“Must Come and Bide”: Antinatalist Sentiments in Hardy’s *Poems of the Past and Present*

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“Not to be born is, past all prizing, best; but, when a man hath seen the light, this is next best by far, that with all speed he should go thither, whence he hath come. For when he hath seen youth go by, with its light follies, what troublous affliction is strange to his lot, what suffering is not therein?—envy, factions, strife, battles and slaughters; and, last of all, age claims him for her own,—age, dispraised, infirm, unsociable, unfriended, with whom all woe of woe abides.”

—*Oedipus at Colonus* (trans. Sir Richard Jebb)

“All that makes a writer is the ability to write strongly and directly from some unaccountable and almost invincible personal prejudice like … Hardy’s against God for the blunder of sex…”

—Robert Frost, in a letter dated 7 April 1926 [1]

“Reader reviews” at Amazon.com are now an established genre, which Amazon implicitly classifies as to the claim they ought to have on a shopper’s attention, and for the citation of which the MLA provides guidelines. Reviews offered up by people using only screen names lie at the bottom of the heap. Next in order of consequence are “Amazon-verified Purchase Review” reviewers. This tag assures shoppers that, though the company cannot verify that the reviewer read the book in question, it can

verify that he or she purchased a copy of it. Finally, at the apex, are "Real Name" reviewers. This tag signals that a reviewer is on record *in propria persona* (or anyway that the name shoppers see matches one on receipts at Amazon).

Navigating to the page at Amazon for David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been: the Harm of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford, 2006)—a major statement of the antinatalist position in philosophy—I find the following, by an "Amazon-Verified Purchaser": "[This book] was recommended to me by someone. Then I realized that the person who recommended it to me had a problem, and so had the author of the book—they obviously are not able physically to have children." Surely antinatalists write from motives of infantile resentment: if I can't have a child, then nobody shall. A "Real Name," "See All My Reviews" reviewer (one D. Kelley), chimes in here: "This is the dumbest book I've ever had the misfortune of reading a part of. … I hope the author gets some guts and follows the illogical conclusions of the book and does away with himself." A screenname only reviewer, "Expat Mommy,"[2] clearly able to have children, and therefore a biologically sound refutation of Benatar, seconds D. Kelley: "I would indeed be suffering less at this moment if David Benatar had never existed." Funny how folk who celebrate life make so free with their capital punishments. Awarding Benatar two stars, "Real Name Reviewer" M. Taylor, apparently a fan of 1980s pop music, writes: "Too bad [David] wasn't born [rock and roller] Pat Benatar. Just existing is so unpleasant that life is a net evil, says Benatar. Well, David," Taylor adds, taking Benatar by the lapels, "if you thought the world was designed to provide you a cradle-to-grave Slip 'n Slide, I can understand your disappointment." Did Taylor cast a ballot for Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan back in 2012? I suspect him of having read Ayn Rand.

Anyway, he continues: "You should have saved yourself a lot of effort and grasped [self-help guru] M. Scott Peck before you invested all that time writing 455 Reasons to Be Suicidally Depressed." Humanists, take heart. Here, certainly, is inadvertent testimony to the power of philosophy to evoke engagement. Then—as Thomas Hardy often does—Taylor puts words in the God's mouth. "Take My hand," he writes, I assume in the person of Christ: "Let Me lift you up out of the clinging primordial slime and grow to be Man. It will cost you; there is great pain to be borne, your heart must be broken over and over, like Mine. But in the end, you will be able to care about something besides your tiny inconsequential self. You will become not only human and mortal, but divine and eternal. You will know Joy."

All this bile—and unsolicited counsel as to redemption—and for what crime? The crime of having seriously entertained the Sophoclean propositions that it might be better never to have been, and that coming into existence is, on balance, more a harm than a good. These propositions are central to antinatalism, which, notwithstanding the infamy some attach to it, is implied by primitive Buddhism, may be deduced from certain arguments advanced in the Pauline epistles, and has attracted the interest of many writers in the Western tradition—from Sophocles, of course, to Arthur Schopenhauer and Thomas Hardy. Mark Twain occasionally dabbled in it, too: "Why is it that we rejoice at a birth and grieve at a funeral?" he asks (as Pudd'nhead Wilson). "It is because we are not the person involved" (69). [3]

A glance at "reader reviews" of Hardy at Amazon shows that he comes in for his share of abuse: "*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a novel remarkable only in its quality to inspire hatred from those unfortunates forced to read it. Apart from keeping a healthy fire roaring in my hearth, *Tess* contains little of merit." I wonder if our reviewer is aware that, in burning a novel by Hardy,

he enjoys what, in the 1890s, passed for exalted company. I refer to William Walsham How, Bishop of Wakefield who, in a letter to *The Yorkshire Post*, announced that he would publicly burn a copy of *Jude the Obscure*, and then carried the act out. [4] Most of his unfriendly readers, as Hardy's various apologia imply, found more dignified ways than that to consign him to the flames. But really, the indictment is the same, and falls out along lines familiar from my little survey of the popular abuse accorded David Benatar. He is bleak, unremittingly so, and surely this shows a failure in character; his views are counterintuitive, and therefore necessarily wrong; he is a pessimist; his books do not redeem us; he deals in the harms of coming into existence and little else.

