

ABSTRACT

The Image of Christ in Thomas Hardy's Poetry of Progress

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Although many scholars discuss the importance of Christian images in Thomas Hardy's poetry, most conclude that the ideas and images of the Christian faith were ultimately inadequate for Hardy in his attempts to find hope for the moral progress of humanity. In this thesis, I argue that Christ is crucial as a figure of hope and a symbol of redemption in Hardy's attempt to assert the possibility of moral progress through human actions. Through a close reading of several of Hardy's poems, as well as a study of texts that influenced his ideas about progress and about Christ, I first discuss the importance of concrete examples of human goodness, rather than speculations about miraculous or divine help, as sources of hope for Hardy. I then examine the continued importance of Christian images, especially the figure of Christ, within Hardy's humanist worldview. To Hardy, Christ serves as a historical example of the lasting efficacy of virtuous activity, as well as a poetic symbol with the power to inspire further virtuous activity in other humans.

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THE IMAGE OF CHRIST IN THOMAS HARDY'S POETRY OF PROGRESS

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CHAPTER ONE

A Full Look at the Worst: Hardy's Search for Goodness in His Denial of Idealism

In spite of widespread accusations of pessimism throughout his long literary career, Thomas Hardy insisted that a hope for the moral advancement of humanity lay at the heart of his poetry. He states in his 1909 Preface to *Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses* that his collection of poetry "will, I hope, take the reader forward, even if not far, rather than backward" (*Complete Poems* 190), and in his important "Apology," which prefaces his 1922 collection of *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, Hardy writes concerning his works that "what is to-day...alleged to be 'pessimism' is, in truth, only... 'questionings' in the exploration of reality, and is the first step towards the soul's betterment, and the body's also" (*Complete Poems* 557).

A basic understanding of Hardy's hope for betterment is difficult to come by as a result of his emphasis on recording impressions in his poetry. He writes in his preface to *Poems of the Past and Present*:

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. (*Complete Poems* 84)

Because this impressionism is a dominant characteristic of Hardy's entire body of work, it is difficult to derive a single, clear idea of how Hardy thinks about humanity's future. Robert Schweik cautions the reader of Hardy that the influences of the various religious, scientific, and philosophical texts which Hardy had read "often overlap, and

identification of how they affected Hardy's work must sometimes be no more than a tentative pointing to diverse and complex sets of possible sources," and also observes that "Hardy was intellectually very much his own man...usually skeptical and hesitant to embrace wholeheartedly any of the various systems of ideas current in his day" (54). In his biography of Hardy, Michael Millgate also notes the difficulty of clearly and simply defining Hardy's views: "The lack of congruence between the views expressed on...two occasions seems not to have disturbed Hardy himself...and Hardy seems to have been constantly drawn towards...a reluctance to adopt absolute or even firm positions, a willingness to see virtue in all sides of a question" (205). In addition, while Hardy's earliest dated poems were written in the 1860s, his first collection of poetry was not published until the end of the nineteenth century, and many of his published poems are not dated, which makes a precise chronology of the development of his thoughts difficult to come by.

These are important points to keep in mind when studying Hardy, as any attempt to attach a specific philosophy or worldview to Hardy's body of work or to any particular era of his life can otherwise become hopelessly frustrating. Although it is possible to find a hope for moral progress throughout Hardy's works, it is important to avoid the temptation to either connect Hardy completely with any certain way of thought or to deny completely the influence of a particular philosophy on Hardy's own set of beliefs. In any study of a particular aspect of Hardy's poetry, there will almost inevitably be exceptions and contradictions. However, it is possible to uncover some essential ideas which lie at the heart of much of Hardy's thought about the possibility of hope for humanity's moral

progress by looking closely at the interactions of his poems with one another and with other texts that influenced Hardy.

Because of the difficulty of dating many of Hardy's poems, my selection of poems has been based primarily on subject matter, although I have attempted to take some account of the chronology whenever possible. In choosing the most relevant poems to discuss for the purpose of this study, I have attempted to show the presence and interaction of several strands of Hardy's thought concerning matters of moral progress and of the Christian religion, but have also focused on one particular strand—the positive role of Christ in Hardy's vision of humanity's progress—which, in the context of Hardy's work and thought as a whole, stands out from several other strands of thought through the great importance which Hardy attached to it, but which has received little notice in previous critical works.

Although many critics have discussed the nature of Hardy's hope for humanity's progress, few have given attention to the positive influence of Christ in shaping Hardy's future vision. While the importance of Hardy's use of theological language and of his lifelong interest in the Christian church remain significant topics within the majority of critical discussions concerning Hardy's hopes for humanity, the critics generally conclude that Hardy ultimately found religious thought and tradition inadequate.¹ To an extent, this is an accurate conclusion, but it falls short as it ignores Hardy's continued reliance on Christian imagery to develop in a positive sense the overall picture of progress which he attempts to create through his poetry. Christian themes and images do

¹ Tom Paulin, for example, suggests that the “injustice of circumstances and the sterility of the outer world make...religious poetry mainly a matter of rebuking a non-existent God,” and therefore Hardy must turn away from religious poetry towards a humanist aesthetic in order to rise above the harsh facts of the world (152-3).

not merely serve as examples of inadequacy which must be left in the past in order to move ahead towards an improved future; they do sometimes provide a means of portraying for the reader what human improvement looks like and how it can be achieved. This is especially true in the case of Christ as he appears in Hardy's poetry. In this sense, the Christian narrative can be placed alongside the other texts which are recognized as essential to Hardy's development of a humanist philosophy through which he finds hope for human redemption—basically characterized in Hardy's poetry by moral progress which leads to a sense of universal brotherhood, resulting in peace and self-sacrifice—within his agnostic understanding of the universe. To Hardy, Christ is significant as a poetic, emotionally powerful symbol of human virtue and change for the better, but also as a historical figure who offers a concrete example of an individual human's capacity to live a significant life of love and self-sacrifice, and thereby to effect lasting change in the world.

Before pursuing the subject of Christ further, it is necessary to review Hardy's notion of progress. A good starting place is Hardy's poem "In Tenebris II," which Hardy dates from 1895-6:

When the clouds' swoln bosoms echo back the shouts of the many and
strong
That things are all as they best may be, save a few to be right ere long,
And my eyes have not the vision in them to discern what to these is so
clear,
The blot seems straightway in me alone; one better he were not here.

The stout upstanders say, All's well with us: ruers have nought to rue!
And what the potent say so oft, can it fail to be somewhat true?
Breezily go they, breezily come; their dust smokes around their career,
Till I think I am one born out of due time, who has no calling here.

Their dawns bring lusty joys, it seems; their evenings all that is sweet;
Our times are blessed times, they cry: Life shapes it as is most meet,

And nothing is much the matter; there are many smiles to a tear;
Then what is the matter is I, I say. Why should such an one be here?...

Let him in whose ears the low-voiced Best is killed by the clash of the
First,
Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the
Worst,
Who feels that delight is a delicate growth cramped by crookedness,
custom, and fear,
Get him up and be gone as one shaped awry; he disturbs the order here.

Upon first reading this poem, there seems to be little hope offered, and the accusations of pessimism which Hardy fought against for much of his life are apparently justified. The speaker appears to be trapped in a dark state of mind, unable to reach any of the hope which seems so readily available to the majority of the world. The problem appears to lie in the pessimism of the speaker rather than in the world itself. However, there are hints throughout the poem that all is not truly well with the world, and the reader's sympathies are ultimately meant to lie with the speaker, who stands apart from the world not because of his hopelessly bleak outlook on life, but because of his concern for truth. Line fourteen of this poem offers a crucial statement for understanding Hardy's means of discovering hope: "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" (14). Hardy sets himself apart from those in the poem who believe that "Our times are blessed times," and that "nothing is much the matter," suggesting that these are meaningless sentiments with no truth in them, and therefore they cannot truly lead to progress.

Hardy's suggestion that the betterment of the world comes from looking at the world truthfully—even though this involves acknowledging the negative aspects of life—is closely related to the Positivism of Comte, whose influence on Hardy has been widely recognized by critics. In his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, Comte writes that "it is only by knowing the laws of phenomena, and thus being able to foresee them, that we can, in

active life, set them to modify one another for our advantage” (88). A knowledge of the world as it is, rather than an idealized but false vision of the world, is essential to Comte’s theory of progress, as well as to Hardy’s. Leslie Stephen, who, according to Hardy himself, had the most influence on Hardy of all of his contemporaries (Schweik 65), also shares this view, writing in *An Agnostic’s Apology*: “Dreams may be pleasanter for the moment than realities; but happiness must be won by adapting our lives to the realities” (3). “In Tenebris II” exemplifies several important aspects of Hardy’s attempt to replace dreams with realities, revealing some of the most important idealistic worldviews which he wishes to overturn by facing the worst in order to suggest the better. A close examination of Hardy’s presentation of several of these idealistic dreams in “In Tenebris II” and other poems ultimately reveals what he does maintain as a viable source of hope: observable human actions. It is through his emphasis on observable conduct that Christ becomes an important figure to Hardy, as he not only serves as a symbol to inspire virtuous actions in others, but provides a historical example of the possibility and efficacy of human virtue.

The effect of the first image of the poem, the “clouds’ swoln bosoms,” is two-fold, suggesting the motherly character of the natural world while at the same time suggesting an impending storm, indicating from the outset of the poem that there is a darkness hanging over the world in spite of what might be said to the contrary. This bringing-together of the Romantic concept of a motherly Nature with a Darwinian recognition of the natural world as an unfeeling force of both life and of destruction is a common characteristic of Hardy’s nature poetry. In “The Lacking Sense,” Hardy adapts the idea of nature as a mother to his own understanding of the natural world in order to

reject earlier notions of nature's inherent goodness. The speaker of the poem asks, "O Time, whence comes the Mother's moody look amid her labours, / As of one who all unwittingly has wounded where she loves?" (1-2), to which Time replies,

–' Ah! knowest thou not her secret yet, her vainly veiled
deficiency,
Whence it comes that all unwittingly she wounds the lives she
loves?
That sightless are those orbs of hers? –which bar to her
omniscience
Brings those fearful unfulfilments, that red ravage through her
zones
Whereat all creation groans. (16-20)

To Hardy, nature is neither a nurturing force nor a malevolent force, but simply a blind and indifferent force. There is no moral sense in nature, and therefore both good and bad occur simply as a part of the natural order. This sentiment appears again in "The Sleep-Worker," in which Hardy depicts nature blindly creating a world of "Fair growths, foul, right enmeshed with wrong, / Strange orchestras of victim-shriek and song, / And curious blends of ache and ecstasy" (5-7). The arbitrary mixture of good and ill which is evident in the world is the result of the activity of the "sleep-worker," Hardy's new designation for Mother Nature.

By combining both of these ideas of nature in the opening line of "In Tenebris II," Hardy emphasizes the simplicity of the thoughts of the people depicted in the poem, who continue to believe in the inherent goodness of the world, in contrast to his own recognition of the amorality of nature. Robert Schweik observes that Hardy was set apart from many of his contemporaries "who saw some 'grandeur' or 'progress' in evolutionary change" (63), such as A. Mary F. Robinson, in whose poem "Darwinism," the "unrest" that causes evolutionary change leads to an "invisible goal" in which "some

new gift, undream'd, unguess'd" will "end the travail of the soul" (21-24). William Clyde Brown notes that the source of Hardy's distress over Darwinism was that "Darwin's ideas had, in effect, challenged belief in the ultimate purpose of the order and process of the universe, belief in a providence auspicious for men" (90). As seen in "In Tenebris II," Hardy is unable to share the feelings of trust and hope which others continue to feel towards nature. He takes a look at the worst, relying on scientific discoveries about the natural world, rather than on conventional sensibilities regarding the world, leading him to an unsettling and uncertain vision of what the world is really like in the present and what it will come to in the future.

As the opening lines of "In Tenebris II" go on, Hardy continues to use Darwinian language, but in relation to humans rather than to the clouds, which represent the natural world. The idea of the survival of the fittest is implied, since the "many and strong" (1) and "the potent" (6) are the ones who declare "That things are all as they best may be" (2). His description of the "stout upstanders" (5) who declare the goodness of the world further suggests the presence of a human struggle: "Breezily go they, breezily come; their dust smokes around their career" (7). They are presented as an army, as if their victory in battle gives them the authority to declare the inherent goodness of life. Thus, Hardy is not only separating himself from those who still hold an idealized view of nature despite the scientific evidence which contradicts such a view, but also from those who derive their authority to make moral declarations based on their power over their fellow human beings.

Hardy's concern for the power struggle between humans is apparent in his strong concerns about warfare, which often appear in his body of work. In poems inspired by

the Boer War at the end of the nineteenth century and by World War I in the twentieth century, Hardy rejects the nationalism often prominent during war-time, focusing on the reality of warfare as man's slaughter of man. In "The Man He Killed," Hardy portrays the arbitrary nature of this slaughter, as one man, who has chosen to enlist "off-hand like" (14) thinks of the man he killed: "I shot him dead because— / Because he was my foe" (9-10). The soldier concludes that "quaint and curious war is! / You shoot a fellow down / You'd treat if met where any bar is, / Or help to half-a-crown" (17-20). The individual human opponents in the battle have nothing personal against one another. Hardy points out that war strips individuals of their identities, causing them to commit the ultimate act of violence against others for reasons which have little bearing on them personally.

Hardy further condemns this impersonal bloodshed in "Departure," focusing in this case on nations as a whole rather than on individual humans:

While the far farewell music thins and fails,
And the broad bottoms rip the bearing brine –
All smalling slowly to the gray sea-line –
And each significant red smoke-shaft pales,

Keen sense of severance everywhere prevails,
Which shapes the late long tramp of mounting men
To seeming words that ask and ask again:
'How long, O striving Teutons, Slavs, and Gaels

Must your wroth reasonings trade on lives like these,
That are as puppets in a playing hand? –
When shall the saner softer polities
Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land
And patriotism, grown Godlike, scorn to stand
Bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas?'

