

## Unorthodox Theists: Thomas Hardy and Percy Bysshe Shelley

An attempt at interrelating certain aspects of Hardy's work with those of Shelley's may not entirely prove abortive. One of Hardy's most widely anthologised poems, *The Darkling Thrush* bears significant resemblance to one of Shelley's most widely anthologised poems, *Ode to the West Wind*. Robert Langbaum in his *Thomas Hardy in Our Time* considers the imagery of *The Darkling Thrush* to be a modern counterpart to the Romantic scenery. The forest-lyre of Shelley's *Ode* turns into a set of tangled bine-stems, scoring the sky like strings of broken lyres and the ethereal skylark of the Shelley poems appears as a frail, gaunt bird's body wasted by age.<sup>1</sup> The contrast is outstanding. Yet Shelley's poetry should not be conceived as entirely canopied by the enthusiasm still present in the *Ode*. Even if scenes beaming with the light of spirit and beauty abound in Shelley's verse, even if Thomas Hardy preaches a gloomy world, there are instances in the poetry of Shelley that might have provided the seeds of Hardy's greyish plant, there are "obscure clouds moulded by the casual air" there,<sup>2</sup> that might have provided for the rainy background, too. The famous question of 1819, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" acquires a sombre, ironic tint with *The Sensitive Plant* in 1820:

When winter had gone and spring came back,  
The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck;  
But the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and darnels,  
Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels.

(114-7)

<sup>1</sup> Robert Langbaum. *Thomas Hardy in Our Time*. London: Macmillan, 1997, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> P.B. Shelley. *The Triumph of Life*. 532.

Harold Bloom writes of Thomas Hardy as of a poetic mind that came to life through its clash with Shelley's poetry. In *A Map of Misreading* Bloom asserts that the central meter-making argument in Hardy's poetry, "the sceptical lament for the hopeless incongruity of ends and means in all human acts" bears the pervading influence of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*.<sup>3</sup> It is Shelley's vision of a "captive multitude," of old men and women "foully disarrayed, shaking / Their grey hairs in the insulting wind;" his sickness in the face of "the world and its mysterious doom," his grief over the way "power and will / In opposition rule our mortal day," over how "God made irreconcilable / Good and the means of good,"<sup>4</sup> that must have echoed long in Thomas Hardy's memory, along with lines such as "Great and mean / Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow,"<sup>5</sup> until he put *Nature's Questioning* on paper, leaving no doubts about a similar vision granted to him as well:

Meanwhile the winds and rains  
And Earth's old glooms and pains  
Are still the same, and Life and Death are neighbours nigh.  
(26-28)

Both Shelley and Hardy had a strong affinity with matters hidden in Death's backyard. Their poetry is densely populated with spirits, presences, memories, and ghosts. Shelley's presences are like a "pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream," they are "glimmering incarnations / Of hopes and fears, and twilight Phantasies."<sup>6</sup> Hardy's ghosts are pale images wandering in deserted houses, echoes of voices that would never die away, past episodes that like "sick leaves reel down in throngs," like "white stormbirds wing across" the poems.<sup>7</sup> A considerable part of their poetic output suggests that both were ready to venture into border-areas of this and the other world. They were equally interested in matters of love and death, and their respective views provoked like outrage among their contemporaries.

Topics related to sexual conventions as well as metaphysical speculations – especially if the latter disclosed religious doubts – seem to have been extremely

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom. *A Map of Misreading*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> P.B. Shelley. *The Triumph of Life*. 119, 165-6, 244, 228-31.

<sup>5</sup> P.B. Shelley. *Adonais*. 185-6.

<sup>6</sup> P.B. Shelley. *Adonais*. 117, 111-2.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hardy. *During Wind and Rain*. 7, 14.

delicate to tackle during the creative period of both the authors discussed here. Those who were brave enough to publicly put their views forth in a direct, sceptical, antagonistic manner were also liable to bear severe consequences.