Whether anyone ever burnt a copy of Hardy's *Poems of the Past and Present* (1902) on principle, or as a form of literary criticism, I do not know. But certain of the views entertained therein, if rightly understood, might set literary arsonists to work. In what follows I examine two lyrics from *Poems of the Past and Present*, in which antinatalist arguments are either made or held out for inspection: "To an Unborn Pauper Child" and "Mad Judy." [5]

1.

Thomas Hardy first published "To an Unborn Pauper Child" in *The Academy* for 23 November 1901, alongside "Mute Opinion," "The Bedridden Peasant to an Unknowing God," and "The Subalterns." The group appeared under the general heading "Mr. Hardy's New Poems." The holograph manuscript Hardy later delivered to his publisher bears in it the alternative, and canceled, title "To an Unborn Child," with an epigraph, also canceled: "She must go to the Union-house to have her baby. *—Casterbridge [i.e., Dorchester] Petty Sessions*." [6]

Hardy then collected the lyric in *Poems of the Past and Present*, the preface to which reads, in part: "[The book] will probably be found . . . 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" (vi). Hardy's modesty (more apparent than real, I suspect) oughtn't mislead us. He's out for "a true philosophy of life" and supposes that poetry might get us on the road to one. A quasi-philosophical vocabulary already underlies the preface, the implications of which are awakened by the Schopenhauerian poem that concludes the volume (about an unknowing "Willer" that makes "life become"). The "phenomena" of life, aptly "recorded" in all their casualties and changes, lead us (or may) to certain assumptions about the noumena underlying and "willing" them. "Adjusting" our "impressions" or "records" would falsify those assumptions. Hardy is an empiricist. He takes the world as it comes.

About Hardy's "philosophy" we can, as should now be apparent, say at least this: a strain of antinatalism runs through it. Often, we find him with the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*: "Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best" (105). [7] Hardy goes so far as to make God Himself an antinatalist, or anyway a kind of nihilist, as here, in "By the Earth's Corpse" (which precedes "To an Unborn Pauper Child" by two pages): "That I made Earth, *and life*, and man, / It still repenteth me!" (my emphasis). [8] A pity He set that bow in the clouds to tie His Hands and be a token of covenant between Himself and the Earth (Genesis 9:12-16). Call it a lesson in the danger of making promises.

But now to the poem:

To An Unborn Pauper Child

I

Breathe not, hid Heart: cease silently,
And though thy birth-hour beckons thee,
  Sleep the long sleep:
  The Doomsters heap
Travails and teens around us here,
And Time-wraiths turn our songsingings to fear.

II

Hark, how the peoples surge and sigh,
And laughters fail, and greetings die:
  Hopes dwindle; yea,
  Faiths waste away,
Affections and enthusiasms numb;
Thou canst not mend these things if thou dost come.

III

Had I the ear of wombèd souls
Ere their terrestrial chart unrolls,
  And thou wert free
  To cease, or be,
Then would I tell thee all I know,
And put it to thee: Wilt thou take Life so?

IV

Vain vow! No hint of mine may hence
To theeward fly: to thy locked sense
  Explain none can

Life's pending plan:
Thou wilt thy ignorant entry make
Though skies spout fire and blood and nations quake.

V

Fain would I, dear, find some shut plot
Of earth's wide wold for thee, where not
One tear, one qualm,
Should break the calm.
But I am weak as thou and bare;
No man can change the common lot to rare.

VI

Must come and bide. And such are we—
Unreasoning, sanguine, visionary—
That I can hope
Health, love, friends, scope
In full for thee; can dream thou'lt find
Joys seldom yet attained by humankind! (111-113)

Hardy apparently read of a pauper woman in the records of the court of petty sessions in Dorchester; this occasioned the poem. But it soon becomes clear that the poverty into which the woman's child will be born is not Hardy's chief concern. He would address the unborn child of an heiress in the same way. Knock pauperism out of the title and you find no trace of it in the poem. The text printed in *The Academy* has "Had I the circuit of *all* souls" for "Had I the ear of wombèd souls" (a reading that persisted, though struck out, in the holograph Hardy provided to his publisher when he readied the book for print). Without question, the poem generalizes the

argument that it's better never to have been. One might prefer, I suppose, that the poem never speak of a "pauper" at all. I can imagine a bad reader—a reader damnably innocent of Hardy—supposing that the poem has about it a eugenic inflection not unknown in early twentieth century writing about pregnant paupers. Ezra Pound, that noted racist and antisemite, is on record as to "the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor." [9] But I mention the possibility of a eugenic reading only to dismiss it outright as absurd. [10]

Hardy begins: "Breathe not, hid Heart: cease silently, / And though thy birth-hour beckons thee, / Sleep the long sleep." Of course, the child isn't "hidden"; it is *in potentia*, like the "hid scent in an unbudded rose" of which Keats writes in *Lamia* (48). Things hidden imply their own discovery, their unfolding, their finding out, their advent; the birth-hour beckons. Hardy at first addresses the unborn child by way of the epithet "Heart," taking the part for the whole. You might expect "*Beat* not, hid Heart," since hearts do not breathe, but that is not what Hardy wrote, and the sense is this: do not come to term, issue from the womb, and take that first breath. Anyway, the epithet "Heart" imparts to the poem a solicitude carried through to the end. The solicitude, in fact, places the poem in an affective register altogether in sympathy with the suffering of which it will speak. It is a very felt thing. It is, in its curious way, a lullaby of a preemptive sort: "sleep the long sleep" of non-existence, of never-having-been-ness.

