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‘HARDY’S TWO VOICES: “THE OXEN” and its contexts’

JOHN HUGHES

This essay surveys a variety of important contexts for considering Hardy’s “The Oxen”: biographical, historical, literary-historical, religious, and personal, among them. It will seek to open up possibilities of reading the poem that extend beyond what can seem its de facto status as a (self-evident) exemplification of Hardy’s attitudes on matters of religion. Critics sometimes give the impression that this is a poem about which there is little more to be said, but these pieces seek to counter this by close examination of its ways of saying. The companion essay (in a following issue) will offer a metrical reading of “The Oxen”, seeking to show that a close study of the expressive dynamics of metre in this poem allow one to examine how extensive is the poem’s meaning, and how characteristically it is shaped by an internal drama of voice and intonation.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, metre, voice, “The Oxen”, religion, childhood

‘The Oxen’ has long been one of Hardy’s most anthologized poems, widely praised for the speaker’s childhood memory of sitting with other children on Christmas Eve. For all its deserved fame, however, there is only one obscure reference to ‘The Oxen’ in the Life. It describes how Mrs Hardy sold the manuscript of the poem in February 1916 at a Red Cross Sale, along with the manuscripts of “‘The Breaking of Nations’ and a fragment of a story – the whole fetching £72:10s”.[1] Yet the very public circumstances of its first publication, in The Times on Christmas Eve in 1915, in the midst of the unprecedented slaughter of the war, show clearly Hardy’s ambitions for ‘The Oxen’ and its intended scope as a pronouncement that seeks to bind together the widest range of readers precisely in terms of something at once utterly inward and private, yet universal: the children’s lost capacity for vision, belief and response.

This piece explores important contexts of the poem. It will move from the outside inwards, examining ‘The Oxen’ in relation to Hardy’s own life, his thought, his attitudes to religion, his critics, and his own links to romanticism and modernity. In doing so, it will prepare the ground for a following piece will approach the poem from the inside outwards, specifically exploring how fundamentally and effectively Hardy uses metre in the poem to voice a sensibility divided between a residual form of unguarded openness, associable with childhood trust and vision, and a thoroughgoing skeptical or atheistic despondency that is underscored by an allusive sense of the horror of the time. These tensions are everywhere evident in the poem’s intonation, as well as its scenario and temporal shifts.[2] The reader will remember how at the prompting of an elder, on the chiming of twelve, the ‘flock’ of children imagine the meek cattle (according to an old tradition) kneeling in their pen on the occasion of Jesus’s birth. As the poem unfolds, the children’s innocent and unquestioning belief is contrasted with the adult’s regrets over the loss of youth, faith and community. Nonetheless, in the poem’s coda, the aged poet, while alluding to ‘these years’ of war, offers a memorable acknowledgement that the child’s attitude of ready hope is still not eradicated within him, though belief itself may be.[3]

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[1] F. E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928 (London: Macmillan, 1975), 372.

[2] Indeed, it will be suggested throughout that one of the benefits of close attention to intonation is that it reveals how far a Hardy poem shapes itself and its thought through singular expressive moments of voice.

Broadly speaking, no one would dispute that ‘The Oxen’ is indeed a very rare thing: a poem on religion and faith that speaks to all, and whose disunities resonate with the discord and carnage of the time. Nonetheless, it is as a personal, even private, piece that it has mostly been received. In purely biographical terms for instance, Florence Hardy claimed in a letter of January 7 1917, to Alda, Lady Hoare that ‘[i]t was of course his mother who told’ young Thomas ‘the legend of the oxen kneeling in their stables at midnight on Christmas Eve’.[4] From very early on, critics have identified their impressions of the poem’s tone with the Hardy who wrote in 1907 that ‘[t]he days of creeds are as dead and done with as days of Pterodactyls’ (Life, 332). Writing a decade or so after publication, R. W. King asserted that its ‘most appealing element’ was its ‘wistful tenderness and pity for human faiths and failings’,[5] while Cecil Day Lewis celebrated the poem’s ‘golden haze of retrospect’.[6] More recently, writers have tended to take the poem as a paradigmatic statement of Hardy’s stoical, skeptical, or nostalgic feeling of displacement from the vanished faith of his youth. Claire Tomalin links it to Hardy’s difficulties on matters of belief: ‘”The Oxen” is Hardy’s musing at Christmas on his lack of faith and his regret for it, a poem [to which] even the most hardened unbeliever is likely to respond’.[7] Tom Paulin identifies these two kinds of exclusion – from belief and youth - as wound round each other, and claims that a ‘strong element in this wish to believe is [Hardy’s] nostalgia for the rural Anglicanism of his child-hood.’[8] In similar vein, Ralph Pite wrote that Hardy in ‘The Oxen’ ‘yearns after the fanciful, almost fairytale belief that “his childhood used to know”’.[9]

Arguably, the consensus of admiring commentary and the poem’s status as an epitome of

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[3] Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy, ed. Samuel Hynes, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 206.