Percy Bysshe Shelley found himself expelled from Oxford University on writing his pamphlet *On the Necessity of Atheism* and exhibiting it in the shop-window of an Oxford bookshop under a pseudonym. Germs of the poet's early materialism and later idealism are equally present in this prose piece:

There is no God. This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit coeternal with the universe remains unshaken.<sup>8</sup>

The rebuke he was subjected to for his too enthusiastic response to William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which he probably first read in Eton in 1809, was only the beginning of a process which soon reduced Shelley to the status of a "monster" in the eyes of those who claimed to be treading the righteous path.<sup>9</sup> His radical political views, which except for those held by Blake and William Hazlitt, were the most consistent of those times,<sup>10</sup> his misunderstood unconventional attitude towards love and women severed for good most social contacts for Shelley in England, turning him into an outcast.

Thomas Hardy had all his creative life been struggling with the morasses of social conventions. As he put it, he was being harassed within the boundaries of style and form, whereas the real reason for the hostile critical reception lay in his own distinctive views upon the nature and order of the universe.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Shelley, who had never tried to disguise facts about his private life, Hardy led a

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<sup>8</sup> P.B. Shelley. "The Necessity of Atheism." *Selected Essays on Atheism*. Arno Press & The New York Times, 1972, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley's views on the perfectibility of man, on his susceptibility to perpetual improvement also originate in Godwin's *Enquiry*, which, according to Timothy Webb (*The Violet in The Crucible*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 3), he planned to translate into French. Godwin's ideas were obviously not a chance 1809 experience for Shelley. The 1820 *Letter to Maria Gisborne* still mentions the philosopher approvingly. The influence of Godwin, traceable in the development of the Romantic spirit, may reveal further implications if thoroughly researched.

<sup>10</sup> Carlos Baker. *The Echoing Green*. Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> (On *The Dynasts*) "[...] in spite of some notable exceptions, the British Philistine is already moved by the odium theologium in his regard of it, though the prejudice is carefully disguised..." "[...] though the critics are in doubt what to say, they have been fairly respectful, but I wish they would not disguise their objection to the philosophy under the cloak of an objection to the form." *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*. Samuel Hynes ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, III. p. 99.

life of carefully guarded privacy, and in order to avoid ulterior investigations, he had arranged for a biography, formally written by his second wife, Florence Emily Hardy, amassed and dictated in fact by himself. These tactics have, in the long run, obviously led to a heightened interest of later critics in the facts of Hardy's hidden life.<sup>12</sup>

During the nineteenth century, writes Carlos Baker, his love poetry and short lyrics helped to establish a stereotype of Shelley as

[...] Ariel, a fleet-footed, rosy-fingered messenger from another world, who never stayed in one place long enough to invite or permit intellectual analysis or appraisal.

W. H. Auden, on the other hand, was dissatisfied with Shelley's poetry, as he "never looked at or listened to anything except ideas."<sup>13</sup> Before discovering the indebtedness of *The Triumph of Life* to Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and before admiring Shelley's terza rima and his precision and economy of image, T. S. Eliot was wondering about how far it was "possible to enjoy Shelley's poetry without approving the use to which he put it" that is, without sharing his views and sympathies, some of which Eliot did "positively dislike."<sup>14</sup> In 1984 Baker laments over the fact that most Shelley criticism has been devoted to "literary source hunting and bibliographical fact hunting" and stresses the importance of considering Shelley as the "visionary philosophical poet," in the line of descent from "the mythmaking Plato, through Dante and Milton, up to Blake and Coleridge, and on to the later Yeats."<sup>15</sup>

As regards the history of its reception, Hardy's work seems to have usually been assessed in the light of the critics' commitment to certain ideologies or literary theories. On one side he is dismissed as a "minor" poet by Richard Blackmur and F.R. Leavis, who, while praising the modernist sacred monsters, have hardly got a good word to say about his commonplace, unmelodious poetry.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Gittings in *The Young Thomas Hardy* 1975, significantly altered the perceptions of a large number of readers who had assumed, perhaps too casually, that Hardy's family background, as described in *The Life* he had prepared for Florence Emily, had been truthfully rendered. Gittings's research, much of it conducted for the first time, identified an alarming number of lies and artful misstatements in Hardy's account. Harold Orel. *The Unknown Thomas Hardy: The Lesser Known Aspects of Hardy's Life and Career*. The Harvester Press, 1987, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, p. 112, 32.

