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**Dialogic Thomas Hardy**

**Edited by**  
**Francesco Marroni**

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## Renzo D'Agnillo

### De-composing the Divine: The Death of God in Arthur Hugh Clough's "Easter Day" and Thomas Hardy's "God's Funeral"

1. Thomas Hardy's profoundly ambiguous response towards orthodox Christianity was shaped by his study of nineteenth-century positivistic thought. The epistemological shift brought about by the writings of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Comte and Mill, with whom the author declared "harmony of view"<sup>1</sup>, was undeniably instrumental to the dialogical tension between belief and unbelief that characterises his fictional and poetic representation of religious experience. Although no writers of fiction appear in the above list, these influences are well-known (Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Swinburne to name but a few). Nevertheless, if there is one nineteenth-century poet whose work dramatises the disillusionment of orthodox faith with the same concern as Hardy for religious truth grounded on scientific and philosophical inquiry, it is undoubtedly Arthur Hugh Clough. Curiously, in spite of their similar intellectual temperaments, no serious criticism has focussed attention on the possible connections between the two writers<sup>2</sup>. In terms of their religious experiences alone, there are significant convergences: both attended the Anglican church; both initially contemplated then refused to take orders, and neither wholly repudiated the importance of Christian doctrine after their loss of faith. The nature

<sup>1</sup> Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (eds.), *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, 7 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 259. Letter to Ernest Brennecke in June 1924.

<sup>2</sup> *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Lennart A. Björk, 2 vols, London, MacMillan, 1985, p. 65, contains the following single reference to Clough: "Greek philosophy of life — what Clough described as a 'Stoic-Epicurean acceptance of the world'".

of their religious predicaments, were admittedly a reflection of different historical and social contexts. As a Rugby School pupil under the demanding figure of Thomas Arnold, Clough grew up as a fervent Anglican. Once at Oxford University, however, he became inadvertently embroiled in the religious controversy between the Tractarian, Evangelical and Liberal Anglican groups at Oxford University where he momentarily succumbed to the charisma of the Tractarian Movement's leader — and Arnold's arch-enemy — John Henry Newman. The lively debates that profoundly disturbed the conservative High-Church college heads may have been intellectually invigorating, but they also contributed to exasperate the religious doubts which had already begun to torment Clough. His eventual rejection of the Thirty-Nine Articles (an act which would have been necessary for him to pursue an ecclesiastical career after taking his degree) meant resignation from Oxford and isolation from the privileges of a protective elitist existence. Although he continued to profess a moral view of the world that incorporated the fundamental principles of Christianity, for the rest of his life he remained an outsider to the Orthodox Church. Clough's religious quandaries were therefore as dramatic as they were painful and the numerous references to biblical characters and events in his poetry testify to a quasi-visceral dialogue with the sacred text<sup>3</sup>. Hardy, on the other hand, cannot be said to have endured such traumatic problems with regard to his loss of faith. The rustic environment in which he was brought up informed his idea of the church "not as a doctrinal entity, rather an emotional attachment"<sup>4</sup>. Robert Graves recalls Hardy's feeling: 'That the church was in the old days the centre of all the musical, literary and artistic education in the country village [...] If there is no church' he told a friend in 1922, "there is nothing"<sup>5</sup>. This nostalgic view of the church,

<sup>3</sup> See Lawrence Lerner (ed.), *The Victorians*, London, Methuen and Co., 1978, p. 157, in which J. W. Burrow observes: "What is striking in Arnold, Clough, Tennyson and even Carlyle is the persistence of the theological idiom".

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Timothy Hands, *Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher?*, London, MacMillan, 1989, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

which derived from his fond childhood memories, was no doubt enhanced by his father's role in the Stinsford (Mellstock) choir<sup>6</sup>. Hardy's negative evaluations of clericalism and established religion, particularly in his last novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, must evidently be counterbalanced with his nostalgic appreciation of its traditional communicative function. For Hardy, religious scepticism is an intellectual inheritance, and an acknowledged historical fact, which explains why his rejection of religion was comparably less problematic than Clough's (it is eloquently testified by the single "erased marginal notation 'doubt' in one of his notebooks under the date 11 September 1864 [...]"<sup>7</sup>). Certainly, from his post-Nietzschean perspective, Hardy was afforded a greater objectivity in confronting the question of lost faith through the perspective of a philosophical tradition denied to Clough, who was, on the contrary, obliged to grope his way through a spiritually confusing quagmire rendered all the more perplexing by the pressure of competing alliances. Nevertheless, Clough's struggles did not prevent him from recognising the existence of a religious tradition at large extending: "not only among clergymen and religious people, but among all who have really tried to order their lives by the highest action of the reasonable and social will"<sup>8</sup>.