[4] Cited by J. O. Bailey, The Poetry of Thomas Hardy (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1970), 370.

[5] Thomas Hardy: A Casebook, ed. James Gibson and Trevor Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1979), 104.

[6] C. Day Lewis, "‘The Lyrical Poetry of Thomas Hardy’: The Warton Lecture on English Poetry, 6 June 1951,"Proceedings of the British Academy (1951); reprinted in Thomas Hardy: A Casebook, ed. James Gibson and Trevor Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1979), 155.

[7] Claire Tomalin, Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man (London: Viking, 2006), 325.

[8] Tom Paulin. Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan), 1975.

[9] Ralph Pite, Thomas Hardy: A Guarded Life (London: Picador, 2006), 110.

Hardy's views on religion, have had the effect of making 'The Oxen' too readily appear a text about which there is nothing more to say, consigning its status to that of a useful, self-evident summation of Hardy's views on religion. Nonetheless, the metrical analysis of the poem will seek to show both how extensively the emotional power of the poem derives from its micro-enactments and metrical nuances, and how fundamental the shifting expressive dimension of intonation is to the unfolding meaning. No one would dispute that thematically the poem's constitutive dynamic is an oscillation between response and cognition. However, it is important to emphasise that the incommensurability of expression and reflection is no less a matter of voice, and its effects. For instance, attention to metre can show how the poem not only passingly incarnates within the reader the drained and isolated reflections of age, but also passingly retrieves, as a kind of virtual transient reality, the lost mind of childhood – guileless, gentle, responsive, and even visionary. The voicings of metre surprise us with affects that disrupt cognition, logic, and chronology, and that effectively put different dimensions of the self and its history into circulation. Metrical analysis reveals in such ways that this is a poem that reads us as much as we read it, prising open our sensibilities and fleetingly incarnates once again, for instance, the forgotten but abiding disposition of childhood. In this respect, the poem is like a child's paper fortune-teller game: its words open and close between different dimensions, and sound out within us singular, folded layers of identity and time.

At this point it is worth developing briefly this sense of what a study of the poem's vocal enactments can reveal. Certainly, it allows us to argue that so far from being a poem about the speaker's exclusion from commonalty, universality, innocence, hope, or transcendence, 'The Oxen' is in fact inalienably dedicated to such things. So one might oppose the scenario of the poem - and the speaker's scepticism on matters of faith and humanity - to its own vocal address, whereby a writer, qua poet, cannot but dedicate himself anew through his words to a new addressee, a new beginning, a new moment of vision, and hence to a renewal of (faith in) humanity within himself and his reader at least. And then one might take this projective aspect of poetic expression as being in secret accord with the poem's mise-en-scène, as we read of children who display an automatic capacity for wonder as they sit together, rapt in their common visioning of the cattle who themselves in their turn are also somehow similarly blessed, with their own strange, bovine visions of the redeemer. So, even as we might consciously reflect sorrowfully on the absence of faith and wonder, and even gloss the poem in such terms (as critics do), it is nonetheless wonder of a kind that the poem produces and transmits: a wonder at that very human capacity for wonder and hope, incarnated undeniably in the children, and recovered in this kind of virtual form in the reader and speaker through links that extend even to the imagined and imaginative cattle themselves... None of this is to deny the stark absence of any circumstance that corresponds to the capacity for such vision, but to assert that it is undeniable that such a capacity, ineradicable and persistent, is all at once the poem's theme, occasion and effect.[10] Thus the poem sounds out within the reader the residual incarnation of a self still receptive to the address of 'someone', as at the end of the poem, who might arrive to lead the dejected self towards hope.

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[10] To put it another way, a sceptical reader could not appreciate the poem unless he discovered that such an attitude of hope and imaginative response were reawakened in him, in the expressive interstices of his reading.