<sup>14</sup> T.S. Eliot. "Shelley and Keats." *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, p. 112.

Then he is used as a “stick with which to beat the modernists,” as Langbaum puts it. J. Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom rank Hardy among the most influential poetic minds of his century, in his inspired, varied and minute treatment of everyday life’s basic matters.<sup>16</sup>

In their views upon religion and divinity, both Shelley and Hardy professed opinions far from being orthodox. They both, unorthodox theists developing new deistic systems, have imposed their own vision of the universe, and they both have adopted a somewhat sceptical view in doing it. Shelley prophesized the possibility and the supremacy of a humanity living harmoniously due to Universal Benevolence, and not due to the fear of hell or of public opinion, the “code of custom’s lawless law.”<sup>17</sup> He believed most humans were lost in a malefic labyrinth because of their ignorance of the true way. He believed that acquainting them with ideal worlds would open their imagination towards living in one.<sup>18</sup> The poet has the task of enlightening his flock of readers. Yet the militant enthusiasm of the young Shelley reached moments of despair too, even in poems of purest imagination as *The Witch of Atlas*:

Error and Truth had hunted from the Earth  
All those bright natures which adorned its prime,  
And left us nothing to believe in, worth  
The pains of putting into learned rhyme.

(51–4)

Hardy was far from thinking he would be able to convert people through the power of his words. Still, he had carefully poured his vision into his novels, poems and *The Dynasts*, the epic drama he regarded to be his masterpiece. He did this despite his strong resentment of hostile criticism, despite his conviction,

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<sup>16</sup> Langbaum, p. 36; J. Hillis Miller. *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*. Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 78; Harold Bloom. *A Map of Misreading*. Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> P.B. Shelley. *The Witch of Atlas*. 541.

<sup>18</sup> “The imagination [...] acquires by exercise a habit [...] of perceiving and abhorring evil. [...] The only distinction between the selfish man and the virtuous man is that the imagination of the former is confined within a narrow limit, while that of the latter embraces a comprehensive circumference.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. D.H. Reiman, S.B. Powers ed. New York: Norton, 1977, p. 189.

before he would put a single word on paper, that his lines were going to stir the shallow waters of Victorian public opinion. And they did.<sup>19</sup>

*The Dynasts*, Hardy's longest poetic work, is also the one that carries much of his philosophy. The term has always been controversial with Hardy. He states in several of his prefaces and letters that whatever his work contains, it does not count as philosophy, it being merely a mass of 'moments of vision,' of momentary impressions, recordings of fleeting states of mind. Yet then he mentions himself not only the philosophy behind the drama, but also the 'philosophy of life' shaped in previous volumes of verse.<sup>20</sup> Hardy's cautious attitude might be due to his horror of being instantly labelled and classified on basis of a superficial glance thrown over his writings.

Thomas Hardy has been called an atheist several times. Nevertheless he was not. He considered himself to be a "harmless agnostic" taken by the "literary contortionists" in their "crass illiteracy" for a "clamorous atheist." He attended church more or less regularly throughout his long life, in spite of his view that "the days of creeds are as dead and done as the days of Pterodactyls."<sup>21</sup> His constitution required much sounder evidence for being able to accept Christian dogmas ("I have been looking for God for fifty years, and I think that if he had existed I should have discovered him," he wrote in an 1890 note included in his *Life*), yet he viewed the Church as an emotional centre of cohesion, a link with tradition and a vehicle of public worship which should not be suspended with,

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<sup>19</sup> Hardy's 3 August 1907 *Letter to Clement Shorter* excellently illustrates the critical turmoil around his work and the way he perceived it: "I endeavour to profit from the opinions of those wonderful youths and maidens, my reviewers & am laying to heart a few infallible truths taught by them: e.g., -  
That T. H.'s verse is his only claim to notice.

That T. H.'s prose is his real work.

That T. H.'s early novels are his best.

That T. H.'s later novels are his best.

That T. H.'s novels are good in plot & bad in character.

That T. H.'s novels are bad in plot & good in character.