In spite of their different spiritual itineraries, Hardy's poetry follows in a direct epistemological line from Clough's as far as interpretation of religious issues is concerned. Like Clough, he confronts religious experience through a deep-rooted questioning of its premises, and just as the rational scepticism that arises from such an approach is, for Clough, the central pre-requisite for "a criticism of life [...] penetrating in its exposure of shams and hypocrisies"<sup>9</sup>, so for Hardy, epistemological speculation signifies a necessary full look into the manifold aspects of human

<sup>6</sup> Hardy was also indirectly acquainted with Tractarianism through a local vicar.

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford Reader's Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Norman Page, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 360.

<sup>8</sup> Buckner B. Trawick (ed.), *Selected Prose Works of Arthur Hugh Clough*, Alabama, University of Alabama Press, 1964, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Katharine Chorley, *Arthur Hugh Clough. The Uncommitted Mind*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962, p. 23.



experience: "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst"<sup>10</sup>. Whilst both repudiate orthodox Christian dogma a priori, neither of them shirk from the uncomfortable realities of human existence that threaten to impede the search for religious truth.

Clough's "Easter Day I" and "Easter Day II" (1849) and Hardy's "God's Funeral" (1910) represent religious dilemmas in terms of a tension between orthodox representation and individual response. Both poems attempt to confront the most controversial issue of nineteenth century angst: the death of God. The concept is most famously expressed by Nietzsche's fictional madman in *The Gay Science*:

'Where is God?', he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him* — you and I! We are all his murderers [...] Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine composition? — Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche's dictum is, in reality, the culmination of over half a century of renewed sceptical interrogation stretching from Hume to Darwin. The quasi-hysterical warnings of his madman denounce a spiritual vacuum for which humanity itself is responsible. To paraphrase Nietzsche, Clough and Hardy may be seen as engaging in a similar act of de-composition of the divine in their poems, as they strip away the layers of falsity and deceit in an attempt to re-define the coordinates of a lost faith<sup>12</sup>. Chronologically, "Easter Day" and "God's Funeral" also stand at opposite ends of T. H. Huxley's assessment of the religious crisis that pervaded Victorian intellectual society<sup>13</sup>. Huxley's metaphysical evaluation sanctioned the critical stance of a whole

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson, London, Macmillan, 1991 (1976), p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 119-120.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that Clough's poem pre-dates Nietzsche's statement by thirty-three years renders the central message of his poem all the more eerily portentous.

<sup>13</sup> Huxley, as one of the first adherents to Darwin's theory of evolution as well as a

generation of scholars who had been morally chastised as social outcasts for daring to question the historical foundations of Christianity. To be precise, Clough's negation of the Resurrection belies his earnest attempt to retrieve the essential core of the Christian faith through a positivistic evaluation of its metaphorical message. Hardy's poem, on the other hand, attenuates his melancholic renunciation of God with a rationalistic positivism that allows little room for such optimism.

2. "Easter Day" is Clough's most poignant poetic expression of his religious crisis. As a deliberately provocative treatment of the most solemn event in the Gospel, it owes its incentive to David Friedrich Strauss's seminal text *The Life of Jesus* which purported to destroy "the antiquated systems of supranaturalism and naturalism"<sup>14</sup> through a demythologisation of the Gospels. The uncompromisingly imperative voice of the dramatic speaker is established from the opening lines:

Through the great sinful streets of Naples as I past,  
With fiercer heat than flamed above my head  
My heart was hot within me; till at last  
My brain was lightened, when my tongue had said

Christ is not risen!

Christ is not risen, no,  
He lies and moulders low;  
Christ is not risen<sup>15</sup>.

major Victorian promoter of scientific investigation, invented the term 'agnostic' in the early 1860s.

<sup>14</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, (Marian Evans trans.), New York, Calvin Blanchard, 1856, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> F. L. Malhauser (ed.), *The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough*, second edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 471. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition followed by page numbers.