Hardy needn't tell us that when the babe does "breathe" it will do so first by crying, as if it knew what lay in wait: the "travails" (oppressive labor) and the "teens" ("woes," "pains," or, in an archaic sense perhaps more appropriate to the poem, *harms inflicted*). Note that suffering, here, is neither merited, as through original sin (we are not in a Calvinist context), nor merely incidental. No, the Doomsters *heap* our lives with travails and

teens. The verb is perfect in its excess. In an earlier, better-known poem, "Hap," Hardy speaks of "Crass Casualty" and "Dicing Time" as "purblind Doomsters" that would "as readily" strew "blisses" about his "pilgrimage as pain" (*Wessex Poems*, 7). Purblind or not, the Doomsters in "To an Unborn Pauper Child" are of one mind: pain it will be. [11]

The most striking line in stanza one is the last: "And Time-wraiths turn our songsingings to fear." So far as I know, "Time-wraith" is a compound peculiar to Hardy, or anyway original to him (the phrase now turns up in on-line role-playing games). A "wraith" is, of course, a specter, usually of the dead; or, in some cases, a spectral presence *portending* the death of the person it resembles. Time makes wraiths of us all; that goes without saying. Portents (apparitions) of what Time does "turn our singsongings"—a word unique to Hardy—to "fear": a) they "turn" our songs to fear *in theme* (we are reading a lyric, a "song," on exactly such a theme; fear is among this poem's burdens); and b) they "turn" our joy (as *expressed* in song) into fear. I'm reminded of Arthur Schopenhauer's remark in "On the Suffering of the World": "Each individual misfortune, to be sure, seems an exceptional occurrence; but misfortune in general is the rule" (*Essays*, 41). What have we here but the First Noble Truth of the Buddha?

One pronatalist argument, an argument in *favor* of bringing more people into being, is that one of them may put the world right, or anyway make it better. Isn't history peopled with men and women who "mended" certain of the abominations we visit on ourselves, and certain other evils that naturally plague us? It is—and the fortune made from dynamite is yearly laundered in prizes awarded them. But the antinatalist argument holds. Why? This child—and not simply because he or she will be born to a pauper—cannot "mend" the failing "laughters," the dying "greetings," the dwindling "hopes,"

the “faiths” all wasting away, the “affections and enthusiasms” going “numb.” Come the revolution and even these will abide. Only a Parisian Maoist, as of 1968, would say otherwise.

The plurals ought to be here: laughters, faiths, and so on. Having addressed the “hid Heart” the poet now asks it to listen as “the peoples surge and sigh.” “People” is already plural. Pluralize it and you mean “nations,” the whole of the world. Yes, entire *peoples* “surge and sigh”; they flow and ebb; the Doomsters toss them about; their singsongings, their anthems, fall to fear. What a succession it is. You’re born; you surge; you sigh; you fail; the promises of all your friendships—your “greetings”—die; your hopes dwindle; your faith, the one thing you might suppose it in your power to keep from the Doomsters, wastes away; all goes numb. We are *in tenebris*, to borrow the title of a suite of three lyrics also printed in *Poems of the Past and Present* (though they bore that title only in later editions; Hardy first called them “De Profundis”). We are deep in shadow.

Now we reach the heart of the poem:

> Had I the ear of wombèd souls
> Ere their terrestrial chart unrolls,
>   And thou wert free
>   To cease, or be,
> Then would I tell thee all I know,
> And put it to thee: Wilt thou take Life so?

To be, or not to be: that is the question. But not in the sense that Hamlet asks it. Antinatalist arguments have nothing to tell us about ending a life already underway. They tell us that it is better never to have been *embodied*. Which

is what Hardy would tell all "wombèd *souls*" (or again, as in the canceled holograph reading, "the circuit of all souls"). The question closing the stanza answers itself in the negative. The Doomsters, the Immanent Will, call it what you like, see to it that our "terrestrial charts" (the charts that map out our life on earth) are "heaped" with miseries. So, wombèd souls, to "cease" coming into being is better than to be. Say no to Life.

> Vain vow! No hint of mine may hence
> To theeward fly: to thy locked sense
> Explain none can
> Life's pending plan:
> Thou wilt thy ignorant entry make
> Though skies spout fire and blood and nations quake.

"Vain *vow*": Hardy feels obliged, duty-bound in conscience, to advance this antinatalist argument. And not to the wombèd soul that can't hear him anyway, but to the reader who certainly can. So, the vow is "vain" in two senses: a) vain because "no hint" of Hardy's can reach the unborn child (who couldn't act on it anyhow); its "sense" is "locked," in utero. And b) vain because no antinatalist hint of Hardy's is likely to convince his readers, either. The pronatalist bias is too strong; evolution by natural selection has seen to that. Many recoil at such arguments, as we saw at the outset of this essay. Hardy understood this. Some of the revisions he made to the poem before publishing it temper it to the shorn lamb. The holograph has "*dismal* plan" for "pending plan," and, in the last stanza, "fatuous" for "sanguine" and "joys *never here* attained" for "joys *seldom yet* attained" (Hynes, 163-64). The prefaces he wrote to several books of his poetry indicate that

Hardy found many of his readers and reviewers obtuse. They didn't take his "pessimism" the right way. Some assumed that such things as antinatalist sentiments, even when merely entertained, necessarily make a man unremittingly dour or misanthropic. They needn't, of course. Antinatalist sentiments, properly understood, derive from compassion.