That T. H.'s philosophy is all that matters.

That T. H.'s writings are good in spite of their bad philosophy.

This is as far as I have got at present, but I struggle gallantly on." *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*. R. Little Purdy, Michael Millgate eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, III. p. 266.

<sup>20</sup> Hardy. *The Collected Letters*. III. p. 255.

<sup>21</sup> Florence Emily Hardy. *The Life of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan, 1962, p. 332.

despite its institutional abuse of the purest early Christianity.<sup>22</sup> As for the universe, he adopted and modified Schopenhauer's vision of the will to live, and transformed it into the notion of the Immanent Will, of which he wrote "I believe too, that the Prime Cause, this Will, has never before been called It, in any literature English or foreign." The term *will* was not the only one Hardy considered for his purpose. Being questioned several times on his matter of choice, he wrote that other terms, as unconscious formative activity, urgency or impulse had also occurred to him, but he chose will, about which

[...] in the lack of another word to express precisely what is meant, a secondary sense has gradually arisen, that of effort exercised in a reflex or unconscious manner. Another word would have been better if one could have had it, though "power" would not do, as power can be suspended or withheld & the forces of nature cannot.

(*Collected Letters*, III. p. 117.)<sup>23</sup>

In *The Dynasts* Hardy managed to combine two of his grandest projects: the literary rendering of the Napoleonic Wars, an *Iliad* of nineteenth century Europe, as he put it, and the exposition of his specific views upon the working of the universe.

The span of Napoleon's reign Hardy chose to orchestrate ranges from 1805 to 1815, ten years of glamour and misery on every side partaking in the War, a perfect stage for the demonstration of a superior "Immanent Will," which

[...] works unconsciously, as heretofore,  
Eternal artistries in Circumstance,  
Whose patterns, wrought by rapt aesthetic rote,  
Seem in themselves its single listless aim,  
And not their consequence.

(*The Dynasts*, I. Fore Scene)

<sup>22</sup> "If the doctrines of the supernatural were quietly abandoned tomorrow by the church & "reverence & love for an ethical ideal" alone retained, not one in ten thousand would object to the readjustment, [...] & our venerable old churches & cathedrals would become the centres of emotional life that they once were." Thomas Hardy. *The Collected Letters*, III. p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> The Immanent Will had already been discussed at length by Eduard von Hartman in his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, translated into English in 1884, and by Schopenhauer, in his *The World as Will and Idea*, read by Hardy in its 1890 translation. J. Hillis Miller. *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, p. 117.

The concept was not a new one in Hardy's poetry.<sup>24</sup> Quite a number of his poems signal the presence in the world of a superior power, "Vast Imbecility," "Great Face behind," indifferent to the suffering of humanity:

Has some Vast Imbecility,  
Mighty to build and blend,  
But impotent to tend,  
Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?  
(*Nature's Questioning*, 13-6.)

I talk, as if the thing were born  
With sense to work its mind;  
Yet it is but one mask of many born  
By the Great Face behind.  
(*The Last Chrysanthemum*, 21-4.)

The myth of this Will having deserted the world, having put its cares off is present in the poems and in *The Dynasts* as well. It slightly resounds of the story of the Fall, for Hardy blames not the Will for the state of things he seems to perceive – as this strange entity is *ab ovo* blameless, having no aim, no logic, no passion, no rule – but humanity:

The Earth of men – let me bethink me... Yea!  
I dimly do recall  
Some tiny shape I built long back  
(Mid millions of such shapes of mine)  
So named [...] It perished, surely – not a wrack  
Remaining, or a sign?

[...]

And 't is strange – though sad enough –  
Earth's race should think that one whose call  
Frames, daily, shining spheres of flawless stuff  
Must heed their tainted ball!

(*God-Forgotten*, 11-6, 33-6.)

<sup>24</sup> *The Dynasts* came out in three series, in 1903, 1905 and 1907, while Hardy published his first book of poems in 1889.



As one sad story runs, It lends Its heed  
To other worlds, being wearied out with this;  
Wherefore its mindlessness of earthly woes.  
Some, too, have told at whiles that rightfully  
Its warefulness, Its care, this planet lost  
When in her early growth and crudity  
By bad mad acts of severance men contrived,  
Working such nescience by their own device.