The positivistic denial of a literal physical resurrection is reiterated throughout "Easter Day I" in the refrain: "Christ is not risen". This is accentuated by Clough's metrical irregularity which vies with lexical repetition to highlight the dramatic clash between the spirit and the flesh. Semantically, the tensions within the poem are mainly generated by the systematic refutation of the veracity of the biblical events pertaining to the Resurrection myth<sup>16</sup>:

What though the stone were rolled away, and though  
The grave found empty there! —  
If not there, then elsewhere;  
If not where Joseph laid Him first, why then  
Where other men  
Translaid Him after; in some humbler clay  
Long ere to-day  
Corruption that sad perfect work hath done,  
Which here she scarcely, lightly had begun.  
The foul engendered worm  
Feeds on the flesh of the life-giving form  
Of our most Holy and Anointed One. (199)

Clough's rhetorical strategies draw on hauntingly insistent lexical echoes, internal rhyme and closely knit rhyme patterns, in this case verging on monorhyme, to create an escalation of 'shocking' realisations that culminate, each time, with the same desolate pronouncement. The recourse throughout to religiously connotative lexemes and biblical references is significant. As Anthony Kenny notes, the poet's intent is to deconstruct the notion of the Resurrection by subverting the language of the Bible in order "to negate the Gospel's prime message"<sup>17</sup>. Thus,

<sup>16</sup> The speaker's other references are contained in the following lines: "What if the women, ere the dawn was grey, / Saw one or more great angels, as they say, / Angles, or Him himself? [...] nor at all / Hath He appeared to Peter or the Ten / Nor, save in thunderous terror, to blind Saul [...] // what if e'en, as runs the tale, the Ten / Saw, heard, and touched again [...] // What if at Emmaüs' inn and by Capernaum's lake / Came One the bread that brake, / Came one that spake as never mortal spake [...]" (200).

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Kenny, *God and Two Poets — Arthur Hugh Clough and Gerard Manley Hopkins*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1988, p. 89. The speaker's retention of

the story of Jesus' entombment by Joseph of Arimathæa (narrated in all four of the gospels) is replaced by a less conspicuous burial by "other men [...] in some humbler clay", and the 'sacrilegious' image "The "foul engendered worm / Feeds on the flesh of the life-giving form / Of our most Holy and Anointed One" has an effect of incongruity through its intermeshing of sacred / profane elements in which all possibility of eternal life is negated. The Anglican burial service formula (based on Genesis<sup>18</sup>) consequently becomes the reiterated death knell not only for Christ, but for Christianity itself:

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust;  
As of the unjust, also of the just —  
Christ is not risen. (199)

Besides Clough's semantic deconstruction of the Gospels, the poem proceeds to reduce the whole episode of the Resurrection to a question of rumour as opposed to historical fact. If Newman is able to confidently assert the undoubted historical veracity of the Resurrection when he states in his sermon "The Resurrection of the Body" that its witnesses were "few in number" precisely "because they were on the side of Truth"<sup>19</sup>, Clough can only query the premises upon which that historical 'truth' is based:

As circulates in some great city crowd  
A rumour changeful, vague, importunate, and loud,  
From no determined centre, or of fact,  
Or authorship exact,  
Which no man can deny  
Nor verify;  
So spread the wondrous fame;  
He all the same  
Lay senseless mouldering low.

capitals, at the same time, (Christ, Him, His, Holy, One) suggests, on the one hand, the power of convention on a linguistic level that he is unable to relinquish and, on another a means of undermining the figure of Christ even more.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 3:19, "[...] for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return".

<sup>19</sup> John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, (8 vols.), vol. 1, London, Longmans Green and Co, 1907, p. 288.

He was not risen, no,  
Christ was not risen! (200)

The suspicion that the Resurrection is in reality the product of rumour becomes tenable once its fixed points of reference are logically seen as bogus. Just like any story recounted, the message has been altered from its original telling. Indeed, its persuasive power lies precisely in the fact that the story occupies a grey area between fantasy and reality. For the Resurrection can neither be verified nor doubted. The shocking realisation that the most powerful message in the Gospel may constitute nothing more than an unsubstantiated myth in which Christians have, incredibly, invested all their spiritual energies may be sober in its rationality, but it carries no joy of discovery: "We are most hopeless who had once most hope / We are most wretched that had most believed" (201). Far from offering humankind hope of eternal salvation, the Christian message of the Resurrection, because it had fostered so much expectation, flounders abysmally into a cruel deception in which justice is negated to both "good and bad alike" (201). All that remains, for the speaker, is the prospect of an earthly existence of which heaven and hell are the mutually exclusive poles: "Eat, drink, and play, and think that this is bliss! / There is no Heaven but this / There is no Hell [...]; — / Save Earth, which serves the purpose doubly well" (201). With sardonic irony the poetic-I addresses the fictional protagonists of the Resurrection story inciting them to desist from following Jesus and spreading his message:

Weep not beside the Tomb,  
Ye women, unto whom  
He was of great solace while ye tended him [...]  
And thou that bar'st Him in thy Wondering Womb.  
Yea, Daughters of Jerusalem, depart,  
Bind up as best ye may your own sad bleeding heart;  
Go to your homes, your loving children tend,  
Your earthly spouses love

[...]