One might also follow the poem's permutations of hope and skepticism beyond the biographical to think of those obscure figures and forbears who Hardy as a poet still felt himself bound to follow. 'The Oxen', like so many Hardy poems, rewards consideration in terms of Hardy's enduring romanticism. To begin with, we might sceptically point out how much this was hollowed-out within his own ironic form of modern consciousness. The young Wordsworth's poetic enquiry into the essentials of human identity was premised often on the hope for a redemptive connection to the childhood self through nature, whereas Hardy's more modern sensibility insists on identity as discontinuous, ungrounded, and ironically exiled from its beginnings.[11] Such a perspective can also give traction to the most important point of connection with Wordsworth, and an often misunderstood aspect of Hardy's writing: its integral philosophical dimensions. Like Wordsworth, Hardy's work generalizes his personal predicaments, so that his work can be taken as philosophy by other means, as an interrogation of subjectivity and cognition in pursuit of greater expressivity. It is easy to see how far this is a matter of voice for the poet of 'Tintern Abbey' whose rolling periods and tones – sportive, wild, hermetic, lofty – find their physical and reflective conditions through the occasions of nature, so that in revisiting the Wye it is also himself the speaker is revisiting, and his own sense of self-loss he is engaging. But what gives Hardy voice? For him it often seems that a poem also begins with some pretext of self-discordance, often temporal in nature, some disparity between circumstance and feeling that poetry can resolve only to the extent that it raises it to expression, and overcomes its isolated condition and moment through its address to its readers.

Finally, this leads to a few words on the central ethical and philosophical conflict of scepticism and hope in the poem. Much of what follows will show not only how extensive this, reaching into contexts of modernity, religion, and politics, but also how far it is a matter of language and meter. The worlds of childhood and of age appear utterly divided in 'The Oxen', and nowhere more so than in the final stanza. Yet the poem also demonstrates not only their ironic coexistence within the speaker, but also a strange, secret congruence between scepticism and childhood. Scepticism is the secular attitude that yearns for the removal of doubt, yet in the child's attitude there is no doubt, since it is not an attitude of belief or knowledge. Rather, the poem voices the attitude of childhood as a responsive, immersive and automatic disposition. It is prior to the parsings of cognition or proof and reaches out from this familiar world towards change, or even a world to come. As this might suggest, the study of metre allows one to consider the surprising irruptions of the childhood mind in the poem, their continuities with the abiding hopefulness of poetry itself and their anticipations of the imagined advent of the nameless person at the close of the poem: the 'someone' who introduces a Christmas miracle, and who issues the Christ-like command, 'come see'. Suitably enough, this command is itself indeterminate from the point of view of knowledge: it is between being a miraculous revelation for the faithful ('come see what I am showing to you if you have the power to believe') and a report of one

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[11] Wordsworth's celebrated sense of birth as 'but a sleep and forgetting' is intensified in 'The Oxen' into what seems the adult's utterly bereft sense of the fall into unredeemed, isolated and dispirited adulthood. Nonetheless, sleep and forgetting are suggestive ideas here for considering Hardy's troubled post-romanticism, if we describe how voice works in the poem at key moments to reawaken childhood within the reader, while reciprocally reducing the state of adulthood for this interval to a kind of slumber.

('come see what I have seen'). Here as elsewhere, then, the expressive means of the poem refuses to allow the poem to fall back simply into the crepuscular reality and the isolated speaker's gloomy musing as the poem ends, however much we might surmise the poem to have begun, and be preoccupied, with these things.

*

Florence Hardy said that the outbreak of the war initially horrified Hardy bringing about, 'a great change in him… To me he seems ten years older. The thought of it all obsesses him', and he told Edmund Gosse around this time that '[t]he effect of it upon me was for a long while to prevent my doing anything, & still is to a great extent'.[12] To Sydney Cockerill he commented that 'the recognition that we are living in a more brutal age that that, say, of Elizabeth' did not 'inspire' him 'to write hopeful prose', but made him feel apathetic. He told the editor of the Daily News that he preferred 'to write nothing' (Pite, 429). However, though the onset of war led Hardy initially to this dispirited falling back, this was eventually succeeded by outbreaks of industry, even inspiration. As Ralph Pite put it, '[p]atriotic duty roused him from torpor' and he soon even became somewhat galvanized by the situation, as the Life shows, producing a steady output of poems like 'Men Who March Away', 'England to Germany in 1914', 'Often When Warring', 'Then and Now', 'We Are Getting to the End', and 'On the Belgian Expatriation'(Pite, 429).