Here, the long-held notions of nationalistic patriotism fade along with the music in the first line, as Hardy points out the senselessness of continuing warfare in a world which has witnessed the severance and weariness caused by war. The final words of the poem

assert several evident shortcomings of warfare: the soldiers serve, as in “The Man He Killed,” as puppets, the political authorities lack sanity, and nationalism fails to understand humanity as a single race. The fact that these words seem to be heard in “the late long tramp” of the soldiers suggests that they speak of ideas which are well-known within the consciousness of those involved in war. Since the knowledge of war’s shortcomings is present within the human consciousness, there is no excuse to continue to support jingoistic patriotism, because a greater form of patriotism—one that is universal, enabling humans to recognize their common kinship—is now conceivable. Such a suggestion of conventional patriotism’s flaws overturns some of the more comforting notions of trust which Hardy depicts in “In Tenebris II,” in which the strong and mighty act as the established and trustworthy authorities in the world. By pointing out that the development of human reason has rendered their traditional policies of warfare unacceptable, Hardy asserts an unsettling idea about the social world. Just as he overturns the trustworthy idealization of nature by revealing the amoral cruelty which is often at work in the natural world, he overturns the idealized views of nationalism and political authority in his war poetry by revealing the immoral cruelty evident in the long-held tradition of patriotic warfare.

Hardy expresses a similar view of warfare in “The Sick Battle-God,” but he goes beyond asserting a distrust in traditional human authorities and suggests an even more unsettling distrust in the existence of God. The first stanza of the poem presents an earlier stage of human history:

In days when men found joy in war,
A God of Battles sped each mortal jar;
The peoples pledged him heart and hand,
From Israel’s land to isles afar. (1-4)

As Hardy traces the gradual demise of the battle-god over the course of history, he suggests that the nature of God has been dictated by the human mind throughout history. God is not a transcendent and unchanging presence, but a human construct, used to justify human deeds. In “A Plaint to Man,” Hardy depicts an imagined deity speaking to mankind: “Wherefore, O Man, did there come to you / The unhappy need of creating me – / A form like your own – for praying to?” (4-6). Deborah Collins observes that, for Hardy, “it is...dangerous to believe in a God whose existence reflects man’s inadequacy or unwillingness to solve his own problems” (25). Thus, in his desire to face the worst in order to progress towards the better, he does not shy away from presenting even such a devastating possibility as the non-existence of God, as he perceives the dangers that can come from humanity’s use of belief in God to either justify their own violent actions or to simply refuse to recognize the moral power of their own actions.

However, the poem immediately following “A Plaint to Man” in his *Satires of Circumstances*, “God’s Funeral,” suggests that Hardy does not forsake the belief in God, at least as God was traditionally understood by most people of his day, without regret. In his *Life and Work*, he refers to the subject of this poem as “the gradual decline and extinction in the human race of a belief in an anthropomorphic god of the King-of-Dahomey type—a fact recognized by theologians for many years” (381). In contrast to his matter-of-fact tone while speaking about the poem, the poem itself reveals the emotional struggle of letting go of such a long-held popular belief. This poem, like “The Sick Battle-God,” emphasizes the idea that God is created by man, and that the changing sensibilities of humanity have led to changes in the characteristics of God. “God’s Funeral” differs, however, in its emphasis on God’s change from a fierce deity into a

loving one: “Framing him jealous, fierce, at first, / We gave him justice as the ages rolled,
/ Will to bless those by circumstances accurst, / And longsuffering, and mercies
manifold” (25-28). It is much easier to see something positive in the demise of the deity
of “The Sick Battle-God” than it is in the demise of this good and merciful God. The
mourners in “God’s Funeral” are depicted as “Darkling, and languid-lipped” (38) and
wonder “who or what shall fill his place?” (45). In these lines, the idea that belief in the
Christian God is no longer possible does not appear to lead to anything good, but only to
utter despair.

The sympathy that Hardy shows towards the mourners of God is helpful for
understanding his apparent recognition of the value of the naïve idealism which he sets
himself against in “In Tenebris II.” In “The Problem,” for instance, the speaker reflects
on the cost of asserting the truth about the world over the ideal falsehoods which many
continue to hold, concluding: “Hearts that are happiest hold not by it; / Better we let,
then, the old view reign” (7-8). In this poem, Hardy’s ultimate conclusion seems to favor
the power of a person’s perception of the world rather than the power of factual
knowledge about the world: as long as the majority of humans believe that life is good,
life will be good. He posits this same viewpoint in a note recorded in his *Life and Work*:
“Thought of the determination to enjoy. We see it in all nature, from the leaf on the tree
to the titled lady at the ball....Even the most oppressed of men and animals find it, so that
out of a thousand there is hardly one who has not a sun of some sort for his soul” (222).
At times, Hardy seems to be convinced of the worth of finding joy and goodness in the
world, in spite of the harsh facts of natural laws. In several poems, particularly those
which speculate on humanity’s ultimate return to nescience, he seems to support the idea

that ignorance can be a means of making the world better simply by allowing humans to perceive the world as a good place.

In “On a Fine Morning,” the speaker of the poem suggests that solace comes “Not from seeing / What is doing, suffering, being, / Not from noting Life’s conditions, /...But in cleaving to the Dream” (1-3, 5). Although this notion directly opposes the positivist ideas which greatly influenced Hardy, there is no attempt made in the following lines of the poem to refute the first stanza, in which he considers the idea that dreams rather than facts can determine the character of life. He adapts this idea to his more scientific view of the world in “Before Life and After.” In this poem, the speaker speculates on a time in the very distant past, “Before the birth of consciousness” (3), when “None suffered sickness, love, or loss, / None knew regret, starved hope, or heart-burnings” (5-6). The emotional and moral sense of humanity is merely a result of the evolution of the human mind, suggesting that there is nothing substantial to serve as the basis of these feelings. The poem closes with the speaker wondering “Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed / How long, how long?” (15-16). This is an extreme view for Hardy, who shows a deep concern for moral problems throughout his work, but it does serve to support the idea that the world can be a better place if people simply believe that it is good, regardless of whether the facts of life suggest otherwise. If there is no eternally present basis for moral truths within nature, then there is a chance that the moral problems which presently trouble the human mind will gradually evolve away in the same way that they appeared, and humanity will be left believing in the merit of life in the absence of any convictions that suggest the contrary.

However, Hardy's moral sense does not allow him to embrace this view. On the surface, the poem "Freed the Fret of Thinking" appears to express sentiments similar to those in "Before Life and After." In the absence of advanced reasoning abilities, humanity was "light of lot" (2) and unconcerned with the perplexities of life: "What Life once or now meant / None had wanted shown – / Measuring but the moment" (10-12). The final lines, however, suggest the essential flaw in this wish for a return to ignorance: "Loosed from wrings of reason / We should laud the Powers!" (20-21). Although Hardy does not explicitly state his critique of this statement, given his representation of the Powers throughout his poetry as blind and arbitrary movers of the world, the final line implicitly forces the reader to ask whether it is a good thing that we should laud these blind and amoral forces. He is more explicit in "Thoughts at Midnight," in which the speaker's main problem with humankind is not any specific moral shortcoming, but an overall moral blindness:

Acting like puppets
Under Time's buffets;
In superstitions
And ambitions
Moved by no wisdom,
Far-sight, or system,
Led by sheer senselessness
And presciencelessness
Into unreason
And hideous self-treason (16-25)

Regardless of the origin of humanity's moral sense, the fact is that the moral sense does exist now, and as a result humanity cannot simply ignore it and still hope to be "light of lot." Even if a return to nescience is a viable possibility for humanity's future, Hardy suggests that it is not an attractive possibility to any thoughtful human being, because morality is important to human beings for its own sake, not simply as one of several

possible means to becoming content with life. Humanity has a responsibility, if to nothing besides the human conscience, to act morally and to attempt to right the wrongs of the world. Thus, the worldview of “On a Fine Morning” is also flawed, because it fails to recognize the moral problems in the world, choosing instead a sort of self-imposed nescience.

To return to “God’s Funeral,” the fifteenth stanza provides some insight into how Hardy makes sense of the conflict between his sympathy for the feelings of despair which come from bidding good-bye to out-dated ideals and his recognition that the truth of the world must be accepted in order to move on towards moral advancement: “Still, how to bear such loss I deemed / The insistent question for each animate mind, / And gazing, to my growing sight there seemed / A pale yet positive gleam low down behind” (57-60). For every traditionally accepted view of life which Hardy refutes, he also suggests that recognizing the shortcomings of these views can lead to progress. In “The Lacking Sense” and “The Sleep-Worker,” for instance, Hardy goes beyond simply accepting the natural world as it is, and posits two different sources of hope which take into account the amorality of nature and seek to overcome that moral indifference.

Hardy focuses in “The Sleep-Worker” on the prospect of nature’s moral awakening. In the first line of the poem, the speaker asks, “When wilt thou wake, O Mother, wake and see” and he concludes by speculating about the awakened mother’s response to the world: “Wilt thou destroy, in one wild shock of shame, / Thy whole high heaving firmamental frame, / Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?” (12-14). One possibility for improvement which Hardy considers is the hope that somehow the blind force of nature will eventually become morally aware and will mend the chaos of the

world, taking on the role of a mother, in accordance with the characterization given to nature by those living in a pre-Darwinian world. However, Hardy's choice to present this poem as a series of questions reveals the uncertainty of such a hope. Not only is the very act of awakening an uncertain occurrence, dependent on the same blind forces which have hitherto formed the world, but, as Hardy suggests in the final lines, the results of that awakening are uncertain. If a more certain hope is to be found, there must be a source of change separate from the natural forces.

Hardy suggests this source in the final stanza of "The Lacking Sense:"

'Deal, then, her groping skill no scorn, no note of malediction;
Not long on thee will press the hand that hurts the lives it loves;
And while she plods dead-reckoning on, in darkness of affliction,
Assist her where thy creaturely dependence can or may,
For thou art of her clay.' (26-30)

Given the blindness of nature, it falls upon humans to bring good from whatever nature causes. Here, Hardy recognizes both the moral superiority of humans over nature and the connection between humanity and nature. Rather than using humanity's role as another of nature's creatures to excuse humans from morality, Hardy understands that as members of the natural world humans also have moral responsibility, as they are the only beings capable of morality and therefore the only beings capable of deliberate improvement. Hardy provides an example of the human role in nature in his poem "Snow in the Suburbs," in which the cold and snowy natural landscape, where a sparrow falls victim to "A snow-lump thrice his own slight size" (11) that "overturns him, / And near inurns him" (13-14), is contrasted with the human figures in the scene, who give shelter to a "wide-eyed and thin" cat (19). There is no foundation for hoping in the

gradual improvement of the world through the arbitrary natural processes which harm the sparrow, but only through the compassionate actions of morally aware human beings.

This sentiment is also evident in Hardy's poem "In a Wood," although in a more skeptical form. At the beginning of the poem, the "City-opprest" (10) speaker enters a wood in hopes of finding "Nature a soft release / From men's unrest" (15-16). However, this Romantic idealization is shattered as the speaker witnesses the Darwinian struggle for survival among the trees, and the speaker ultimately concludes:

Since, then, no grace I find
 Taught me of trees,
Turn I back to my kind,
 Worthy as these.
There at least smiles abound,
There discourse trills around,
There, now and then, are found
 Life-loyalties. (33-40)

Humanity is set apart from nature by the goodness which exists in human camaraderie. Only among humans can the speaker find anything besides struggle. However, there is still a sense of human struggle present in the poem. In line 19, the warring trees are "to men akin," rather than inferior to men, because of their strife, and the oppression of the city which originally drives the speaker into the woods is still a reality of life. Thus, humanity's moral superiority to nature does not provide a complete answer to Hardy's problem of finding a means of improving the world. As one critic observes in reference to the indifferent universe of Darwinian thought, "Hardy saw this uncaring, mechanistic Universe not in the vicissitudes of Nature but in the mechanisms of society" (Padian 224). As seen in Hardy's war poems, the injustice and immorality of humans towards other humans is a more troubling issue than the natural world's blindness towards

humans. Therefore, he must also suggest a way to rise above the evils of society which have become increasingly apparent as the human moral sense has continued to evolve.

One possibility that Hardy sets forth in his poetry is that God—who, to Hardy, has the character of an impersonal Will or Mover—will have a moral awakening, much like the possible awakening of nature in “The Sleep-Worker.” In “Fragment,” Hardy depicts dead men waiting for God “To know how things have been going on earth and below it: / It is clear that he must know someday” (15-16). The dead express the hope that, since humans have evolved a moral consciousness, God must eventually evolve one as well: “We have reached knowing faster than he, / But he will overtake us anon, / If the world goes on” (24-26). Several critics have stressed the importance of Hardy’s hope in God’s awakening. Collins suggests that this hope is equal to Hardy’s hope that the human race will improve through its own ethical progress (58), and writes of him finding “solace and hope in the thought that the Mover is presently capable of tossing uncomfortably in its sleep” (68). Brown, too, sees the possibility of God’s awakening as one of the strongest sources of Hardy’s hope: “In his late poems Hardy considers another possibility which might surpass ‘a good deed nevertheless’ in its power to make life tolerable...the possibility that the Immanent Will may become conscious” (98). However, both critics also note the importance of humans as ethical authorities, responsible for educating God (Collins 59, Brown 99). This relationship between humans and God is seen clearly in “God’s Education,” in which the speaker reprimands a morally blind and careless God for taking youthfulness away from a woman:

Said I: ‘We call that cruelty –
We, your poor mortal kind.’
He mused. ‘The thought is new to me.

Forsooth, though I men's master be,
Theirs is the teaching mind!' (16-20)

While it might be ideal that such moral development take place in the Will which is responsible for otherwise uncontrollable problems of human existence, such as aging, the nature of Hardy's poems about the moral awakening of God, compared with his poems which focus solely on human life and action, suggests that Hardy does not find any firm hope in the idea of God's awakening, contrary to Collins's and Brown's suggestion. Instead, he uses poems which involve the concept of this awakening to stress the importance of human ethical responsibility.