Ye men of Galilee!  
Why stand ye looking up to heaven, where Him ye ne'er  
may see,  
Neither ascending hence, nor hither returning again?  
Ye ignorant and idle fishermen!  
Hence to your huts and boats and inland native shore,  
And catch not men but fish [...] (202)

The warning to pay no heed to such “an idle tale” (202) extends to “good men of ages yet to be” (202) and all clergymen who “would preach, because another heard” (203). Undoubtedly, this outpouring of disillusion is fuelled by the necessity to see into the nature of religious truth through experience and systematic observation rather than the a priori assumptions that, for Clough, typify conventional forms of religious belief.

Far from constituting a separate or pendant poem, “Easter Day II” is a continuation and modification of the thematic preoccupation of “Easter Day I”. Moreover, the spatial-temporal coordinates of the sub-title (*Naples, 1849*) are immediately focalised in the circumstantial details of the opening sequence. These are elaborated in a series of clauses (marked by the reiterated conjunction ‘so’) which syntactically delay the development of the main discourse:

So while the blear-eyed pimp beside me walked,  
And talked,  
For instance, of the beautiful danseuse,  
And ‘Eccellenza sure must see, if he would choose’  
Or of the lady in the green skirt there,  
Who passes by and bows with minx’s air,  
Or of the little thing not quite fifteen,  
Sicilian-born who surely should be seen.  
So while the blear-eyed pimp beside me walked  
And talked, and I too with fit answer talked,  
So in the sinful streets, abstracted and alone,  
I with my secret self held self-communing of my own.

So in the southern city spake the tongue  
Of one that somewhat overwildly sung;  
But in a later hour I sat and heard  
Another voice that spake, another graver word. (203)

The fact that the date appears in the title is significant. On an autobiographical level, 1849 was a key year for Clough, representing not only his break with the ecclesiastical world of Oxford, but also a newly-discovered passion for political issues, particularly the republican revolutions that had taken place on the continent<sup>20</sup>. Spatially, the initially enigmatic description of "the great sinful streets of Naples" is also elucidated, becoming, on a figurative level, an extension of the speaker's own sinful condition. His reference to the "fiercer heat" raging in his heart can now be disambiguated as a reference to sexual desire. In this sense, his bitter declamations in "Easter Day I" become the symptoms of a guilty conscience that arises from his momentary association with the pimp<sup>21</sup> on the very holy day that celebrates the salvation of the Christian soul. More importantly, "Easter Day II" dramatises the poetic-I's awareness of an inner conflict between a self that "that somewhat overwildly sung" and another "that spake, another graver word". The counter-reaction of resistance to this external pressure ("abstracted and alone") forces a re-consideration of the poem's initial hypothesis. As a result, the tragic denial of the Resurrection in "Easter Day I", asserted by the first 'voice', is superseded by the second with a re-evaluation of its spiritual significance:

Hope conquers cowardice, joy grief:  
Or at the least, faith unbelief.  
    Though dead, not dead;  
    Not gone, though fled;  
    Not lost, not vanished.  
    In the great Gospel and true Creed,  
    He is yet risen indeed;  
    Christ is risen (204).

The insistence on Christ's bodily death is now tempered by a simultaneous acceptance of the symbolic valence of the

<sup>20</sup> Clough travelled to the continent in order to witness the republican revolutions of 1848-49.

<sup>21</sup> John Schad, *Arthur Hugh Clough*, Tavistock, Northcote, 2006, p. 12, sees the pimp as a Christ-like figure in accordance with Clough's "re-imagining the resurrection in non-transcendental, humanistic terms".

Resurrection in order to derive an important spiritual lesson from the myth. However, this realisation is not without its limitations as is revealed on a textual level. For by omitting the verb *conquers* — to avoid its repetition — in the second line of the final stanza, Clough juxtaposes the contrary nouns “faith unbelief” as if to suggest a progression that is the very inverse of his intended statement. Thus, in spite of the attempt to offer a positive resolution to the spiritual desolation of “Easter Day I”, “Easter Day II” concludes with a tangent sense of regret for the loss of a faith that can only be sustained by a blind acceptance of its religious myths and superstitions.