Anyway, every man and woman jack of us enters the world in perfect "ignorance," though "skies spout fire and blood and nations quake." I find it characteristic of Hardy that he should, as it appears, take the "terrestrial chart" to its eschatological conclusion. The allusion, I assume, is to *Revelation* 8:7 and 16:17-19:

> The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up. . . And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done. And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great. And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell.

It's bad enough to be born, the poem suggests. But to be born into Armageddon after the breaking of the seventh seal? The ultimate book of the Bible may as well be descriptive as prophetic.

The poem concludes:

> Fain would I, dear, find some shut plot

Of earth's wide wold for thee, where not
One tear, one qualm,
Should break the calm.
But I am weak as thou and bare;
No man can change the common lot to rare.

Must come and bide. And such are we—
Unreasoning, sanguine, visionary—
That I can hope
Health, love, friends, scope
In full for thee; can dream thou'lt find
Joys seldom yet attained by humankind! [12]

The "birth-hour beckons"; the child will come though "nations quake." So, Hardy, addressing it in terms of endearment recalling the "hid Heart" of the opening line, makes not a vow but expresses a wish: "fain" would he find for the child—seeing as how its wombèd soul has no choice but to take body and trace out its dismal terrestrial chart;—fain would he find for the child some place of refuge. Un-wombèd though the child must be, he would harbor it in a place very *like* a womb (and quite like a tomb): "some shut plot / Of earth's wide wold [land] for thee, where not / One tear, one qualm, / Should break the calm." No better able to fulfill his wish than to keep his vow Hardy concedes what anyone ought to: "I am weak as thou and bare; / No man can change the common lot to rare." The feeling of exposure and vulnerability is important. As for "the common lot": this is of course what Gertrude, tritely more than contritely, would console Hamlet with (20).

Not the pauper child only, but everyone "must come and bide." Wonderful

that Hardy should give us two verbs and no subject; the line subjects us all. We come. And we "bide," the verb Hardy prefers to "live," owing to the connotations it bears of mere waiting, mere endurance, mere *and so on*. [13] Then follows that triad as to what "we" are: unreasoning, sanguine, visionary. The foregoing five stanzas have "reasoned" out an antinatalist argument. Hardy expects few readers to grant him his reasons. Our incapacity mirrors that of an unborn child. No one hears, no one heeds (the Immanent Will has seen to that). We accept our irrationality readily enough, *homo sapiens* though we call ourselves. Reason is always in bad taste. Whim, on the other hand, charms. We are also "sanguine." The primary meaning is the one the word bore in the quaint, Medieval psychology of the humors: hale, optimistic (against all reason). The line controls for, keeps out of view, the other meaning of sanguine: "causing or delighting in bloodshed; bloody, sanguinary. Now *poet.* or *rhetorical*" (*OED* 2b). I say the poem controls for that meaning. I mean that it makes the reader *feel* that the less pleasant connotations of the word are being "controlled": back of the whole poem lies not merely the recognition that such is humankind (causing or delighting in bloodshed), but an implicit *assertion* that it must be. That's why it's better never to have been, better—yes, let's follow Hardy where he takes us—that *none* of us had ever been. [14] That Hardy thought to occlude the darker implications of "sanguine" is perhaps indicated by his suppression of the word that "sanguine" replaced: "fatuous." Following hard upon "unreasoning" that word might call up its earlier connotations: demented, imbecilic, and so on. So, let's go with "sanguine": hearty, full of vitality (and full also—but banish the thought, for now—of bloodlust). "Visionary" completes the succession from irrational to hale to, well, deluded. I think Hardy chiefly has in mind *OED* sense 1b for "visionary": "Given to fanciful

and unpractical views; having little regard to what is actual or possible; speculative, dreamy."

In short: "such are we"—irrational, given to fancy, and sanguine to the point of Pollyanna-hood (i.e., when not to the point of slaughter). That fact alone allows the poet, and the poem, to entertain, in its closing lines, what it has taught us cannot be possible: "Health, love, friends, scope / In full"; that fact alone allows the poet to "dream" the child will "find / Joys seldom yet attained by humankind!" Or, as the text reads in holograph, before Hardy gave it birth: "Joys *never here* attained by humankind" (Hynes, 164). Fatuous hope to be sure. And meant to be. But what of it? The poem is here to say: We are the sort of creatures that always say yea to what perhaps ought to be negated: vitality, or, as Hardy sometimes prefers to call it (after Schopenhauer), "Will." Why? Because we are its hirelings, its puppets. True, the poet "can" hope. The great joke is that "Will" disposes us to hope. But so can the poet have God say, in these pages, that He repents ever having made "Earth, and life, and man" (108). The poet can also say, in "De Profundis" (again, later re-titled "In Tenebris"), that being "past doubtings all" he "waits in unhope" (214). The antinatalist argument, the *rational* argument as this poem understands it, carries the day. The arguments in favor of vitality, the arguments that "Will" leads us to make *ad tedium*, fail.