That Hardy sees little basis for hoping in God is evident in his emphasis on the dream-like nature of the expectation that the Will will become aware. Even the title of "Fragment," which otherwise presents an unqualified hope for God's awakening, suggests that the idea of hope that is presented in the poem is incomplete. In "Agnostoi Theoi [Unknown Gods]," which also treats of a similar theme of God eventually righting the world's wrongs, Hardy expresses his skepticism, speaking of his "weak phantasies" of God (1), and using the words "Perhaps" and "may be" in reference to the possibilities of God's awakening and of the world's mending (11, 18). Perhaps Hardy's strongest expression of skepticism concerning the legitimacy of hoping for God's awakening is found in "God-Forgotten," in which the speaker imagines himself standing in the presence of God and reminding him about earth, which has been forgotten by God due to the silence of earth's inhabitants, rather than God's own forgetfulness or moral blindness. The penultimate stanza ends with God sending his messengers to "straightway put an end / To what men undergo" (43-44). However, Hardy tempers the hopefulness of this conclusion with his final stanza:

Homing at dawn, I thought to see
One of the Messengers standing by.
– Oh, childish thought!...Yet often it comes to me
When trouble hovers nigh. (45-48)

As attractive as such a hope in a blind Mover's eventual awareness of the suffering of humanity might be, Hardy ultimately places it among the naïve and ineffectual beliefs which detract from true progress. It is a comforting thought, but it is childish, and it has little basis in the observable facts of the world.

In contrast to the dream-like poems which speculate on the moral awakening of the higher forces of the world, Hardy's poems about human actions seem more concrete, portraying examples from human life rather than visions and fantasies, and in this way they suggest that Hardy places his strongest hope in observable human actions. Hardy offers a glimpse of this hope in "Often When Warring:"

Often when warring for he wist not what,
An enemy-soldier, passing by one weak,
Has tendered water, wiped the burning cheek,
And cooled the lips so black and clammed and hot;

Then gone his way, and maybe quite forgot
The deed of grace amid the roar and reek;
Yet larger vision than loud arms bespeak
He there has reached, although he has known it not

For natural mindsight, triumphing in the act
Over the throes of artificial rage,
Has thuswise muffled victory's peal of pride,
Rended to ribands policy's specious page
That deals but with evasion, code, and pact,
And war's apology wholly stultified.

As in "The Man He Killed," the soldier in this poem fights for "he wist not what;" he has no personal connection to the cause for which he is fighting. Unlike the soldier in "The Man He Killed," the soldier of "Often When Warring" reveals his emotional

disconnection from the cause not by blindly following the rules of war, but by transcending the rules of war by acting according to a natural impulse towards universal brotherhood. Hardy's observation that it is "natural mindsight" which prompts the soldier to help his enemy, as well as the fact that the soldier quickly forgets about the act which he has performed, might come across as negative, suggesting that the soldier is merely an automaton, and that his good deed is essentially meaningless because it is not consciously performed. However, the emphasis on the "larger vision" and the contrast between the "natural mindsight" of the soldier and the "artificial rage" of war indicates otherwise: human morality is grounded in reality in a way in which human evil cannot be. Moral actions are more natural than immoral actions. Thus, ethical action is capable of overcoming, if not the natural badness of the universe, at least the artificial badness which the human race creates for itself through such evils as warfare.

In this poem, Hardy takes his positivist emphasis on a general accumulation of knowledge over time, which he presents in such poems as "Departure," and focuses on one particular revelation which serves as evidence of the irrationality of warfare. A single act of natural charity proves "war's apology wholly stultified." Although in the instance of the poem the soldier does not appear to perform a conscious act, but merely follows the natural human tendency towards charitable action, the importance of positivist philosophy to Hardy's thought suggests that by portraying specific moments of moral activity in his poetry, Hardy can achieve his goal to "take the reader forward." Comte observes "the marked preference that almost all minds, from the highest to the commonest, accord to positive knowledge over vague and mystical conceptions" and asserts that "[positive philosophy's] supremacy will take place spontaneously, and will

re-establish order throughout society” (84). This idea is evident in a letter written at the turn of the twentieth century to the Red Cross Society, in which Hardy states his “hope that during the next hundred years the relations between our inward and our outward progress may become less of a reproach to civilization” (*Life and Work* 330). In light of Hardy’s interest in positivism, “Often When Warring” presents a picture of that inward moral progress, but also seems to offer to the reader the positive knowledge that good human actions are more natural than bad actions, which, according to positivists such as Comte, will result in the outward progress of society.

There remains, however, a problem with presenting human actions as positive knowledge: human actions are not all good. This is a fact of which Hardy remains acutely aware throughout his life, and which prevents him from fully embracing the optimism of such a thinker as Comte. While the hope that human goodness will ultimately correct the evils of society shines through in “Often When Warring,” other poems serve as reminders that often the evils of the world prevail. Although “Often When Warring” stands as a contrast to “The Man He Killed,” it does not manage to completely overturn the troubling truths of the latter poem because it is a fact that warfare continues just as much as it is a fact that sometimes humans act charitably in the midst of war. The effects on Hardy of the First World War are discussed in his *Life and Work*:

It may be added here that so mad and brutal a war destroyed Hardy’s belief in the gradual ennoblement of man, a belief he had held for many years, as is shown by poems like “The Sick Battle-God” and others....Moreover the war gave the *coup de grace* to any conception he may have nourished of a fundamental ultimate Wisdom at the back of things. (398)

Such disillusionment is also expressed in “We Are Getting to the End,” the penultimate poem in Hardy’s final collection of poetry. In the first stanza, the speaker laments:

We are getting to the end of visioning
The impossible within this universe,
Such as that better whiles may follow worse,
And that our race may mend by reasoning. (1-4)

The importance of warfare as the major factor in Hardy's loss of hope is apparent in the final stanza, in which the greatest evidence of the world's madness is that "nations set them to lay waste / Their neighbors' heritage by foot and horse, / And hack their pleasant plains in festering seams" (9-11). The final line of the poem announces "We are getting to the end of dreams!" (14). The language of "visioning" and "dreams" in this poem is of particular importance as it recalls the language used in Hardy's skeptical poems about the awakening of God. The hope that humanity can be improved by acquiring greater moral knowledge becomes just as naïve and baseless an idea as the hope that the blind force which governs the universe will become aware of the suffering of the world and set everything right.

However, the image that Hardy presents of himself in this poem and in the passage from his *Life and Work* as a man who has fully rejected all hopes that progress is possible is complicated by the fact that "Often When Warring" is dated 1915, during the World War which caused his loss of hope. Even after his apparent denial of any hope that humans will progress, he published one of his most poignant pictures of human goodness overcoming society's badness. Perhaps the disillusionment evident in "We Are Getting to the End" is best understood in light of the first stanza's emphasis on reason as the way to humanity's improvement. Having taken a full look at the worst in order to find a way to the better, the most persuasive conclusion which emerges from Hardy's body of poetry is that humanity's reliance on any form of simplistic idealism—whether it

be a romanticized trust in the inherent goodness of nature, a belief in the goodness of human authorities, a faith in a good God who constantly watches over and keeps the universe, or even a reliance purely on positive knowledge and reason—is an inadequate source of hope, because they have all failed to provide real moral progress. The one thing that remains for Hardy is the individual human being, whose moral sense leads to moral action.

It is at this point that Christ becomes an important figure to Hardy. One particularly important poem for this discussion is “A Christmas Ghost-Story,” which Hardy dates Christmas-eve 1899, during the Boer War:

South of the Line, inland from far Durban,
A mouldering soldier lies – your countryman.
Awry and doubled up are his gray bones,
And on the breeze his puzzled phantom moans
Nightly to clear Canopus: ‘I would know
By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening Law
Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,
Was ruled to be inept, and set aside?
And what of logic or of truth appears
In tacking “Anno Domini” to the years?
Near twenty-hundred liveried thus have hied,
But tarries yet the Cause for which He died.’

Robert Schweik interprets this poem merely as a comment “on the theme of Christianity’s ineffectualness” (57). However, as a closer examination of Hardy’s poetic use of the figure of Christ will show, this poem suggests something much deeper than the inefficacy of the Christian religion. It is not only about the Christian religion as a flawed institution, but also about the expectant hope attached to the man Jesus Christ. Brown describes the conundrum which Hardy faces in his attempt to find hope in human deeds: “those beings who must teach charity and compassion...are also agents of suffering; they themselves must experience moral improvement. They are sinners in a world without

grace, save whatever may come from among themselves” (101). It is appropriate, therefore, that Hardy would look to the most recognized exemplar of charity and grace in his search to find a type of redemption for a corrupt and war-torn world.

CHAPTER TWO

Hardy and the Higher Criticism: Maintaining Christ's Unmiraculous Significance

It is possible, given a poem such as "A Christmas Ghost-Story," to conclude that Hardy's primary attitude towards the Christian religion was one of bitter disillusionment, as the foundation of the Church—Christ's redemptive act—appears to be no nearer to its fulfillment in the modern world than it was when the Church was founded. The temptation to understand Hardy's main attitude towards the Church in this light becomes even stronger upon reading such poems as "Christmas:1924":

'Peace upon earth!' was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poison-gas.

This poem, written many years after "A Christmas Ghost-Story" and reflecting the even greater disillusionment which Hardy faced following the first World War, seems to indicate that any change which might have occurred in Hardy's view of the Church between the composition of these two poems was a progression towards greater cynicism. Unlike "A Christmas Ghost-Story," which manages to suggest at least a continued reverence for the basic cause of Christianity, "Christmas:1924" only recognizes the ineffectuality and the corruption of the forms and representative figures of the faith. In addition, the final reference to poison gas indicates that the world has not only failed to progress over the course of the Christian era, but has in fact become more violent, developing newer and fouler weapons of warfare.

However, in Hardy's Apology from his volume of poetry *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, written in 1922—also after the World War which caused the powerful disillusionment of “Christmas: 1924”—he expresses a hope that the Church will still play a role in the moral progress of the world, asking, “what other purely English establishment than the Church, of sufficient dignity and footing, with such strength of old association, such scope for transmutability, such architectural spell, is left in this country to keep the shreds of morality together?” (*Complete Poems* 561). This hope is certainly tempered—he goes on to add, “It may indeed be a forlorn hope, a mere dream, that of an alliance between religion, which must be retained unless the world is to perish, and complete rationality, which must come, unless also the world is to perish, by the interfusing effect of poetry” (561-2)—but his assertion that religion must remain in society indicates a much more complex attitude towards the Church than that which reading a poem such as “Christmas:1924” suggests. Geoffrey Harvey's notion that Hardy “replaced Christianity with social meliorism,” which he bases on an earlier comment that Hardy makes in his Apology—“pain...shall be kept down to a minimum by loving-kindness, operating through scientific knowledge and actuated by the modicum of free will” (*Complete Poems* 558)—is only partially correct (Harvey 121). Although Hardy, in his essentially agnostic worldview, rejects the supernatural elements of the Christian religion, he does maintain a certain amount of respect for and belief in the moral worth of the faith. As his comments concerning the Church in his Apology suggest, the Church remains a necessary establishment in society because of its ability to inspire virtue through the strong emotional attachment that the majority of people have to its teachings and its symbols.

Hardy's relationship with Christianity becomes more complex upon a close examination of his poetry, much of which deals with the images and teachings of Christianity, and reveals not only disillusionment, but also deep nostalgia, as well as a continued belief in a type of spiritual efficacy in the ideas and images of the faith. It is important to remember Jan Jedrzejewski's observation that "Thomas Hardy's attitude towards Christianity was far too complex to be described in terms of brief and generalised labels" (211). In his study of Hardy's relationship with the Church, Jedrzejewski suggests that one way of understanding the complexities of Hardy's views of the Church is to understand these views as changing and developing over his long lifetime. The basic trajectory shows Hardy gradually becoming more accepting of the Church's role as a moral center, even if it is no longer a source of supernatural truth. This is one helpful way of understanding Hardy's basic development, although it is complicated by the fact that some of his most bitter poems against the Church come from the same stage in which he is most ready to accept the Church. This dilemma makes it necessary to distinguish between different notions of what the Church and the Christian faith actually entail. By reading Hardy's poetry alongside the thinkers who influenced his views of the Christian religion—especially those involved in the Higher Criticism of the mid-nineteenth century—an important distinction between the moral essence of the Christian faith and the doctrines and dogma of the religion becomes evident. In making this distinction, the Church is shown to be morally significant for the symbols of universal virtue that it provides for society. In the minds of the critics who influenced Hardy and of Hardy himself, Christ continues to stand at the heart of the Christian faith

as the most important and most complete representative of the essential virtues of the Church.

Most critics who discuss Hardy's religious views at any length mention the importance of *Essays and Reviews*, the 1860 collection of critical essays on the Bible and the Christian faith which "impressed him much" (*Life and Work* 37). The influence of *Essays and Reviews* is typically discussed in relation to Hardy's loss of faith, often mentioned alongside *Origin of Species* (Collins 33, Schweik 55, Jedrzejewski 5, Hands 2). The approach taken by the English critics, as well as their German forerunners like Feuerbach and Strauss (with whom Hardy was familiar through George Eliot's translations), did indeed contribute to Hardy's skeptical view of the supernatural aspects of religious life; but these works are also important as the foundation of Hardy's continued belief in the efficacy of the Christian religion as a moral base in society. Four important critics with whom Hardy was familiar—Feuerbach, Strauss, Jowett, and Arnold—focus on the importance of Christianity as a symbol of virtue. All four of these thinkers are recognized by scholars as important influences for Hardy's thought, and references to their works appear in Hardy's literary notebooks and annotations. Although they reject the historicity of the supernatural elements of the Christian story, speaking of most of the biblical narrative as myth or legend, they do acknowledge the continued significance of this narrative and of the Church that has been formed by this narrative. Understanding each of these thinkers to whom Hardy owed a great deal concerning his own ways of thinking about the Church, as well as understanding the important ways in which Hardy diverged from these thinkers, can shed light on Hardy's presentation of the Christian faith throughout his work.