3. Hardy describes the subject of “God’s Funeral”<sup>22</sup> as “the gradual decline and extinction in the human race of a belief in an anthropomorphic god [...]”<sup>23</sup>. In a godless world in which the individual has become hardened to unbelief, he eschews the very notion of a resurrection<sup>24</sup>. Whilst the sundrenched cityscape of Clough’s poem at least points to the dynamic continuity of life, however sinful, the twilight zone of Hardy’s natural landscape, with its deliberate absence of definable co-ordinates, evokes a world emptied of all spiritual and eschatological values:

I

I saw a slowly-stepping train —  
Lined on the brows, scoop-eyed and bent and hoar  
Following in files across a twilit plain  
A strange and mystic form the foremost bore.

II

And by contagious throbs of thought  
Or latent knowledge that within me lay

<sup>22</sup> The poem was first published in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1919. Hardy had also submitted an alternative title “The Funeral of Jahveh”. See *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, Florence Emily Hardy, London, Macmillan, 1975 (1928), p. 354.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 354.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Johan Ramazani, “Hardy’s Elegies for an Era: ‘By the Century’s Deathbed’”, *Victorian Poetry*, 2, 1991, p. 138.



*Renzo D'Agnillo*

And had already stirred me, I was wrought  
To consciousness of sorrow even as they.

III

The fore-borne shape, to my blurred eyes,  
At first seemed man-like, and anon to change  
To an amorphous cloud of marvellous size,  
At times endowed with wings of glorious range.

IV

And this phantasmal variousness  
Ever possessed it as they drew along:  
Yet throughout all it symbolled none the less  
Potency vast and loving-kindness strong.

V

Almost before I knew I bent  
Towards the moving columns without a word;  
They, growing in bulk and numbers as they went,  
Struck out sick thoughts that could be overheard (326-327).

From a prosodic point of view, "Easter Day" and "God's Funeral" differ considerably. To the dramatic frenzy in the erratically irregular metrical and rhyme schemes of the former corresponds a relentless despondency in the predominant iambic pentameter and alternating rhyme scheme in the latter. This mood is evident from the opening stanza, which intimates an incongruous connection between the "strange and mystic form" and the procession, whose common bereavement is conveyed through the synecdochic image of a worn, frail figure stretched to the limits of pain and exhaustion: "Lined on the brows, scoop-eyed and bent and hoar". This anticipatory element, signals the metaphysical distance between humanity and God which is explored in the central part of the poem. The fact that the speaker's reaction to this initially disconcerting scene is manifested on the textual level before being explicated on a semantic level is consonant with Hardy's figurative rendering of it as a process of infection, transmitted by "contagious throbs" of "latent knowledge" that has lain dormant within him. The sudden release of a knowledge suppressed, like the symptoms of a sudden outbreak of sickness, is also intrinsic

to "Easter Day". Just as Clough's speaker feels "lightened" once his tongue can utter the words of denial burning within him like a fever, so Hardy's speaker is impelled to release the knowledge by which he has already been stirred to consciousness in order to externalise the paradoxes and contradictions that shape his thoughts and feelings concerning religious faith. However, the impulses through which their scepticism arises differs. Whilst it appears in Clough as the scornful outburst of a guilt-ridden conscience ("My heart was hot within me; till at last/My brain was lightened, when my tongue had said / Christ is not risen!"), in Hardy the realisation of a truth almost impossible to confute is poised between impulse and conscious response: "Almost before I knew I bent / Towards the moving columns without a word". Furthermore, the speaker's acknowledgement of his common feelings with the crowd, once he is 'contaminated' (i.e. conscious) himself, incites a moral obligation to participate in the sorrowful requiem.

The rhetorical function of the crowd is also an important element of differentiation between the two poems. For "Easter Day" represents the vocal suffering of a dramatic speaker engaged in a self-conflicting discourse. Like Nietzsche's madman, he is the sole witness to a terrifying discovery made in a foreign country surrounded by the general indifference and ignorance of the passing crowds. This is further emphasised by the fact that the two parts of "Easter Day" dramatise mutually exclusive attitudes co-habiting within the same individual. Conversely, in "God's Funeral", the crowd contributes a multi-voicedness that articulates an objective exchange of views between believers and non-believers. Therefore, what, for Clough, is perceived as a dilemma limited to an individual conscience very much at variance with the status quo, in Hardy becomes the issue of a public debate.