I have spoken of antinatalism and of its best current exponent, David Benatar, in *Better Never to Have Been*, a book whose arguments are as carefully arrayed as its prose is clean. Schopenhauer turns up in *Better Never to Have Been*, but not Hardy. "The central idea of this book," Benatar explains, "is that coming into existence is always a serious harm. That idea will be defended at length, but the basic insight is quite simple: Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have

gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived." So far as I can tell, this is what Hardy says in speaking to, and of, that unborn child. Cease now and suffer nothing. Benatar continues: "However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence. To say that the basic insight is quite simple is not to say that either it or what we can deduce from it will be undisputed" (1). Is this why Hardy tempered the published text of the poem, as I earlier suggested? Maybe, though I wouldn't insist on it. "I shall consider all the anticipated objections in due course," says Benatar, "and shall argue that they fail. The implication of all this is that coming into existence, far from ever constituting a net benefit, always constitutes a net harm. Most people, under the influence of powerful biological dispositions towards optimism, find this conclusion intolerable" (1). Where Benatar speaks of "powerful biological dispositions" Hardy speaks of "Will" or "Immanent Will" (the force that "stirs and urges everything," as he puts it in "The Convergence of the Twain" [*Satires*, 10]). The point is the same: "Antinatalist views," as Benatar puts it, "whatever their source, run up against an extremely powerful pro-natalist bias. This bias has its roots in the evolutionary origins of human (and more primitive animal) psychology and biology." Why? Because "those with pro-natal views are more likely to pass on their genes" (8). Of course. But that is a measure of facility, not insight.

Stipulate that Benatar is correct in his antinatalism and in his suggestion as to why most people find it abhorrent. Stipulate also that Hardy felt both the force of antinatalist arguments and the force of the intuitions that oppose them. The result would be a poem precisely like "To an Unborn Pauper Child": unimpeachable as to the antinatalist position, but keenly aware,

always, of the complex relation that "unreasoning, sanguine, visionary" people—or "unreasoning, *fatuous*, visionary" people—will have to that position. In us the Immanent Will, the unknowing force that causes all things to become, has—quite blindly—stumbled upon minds. We see vitality (or can see vitality) for what it is and has made of us. We understand (or can understand) that existence precedes essence, as the Existentialists used to say: it is up to *homo sapiens*, the means through which the world has become aware of itself, to say what sort of creatures we are, or ought to be, or even whether we should "cease" to be. So flummoxed by these responsibilities are men and women that they write, read, and then write about poems such as "To an Unborn Pauper Child."

Hardy closes *Poems of the Past and Present* with this:

ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩι ΘΕΩι

Long have I framed weak phantasies of Thee,
O Willer masked and dumb!
Who makest Life become,—
By labouring all-unknowingly, maybe,
Like one whom reveries numb.
How much of consciousness informs Thy will,
Thy biddings, as if blind,
Of death-inducing kind,
Nought shows to us ephemeral ones who fill
But moments in Thy mind.
Haply Thy ancient rote-restricted ways
Thy ripening rule transcends;
That listless effort tends

To grow percipient with advance of days,
    And with percipience mends.
For, in unwonted purlieus, far and nigh,
    At whiles or short or long,
    May be discerned a wrong
Dying as of self-slaughter; whereat I
    Would raise my voice in song. (259-260)

The Greek title (Koine) means "to the unknown god." [15] The poem addresses that entity as the "Willer masked and dumb" who "makest Life become." Call it, with Dylan Thomas, "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower" (10); call it, with Walt Whitman, the "procreant urge of the world" (25); call it—as Sue Bridehead does in *Jude the Obscure*—"Nature's law and *raison d'être*" (339); or call it, with Richard Dawkins, the "selfish gene." "Will" neither shows itself nor has anything to say (it is "masked" and "dumb"). We are left, with Hardy, to "frame" "weak phantasies" of it (as in "To an Unborn Pauper Child" or *The Dynasts*, for example). "Will" labors "all unknowingly." It knows its purposes no better than we do. "The universe we observe," writes Dawkins in *A River Out of Eden*, "has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. As that unhappy poet A.E. Housman put it: 'For Nature, heartless, witless Nature / Will neither know nor care.' DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music" (133).

The fifth line of "ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩι ΘΕΩι" is a little obscure. I think it means: *Will* works, insofar as it may be said to "work," as do we when we fall into a day-dreaming revery while engaged in mundane tasks that don't tax our

attention. Habit numbs us to so much of work and world alike that real "consciousness" is rarer than we suppose. Hardy here fashions Will after what will has fashioned: namely, us. And Hardy's "Willer" is easily bored. Unlike the God of the Old Testament, Will is neither vain nor jealous. It has no interest in itself. It has no chosen people. It couldn't care less. Unlike the God of the *New* Testament, Will doesn't love us. It doesn't become flesh and dwell among us, bearing the Word. Nor does it crucify itself to redeem us. We are "ephemeral" manifestations of Will—highly temporary embodiments or individuations of a Will, or vitality, that takes, oh, countless forms, only to cast them all aside while retaining its essential unity. We are phenomenal; Will is noumenal. Our lives are as "moments" in the long calendar that reckons the work of Will. "Nought shows us," nothing indicates to us, whether "consciousness" "informs" Will. Nor does anything tell us what that consciousness might be like (or of) if it *did* exist. Will's "biddings"—for example, "must come and bide"—are "as if blind." This phrasing is curious. I can sort it out only by taking the sentence whole and in paraphrase: "Will, thy biddings (imperatives, commands)—undertaken without insight or foresight (as if doubly blind), and operating in such a way as to deaden as often as to enliven—reveal to us (epiphenomenal as we are) nothing whatsoever as to the nature of thy consciousness (which, at any rate, we have no good reason to suspect exists)." But although Will works, and always has, in "rote-restricted ways"—mechanically and without understanding—we may speak of it as having a "mind," if only for the sake of argument. "Haply" (that is, perhaps) the ancient ways of Will are now "ripening," coming to fruition. Will may be "transcending" its "listless," or languidly indifferent, "efforts." Haply, just maybe, these "efforts" have attained, or will soon attain, "percipience": consciousness, awareness,