In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), translated by George Eliot in 1854, Feuerbach, working under the assumption that the divine elements of Christianity are products of the human imagination, scrutinizes various aspects of the Christian faith in order to gain a better understanding of humanity's essential nature. He writes: "Such as are a man's thoughts and dispositions, such is his God...Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God" (12). Hardy works with this idea in poems such as "The Sick Battle-God" and "God's Funeral," in which the character of a deity is transformed as the character of its human worshippers is transformed. This idea that the human mind creates an idea of God by projecting its own nature onto the nature of God forms the basis for Feuerbach's study of the Christian religion's essence. He makes a distinction between religion itself and the appearance of religion (the external symbols of the Church), criticizing his society "which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence" (xxxix). Like Hardy, Feuerbach's concern is for leaving behind illusions and ineffective ideals in order to see the truth of the world. He does not deny the importance or efficacy of Christianity in general, but only those parts of it which he views as inessential: "Religion is the relation of man to his own nature,—therein lies its truth and its power of moral amelioration" (197). Religion remains important as a way of revealing to humanity what is essential to human nature: the virtues which religion extols are the virtues which human nature extols, and religion can serve as a type of symbol, directing the human race towards those virtues. However, Feuerbach goes on in this passage to assert that "when religion advances in years, and, with years, in understanding...the originally involuntary and

harmless separation of God from man becomes an intentional, excogitated separation, which has no other object than to banish again from the consciousness the identity which has already entered there” (197). Religion, to Feuerbach, is a positive thing since it serves as a symbol and guide to moral progress, but it is only positive, in the modern world, as long as it is recognized as a symbol.

Strauss presents a similar view in his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835), which was translated into English by George Eliot in 1848. In his critical study of the Gospels, he attempts to uncover which parts of the narratives are historical and which parts are mythical or legendary stories that have been developed by the Gospel writers or through oral traditions surrounding the life of Jesus. Like Feuerbach, he works within the modern assumption that the supernatural elements are best understood as a product of the imagination. In defense of his critical account of Christ’s life, he writes in his preface:

The author is aware that the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his criticism. The supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts. The certainty of this can alone give calmness and dignity to our criticism, and distinguish it from the naturalistic criticism of the last century, the design of which was, with the historical fact, to subvert also the religious truth, and which thus necessarily became frivolous. (xxx)

Like Feuerbach, Strauss distinguishes between the essence of Christianity and the traditional dogmas and belief in the supernatural which are a part of Christianity. He suggests that the Gospels present “eternal truths,” even if not historical truths, through the ideas which they represent.

Benjamin Jowett works with a similar idea in his contribution to *Essays and Reviews*, “On the Interpretation of Scripture” (1860). Jowett’s major concern in his defense of the methods of Higher Criticism is for a return to the true meaning of the

Scripture, apart from the meanings that have been placed on it by dogmatists and theologians over the centuries:

[The interpreter's] object is to read Scripture like any other book, with a real interest and not merely a conventional one. He wants to be able to open his eyes and see or imagine things as they truly are...it would clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon [the words]. (482)

Jowett's method, like that of the German critics, is rooted in an attempt to discover the universal, essential truths of the Christian faith. By first clearing away the "encrusted" ideas from the Scripture, including assumptions about its historical accuracy, and recognizing the actual genre of each part of Scripture by correcting the "misunderstanding of the nature of the Gospel" (488), the interpreter will be able to uncover what the essential truths of the Bible are, and how these truths can be integrated into contemporary society. Jowett suggests that "the harmony between Scripture and the life of man, in all its stages, may be far greater than appears at present. No one can form any notion from what we see around us, of the power which Christianity might have if it were at one with the conscience of man and not at variance with his intellectual convictions" (503). Jowett's denial of Scripture's historical accuracy does not imply a denial of its moral efficacy. By viewing the world as it is, the interpreter of Scripture is able to look past religious principles which are based on apparently false assumptions about the world and about the nature of biblical texts, and to determine the essential message of the texts. Jowett uses the important idea of Christianity's essence in his concluding pages: "the essentials of Christianity are contrasted with the details and definitions of it...We may perhaps figure to ourselves the battle against error and moral evil taking the place of one of sects and parties" (531-2). As seen in the works of

Feuerbach and Strauss, the basic elements of the Christian faith (in this case, the particular element of Scripture) are still useful parts of society as they present the basic, universal truths of human morality.

Matthew Arnold, in his essay “A Comment on Christmas” (1885), also pursues this line of thought, asserting “that apart from all question of the evidence for miracles and of the historical quality of the Gospel narratives, the essential matters of Christianity are necessary and eternal facts of nature or truths of reason” (227). Although Hardy’s reading of this specific text is not documented, Hardy’s interaction with other of Arnold’s texts is evident throughout his notebooks, and he refers to himself in a letter as a disciple of Arnold (Buckler 10). The essay “A Comment on Christmas” contains several of Arnold’s central ideas, including his assertion that “the strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry,” a statement from his “Study of Poetry” which Hardy cites in his notebooks (182). Given Hardy’s devotion to Arnold, it is not at all unlikely that he was familiar with this particular essay, but regardless of his familiarity with this specific text, the essay’s focus on Christ makes it a useful text for comparing Arnold’s thoughts concerning Christianity and Hardy’s own thoughts.

In this essay, Arnold defends the continued role of Christianity in society as a source of moral truth, focusing particularly on the role of the Christmas narrative as a legend rather than as an historical record. Again, like the other critics who were interested in uncovering the essence of Christianity, there is an emphasis on the importance of recognizing the truth of the unmiraculousness of actual history: “he who would help men will probably now do most good by treating this element with entire unreserve. Let him frankly say, that miracle narrated in the Bible is as legendary as miracle narrated

anywhere else, and not more to be taken as having actually happened” (233). While he is aware of the necessary difficulties of losing such a belief because of the strong emotional attachment that so many people have to it, he also believes this emotional attachment can play a positive role in moral progress:

As time goes on, as legend and miracle are less taken seriously as matters of fact, this worth of the Christmas legend as symbol will more and more come into view. The legend will still be loved, but as poetry—poetry endeared by the associations of some two thousand years; religious thought will rest upon that which the legend symbolizes. (231)

As a poet himself, Arnold takes the ideas of the historical critics and adds to them an emphasis on the poetic value of Christianity. The focus of the previous three critics is on intellectual recognition of truth; Arnold, while maintaining this emphasis, focuses on the emotional recognition of truth. His emphasis on the Christian narratives’ importance as poetry mirrors Hardy’s own interest in the importance of poetry: he writes in his Apology that rationality must come to the world “by the interfusing effect of poetry” (562). The legends and symbols surrounding the Church are important because they reveal, through their poetic appeal, universal truths which are essential to human nature, and it is important that these legends and symbols (as long as they are recognized as legends and symbols) remain in society because their emotional appeal makes them function as a moral guide in a way in which no other parts of society can.

Hardy’s poem “The Respectable Burgher: On ‘The Higher Criticism’” reveals Hardy’s acknowledgment of both the positive and negative implications of the rise of this new criticism:

Since Reverend Doctors now declare
That clerks and people must prepare
To doubt if Adam ever were;
To hold the flood a local scare;

To argue, though the stolid stare,
 That everything had happened ere
 The prophets to its happening sware;
 That David was no giant-slayer,
 Nor one to call a God-obeyer
 In certain details we could spare,
 But rather was a debonair
 Shrewd bandit, skilled as banjo-player:
 That Solomon sang the fleshly Fair,
 And gave the Church no though whate'er,
 That Esther with her royal wear,
 And Mordecai, the son of Jair,
 And Joshua's triumphs, Job's despair,
 And Balaam's ass's bitter blare;
 Nebuchadnezzar's furnace-flare,
 And Daniel and the den affair,
 And other stories rich and rare,
 Were writ to make old doctrine wear
 Something of a romantic air:
 That the Nain widow's only heir,
 And Lazarus with the cadaverous glare
 (As done in oils by Piombo's care)
 Did not return from Sheol's lair:
 That Jael set a fiendish snare,
 That Pontius Pilate acted square,
 That never a sword cut Malchus' ear;
 And (but for shame I must forbear)
 That —— —— did not reappear!...
 - Since thus they hint, nor turn a hair,
 All churchgoing will I forswear,
 And sit on Sundays in my chair,
 And read that moderate man Voltaire.

The “respectable burgher” who speaks in this passage, is subtly criticized through the irony of his final decision to turn to Voltaire rather than the Church. The farcical nature of the poem is emphasized in the monotonous rhyme scheme, which often results in awkward line endings. By treating a common man's response to critical methods in this comical way, Hardy suggests that the burgher's response to the criticism is not necessarily the ideal response. However, the poem does recognize that the results of critical examinations of the Bible do pose a very real threat to the traditions of ordinary

people. The long list, moving from the story of creation, through the Old Testament, and finally to the resurrection of Christ, shows the foundational and traditional beliefs of the Christian faith being overturned. The rhyme scheme, beyond its comical function, also gives a sense of the exhaustion which comes of so many proposed changes to the most basic beliefs of so many people. It also serves, through its monotony, to emphasize the danger of the poetry of the Christian faith being lost to the purely rationalistic tendencies of the biblical criticism of such critics as Feuerbach, leading to the loss of the important emotional appeal that gives the Church a unique role in society as a moral guide. The decision to suddenly replace a long-held practice of religion with Voltaire is at least partially understandable in light of the devastation which critical conclusions can cause to a person's belief system when that system is suddenly stripped of everything which seems to make it meaningful. Thus, Hardy reveals at once both sympathy for and a critique of the burgher's response to new critical accounts of Scripture. It is right to be troubled; it is not, however, right to so conclusively discount all that the Church can still represent.

Hardy reveals a more personal response to the pain of losing faith in "The Oxen." In this poem, Hardy reflects on the firm belief which he held in his childhood that, on Christmas Eve, the oxen knelt in honor of Christ. He expresses the painful nostalgia of later years:

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
'Come; see the oxen kneel

'In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,'

I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so. (9-16)

In a sense, the poem ends with hope, but based on the tone of the poem as a whole it is an empty hope. Hardy's hope for a miraculous occurrence is rooted in his nostalgia, not in fact. The reality of the final lines of the poem is the gloom of the penultimate line; the childish idea of the oxen kneeling is mere fancy. As Collins observes, this "seemingly pastoral poem which is often presented as evidence that he nursed the hope of restored faith, reveals that Hardy never confused wishful thinking with perceived truth" (19). It might be pleasant to believe in miracles, but for Hardy, such belief is no longer an option in light of the observable facts of the world.

Another poem, "The Lost Pyx," though apparently similar to "The Oxen," provides an interesting contrast which sheds light on Hardy's understanding of the function of mystical symbolism. Hardy subtitles this poem "A Mediaeval Legend," making it evident from the outset that it is not meant to be taken as an historical event. Instead, as he explains in a footnote, it is a local legend, meant to explain the presence of a pillar. In this poem, set during a stormy night, a priest is called to the bedside of a dying man, to which he reluctantly goes only after he receives a terrifying vision of heavenly disfavor in a dream. Upon arriving at the man's bedside, he discovers that, in his struggle to make his way through the storm, he has lost the pyx. He sets out "in a heat of shame" to find the pyx and discovers it in a miraculous setting:

Till here on the hill, betwixt vill and vill,
He noted a clear straight ray
Stretching down from the sky to a spot hard by,
Which shone with the light of day.

And gathered around the illumined ground
Were common beasts and rare,

All kneeling at gaze, and in pause profound
Attent on an object there.

'Twas the Pyx, unharmed 'mid the circling rows
Of Blackmore's hairy throng,
Whereof were oxen, sheep, and does,
And hares from the brakes among;...

The ireful winds that scoured and swept
Through coppice, clump, and dell,
Within that holy circle slept
Calm as in hermit's cell. (45-56, 61-64)

Because Hardy establishes from the beginning that this story is not an historical account, there is no sense in the poem of nostalgia or lost hope as there is in "The Oxen." In this way, the poem can more readily serve as a source of truth. Hardy's resemblance to the critics discussed above is evident here. Rather than trying to convince himself or the reader of the factual occurrence of a miraculous event, Hardy accepts the event as mythical and finds meaning in that myth.

In her article on Hardy's use of myth in his writings, Felicia Bonaparte stresses the rising importance of myth as critics like Feuerbach and Strauss increasingly emphasized the mythological nature of Christian beliefs. She writes that in Victorian literature "myths could serve as conceptual frames capable of making order out of the chaos of experience" (417). However, she goes on to conclude that "Christian paradigms in Hardy are almost invariably invoked for the sake of being undermined" (429), an idea which is shared by several other critics, especially those most interested in Hardy's novels (Springer 145; Paulin 96; Hands 51, 77). This is indeed true of many of Hardy's religious allusions, but there are a significant number of exceptions, especially in his poetry. The positive role of Christian mythology in "The Lost Pyx" reveals the essential power that is contained within the symbols of Christianity. The priest is presented as

morally flawed because of his careless treatment not only of the pyx itself, which ought to be revered, but also of the soul of a dying man, whom he visits not out of a sense of concern or compassion, or even of religious duty, but because he fears for himself. His attitude is contrasted with that of the natural world, which recognizes the reverence due to the sacred object. The priest is occupied with the external forms of the Christian faith; the animals, and even the weather itself, are occupied with the essentials—the elements of the religion that represent salvation. Thus, Hardy in this poem echoes the thoughts of the critics who distinguish between the doctrines and external rites which have developed over time, and the essential, universal truths of the faith which represent the truths of human nature.