Tellingly, the speaker's metamorphic perception of the "strange and mystic form" [man → cloud → angel] anticipates the central section, the first four stanzas of which concern the historical transfigurations of "phantasmal variousness" that have eroded humankind's belief in a one and only God<sup>25</sup>:

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ramazani, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

VI

'O man-projected Figure, of late  
Imaged as we, thy knell who shall survive?  
Whence came it we were tempted to create  
One whom we can no longer keep alive?

VII

'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.

VIII

'And tricked by our own early dream  
And need of solace, we grew self deceived,  
Our making soon our maker did we deem,  
And what we had imagined we believed.

IX

'Till, in Time's stayless stealthy swing,  
Uncompromising rude reality  
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,  
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be. (327)

The polyphonic discourse that occupies the central section of the poem evokes the sentiments of a collective consciousness in which the speaker himself is "a model of complex sympathy"<sup>26</sup>. Through the sceptical comments of this choral voice, intent on exposing its ontologically fictional concept of God, Hardy sidesteps the issue of biblical exegesis highlighted in Clough's Straussian deconstruction of the Gospels<sup>27</sup> to ponder the metaphysical implications of deluded faith. From the fearful presence of the Old Testament to the benevolent figure of the Gospels, humanity has shaped God according to changing historical, social and political exigencies. Fundamentally, God

<sup>26</sup> Paul Zietlow, *Moments of Vision. The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> See *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, cit., p. 479, for Hardy's assertion that biblical narratives, however uplifting, had no status as truth.

has been nothing more than an imaginative elaboration of humanity's solipsistic preoccupations, as is ironically evidenced in the mock prayer of stanza VI: "O man-projected Figure, of late / Imaged as we [...]". Indeed, the circular repetition of the pronoun 'we' in stanza VIII is no mere rhetorical effect, for it deliberately evokes a godless universe in which man is placed at the centre<sup>28</sup>. Thus, whilst "Easter Day" implicitly queries God's existence through the negation of Christ's Resurrection, Hardy's poem explores the reasons why God was invented in the first place: "Whence came it we were *tempted* to create / One whom we can no longer keep alive?" (italics mine). By defining the creation of God as a 'temptation', the axes of good and evil are perversely reversed. For by bestowing God with powers ("We gave him justice as the ages rolled") it is man who has ultimately assumed the role of God. In this light, the reference to 'framing' (stanza VII), a recurrent "metaphor for human subjectivity"<sup>29</sup> in Hardy's verse, is of special significance. The image of God has been 'framed' to so many purposes throughout the ages, whether by human arrogance, short-sightedness or the ontological fear of nothingness, that it has now lost all recognition as a single deity. The resultant self-deceit, generated by the unresolved tension between dream and reality, is paradigmatic of the counter processes of framing and disruption that forms the epistemological dilemma in the poem: "' And tricked by our own early dream / And need of solace, we grew self-deceived [...] And what we had *imagined* we *believed*.'" — italics mine). The speaker of "Easter Day" also assigns the defeated expectations of faith to human self-deception: "We are most *hopeless* who had once most *hope* / We are most wretched that had once *believed*" (italics mine). However, whilst Clough's poem is based on a religiously oriented dichotomy between hope and belief, Hardy's hinges on an intricately psychological conflict between imagination and belief. To resume the previously evoked metaphor of illness, there is a sense that humanity, through its ontological fear of a spiritual

<sup>28</sup> I am indebted to Francesco Marroni for this observation.

<sup>29</sup> Sheila Berger, *Thomas Hardy and Visual Structures: Framing, Disruption, Process*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1990, p. 15.

abyss, has contaminated itself by the delusional visions of "sick thoughts", the contagious effects of which are underlined, on a metaphorical level, in the image of the multiplying crowd in stanza V ("growing in bulk and numbers"). If, as Alan Conrad Christensen notes in his authoritative study on the significance of contagion in nineteenth-century literature, "The touch of God's finger, as in Michelangelo's representation of his creation, has conveyed the contagion of life to Adam and thereby to all the offspring of Adam"<sup>30</sup>, the human imagination has, conversely, contaminated reality with the idea of religious faith through the distorted nature of its fictional construction of God. The tragic outcome of this ontological 'disease' is manifested in both "Easter Day" and "God's Funeral", in images that appear dialogically converging in terms of their dysphoric impact:

[...] the foul-engendered worm  
feeds on the flesh of the life-giving one (*Easter Day*).

