

⁷⁰ *TD* 320.

CHAPTER SIX

HARDY'S LITERARY THOUGHT-EXPERIMENTS PART II: *JUDE THE OBSCURE* AND THE
CONSEQUENCES OF AGNOSTICISM

*Perhaps the world is not illuminated enough for such experiments as ours! Who were we, to think we could act as pioneers!*¹

In Jude Fawley's anguished suspicion that the world was not ready for him and Sue, we may also hear the voice of the author, predicting that the world would not be ready for his highly contentious final novel.² Like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* was an experiment; but where *Tess* had shocked the public, *Jude* appalled. Pre-marital sex, divorce, suicide, murder, alcohol abuse, religious doubt, bigamy and adultery: the tangled lives of the four main protagonists of *Jude the Obscure* leave few moral parameters untested. Hardy's novel dismayed his critics and led a bishop, literally, to condemn the book to flames.³ Such objections to the novel, the author claimed in 1912 in his 'Postscript' to the 1895 'Preface', 'completely cured [him] of further interest in novel-writing.'⁴

Hardy nevertheless believed that the objections to his novel were unfounded and irrelevant. He had intended, with *Jude the Obscure*, to address 'men and women of full age' and 'deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity; to tell, without a mincing of words, of a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit; and to point to the tragedy of unfulfilled aims, I am not aware,' he declared, 'that there is anything in the handling to which exception can be taken.'⁵ As far as Hardy was concerned, the novel's morality was unquestionable, and by

¹ JO 371.

² Although *The Well-Beloved* was published in volume form in 1897 (that is, two years after the first volume edition of *Jude the Obscure*), the serial, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, was published in the *Illustrated London News* in 1892, two years prior to the serialisation of *Jude the Obscure* in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. There are substantial and significant variations between the serial and volume versions of *The Well-Beloved*, which have prompted debate about whether *Jude the Obscure* can rightly be called Hardy's final novel.

³ Hardy, 'Preface', JO xxxvi.

⁴ Hardy, 'Postscript', JO xxxvii.

⁵ JO xxxv. These claims for *Jude the Obscure* echo the sentiment of 'Candour in English Fiction', Hardy's contribution to a symposium in the *New Review* in January 1890, in which he complained that the censorship

persistently focusing on perceived immorality his critics had missed the point.⁶ What was important was the exploration of how a simple but contemplative man deals with a practically intolerable life. With his final agnostic hero, Hardy allowed the common man philosophical speculation, demonstrating that a purely rational approach to the human predicament is neither possible for nor beneficial to the socially and intellectually unprivileged. Hardy's experiment, though, especially for his socially and intellectually privileged critics, had, like *Jude's*, come too early: the Victorian literary world was not 'illuminated' enough to appreciate what he was trying to achieve.

In this chapter I argue that with *Jude the Obscure* Hardy revisited and reworked the literary thought-experiment he began in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In 1895, Hardy wrote in the 'Preface to the First Edition' of *Jude the Obscure* that, '[l]ike former productions of this pen, *Jude the Obscure* is simply an endeavour to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions, the question of their consistency or discordance, of their permanence or their transitoriness, being regarded as not of the first moment.'⁷ Echoes of the 'Preface to the Fifth and Later Editions' of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can clearly be heard in these claims for *Jude*.⁸ Indeed, echoes of *Tess* can be heard more generally throughout *Jude the Obscure*; so distinctly, in fact, that Peter Casagrande asserts that it is credible that 'Hardy would have approved of an attempt to read *Jude* as something more to be said about *Tess*'.⁹ The plots of the two novels are strikingly similar. *Tess* and *Jude* both begin as outsiders with unusual temperaments and both are instinctively philosophical in their approaches to the human predicament. At an early stage, both their lives are dramatically altered by seduction, *Jude's* by Arabella and *Tess's* by Alec. Leaving their seducers, they endeavour to

imposed by magazine editors and circulating libraries obliges writers to force their characters to act unnaturally in order to comply with what the editors and libraries believed to be acceptable moral behaviour. See 'Candour in English Fiction', *New Review*, 2/8 (1890), 15-21.

⁶ Indeed, Hardy later noted ironically that 'somebody discovered that *Jude* was a moral work—austere in its treatment of a difficult subject—as if the writer had not all the time said that it was in the Preface.' (Hardy, 'Postscript', *JO* xxxvi-xxxvii.)

⁷ Hardy, 'Preface', *JO* xxxv-xxxvi.

⁸ See Hardy, 'Preface', *TD* 4. Hardy had declared that *Tess* was 'representative simply...oftener charged with impressions than with convictions'.

⁹ Peter Casagrande, '“Something More to be Said”: Hardy's Creative Process and the Case of *Tess* and *Jude*', in Pettit (ed.), *New Perspectives*, 16-40 (37).

rebuild their lives in new locations, but find their sanctuaries intruded upon by new and problematic objects of desire; this time, however, the aroused feelings are not merely sexual, but intellectual and spiritual. After initially shrinking from the new relationships the lovers unite (Jude with Sue, and Tess with Angel), only to be driven apart again by the hypocrisy and inflexible morality of the supposedly liberated partner. Jude and Tess are unhappily driven back to their seducers. At the end of their respective novels, they die.

But Jude was a more useful subject for Hardy's thought-experiment because he was capable of more autonomy than Tess. The male subject provided more possibilities for the experiment because a man could be self-determining in a way that a woman, especially a Victorian woman, could not. By making a woman the subject of his experiment, Hardy had been constrained by social expectations of what she realistically could and could not do while still remaining blameless. In all but four of his fourteen novels, Hardy had concentrated primarily on the female protagonists: the exceptions were *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Well-beloved* (1892/1897) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). The narrative focuses on the male protagonists in only the last two of these four. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was the last of his female-focused novels: with Tess, Hardy had gone as far as he could go with a woman as the subject of his thought-experiment. Although marketable, the heroine-centred romance plot was too limiting for what he was trying to achieve; so, for his last novel, Hardy returned to the basic structure of *Tess* and rewrote the tale with a man at the centre. Again, Hardy throws the protagonist into virtually unbearable situations and allows him to feel his way, to develop his philosophy and to work out the best way to deal with an intolerable world. Where Tess's femininity had confounded the experiment, Jude's masculinity opened up further possibilities.

The relative autonomy of Jude is emphasised by the titles of the novels. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* furnishes Tess with a speculative history that has the potential to (and does) affect the path of her life. Jude is 'obscure'. An only-child, an orphan since the age of ten, and raised grudgingly by a great-aunt who 'did not care much about him', and thought that

‘It would ha’ been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too wi’ thy mother and father, poor useless boy’, the only heritage that Jude is aware of is that his family is notoriously unsuited for marriage.¹⁰ There are more external influences on Tess than on Jude: she is part of a large family; she has friends with whom she grew up and later socialised (the ladies’ club-walking); she was educated in the village school; and her employment is generally sociable. In contrast, Jude is the only child specifically mentioned in the first part of the novel; he works largely in solitary occupations in his youth (bird-scaring and delivering for his aunt’s bakery); and is an autodidact throughout his life.¹¹ Jude, therefore, has more freedom to make decisions based upon situations as he finds them and not upon the social and moral expectations of others.

Hardy’s experiment in *Jude the Obscure* did not, however, simply replace Tess with Jude. As discussed in Chapter Five, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* had brought Hardy three possible approaches for deriving a philosophical system (in the case of *Tess*, a system of morality): Alec’s self-serving application of rationality; Angel’s limited application of rationality; and the non-rational approach offered by Hardy (albeit tentatively) through Tess. Jude’s philosophical history begins at the ideologically amorphous position at which Angel’s ended when he removed himself from society and found that he needed to strip away fixed notions of morality just as he had stripped away notions of theology. With Jude, Hardy demonstrated how an already unprejudiced mind resolves the myriad philosophical possibilities offered him by the world, showing the complex process of arriving at a conclusion with regard to these matters and what, after the philosophical journey is complete, that conclusion might be.

Jude is the inheritor of the role occupied by Angel in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (and by Clym and Fitzpiers in earlier novels), that of the agnostic hero.¹² In the context of this experiment, however, the term ‘agnostic hero’ needs some clarification. Hardy, using the

¹⁰ JO 17, 7.

¹¹ For further comparison of Jude and Tess see Katharine Rogers, ‘Woman in Thomas Hardy’, *Centennial Review*, 19 (1975), 249-58 (251).

¹² See Chapters Three, Four and Five.

term as a label for a particular school of thought, made it clear in *Jude the Obscure* that ‘Agnostics had scarcely been heard of at this time’.¹³ By 1895 the word ‘Agnostics’ would have, to most people, referred to a specific group (that is, followers of Huxley, Stephen, Clifford, *et al*), even though their individual theories were quite different. Specifically, ‘Agnostics’ had come to be considered as unbelievers. Hardy distanced Jude from this school of thought, and from its particular association with theological matters, by situating the story before agnosticism was widely known. Jude is, then, not an agnostic, but he does have an agnostic approach to philosophy and theology.

In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy moved the agnostic hero to centre stage and altered his social class. Clym, Fitzpiers and Angel are all formally educated men and, at least initially, financially stable: Jude is neither. Education and money liberate the earlier heroes, affording them the luxury of travel, leisure and relatively easy access to literature. The structure of *Jude the Obscure*—each Part named after the geographical location inhabited by the hero in that Part—emphasises the limits of Jude’s experience: he moves no further than the boundaries of Wessex. He is a poor man, forced to work hard for a living as a stonemason and unable to afford formal education, the latest books or the time to concentrate on his studies. Though liberated by education and money, the earlier agnostic heroes are in chains intellectually. Comparatively, Jude’s mind is closest to that of the cosmopolitan traveller Angel meets in Brazil than to that any of the other agnostic heroes. More than any of them, Jude has an open and inquiring approach to life, and, as important, he is an altruist. Angel, Clym and Fitzpiers all seem largely oblivious to the people around them (even Clym, with his dream of educating the people of Egdon Heath, fails to pay any attention to the real needs of those his scheme would affect). What makes Jude and the traveller similar is that they have experienced the world more extensively than any of the other men, although where Angel’s cosmopolitan friend developed his liberalism through travel, Jude’s is developed through the various struggles he encounters. Jude is continuously faced with

¹³ JO 320.

situations that force him to reassess his philosophical beliefs, situations that are largely a result of his inferior social class and of which the intensity of the practical difficulty far outweighs that of any situation encountered by the other philosophical heroes. He does not have the luxury of abstraction afforded the richer, better educated man.

Throughout the novel, the reader follows the trajectory of Jude's gain and loss of faith in the various objects he worships (intellectually, theologically and romantically) and his reinterpretation of philosophy, theology and morality. We watch as he tries to make rational choices in a world that does not itself appear to him to be based on these rational principles. This chapter seeks to examine Jude Fawley as the culmination of Hardy's experiments with agnosticism and philosophy, tracing the development of Jude's philosophical viewpoint, examining the influences to which he is subjected, and asking what Hardy's final experiment in fiction might offer to a reinterpretation of nineteenth-century agnosticism and to an understanding of the author's philosophy in general.

At the start of the novel Jude is philosophically and theologically unfocused, but he has a desire to find direction for himself: it was 'the yearning of his heart to find something to anchor on, to cling to; for some place which he could call admirable.'¹⁴ Man is, Hardy suggests, innately ambitious. This ambition is not necessarily interested in social or intellectual achievement; rather, more generally, he needs meaning in his life, a sense of purpose, something more to aim for than simple survival, something 'admirable' that might justify the existence of the world and his place in it. Jude is unformed and uninformed, open to all possibilities. He has an instinctive tendency to be compassionate and to live outside civilisation, as is shown by his treatment of the birds on Farmer Troutham's farm. However, this is not enough. Cruel Nature, as he sees it, cannot give his life meaning: he realises that 'Nature's logic was too horrid for him to care for' and feels the unwanted but

¹⁴ JO 21.

inexorable pull of civilisation: ‘glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it.’¹⁵ He has to silence his natural inclinations and replace them with something else.

Jude settles initially on Christminster because Mr. Phillotson, who has himself up to this point been the focus of Jude’s admiration, inspires him. Desperate to see the city, which has already taken on something of a mythological status for Jude, he climbs a ladder to reach the highest local vantage point, but is disappointed by the mists shrouding Christminster from sight. Though not religious, the ‘serious urchin’ recalls that he ‘had read in a tract that a man who had begun to build a church and had no money to finish it, knelt down and prayed and the money came in by the next post.’¹⁶ Jude decides it is worth a try, so kneels and prays. The mist lifts and it appears to Jude that his first experiment with religion is a successful one. But the narrative voice is careful to point out that mist had already started to thin and had, in fact, lifted elsewhere, undermining any suggestion of Godly intervention and slyly suggesting that from such slight coincidences faith might be born. Nonetheless, having seen its apparently mystical emergence from the mist, Jude is entranced by Christminster, and his enthusiasm grows upon hearing more about it. Christminster, religion and learning begin to fill the blank spaces in the boy’s psyche and fulfil his ‘yearning’ for something ‘to cling on’ to. Because he had no previous dreams, the ambition to go to Christminster becomes everything to him and the place itself romanticised.

Jude consequently immerses himself in the study of classical texts, teaching himself Latin and Ancient Greek. Because this study is what gives his life meaning, his learning greatly influences him. One evening, Jude is so deeply affected by his reading of Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare* that he is compelled to fall to his knees and recite the hymn to the sun and the moon. This act of worship, the narrator points out, is driven by the same ‘impulsive emotion’ that had caused Jude to pray to see Christminster. The echoes of that first

¹⁵ JO 13.

¹⁶ JO 16.

moment of worship seem to resonate with Jude and he perceives an inconsistency in his actions. The similarity of these two moments forces Jude to consider the piety of his Christminster ambitions alongside the paganism of the works he had been reading, and the contrast jars. Consequently, Jude refocuses his studies:

Reaching home he mused over his curious superstition, innate or acquired, in doing this; and the strange forgetfulness which had led to such a lapse from common-sense and custom in one who wished, next to being a scholar, to be a Christian divine. It had all come of reading heathen works exclusively. The more he thought of it the more convinced he was of his inconsistency. He began to wonder whether he could be reading quite the right books for his object in life. Certainly there seemed little harmony between this pagan literature and the mediæval colleges at Christminster, that ecclesiastical romance in stone.¹⁷

Jude is by nature doctrinally ambivalent. This means that he is equally liable to be influenced by Horace as he is by the Greek New Testament. Though he does not as yet perceive it, Jude's religious piety is, therefore, not innate, but a requirement of his ambition: he chooses God because it is necessary to do so to become a Christminster scholar.

Jude's ambitions are put on hold when he is seduced by Arabella and tricked into marrying her. At the start of their relationship, he is mindful enough of Christian obligations to comment, 'Somehow it seems odd to come to a public-house for beer on a Sunday evening', but this concern is easily quashed by his manipulative lover.¹⁸ During their short marriage, he attempts to keep up his studies, but the day-to-day life of a husband and labourer makes this dream impractical. The fact that Jude is so quickly distracted by Arabella is further proof that his ambition was not ingrained: Arabella provides him with an alternative focus, something else 'to cling on' to. But Jude discovers quite quickly that the foundations of his fascination with Arabella are unsound: her hair is false (the discovery of which gives him 'a sudden distaste for her'); her dimples are 'artificially produc[ed]'; and the pregnancy that obliged them to marry turns out to be 'a mistake'. Jude's suspicions of

¹⁷ JO 30-1.

¹⁸ JO 43.

her deceit regarding the pregnancy are later born out by a conversation he overhears in which Arabella's friend claims to have 'put her up to it' to entrap him.¹⁹

In a pattern that recurs throughout the novel, Jude's first desperate response to discovering that his marriage has failed is to drink. However, once he has been thoroughly disabused of Arabella's charms (the deciding factor is her leaving a frame containing a picture of him to be auctioned at her parents' house-sale), he refocuses his ambitions on Christminster. Though he regrets the lost time, he in no way regrets the loss of Arabella because he rationalises that what he had perceived admirable in her was, in fact, fabricated. Jude has a similar approach to his other aspirations. In each case, once he has discovered that the object of his ambition is inherently inconsistent, he is able to refocus his ambitions. For example, despite his obvious disappointment, Jude re-evaluates his admiration for Mr. Phillotson, who had promised Jude that he would 'not forget' him, but confesses in later years when Jude seeks him out at Lumsdon, 'I don't remember you in the least.'²⁰ Because Phillotson was not consistent, either to his promise to remember the boy (though he eventually does with some prompting) or to his ambition to be a scholar, Jude's opinion of his old schoolmaster is tempered from admiration to straightforward friendship.

As will be discussed, both the Christminster dream and Jude's subsequent ambition to be a curate are re-evaluated in the light of his discovery that the establishments are ideologically incoherent. The only admiration Jude is not fully able to cast off is for Sue because he sees that, though she is false to her own ideals, she is compelled to occupy this false position by circumstance rather than by nature. Because Jude is an ideologically unformed man, he is more easily able to cast off his old views, when he sees that what he had focused on is not, as he had hoped, 'admirable', than could a man whose views had been ingrained by the formality of education or by simple association with family or friends. Jude repeatedly turns to alcohol, ostensibly as a crutch to quash feelings of isolation and emptiness that result from discovery that his admiration has been misplaced,

¹⁹ *JO* 57-8, 59, 66-7.

²⁰ *JO* 4, 102.

though the state of intoxication marks a regression to his natural state of unformed ideals, after which point he can reassess and refocus more easily.

The next phase in the trajectory of Jude's philosophical education comes with his move to Christminster. As he enters the city late at night, Jude is immersed in what he perceives to be the intellectual spirit of the place and, with typical romanticism, he imagines that he walks among the 'sons of the University'.²¹ These imaginings highlight Jude's somewhat indiscriminate preparation for the University, as he lists (by inference rather than naming) the 'worthies' he imagines around him:

Some of them, by the accidents of his reading, loomed out in his fancy disproportionately large by comparison with the rest...