The good that is inherent in the Church even after the supernatural elements have been stripped from the faith is also apparent in “Apostrophe to an Old Psalm Tune,” in which the speaker traces the presence of a psalm tune throughout his life. In the first stanza, he is a young and innocent church-goer:

I met you first – ah, when did I first meet you?
When I was full of wonder, and innocent,
Standing meek-eyed with those of choric bent,
While dimming day grew dimmer
In the pulpit-glimmer. (1-5)

Through the rest of the poem, the tune appears again in different settings and in different forms, serving as a source of stability through the speaker’s changing life. The tune’s role as a stabilizing force is especially evident in the final stanza:

So, your quired oracles beat till they make me tremble
As I discern your mien in the old attire,
Here in these turmoiled years of belligerent fire
Living still on – and onward, maybe,
Till Doom’s great day be! (31-35)

Although the perspective of the speaker and the character of the world have changed from the first stanza to the last, the psalm tune continues on. Concerning the importance of such forms of worship as psalms or weekly lessons in the Church, Tom Paulin observes that they were important to Hardy for the “numerous personal associations and meanings which had nothing to do with what [they] actually mean[t]” (46). In the case of this old psalm tune, Hardy associates it with the wonder and innocence of his youth, and its continued presence even in a time of warfare seems to suggest that such innocence might still be possible, and might last beyond the “turmoiled years.” However, it is not merely a symbol of a baseless hope. Jędrzejewski suggests that the psalm is significant “far beyond its narrow Biblical context into the sphere of the common experience of all humanity...The ultimate message of the poem is therefore that of the universal nature of Christianity’s – and all humanity’s – fundamental call for peace” (168). Again, Hardy is presenting the value of the parts of the Christian religion that reveal universal truths, especially as the emotional attachment which society has to these parts of religion inspire a greater concern and love for the truths they reveal. The psalm tune serves as a representation of the essence of Christianity.

He again joins the critics in searching for this essence in “The Graveyard of Dead Creeds,” in which he presents a picture of what is not essential. Just as the four critics discussed above sought to strip away the theological doctrines based on non-factual assumptions in order to find essential truths, Hardy also expresses a wish to distinguish between the truths and the constructs of the Christian faith. This poem shows the speaker wandering through a “graveyard of dead creeds” filled with “old wastes of thought” (1,

2). These dead ideas represent the various dogmas and ideals which have ceased to be effective. In the final stanza, the ghosts of the dead creeds explain their role in society:

‘Out of us cometh an heir, that shall disclose
New promise!’ cried they. ‘And the caustic cup

‘We ignorantly upheld to men, be filled
With draughts more pure than those we ever distilled,
That shall make tolerable to sentient seers
The melancholy marching of the years.’ (13-16)

These creeds represent to Hardy the false ideals that he counters in “In Tenebris II,” discussed in the previous chapter. They do not actually solve any problems in the world, but instead serve as a type of drug, causing their upholders to ignore the problems. In a letter concerning the reformation of the Prayer Book, Hardy expresses his view of the creeds of the Church: “I may say that it has seemed to me that a simpler plan... would be just to abridge the creeds and other primitive parts of the Liturgy, leaving only the essentials” (*Life and Work* 465). This view of the limitations of creeds and other religious doctrines appears elsewhere in the *Life and Work*, specifically in reference to baptism: “Christianity did not hang on temporary details that expediency might modify, and... the practice of an isolated few in the early ages [is not] binding on its multitudes in differing circumstances” (34). For Hardy, the specific doctrines of the creeds are not essential truths. Creeds pass away as time moves on and the world changes. The ideas that seem to offer hope at the time that they are put forth as dogma are eventually shown to be ineffective, and humans must be willing to recognize this and base their concepts of essential moral truths on something other than creeds.

Hardy’s reference to Christ in “The Graveyard of Dead Creeds” seems to suggest that Christ is one of the ineffective ideas that ought to be done away with, or at least

adapted to suit the present state of the world. The ghosts of the creeds allude to the prophetic reference to Christ in Matthew 2:6: “And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel” (AV). The occurrence of this reference in the speech of the creeds suggests that the new promise which was brought about through Christ is just as dead as the creeds that represent this promise. The disillusionment apparent in Hardy’s Christmas Eve poems seems to verify such an interpretation. However, his view of Christ extends far beyond Christ’s connection with the ineffectual creeds. In the works of Feuerbach, Strauss, Jowett, and Arnold, Jesus is not merely part of a worn-out doctrine, nor is he even simply an emotionally and psychologically powerful symbol, like the pyx or the psalm tune. Christ is at the center of all four attempts to derive the essence of Christianity. Hardy’s close connection to these critics continues in this respect.

Jowett’s observations concerning creeds closely resembles Hardy’s, and his discussion of the creeds in relation to Christ can clarify Hardy’s own views:

Between Scripture and the Nicene or Athanasian Creed, a world of the understanding comes in—that world of abstractions and second notions; and mankind are no longer at the same point as when the whole of Christianity was contained in the words, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou mayest be saved,’ when the Gospel centred in the attachment to a living or recently departed friend and Lord. The language of the New Testament is the first utterance and consciousness of the mind of Christ; or the immediate vision of the Word of life (I John i.I) as it presented itself before the eyes of his first followers, or as the sense of his truth and power grew upon them (Romans i. 3,4); the other is the result of three or four centuries of reflection and controversy. (490)

The importance of biblical criticism, to Jowett, lies in its ability to return the reader to what Christ actually taught and represented, rather than what later teachings of the Church construed Christ’s message to be. The creeds, and the picture of Christ presented

in the creeds, do not necessarily convey an accurate idea of Christ's teachings. Jowett goes on to suggest that Christ himself would be a proponent of adapting the teachings of the Church: "The world changes, but the human heart remains the same; events and details by which they are governed, or the rule by which we are to act, is not different...we cannot suppose that our Saviour, were He to come again upon earth, would refuse thus to extend [his words]" (524). Christ is distinct from the modern Church because he was primarily interested in changing opinions. Jowett notes the irony "that in the present day the great object of Christianity should be, not to change the lives of men, but to prevent them from changing their opinions; that would be a singular inversion of the purposes for which Christ came into the world" (502). In this view, then, Christ is the ultimate exemplar of the attempt which Hardy demonstrates in poems such as "In Tenebris II" to accept the truths of the world, which become apparent through the human race's intellectual development, in order to progress morally.

The nature of Christ's words, therefore, takes on a more inward and universal sense. To Jowett, the specific precepts given by Christ are not meant "to be followed on all occasions and to last for all time," but must instead be interpreted within "the liberty with which Christ has made us free" (493). This means that Christ's counsel "is a counsel of perfection, and has its dwelling place in the heart of man...this inwardness of the words of Christ is what few are able to receive; it is easier to apply them superficially to things without, than to be a partaker of them from within" (493). Essentially, Christ presents ideals instead of specific and practical rules of conduct. It is up to his followers to determine how the essence of his words can be applied in the contemporary world.

This idea of Christ as a representative of ideal principles occurs in the other critical works under discussion. To Feuerbach, the human mind's creation of an incarnate God as the center of its religion suggests that the ultimate goal of religion is "that God, who in himself is nothing else than the nature of man, should also have a real existence as such" (145). Christ is "the ideal of humanity become existent" (154). Of course, to Feuerbach, the actual divinity of Christ is a myth. The importance of Christ lies in the reason for the creation of this myth: humans need to know that the virtues of God can exist within the human race—"The Son is the satisfaction of the need for mental images" (75). Thus, once humans have recognized the mythological nature of the Incarnation, it is no longer a necessary myth because this recognition leads to the realization that the virtues taught by Christ are virtues which have been created by the human mind, and are therefore already inherent to humanity. Feuerbach focuses particularly on love, the ultimate virtue of God. He writes: "The idea of love is an independent idea; I do not first deduce it from the life of Christ; on the contrary, I revere that life only because I find it accordant with the law, the idea of love" (266). When humanity recognizes this truth, it can progress through acting upon the virtue of love, and the Christian religion, including the idea of Christ, will eventually cease to be necessary:

In love, in reason, the need of an intermediate person disappears. Christ is nothing but an image, under which the unity of the species has impressed itself on the popular consciousness... Christ is the love of mankind to itself embodied in an image—in accordance with the nature of religion as we have developed it—or contemplated as a person, but a person who (we mean, of course, as a religious object) has only the significance of an image, who is only an ideal. (268)

Christ is a necessary part of humanity's belief system because of the virtues that he represents, but only temporarily. Eventually, Feuerbach suggests, the image of Christ,

even after it has been separated from the doctrines of the church and the belief in the supernatural, will no longer be necessary for humanity's moral progress, as the virtues that are contained in the symbol of Christ become more firmly rooted in the mind of the human race.

Although Strauss's primary task in his *Life of Jesus* is not to discuss the moral import of Christ, but instead to consider the truth of historical claims about Jesus' life, he does offer some reflections on how Christ can still be of importance to society after most of the beliefs about the facts of his life have been turned into myths. Strauss's final conclusion about Christ is similar to that of Jowett and Feuerbach, as he views Christ as an important symbol of ideal human life. Although, as he argues through his historical study, all of the traits which are ascribed to Christ by the Church cannot possibly be contained logically within one human being, "in the idea of the human race, they perfectly agree" (780). The virtues of Christ are virtues which are present in the human race as a whole, though not all at once in each individual. Through the idea of Christ, humanity as a whole can be elevated to a higher life:

This alone is the absolute sense of Christology: that it is annexed to the person and history of one individual, is a necessary result of the historical form which Christology has taken... Faith, in her early stages, is governed by the senses, and therefore contemplates a temporal history; what she holds to be true is the external event... But mind having once taken occasion by this external fact, to bring under its consciousness the idea of humanity as one with God, sees in the history only the presentation of that idea; the object of faith is completely changed; instead of a sensible, empirical fact, it has become a spiritual and divine idea, which has its confirmation no longer in history but in philosophy. (780-1)

Fact is unimportant in comparison to the idea of Christ. It is not the historical existence and activity of Christ that ought to inspire his followers, but the idea of the virtues that are inherent to humanity as a whole, and are presented in the idea of Christ.

Arnold also bases his discussion of Christ on the idea that his miraculous conception and birth is legendary, and that this legend is an important aspect of the Church's value to society: "when legend represents the founder of Christianity and great exemplar of this virtue [purity] as *born of a virgin*, thus doing homage to purity, it does homage to what has natural worth and necessity" (228). The "natural worth" of the virtue represented in Christ grounds the significance of Christian legend in its relation to universal truths of morality. As in the previous critics, the universal virtues represented in the Christian religion are ultimately rooted in the virtues of Christ himself: "what is the kingdom of God? The ideal society of the future. Then what is immortality? To live in the eternal order, which never dies. What is salvation by Jesus Christ? The attainment of this immortality. Through what means? Through faith in Jesus, and appropriation of his method, secret, and temper" (234). By recognizing Jesus as a representative of ideal virtues, and acting out those same virtues, humanity can reach a type of salvation, not in the spiritual sense of attaining literal immortality in a literal heaven, but in the earthly sense of improving the material world. Arnold goes on to assert, similar to Feuerbach, that "as time goes on, it will be more and more manifest that salvation does not really depend on conformity to the line of Jesus" (235). However, within his own society, Arnold still maintains the importance of Jesus as the representative of how life ought to be lived, and the importance of encapsulating universal virtues in the legends of Christ's life.

Hardy's viewpoint concerning Christ often corresponds to the views of these critics. His *Life and Work* tells the story of Hardy's coming upon an image of the crucifixion "tottering to its fall; and as it rocked in the wind like a ship's mast Hardy

thought that the crudely painted figure of Christ upon it seemed to writhe and cry in the twilight: "Yes, Yes! I agree that this travesty of me and my doctrines should totter and overturn in this modern world!" (143). By separating the person of Christ from the doctrines of the Church, Hardy distinguishes between Christ himself and the ineffective doctrines which have weakened and distorted the actual power of Christ. This power, in one way that Hardy understands it, lies in the universality of Christ's teachings: "[Christianity] now limits itself to the religion of emotional morality and altruism that was taught by Jesus Christ...But this teaching does not appertain especially to Christianity: other moral religions within whose sphere the name of Christ has never been heard, teach the same thing" (*Life and Work* 358). In reference to Comte's Religion of Humanity, particularly his positivist calendar which recognizes through a type of canonization the great human movers of history, Hardy remarks that Positivism would have been accepted by more people "if Comte had introduced Christ among the worthies in his calendar...it would have enabled them to modulate gently into the new religion by deceiving themselves with the sophistry that they still continued one-quarter Christian" (*Life and Work* 150-1). Such an emotionless, positivistic view of Christ seems strange coming from the writer of a nostalgic poem like "The Oxen," and it is in a case like this that it is important to recall that one of Hardy's central goals in his work was to record the various impressions of life. If at some points he seems to be most sympathetic to the detached viewpoint of Feuerbach, he often portrays a stronger connection to the viewpoint of Arnold, in which Christ's emotional and poetic power is his most important trait. Returning once again to "A Christmas Ghost-Story," this aspect of Christ's symbolic power is apparent. Christ is separate from the Church here as he continues to

be effective in stirring up the desire and the expectancy for peace on earth. The human establishment which is responsible for “tacking ‘Anno Domini’ to the years” (10) has failed in bringing the world any closer to the goal of peace. Christ himself, however, still functions as a literary, emotionally provocative symbol of an inherent desire for peace which has remained present within the collective mind of humanity. The fact that he has remained such a powerful symbol for so long is evidence of this desire’s continuity. Hardy still recognizes the power of Christ’s death in bringing about “the All-Earth-gladdening Law / Of Peace” (6-7), but that power rests in its symbolic power as a legend rather than in any literal supernatural power of divine redemption. By pointing out the disparity between the idea of peace that Christ represents and the efficacy of his followers thus far in history, Hardy uses Christ to reveal the truth of the world: the desire for peace is a natural, universal virtue that is central to humanity’s concept of redemption, but this redemption has not been brought about by the work thus far carried out by Christ’s followers.