This reaction seems very characteristic since such movements - between disillusion or deflation and moments of vision – are essential to Hardy's verse itself. Certainly, they are powerful in 'The Oxen', which also shares with these war poems a particular piquancy and power, and a very public sense of timeliness. However, unlike these poems, 'The Oxen' took the war as its occasion rather than its obvious topic, and in its ironic specification and themes it preserves, as Irving Howe put it 'an intensely personal accent'.[13] Characteristically, it registers the ironic discontinuities of our experience in ways that are structural as well as temporal, moving stanza by stanza between incommensurable moments of identity. The poem is almost archetypal of Hardy in the way in which its central figure forlornly cleaves to a locus of lost joy while the verses unfold between the divergent worlds of past and present, and different incarnations of the self, before the speaker fashions his final rueful acknowledgement of how temporality constitutes (and destitutes) the self through paradoxical involutions of time.

In this section I want to prepare the ground for the metrical reading of the poem by considering a little further how Hardy deals with issues of religion in his verse. John Bayley offers a useful way into this with his remark that the adult Hardy 'does not substitute a new belief or attitude but continues in the old one, having ceased to believe it'.[14] It is a subtle formulation, suggestive of the complexities of Hardy's liminal status between religion and secularism. Understandably, Timothy Hands's exploration of Hardy's self-professed agnosticism led him to reiterate the need to be wary of labels in responding to the particular suspensions and refusals of Hardy's attitude, not least because Hardy was himself so scrupulous in this respect:

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[12] Comments by Florence Hardy, Gosse, and Cokerill cited by Pite on same page as Pite's comment (Pite, 429)

[13] Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966),177.

> It is not just that Hardy was not a believer, agnostic or atheist by any accepted or historical definition of these terms: it is in addition that he was notable for the extent to which he strove to avoid any kind of categorization.[15]

Accordingly, Hands emphasized Hardy's ambivalence in matters of faith, as evident in giving a prevailing 'impression of a regret, sometimes sentimental, sometimes wistful, for a religious belief which he found constantly considerable, yet personally elusive because intellectually unacceptable.' (Hands, 215). Hardy is perpetually divided, Hands suggests, by an intellectual necessity for unbelief that he acknowledges but cannot assimilate.

In 1928, John Middleton Murry reported his astonishment when 'in the summer of last year'[1927], Thomas Hardy told him of how circumstances had prevented his boyhood wish to enter the Church, leaving him to comment that 'I have often regretted it'.[16] This Hardy, both 'churchy' and 'agnostic' - unable either to endorse or renounce his youthful faith - has long been a familiar figure to readers, and critics such as Hands and Jan Jędrzejeweski have advanced varied accounts of how Hardy's mind developed within these two inextricable and incompatible attitudes. Hands has offered an extensive account of the religious and liturgical environment of Hardy's upbringing, while Jędrzejeweski traces a phased evolution away from the boy's unquestioning faith towards the theological questioning of his youth, and on to the bitter condemnation of the Church as a social institution in later life, before a final rapprochement with the value, even necessity, of 'fundamental ethical values of Christianity in the life of human society despite the irrelevance of their ontological basis'.[17] This is borne out in a reminiscence by J. H. Morgan, published in The Times on 19 January 1928, eight days after Thomas Hardy's death, recalling a conversation of October 21 1922 in which he confided to Morgan his late practice of more regular, if still sporadic, church attendance: 'I believe in going to church. It is a moral drill and people must have something'.[18]

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[14] John Bayley, An Essay on Hardy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 49.

[15] Timothy Hands, The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy, ed. Rosemarie Morgan (Aldershot: Ashgate), 210.

[16] Pamel Dalziel, '"The Hard Case of the Would-be-Religious": Hardy and the Church from Early Life to Later Years', in A Companion to Thomas Hardy, ed. Keith Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 83.

[17] Jan Jędrzejeweski, Thomas Hardy and the Church (London: Macmillan, 1996), 5. Dalziel traces more an ongoing oscillation in Hardy's attitudes between the two poles of scepticism and belief.

[18] J. H. Morgan, 'Mr Hardy and the Church. A Reminiscence', The Times, January 19 1928, 8. Reprinted in Martin Ray, ed., Thomas Hardy Remembered (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 259-60.