There were poets abroad, of early date and of late, from the friend and eulogist of Shakespeare down to him that has recently passed into silence, and that musical one of the tribe who is still among us. Speculative philosophers drew along, . . . ; modern divines sheeted in their surplices, among whom the most real to Jude Fawley were the founders of the religious school called Tractarian; the well-known three, the enthusiast, the poet, and the formularist, the echoes of whose teachings had influenced him even in his obscure home. A start of aversion appeared in his fancy to move them at sight of those other sons of the place, the form in the full-bottomed wig, statesmen, rake, reasoner, and sceptic; the smoothly shaven historian so ironically civil to Christianity; with others of the same incredulous temper, who knew each quoad as well as the faithful, and took equal freedom in haunting its cloisters.

He regarded the statesmen in their various types, men of firmer movement and less dreamy air; the scholar, the speaker, the plodder; the man whose mind grew with his growth in years, and the man whose mind contracted with the same.

The scientists and philologists followed on in his mind-sight in an odd and impossible combination. . . ; then official characters—such men as Governor-generals and Lord-lieutenants, in whom he took little interest; Chief-justices and Lord chancellors. . . of whom he knew barely the names. A keener regard attached to the prelates, by reason of his own former hopes. . . he who apologized for the Church in Latin; the saintly author of the Evening Hymn; and near them the great itinerant preacher, hymn-writer, and zealot, shadowed like Jude by his matrimonial difficulties.²²

²¹ *JO* 80-1.

²² *Ibid.* In a note to Florence Henniker, Hardy offered a key to Jude's Christminster spectres. They are as follows: Ben Johnson, Robert Browning, Algernon Swinburne, John Henry Newman, John Keble, Edward Pusey, Lord Bolingbroke, Edward Gibbon, Bishop Thomas Ken, and John Wesley. (*L* ii 95.) See also *JO* 413-4, Jude's description of his delusional last tour of Christminster.

His dreams later that night include varied (though unattributed) quotations from Arnold, Sir Robert Peel, Gibbon, Browning, Newman, Keble, Joseph Addison and Ken.²³

Significantly, he does not name any of the 'worthies' (though it is hinted that he does remember some of them): Hardy did not allow Jude's knowledge to have any precision, but left it vague—a jumble of ideas from poets, to scientists, politicians and clergymen.

According to Patricia Ingham, there is 'no meaningful sequence' in the list of thinkers and there is 'no linked theme for quotations.'²⁴ Jude's learning is unfocused (though he has attempted to concentrate more on religious thinkers): he is by nature not disposed to limit himself.

These musings disclose a breadth of knowledge that makes Jude's exclusion from this world in which he has clearly invested much time and effort even more disheartening. Jude's approach to learning is uncontrolled. While his ambition had been focused on Christminster, he had read works by all of her 'sons'; but, with such breadth, Jude's education lacks the rigour required by Christminster. Christminster's approach is not as eclectic as Jude's. The learning that takes place within her walls is relatively disciplined and pious. Though the University appears to be a multifaceted seat of learning, its links with the Church are restrictive, as Hardy himself decided when he chose not to go up to Cambridge.²⁵ Hardy may have been from a rural working-class background, but he was learned enough to know how the universities worked. Jude, because of his background, does not have that information and has no way of predicting the irony of Christminster that he would later come to learn: rationality and diversity might be fostered within her walls, but entering those walls needs a discipline and rigour that only money can buy.

Jude receives only one, abrupt, rejection letter, from the Master of Biblioll College:

²³ JO 82-3. See Patricia Ingham, 'Explanatory Notes', JO 433-51 (436-7, note to JO 80).

²⁴ Ingham, 'Explanatory Notes', JO 437, note to JO 80.

²⁵ Hardy's first note that appears to pertain to *Jude the Obscure* was made on 28 April 1888 and shows that he felt some sympathy—though limited empathy—with Jude's struggles: 'April 28. A story of a young man—"who could not go to Oxford"—His struggles and ultimate failure. Suicide. [Probably the germ of *Jude the Obscure*.] There is something [in this] the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them—though I was not altogether hindered going, at least to Cambridge, and could have gone up easily at five-and-twenty.' (LW 216. The text enclosed in square brackets is an insertion by the *Life*'s editor, Michael Millgate.)

SIR: I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do. Yours

T. TETUPHENAY.²⁶

When Jude first looked at Christminster, he saw a world of learning that encompassed all imaginable studies; when Christminster looked at Jude, it saw only a stonemason. Both were wrong. Jude, however, because of his ideological openness is able to reassess his conclusions, and he sees the incongruity of the impossibility of achieving what Christminster requires of him, without first being allowed in. Full of scorn for the institution, Jude writes on the wall of Biblioll College: ‘*“I have understanding as well as you. I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these?”*’—Job xii. 3.²⁷ Jude highlights the irony of the rejection through his use of the biblical text, the knowledge of which he has not been allowed to demonstrate to the College. Even if he never fully loses his fascination and admiration for Christminster (he returns there with Sue and his family), Jude’s later reverence for the city is more sentimental in nature, a fondness for his first ideal. He accepts, sadly, that it is not for him.

Following rejection from Christminster, Jude seeks the advice of a young clergyman, explaining that he does not mind that his aspirations to a University career have been crushed so much as he regrets not being able to enter the Church. Jude speaks of the religious aspect of his former ambition with ‘an unconscious bias’, which the curate detects, and as a result encourages Jude to enter the ministry as a licentiate.²⁸ The idea revives Jude and he declares that, offered this new hope, he would be able to avoid drink. Whilst it appears that Jude’s modest theological goal is a true calling, it is the promise of a new ambition (and not the content of that ambition) that is of greatest consequence: the ‘unconscious bias’ that the curate detects is an accidental result of Jude’s intellectual

²⁶ JO 120.

²⁷ JO 121.

²⁸ JO 128.

training in former years rather than a natural inclination towards the Church. Nevertheless, he pursues this new ambition with vigour:

It was a new idea; the ecclesiastical and altruistic life as distinct from the intellectual and emulative life. A man could preach and do good to his fellow-creatures without taking double-firsts in the schools of Christminster, or having anything but ordinary knowledge. The old fancy which had led on to the culminating vision of the bishopric had not been an ethical or theological enthusiasm at all, but a mundane ambition masquerading in a surplice. He feared that his whole scheme had degenerated to, even though it might not have originated in, a social unrest which had no foundation in the nobler instincts; which was purely an artificial product of civilization. . .

But to enter the Church in such an unscholarly way that he could not in any probability rise to a higher grade through all his career than that of the humble curate wearing his life out in an obscure village or city slum; that might have a touch of goodness and greatness in it; that might be true religion, and a purgatorial course worthy of being followed by a remorseful man.²⁹

Jude's principal motivation for becoming a humble curate is not theological but 'altruistic'. He is drawn towards a life in which he can 'do good to his fellow-creatures', and decides that, in retrospect, his previous goal had not been driven by 'ethical or theological enthusiasm' (the ethical notably given priority). The 'goodness and greatness' of dedicating his life to an 'obscure village or city slum' is, for him, 'true religion.' Jude's new scheme is his way of repaying a debt; he is 'remorseful' and vows to follow 'a purgatorial course'. This remorse is ostensibly for his slump into inebriation, but is also regret for his former, less noble, ambition to hold a socially-revered role. Jude's instinct is towards compassion, this time not just for the hungry birds on Farmer Troutham's farm, but towards humanity itself.³⁰ His thought-process appears to be rational and logical: he analyses his current position, his former aspiration, and his new goal systematically. However, the reference to Jude's 'old fancy', remind us that he is not logical by nature. A more completely rational evaluation would show Jude that his new goal is equally futile for one of his social and financial position, and that the new idea—however logically he might phrase its

²⁹ *JO* 133.

³⁰ Parallels might be drawn between Jude's compassion for birds and mankind and Luke 12: 24: 'Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have store-house nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than fowls?'

justification—is nothing more than another romantic notion dreamed up by a man who desperately needs an objective to inspire and sustain him.

Nonetheless, it is a restorative vision that Jude takes very seriously, though he approaches it with the same romanticism with which he had viewed his Christminster dream. On discovering that the cathedral in Melchester is undergoing restoration, Jude takes this as a sign that the path he has chosen is the right one: ‘It seemed to him, full of the superstitions of his beliefs, that this was an exercise of forethought on the part of a ruling Power, that he might find plenty to do in the art he practised while waiting for a call to higher labours.’³¹ Again, Jude’s imagination nourishes his ambition. The ironic comment that Jude was ‘full of the superstitions of his beliefs’ is made by the narrative voice and not by Jude himself who, at this point, genuinely considers himself a believer. Indeed, following Sue’s suggestion that she rearrange his New Testament by ‘cutting up all the Epistles and Gospels into separate *brochures*, and re-arranging them in chronological order as written’ (emphasis in original), Jude feels a ‘sense of sacrilege’.³²

Jude later explains the foundations of his religious belief to Sue, who is disappointed that he does not share in her forceful scepticism. Jude’s belief is based on trust because there is not enough time in the short human life to work everything out, as he puts it, in ‘Euclid problems’. He needed to make a decision one way or the other, particularly in the light of his ambition to be a curate; therefore, he chose to believe in Christianity:

‘I won’t disturb your convictions—I really won’t!’ she went on soothingly, for now he was rather more ruffled than she. ‘But I did want and long to ennoble some man to high aims; and when I saw you, and knew you wanted to be my comrade, I—shall I confess it?—thought that man might be you. But you take so much tradition on trust that I don’t know what to say.’

‘Well, dear; I suppose one must take some things on trust. Life isn’t long enough to work out everything in Euclid problems before you believe it. I take Christianity.’

‘Well, perhaps you might take something worse.’

³¹ JO 135-6.

³² JO 157.

‘Indeed I might. Perhaps I have done so.’ He thought of Arabella.³³

By recalling his earlier faith in Arabella, Jude shows that he is not irrevocably committed to any position he chooses to take, and that he recognises such positions may turn out to be mistakes. But Jude will, for now, take Christianity ‘on trust’, as Sue cynically observes.

Jude’s argument points to one of the dilemmas at the heart of the debate over agnosticism. Though rationality might be the ideal, most people simply do not have the time to work systematically through matters of, for instance, belief in God. Indeed, scientific convictions are—no less than religious convictions—matters of faith for the majority who cannot work everything out from first principles. Even so, the stance of scepticism is unsatisfying. For some, including Jude, there comes a time when it is inappropriate to continue in a state of eternal doubt, and he must either resolve to give up questioning or choose a side of the debate. It is a given fact that it is impossible to discover ultimate truths; therefore, it is just as satisfactory to situate oneself as a believer as it is a non-believer. The step that separates Jude’s philosophy from nineteenth-century agnosticism is that, for the nineteenth-century agnostics, it was unacceptable to take logically unproveable things on trust, and to commit oneself to something that cannot be proven would undermine their rational principles. But it is necessary for Jude to answer for himself the question of belief in order to pursue his theological goal—a goal which he needs to give his life purpose.

Jude can pride himself on his intellectual consistency. In each situation, after considering the options as systematically as is realistic, given the restraints of time, he makes his decision based on what he has rationalised. But every decision requires, at some stage, a leap of faith. After hearing about Christminster, Jude seeks it out, researches it by speaking to a knowledgeable carter, and is then required to make a choice: should he place his faith in Christminster or should he turn his back on it? In such situations the final step is not logical, but it would have been equally illogical to turn his back on Christminster or

³³ *JO* 158.

to disavow Christianity, and so Jude takes whichever position will fulfil his need for an admirable goal that will give his life meaning.

In 1896, almost contemporary with (though slightly later than) *Jude the Obscure*, William James (brother of Henry), the American philosopher and psychologist, and one of the founding fathers of Pragmatism, set out his theory of the ‘will to believe’, which proposed a justification of faith that was, in essence, very similar to that asserted by Jude. James argued that in the matter of religion, to believe or not to believe is a ‘momentous decision’; in other words, it is a decision in which by choosing one path, the individual will gain, and by choosing the other, he will lose—an hypothesis loosely based on Pascal’s Wager.³⁴ James also argued that it is a ‘forced decision’, meaning that whilst remaining sceptical is justified, it is not necessarily a better option: ‘although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively choose to disbelieve... Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk.’ (emphasis in original)³⁵ Jude’s risk is that if he does not believe in God, he will be without ambition and have nothing ‘to cling on’ to. Perhaps in another class, Jude would have been able to remain a sceptic; but as a poor man, he is constantly forced to make decisions based upon the real situations he finds himself in. The chance to make something of his life, albeit as a ‘humble curate’, presents itself and Jude does not have the luxury of time and money to spend on investigating the many lines of reasoning. So, he chooses—indeed, needs to choose—to desist from the endless questioning and problem-solving, and pragmatically ‘take Christianity’.

The first instance in which Jude’s Christian beliefs are tested is when Sue confides in him her ‘physical objection’ to her new husband and asks of herself, ‘Ought she to try to overcome her pruderies?’: ‘Jude threw a troubled look at her. He said, looking away: “It

³⁴ Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) argued that, even assuming that God’s existence is unlikely, the potential benefits of believing in him (that is, eternal rewards in Heaven) far outweigh the potential risks of not believing (that is, eternal punishment), and, therefore, it is rational to ‘bet’ on theism. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées: And Other Writings*, trans. by Honor Levi and ed. with an intro. and notes by Anthony Levi (World’s Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁵ William James, ‘The Will to Believe’, in id., *Selected Papers on Philosophy* (1896; London: Dent, 1917), 99-124 (120).

would be just one of those cases in which my experiences go contrary to my dogmas. Speaking as an order-loving man—which I hope I am, though I fear I am not—I should say yes. Speaking from experience and unbiased nature, I should say no...”³⁶ Jude begins to be aware, here, that the Christian moral order, with which he had hoped he would be in sympathy, does not fit in all cases. He is incapable of being an unbiased and critical observer, but is wise enough to realise this. This moment is the start of Jude’s gradual awakening to his natural aversion to dogmatism—an aversion that has always existed but that Jude had not previously recognised because he had not been tested. His response is to begin to reassess his position as a potential Churchman. Eventually, his increasing desire for Sue becomes so great that he can no longer sincerely dismiss it, and he recognises that this desire is incompatible with his professed religion: “Those earnest men he read of, the saints, whom Sue, with gentle irreverence, called his demi-gods would have shunned such encounters if they doubted their own strength. But he could not. He might fast and pray during the whole interval, but the human was more powerful in him than the Divine.”³⁷ It is not long before he has scrutinised the inconsistency between what the Church dictates and what the human naturally feels, and he then admits in a nocturnal exchange with Sue that he must leave his pious ambition behind:

‘...I know you, with your religious doctrines, think that a married woman in trouble of a kind like mine commits a mortal sin in making a man the confidant of it, as I did you. I wish I hadn’t, now!’

‘Don’t wish it, dear,’ he said. ‘That may have been my view; but my doctrines and I begin to part company.’

‘I knew it—I knew it! And that’s why I vowed I wouldn’t disturb your beliefs. But—I am *so glad* to see you!—and, O, I didn’t mean to see you again, now the last tie between us, Aunt Drusilla, is dead!’

Jude seized her hand and kissed it. ‘There is a stronger one left!’ he said. ‘I’ll never care about my doctrines or my religion any more! Let them go!...’³⁸

In what appears to be a simple outburst of passion, Jude, here, starts to rewrite his own rule book. His disavowal of religion is not spontaneous decision, but an awakening to a

³⁶ JO 221.

³⁷ JO 217.

³⁸ JO 225-6.

loss of faith in established moral dogma. Moreover, his decision is not based on hard logic: this move to unbelief is an emotional reaction to the situation he finds himself in, but it is nevertheless a step that is worked out with some recourse to rationality. In as much as Jude finds himself unable to live up to the standards of the Church, the Church equally falls short of meeting his. Jude had 'take[n] Christianity' as a means by which he might live an altruistic life, showing compassion for his fellow creatures; but the Church does not appear to work on these principles nor to recognise or care about the natural instincts of its followers. It is, therefore, not for him.

In an almost ritualistic act, Jude decides to burn all of the books that had been the source and endorsement of everything he had previously believed. Jude is comically portrayed carrying out this ritual with a demon-like three-pronged fork (perhaps Hardy's devious attempt to ensure the Grundyists would be thoroughly scandalised). Jude's decision to reject Christianity is not to do with his doubts with regard to God at this stage, but because of the incompatibility of his natural inclinations with the obligations of a commitment to the Church. He disavows dogma, reclaims his autonomy, and hopes to be able to live without concerning himself with accepted moral codes:

At dusk that evening he went into the garden and dug a shallow hole, to which he brought out all the theological and ethical works that he possessed, and had stored here [in his aunt's house]. He knew that, in this country of true believers, most of them were not saleable at a much higher price than waste-paper value, and preferred to get rid of them in his own way, even if he should sacrifice a little money to the sentiment of thus destroying them. Lighting some loose pamphlets to begin with, he cut the volumes into pieces as well as he could, and with a three-pronged fork shook them over the flames. They kindled, and lighted up the back of the house, the pigsty, and his own face, till they were more or less consumed...

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning before the leaves, covers, and binding of Jeremy Taylor, Butler, Doddridge, Paley, Pusey, Newman, and the rest had gone to ashes; but the night was quiet, and as he turned and turned the paper shreds with the fork, the sense of being no longer a hypocrite to himself afforded his mind a relief which gave him calm. He might go on believing as before, but he professed nothing, and no longer owned and exhibited engines of faith which, as their proprietor, he might naturally be supposed to exercise on himself first of all.³⁹

³⁹ JO 228-9.

The act is liberating. By destroying the books in this way, Jude symbolically frees himself from the values and beliefs that had accumulated in his mind through his studies. He is, thus, almost fully returned to the pre-ideological position that he had occupied initially. He realises that he has wrongly allowed himself to perceive authority where there was really none. The problem with taking values from the world around you, whether from books, other people or society in general, is that these values will not necessarily be consistent with those you might more naturally develop. Through Jude, Hardy offered an alternative, a more authentic system whereby principles are personal. As will be shown, however, while Jude's new position may be the ideal, it is incompatible and unfeasible in a society that has not—and cannot—do the same.