(*The Dynasts*, I. Fore Scene)

Possible examples for these bad mad acts are certainly abounding in the period covered by *The Dynasts*. The epic drama is also made a vehicle of Hardy's comments upon human vanity, immorality and the spirit of the flock, on basis of which the masses are governed by the kingly heads of Europe towards a chaotic state that much resembles the one into which the Unconscious Will thrusts humanity:

I see red smears upon the sickly dawn,  
And seeming drops of gore. On earth below  
Are men – unnatured and mechanic-drawn –  
Mixt nationalities in row and row,  
Wheeling there to and fro  
In moves dissociate from their souls' demand,  
For dynasts' end that few even understand!

(*The Dynasts*, II. 6. 3.)

Be Hardy's Immanent Will as inedite as he in several of his letters claims it to be, the reader might ponder over some lines of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* that pencil the presence of a similarly terrifying blind figure that is supposed to govern the earthly turmoil:

All the four faces of that charioteer  
Had their eyes banded [...] little profit brings  
Speed in the van and blindness in the rear,  
Nor [...] [...] that these banded eyes could pierce the sphere  
Of all that is, has been, or will be done...

(99–104)

A specific kind of view unites the elements of Hardy's epic drama. For one thing, the narrative is presented as viewed by "Spirits" from above, the whole human show becoming thus somewhat insignificant. Throughout this perspective the organic character of the universe becomes visible, a fact that much reminds one of Shelley's description of the same attribute, on different grounds, though:

*Spirit of the Pities*

Amid this scene of bodies substantive  
 Strange waves I sight like winds grown visible,  
 Which bear men's forms on their innumerable coils,  
 Twining and serpentining round and through.  
 Also retracting threads like gossamers –  
 Except in being irresistible –  
 Which complicate with some, and balance all.

[...]

*Spirit of the Years*

These are the Prime Volitions, – fibrils, veins,  
 Will-tissues, nerves, and pulses of the Cause,  
 That heave throughout the Earth's compositure.  
 Their sum is like the lobule of a Brain  
 Evolving always that it wots not of;  
 A Brain whose whole connotes the Everywhere,  
 And whose procedure may but be discerned  
 By phantom eyes like ours; the while unguessed  
 Of those it stirs, who (even as ye do) dream  
 Their motions free, their orderings supreme;  
 Each life apart from each, with power to mete  
 Its own day's measures; balanced, self-complete;  
 Though they subsist but atoms of the One  
 Labouring through all, divisible from none...

(*The Dynasts*, I. Fore Scene)

While Hardy sees the world as a huge anthropomorphic organism, where everything falls into place in constructing the overall pattern momentarily designed by the Immanent Will,<sup>25</sup> Shelley conceives it in its uttermost unity, within which every particle resembles the whole, and everything contributes to the resulting harmony:

There's no atom of yon earth  
But once was living man;  
Nor the minutest drop of rain,  
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,  
But flowed in human veins.

(*Queen Mab*, 211-5.)

The merging of the human and natural elements in Shelley's verse is also traceable on the level of such modifiers as "smiling air," "wakeful stars," "enamoured air," "waking dream," "young moon," "casual air." Elements of nature bear human-like characteristics, while mortals are viewed through a set of features taken from the natural environment. People are "Numerous, as gnats upon the evening gleam," man is borne as "one of the million leaves of summer's bier." Man and nature are animated by the same power as "living winds [...] flow / Like waves above the living waves below."<sup>26</sup> The association of the two entities occurs in *Epipsychidion* as the female and male principles of nature sublimate at the apogee of visionary experience:

Be this our home in life, and when years heap  
Their withered hours, like leaves, on our decay,  
Let us become the overhanging day,  
The living soul of this Elysian isle,  
Conscious, inseparable, one.

(536-40)

Shelley is noted for his ability to illustrate the nature of thinking through effects of musicality and light, to create a sort of landscape of the mind, to populate his Nature with concepts of ethics and philosophy and to describe the

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<sup>25</sup> "The nether sky opens, and Europe is disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain-chains like ribs, the peninsular plateau of Spain forming a head." *The Dynasts* I. Fore Scene.