The image of Christ can be very effective as a symbol of an ideal, and Hardy does value the image in this regard, but given Hardy’s tendency to ultimately reject mere ideals in favor of real human action, Christ must remain an essentially weak figure when he is characterized only according to the symbolic significance which is emphasized in the works of Higher Criticism. Collins writes that “perhaps the reason Hardy failed to establish a watertight case against pessimism is that his desperate trust in meliorism was undercut by a deeper conviction that such confidence was historically unwarranted” (157). If all of Hardy’s speculations on meliorism were confined to such ideas as those expressed by the critics, it certainly would be historically unwarranted: Hardy’s hope

would be placed only on a significant symbol of how humans ought to think and live, but not on actual human activity. However, there is another way that Hardy uses the portrayal of Christ in his poetry—as an historical human being—and this, combined with the idea of Christ as a symbol of virtue, suggests that Hardy, unsatisfied with the Christ who is left to the world after critical examinations of his life and works, sought a new way to allow Christ to continue as a necessary part of the moral advancement of the world.

In a letter from 1905, in which Hardy discusses Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish state, he writes: “nobody outside Jewry can take a deeper interest than I do in people of such extraordinary character and history; who brought forth, moreover, a young reformer who, though only in the humblest walk of life, became the most famous personage the world has ever known” (353). Hardy’s deep interest in Jesus as a “famous personage” arises in several of his poems. The most often-discussed of these is his long poem “Panthera,” in which he retells a legend that appears in various writings, as he points out in the heading of his poem, including the writings of Origen, the Talmud, the Apocryphal gospels, and Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*. This legend denies the miraculous birth of Christ, instead attributing his birth to a secret encounter between Mary and a man named Panthera. In his evaluation of the legend, Strauss rejects it as “not only extravagant, but revolting” and concludes that the Virgin Birth is best understood as neither a supernatural event nor a lie to cover the sin of Mary, but as a myth created by Christ’s followers to emphasize his greatness (140). Hardy does not simply reject it as Strauss does, though; instead, he bases one of his longest poems on this legend. His purpose in doing so is not to convince the reader of the historicity of the event—he

includes several lines that cast doubt on Panthera's tale, thereby making it less threatening to the Christian reader and emphasizing that the main point of the poem is not Panthera's historical validity ("That the said woman did not recognize / Her lover's face, is matter for surprise. / However, there's his tale, fantasy or otherwise" [194-6]). Hardy's real interest in this poem reflects one of his major interests throughout his body of work: the ironies which are inherent in human life. While working as an officer in Palestine, Panthera arrives at an apparently routine crucifixion one day to discover that the mother of one of the men being crucified is a woman with whom he had an affair about thirty years before. He then learns of a rumor "how at Nazareth long before / An old man wedded her for pity's sake / On finding she had grown pregnant, none knew how" (157-9). This upsetting discovery that his son is a malefactor causes the events of the day to remain in his mind:

...A day of wont
It was to me, so far, and would have slid
Clean from my memory at its squalid close
But for an incident that followed these. (85-88)

The irony of Panthera's story arises from the reader's knowledge of the real significance of the day: Panthera, from his limited historical viewpoint, only sees the personal ramifications of knowing that an unnamed criminal is his son; the reader understands that this unnamed criminal, and the "incident" of his crucifixion, is actually responsible for drastically altering history through his death, as his death leads to the creation of a powerful moral symbol and of a powerful moral force—the Church—which continue in the present day.

Hardy uses similar irony in "The Wood Fire," in which a man warms himself by a fire which he has kindled with the crosses from crucifixions a week before, one of which,

the reader learns, was used for “That Galilee carpenter’s son / Who boasted he was king.../ And it’s worthless for much else, what with cuts and stains thereon” (14-15, 18). Again, the significance of Christ’s life, immediately apparent to the reader, is not yet evident to those of Christ’s own time who have only a limited awareness of his life. Yet this irony also occurs in “An Evening in Galilee,” which focuses not on a stranger who has had limited contact with Jesus, but on his own mother, who expresses her fear that her son is mad. His radical actions, as he “professes as his firm faiths things far too grotesque to be true” and mixes “with the lowest folk” and “that woman of no good character” (5, 15, 17), lead her to conclude:

It is just what all those do who are wandering in their wit.
I don’t know – dare not say – what harm may grow from it.
O a mad son is a terrible thing; it even may lead
To arrest, and death!... And how he can preach, expound, and read! (21-24)

The very things that make Christ great in the Christian world—his new teachings, his acts of love, and his death—are the things that trouble Mary the most about her son. Like Panthera and the man in “The Wood Fire,” Mary is limited in her understanding by her limited view of history.

Hardy’s interest in depicting these limited views of the life of Jesus reveals his particular concern for viewing Christ as an important historical (rather than just symbolic) figure whose words and actions are responsible for creating the moral power in the Church. Even given the mythological nature of many events in Christ’s life, which is especially an important element of Strauss’s study in which the historical life of Christ nearly vanishes beneath all of the myths created by his followers, Hardy still finds it important to remember Christ as an historical human being. Strauss himself offers a way

of thinking about this aspect of Christ, writing that “we must take into account the overwhelming impression which was made upon those around him by the personal character and discourse of Jesus, as long as he was living amongst them, which did not permit them deliberately to scrutinize and compare him with their previous standard” (85). The reason for so many myths concerning Jesus, Strauss suggests, is that his life was impressive enough that his followers could easily perceive him as the Messiah and present him as such. Although this concept does not appear in Strauss’s final conclusion concerning the continued significance of Christ, it does play a crucial role in Hardy’s view of Christ as a powerful source of hope. The fact that the life of a single human being formed the basis of so many morally significant ideas and symbols means that there is room for hope in humanity. As Leslie Stephen puts it in his essay “The Religion of All Sensible Men:” “What sect is analogous to the ancient Christians? Who are the Christians of the present day?...May there not be doctrines, apparently too absurd for discussion, which are spreading in obscure regions far below the surface of conscious and articulate thought, and destined to have their day?” (854-6). Hardy implicitly raises the same question in his historical depictions of Christ, who is perceived by his contemporaries as an absurd or obscure figure. The continued appearance of Christ, both explicitly and implicitly, in much of his poetry reveals his reliance on understanding Christ as both a historical and symbolic figure as he depicts humanity itself as the most reliable source of hope for the world’s improvement. Christ is not merely important to moral progress for the emotional connection which so many have with him, nor simply because he represents an ideal of virtue which the human race might eventually reach.

He is important to Hardy because he was a real human being, who brought about real change in the moral life of the world.

CHAPTER THREE

“These Nameless Christs:” Christ’s Moral Example in Hardy’s Poetry

In “Near Lanivet, 1872,” a woman’s simple act of resting against a handrail suggests an image of crucifixion that is powerful enough to cause a lingering sense of distress: the woman declares “I wish I had not leant so!” (16), and is evidently shaken as she continues her walk with the poem’s speaker: “as if afraid / She heavily breathed as we trailed” (21-2). The act leads her to think “If no one is bodily crucified now, / In spirit one may be” (27-8), and the speaker of the poem concludes with an indication that the woman herself was eventually “crucified, as she wondered if she might be / Some day,” leaving the precise nature of this crucifixion a mystery to the reader (31-2). Through his depiction of this event, Hardy reveals the typological significance of the symbol of the crucifixion in the minds of his society, as a commonplace posture of rest becomes a reminder of deep suffering, both physical and spiritual. Although the image is not considered in any expressly Christian way of thought, the widely-recognized symbol of Christ’s death has a special power as a basis for thinking about the human condition of the present day. The presence of Christ in several of Hardy’s poems has a similar function, as various aspects of the life and work of Christ provide significant images for understanding Hardy’s more general view of human life. As a powerful representative of truth and goodness, as well as a reminder of both the presence of suffering and of the hope for some type of moral redemption for humanity, the figure of Christ becomes an important means of understanding Hardy’s own thoughts concerning these matters. As

seen in several important poems in which Christ appears, his activity during his life provides a guide for thinking about human moral progress, not only by a reliance on his teachings, but by a reliance on the aspects of his life that have emerged over time as universal images of virtue and truth, and a hope in the possibility of other “Christs” emerging throughout history to continue to establish virtue and truth.

This does not mean that Hardy easily accepts every idea attached to the figure of Christ. Hardy raises the problematic idea of resurrection in his poem “A Drizzling Easter Morning,” in which he sets aside his unbelief in the miraculous in order to consider what the idea of Christ’s literal resurrection means for the world in the tumultuous and wearying state in which Hardy perceives it:

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

In this pained speculation on the meaning of redemption through Christ, Hardy finds no solace in the traditional Christian idea of bodily resurrection. Having lived in acute awareness of the persistent moral ills of humanity and the even more permanent amoral ills of the natural world, the ideas of resurrection and eternal life are not as appealing to Hardy as the idea of eternal rest. In this poem, death is presented as a welcome release from a troubled life: the grave is a “sheltering door” that keeps out the “blusters” and provides relief from the painful labors of life. Hardy’s emphasis on the weather is

especially important here, as it highlights the harsh forces of nature that no human can change. In such a wearying world, the miracle of Christ's resurrection is rendered meaningless, as indicated by the ellipsis—as one scholar calls it, the “ellipsis of bitter resignation” (Roberts 56)—at the end of line one, with which the speaker passively acknowledges the resurrection as a possibility that does not change much about the world as it is. Even if Christ has risen, the world still carries on as it always has, and the only salvation its weary inhabitants really want and need is the type that comes from the eternal rest of death.

The sentiments of this poem seem to suggest that the idea of Christ as a redeemer ultimately fails in its role of offering hope and inspiration for the troubled world. Jon Roberts offers that the “dashed hope” presented in the poem “need not argue against other, less worldly forms of redemption by Christ” (57), but given Hardy's overall acceptance of Christ as an un-miraculous figure, the redemption of Christ can only come in worldly forms. The idea of resurrection in this poem is not an assertion of an actual belief of Hardy's, but instead is a means of conducting a thought experiment concerning the real value of a belief in the miracle of resurrection. Hardy's view of the world and of moral progress requires a worldly redemption, brought about in and through humanity. Although the image of Christ fails in this poem to validate any real sense of hope, the importance of Christ as a positive image is particularly apparent in “Unkept Good Fridays:”

There are many more Good Fridays
Than this, if we but knew
The names, and could relate them,
Of men whom rulers slew
For their goodwill, and date them
As runs the twelvemonth through.

These nameless Christs' Good Fridays,
Whose virtues wrought their end,
Bore days of bonds and burning,
With no man to their friend,
Of mockeries, and spurning;
Yet they are all unpenned.

When they had their Good Fridays
Of bloody sweat and strain
Oblivion hides. We quote not
Their dying words of pain,
Their sepulchres we note not,
Unwitting where they have lain.

No annual Good Fridays
Gained they from cross and cord,
From being sawn asunder,
Disfigured and abhorred,
Smitten and trampled under:
Such dates no hands have scored.

Let be. Let lack Good Fridays
These Christs of unwrit names;
The world was not even worthy
To taunt their hopes and aims,
As little of earth, earthy,
As his mankind proclaims.

This poem, read alongside “A Drizzling Easter Morning,” indicates an important distinction in Hardy’s thought between two crucial moments in the life of Christ: to Hardy, Good Friday is of much greater importance than Easter Morning. As a historical human being, whose life on the earth continues to have profound significance in the modern world, Christ’s death functions as the truly important symbol, as it marks Jesus himself as a historical figure who has died for the sake of virtue, and establishes him as the most important symbol of other humans who have died the same type of death. Martyrdom, for a moral cause, remains a powerful act to Hardy, as it speaks of the continued human capacity to act in favor of goodness, even to the point of self-sacrifice;

resurrection, on the other hand, because of its miraculous nature, is at best a dubious thing to believe and, as “A Drizzling Easter Morning” suggests, does not have the same moral worth as a symbol that the crucifixion has, because resurrection does not entail the same notion of moral activity during life as the crucifixion does. Throughout his poetry, therefore, it is to the life and death, not the resurrection, of Christ that Hardy typically looks when offering a positive image of hope for humanity’s moral progress.

However, while he rejects literal notions of individual souls living eternally, he does not simply ignore the idea of eternal life. His poetry is filled with speculations on life after death; yet these speculations perceive eternal life not as a literal resurrection from the dead, but as a continuance of what each person has represented to the world during their life. In this way, it is the symbolic significance of life, rather than the miracle of bodily resurrection, that determines the eternal destiny of each person.

Hardy’s basic understanding of immortality is apparent in his poems “Her Immortality” and “His Immortality.” In “Her Immortality,” the speaker visits the grave of a woman he loves, whose ghost appears to him and tells him that

A Shade but in its mindful ones
Has immortality;
By living, me you keep alive,
By dying you slay me. (37-40)

The soul’s immortality is dependent upon the lives of those who knew the deceased person: it is a function of memory. “His Immortality” presents a similar concept:

I saw a dead man’s finer part
Shining within each faithful heart
Of those bereft. Then said I: ‘This must be
His immortality.’ (1-4)

However, as in “Her Immortality,” the soul’s immortality is dependent on the survival of those who still remember the man. As the speaker ages, he watches the dead man’s immortality fade: in the end, the aging speaker is the only person left who remembers the dead man, and the apparently immortal soul of the dead man is nothing but “a feeble spark / Dying amid the dark” (15-16). In both of these poems, the hope for immortal life falls short because even immortality, as it is depicted here, comes to an end. There is comfort in the deceased’s presence in the memories of the living, but this is only a temporary comfort, as eventually the memory of the deceased will also die away.

However, other poems of Hardy’s suggest that there is a way to transcend the fate of eventually vanishing completely from the life and memory of the living world, as they assert that it is not the individual person so much as the words and works of the person that attain true immortality. Such an alternate view of immortality helps to shed light on the contrasting uses of Christ in “A Drizzling Easter Morning” and “Unkept Good Fridays,” and on the importance of Christ as a historical figure and symbol of moral progress. This notion of immortality is particularly evident in Hardy’s poems about great artists and thinkers. By leaving behind visionary works, their souls achieve a true immortality through the living presence of their words and works in the minds of the living. In his poem “George Meredith,” Hardy reflects on the death of the writer who, as indicated throughout Hardy’s *Life and Work*, was a close acquaintance of his. In this poem, Hardy speaks of Meredith as someone “whose wit can shake / And riddle to the very core / The counterfeits that Time will break,” and who possessed a “luminous countenance and rare” (7-9, 11). Meredith’s wit is depicted as having a transcendent

power, and the man himself is spiritualized through the description of his countenance.