Even those who are supposedly the most liberal cannot tolerate Jude's seemingly amoral principles. When Jude moves to Aldbrickham he joins the Artizans' Mutual Improvement Society, a group of working men with diverse philosophies, but, it turns out, fairly fixed moral principles. At first, though, the group appears to be just the thing that Jude needs: they have a curiosity for intellectualism but are untrained, and Jude can guide them in the right way to approach their reading:

Fawley had still a pretty zeal in the cause of education, and, as was natural with his experiences, he was active in furthering 'equality of opportunity' by any humble means open to him. He had joined an Artizans' Mutual Improvement Society established in the town about the time of his arrival there; its members being young men of all creeds and denominations, including Churchmen, Congregationalists, Baptists, Unitarians, Positivists, and others—Agnostics had scarcely been heard of at this time—their one common wish to enlarge their minds forming a sufficiently close bond of union. The subscription was small, and the room homely; and Jude's activity, uncustomary acquirements, and above all, singular intuition on what to read and how to set about it—begotten of his years of struggle against malignant stars—had led to his being placed on the committee.⁴⁰

But, sadly, this group who claim to share the 'common wish to enlarge their minds' is insufficiently enlightened to accept Jude's uncommon living situation: Jude is compelled to resign his position on the committee following an ostensibly undirected comment

⁴⁰ *JO* 319-20.

regarding the group's 'common standard of *conduct*' (emphasis in original).⁴¹ Hardy's emphasis on the word 'conduct' suggests that, while the members of the Society are open to enlarging their minds in the abstract, and pleased to be led by Jude's 'singular intuition' in determining their reading material, their minds remain closed as regards morality and real life. As previously discussed, Hardy carefully drew attention to the fact that the action of the novel takes place before agnosticism had properly been heard of (so, presumably, in the mid-1870s or earlier). The word 'scarcely' suggests that agnosticism exists, but is not widely spread. We might assume, then, that at the time the novel was set it was still a concept restricted to intellectual debate and had not filtered down to the class of men who would have made up a group such as this. Indeed, the Society sounds remarkably like a working-man's version of the Metaphysical Society of which Huxley was a member in 1869 when he coined the word 'agnostic'. Huxley's Society met nine times a year for over a decade to discuss philosophy and religion, and, Lightman explains, 'Every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there, and expressed itself with entire openness.'⁴² Members included orthodox, liberal, and left-wing Christians, and unbelievers of many types, atheists, pantheists, materialists, positivists and idealists. This comparison between the Artizans' Mutual Improvement Society and the Metaphysical Society underlines the fact that liberal thinking was a luxury for men who could afford to lead an intellectual life. Without the need to be concerned about public image and reputation to make a living, the men in Huxley's Society could exhibit their unbelief more freely than the Artizans. Of course, Hardy himself had felt similar restrictions, spending much of his career treading carefully so as not to offend the public upon whom he relied to make a living.

Jude's final vestiges of respect for the Church are dispersed when the church in which he had been contracted to repaint the Ten Commandments dismisses him on account of his supposedly immoral relationship with Sue. Jude rethinks his principles, refusing to live by society's strictures at the expense of his intellectual integrity carrying this

⁴¹ JO 320.

⁴² Lightman, *Origins of Agnosticism*, 11.

refusal into practical life as well as intellectual by vowing never to take any more ecclesiastical work:

His curious and sudden antipathy to ecclesiastical work, both episcopal and nonconformist, which had risen in him when suffering under a smarting sense of misconception, remained with him in cold blood, less from any fear of renewed censure than from an ultra-conscientiousness which would not allow him to seek a living out of those who would disapprove of his ways, also, too, from a sense of inconsistency between his former dogmas and his present practice, hardly a shred of the beliefs with which he had first gone up to Christminster now remaining with him.⁴³

Jude must start again. He attempts to describe the viewpoint he has arrived at through the process of rejecting all the 'social formulas' by which he has endeavoured to abide but which have ultimately turned out to be flawed:

I am in a chaos of principles—groping in the dark—acting by instinct and not after example. Eight or nine years ago when I came here [Christminster] first, I had a neat stock of fixed opinions, but they dropped away one by one; and the further I get the less sure I am. I doubt if I have anything more for my present rule of life than following inclinations which do me and nobody else any harm, and actually give pleasure to those I love best... I perceive there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas; what it is can only be discovered by men or women with greater insight than mine,—if, indeed, they ever discover it—at least in our time. "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life?—and who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?"⁴⁴

In the manuscript, Jude's doubt is not about his 'present rule of life', but whether he is 'even a Christian', and it is surprising that Hardy replaced the more controversial statement (to do with unbelief) with one that was less controversial for the volume version.⁴⁵

Typically the move would have been the other direction. Originally, then, Jude was simply to have expressed doubt in the Church. In re-visiting the novel, Hardy had Jude attempt to describe an alternative position, rather than simply negating the position he formally held. For Jude merely to disavow his allegiance to Christianity would have been too simplistic and would have left his world without meaning. It was necessary for him to have properly

⁴³ *JO* 325-6.

⁴⁴ *JO* 345.

⁴⁵ Ingham, 'Explanatory Notes', *JO* 448, note to *JO* 345.

considered alternatives to his philosophical standpoint. The 1912-Jude is more intellectual than his 1895 counterpart, and is a more suitable culmination of Hardy's experiments with his agnostic heroes. It is significant that Jude does not attempt to give a label to his 'present rule of life': he makes a modest claim for a moral and ethical life, echoing Hardy's own feelings that to append a label to one's thoughts is to step too close to absolutism.

Jude's diminishing social ambitions—an exchange of altruism for the more modest principle of loving-kindness—underlines the incompatibility of his optimistic liberalism with society's rigidity. But loving-kindness can only work reciprocally, and eventually society erodes Jude's ambitions even further as he comes to realise, through Sue's breakdown, that the pressure to live in opposition to a society that cannot rethink its rules is too intense to be born by anyone who does not naturally occupy the same nebulous position as himself. Mr. Phillotson, Jude's old schoolmaster, attempts to move outside of society's strictures, but finds himself unable to maintain the position for long. When Sue asks to be freed from their marriage, Phillotson is compelled to reassess his moral principles and obligations, and finds that, while he has thus far lived his life by an essentially Christian ethic, when this ethic is tested by Sue's utter wretchedness, he is unable to uphold it conscientiously without committing a cruelty that he intuitively finds morally wrong. He explains this rationale to his friend, Gillingham:

I shall let her go; with him certainly, if she wishes. I know I may be wrong—I know I can't logically, or religiously, defend my concession to such a wish of hers; or harmonize it with the doctrines I was brought up in. Only I know one thing: something within me tells me I am doing wrong in refusing her. I, like other men, profess to hold that if a husband gets such a so-called preposterous request from his wife, the only course that can possibly be regarded as right and proper and honourable in him is to refuse it, and put her virtuously under lock and key, and murder her lover perhaps. But is that essentially right, and proper, and honourable, or is it contemptibly mean and selfish? I don't profess to decide. I simply am going to act by instinct, and let principles take care of themselves. If a person who has blindly walked into a quagmire cries for help, I am inclined to give it, if possible.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ JO 241.

Phillotson's emphasis on instinct and his decision to 'let principles take care of themselves' is strongly reminiscent of Jude's assertion that he is 'in chaos of principles—groping in the dark—acting by instinct and not after example', and his declaration that his rule of life is nothing more than to follow 'inclinations which do [him] and nobody else any harm.' But Phillotson sees his decision as a disavowal of any philosophical standpoint ('O', he declares, 'I am not going to be a philosopher any longer. I only see what's under my eyes'), believing that his new code, prioritising instinct over dogma, is somewhat illegitimate.⁴⁷ For Jude, the disavowal of a permanent philosophical or moral position becomes a positive philosophical position in itself. Because Phillotson does not hold that intuition—which he calls 'crude loving-kindness'—can be a legitimate position, he is able to ignore it without a sense of hypocrisy when, ignoring what might be right or wrong for her, he agrees to take Sue back. Ultimately, Phillotson is compelled—through financial strain and his desire for Sue—to bow to social opinion: 'To indulge one's instinctive and uncontrolled sense of justice and right, was not, he had found, permitted with impunity in an old civilisation like ours. It was necessary to act under an acquired and cultivated sense of the same, if you wished to enjoy an average share of comfort and honour; and to let crude loving-kindness take care of itself.'⁴⁸

Thus, both Phillotson and Jude realise that rationality can only go so far in working out the guiding principles for a moral life, and that at some stage it is necessary to make a decision based on a non-rational (as opposed to irrational) feeling. Jude, though, has so little regard for society that he is capable of maintaining this position: Phillotson is not. In juxtaposing these characters, Hardy suggested that a choice must be made between a comfortable life of hypocritically denying one's moral intuition and a tormented life of personal integrity. Choosing to live outside of society's moral standards is to choose to live outside of the protection social acceptance can offer.

⁴⁷ *JO* 242.

⁴⁸ *JO* 379.

Jude reaches the final stage in the trajectory of his philosophical development when Sue, superstitiously reacting to the deaths of their children, is convinced that she and Jude are being punished by an external force for their immorality. Jude is bitterly disappointed by his lover's reaction. Finding her in a church praying against her sins and determined to return to her 'proper' husband, Jude declares

You make me hate Christianity, or mysticism, or Sacerdotalism, or whatever it may be called, if it's that which has caused this deterioration in you. That a woman-poet, a woman-seer, a woman whose soul shone like a diamond—whom all the wise of the world would have been proud if, if they could have known you—should degrade herself like this! I am glad I had nothing to do with Divinity—damn glad—if it's going to ruin you in this way!⁴⁹

It is Sue's deterioration that finally compels Jude to make his decision regarding his faith in the Church: he tells her that her behaviour is 'unreasonable': 'You root out of me what little affection and reverence I had left in me for the church as an old acquaintance'.⁵⁰

Jude has reached another Jamesian 'momentous decision': he could continue in the state of unquestioning scepticism regarding religion that he has been in since abandoning his ambition to become a curate, but, Sue's emotional and intellectual collapse, caused by an obsessive belief in divine retribution, brings Jude to a point at which he feels compelled to define his position. In contrast with his first 'momentous decision', to subscribe to religion this time would be detrimental, involving acceptance that he and Sue were to blame for the deaths of their children. So, Jude declares his unbelief in the Church.

When he remarries Arabella, following Sue's religiously-motivated and feverish insistence that he ought to (although the re-marriage is not entirely motivated by Sue but by an alcohol-induced resignation to his lot), he scathingly declares to Arabella that the act 'is true religion! Ha—ha—ha!'⁵¹ For Jude, forcing devotees to commit acts that are contrary, even damaging, to their true natures is a 'true' characteristic of religion. He equates his personal demon, alcohol, with Sue's religious fervour, blaming their respective

⁴⁹ *JO* 369-70.

⁵⁰ *JO* 370.

⁵¹ *JO* 405.

remarriages on a 'form of intoxication [that] takes away the nobler vision': 'I was made drunk to do it', he explains, 'You were the same. I was gin-drunk; you were creed-drunk.'⁵² Jude's 'nobler vision' is his intuition, his instinct for what is right. Both alcohol and religion obscure that vision—the first by physically rendering the drinker unable to think, the second by mentally restricting what the thinker is permitted to think.

Sue is to Jude as Angel is to Tess. Indeed, the similarities between Sue and Angel are striking, both in the trajectories of their respective faiths and in their treatment of Jude and Tess. Sue, like Angel, opens Jude's mind to unbelief, but then collapses under the pressure of maintaining her own radical standpoint in the face of a huge moral shock (for Sue it is the supposed mercy-killing of her two children by Jude and Arabella's tormented son that brings about her collapse; for Angel it is Tess's confession). It is clear that Hardy painted both Angel and Sue as unexpectedly inimical forces in the lives of Jude and Tess, showing that rational thinking has to be based on experience and not upon books in order to be upheld (or reassessed) with integrity.

However, while Angel limited his application of rationality by founding his moral views on a school of thought that he had rejected for all other purposes, Sue is not, by nature, rational at all (though she has learned the theory of rationality and used it to dispose of theology temporarily). So, whereas Angel does realise (albeit too late) that his rationality could be extended to reassess morality, Sue finds it impossible to apply her theoretical rationality to real situations because she is impulsively drawn to irrationality. Katharine Rogers says of Sue that 'though brighter than either Jude or Phillotson, she is not more rational. She can think abstractly, but she lacks the ability to control her emotional impulses, to behave consistently and responsibly, to respect the rights and feelings of others.'⁵³ Jude, who is averse to inconsistency, is not deterred by this feature of Sue's personality, and continues to worship her. This is, of course, mainly because he loves her. But he is also aware that the inconsistencies that exist within institutions such as

⁵² *JO* 411.

⁵³ Rogers, 'Woman in Thomas Hardy', 254.

Christminster or the Church (as well as those evident in Arabella), are purposely upheld by the institutions themselves. Sue's inconsistencies are natural and uncontrollable: she is, as Jude points out, 'one lovely conundrum'.⁵⁴

Sue is a complicated mixture of rationality and emotion: she attempts to live by rational principles, by disavowing the Church, society and social laws, but repeatedly finds herself in situations in which these principles are tested and found wanting—at the Training School, in her marriage to Phillotson, and in her non-marriage to Jude. Her reactions are persistently irrational. Indeed, twice she is depicted literally throwing herself out of the situation, first into a river and then out of a window. This behaviour is, to some extent, similar to Jude's intuitive philosophical moves; but, where Jude applies logic as far as he can before quietly making a decision based on his instinct and his expectation of what that decision might entail, Sue leaps blindly away without thinking of where she might land. Hardy attributed Sue's behaviour to her gender, describing her as representative of 'the slight, pale, "bachelor" girl—the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing'.⁵⁵ According to the German reviewer to whom Hardy alludes in his 'Postscript', Sue 'was the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in her thousands every year—the woman of the feminist movement'.⁵⁶ It is perhaps understandable that a pioneer of this movement would as yet be unsteady, balanced precariously between the accepted limitations of femininity and the brave new world of female liberty. Thus, Sue—for all she can speak in a radical manner and believes that what she says is true—as a woman, still feels the weight of social expectation in a way that Jude does not, and so she is unable to realise the ideals of which she speaks so eloquently.

⁵⁴ *JO* 141.

⁵⁵ Hardy, 'Postscript', *JO* xxxviii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Jude recognises from very early on the inconsistencies in Sue's position. After missing the last train back to Melchester, Jude and Sue find themselves compelled to stay overnight at the home of a shepherd and his mother:

'I rather like this,' said Sue, while their entertainers were clearing away the dishes. 'Outside all laws except gravitation and germination.'

'You only think you like it; you don't. You are quite a product of civilization,' said Jude, a recollection of her engagement reviving his soreness a little.

'Indeed I am not, Jude. I like reading and all that; but I crave to get back to the life of my infancy, and its freedom.'

'Do you remember it so well? You seem to me to have nothing unconventional at all about you.'

'O, haven't I! You don't know what's inside me!'

'What?'

'The Ishmaelite.'

'An urban miss is what you are.'

She looked severe disagreement and turned away.⁵⁷

The Ishmaelite, who Sue claims to be, is a descendant of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. The term is usually understood to describe an outcast, the unfavoured son, one 'whose hand is against every man, and every man's hand against him.'⁵⁸ In contradicting Sue, Jude's judgment is astute. While Sue believes that she is outside of society, in fact only her abstract thoughts achieve this liberation, as it is her instinct to be rigidly conventional. While Sue proclaims her dissatisfaction with society and religion in the first half of the novel, this intellectual freedom is easily quashed when she attempts to live by these proclaimed standards and finds that the practice is far more complicated than the theory. She finally resigns herself to a life of torturous convention.

Many of the novel's most perceptive assessments of society are, however, spoken by Sue, making her emotional and intellectual deterioration more poignant. For example, following her marriage to Phillotson, Sue comments on the discrepancy between the way society views her as his wife and the way in which she actually feels: ' "I have been thinking," she continued, still in the tone of one brimful of feeling, "that the social moulds

⁵⁷ JO 143-4.

⁵⁸ OED online edition: 'Ishmael' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50121769>>, 13 Jul. 2006. See also Genesis 14: 12.

civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns.”⁵⁹ In this comparison, we are alerted to the human tendency to attempt to make sense of his world, to look for and impose patterns and meaning. Sue shrewdly notes that such systems are artificial and should be viewed as such in order to avoid fundamental misunderstandings concerning individual and social obligation. As Jude observes, Sue is unable to carry her abstract contemplations of the universe through into the real world: ‘Sue’s logic was extraordinarily compounded, and seemed to maintain that before a thing was done it might be right to do, but that being done it became wrong; or, in other words, that things which were right in theory were wrong in practice’.⁶⁰ Jude rebukes her for her inconsistency: ‘under the affectation of independent views you are as enslaved to the social code as any woman I know!’⁶¹ The essential (and ultimately destructive) dichotomy of Sue’s character is revealed in her assessment of the world: where she claims to be ‘thinking’, the narrator is careful to point out that she is still ‘feeling’. Despite the sophistication of her thoughts and her apparent rationality, her emotions are always under the surface. Hardy does not make a case for subduing one with the other—that is, making a choice between rationality and irrationality—but does suggest that some kind of reconciliatory position needs to be located, one that he later referred to as ‘non-rationality’.⁶²

Sue’s strength is shattered by her children’s deaths, causing a collapse that today would be recognised as a nervous breakdown. Jude helplessly observes his lover’s decline, comparing what she once was capable of being with what she becomes:

Vague and quaint imaginings had haunted Sue in the days when her intellect scintillated like a star, that the world resembled a stanza or melody composed in a dream; it was wonderfully excellent to the half-aroused intelligence, but hopelessly absurd at the full waking; that the First Cause worked automatically like a somnambulist, and not reflectively like a sage; that at the framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a

⁵⁹ *JO* 215.

⁶⁰ *JO* 229.

