

## *The Unbeliever's Lament*

These poems speak for themselves. Both Matthew Arnold and Thomas Hardy lacked a living trust in Christ.

Matthew Arnold in his 'Dover Beach' confessed:

*The sea is calm tonight.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!  
Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.*

*Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.*

*The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.*

*Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,*

*Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Thomas Hardy, in his poem ‘The Respectable Burgher on “The Higher Criticism”’, graphically set out the consequences, for many, of that attack on Scripture:

*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 thought 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 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.*

Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Oxen':

*Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.  
'Now they are all on their knees',  
An elder said as we sat in a flock  
By the embers in hearthside ease.*

*We pictured the meek mild creatures where  
They dwelt in their strawy pen,  
Nor did it occur to one of us there  
To doubt they were kneeling then.*

*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<sup>1</sup> by yonder coomb  
Our childhood used to know',  
I should go with him in the gloom,  
Hoping it might be so.*

---

<sup>1</sup> A farmyard.

Thomas Hardy's poem 'God's Funeral':

*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.*

*And by contagious throbs of thought  
Or latent knowledge that within me lay  
And had already stirred me, I was wrought  
To consciousness of sorrow even as they.*

*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.*

*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.*

*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:*

*'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?  
Framing him jealous, fierce, at first,  
We gave him justice as the ages rolled,  
Will to bless those by circumstance accurst,  
And longsuffering, and mercies manifold.  
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,  
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.  
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.  
How sweet it was in years far hied<sup>2</sup>  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely<sup>3</sup> at the eventide  
And feel a blest assurance he was there!  
And who or what shall fill his place?  
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes  
For some fixed star to stimulate their pace  
Towards the goal of their enterprise? ’...*

*Some in the background then I saw,  
Sweet women, youths, men, all incredulous,  
Who chimed as one: ‘This figure is of straw,  
This requiem mockery! Still he lives to us!’*

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

*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,  
Whereof, to lift 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.*

*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.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Gone or fled away.

<sup>3</sup> As subjects of the king.

Thomas Hardy's poem 'God-Forgotten':

*I towered far, and lo! I stood within  
The presence of the Lord Most High,  
Sent thither by the sons of earth, to win  
Some answer to their cry.*

*'The Earth, say 'st thou? The Human race?  
By Me created? Sad its lot?  
Nay: I have no remembrance of such place:  
Such world I fashioned not'.*

*'O Lord, forgive me when I say  
Thou spak'st the word, and mad'st it all'.*

*'The Earth of men – let me bethink me... Yea!  
I dimly do recall  
Some tiny sphere I built long back  
(Mid millions of such shapes of mine)  
So named... It perished, surely – not a wrack<sup>4</sup>  
Remaining, or a sign?  
It lost my interest from the first,  
My aims therefor succeeding ill;  
Haply it died of doing as it durst?'*

*'Lord, it existeth still'.*

*'Dark, then, its life! For not a cry  
Of aught it bears do I now hear;  
Of its own act the threads were snapt whereby  
Its plaints had reached mine ear.  
It used to ask for gifts of good,  
Till came its severance self-entailed,  
When sudden silence on that side ensued,  
And has till now prevailed.  
All other orbs have kept in touch;  
Their voicings reach me speedily:  
Thy people took upon them overmuch  
In sundering them from me!  
And it is strange – though sad enough –  
Earth's race should think that one whose call  
Frames, daily, shining spheres of flawless stuff  
Must heed their tainted ball!...*

---

<sup>4</sup> A remnant, a scrap, a trace.

*But say'st thou 'tis by pangs distraught,  
And strife, and silent suffering?  
Deep grieved am I that injury should be wrought  
Even on so poor a thing!  
Thou should'st have learnt that Not to Mend  
For Me could mean but Not to Know:  
Hence, Messengers! and straightway put an end  
To what men undergo'...*

*Homing at dawn, I thought to see  
One of the Messengers standing by.*

*Oh, childish thought!...  
Yet oft it comes to me  
When trouble hovers nigh.*



Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Darkling Thrush':

*I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-grey,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems<sup>5</sup> scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted nigh  
Had sought their household fires.*

*The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.*

*At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.*

*So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.*

---

<sup>5</sup> Long, twisting stems of vines or similar plants.