The poem concludes:

...when now all tongues declare
His shape unseen by his green hill,
I scarce believe he sits not there.

No matter. Further and further still
Through the world's vaporous vitiate air
His words wing on – as live words will. (13-18)

Having established Meredith's powerful character, Hardy at first finds the idea of his death difficult to accept, but concludes on a hopeful note, as he expresses his assurance that the transcendent nature of Meredith's life will continue, not through the eternal presence of the man himself, but through the immortality of his words. The image of Meredith's words in flight, going "further and further" suggests that these words continue to have a long-lasting power of their own: they do not simply linger after the death of the writer, but instead exist dynamically, exhibiting a liveliness and strength that contrasts with the lifelessness and corruption of their "vaporous, vitiate" surroundings, and spread through the world. Because Meredith's immortality is not dependent simply upon the finite existence of those who remember him—as is the case with the souls of "His Immortality" and "Her Immortality"—but on the still-existing works that he left behind, his life remains significant, even after his person has vanished from life and memory.

Like Meredith's lasting works, it is the works of Christ which Hardy finds to be the meaningful and lasting aspects of Christ's life. Thus, the symbol of Good Friday is more positive and helpful to Hardy than the symbol of Easter, because the focus of Good Friday is the definitive action of Christ's life, which, in Hardy's un-miraculous worldview, is the truly important part of Christ's significance. In contrast to orthodox

Christian theology, the hope of eternal life which is represented in Easter is not, for Hardy, in itself a final solution to the world's ills. Instead, the alternative form of eternal life that Hardy posits suggests that immortality is a consequence of the centrally important need to produce works during life that can lead to changes in the world. In this view, Christ's resurrection itself does not accomplish anything worthwhile; instead, his actions and words, and the powerful act of martyrdom in which they culminated, are the truly powerful force of Christ's life on earth, and his resurrection is merely a symbolic indicator of the power of his deeds during his life.

Hardy does not always easily embrace the idea of the immortality and the positive force of visionary works, as indicated in some of his poems concerning society's response to the truths presented by its visionaries. Hardy presents an especially bitter tone in "A Jingle on the Times," dated December 1914. In the first seven stanzas, Hardy portrays seven varieties of creative or moral figures—a painter, a sculptor, a poet, a musician, an actor, an architect, and a preacher—each of whom offers his work to society, only to have it rejected as unnecessary and unwanted. In the conclusion of the poem, the rejected group asks "How shall we ply, then, / Our old mysteries?" and are informed by the members of society of the "Good, artistic, / Cultured, Christian / Thing to do" (57-8, 62-4):

'To manners, amenities,
Bid we adieu, –
To the old lumber
Of Right and True!
Fighting, smiting,
Running through;
That's now the civilized
Thing to do.' (65-73)

In spite of the efforts of these figures to present deeper understandings of the world and of morality to society—the poet attempts to “set in view / Life and its secrets,” the musician tries to put “balm...On the passions people / Are prone unto,” and the preacher “would ensue / Whatsoever things are / Lovely, true” (18-9, 26-8, 50-2)—society chooses to ignore the truths which are offered to them, and instead pursue violence. The possibility of moral progress is offered, but it is rejected. It is not enough, therefore, that works of a transcendent, immortal nature be produced: they must also be accepted by the world in order to be truly effective, and Hardy’s pessimistic view of progress comes from the apparent inefficacy to which potentially world-changing works are fated.

However, in the continued immortality of his actions and teachings, Christ persists as a powerful symbol for modern society, offering greater reason for hope. The connection between Christ’s symbolic immortality and that of other souls is apparent in Hardy’s poem “Lausanne: In Gibbon’s Old Garden: 11-12 p.m.,” inspired during a European tour and commemorating, according to the headnote “the 100th anniversary of the completion of the ‘Decline and Fall’ at the same hour and place.” In this celebration of Edward Gibbon’s work, the writer is presented as a Christ-figure:

A spirit seems to pass,
 Formal in pose, but grave withal and grand:
 He contemplates a volume in his hand,
 And far lamps fleck him through the thin acacias.

Anon the book is closed,
 With ‘It is finished!’ And at the alley’s end
 He turns, and when on me his glances bend
 As from the Past comes speech – small, muted, yet composed.

‘How fares the Truth now? – III?
 – Do pens but slily further her advance?
 May one not speed her but in phrase askance?
 Do scribes still aver the Comic to be Reverend still?’

‘Still rule those minds on earth
At whom sage Milton’s wormwood words were hurled:
*“Truth like a bastard comes into the world
Never without ill-fame to him who gives her birth”?*’

As he completes his work, Gibbon echoes the words uttered by Christ as he completed his work on the cross: “It is finished” (John 19:30). By connecting Gibbon directly to Christ in this way, Hardy suggests that the controversial work of Gibbon contains an essential power to inspire progress in the world, similar to the power in the work of Christ, especially, as the poem goes on to express, through its commitment to truth. The conclusion of this poem is similar to the conclusion of “In Tenebris II,” in which Hardy expresses the need to view the world truthfully, but also the difficulty of finding acceptance within society when viewing the world in such a way. Hardy not only brings other writers and thinkers into the group of those who uphold truth at the risk of condemnation, but Christ himself, whose crucifixion as a result of his radical claims serves as the ultimate symbol of the rejection that Hardy finds himself and other writers facing. In spite of the inefficacy that is sometimes apparent even in the Christian faith, as the world continues in its violent tendencies, the continuous effect of Christ’s life and work, and his continued power as a symbol of truth and righteousness, also provides a way of seeing beyond the temporary problem of rejection. Like the eternally effective work of Christ, the works of the other “Christs” of history have a transcendent power to continue guiding the world.

This power is not confined only to prominent figures of history. Hardy makes it clear throughout his works that the lives of common people have the potential for lasting significance for the moral progress of society. This idea arises in “The To-Be-

Forgotten,” the poem immediately following “His Immortality” in the 1901 collection *Poems of the Past and Present*, which continues Hardy’s reflections on the matter of immortality and the fear of simply fading away from memory and thereby entering a state of eternal death. In this poem, the souls who are fading out of memory lament their fate, as they prepare to enter “oblivion’s swallowing sea” (22). However, the poem goes on to reveal a possible way by which souls can avoid such a fate and achieve a type of true immortality. In the final two stanzas, the souls continue their lament:

‘For which of us could hope
To show in life that world-awakening scope
Granted the few whose memory none lets die,
But all men magnify?

‘We were but Fortune’s sport;
Things true, things lovely, things of good report
We neither shunned nor sought... We see our bourne,
And seeing it we mourn.’ (25-32)

It is through great actions, those of “world-awakening scope,” that humans can attain a permanent place in the memories of the living, and therefore achieve immortality. However, the spirits who speak in the poem ascribe the ability to attain this immortality to the workings of Fortune: they are merely victims of fate, doomed to be forgotten because they do not belong to the fortunate few who have the capacity to achieve great things. Lines 30 and 31, however, suggest that the opinion of the “to-be-forgotten” is not meant to be the prevailing message of the poem. The problem with the lives of these souls is not that they were mere commoners, but that they did not seek to live virtuously over the course of their common lives. Hardy makes this clear in his allusion to Philippians 4:8, which reads: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true... whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there

be any praise, think on these things” (AV). The continued importance of Christian virtue is evident, as the moral guide which is provided in Scripture becomes a path to a type of immortality, and the choice to ignore this guide leads to a type of eternal damnation. Thus, the moral choices and actions of each individual, rather than the amoral workings of fate, are primarily responsible for determining the eternal fate of a person, because it is through the activity of individual humans, even if these individuals are not ultimately remembered, that the character of human life is determined. Immortality, in this sense, comes not merely from an individual’s presence in other individual minds, but from a contribution of individual virtue to human life as a whole.

The importance of recognizing the moral obligation of each individual, regardless of his or her position in society, comes across in Hardy’s view of the world’s future progress, especially as it is depicted in his well-known poem “In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations:’”

I

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War’s annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

In the *Life and Work*, Hardy mentions that the poem was originally inspired in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, but was not written until the First World War began in 1914 (408). The poem is most impactful for its quietness: the “slow, silent,” and sleepy farmer, the “thin smoke without flame” and the “whispering” couple provide a picture of the unremarkability of peasant life. It goes on quietly and unnoticed, and yet, through its longevity, is more powerful than the renowned wars of history. Hardy takes the title from Jeremiah 51:20: “Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee I will break in pieces the nations, and with thee I will destroy kingdoms” (AV). The striking contrast between the quietly enduring life of Hardy’s poem and the apocalyptic images of destruction in Jeremiah’s oracle suggests a key difference between Hardy’s expectations for redemption and the biblical expectations: in this passage of Scripture, God is responsible for saving His people, and He does so through the use of an army to bring swift and powerful destruction, breaking in pieces, among other entities, “the horse and his rider” (v.21), “the young man and the maid”(v. 22), “the shepherd and his flock; and...the husbandman and his yoke of oxen” (v.23). Hardy, with his essentially godless worldview, finds a hope for future humanity not in the destruction of entire nations, but in the quiet, unobserved survival of basic, natural human life and work. The shepherds and husbandmen and young men and maids of Hardy’s world who continue to go about their daily lives hold the promise for Hardy of the realization of a society that transcends the problems of inhumanity and warfare. Thus, it is essential that in the common, quiet parts of society virtue be established, as it is these parts that ultimately seem to have the power to determine the nature of human life. The central idea expressed in “Unkept Good Fridays” is crucial here, as Hardy emphasizes the role of the unrecognized

members of society—the “Christ of unwritten names” (26)—in bringing about moral progress. Thus, although the individual identity of each person may be forgotten, there is a sense in which the oblivion to which the souls of “The To-Be-Forgotten” are fated is overcome through the individual’s contribution to perpetuating virtue in the world.

Several of Hardy’s poems present the lives of those who act as “nameless Christs” through their exemplary virtue. In keeping with the idea of rejection and metaphorical crucifixion as results of Christ-like activity, the majority of these characters fail to attain high honor in society. In “Whispered at the Church-Opening,” the congregants of a new church, during the eloquent bishop’s sermon, recall another preacher “Whose words, though unpicked, gave the essence of things,” but who had “no touches of tactic skill: / His mind ran on charity and good will: / He’s but as he was, a vicar still” (15, 17-19). The clergyman who most exemplifies Christian virtue in his life remains in a humble station, while the great rhetoricians advance. However, this virtuous man manages to attain a place in the minds of the people who have come into contact with him which transcends his station in life, providing an image of what truly virtuous living looks like.

The power of the vicar’s virtuous life is especially evident when he is compared to another clergyman of Hardy’s poetry, who is portrayed in “An East-End Curate.” While this curate, like the vicar, also has a more humble profession within the church, he does not exhibit the same admirable virtues as the vicar, whose charity leaves a permanent impression in the minds of his congregants. The curate is presented as a detached presence in the lives of those around him: his face is “pale” and “pallid” (5, 17), representing the colorless nature of his life as “He goes through his neighbors’ houses as his own, and none regards” (11) and “notes not” the calls of the children around him (17).

The final line of the poem emphasizes the essentially purposeless nature of his life: he “stoops along abstractedly, for good, or in vain, Got wot!” (18). Like the “to-be-forgotten” souls of the poem discussed earlier, the curate is characterized by his lack of activity. He simply drifts through life, acting neither very virtuously nor very unvirtuously, and therefore making little impact on the world around him. The vanity of his life has nothing to do with his humble station in life, as shown through the example of the charitable, and therefore memorable, vicar of the previous poem, but only with his own choice not to act virtuously.

The contrast between these two men also serves to emphasize the point that it is not merely connection to the Church, but a life of “charity and good will” like the vicar’s, which truly associates a person with the virtues that are represented by Christ. Although, as discussed in chapter two, the Church remains an important establishment for inspiring moral progress, morality is not synonymous with church membership: it is a more universal matter, dependent on individual actions, and is exemplified by some, but not all, members of the church, as well as by some who are outside of the social institution of the Church. This idea is also apparent in “A Jingle on the Times,” in which the preacher is an important representative of goodness through his inclusion among the artists rather than his relationship with the Church. In this respect, the importance that Christ has to Hardy as an individual human exemplar of virtue, rather than as simply the source of Christian tradition, becomes clear. Whether within or without the Church, it is possible for humans to follow the way of Christ through their virtuous actions, and it is these individuals, although they often go largely unrecognized, whose activity inspires hope that moral progress is not only possible, but is in fact present in the world.

Another nameless Christ of Hardy's poetry appears in "By the Barrows," in which a historic battle fought at the barrows in which the poem is set, and which was "desperate doubtless unto death" (5), is eclipsed in the speaker's mind by the modern event of a woman who "Fought singlehandedly to shield a child – / One not her own – from a man's senseless rage" (10-11). The speaker reflects that "to my mind no patriots' bones there piled / So consecrate the silence as her deed / Of stoic and devoted self-unheed" (12-14). The well-known deeds of history, with all the notions of valor and virtue that are attached to them, are less important than the largely unacknowledged acts of nameless individuals. The unrecognized, un-glorified acts of charity indicate the human capacity to act rightly simply for the sake of doing what is right rather than for the sake of honor and renown. A similar idea appears in "The Souls of the Slain," in which the souls of a group of soldiers who have been buried in foreign soil rise from their graves in order to return home and "feast on [their] fame" (37). Before they journey home, however, they are informed by an older spirit that "your kin linger less / On your glory and war-mightiness / Than on dearer things" (40-42): things such as their "babyhood's innocent days" and "deeds of home" (48, 65). The soldiers regretfully reflect upon this news:

– 'Alas! then it seems that our glory
Weighs less in their thought
Than our old homely acts,
And the long-ago commonplace facts
Of our lives – held by us as scarce part of our story,
And rated as nought! (69-74)

As evinced through much of his war poetry, Hardy views warfare as a major reminder of the moral progress that has yet to occur: it speaks of the continuing lack of the universal love and respect that Hardy associates, especially through poems such as "A Christmas Ghost-Story," with redemption. Hardy rejects the conventional notion that death in war

is valiant, and replaces that valiance with the virtue of humbler, less noticeable acts. In doing so, he asserts that it is through these homely, local acts that the type of redemption for which he hopes will be accomplished.