⁶¹ *JO* 253.

⁶² *LW* 332.

development of emotional perceptiveness among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity. But affliction makes opposing forces loom anthropomorphous; and those ideas were now exchanged for a sense of Jude and herself fleeing from a persecutor.

‘We must conform!’ she said mournfully. ‘All the ancient wrath of Power above us has been vented upon us, His poor creatures, and we must submit. There is no choice. We must. It is no use fighting against God!’

‘It is only against man and senseless circumstance,’ said Jude.

‘True!’ she murmured. ‘What have I been thinking of! I am getting as superstitious as a savage! . . . But whoever or whatever our foe may be, I am cowed into submission.’⁶³

That the world is an absurd place, its existence an accident, and that humans are bound to struggle through their lives because their creator had never considered that they would reach a level of emotional development that would enable them to perceive the injustices about them is an idea that Hardy revisited often throughout his work. Many of his poems speculated about such a notion (as discussed in Chapter Seven). The phrase ‘vague and quaint imaginings’ echoes Hardy’s repeated claims that he was merely giving artistic expression to ‘impressions’ and ‘seemings’: they are fictions that perform the function of a philosophical explanation but which never claim to be true. Sue is able to frame these ideas eloquently before she is afflicted by the injustices about which she was previously so rational. The contrast between the reactions of Jude and Sue to their children’s deaths is stark; as Jude notes, they have traded philosophical positions by the close of the novel. Jude is able to maintain his sense of rationality, seeing that they are not being persecuted and that they cannot buy their way into the favour of their persecutor through reconciliatory acts of supposed morality: the simple fact is that they are living in a world in which suffering and injustice exists.

Sue’s ‘momentous decision’ is to believe in an anthropomorphic First Cause because she believes that suffering is punishment: not to believe might risk further torment and would make her children’s deaths pointless. Sue suffers this collapse of ideals not only because of the limitations of gender, but also because her philosophy was not derived, as Jude’s was, from need or experience. Sue’s mind was opened by reading and by the

⁶³ JO 361.

informal education offered her by the university undergraduate, whereas Jude's mind was opened through his own experience and contemplation, his books were rejected as of no use to him in the real world.

With *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy showed the impossibility of the human predicament.

Intellectually unformed and unbiased, Jude was the ideal man through which to investigate possible schools of thought, theological and philosophical, that might provide meaning in an otherwise unbearable life. Jude rests his ambitions in turn on intellectualism, religion, altruism and, finally, the more modest principle of loving-kindness. None of these proves viable. The tragedy of the novel is unrelenting: there is no glimpse of a sustainable system.

Jude's life ends in an empty room, neglected by Arabella who has already started to entice the man we must assume will be her next husband. (Ironically, her target is Physician Vilbert, the doctor who cheated Jude into recommending spurious medicines in return for language books that he never provided, and later wrongly diagnosed Arabella's feigned pregnancy.) As Jude lies on his deathbed, calling deliriously and in vain for water from both Sue and Arabella, he recites the following lines from Job 3:

'Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.'

('Hurrah!')

'Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein.'

('Hurrah!')

'Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? . . . For now should I have lain still and been quiet. I should have slept: then had I been at rest!

('Hurrah!')

*'There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor. . . . The small and the great are there; and the servant is free from his master. Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul?'*⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Job 3: 3, 4, 11, 13, 18-20.

These lines do not appear in the manuscript of *Jude*, but were appended in 1895, and are the last of several allusions to the Book of Job. Hardy clearly wished to draw attention to the similarities between Job and Jude—both ever-suffering and maltreated by society and circumstance—and, through this comparison, to force the question of unjust suffering. It is ironic that Hardy put lines from a religious text into the mouth of a professed unbeliever. Jude's last words are Job's first lament, following the destruction of his livelihood, the deaths of his children and the affliction of disease. (These are stages through which Jude passes in the novel: first, he is stripped of his ambitions, then his children die, and finally he grows weak with an illness that results in his death). In the Book of Job, the lament provides the introduction for the speeches of Job's friends who insist that Job should curse God and die, advice to which Job never succumbs and, indeed, he is ultimately greatly rewarded for his suffering and unswerving devotion to God.⁶⁵ The words taken from Job are about despair, but are uttered by Jude without Job's sustaining belief in God. The reader is encouraged, like Job's advisors, to question the justification for such suffering: God is not permitted to redeem himself—nor to prove he exists—in *Jude the Obscure*.

Exultant interjections from the crowd below the window intrude upon Jude's dying speech, voices that are at absolute variance with the lament, and each 'Hurrah!' appears to be a mocking affirmation that he is right to regret his birth. The calls are from a jubilant crowd celebrating Remembrance Day (the Christminster version of Oxford's *Encaenia*). The juxtaposition of religion on the one hand (in Jude's lament) and intellectualism and society on the other (represented by the jubilant Christminster crowd) confirms that Jude is categorically and eternally outside of both of those worlds.

Jude is an admirable man: he does no harm and is willing to modify his beliefs and his dreams in a vain attempt to satisfy his innately human need to find something admirable 'to cling on' to. His viewpoints are never chosen at random or adopted because his temperament happens to lead him in a certain direction, but are the outcome of this

⁶⁵ For his constant devotion, God rewards Job with 'twice as much as he had before' and 'blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning.' (Job 42: 10, 12).

human need, practical exigency and serious thought. Equally, he does not disavow any position without rational motivation. Jude eventually chooses to live agnostically, in Hardy's non-rational sense of the word, but even that does not work. The relentless tragedy of the novel demonstrates Hardy's conviction that the human predicament of suffering is unavoidable.

Among Hardy's notes is a cutting from the reviews section of the *Record* on 10 March 1905 (a decade after Hardy stopped publishing prose fiction) appraising an article by Dr. William Barry entitled 'Agnosticism and National Decay', which boldly states in its opening line that '[i]gnorance of God lies at the root of social anarchy.'⁶⁶ Barry lays the blame for the collapse of society at the feet of the agnostics, particularly Huxley and Spencer. Their ideas, he argued, had given too much freedom to the people, who were now content to live immorally because they no longer feared the vigilant eye of God and the Church. For Hardy, though, the root of the problem was not that people were living without a dogmatic system of morality; rather, it was a result of the clash between the two systems—or, more precisely, between system and non-system. Jude's principle of loving-kindness is too loose a moral code for a society that demands doctrinal discipline, and he is the only person who is willing to risk ignoring those demands. But loving-kindness cannot exist in isolation: with no one to reciprocate, the principle falls apart. Jude's tragedy, as he realises, stems from the fact that 'world [wa]s not illuminated enough for such experiments as' his. Though he may have identified that loving-kindness could provide the most comfortable and feasible rule to live by, he alone recognises its worth.

⁶⁶ *LN* ii 2289. Anon, 'Magazines and Reviews for March', *Record*, 10 Mar. 1905, 226. Björk notes that Hardy has dated the cutting 14 March 1905, which probably refers to the date he read the article. (*LN* ii 2289n.)

CHAPTER SEVEN

'ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩΙ ΘΕΩΙ: ADDRESSING THE UNKNOWN IN HARDY'S POETRY

In the 1901 'Preface' to *Poems of the Past and the Present*, Hardy proposed that poetry might light the way to a proper understanding of the world:

Of the subject matter of this volume – even that which is in other than narrative form – much is dramatic or impersonative even when not explicitly so. Moreover, the portion which may be regarded as individual comprises 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. 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.¹

Poetry, Hardy believed, provided a suitable form in which to explore these loose ideas not *despite* its lack of cohesion and harmony but *because* of it. The valuation of the '[u]nadjusted impressions', 'series of feelings' and the 'diverse readings' echoes the prefaces to *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. However, whereas the author had decided in those two novels on the impossibility of locating a philosophical standpoint, he suggests in the 'Preface' to these poems that this manner of 'humbly' recording the 'impressions' may be the 'road to a true philosophy of life.' As the relevant prefaces to *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* were written in 1895 and 1912, respectively (that is, either side of the 'Preface' to *Poems of the Past and the Present*), it seems likely that the view expressed was not one Hardy eventually arrived at in relation to literary writing *per se*. He saw, in poetry, a special capacity to speak to impressions, moods and feelings, and a special freedom from the constraints of 'cohesive thought'. The function of the novelist must be, in some degree, to adjust the impressions in the service of the story, and, though he can avoid dogmatism of ideas, he cannot avoid a degree of formal 'harmonising'. The poet, on the other hand, gathers and records phenomena and develops these into concentrated vignettes which may

¹ Thomas Hardy, 'Poems of the Past and the Present: Preface', in Peter Widdowson (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry and Non-Fictional Prose* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 220-1 (221).

or may not lead to enlightenment, but certainly do not appear as coherent as they might in a novel.

Poetry, as Hardy saw it, opened up opportunities for experimentation that the novel simply could not offer. His experience of publishing fictional prose was that his readers were peculiarly unable to rest with the impressionism he wanted to show: they wanted more, although perhaps with some justification considering the ambiguous prefaces in which he at once disclaims intention and announces it. In the poems, Hardy was able to alter the voices of the narrators from poem to poem to achieve quite different effects, for example, to represent passing or purely circumstantial states of feeling. In poems such as 'Hap' or 'A Sign-Seeker', the first person creates a dramatic intimacy that the novel's third person narration, with occasional commentary by an implied author, does not pretend to. Indeed, the narrating voice in Hardy's fiction is rarely one with which the reader has much sympathy. In other poems (for example, 'Fragment', 'Nature's Questioning' or 'A Plaint to Man'), the voice of doubt or dissent comes from a character and the speaker plays the part of the innocent questioner. In 'The Bedridden Peasant', the poet takes on the persona of the peasant, so Hardy is absolved from direct responsibility for the expressions of complaint. The brevity and, therefore, the quantity of the poems meant that Hardy was much freer to experiment without undermining the authority of the texts—and, indeed, without committing himself. The miscellany of philosophical options made available through this change in genre meant that Hardy could play more freely with the philosophy towards which he appeared tentatively to have been heading throughout his career as a novelist, that of a non-prescriptive agnosticism in which nothing is absolutely adhered to, but—more importantly for Hardy—nothing is rejected.

By and large, Hardy does not shy away from articulating his criticism of God, his scepticism or his outright unbelief. This might seem a surprising development for a writer who, as we know, was skilled in his fiction and prose writings at eluding those who sought to label his religious and philosophical views. In poems such as 'Hap', 'A Sign-Seeker', 'The

Impercipient' and 'The Problem', he sets forth controversial opinions. 'A Plaint to Man' and 'God's Funeral' treat the matter of unbelief with even less delicacy. However, his treatment of religious belief was as 'diverse' as he claimed in the 1901 'Preface', approaching the subject from a variety of perspectives in a variety of 'moods' and forms, and what becomes clear to the reader seeking a definitive answer to the question of where Hardy stood in the matter of unbelief is that, though there are recurrent themes and even metaphysical hypotheses, there is still no single philosophy being prosecuted. As a consequence, Hardy's selections of poetry do not have the philosophical coherence, or even the philosophical focus, of, say, Yeats. Rather, they need to be read, as he encouraged, as a grouping together of quite distinct moods and impressions.

In his study of 'Hap' and some other of Hardy's poems of epistemological enquiry, Francis L. Kunkel suggests that the philosophical ideas of 'Hap' might be used to understand something of the others:

To "Crass Casualty" and the "purlind Doomsters," not God, is attributed the overwhelming presence of sorrow and pain in this bleak world. The implication that God is subject to these unconscious and unintelligent impulses in cosmic affairs explains the creator's inability to direct his work to any rational end in "New Year's Eve."²

Kunkel is looking for more coherence than is there to be found. Hardy's philosophy, as was clear from the novels and grows more so in the poetry, was not unitary, and the most appropriate and useful approach is to read his poems as distinct meditations without any overarching agenda.

Partly because so few of the poems are dated (volume publication dates not, of course, being a reliable indication of the date of composition) and partly because the poems treat the subject in so many different ways, it is not possible to trace any kind of philosophical trajectory or to locate a pattern of thought working through the poems as a

² Francis L. Kunkel, 'The Two Dominant Views of God in Modern Poetry', in Sebastian A Matczak (ed.), *God in Contemporary Thought: A Philosophical Perspective* (Philosophical Questions Series, 10; Jamaica, NY: Learned Publications, 1977), 907-35 (924).

whole. In addition, the ‘agnostic lyrics’, to borrow Jon Roberts’s phrase, are too numerous to be exhaustively discussed here.³ This chapter therefore looks at a selection of poems, examining the ‘feelings and fancies’ and the ‘diverse readings’ not according to chronology or even according to the volumes in which they appeared, but in groups loosely defined by the imaginative approaches taken with respect to metaphysical or epistemological matters. These groups are as follows: poems of complaint (‘Hap’ and ‘The Bedridden Peasant’); poems offering an explanation for suffering (‘Nature’s Questioning’, ‘Doom and She’ and ‘Fragment’); poems exploring unbelief (‘Ἀγνωστῶι Θεῶι’, ‘A Sign-Seeker’, ‘The Problem’ and ‘The Impercipient’). Finally, I will discuss ‘A Plaint to Man’ and consider the provocative claims made in that poem—that God is an invention of man—a charge ironically articulated, as Hardy imagines it, by God himself. Where individual poems are discussed in some detail, the full text has been provided. In cases where parts of poems are used to make a comparative point, only the relevant lines are quoted.

As early as 1866, in his mid-twenties and not yet launched onto the literary stage, Hardy was already writing about the nature and existence of God. Not published until September 1898, in his first collection of poetry, *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, ‘Hap’ is the earliest example of Hardy’s agnostic poetry. It was written in the period during which, most biographers believe, his religious faith began to dwindle. It provides an apt starting point for an investigation into his poetic treatment of matters of religious belief, creation, suffering and morality.

Hap

IF but some vengeful god would call to me
 From up the sky, and laugh: ‘Thou suffering thing,
 Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
 That thy love’s loss is my hate’s profiting!’

³ Jon Roberts, ‘Mortal Projections: Thomas Hardy’s Dissolving Views of God’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 43-66 (45).

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
 Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
 Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
 Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
 And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
 - Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan....
 These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
 Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

1866⁴

The first of Hardy's poems of complaint, 'Hap' presents a speaker who expresses his wish that there existed a 'vengeful god' upon whom the blame for sorrow and misfortune might be placed. He explains that the existence of such a being, while it would not necessarily reduce the tears he has shed over a lost love would '[h]alf-ease...' him by providing an explanation that he is helplessly in the hands of 'a Powerfuller'. But no such being can be blamed. His suffering is simply bad luck, personified as 'purblind Doomsters', 'Crass Casualty' and 'Time'. Though the speaker repeatedly emphasises the role of chance in his fate, he does not conceal the bitterness he feels, and the poem exhibits some degree of incoherence on the question of a higher agency. While supposedly impartial, the 'Doomsters' might also, in the other definition of the word 'purblind', be only half-blind, and they seem to operate with a degree of bias, only ever causing him pain.⁵

Mimicking a Petrarchan sonnet, in its stanza form and rhyme scheme, 'Hap' is meticulously controlled by the poet. But the title and the opening 'If' work against the assuredness of the poem's structure, showing that there is a certain dichotomy between the subject matter of Hardy's sonnet and that of its traditional counterparts: Hardy has employed the sonnet form to contemplate metaphysical as opposed to romantic ideas. Lost love is only a pretext for addressing the higher question of a First Cause. Because of the form and (to a lesser extent) the content of the poem, a ghost of the lover's complaint

⁴ CP 4.

⁵ OED online edition: 'purblind, *a.*' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50192786>>, accessed 9 Jun. 2006.

lingers, echoing Hardy's recurring alignment of the faith in the lover with faith in the divine (discussed in Chapter Three). 'Love', according to Henry Knight in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 'is faith': the earthlier emotion of love appears to have been the clearest and most natural way for the sceptic to attempt to investigate and understand faith in the divine.⁶

The *OED* describes 'hap' as an archaic term, used principally in the seventeenth century, although it continued to be employed poetically up to the late nineteenth century. Its last recorded usage was in weekly paper *The Quiver* in May 1888.⁷ Hardy's 'Hap' would appear to be, therefore, one of the last published poetic usages of the word (although the reason that the *OED* does not list it as the latest may be that its publication date is significantly later than its composition date). There are at least four related layers of meaning of the word, and each of them can be applied to this poem with quite different effect. Its first meaning is simply '[c]hance or fortune (good or bad) that falls to any one; luck, lot': no value-judgment is implied in this sense of the word.⁸ The second meaning is more specific: an ('often...unfortunate') 'occurrence' or 'accident': in the case of Hardy's 'Hap', the unfortunate events encompass everything from the simple incidents and disappointments that cause human suffering to the creation of the world itself.⁹ Thirdly, a now obsolete sense of the word describes '[g]ood fortune, good luck; success, prosperity',¹⁰ an ironic meaning that shows not what *is*, but what might as easily have been ('These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown/Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.'). Finally, the word can be used in a poetic sense to refer to an 'absence of design or intent in relation to a particular event' or as the 'personified' 'cause or determiner of events.'¹¹ Of course, Hardy's 'Crass Casualty' and 'purblind Doomsters' are instances of such personification, and, in this sense, the title of the poem suggests particularly the production of human

⁶ *PBE* 212.

⁷ *OED* online edition: 'hap, n.1' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50102396>>, accessed 9 Jun. 2006.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

suffering. The use of the archaism serves to romanticise the poem, whilst also slightly obscuring its sense. This obscurity contributes to a mood of confusion and helplessness.

The speaker makes no attempt to universalise the suffering—‘call to *me*’; the ‘tears *I* shed’; ‘*my* pilgrimage’; this poem focuses on the suffering of an individual, not of mankind as a whole. However, rather than appearing self-interested, the exclusive use of the first person pronoun serves to create a heightened sense of personal tragedy: he is one man suffering alone—much simpler and more poignant than if the poem were about the inhabitants of the entire world. The speaker’s pain is at the forefront of the poem, undiluted and intense.