<sup>26</sup> P.B. Shelley. *The Triumph of Life*, 46, 51.

latter in terms of natural phenomena. Hardy is an artist in catching the instances of human presence in nature.<sup>27</sup> In his rendering, man and nature are in a somewhat hierarchical relation, as nature is always a fiddle on which human spirits play the tune, is always the instrument for revealing the intricacies of a state of mind:

The black, lean land, of featureless contour  
Was like a tract in pain.

*(A Meeting With Despair)*

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...

*(Nature's Questioning)*

Wanly upon the panes  
The rain slides, as have slid since mourn my colourless thoughts.

*(A Commonplace Day)*

A glowing fire  
Is life on these depressing, mired, moist days  
Of smitten leaves down-dropping clammily,  
And toadstools like the putrid lungs of men.

*(The Dynasts, I.4.5. Napoleon)*

The same set of similar and different elements appears to the inquiring eye when taking into consideration the attitude of the two authors towards institutionalised Christianity.

Shelley's adventure with Christianity mostly broke off with his attempts to translate Pliny's *Natural History* at Eton, the chapter "De Deo" of which had defined his unorthodox stance that brought the first blow upon him by the time he dreamt of 16-year-old Harriet Grove, his cousin, who chose the security of her parents' views instead of the inflamed ideal of the poet. Shelley's letters written to

<sup>27</sup> An object or a mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by Unconscious nature. Hence clouds, mists and mountains are unimportant beside the wear on a threshold or the print of a hand. Florence Emily Hardy. *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p. 126.

Thomas Jefferson Hogg in the aftermonths of the break-off of their engagement are full of untempered attacks on the cult that had stolen his sweetheart. His hatred for Christianity, which formerly had merely been a point of view open to discussion (see his letters written to his father from Eton), may have lost its adolescent ardour, nevertheless he wrote *Queen Mab* under the spell of anti-Christian rage, and produced a line of argument against the rigidities of the cult that he himself regretted later:

Falsehood demands but gold to pay the pangs  
 Of outraged conscience; for the slavish priest  
 Sets no great value on his hireling faith:  
 A little passing pomp, some servile souls,  
 Whom cowardice itself might safely chain,  
 Or the spare mite of avarice could bribe  
 To deck the triumph of their languid zeal,  
 Can make him minister to tyranny.

(*Queen Mab*, 197–203.)

Here obviously it is not the metaphysical implications of Christianity that Shelley focuses on. It is clear enough that he basically has a distaste not for religion, but for those who made it up and have been busy keeping it alive, perverting it according to their own needs. The anti-Christian voice softens into idealist musing over the nature and essence of immortality, while the poet, unlike a “mighty mechanist” who would breathe “soul into the iron heart / of some machine portentous,” yields to the impulses of an “infancy outlasting manhood,” thus:<sup>28</sup>

So I, a thing whom moralists call worm,  
 Sit spinning, till round this decaying form  
 From the firm threads of rare and subtle thought –  
 No net of words in garish colour wrought,  
 To catch the idle buzzers of the day –  
 But a soft cell, where, when that fades away,  
 Memory may cloth in wings my living name  
 And feed it with the asphodels of fame,  
 Which in those hearts which most remember me  
 Grow, making love an immortality.

(*Letter to Maria Gisborne*, 5–14.)

<sup>28</sup> P.B. Shelley. *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, 16, 18–9, 73–4.

The youngster poet's zeal prevails only in his critique of the abusers of whatever ideal:

Or those in philosophic councils met  
 Who thought to pay some interest for the debt  
 They owed to Jesus Christ for their salvation  
 By giving a faint foretaste of damnation  
 To Shakespeare, Sidney, Spencer and the rest  
 Who made our land an island of the blest.