The importance of selfless acts and their relation to immortality is also apparent in “The Old Workman,” in which a stone mason who is “bent down before [his] time” (1) tells the story of permanently injuring his back while building a house. The mason concludes his tale:

‘They don’t know me, or even know my name,
But good I think it, somehow, all the same
To have kept ’em safe from harm, and right and tight,
Though it has broken me quite.

‘Yes; that I fixed it firm up there I am proud,
Facing the hail and snow and sun and cloud,
And to stand storms for ages, beating round
When I lie underground.’ (21-28)

The mason recognizes that his good work extends beyond his own life, both in the sense that it will still exist after he has died, and in the sense that it is a part of the lives of other people. This recognition allows him to accept his pain and his anonymity, as his own personal problems and concerns are eclipsed by his role in establishing something good and long-lasting for the sake of other people.

As is evident in the portrayals of the woman in “By the Barrows” and the mason in “The Old Workman,” the choice to act virtuously in common life does not eliminate the necessity of struggle and suffering in the world. The woman must risk her own safety, fighting in order to defend the child, and the workman must sacrifice his own comfort and well-being in order to build a good home for someone he does not know. Again, the image of Christ’s crucifixion becomes an important lens through which to

consider this aspect of virtuous living, as it reveals the fact that suffering is often part of a lifestyle that embraces virtue and exemplifies hope for the prevalence of goodness. In other poems, Hardy explicitly connects the undeserved suffering of individuals to Christ's crucifixion through the image of bearing a cross.

Jedrzejewski observes that an important component of Hardy's pessimistic religious views, especially during the late 1890s, is his attraction to "those aspects of the religious view of the human condition and those passages of the Bible that stress the suffering and hardships man has to endure in life rather than those offering hope and belief in the existence of a loving and benevolent God" (39). Such a pessimism concerning suffering is certainly the case in several of Hardy's poems, such as "The Child and the Sage," in which Hardy raises the problem of apparently needless suffering, as a child questions the logic of a sage's assertion that

...Such bliss has been my share
From Love's unbroken smile,
It is but reason I should bear
A cross therein awhile. (9-12)

To the child, it seems unreasonable simply to accept the presence of suffering as a fact made bearable by the equal fact of the presence of pleasure. It seems more correct to wonder why the earth should not be "a place...Where never a spell of pleasantness / Makes reasonable a pain" (17, 19-20). Hardy expresses an even deeper disillusionment with the presence of suffering in "A Wish for Unconsciousness:"

If I could but abide
As a tablet on a wall,
Or a hillock daisy-pied,
Or a picture in a hall,
And as nothing else at all,
I should feel no doleful achings,
I should hear no judgment-call,

Have no evil dreams or wakings,
No uncouth or grisly care;
In a word, no cross to bear.

This poem, with its wish for freedom from moral consciousness, which causes discontent by making humanity aware of its suffering, resembles several other poems of Hardy's, such as "Before Life and After," discussed in chapter one. Here, the act of bearing a cross is something to be wished away, in favor of a state of unconsciousness, in which human concerns and emotions are no longer important.

However, just as in such poems as "Before Life and After," this desire for an amoral state is a mere fancy to Hardy, making up only a part of the impressions about life that he presents in his body of poetry. His depiction of others who have borne crosses of their own suggests another way of thinking about suffering as a redemptive act, in accord with the meaning of Christ's suffering. In several of his poems he presents specific and concrete examples of suffering in the daily lives of ordinary people, rather than more general reflections on the presence of suffering in the world. In these poems, the struggles of human life serve to shape and to reveal human goodness. This is especially true of struggles against the natural elements, which, unlike human vices, are beyond humanity's power to mend. Thus, the workman's broken back, a result of the natural frailty of the human body, becomes an indicator of his great virtue, because it represents the workman's choice to act for the good of other humans rather than to allow his moral decisions to be dictated by the risks of living in an amoral natural world.

This virtuous endurance under personal crosses is apparent in several of Hardy's depictions of peasant life, as in his poem "Ice on the Highway:"

Seven buxom women abreast, and arm in arm,
Trudge down the hill, tip-toed,

And breathing warm;
They must perforce trudge thus, to keep upright
On the glassy ice-bound road,
And they must get to market whether or no,
Provisions running low
With the nearing Saturday night,
While the lumbering van wherein they mostly ride
Can nowise go:
Yet loud their laughter as they stagger and slide!

In this poem, Hardy provides a portrait of what one critic calls “a real human poignancy that transcends time” (Padian 233). It is not by finding an end to suffering, but by accepting and laughing in the face of the inevitable problems of life, that humanity can attain real hope in the human capacity to overcome the strife of the natural world. The women refuse to be deterred by the harsh conditions of the world, but instead raise their moral characters above its amoral character, choosing to carry out their duties in life and finding a way to maintain a positive view of life while doing so. Such a response to the conditions of life does not suggest an ignorance of reality, which, as discussed in the first chapter, Hardy criticizes as detrimental to humanity’s progress. Instead, it recognizes and accepts that there are problems with the world, but finds a way to transcend those problems through the choice to live according to the moral sense.

Hardy’s “Drinking Song” maintains this idea of accepting the nature of the world and choosing to live virtuously, even when virtuous living does not solve the complications of the world. The song traces the downfall of supposed truths throughout history, including Copernicus’s revelation that humanity is not at the center of the universe, Hume’s skepticism concerning miracles, Darwin’s suggestion that humans are a species of animal, biblical criticism’s denial of the virgin birth, and Einstein’s unsettling assertion “That there’s no time, no space, no motion” (67). After this recounting of

disturbing revelations over the course of history, which have served to place humanity in an ever-decreasing position of control and primacy within the universe, and have made belief in any power outside of the universe more difficult to maintain, the song concludes: “Fill full your cups: feel no distress / At all our great thoughts shrinking less: / We’ll do a good deed nevertheless!” (80-3). According to Brown’s interpretation of “Drinking Song,” the “good deed” of the final line is tied to the notion that “the world is already so bad that we dare not make it still worse by being uncharitable to each other,” and the “nevertheless” suggests an ambiguity and uncertainty in Hardy’s hope concerning the good deed (97-8). To Brown, a more powerful hope comes from Hardy’s speculations on the awakening of the Immanent Will (98); but, as discussed in chapter one, Hardy bases such a hope on wishful thinking much more than he bases his hope in human activity on such fanciful speculation. The conclusion of “The Sleep-Worker”—“Wilt thou destroy, in one wild shock of shame, / Thy whole high heaving firmamental frame, / Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?” (12-14)—is more uncertain than “Drinking Song’s” declaration of an attainable plan to do good in spite of the problems of the universe.

Thus, the final decision of the singers of “Drinking Song” to perform a good deed in spite of the complex and unsettling truths of the world reveals a central element of Hardy’s hope for humanity’s progress towards a more virtuous, less violent state. There is a distinction between the natural facts of the impersonal universe and the facts of personal human relationships: human life and morality may not be the center of the universe, but they are central to humanity’s own perception of life, and it is therefore necessary to live according to that perception. The centrality to the human experience of

this inherent human sense of moral responsibility is especially apparent in the persistent power of Christ as a historical human, who continues to represent a concern for truth and a determination to live selflessly, even to the point of accepting suffering and death, and whose immortality is found in his ability to continue inspiring moral activity. The significance of Christ as a symbol of moral progress and human potential in Hardy's poetry reveals Hardy's own hope for the lives of individual humans, whether well-known figures or unacknowledged laborers, to continue acting as types of Christ in order to ultimately bring about the unrealized hope expressed in "A Christmas Ghost Story" as "the All-Earth-gladdening Law / Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified" (6-7). Although the moral changes that are so closely tied to Christ's life and death have yet to be enacted, and much of Hardy's poems show a deep despair because of this fact, a sense of hope also runs throughout Hardy's poetry, as the lives of individual humans—including Christ himself—provide specific examples of the moral goodness that is still a present and powerful part of human nature.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

The conclusion of *The Life and Work* records some of Hardy's reflections during his final Christmas-time, 1927, revealing the persistence of Hardy's interest in Christ as a historical figure:

On December 26 he said that he had been thinking of the Nativity and of the Massacre of the Innocents, and his wife read to him the gospel accounts, and also articles in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*. He remarked that there was not a grain of evidence that the gospel story was true in any detail. (479)

This preoccupation with the historicity of the gospel narrative, just a little more than two weeks before his death, reflects his long interest in the matter, and his continual need to reconsider the issue. Such continuous meditation on the stories surrounding the life of Christ creates some complexity in Hardy's poems concerning Christ, and it is important to recognize that the figure of Christ is not always simply a source of hope for Hardy. One poem that reveals this complexity is mentioned in the same section of the *Life and Work* as the remark cited above. In the middle of his final December, Hardy "was anxious that a poem he had written, "Christmas in the Elgin Room," should be copied and sent to *The Times*" (479). In this poem, Hardy presents a conversation between the ancient Athenian statues in the British Museum as they hear the Christmas bells chime. They assert, "We are those whom Christmas overthrew / Some centuries after Pheidias knew / How to shape us" (11-13), and recall, with regret, the time "Before this Christ was known, and we had men's good will" (25). Through these representatives of classical

myth, Hardy presents to the reader the power of Christ, whose life and activity created an image that overpowers the images of the pagan gods. However, the tone of this poem is not one of celebration, but of lament: by stressing the lost power of the Greek figures, who represent the images and ideas of a time before the Christian era, Hardy suggests that in gaining the important symbols of Christianity, particularly the symbol of Christ, other powerful images, like those of the classical myths, were lost to society. By employing the image of Christ in a less positive way than in poems such as “A Christmas Ghost-Story” and “Unkept Good Fridays,” Hardy suggests the negative impact of the rise of Christendom, as the worship of Christ brings an end to the potential good that can come from the symbols of Greek myth.

A similar use of Christ occurs in Hardy’s “The Woman I Met,” discussed in an essay by Frank Giordano. Giordano reads the characters of the poem—in which the ghost of a prostitute visits a virtuous man whom she loved for his virtue and who, because of that same virtue, could never return her love—as allusions to Mary Magdalene and Christ, and argues that Hardy reveals the destructive conflict between two types of lifestyles—one which lives according to human desire, represented in the Magdalene figure, and one which lives according to other-worldly conduct, represented in the Christ figure:

Though she is won by *caritas*, she can be held only by *eros*...the prostitute is spiritually a pagan...whose governing idea is spontaneity of consciousness. She tries to work out her self-realization as she responds to the stranger’s love and converts from her sinful way of life. But the other-worldly...ideals of conduct and self-sacrifice prove insufficient to sustain one whose nature requires full sensual gratification in this world. (140)

Ultimately, according to Giordano, “there is an implicit criticism...of the limitations of Christ’s example of self-sacrifice...The great weakness of modern Christianity lies in its failure to evolve a satisfactory conception of human nature which would supplement the limited conception defined by the sacrificial Christ” (142).

Giordano’s reading is valid, and provides one way of understanding Hardy’s use of Christ as a symbol in his poetry. However, as I have shown through this study of several other images of Christ in Hardy’s poems, he does not only perceive Christ in terms of his limitations. If at some points Christ appears as a symbol of the weaknesses of charity and of the Church’s influence as a moral center, at other times Christ appears in his traditional role as a redeemer, a crucial source of hope and a sign of humankind’s potential for progress.

In such cases, Christ becomes an important image for Hardy’s humanist mindset. To Hardy, the world must be viewed as it is, and humanity must work with the truths it discovers, especially the truths of human nature, in order to progress towards the state of peace and universal goodwill which Hardy envisions. His fanciful poems about uncertain ideals—such as the hope that a God or Mover, whose existence can hardly be believed, will someday mend the world’s problems—contrast with his more concrete representations of the effects of human actions. This contrast, which runs through much of Hardy’s poetic work, reveals the primary importance that Hardy placed upon observable human action, rather than idealistic speculation, as a source of hope.

As a part of his attempt to move beyond mere speculation towards observable truths, Hardy views Christianity as an important foundation for society’s moral formation, but not as a miraculous, divinely-ordained establishment. The important

symbols of the Church are emotionally powerful to society, but, to Hardy and the biblical critics with whom he was familiar, the Church's belief in the miraculous and its hope in divine, other-worldly salvation are outdated ideals in light of the revelations of empirical science and history. Thus, true progress is brought about by rejecting the old creeds and dogmas of the Christian religion, while maintaining the emotional significance of its images. This process includes the central symbol of Christianity, Christ himself, whose divinity Hardy rejects, but whose humanity Hardy embraces.

Once Christ has been subjected to such scrutiny, he appears throughout Hardy's work as an important symbol for considering humanity's potential for progress. He is not only an emotionally powerful symbol for society, portraying essential virtues, but is also, for Hardy, a significant historical figure, whose life provides a concrete example of the moral change that is possible through human activity. Thus, through the record of Christ's life and activity, Hardy presents both real events such as the crucifixion, and symbolic ideas such as the resurrection, that can serve as readily identifiable and highly evocative concepts with which to discuss human life and activity more generally. Thus, through his capacity to provide both an emotionally powerful poetic symbol and a historical example of world-altering human efficacy, Christ remains a redemptive figure for Hardy, as he provides a standard for moral thought and action, which can lead humanity towards a state of universal goodness and peace.

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