perception. And with percipience comes the “mending” Hardy tells the unborn pauper child *it* could never achieve. What evidence does Hardy adduce for this possibility? Well, “in unwonted purlieus” (far-flung precincts of the world), and occasionally, he discerns that a wrong has been put right, or anyway put to death. Note that the wrong dies “as of self-slaughter”: it commits suicide. God may have, as Hamlet reminds us, “fixed his canon ’gainst self-slaughter” (22), but not the Immanent Will (which has no “canon”).

What can all this mean? How can Will attain percipience of a kind that will “mend” a world in which, for the most part, it’s better never to have been? How can a “rote-restricted” algorithm for “making life become” “mend” *anything*? Add a bit of Darwin to your Schopenhauer, and you may tender an answer: evolution by natural selection has stumbled, in us, upon consciousness, as I’ve said. True, there are feline, canine, lupine, avian, and insect ways of being “aware” of the world. But we do not think of those ways as constituting “percipience” or “consciousness.” The beasts of the field and the birds of the air know what they know. But they do not write *The World as Will and Idea*, nor *Poems of the Past and Present*. They do not widen the circle of empathy, as Hardy does in “The Wind Blew Words Along the Skies” or “The Blinded Bird.” They do not ponder the “non-identity problem” or puzzle out “the paradox of future individuals,” as utilitarian philosophers do (Benatar, 19). As it would appear, Will has attained consciousness (in a strong sense) only in and through us. Through and in us the world becomes “self-aware” in ways that allow it to take itself in hand, so to speak. We have certainly used consciousness for wrong—say, in getting up the international slave trade, mortgage-backed securities, Monsanto, the Australian pop-group Air Supply, and

thermonuclear weapons. But nothing about consciousness requires that it be used for wrong. Humanity has generally been a disaster. But it can be a self-canceling disaster. In unwonted purlieus, at whiles short and long, wrongs come to be seen as wrongs, and *we* are the organs of sight (the Will is blind and "un-knowing"). Though we perpetrated these wrongs—or were the instrument whereby Will unwittingly gave rise to them—we can put that part of ourselves implicated in any particular wrong to death. American hereditary bond slavery (let's say) died "as of self-slaughter" in 1865, at least *de jure*. Whereat Thomas Hardy would "raise his voice in song."

There are problems with this, of course. We white Americans resuscitated hereditary bond-slavery. We just couldn't let so profitable an enterprise die. We gave it renewed life in other guise: constitutionally underwritten apartheid (1896-1964), the lynching terror (1865-ca. 1950s), and a system of convict labor into which generations of Black men vanished (1877-ca. 1941)—to augment the share price, to take but one example, of U.S. Steel. [16] In this case, wrong hadn't slaughtered enough of itself and got a second round. Another problem with "ΑΓΝΩΣΤΕι ΘΕΩι" is that the poem seems to imply, its blandishments to the contrary notwithstanding, that Will is *headed* somewhere: it is "ripening." This cannot be the case. Hardy acknowledges as much, hoping against hope, as the saying goes: "haply," perhaps, just maybe, the Will that "makest Life become" betters itself, not merely through us, but of its own inclination. This would be a case of a motiveless force *acquiring* purpose, as against a motiveless force throwing up, quite incidentally, agents who can form and carry out purposes (that is, men and women). It would be a case of Will realizing itself in us, as against casting us off like sparks. It would be, in other words, a case of Hegelism.

"ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩι ΘΕΩι" takes the form of a prayer, though of an unusual

kind. Richard Dawkins offers something like it late in *The Selfish Gene*:

> It is possible that yet another unique quality of man is a capacity for genuine, disinterested, true altruism. I hope so, but I am not going to argue the case one way or the other, nor to speculate over its possible memic evolution [i.e., its evolution as an idea, a going concern, a gospel]. The point I am making now is that, even if we look on the dark side and assume that individual man is fundamentally selfish, our conscious foresight—our capacity to simulate the future in imagination—could save us from the worst selfish excesses of the blind replicators [DNA proper, the individual 'selfish' genes *within* DNA, etc.]. We have at least the mental equipment to foster our long-term selfish interests rather than merely our short-term selfish interests. We can see the long-term benefits of participating in a 'conspiracy of doves,' and we can sit down together to discuss ways of making the conspiracy work. We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination [as in principles of bigotry and religion]. We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism—something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators. (200-201) [17]

Dawkins is no antinatalist. And he's sunnier and more self-satisfied than

Hardy, at times insufferably so. Insofar as *Poems of the Past and the Present* offers, as its preface promises, “unadjusted impressions” of the world, the record is such that the note on which it closes, in “ΑΓΝΩΣΤΕι ΘΕΩι,” is not characteristic. The volume opens with eleven poems devoted to the Boer War. Later come such bleak poems as “At a Lunar Eclipse” (with its “continents of moil and misery” [81]), “The Subalterns,” “By the Earth’s Corpse,” “At a Hasty Wedding,” “His Immortality,” “Wives in the Sere,” “Winter in Durnover Field,” “The Darkling Thrush,” “Mad Judy” (a strange anti-natalist counterpart to “An Unborn Pauper Child,” which I’ll soon take up), “The Levelled Churchyard” (“We late-lamented, resting here, / Are mixed to human jam” [190]), “Tess’s Lament,” and, darkest of all, that trio of poems called “De Profundis” (aka “In Tenebris”):