In a poem like ‘Afternoon Service at Mellstock’ the hymn-like quality of structure and verse contribute to the poet’s abiding sense of displacement. As in ‘The Oxen’, the speaker reaches back into his own childhood to evoke the children’s communal and unquestioning faith, as they sway and sing in the church, before he comes to regret how little advantage intellectual advancement has brought.[19] It is a poem that clearly bears out in fabric and feeling Dennis Taylor’s emphasis on how far Hardy’s sensibility was formed by Hymns Ancient and Modern, with his ‘strict’ church upbringing, and his knowing ‘by heart’ the ‘Morning and Evening Services’ and the ‘New Version of the Psalms’ (Life, 18). Hardy’s sensibility and verse one can say, were both alike formed by the four-square frameworks of his mother’s faith. Accordingly, these poems do not parody or critique the structures of church and hymn, so much as inhabit them still, but with an inability to grant assent. From this point of view, Hardy’s self-description as ‘churchy’ (Life, 376) takes on further resonances, as if his adult mind in some aspects resembled an abandoned church that he was reluctant to leave.

This way of putting it brings to mind not only the many poems where Hardy describes himself as regretfully excluded from the faith that others still enjoy, but also the very literal as well as metaphorical way in which he was often not disposed to leave behind the grounds, or premises of belief. There is a telling passage in the Life:

> We enter church … we are pretending what is not true; that we are believers. This must not be; we must leave. And if we do, we reluctantly go to the door, and creep out as it creaks complainingly behind us. (Life, 333)

The passage offers a powerful illustration of how Hardy found himself perpetually on the threshold of a locus of belief, unable to enter or depart. One might say that he did not so much refuse faith as refuse to accept it, but while also refusing to refuse it... In poetic form, ‘The Impercipient’ is perhaps the most direct statement of this felt dislocation, its speaker finding himself an ‘outcast’ from the worshippers he observes in the church. He retreats from observation of ‘this bright believing band’, into liminal musing and reflection on the ‘unfelicity’ that leaves him outside of the joy and visions (the ‘mirage-mists’ of ‘their Shining Land’) they appear to enjoy, leaving him only in ‘disquiet’.[20] As Howe comments, ‘far from claiming any superiority as an “emancipated” modern’ [Hardy] recognizes the extent of his losses while refusing to allow these to lure him into a faith his mind has already rejected’ (Howe, 177).[21]

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[19] In ‘Afternoon Service at Mellstock’, as in ‘The Oxen’, the poem moves from a past scene of concord and automatic expressive freedom. In the first verse once again, the former scene is set: the children are the ‘we’ standing in ‘the pannelled pew’, and ‘[s]inging one-voiced a Tate-and-Brady psalm’. The second stanza, as in the other poem, immerses itself in the past occasion. The physicality of the singing is miraculously given in lines that associate the children with the elms and rooks that capture their gaze, as they compose a common rhythm with each other and the trees swaying with the breeze:

> We watched the elms, we watched the rooks,
>   The clouds upon the breeze,
> Between the whiles of glancing at our books,
>   And swaying like the trees.

Elsewhere, I have analysed closely the metrical features of this poem in terms of the ways the rhythm opens and closes between such an expressivity – communal, physical, and spiritual – and the advent of ‘subtle thoughts’ in later life. Hardy incorporates metrical effects that suggest the limiting incursions of reflection, even in the former time. So the line ‘Singing one-voiced a Tate-and-Brady psalm’ suggests children struggling to cram words in with the melody, while the arhythmical line, ‘Between the whiles of glancing at our books’, itself suggests the interruptive cognitive process of spelling out words in intervals between ‘glances’ down at the page. (See Hughes, 2011/12 ‘A Metrical Reading of Thomas Hardy’s “Afternoon Service at Mellstock”’, The Explicator, Vol. 69, 4, 207-11).