In the opening quatrain, the speaker uses the conditional ‘If’ to speculate as to the behaviour and motivation of a ‘vengeful god’, and by foregrounding the conditional in this way demonstrates a conviction that there is no such being. Direct speech dramatises the vengeful god’s justification for torturing the speaker. This imaginary monologue serves to emphasise the contrast between the god of the first stanza and the ‘purblind Doomsters’ of the third who, the speaker asserts, are the true agents of his suffering. Direct speech humanises the god, whereas Casualty and Time remain closer to abstractions, remote from man and without motive. But they are personified: they are doing things—obstructing, dicing, moaning. The repetition, rhyme and thematic balance of ‘thy’ and ‘my’ in lines three and four of the first quatrain—‘Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,/That thy love’s loss is my hate’s profiting!’—emphasised by the alteration in the rhythm caused by the stress on these syllables, shows both the connection and the disparity between the being and the speaker. Both god and man are capable of emotion: indeed, the emotion of one triggers the opposing sentiment in the other. Such emphasis on shared characteristics demonstrates the speaker’s need not simply to locate an agent behind his suffering, but, crucially, to attribute intent to this divine agency. This agency can only be placated if the speaker can find a motivation, and to do this the agent must have human characteristics and emotions.

The second quatrain concerns the solace (albeit an agonising one) that the existence of this 'vengeful god' would bring to the speaker, who would then be able to 'bear it, clench myself, and die.' The speaker somewhat melodramatically asserts that 'clench[ing]' and 'd[ying]' at the hands of this divine sadist would be preferable to the inexplicable suffering he now endures. The alliterative 's' of '[s]teeled by the sense' reinforces the connection between '[s]teel' and 'sense' underlining the strength that can be gained from 'sense'. So as not to undermine the level of suffering, he asserts that he would only be 'Half-eased' even with the knowledge of the vengeful god's existence. The capitalisation of 'Powerfuller'—noticeably avoided in the reference to 'god'—suggests a more specific agent and, therefore, a more credible target of blame. Matched with 'meted' in line eight, the word takes on some religious connotations (the conventional use of 'mete' being at that time predominantly biblical according to the *OED*¹²). However, these references are at best oblique, and, because the speaker is merely speculating, the Christian god is never directly implicated.

The final sextet firmly dismisses the notion of a 'vengeful god' with a sharp 'But not so', which momentarily alters the rhythm of the poem drawing attention to the definite negation of the possibility. He poses two questions: 'How is it joy lies slain,/And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?' These images are, of course, associated with life and death: joy is murdered and hope does not simply wither and die: it 'unblooms'. There is something distinctly unnatural about this image: its development is directly reversed—rather like a film in reverse as we would now see it—and images a direct reversal of hope into either hopelessness or despair, leaving not, as would a withered plant, a trace of its existence. The perpetrators of the attack on joy and the agents of the reversal of hope are 'Crass Casualty' and 'dicing Time'. Hardy sustains the plant metaphor for a while: 'Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain', showing that it is a mere chance blunder that renders man's aspirations hopeless. But that metaphor is then dropped. '[D]icing Time' gambles for

¹² *OED* online edition: 'mete, *v.*¹' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00307610>>, accessed 23 Jul. 2006.

man's happiness or sorrow, again emphasising that the root of suffering is accidental. As the speaker points out, happiness could have been created quite as easily and as arbitrarily as the sorrow that does exist. That 'Time'—an unrelenting force, far greater than man and absolutely outside of his control—is the dice player emphasises quite how vulnerable the human situation is. The long-anticipated reason for suffering is marked out from the rest of the poem by the surrounding hyphen and ellipsis. The hyphen, both visually and grammatically a stronger mark, alerts the reader to the important revelation, whereas the weaker ellipsis gives the effect of petering out, emphasising the helpless and eternal dilemma, and acting as an anticlimax: the answer is known, but there is nothing to be done. The speaker underlines the unconsciousness with which Casualty and Time operate by describing them as 'purblind.' The removal of sight is significant as it implies not only the physical sense, but also the ability to comprehend the effects of their actions. It also parodies the blindfolded figure of Justice in Roman mythology, undermining the supposed impartiality of Time and Casualty in contrast to that of Lady Justice. Thus, though the speaker refers to random chance, there is a part of him that still needs to allocate blame. Further, although Time and Casualty are personified, this is simply a poetic way of describing unfortunate events and facts of life; outside of the poetry, man is left with nothing to explain his misfortune apart from misfortune itself. That is the poem's dilemma: there is no one and nothing to blame.

Taken (narrowly) as a piece of reasoning in verse, 'Hap' is not quite satisfactory. Though the speaker denies the existence of 'some vengeful god', he does not entirely relinquish the possibility of any god at all, and having dismissed the idea of a divine being, the poet seems to reintroduce religion obliquely in the last lines of the poem: 'These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown/Blesses about my pilgrimage as pain.' The alliteration of 'pilgrimage' and 'pain' firmly links the two concepts together; so, despite avoiding any direct references to religion, this closing line implies the futility of a

‘pilgrimage’, presumably because the god in whose name a pilgrimage might be undertaken is absent (or nonexistent), and in his place there is nothing but time and accident.

This apparent unwillingness to abandon religion recurs throughout Hardy’s agnostic poetry. In later poems, the poet often presents a culpably unconscious creator, sometimes (but certainly not always) referred to as God, who ignores the plight of man while Chance or Doom or Time act as the instruments of human suffering (‘Doom and She’ or ‘Nature’s Questioning’). In other poetry, the speaker regrets his inability to believe (‘The Impercipient’) or places conditions on his belief (‘Αγνωστωι Θεωι’). Even poems that candidly deny the existence of God reintroduce religion in some way: for example, ‘The Problem’ highlights the usefulness of belief, and God’s is the voice of complaint in ‘A Plaint to Man’. Religion, for Hardy, was not to be absolutely dismissed: no matter how intense the scepticism, a ghost of the divine remains as a possibility.

‘The Bedridden Peasant (To an Unknowing God)’ is an ostensibly forgiving address to a god who cannot be blamed for the peasant’s suffering because he, like Doom in the earlier poem, ‘dost not know’ the pain he causes.¹³ Nonetheless, this is, like ‘Hap’, a poem of complaint. A sick peasant addresses God, who, he assumes, must be an ‘Unknowing God’, given that he does not alleviate the peasant’s pain. The speaker speculates on this failure to intervene, understanding that a creator is generally assumed to watch over his creation. He compares the creator to a father and the earth to a child: this father has delegated responsibility to Time and Chance. The sick peasant imagines that something must have occurred to divide God from man because were that not so nothing would stop God intervening to prevent man’s suffering. In short, he makes excuses for God. He then declares that because God does not or cannot see such things—much less causes them—he will continue to live as if there were a God who would be merciful if he were aware of pain.

¹³ CP 88 l.30.

The Bedridden Peasant
To an Unknowing God

MUCH wonder I – here long low-laid –
 That this dead wall should be
 Betwixt the Maker and the made,
 Between Thyself and me!

For, say one puts a child to nurse.
 He eyes it now and then
 To know if better it is, or worse,
 And if it mourn, and when.

But Thou, Lord, giv'st us men our day
 In helpless bondage thus
 To Time and Chance, and seem'st straightway
 To think no more of us!

That some disaster cleft Thy scheme
 And tore us wide apart,
 So that no cry can cross, I deem;
 For Thou art mild of heart,

And wouldst not shape and shut us in
 Where voice can not be heard:
 Plainly Thou meant'st that we should win
 Thy succour by a word.

Might but Thy sense flash down the skies
 Like man's from clime to clime,
 Thou wouldst not let me agonize
 Through my remaining time;

But, seeing how much Thy creatures bear –
 Lame, starved, or maimed, or blind –
 Wouldst heal the ills with quickest care
 Of me and all my kind.

Then, since Thou mak'st not these things be,
 But these things dost not know,
 I'll praise Thee as were shown to me
 The mercies Thou wouldst show!¹⁴

'The Bedridden Peasant' gently moves belief into the conditional mode (though not so explicitly as in, for example, 'Αγνωστῶι Θεῶι' or 'To Life'): the poem is specifically addressed 'To an Unknowing God' and the peasant agrees to continue worshipping this God only because he 'mak'st not these things be,/But these things dost not know'.

¹⁴ CP 88.

Following a simple pattern of eight cross-rhymed quatrains, alternating for the most part iambic tetrameter and trimeter, the form imitates a simple hymn or carol, befitting an unsophisticated peasant attempting to address God. This is one of many hymn-like poems in Hardy's collected works: 'Ἀγνώστῳ Θεῷ' and 'The Impercipient' also mimic the hymn form, holding scepticism within the traditional vehicle of praise in a manner that illustrates Hardy's reluctance to commit or eschew either position. The simplicity of 'The Bedridden Peasant' echoes the pattern in which children are taught to worship, reinforcing the peasant's final assertion that, despite his acute suffering, he will 'praise Thee as were shown to me'. The argument of the poem is, nonetheless, logical, and the simplicity of the syntax, rhyme and meter attest to the clarity of his perception.

The poem is more sceptical than the simple peasant's song appears. By taking on the persona of the peasant—a character so clearly different from his own—the poet gently ironises the simple but disillusioned faith of a believer. The effect of the poem is enhanced both by the peasant's obvious vulnerability as well as by Hardy's famous sympathy for the rural labouring classes. The language and symbolism of the poem mimic those of the suffering Christ. The peasant speaks of the 'dead wall' that exists between the 'Maker and the made', alluding to the Fall of Adam in Genesis 3. The poem also has echoes of the crucifixion ('Thou wouldst not let me agonize/Through my remaining time') and makes oblique references to Christ in the healing of the 'Lame, starved, or maimed, or blind' in the seventh stanza. Though his lowly stature and faith in God might echo Christ, the poem diverges from the Gospels because the peasant's faith is not placed in God's plan for human salvation, but is blind and based on learned doctrine rather than gratitude and awe at God's mercy. The poet gently undermines the peasant's devotion by juxtaposing the language and imagery of the cross with his simplicity, and emphasises that which is noticeably absent from the peasant's song, hope of salvation: 'I'll praise Thee as were shown to me/The mercies Thou wouldst show!' Though the poem makes allowances for

God, the conclusion of the poem is not really one of hope of resurrection, but suggests that God cannot show mercy.

'Nature's Questioning' is also a poem of complaint, but the complaint here is comparatively subdued and is interwoven with various explanations for the suffering. The poem provides a concise example of the philosophical divergence that might be witnessed throughout the canon of Hardy's poetry. As the title suggests, the poem gives a voice to the natural world, which communicates its unhappiness to the speaker and muses on its existence, purpose and, principally, on the nature of its creator. Various possibilities are offered, but the speaker ultimately admits, after hearing all that Nature has to say, that he has no understanding himself and bows out, leaving the world to tread its old path.

Nature's Questioning

WHEN I look forth at dawning, pool,
 Field, flock, and lonely tree,
 All seem to gaze at me
 Like chastened children sitting silent in a school;

Their faces dulled, constrained, and worn,
 As though the master's ways
 Through the long teaching days
 Had cowed them till their early zest was overborne.

Upon them stirs in lippings mere
 (As if once clear in call,
 But now scarce breathed at all) –
 'We wonder, ever wonder, why we find us here!

'Has some Vast Imbecility,
 Mighty to build and blend,
 But impotent to tend,
 Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?

'Or come we of an Automaton
 Unconscious of our pains? ...
 Or are we live remains
 Of Godhead dying downwards, brain and eye now gone?

'Or is it that some high Plan betides,
 As yet not understood,
 Of Evil stormed by Good,
 We the Forlorn Hope over which Achievement strides?'

Thus things around. No answerer I...
 Meanwhile the winds, and rains,
 And Earth's old glooms and pains
 Are still the same, and Life and Death are neighbours nigh.¹⁵

Questioning in this poem has been displaced from man to the natural world. It would seem, therefore, that it is not only the human condition which is of concern to the poet, but also the condition of nature, which constantly seeks reasons for its own existence and suffering. The fact that it is the world as a whole that is a victim of pain universalises the sentiment, which contrasts with the unique suffering in 'Hap': nothing escapes the pain of this life. This is a new vision of the natural world for Hardy who, in his novels (particularly *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*), holds up nature as an instance of perfection. This conflicting image, then, presents us with an even stronger picture of helplessness.

The various components of the landscape are collectively likened to 'chastened children' watching the speaker expectantly and (more importantly) resignedly. That they are depicted as children emphasises their vulnerability, innocence and powerlessness under oppression. The simile is extended into the second stanza: they are 'cowed' by their 'master's ways', which have smothered their early enthusiasm. There is no indication of who the master might be, but we can assume that it is whatever force dictates the processes of the natural world, whether this is God or a god is not clear. By the third stanza, the speaker describes their subdued questioning, now diminished to 'lippings mere': cowed as they are, insistently (as is made evident by the repetitious 'wonder, ever wonder') they question their own existence. The following stanzas offer suggestions as to what the purpose behind their existence might be. First, they propose that a 'Vast Imbecility' created the world for amusement, but is now powerless to control his creation and has left it to chance. The second suggestion is that an 'Automaton' created the world without reason or intent or knowledge of the consequences. The third gruesomely physicalised option is that the world is a remnant of a dying 'Godhead' with 'brain and eye now gone' (unable to

¹⁵ CP 43.

formulate a plan to save itself or its creation, unable see the pain it leaves behind). Finally, the children (Nature) suggest that they are the 'Forlorn Hope' (that is, the sacrificed troops) sent to die as part of an as yet unknown and incomprehensible 'high Plan.' The world is, in this 'high Plan', nothing more than a distraction to divert the attention of 'Evil' and to lead 'Achievement' to victory. The first line of the final stanza sums up Hardy's standpoint, both in this poem particularly and in his wider view of philosophy: with regards to matters of philosophy he is 'No answerer'. He then draws back from nature and observes the movements of the Earth, pain and gloom, storminess, and remarks that no matter what the question, however we might speculate, these things will ever remain and life and death will still exist together.

'Doom and She' provides a more thorough investigation of some of the ideas introduced in 'Nature's Questioning'.¹⁶ The poem dramatises an exchange between the 'Mother' (that is, Nature) and 'Doom'. She, having heard groans from the Earth, her creation, asks Doom to tell her how mankind is coping in the world because, being blind, she produced her creatures by touch alone and was then unable to watch or protect them. Doom, the cause of human strife, is unable to provide her with an answer because he has no concept of emotion, and can feel and understand nothing of suffering, grief or pain. Doom responds to her questions with uncomprehending questions of his own, asking Mother to explain 'Grief', 'Right', 'Wrong', 'Feeling', 'Weak' and 'Strong'. The Mother, 'Unanswered, ... / ... broods in sad surmise...'.¹⁷ The poem closes with the remark that her 'sighs' can sometimes be heard 'on Alpine height or Polar peak'.¹⁸

In this poem the creator is not a Vast Imbecility, an Automaton or a dying Godhead, but blind 'Mother' (the 'She' of the title). It is evident, though, that each of these images is in some way echoed in the characterisation of Doom and Mother:

¹⁶ CP 82.

¹⁷ Ibid. ll.31-5, 36-7.

¹⁸ Ibid. ll.38-9.

Mother of all things made,
 Matchless in artistry,
 Unlit with sight is she. –
 And though her ever well-obeyed
 Vacant of feeling he.¹⁹

Mother, while not an ‘Imbecility’, is ‘Mighty to build and blend,/But impotent to tend’; Doom is not the ‘Automaton’ who mindlessly created the world, but he is ‘Unconscious of our pains’; and, though there is no suggestion that either Doom or She is ‘dying downwards’, the brain and eye of Mother and Doom are under strain. This intertextual reinterpretation demonstrates what I am describing as Hardy’s agnostic experimentalism in poetry: he offers the alternatives, but by reworking the imagery he avoids committing himself to a single point of view.

Spoken in the third person plural, ‘Fragment’ removes Hardy’s speaker from its sentiment: he is an observer who cannot be held accountable for the views expressed. The poem dramatises an exchange between the poet and a group of believers in the setting of a sort of afterlife.

Fragment

AT last I entered a long dark gallery,
 Catacomb-lined; and ranged at the side
 Were the bodies of men from far and wide
 Who, motion past, were nevertheless not dead.

‘The sense of waiting here strikes strong;
 Everyone’s waiting, waiting, it seems to me;
 What are you waiting for so long? –
 What is to happen?’ I said.

‘O we are waiting for one called God,’ said they,
 ‘(Though by some the Will, or Force, or Laws;
 And, vaguely, by some, the Ultimate Cause);
 Waiting for him to see us before we are clay.
 Yes; waiting, waiting, for God *to know it*.’...
 ‘To know what?’ questioned I.
 ‘To know how things have been going on earth and below it:
 It is clear that he must know some day.’
 I thereon asked them why.
 ‘Since he has made us humble pioneers

¹⁹ CP 82 ll.5-8.

Of himself in consciousness of Life's tears,
 It needs no mighty prophecy
 To tell that what he could mindlessly show
 His creatures, he himself will know.

'By some still close-cowled mystery
 We have reached feeling faster than he,
 But he will overtake us anon,
 If the world goes on.'²⁰

The 'At last' opening the poem refers back ambiguously either to a lengthy wait or journey or to death itself. The speaker enters a long room that seems to represent an antechamber to the afterlife (its inhabitants, though 'motion past' are 'nevertheless not dead'), though the place and time of the poem, and the nature of the 'bodies' are all uncertain. As Mariaconcetta Costantini asks, '[W]hat is the real meaning of their dark prison? Is it an existential symbol of life and its enigmas? Or does it refer to an unfathomable afterlife condition?'²¹ The poet would appear to be hinting at a non-corporeal afterlife, in which the body is sentient but immobile, but the person is not actually dead. The gruesome image of the 'bodies' makes this a far from comforting or hopeful image. The opening stanza is very visual, and reads almost like a fairy-tale with 'At last' and the 'long dark gallery' and the 'men from far and wide': thus, while it is possible to picture the scene it somehow slips from comprehension and reality.