Uncompromising, rude reality  
Mangled the monarch of our fashioning (*God's Funeral*).

Clough's organic description of the body of Christ consumed by "the foul-engendered worm" entails the triumph of Evil over Good, whereas the mechanical devastation by Hardy's abstract entity ("rude reality") underlines a process of self-destruction which has originated and ended with man. On a rhetorical level, the semantic association foregrounded in Clough's alliteration: "feeds on the flesh" is grammatically echoed in Hardy ("Mangled the Monarch"). But Clough's Evangelical phrase "the life-giving one", together with the biblically connotative worm (the serpent in the Garden of Eden), becomes a secularised and negatively personified force in Hardy. Furthermore, it is no accident that 'God' is substituted by the term "monarch", to indicate an earthly leader rather than a celestial deity.

In the following four stanzas, the collective lament of the

<sup>30</sup> Allan Conrad Christensen, *Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Contagion: 'Our feverish contact'*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 40.

people in the procession (effectively an elegy within an elegy<sup>31</sup>) is countered by the voices of diehard believers who refuse to join in their mourning:

X

'So, toward our myth's oblivion,  
Darkling, and languid-lipped, we creep and grope  
Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon.  
Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.

XI

'How sweet it was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely at the eventide  
And feel a blest assurance he was there!

XII

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

XIII

Some in the background then I saw,  
Sweet women, youths, men, all incredulous,  
Who chimed: 'This is a counterfeit of straw,  
This requiem mockery! Still he lives to us!' (327-8).

It has not gone unnoticed<sup>32</sup> that the lexeme *darkling* alludes to the concluding lines of Matthew Arnold's great poem on the death of religious faith; "Dover Beach": "And we are here as on a darkling plane / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight / Where ignorant armies clash by night"<sup>33</sup>. Hardy corroborates Arnold's pessimism in that poem with his own apocalyptic vision

<sup>31</sup> Ramazani, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> F. B. Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy*, London, Macmillan, 1976, p. 100.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allot (2<sup>nd</sup> edition Miriam Allot), London, Longman, 1979 (1985), p. 305.

of a "myth's oblivion", one in which individuals, in contrast with the confusion of Arnold's ignorant armies, are united under one collective voice with a single bleak message<sup>34</sup>. Yet, at the same time, the line "Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes [...]" is reminiscent of Arnold's, *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*, a poem that manifests a cautious approach to the loss of faith in which those seeking a new religion are depicted as "wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born"<sup>35</sup> — a state of spiritual limbo analogous to that occupied by the speaker of "God's Funeral" whose nostalgia for God vies with his inability to believe in him.

A central feature of "God's Funeral" is the connection between language and faith. This theme emerges intertextually in stanza X which, in contrast to "Easter Day", contains the only explicit biblical reference in the poem: "we creep and grope / Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon, / Whose Zion was a still abiding hope". These lines recall the verses from Psalms: "By the rivers of Bablylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion"<sup>36</sup>. Significantly, the passage in Psalms also contains a question relevant to the central dilemma of Hardy's poem: "How shall we *sing* the Lord's song in a strange land?" (italics mine). The dilemma of a stranded but devoted people becomes, in Hardy, the empty question of a faithless crowd that can no longer recognise the deity that they have created ("[...] who or what shall fill his place?"). The death of God entails the impossibility of finding a language with which to re-define him (rather than to praise him) since what the procession mourns precisely is the death of its *idea* of God, rather than the death of its faith in God. The "incredulous" passers-by, on the other hand, who decry the funeral ceremony as "a counterfeit of straw",

<sup>34</sup> The fact that Arnold and Clough were close friends and rival poets also complicates the dialogical levels of Hardy's text. Both poets were representative voices of the religious crisis of the early Victorian age, but differed profoundly in their poetic approaches. Unfortunately, a discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305. For a consideration of images of sickness in *Dover Beach* see Renzo D'Agnillo, *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold*, Roma, Aracne, 2005, pp. 150-151.