The philosophical complexities of Hardy’s attitudes to belief can be clearly seen in ‘A Sign Seeker’, with its extraordinary tone and theme of unappeased rigour. It is a poem in which the mind is represented and enacted as bending itself away from the lure of faith:

> - There are who, rapt to heights of trancelike trust.
> These tokens claim to feel and see,
> Read radiant hints of time to be -
> Of heart to heart returning after dust to dust.
>
> Such scope is granted not to lives like mine…
> I have lain in dead men’s beds, have walked
> The tombs of those with whom I had talked,
> Called many a gone and goodly one to shape a sign,
>
> And panted for response. But none replies;
> No warnings loom, nor whisperings
> To open out my limitings,
> And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies. (Complete Poems, 50)

In the 1898 ‘Wessex Poems’, the line ‘Such scope is granted not to lives like mine’ reads as ‘Such scope is granted not my powers indign’.[22] The gnarled and recondite terms ‘indign’ and ‘Nescience’ are very striking. Aesthetically rebarbative, even ugly, they are effective indices of a searching and extended mind, one not intent on pleasing itself merely, but on struggling with awkward truths. As such, they are inward with the poem’s emphasis on the business of learning as an empirical business, dependent on percipience, and knotty, obdurate signs. They enact what the poem also says: that knowledge is a function of one’s encounters, of the mind’s difficulty construing of truth through external, physical ‘tokens’ that it reads as signs:

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[20] Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poems, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan), 66-67.

[21] It is a subtly different attitude to that of Philip Larkin whose celebrated and more dispassionate ‘Church Going’ this extract so clearly brings to mind. For both the church is an empty place, voided of revelation. Yet Hardy cannot but remain at the threshold, as if abandoned by a faith that he cannot bring himself to abandon. ‘The Oxen’ is one of the clearest examples of this, and of the way in which memory often works on an emotional level to deny the denial of faith itself. (By an uncanny Hardeyan irony, Hardy of course did actually return in a literal way to the locus of childhood belief, since as J. O. Bailey pointed out the ‘lonely barton’ of the poem is near to where Hardy’s heart is buried in Stinsford churchyard (J. O. Bailey, The Poetry of Thomas Hardy, 370).

[22] Thomas Hardy, Selected Poems, ed. Timothy Armstrong (London: Longman, 1993), 62.

> But none replies;
> No warnings loom, nor whisperings
> To open out my limitings,
> And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies.

In these final lines, the material condition of mind is clearly stated through a bathos that is again literal and metaphorical, leading him ‘mutely’ to ‘muse’ that ‘[w]hen a man falls he lies.’. Human existence is a matter of acknowledging finitude, of an attitude receptive of ‘limitings’ and ‘[n]eiscience’ opposed to the wishfulness and uplift of ‘tranced trust’. By these means ‘The Sign Seeker’ enacts as well as advances the internal rigours and schisms of Hardy’s attitude to faith, conveying an empiricist bent of the kind that led him to write in 1901:

> After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this: Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience. (Life, 310)

Other poems by Hardy on faith or Christmas indicate similar features, where the poem registers and rejects faint residual reverberations and echoes of a departed faith, the contortions of mind evident in the twists and turns of metre and language. These discordances are clearly evident in celebrated poems like ‘The Darkling Thrush’ or ‘Christmastide’ which are layered with intimations of Christian hope, or Romantic inspiration. The speaker in each poem cannot but acknowledge these, while being bewildered or dispirited by their incongruity. Both poems are identified with the Christmas season, the former by the date, and also the word ‘carolings’ which describes the joyful song of the bird in Christian terms (though clearly it references also the famous nightingale or skylark of Keats or Shelley) (Complete Poems, 150). Though the song is the poem’s pretext, its transport is one the poet cannot help but respond to, though he feels he cannot endorse. The tramp in ‘Christmastide’, on his way to the workhouse, prompts a similar sense of mystery in the poet. He cheerily greets the poem’s despondent speaker with ‘A merry Christmas, friend!’, as the latter traverses the gloomy, rainy, and ‘blank high-road’. Hardy’s language, so exact in every other respect, with its registration of splintering ‘rain-shafts’ and the sighing, wind-blown, bushes, takes on an uncanny indeterminacy with the advent of this figure who is described (a little like Wordsworth’s discharged soldier) as if he had arisen out of thin air. Like the imagined figure at the end of ‘The Oxen’, he seems as if he could partake of the scriptural quality of an apparition or visitation (‘‘There rose a figure by me’), an unfathomable harbinger of seasonal and redemptive cheer, before the poet resolves into the quotidian register with the detail of ‘a sodden tramp’ who yet sings ‘a thin song’ as he presses on to the workhouse for a Christmas (Complete Poems, 846). Again such features of structure and theme convey the pattern we have noted, of a poem that registers at the level of theme and expression its many-sided, generative, dislocations. The speaker’s subjectivity is divided between his conscious attitudes and these surprising voicings of hope or vision that appear ineradicable - however much they seem also to belong only to a former state of being or belief.