Hardy's poem seems to describe some kind of intellectual limbo inhabited by these 'men from far and wide' and into which he has himself now entered. Apparently confused by the scene before him, the speaker asks the men to explain their evident patience. The word 'waiting' is repeated four times in the second stanza, and echoed three times in the third, emphasising at once the length of the wait and the tenacity of expectation. The frequency of the alliteration of 's' and 'w' echoes this sense of endurance, and the long vowels at the ends of each line ('strong', 'me', 'long') further underline the sense of time slowly passing.

²⁰ CP 464.

²¹ Mariaconcetta Costantini, 'Darkness and Doubts: Visionary Anxiety and Sceptical Interrogation in Hardy's "Fragment"', *THJ*, 17/2 (2001), 76-86 (78).

The following fourteen-line third stanza is visually distinct from the rest of the poem, interrupting the monotony: the men are finally able to express their hypothesis about the nature of God. They reply: ‘“O we are waiting for one called God,” said they,/“(Though by some the Will, or Force, or Laws;/And, vaguely, by some, the Ultimate Cause);...”.’ Not God then, but a being to whom such a name has been given. The various names by which he or it is known highlight the anonymity of this being. Each name is one given to God rather than one he definitively owns, thus heightening the sense of His remote indefinability: these men do not *know* him, only *of* him.

They are waiting for God to develop consciousness and thereby see and understand the sorrows that have been and are still taking place on Earth. It appears to them to be an anomaly that man has ‘reached feeling’ before God, but they are sure that, if the world ‘goes on’, he will match and overtake their consciousness in time. The men are waiting to see this God before they become ‘clay’, which both evokes the image of Genesis and, when juxtaposed with the ‘bodies’ of the opening stanza, conjures macabre images of decay. The mixture of biological and religious language becomes increasingly significant as the poem progresses and the men explain the reason for their lengthy wait. They are waiting for God ‘*to know it.*’ The non-specific ‘it’ (underlined by the ellipsis) provides the key to their interminable patience: ‘it’ is ultimate knowledge. However, Hardy turns the idea of the pursuit of knowledge on its head: no longer is it man who is working towards knowledge—he already has it—but God who must develop senses sufficient to be conscious of man’s plight and understand the human condition. Begging to know what this ‘it’ is of which they so confidently speak, the speaker is told: ‘“To know how things have been going on earth and below it:/It is clear he must know some day.”’ ‘[B]elow’ is ambiguous: in the context of the earlier part of poem, it refers to burial and death; however, it also summons up images of the underworld or hell, and any hope of heaven is absent here. The men want God not only to realise that the state of life on Earth is hellish, but also that by his hand—or because of his ignorance—people die.

The speaker asks the men to defend their faith that their patience will be rewarded by God's ultimate percipience. It is the men's belief that they have been sent by God as pioneers to investigate consciousness of woe for him, and that God must inevitably arrive to this consciousness. The final quatrain admits that, while the fact of this development is clear to them, it is nonetheless a 'close-cowled mystery' as to why he is so far behind man. In their naivety, though, the men have assumed that it is only a matter of time before God reaches their emotional maturity.

Implicit in the speaker's silence is the possibility that the god for whom they wait so patiently is already aware of their suffering, but that he simply does not—or can not—care. In 1881, Hardy made the following note, which shows that he, at least at the time he wrote it, was coming to that conclusion:

“May 9 [1881]. After infinite trying to reconcile a scientific view of life with the emotional and spiritual, so that they may not be interdestructive, I come to the following:—

“General Principles. Law has produced in man a child who cannot but constantly reproach its parent for doing much and yet not at all, and constantly say to such parent that it would have been better never to have begun doing than to have *overdone* so indecisively; that is, than to have created so far beyond all apparent first intention (on the emotional side), without mending matters by a second intent and execution, to eliminate the evils of the blunder of overdoing. The emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it.

“If Law itself had consciousness, how the aspect of its creatures would terrify it, fill it with remorse!”²²

The men's assurance in God's progress, however, is so firm that they only qualify it by the possibility that the world might not last long enough for them to witness him attaining their level of consciousness. The final line ('If the world goes on.') is visually distinct from the previous lines in the stanza suggesting that the speaker, at least, has recognised the significance of the qualification if the men themselves do not. What is not offered, but is also implicit in the speaker's detachment and in his repeated lack of comprehension, is the possibility that there is no god to develop consciousness. Finally, it may be that even if

²² LW 153.

there is a god who is aware of suffering, he is so far beyond the comprehension of human beings that to apply such rules to him is nonsensical. Man is, then, either striving to know a god whom it is impossible to know or he is trying to invent a reason for irrational suffering.

The significance of the title, 'Fragment' is ambiguous. It may refer to the 'fragment' of the poet's life which he has '[a]t last' reached; or the 'fragment' of the men's long wait. It also places the poem as part of a missing bigger story, suggesting that there is more to this than can be seen or explained. Finally, it suggests, perhaps, that the men are but a 'fragment' of the world, of little significance and, consequently, unlikely to see their ambitions realised. Whatever it refers to specifically, there is a sense that there is a bigger picture that we are not able to see.

'Ἀγνωστωι Θεωι' ('To An Unknown God') bridges the three loose categories set up at the beginning of this chapter: it is at once a poem of complaint, an attempt to offer explanations for suffering, and a poem which hints at the ultimate indefensibility of belief. It addresses a god who is seen to inflict pain on mankind, and argues that the only way to begin to rationalise this 'death-inducing' behaviour is to imagine that no 'consciousness informs Thy will'. As in 'Doom and She', this god is 'blind' and 'numb'. However, where in the earlier poem there was no room for hope for mankind, here the speaker fantasises that this god might slowly 'grow percipient', mend his ways and become worthy of the speaker's worship.

ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩΙ ΘΕΩΙ

LONG have I framed weak phantasies of Thee,
 O 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.

Perhaps Thy ancient rote-restricted ways
 Thy ripening rule transcends:
 That listless effort tends
 To grow percipient with advance of days,
 And with percipience mends.

For, in unwonted purlieus, far and nigh,
 At whiles or short or long,
 May be discerned a wrong
 Dying as of self-slaughter; whereat I
 Would raise my voice in song.²³

This is another hymn-like poem, composed of four identical five-line stanzas, largely iambic, in which lines one and four are rhyming pentameters and lines two, three and five rhyming trimeters. The syntax is inverted and the language complex to emulate more properly the sombreness of the hymn. The use of Greek in the title asserts a degree of erudition: the speaker of this poem (in sharp contrast with that of ‘The Bedridden Peasant’) is a learned man. However, the convoluted syntax and for some readers the unfamiliar alphabet also serve to place a barrier between the reader and the speaker: the poet’s voice and meaning struggle to find their way through the words and symbols. The tortured syntax, especially, undermines the typical purpose of the hymn form, emphasising the poet’s reluctance to offer praise to an impercipient deity. The last line of the poem corroborates this notion: if this god were to mend his ways then the speaker ‘[w]ould raise [his] voice in song.’ By placing a condition on worship, the speaker acknowledges the fact that, despite the visual and rhythmic reconstruction of the hymn form, this hymn is not sung in praise and as such it represents a shift from the poems which apologise for God and assert faith in a conditionally imagined God, to poems which make belief dependent on not only the existence of God but also on his worthiness as an object of worship.

²³ CP 151.

Deborah Collins sees this poem as an almost optimistic reflection on the evolution of the deity's compassion:

After lengthy pondering the poet migrates from agnosticism to a theism of sorts. As the title suggests, he determines to believe that God will eventually loosen his automatic bonds and remedy man's ills... This awakening – which Hardy significantly terms 'Thy ripening rule' for its vivid image of the process of evolution – will come about imperceptibly at evolutionary pace as the Prime Mover now and again recognises moments of its own abominable behaviour... Knowing that he will be long dead before redress even begins, the poet finds solace and hope in the thought that the Mover is presently capable of tossing uncomfortably in his sleep.²⁴

The poem is much more sceptical than Collins allows here. Indeed, I would argue that she has missed the point. The opening line—'Long have I framed weak phantasies of Thee'—emphasises the fragility of the speaker's defence of the deity: despite the '[l]ong' time he has taken to reach a position on the matter of unjustified suffering, his conclusions are not only 'weak' but nothing more than 'phantasies'. It is also implied that the very existence of the deity may be a facet of these 'phantasies'. Throughout the poem he underlines the provisional nature of his idea: '*As though* by labouring all-unknowingly/*Like* one whom reveries numb'; 'Thy biddings, *as if* blind', and, finally, '*Perhaps* Thy ancient rote-restricted ways' (emphases added). Moreover, the title, which Collins argues expresses the speaker's determination to believe that God will evolve and improve, throws more confusion on the speaker's position. Ἄγνωστω Θεῷ is a reference to an inscription on an Athenian altar that angered St. Paul:

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made by hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; ...

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

²⁴ Collins, *Thomas Hardy and His God*, 68.

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent:

Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.²⁵

The Athenians were superstitiously worshipping an unknown god: Paul insisted that the object of worship was the one true God, who must be worshipped not ignorantly but in confident knowledge of his existence and power. Viewed in the context of the poem, the title does not imply that the speaker has done or will do as the Athenians do (repent and worship a known god), but that he continues to speculate about this god. The deity of the poem is not the same as the deity that St. Paul describes: this god is absent or, at best, unconscious, and the only evidence that he ever existed can be seen in what he has left behind him, mankind and the earth. The 'Unknown God' of Hardy's poem is viewed from the side of the superstitious Athenians and not from that of the enlightened apostle.

In 'A Sign-Seeker', Hardy demonstrates the process by which mankind has reached agnosticism, or an understanding that requires it. It takes on the voice of a man (or, more likely, the collective voice of mankind) methodical in the study of all things, open to accepting evidence of the existence of a world beyond this one, but unable to locate that for which he searches. The sign-seeker, far from refuting belief in the afterlife, is desperate to attain it, but he cannot accept the idea for himself without verification. The voice of 'A Sign-Seeker' is that of a keen observer of the world. He describes how he carefully scrutinises the world in all its various stages, observing and reaching an understanding about the changes in nature and in man, from time to the changes of the seasons, from observing natural phenomena to understanding astrophysics and politics. He has, in short, grasped as far as he can the processes of everything in the world, except that knowledge

²⁵ Acts 17: 22-31. In *A Laodicean*, Sir William 'raise[s] an altar' to 'Economy', 'as the Athenians did to the unknown God'. *AL* 244.

which he would most gladly find, the knowledge that there is something after death. He has consciously and lengthily searched for evidence, but can only conclude that there is nothing beyond this life.

Written in twelve quatrains, with a sustained ABBA rhyme scheme, and following, with minor freedoms of interpretation, an iambic metre and moving from pentameter in the first line, to tetrameter in the second and third lines, and finally to hexameter in the fourth, gives a sense of moving forward, stopping and then falling back once more. This form echoes the progress of the speaker's quest to obtain proof of an afterlife: he begins his quest, appears to be finding the answers, but is then confounded. There is also extensive use of half rhyme, suggesting, as the rhythm does, that the form cannot contain the content and that it is extending beyond the confines of the poem.

A Sign-Seeker

I MARK the months in liveries dank and dry,
 The noontides many-shaped and hued;
 I see the nightfall shades subtrude,
 And hear the monotonous hours clang negligently by.

I view the evening bonfires of the sun
 On hills where morning rains have hissed;
 The eyeless countenance of the mist
 Pallidly rising when the summer droughts are done.

I have seen the lightning-blade, the leaping star,
 The cauldrons of the sea in storm,
 Have felt the earthquake's lifting arm,
 And trodden where abysmal fires and snow-cones are.

I learn to prophesy the hid eclipse,
 The coming of eccentric orbs;
 To mete the dust the sky absorbs,
 To weigh the sun, and fix the hour each planet dips.

I witness fellow earth-men surge and strive;
 Assemblies meet, and throb, and part;
 Death's sudden finger, sorrow's smart;²⁶
 - All the vast various moils that mean a world alive.

But that I fain would wot of shuns my sense –
 Those sights of which old prophets tell,
 Those signs the general word so well
 As vouchsafed their unheed, denied my long suspense.

In graveyard green, where his pale dust lies pent
 To glimpse a phantom parent, friend,
 Wearing his smile, and 'Not the end!'
 Outbreathing softly: that were blest enlightenment;

Or, if a dead Love's lips, whom dreams reveal
 When midnight imps of King decay
 Delve sly to solve me back to clay,
 Should leave some print to prove her spirit-kisses real;

Or, when Earth's Frail lie bleeding of her Strong,
 If some Recorder, as in Writ,
 Near to the weary scene should flit
 And drop one plume as pledge that Heaven inscrolls the wrong.

- There are who, rapt to heights of trancelike trust,
 These tokens claim to feel and see,
 Read radiant hints of times to be –
 Of heart to heart returning after dust to dust.

Such scope is granted not to lives like mine...
 I have lain in dead men's beds, have walked
 The tombs of those with whom I had talked,
 Called many a gone and goodly one to shape a sign,

And panted for response. But none replies;
 No warnings loom, nor whisperings
 To open out my limitings,
 And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies.²⁷

Striking similarities can be seen between the form of 'A Sign-Seeker' and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, a poem considered to have 'had a powerful influence on Thomas Hardy's self-

²⁶ As will be discussed, in the manuscript of *Wessex Poems*, this line reads: 'Death's *soothing* finger, sorrow's smart' (emphasis added). It is not clear where the typographical inaccuracy comes from. I am grateful to Victoria Osborne at the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, where the manuscript is held, for confirming the correct wording of this line when I was unable to view the manuscript myself. (Victoria Osborne, 'Wessex Poems', personal communication (email), 16 Jun. 2006.)

²⁷ CP 30.

definition as an aspiring poet'.²⁸ Hardy's copy of *In Memoriam* is an 1875 edition and is extensively annotated, showing that part of its emotional appeal to him was in the parallels he saw between Tennyson's sentiment regarding Arthur Hallam, and his own feelings following the suicide of his close friend Horace Moule in 1873.²⁹ Tennyson's sentiment of loss is echoed in the second half of 'A Sign-Seeker', in which the speaker yearns for a sign that those he has lost still exist somewhere beyond the graveyard. Though sentimentality is explicitly present in the poem, the implicit focus of 'A Sign-Seeker' is not on lost love, but on the futility of the speaker's desperate search for proof of an afterlife. Metaphysical inquiry is its real objective.

The first five stanzas examine the speaker's many intellectual achievements. The word 'I' is noticeably foregrounded by the poem's visual form not only because it is the first word of each stanza, but also because the following two lines are slightly indented. In the first part of this poem, man is central and we join the speaker in celebrating his achievements. In the second part of the poem, the speaker's world is less certain, opening the sixth stanza with a prominent and uncertain 'But' that serves to undermine the triumphant positioning of the 'I' from the first part of the poem. Stanzas eight and nine begin with 'Or', indicating a diminishing confidence. The tenth stanza opens with a hyphen, creating a caesura in the poem which is echoed below by the ellipsis at the end of the first line of the eleventh stanza. Thus, by simply looking at the printed aspect of the poem, one sees signs of an increasing sense of uncertainty and of hesitancy as the speaker moves towards his conclusion.

The first stanza is concerned with man's meticulous observations of the passing of time. He starts by broadly observing the movement of the months through their seasons 'dank and dry', then the days and nights, and finally the 'monotonous hours'. In each line,

²⁸ Dennis Taylor, 'Hardy's Use of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*', *Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 7/1 (1997), 32-41 (32).

²⁹ For a facsimile transcript of Hardy's copy of *In Memoriam* see Dennis Taylor, 'Hardy's Copy of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*', *THJ*, 13/1 (1997), 43-63. The book is part of Hardy's Max Gate Library, held in the DCM. See also Pamela Dalziel and Michael Millgate (eds.), *Thomas Hardy's 'Studies, Specimens &c.' Notebook* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 25-8, 114-17.

he shows a smaller unit of time, portraying the stages of a thorough examination of nature as befits the careful scientist that he is shown to be as the poem progresses. Time is, as so often in Hardy's work, personified as an aloof, stealthy and unstoppable being, 'subtrud[ing]' and 'negligent'. In this poem, time would also appear to be a master of disguise, with his 'liveries' and shifting shapes: nonetheless, time's slipperiness is no match for man, the patient observer. The prominent position of the subject and verb, 'I mark', demonstrates clearly the key concerns of the speaker, 'mark' implying both keen observation and the act of making physical notes on the properties of the subject matter. The rhythm of the stanza is retarded by long vowel sounds—for example, 'mark', 'dry', 'noontides', 'hued', 'nightfall shades subtrude', and 'hear the monotonous hours clang negligently by'—which mimics not only the subject matter of this stanza (time), but also the careful and methodical studies of the speaker. Both this and the personification of time demonstrate the character of the sign-seeker: he is a scientist who is patient and scrupulous, unlikely to overlook or neglect the evidence. The intense focus on time also presents the sign-seeker as symbolic of the cumulative knowledge of man throughout history.

The weather is investigated next, and while the sentiment should perhaps be one of awe at the existence of such elemental extremes (that is, 'bonfires' and 'rains') or at the transience and miraculous character of the natural world, the speaker 'view[s]' these wonders without emotion. This unemotional response is sustained throughout these opening stanzas in which there are no adverbs appended to his activities: 'I mark', 'I view', 'I have seen', 'I learn', 'I witness'. Indeed, the verbs are themselves inactive: though transitive they do not in any way affect the object upon which they act. The speaker is carefully detached from his subject matter in order to analyse it more properly.

The third stanza echoes the second, but the events witnessed by the speaker are more dramatic as he contemplates natural phenomena such as lightning, shooting stars, stormy seas, earthquakes, volcanoes and glaciers. The drama of the natural world is emphasised by the use of imagery based on human inventions or abilities: thus, the

lightning is a 'blade' and the storm a 'cauldron'; the star 'leap[s]' and the earthquake has a 'lifting arm'. Though these are dramatic images, evoking war and witchcraft and granting the natural world human capabilities, the juxtaposition of the two things, nature and humanity, suggests that nature is within the intellectual grasp of mankind. The 'abysmal fires and snow-cones' are, while not humanised in the same way, nonetheless conquered, as the speaker tells us that he has 'trodden where [they] are'. He does not deny the magnificence of the natural world, but by rendering them in this language he subdues the sublime. There is nothing, it seems, in the workings of the physical world that is completely beyond man's comprehension.