> Black is night’s cope;
> But death will not appal
> One who, past doubtings all,
> Waits in unhope. (214)

The book, as Hardy tells us in the preface, “will probably be found” to “possess little cohesion of thought or harmony of colouring” (vi). Really? I find it quite coherent. A “philosophy of life,” empirically arrived at, does underlie the book; we might as well call it “compassionately antinatalist” as anything else, and aspiring toward neither hope nor despair but “unhope” (a stoic negation of aspiration). The book says what Hardy says to the unborn pauper child: Cease.

What, then, to make of “ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩι ΘΕΩι,” once the reader reaches its queer terminus and closes the book? It strikes me as a touching, but tellingly

effortful, endeavor to "adjust" the "impression" the book makes. A fine, forgivable bit of whistling, "haply," as may be, in a "levelled churchyard," amidst the general "human jam." [18] Consider the blurb that appeared on the second edition of *Poems of the Past and Present* issued in the United States by Harper and Brothers: "Sad and strange. —*Pall Mall Gazette*." This book and these poems are "sent out," as Hardy said *Jude the Obscure* was, "to those into whose souls the iron of adversity has deeply entered at some point in their lives" (*Letters* II, 94).

2.

I turn now to "Mad Judy," placed among a section of *Poems of the Past and Present* subtitled "Miscellaneous Poems." It had appeared nowhere else previously. In his preface to the book, Hardy writes, in addition to what I've quoted already: "Of the subject-matter of this volume which is in other than narrative form, much is dramatic or impersonative even where not explicitly so. Moreover, that portion which may be regarded as individual comprises a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances, and at various dates" (v-vi). No clear boundary separates "dramatic" poems from those in which the poet "impersonates" a character. Under the heading "dramatic" may fall such varied things as "The Colonel's Soliloquy"; "The Going of the Battery: Wives' Lament"; "The Souls of the Slain," in which the unquiet spirits of dead soldiers address their (also dead) commander; "By the Earth's Corpse," in which Time and God query one another; "Winter in Durnover Field," an ingenious triolet that puts a rook, a pigeon, and a starling in conversation—with stage directions, no less; and "The Ruined Maid," in which two young women confer (one "ruined," one aspiring to be). Poems in which Hardy "impersonates" characters include

(I think) "Song of the Soldiers' Wives," "The Bed-Ridden Peasant to an Unknowing God," "To Lizbie Brown," "The Levelled Churchyard" (in which the dead speak), and, of course, "The Respectable Burgher on 'The Higher Criticism.'"

Poems that bear Hardy's "individual" stamp, written *in propria persona*, include: "On an Invitation to the United States," the sequence of poems associated with Hardy's travels on the Continent in 1897 ("Zermatt: To the Matterhorn," etc.), "At a Lunar Eclipse," "The Darkling Thrush," and so on. Which among the "individual" poems are better described as "feelings" and which as "fancies" is a matter for debate. But I don't think Hardy makes a distinction without a difference. No one would call "At a Lunar Eclipse" or "The Darkling Thrush" "fanciful." But such things as "At a Hasty Wedding," a wonderfully ironic triolet, are.

"Mad Judy" falls among those poems that are "explicitly" impersonative, though that's not to say Hardy's "person" isn't somehow in it. Much of the interest in the poem has to do with whether any of its sentiments are ventriloqual. One wonders whether Hardy "throws his voice" when Judy, on hearing of weddings (which imply childbearing), is said to "sigh" and "rock and mutter": "More / Comers to this stony shore!" How much of her voice is also Hardy's? Certainly not all of it. But just as surely some.

The speaker of the poem—the figure Hardy "impersonates"—is a hale country villager, unnamed, undistinguished, and therefore representative. He speaks for "the hamlet." (I say "he" for the sake of convenience: the gender of the speaker is not made clear and, so far as I can tell, is of no consequence.) Hardy interposes that "speaker" between himself as author/poet and the character who is, ostensibly, the subject of the poem: Mad Judy. This interests me because Judy's notions are not, insofar as the poem makes

them known to us, notably different from Hardy's, as we discern them elsewhere in the book, "To an Unborn Pauper Child" being only the best example. That poem we must take as "individual"; nothing in it compels the reader to dislocate the voice speaking in the poem from the poet's own.

Judy's "aberrancy," her "madness" or "insanity," takes, of course, a peculiar and definite form, with which we are now quite familiar: antinatalism. The view the rustic speaker takes of her is clear: she is insane. So says the hamlet. One knows exactly what the speaker and his hale confederates would write were they around, now, to review David Benatar on Amazon. They'd join our friend D. Kelley: "This is the dumbest book I've ever had the misfortune to read part of." But what view does Hardy invite *us* to take of Judy and of the hamlet? And is that view his own?