(27-32)

And this is the point where the views of Shelley and Hardy are in total agreement. Both were sceptical about the validity of Christian dogma, and both saw way too clearly the uses it had been put to during the turmoil of its history. Nevertheless neither of the two denied the world a higher divinity. In January 1811 Shelley wrote to Hogg:

The word God has been and will continue to be the source of numberless errors until it is erased from the nomenclature of philosophy. [...] It does not imply 'the Soul of the Universe, the intelligent and necessarily beneficent actuating principle.' This I believe in; I may not be able to adduce proofs, but I think that the leaf of a tree, the meanest insect on which we trample, are in themselves arguments more conclusive than anything which can be adduced that some vast Intellect animates Infinity.

According to J. Hillis Miller, in baroque poetry we can witness the crucial moment

[...] of a change from a poetry of presence to a poetry of allusion and absence; [...] the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem to many writers a time when God is no more present and not yet again present, and can only be experienced negatively, as a terrifying absence.<sup>29</sup>

To the common experience of a withdrawal, of a disappearance of the Divinity from the world, both authors responded by developing their own concepts of an immanent spiritual presence in the universe, neither was capable of accepting the state of a *terrifying absence*. Even if unconscious, blind and uncaring,

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<sup>29</sup>J. Hillis Miller. *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers*. Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 17.

the Immanent Will of Thomas Hardy is still an Entity in action, a supreme cause and explanation to all earthly events. He did not believe much in human perfectibility as Shelley most certainly did, yet Hardy too had made his compromise by speculating over the possibility of this Immanent Will gradually becoming conscious and thus more merciful. He ended his *Dynasts* on this tone, but regretted doing so when the First World War broke out and the world seemed to have been governed by forces more irrational than ever. Shelley was convinced that most deities were no more than projections of the psychological needs of those who believed in them.<sup>30</sup> In his view, God was created in the image of man and not the other way round:

Some moon-struck sophist stood  
 Watching the shade from his own soul upthrown  
 Fill heaven and darken Earth, and in such mood  
 The Form he saw and worshipped was his own,  
 His likeness in the world's vast mirror shown...  
 (Hellas, 46-50.)

It was the moral degradation of Christianity that drove Shelley on other paths, the implicit ugliness of his contemporaries in the ugliness of their God. His repulse to moral aspects of his age are clearly enough exposed in his *Essay on Christianity*:

Mankind, transmitting from generation to generation the legacy of accumulated vengeances, and pursuing with the feelings of duty the misery of their fellow-beings, have not failed to attribute to the Universal Cause a character analogous with their own.<sup>31</sup>

Shelley did for a time maintain his militant attitude of the youthful enthusiast who wrote revolutionary pamphlets in Ireland, to be scorned by the very Irish themselves, but lost much of his ardour during his years of exile. The thought of a vast body of verse that would convert readers and win them for the ethereal world of beauty seemed to steadily fade.

By the time Shelley began to change his point of view, realising that the world

<sup>30</sup> I.V. Chapple. *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> P.B. Shelley. "An Essay on Christianity." *Selected Essays on Atheism*, p. 19.

[...] is not so much more glorious than it was,  
 That I desire to worship those who drew  
 New figures on its false and fragile glass

As the old faded. – Figures ever new  
 Rise on the bubble, paint them as you may;  
 We have but thrown, as those before us threw

Our shadows on it as it passed away...

(*The Triumph of Life*, 245–251.)

he set out on one of his numerous sea-journeys, one that never led him back into the world of senses.

Despite the harsh crusades conducted against his unorthodox views, Hardy lived to become the living monstre sacre of English Literature, and had never ceased to re-create, to explain the meanings of his past, of his work, of his words. He remained faithful to his perhaps most poignant feature, his duplicity. He knew his fellows too well to trust them. His age never really understood how to make a distinction between the facts of a writer's work and elements of the life or conduct of the same person. Struggling now and concealing then, Thomas Hardy had basically kept the sceptical attitude characteristic of many of his poems, but had also kept a bitter feeling about the order of things too:

what we gain by science is, after all, sadness. [...] The more we know of the laws & nature of the Universe the more ghastly a business we perceive it all to be – & the non-necessity of it. As some philosopher says, if nothing at all existed, it would be a completely natural thing; but that the world exists is a fact absolutely logicless & senseless.

(*Collected Letters*, III. p. 5.)