Indeed, the speaker's claim to have mastered nature is not merely limited to the earth: his insight stretches further into the galaxy (and perhaps, we may assume, the universe). The knowledge to which the sign-seeker here lays claim is extraterrestrial, thus moving beyond what the ordinary man can observe and discover. His knowledge is, like the system he observes, vast. Hardy here shows an awareness of various developments in astrophysics, and these poetic, but more importantly technical, accomplishments firmly characterise the speaker as an expert and not simply a uniquely observant layman, thereby underlining mankind's accomplishments and mastery of his world. He understands and can predict the phases of the moon, which, however, he refers to only by the technical terms 'eclipse' and 'eccentric orbs', avoiding the poetic temptation to romanticise. This is especially significant considering that personification and adoration of the moon is a common leitmotif in many of Hardy's works³⁰—he is here an impassive scientist and nothing more. The use of 'eccentric' suggests not only the physical shape of the 'orb', but that it is, in the other sense of the word, irregular or uncommon; what had hitherto been thought of as changing and unpredictable, can now not only be read and understood, but predicted. There are religious connotations in the words 'prophecy' and 'dust', and the mixing of linguistic codes surreptitiously places the speaker on an intellectual plane with

³⁰ See, for example, Jude's hymn to the sun and moon: see *JO* 30.

religious prophets. The next lines refer to burgeoning—but rapidly advancing—scientific notions: a reference to planets created from ‘dust’; the formula for calculating the sun’s mass; and, finally, the ability to work out the orbits of the other planets. This last claim hints at a geocentric universe. The planets, as we know and as was known then, do not dip; they only appear to because of the rotation of our own planet. This slightly flawed image does not undermine the sign-seeker’s command of astrophysics, but is simply his way of emphasising the intellectual grandeur of mankind.

Having detailed his knowledge of the physical world, the sign-seeker next lays claim to an understanding of mankind. He watches his fellow-men going about their daily lives. They work, meet, live, and part. There is a clear attempt in this stanza to evoke a sense of living processes: the word ‘throb’, for example, implies not only the lively activities of the ‘[a]ssemblies’, but also the human heartbeat; similarly, ‘part’ suggests both the physical act of separation and death. By using these biological images, the poet sustains the stance of the observant scientist that has dominated throughout. The rhythm of third line of this stanza—‘Death’s sudden finger, sorrow’s smart’—is clipped by the absence of a conjunction, perhaps mirroring the suddenness of Death. In the manuscript, this line reads ‘Death’s soothing finger’. It is not clear where or when the change was made, or even if it was made by Hardy himself, but the original word offers a more emotional facet to the scientist, who sees that the most comforting aspect of the human predicament is death. However, he attempts to remain detached from the subject of his study, his status as ‘witness’ almost negating the kinship he then claims with his ‘fellow earth-men’. The caesura created by the hyphen at the start of the last line of this quatrain abruptly terminates the description of the lives of his ‘fellow earth-men’, ostensibly offering a dismissive summary of human life to conclude the first section of the poem. This sense of detachment is corroborated by the use of the de-emotionalising ‘moils’. The speaker, having spent four stanzas in detailed exploration of the physical world, in these four lines appears too quickly to dismiss the strivings and sorrows of human life. Even the word

'soothing' offers little to the speaker by way of emotional attachment to his subjects. This seemingly superficial acknowledgement of human experience, I suggest, emulates the poet's anxiety at the brevity of human life. In contrast, the earth and the galaxy appear to have an eternal presence. This notion is mirrored by the comparatively lengthy and more detailed consideration they are afforded in these opening five stanzas. By drawing attention to the fact that he sees and understands the 'world alive', the speaker silently introduces the question, 'But what next?'

The sixth stanza marks a change in direction for the poem. After detailing at length all the knowledge that he commands, the sign-seeker declares: 'But that I fain would wot of shuns my sense—'. The decisive 'But' clearly stands out against the assertive 'I's of the first part of the poem, repeating the move made in the final sestet of 'Hap', and, together with the archaic language and awkward syntax, emphasises that he is now tackling a matter in which he is not an expert and is no longer in control. The sights that the 'prophets' speak of and the 'signs the general word' knows so well that they can simply ignore, are denied to him despite his lengthy anticipation.³¹ The rhyme of 'sense' with 'suspense', in the first and fourth lines respectively, underlines the extent of his quest, and, by not revealing 'that [he] fain would wot' in this stanza, the sign-seeker forces the reader to participate in his 'long suspense'.

The language of the poem becomes noticeably more romantic and lyrical in the following three stanzas in which the speaker details the signs that he impassionedly seeks. He makes extensive use of the language of sensibility and adding a touch of the Gothic, echoing the 'graveyard poetry' of earlier in the century. The single sentence enjambed over the three quatrains evokes both a sense of time as well as a certain breathlessness created by the absence of a full stop. The 'graveyard green' signals a thematic shift in the poem, away from analytical science to a pastoral world. This sign-seeker would be content merely

³¹ The word 'word' is confusing here. It is possible that Hardy meant to write 'world', which may have made more sense, though Victoria Osborne at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery confirms that the manuscript clearly says 'word' and not 'world'. (Victoria Osborne, 'Re: FW: Wessex Poems', personal communication (email), 11 Jul. 2006.)

to ‘glimpse’ where before he would ‘mark’, ‘view’, ‘learn’ and ‘witness’ the world around him. A direct contrast is made between this and the previous scientific stanzas in the phrase ‘blest enlightenment’: enlightenment, of course, more typically bears scientific connotations, but this ‘*blest* enlightenment’ (emphasis added) is one in which science does not play a part.

The eighth quatrain, while no less lyrical than the previous one, employs rather more gruesome imagery. The sign-seeker wishes that a dead lover, about whom he still dreams, would visit him in his dreams and leave a ‘print’ to prove that her ‘spirit kisses [are] real’. This brings back the idea of the lover’s complaint introduced in ‘Hap’ and turns the poem rather suddenly into a sort of elegy for lost love. This is part of a repeated pattern in Hardy’s poetry whereby religious doubt occupies the space of a complaint about misfortune in love, or where misfortune in love seems merely to provide a pretext for voicing a deeper or more profound distress about the unknowability of what greater power, if any, guides our existence on earth. The speaker romanticises the process of ageing, imagining that ‘King Decay’ sends his ‘imps’ to ‘[dis]solve’ the poet’s sleeping body and reduce it ‘back to clay’, fairytale-like imagery that serves to veil the macabre truth of the ageing human body. ‘Delve sly’ implies an intelligent, almost imperceptible, but nonetheless relentless agent: something beyond the control of the poet. Again, ‘back to clay’ hints at a biblical idiom, but, in this context, the rhyme of ‘Decay’ with ‘clay’ seems contentious: the image is one of uncreating.

Finally, the poem alludes to wrongful death. The ‘Frail’—slaughtered by the ‘Strong’—can take solace in the knowledge that a ‘Recorder’ (that is, a heavenly judge), supported by ‘Writ’ (that is, a legal document), is nearby, and will send a signal that ‘Heaven inscrolls the wrong’. The legal language of this stanza implies that the speaker wants more than just a sign; he wants evidence that injustices on Earth will be witnessed and recorded by Heaven and, presumably, appropriate punishment administered.

Moreover, 'Writ' is, of course, the archaic form of 'written', evoking, in particular, the Old Testament concept of God as judge.

The last three stanzas begin with a hyphen, the visual impact of which abruptly brings to a halt the wistful meditations of the previous three stanzas. Thus returned to reality, the speaker acknowledges that there are people who 'claim' to 'feel and see' the 'tokens' of which he has spoken and who can 'read' of a future where lovers will be reunited after death. The words 'claim' and 'tokens' suggest a certain scepticism in the mind of the speaker, further underlined by 'rapt[ure]' and 'trance', both implying a state of partial unconsciousness and a detachment from reality.

The speaker withdraws from the pursuit. He wearily admits that he will never be able to see what they can see. He remarks that '[s]uch scope is *granted* not' (emphasis added), implying that he does not entirely eschew the concept of an agent with the ability to grant such favours. In addition, he particularly points out that it is not a general debilitation, but one that affects 'lives like mine', which we might assume, from the opening stanzas, to mean one who is able to understand the world so effectively by empirical observation and measurement. The insinuation here is that the scientific knowledge to which man can lay claim is somehow incompatible with the knowledge that he most wants, knowledge not of physics but of metaphysics. The ellipsis at the end of this line indicates both inconclusiveness and a degree of weariness and resignation on the part of the defeated sign-seeker. He lists the steps that he has taken to elicit communication with the afterlife: he has slept in the beds of dead men; has walked past the tombs of friends and acquaintances; and has called to the dead to 'shape a sign'. No conjunctions are used in the last three lines of the stanza and it is not end-stopped—'I have lain in dead men's beds, have walked/The tombs of those with whom I had talked,/Called many a gone and goodly one to shape a sign'—consequently, the natural pauses between the sentence clauses are brief and more dramatically build up to the climax, which heightens

the reader's anticipation to learn the results of his feverish quest as well as emphasising the duration of his pursuit.

The first line of the last stanza is enjambed from the last of the previous stanza: 'And panted for response' shows the strain that the search has put on the speaker and comes as something of an anticlimax to the expectation created in the previous two stanzas. This is followed by the equally short 'But none replies', putting an end to speculation. The negatives of the following line—'No warning looms, not whisperings'—show that he is left with nothing. He describes his inability to locate a sign as if it were a personal failure, his 'limitings', leaving room for the possibility that it is the speaker who is the problem rather than the world. It is 'Nescience' that muses that there is no afterlife: not-knowingness personified. '[M]utely muses' suggests the further limits of his knowledge: this is silent meditation rather than a public knowledge. Ignorance, that is, cannot pretend to be a form of negative knowledge. Nescience's conclusion—'When a man falls he lies'—is ambiguous.³² Most obviously, it refers to death and the absence of an afterlife. However, with the recurrent references to 'dust' and allusions to the creation story in Genesis, the word 'fall' takes on a biblical echo of the Fall of Adam.³³ In other words, when man fell from grace, he remained that way, separate, removed from God and from salvation with no hope of reunion.

Published in the same volume, 'The Impercipient (At a Cathedral Service)' shows a similarly wistful undertow to the agnostic's struggle with the difficulty of unbelief. It traces the thoughts of an unbeliever as he attends a cathedral service. Surrounded by a 'bright believing band'—the alliteration underlines the steadfastness, as well as the blithe unthinkingness, of their belief—he ponders his own lack of certain faith and remarks that he has no place among them.

³² In the *Life*, at news of the death of Thomas Carlyle, Hardy notes that both Carlyle and George Eliot had 'vanished into nescience'. (*LW* 152.)

³³ Genesis 3.

The Impercipient
(*At a Cathedral Service*)

THAT with this bright believing band
I have no claim to be,
That faiths by which my comrades stand
Seem fantasies to me,
And mirage-mists their Shining Land,
Is a strange destiny.

Why thus my soul should be consigned
To infelicity,
Why always I must feel as blind
To sights my brethren see,
Why joys they've found I cannot find,
Abides a mystery.

Since heart of mine knows not that ease
Which they know; since it be
That He who breathes All's Well to these
Breathes no All's-Well to me,
My lack might move their sympathies
And Christian charity!

I am like a gazer who should mark
An inland company
Standing upfingered, with 'Hark! hark!
The glorious distant sea!
And feel, 'Alas, 'tis but yon dark
And wind-swept pine to me!

Yet I would bear my shortcomings
With meet tranquillity,
But for the charge that blessed things
I'd liefer not have be.
O, doth a bird deprived of wings
Go earth-bound wilfully!

Enough. As yet disquiet clings
About us. Rest shall we.³⁴

In comparison with the romanticism of the sign-seeker, the impercipient's tone is composed, but the hint of longing and regret in the voice remains, echoed in the sustained rhyme scheme and the repetition of the 'i:' sound throughout. The speaker is aware of the joy that belief in God can bring and cannot help but regret his inability to believe with them. Comprised of five six-line stanzas alternating iambic tetrameter with iambic trimeter,

³⁴ CP 44.

this is another example of Hardy's use of hymn-like forms (presumably, in this case, the hymn sung by the surrounding congregation). The anomalous couplet at the end of the poem, however, provides a challenge to the hymn format and sets the impercipient apart from the singers around him. This final couplet shows his determination to stop the eternal questioning and complaint. He finally decides to '[r]est' because it is not conclusively proven that the 'blessed things' do not exist and, while there is a possibility that they might, he can be at peace. Alternatively, it may be that the 'Rest' to which the speaker refers is, as in the final line of 'A Sign-Seeker', death, similarly suggesting that such musings are ultimately futile because of the existence of death. For the sign-seeker, however, the assumption of absolute death is the most logical conclusion he can reach in his quest for knowledge, whereas, for the impercipient, the conclusion is rather more ambiguous and death is where and when his doubts will be confirmed or proved false.

In the manuscript, the poem has the deleted title 'The Agnostic (Evensong: —— Cathedral)'. It also has an extra stanza after the third stanza:

But ah, they love me not, although
 I treat them tenderly,
 And while I bear with them they go
 To no such lengths with me,
 Because – to match their sight I show
 An incapacity.³⁵

The final couplet in the manuscript reads: 'Enough. As yet confusion clings/About us. We shall see'. In the original version of the poem, then, the speaker was to take a more controversial, also a clearer, standpoint. The poem in its final version focuses closely on the shortcomings of the speaker and takes the form of a private contemplation of his own lack of perception, underlined, of course, by the poem's published title. The rejected stanza, is more of a barbed reflection on the failure of what he had hoped for from 'Christian charity'. Without it, the poem no longer considers—or even mentions—the unbeliever's reception by the Christians around him. Finally, 'We shall see' is assuaged in the published

³⁵ The manuscript is held at the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

version by the softer 'Rest shall we'. Although the word 'we' is used in both of these endings, the 'we' of the final version would appear to be more inclusive than the 'we' of the original version. 'The Impercipient' suggests that everyone—believers and unbelievers alike—will rest; 'The Agnostic' implies that only in death will they all discover who is right, and that only one group will be vindicated.

The altered title is ostensibly more moderate. 'Impercipient' suggests one lacking in perception, not able to see, which leaves room for the possibility that his unbelief is a result of his own deficiency. James Persoon, however, rightly points out that 'impercipient' is an 'adjective amenable to singular or plural number', and as such it might as easily apply to the 'bright believing band' as to the speaker himself.³⁶ In revising the poem's title away from association with agnosticism *per se*, and—by deleting the original fourth stanza—from making a direct comment on the anticipated lack of 'Christian charity', Hardy mischievously created an ambiguity that hints that the lack of perception is not his, but the Christians'. Persoon suggests that 'Hardy changed the title to a more ambiguous word, befitting his more ambivalent, conflicted feelings about faith and the afterlife and what we know of them.'³⁷

Although this poem is undated, it certainly predates September 1898 when the volume of *Wessex Poems* was published and, therefore, was probably written at the same time as the novels. It seems that as a poet, Hardy felt as reluctant to tie himself to any particular philosophical standpoint in poetry as in prose fiction. *Wessex Poems* was his first volume of poetry and marked a dramatic change in direction after almost thirty years as a novelist. Hardy was aware of the risk he was taking in publishing poetry and 'under no delusion about the coldness and even opposition he would have to encounter—at any rate from some voices—in openly issuing verse after printing nothing (with trifling exceptions)

³⁶ James Persoon, 'Hardy's "The Impercipient"', *Explicator*, 61 (2003), 92-4 (93).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

but prose for so many years.’³⁸ He acknowledged that he had set his critics a challenge in expecting them to read his poetry without prejudice:

By no fault of their own the power of looking clearly and responsively into his poetry as form and as content—meeting the mood of the poet half-way, as it were—was denied to critics in Hardy’s case (except those of distinctly acute vision, few of whom would have been set by editors to waste their powers on a poet’s first volume). They *could not* look clearly into it, by reason of the aforesaid obsession of the idea that novel-writing was Hardy’s trade, and no other. There were those prose works standing in a row in front, catching the eye at every attempt to see the poetry, and forming an almost impenetrable screen.³⁹ (emphasis in original)

But perhaps it was not only the critics who were unable to see through the ‘impenetrable screen’ of the prose. Hardy’s alterations to ‘The Impercipient’ reveal a poet still acutely aware of the commercial and critical reception of his prose, making similar alterations to the content that he had, for example, made to the character of Angel Clare in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. ‘Hap’, ‘The Sign-Seeker’ and ‘The Impercipient’ each eschew the absolute disavowal of belief: ‘Hap’ offering alternative justifications for human suffering and ‘The Sign-Seeker’ and ‘The Impercipient’ portraying characters who are unable but, importantly, not unwilling to believe in God or something beyond death. Had ‘The Impercipient’ included the original title, the now-deleted fourth stanza and the original closing couplet, it would have too firmly detracted from the open-minded approach to belief (or, rather, the tentative approach to unbelief).

Where ‘A Sign-Seeker’ and ‘The Impercipient’ present the internal struggle of man with the desire but not the ability to believe, ‘The Problem—a poem from Hardy’s next volume of verse, *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901)—directly tackles unbelief.

³⁸ LW 319.

³⁹ LW 320.

The Problem

SHALL we conceal the Case, or tell it –
 We who believe the evidence?
 Here and there the watch-towers knell it
 With a sullen significance,
 Heard of the few who hearken intently and carry an eagerly
 upstrained sense.