<sup>36</sup> Psalms, 137:4.

express an uncompromisingly simple belief that pertains to a pre-positivistic stage: "Still he lives to us!" The main linguistic contrast, however, is that between the silent reflections of the speaker and the direct speech of the believers and non-believers. Moreover, excluding his transitory betrayal of emotion in stanza III ("to my blurred eyes"), the speaker's discourse is conspicuously void of the self-pitiful indulgence of his fellow mourners who, in their constant lamentations, tend to express themselves in derivative and obsolete terms<sup>37</sup>. But it is also a rejection of the simplistically held beliefs of the "Sweet women, youths and men" whose faith he cannot share. His transcription of each dialogue underlines a dramatic irony in which the conflicting viewpoints are subsumed in order to be brought to a tentative resolution. By transcending their linguistic short-sightedness he can situate himself at an ontologically advantaged position where the painfully ambivalent effects of a universal spiritual gulf can be truthfully recorded:

XIV

I could not buoy their faith: and yet  
Many I had known: with all I sympathized;  
And though struck speechless, I did not forget  
That what was mourned for, I, too, long had prized.

XV

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.

<sup>37</sup> These features include clichés and archaisms: *hied*, *liegely*, *eventide*, *blest*, *whither*, and hyperbaton: "thy knell who shall survive?"; "Our making soon our maker did we deem". See Ralph W.V. Elliott, *Thomas Hardy's English*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984, pp. 306-307 for Hardy's ironic use of the diction of Christian scripture and liturgy. See also Trevor Johnson, *A Critical Introduction to The Poems of Thomas Hardy*, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 146, who wittily observes that such archaic poeticisms "somehow seem to proliferate the moment he has God in his sights".



XVI

Whereof, to life the general night,  
A certain few who stood aloof had said,  
'See you upon the horizon that small light —  
Swelling somewhat?' Each mourner shook his head.

XVII

And they composed a crowd of whom  
Some were right good, and many nigh the best. ...  
Thus, dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom  
Mechanically I followed with the rest (328-9).

The 'silence' of the poetic-I ("And though struck speechless [...]") is tantamount to his sympathetic engagement with the whole community<sup>38</sup>: "Many had I known: with all I sympathized". In this light, Francesco Marroni's observation at the end of his acute analysis of "Dover Beach", is particularly applicable to Hardy's poem: "[...] all those who still want to believe in salvation are condemned to silence"<sup>39</sup>. This silent testimony of the universal spiritual crisis necessarily entails a moral responsibility in acknowledging and interpreting its existential implications. At the same time, there is a peculiar irony in the procession's denial of the existence of a body that is being borne by them for burial! Indeed, God's simultaneous presence and absence parallels the ambiguous dimension between belief and non-belief in which both the speaker and the procession are entrapped. But whilst the mourning procession frets over *how* to find a replacement for God, the speaker intuits that the real dilemma already concerns how to cope with such a loss: "Still, how to bear such loss I deemed / The insistent question for each animate mind [...]". Just as the speaker exhorts at the end of "Easter Day II": "Sit if ye will, sit down upon the ground / Yet not to weep and wail, but calmly

<sup>38</sup> Christensen, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Christensen's observation that although "humanity exists chiefly in the painful and elusive moments of historically passing time" without the comfort of a God, it can "experience at least its community" is of particular relevance to the discourse situation in *God's Funeral*.

<sup>39</sup> Francesco Marroni, *Victorian Disharmonies. A Reconsideration of Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Cranbury NJ, University of Delaware Press; Rome, John Cabot University Press, 2010, p. 47.

look around" (204), Hardy's speaker assumes a similar attitude of calm resignation before the bewildering ambivalence of the "pale yet positive gleam" in the distance which communicates no definite meaning or final message and cannot be perceived by all of those present. Thus, whilst Clough concludes his poem with an unresolved, dichotomy between faith and unbelief, Hardy is no longer in a position to retain such obsolete terms. The final vision of indeterminacy reflected in his speaker's confused perception (" 'twixt the gleam and gloom") envisages a possible dissolution into meaninglessness and nullity.

Unlike "Easter Day II", which suggests a tentative resolution to the speaker's denouncement of the myth of the Resurrection through an evaluation of its symbolic significance, "God's Funeral" concludes with the speaker's melancholic submission to a state of spiritual paralysis instigated by the loss of a faith that can no longer be retrieved. The speaker's confused renunciation is the end result of a worn-out tradition of rational positivism that, for Clough, still carried the stigma of a radically subversive philosophical outlook. For at the emotional core of Clough's poem there still gravitates a hope that, although Christ is dead in the literal sense, the essence of the Christian message will live on. In "God's Funeral" no such optimistic resolution remains plausible. For God is already dead before the poem begins.