Hearts that are happiest hold not by it;
 Better we let, then, the old view reign:
 Since there is peace in that, why decry it?
 Since there is comfort, why disdain?
 Note not the pigment so long as the painting determines
 humanity's joy and pain.⁴⁰

The 'problem' announced by the title is whether it is right to allow naïve believers to continue in a false but comforting faith. The speaker sets out his dilemma, asking if the 'Case' (that is, the proposition that there is no god) should be revealed to the unwitting believers. The capitalisation places the 'Case' in direct opposition to God. There is only a measure of uncertainty in his words when he asserts that he is one of a group ('we') who 'believe the evidence'. The word 'believe' leaves room for doubt in their contention: there is evidence to be believed, but no suggestion that it is infallible. The 'watch-towers' would appear to house those who seek such evidence (presumably the scientists and philosophers) and their significant 'knell', which is echoed by the slow rhythm of the poem, can be heard by those who, like Hardy, are not necessarily gathering the evidence, but are listening for it intently. In the second stanza, the poet explains that, despite this evidence, it is not a straightforward matter to reveal the conclusion to the believers because '[h]earts that are happiest hold not by it [the Case]'. He admits that, this being so, it is less cruel to allow them to continue in the 'old view'. '[P]eace' and 'comfort' are derived from this 'old view' and the speaker is unwilling to take them away. The fact that he is willing not to press the case for rationalism suggests that no peace or comfort is to be found in it. He closes with the thought that it does not matter what pigment a picture is made up of, providing that it

⁴⁰ CP 83.

has the capacity to control or deliver joy or pain: better to be happy living a lie than to exist in despondence because of the truth.

In 1909-10, Hardy wrote 'A Complaint to Man', subsequently published in *Satires of Circumstance: Lyrics and Reveries*. In the poem, Hardy hands over the form of complaint—so extensively used in his collection of poems on the question of belief—to God. God asks man why he felt it necessary to invent a god. This blasphemy (as it would be in the eyes of traditional religious readers of the poem) appears to point towards an atheistic message for the poem; however, it is clear that the implied conclusion of the poem is not really that God does not exist, but that the guiding principle for man should not be the worship of a remote being, but 'loving-kindness' for his fellow man.

A Complaint to Man

WHEN you slowly emerged from the den of Time,
And gained percipience as you grew,
And fleshed you fair out of shapeless slime,

Wherefore, O Man, did there come to you
The unhappy need of creating me –
A form like your own – for praying to?

My virtue, power, utility,
Within my maker must all abide,
Since none in myself can ever be,

One thin as a phasm on a lantern-slide
Shown forth in the dark upon some dim sheet,
And by none but its showman vivified.

'Such a forced device,' you may say, 'is meet
For easing a loaded heart at whiles:
Man needs to conceive of a mercy-seat

Somewhere above the gloomy aisles
Of this wistful world, or he could not bear
The irk no local hope beguiles.'

- But since I was framed in your first despair
The doing without me has had no play
In the minds of men when shadows scare;

And now that I dwindle day by day
 Beneath the deicide eyes of seers
 In a light that will not let me stay,

And to-morrow the whole of me disappears,
 The truth should be told, and the fact faced
 That had best been faced in earlier years:

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

With loving-kindness fully blown,
 And visioned help unsought, unknown.

1909-10⁴¹

The opening stanza is unequivocally Darwinist, referring to 'slowly emerg[ing]', 'gain[ing] percipience' and 'shapeless slime'. Immediately, Hardy has pulled the reader away from any thought of divine creation: the world is formed by a slow, unguided process. The stanza is not end-stopped, leading the reader on, and extending the 'plaint'. The second stanza, however, provides a contrast to the first, employing religious language which is offered up for direct comparison with the evolutionary language of the first. The comparison is not without bias: the poet turns the Genesis creation myth on its head. The capitalisation of 'Man' places mankind in the position that God is assumed to hold in Christian texts, and the reference to a 'form like your own' echoing but inverting the idea that man was created in God's image. In the third stanza, God's characteristics—'virtue, power, utility'—are seen to be nothing more than traits of man. Conventional religious language is carried through this stanza ('my maker'), in the service of a picture which not only diminishes God, but encourages man to look to his capacity to change the condition of his fellow-men for the better.

God is, according to his plaint, nothing more than a 'phasm on a lantern-slide,/Shown forth in the dark upon some dark sheet,/And by none but the showman vivified.' He was invented and is 'vivified' by a race desperate to 'eas[e] a loaded heart' because man needs to believe that there is a way of obtaining mercy and release from the

⁴¹ CP 266.

trials of life. Man uses this 'phasm' to justify passivity in the face of suffering and, more, to compensate for it imaginatively: the poet acknowledges that there would appear to be no 'local hope' of real change. God explains that since he was invented, man has ceased to look for consolation around him and in this life, choosing instead to focus not on life, but on an invented being. God 'dwindle[s] day by day' as the 'seers' (the scientists and philosophers) begin to unravel the truth: their enlightenment shines a light from the wrong side of the 'lantern-slide' and the image on the screen begins to fade. Knowledge and science, in other words, destroy the projected image.

God sees a future in which he no longer exists and explains that man must prepare himself for that day and face the facts that 'had best been faced in earlier years'. Man must now depend on himself, on the 'human heart' and on 'brotherhood'. What the poet is suggesting is that an inevitable result of inventing God was that man would turn to the idea of him in times of trouble, and would complacently allow his fellow-man to do the same. Without God, there can be no such denial of our own agency. Man must rely on his fellow-man and, it is implied, must strive to decrease the suffering he himself causes by intent or simple neglect. God can no longer be blamed and can no longer provide comfort.

The world must face up to reality and recreate a state of secular humanism. 'Grace'—traditionally a gift from God—can now be obtained only through 'loving-kindness' and by forgetting about 'visioned help'. This is, of course, the overriding sentiment of both *Tess* and *Jude*, and addresses directly what they have to say about morality and religion. Hardy is looking for a world of 'loving-kindness', a secular, humane mode of living. It is significant that the poem ends with the word 'unknown', ambiguously suggesting that man should forget God, yet also suggesting the possibility that a god may well exist, but one that it is impossible to know and, therefore, futile to worship or try to imagine. So, it is unclear whether God is an absolute fabrication, as the words of the poem appear to suggest, or whether it is man's capacity for understanding God that is at fault. Of course, the irony of the poem lies in its mode of address: God declares his own non-

existence. It is not, perhaps, a very successful irony. The anthropomorphisation of God risks undermining what the poem actually says and throwing us back to square one: yet again, failure of belief is articulated in terms which cling onto belief. Just as we feel we may have reached an understanding, the poet slips from our grasp.

‘A Plaint to Man’ would appear to offer one of the strongest indications of Hardy’s philosophical and religious positions. The poet categorically states that man invented God. But, there is no reason to assume that a denial of God’s existence, as in this poem, is or should be any more convincing than a poem in which he personifies Time or Doom or Casualty or Nature, or in which he claims that there is a God, but one that is careless of man’s plight, or portrays him as an underdeveloped or dying figure. That such apostrophised abstractions are not traditional or accepted ways of figuring an ultimate power does not imply that to the poet those ideas were not equally valid. However, the answers to such questions, as Hardy knew, cannot be found. That being so, it is necessary for man to work out what the focus of life must be in a world without God and the answer, provided by God himself, is each other.

However, in this seemingly unequivocal dismissal of God, not only is God himself the orator, but the final image is one which again reintroduces religion into the spotlight, deviously inviting the reader to continue the metaphysical questioning. He is careful to suggest that no comfort can be found in the pursuit of the ‘unknown’, but nevertheless the lasting image is not of ‘loving-kindness’—though it was important enough to Hardy to be foregrounded in the closing couplet—but a reminder of the search for ‘visioned help’ and the unknowability of the divine.

It is one of the strengths of Hardy’s poetry that it finally neither confirms nor disproves his allegiance to agnosticism, nor to any other philosophical standpoint. In the novels, he had been unable to sustain fully his commitment to the principle that fiction is only a ‘series of

seemings'. Time and again his prefaces state a wish to be read one way rather than another, or the implied author intrudes, or the acts of a certain character appear to be tied to a philosophical standpoint that the reader is being asked to endorse. Poetry offered Hardy the opportunity to be true to his aspirations for art. Each poem could offer something new and facilitate more fully his desire to create an unresolved 'series of seemings'. No voice can be considered quite the same as or truer than the next, and each poem uniquely presents a vignette that may echo the poet's vision of reality in that mood, or under those circumstances, but that does not prove a consistent or underlying philosophy. The transitory nature of the poetic form, the brevity, the possibility for experimentation was, for Hardy, a release from the constraints of narrative fiction. Opened up by the poetic form was the opportunity to switch between narrative voices, avoiding absolute association with any. The seemings could now be presented as a series without the need for Hardy to explain that fact.

It is my suggestion that poetry gives a more appropriate literary voice to agnosticism. As Hardy interpreted the genre, it could be more provisional, more partial and did not have to try to form a complete picture of society or of life. More importantly, however, Hardy's poetry allowed him to provide the agnostic thinker with an answer to the criticism that Frederic Harrison and others had levelled at agnosticism and that threatened to undermine its relevance, namely that it could not replace what it took away. In removing God, it also removed a sense of purpose for the disillusioned believer. Almost all of Hardy's work at some level seeks to answer the problem of what happens to morality and what gives life its purpose if one cannot fully believe in God. His 'series of feelings and fancies', as he claimed in the 'Preface' to *Poems of the Past and the Present*, provide 'the road to a true philosophy of life [which] seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.'⁴² And what is left when all the seemings and diverse feelings lead to the conclusion that one cannot depend on God

⁴² Hardy, 'Poems of the Past and the Present: Preface', 221.

for mercy, reward or even punishment, and cannot blame him for the condition of man? The answer, to which Hardy had been building throughout his career, was that, without God, man still has his fellow-man and must place his faith in his kinship with others and base his morality on the principal of loving-kindness.

And yet, even here, Hardy was not satisfied with a philosophy that aims only to get one through day-to-day life. What cannot be avoided in his poetry is the persistent tug towards the bigger questions of metaphysics and epistemology. The poetry largely strips away the moral problems that are inevitable in narrative fiction and allows speculation on issues that go beyond that which could reasonably be covered in novel form. None of Hardy's 'agnostic lyrics', no matter how convincing they prove as to the rationality of unbelief, can wholly remove themselves from religion: they all return to the same point, reintroducing at the level of allusion and metaphor that which they have ostensibly denied: hinting at malign intent ('Hap'), recognising the value of faith even when it is unsupported by reason ('The Problem', 'The Impercipient'), not absolutely eschewing faith, but placing conditions on it ('Αγνωστωι Θεωι', 'The Bedridden Peasant'). Even 'A Complaint to Man', which seems to provide a definitive answer on the question to the existence of God, is complicated by the fact that the complaint is spoken by God himself and by its coming to rest on the idea of 'visioned help' rather than the poem's ostensible focus, 'loving-kindness'. These very diverse poems are united by this single fact: that when answers appear to have been reached there remains an inability to leave the questioning alone. It is appropriate, of course, that the unifying factor in poems which speak for the agnostic should thus be their placing of an insistent question mark over what, ultimately, we can know and what, ultimately, we are justified in believing.

CONCLUSION

AN AGNOSTIC VOICE: ART, SCIENCE, AND THE 'KNOWLEDGE OF REALITIES'

Since Art is science with an addition, since some science underlies all Art, there is seemingly no paradox in the use of such a phrase as "the Science of Fiction." One concludes it to mean that comprehensive and accurate knowledge of realities which must be sought for, or intuitively possessed, to some extent, before anything deserving the name of artistic performance in narrative can be produced.¹

Hardy held very clear ideas about the function of art. In his contribution to the *New Review's* 1891 symposium 'The Science of Fiction', he attempted to delineate what he believed to be the proper approach to the production of 'Art', specifically literary fiction. He acknowledged that all art is based on some science, which he defined as the 'comprehensive and accurate knowledge of realities'—those 'realities' being 'human nature and circumstances'.² Hardy did not imply that 'comprehensive and accurate knowledge' was achievable, only that it must either be 'sought for', or be 'intuitively possessed'. The artist's role, as he viewed it, is not simply to replicate these 'realities', but only to select aspects and combine them in a representation that is more 'truthful than truth'.³

Hardy was critical of the so-called realists whose writing focused on describing trivialities in intricate detail to the exclusion of more important matters, such as human emotions and predicaments. Hardy thought Henry James a particular culprit of this 'copyism', recording on 9 July 1888 that he was '[r]eading H. James's "Reverberator"', and commenting, 'After this kind of work one feels inclined to be purposely careless in detail. The great novels of the future will certainly not concern themselves with the minutiae of manners... James's subjects are those one could be interested in at moments when there is nothing larger to think of.'⁴ In its reporting of insignificant 'minutiae', James's writing, according to Hardy, inclined away from presenting reality symbolically. Though Hardy did

¹ SF 315. The essay was Hardy's contribution to a symposium entitled 'The Science of Fiction' that was published in the *New Review*, 4 (1891), 315-19. The other contributors were Paul Bourget, a French novelist, critic and a friend of Henry James, and Walter Besant, a man-of-letters and a friend of Hardy. See *New Review*, 4 (1891), 304-9, 310-15.

² SF 315.

³ SF 316.

⁴ SF 317 and LW 220.

not advocate ignoring details, he maintained that, in selecting and rendering them, the artist should seek to evoke a scene's mood or essence, rather than merely depicting its external facts. As Hardy noted in August 1890: 'Art is a disproportioning—(i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art.'⁵

Hardy argued that 'blindness to material particulars often accompanies a quick perception of the more ethereal characteristics of humanity'.⁶ He wrote:

What cannot be discerned by eye and ear, what may be apprehended only by the mental tactility that comes from a sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all its manifestations, this is the gift which renders its possessor a more accurate delineator of human nature than many another with twice his powers and means of external observation, but without that sympathy. To see in half and quarter views the whole picture, to catch from a few bars the whole tune, is the intuitive power that supplies the would-be story-writer with the scientific bases for his pursuit.⁷

Hardy is using the word 'scientific' here, clearly in its early sense: 'producing knowledge', and somewhat against its more recent use.⁸ Hardy saw that for literature to fulfil its objective in presenting reality, it was necessary for the writer to have the 'gift' for ranking intuition, and sympathy, above empirical observation. Not bogged down by details, but grounded firmly enough in the real world to avoid fantasy, the writer can access a purer reality and begin to address the questions that really matter. This alternative to empiricism was what Hardy referred to in 1901 as non-rationalism.

In April 1892 Hardy wrote to Roden Noel of the Psychological Society to explain why he did not agree with Noel's suggestion that the Society might be able to offer the answers to the metaphysical problems with which Hardy appeared to be struggling. Hardy explained that he had a 'mistrust of metaphysics':

⁵ LW 239.

⁶ SF 318.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ OED online edition: 'scientific, *a. A.1*' *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50215811>>, accessed 22 Jul. 2006.

My shyness arises from my consciousness of its [metaphysic's] paternity—that it is a sort of bastard, begotten of science upon theology—or, in another form, a halfway house between Deism & Materialism. It ultimately comes to this—such & such things *may* be. But they will ever be improbable: & since infinitely other things may also be, with equal probability, why select any one bundle of suppositions in preference to another? I prefer to relegate such thoughts to the domain of fancy, & to recognize them as pure imagination.

Still, there is a fascination in these labyrinths even when regarded as philosophy.⁹ (emphasis in original)

Hardy suggested that there was something untrustworthy about the metaphysician's quest because of the impure or improper mix of science and theology it contains. Psychological writing—to be respectable—should avoid metaphysical speculation and restrict itself to considering only that which is demonstrable. He held that it was illogical to express quasi-scientific convictions about things that only '*may* be' and that would remain as 'improbable' as any other theory one might embrace.

But Hardy did not place the same restrictions on art. Despite his 'mistrust', there was, for him, a 'fascination' in exploring the labyrinthine world of metaphysics, once relegated to the 'domain of fancy'. The difference between Hardy's metaphysical speculations and those of the philosophers was that Hardy had long ago rescinded any idea that full knowledge, in such matters, was possible. If the speculation must be undertaken at all, it should be approached in a genre of writing that made no claims to absolute truth. The key was the process of explanation.

While holidaying in Paris in October 1882, Hardy wrote:

Since I discovered, several years ago, that I was living in a world where nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently, I have troubled myself very little about theories. . . . Where development according to perfect reason is limited to the narrow region of pure mathematics, I am content with tentativeness from day to day.¹⁰

The 'tentativeness' with which Hardy was content was synonymous with what I have referred to as his pure agnosticism: that is, his conscious decision to embrace religious and

⁹ *Li* 261-2.

¹⁰ *LW* 160.

philosophical uncertainty as a positive position in itself. Hardy played out this agnosticism through his work, and in so doing he created a body of work that is a paradigm of agnostic thought. Through his novels Hardy explored the human experience—relationships, emotions, and the predicament of inexorable suffering—and through some of his poems he considered metaphysics more directly. In both genres he showed a refusal, on one hand, to endorse any one system of belief; on the other, to refuse the potential validity of many systems of belief. In his writing, this positive uncertainty takes the form of a scrupulous refusal to fix the terms for belief in a First Cause or origin of human life, and a rejection of certainty in what can be known in the human and natural world more broadly. Literature, understood as a series of seemings, is the appropriate vehicle for that broad view of the world. Hardy was alert to the moral quandary of the individual who takes seriously the scientific rationalists' claims to the necessity of unbelief, searching, in his work, for a basis on which we might live well and kindly in a world where God cannot be found. For Hardy, swapping one set of dogmatic principles for another was irrational. Though the metaphysical questions never go away, and society as a whole will take a long time to reach Hardy's position of eclecticism and tolerance, the best that can be hoped for in this world is to step back from strict rationalism to embrace a more human loving-kindness.

The claim of this thesis has been that, Hardy, as artist, was thus able to take agnosticism further than the agnostics. He was, in quite large measure, sympathetic to their views; but whereas, for the hard-headed scientist, agnosticism showed where rational inquiry must end, for Hardy, agnosticism showed where useful artistic inquiry might begin. The 'domain of fancy' could not be proven but it could be used to explore the products of 'pure imagination', and the end result would be interpretations of reality that individually and collectively were more 'truthful than truth'.

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