When the hamlet hailed a birth
    Judy used to cry:
When she heard our christening mirth
    She would kneel and sigh.
She was crazed, we knew, and we
Humoured her aberrancy. [19]

When the daughters and the sons
    Gathered them to wed,
And we like-intending ones
    Danced till dawn was red,
She would rock and mutter, "More
Comers to this stony shore!" [20]

When old Headsman Death laid hands
    On a babe or twain, [21]
She would feast, and by her brands
    Sing her songs again.
What she liked we let her do,
Judy was insane, we knew. (173-174)

As to diction, only "brands" is much out of the way, though it's a word we might expect to find on the lips of a rustic. Hardy has in mind a sense now archaic for "brands": the hearth-fire. Judy sings and feasts by the hearth when old Headsman Death lays His hands on a village "babe or twain" (about which more later). [22] Stanza one rhymes well. The "cry/sigh" pair sounds a perfect counterpoint to the "birth/mirth" pair. In this we feel the art of the poet as against the utterance of the speaker. The two may be distinguished as much in technique as in sentiment. The genius of this "impersonative" poem relies on our feeling that it must be so. We have the artful and the artless, the artless presented artfully.

But what evidence does our hale speaker adduce that Judy *is* "aberrant" and "insane"? Well, she weeps and sighs at the birth of each new villager, even as everyone else celebrates; that much we know. She "rocks and mutters" when villagers marry or manifest an intention to marry ("More / Comers to this stony shore!"). What she does when old Headsman Death appears I've already noted and will speak of again. And this is all we know. We speak of "unreliable narrators" in connection with fiction. Here we have to do with an "unreliable speaker." He cannot earn our trust, at least as to what we should make of Judy.

Hardy's rustic persona speaks of "daughters and sons" "gathering" to

"wed." It should go without saying that they are sons and daughters (who among us that exists *aren't*?). But calling them "daughters and sons," as against, say, lasses and lads, or any other of several possibilities, brings them before us in their generative and relational offices. (True, "ones" in line nine requires a rhyme in line seven, and "sons" provides it; but line seven falls first.) These sons and daughters relay the vitality their parents imparted to them; they marry to generate still more "daughters and sons," who shall, in due course, do the same, etc. Ever and ever "more comers to this stony shore"—by which, of course, Mad Judy means Earth, the world; the stage on which we strut and fret, often signifying nothing (but sometimes not); the realm beyond the womb; the realm that is the womb's extension.

It's as if Mad Judy intuited the "iceberg" metaphor Benatar deploys in *Better Never to Have Been*:

> Nor is the harm produced by the creation of a child usually restricted to that child. The child soon finds itself motivated to procreate, producing children who, in turn, develop the same desire. Thus any pair of procreators can view themselves as occupying the tip of a generational iceberg of suffering. They experience the bad in their own lives. In the ordinary course of events they will experience only some of the bad in their children's and possibly grandchildren's lives (because these offspring usually survive their progenitors), but beneath the surface of the current generations lurk increasingly larger numbers of descendents and their misfortunes. Assuming that each couple has three children, an original pair's cumulative descendents over ten generations amount to 88,572 people. That constitutes a lot of pointless, avoidable suffering. To be sure, full responsibility for it

> all does not lie with the original couple because each new generation faces the choice of whether to continue that line of descendents. Nevertheless, they bear some responsibility for the generations that ensue. If one does not desist from having children, one can hardly expect one's descendents to do so. (6-7)

Judy might say the same of the espoused "daughters and sons" and the "like-intending ones" that celebrate the wedding (including the rustic speaker): each couple sits atop (and is also part of a layer within) "a generational iceberg of suffering." 88,572 per couple, down ten generations. That strain again: More comers to this stony shore.

Just how mad is Judy? If we had it on good authority that she was, in fact, insane, we might understand her village antinatalism. The insane often suffer immensely. Why shouldn't a woman so situated generalize her suffering, or take it as among not merely *possible* outcomes of any given birth, but as among *likely* ones? Of course, only the insane would wish a child born to suffer insanity. So, by that test Judy is in her right mind and the poem is a conundrum.

But of course, we do not know whether Judy is insane. Hardy has so arranged things that we have only her antinatalism to go on. Now, that may indeed be "aberrant." It most certainly isn't the rule in any hamlet of which I'm aware. But it's not, *pace* certain Amazonian opponents of David Benatar, prima facie evidence of insanity. Here's where the poem gets us. Had Hardy retained the reading he cancelled for the second line in stanza three—"neighbor swain" for "babe or twain" (Hynes 189)—we might have, or suppose we had, a better purchase on Judy; we might ignore her, or humor her, as the villagers do. But Hardy restricts her concerns to *nativity*.

Wise of him to do so. Of course, it's unseemly to "feast" and "sing" when old Headsman Death carries off "a babe or two." But, if only for a moment, let's see things as Judy appears to, and as Peter Singer does, in certain cases: a "babe"—and, as I say, let's bear with the difficult idea, taking it as Judy would;—a "babe" is not yet fully a "person" *in its capacity to suffer*. Death deprives an infant to a lesser degree than it would a "neighbor swain," who will have lived long enough to know joy, delight, and the satisfactions that attend setting projects for himself, but also to have known—in addition to the afflictions of mere *physical* pain, which any infant can know—the social and psychological pains of envy, humiliation, insult, heartbreak, dashed hopes, poverty, grief, and so on. Maybe Hardy first wanted to fetch in the archaic sense given in *OED* 5 for "swain": "A country gallant or lover; hence *gen*. a lover, wooer, sweetheart, esp. in pastoral poetry." That would be the swain as progenitor. But Hardy set that possibility aside for a reading that makes it more difficult to write Judy off as insane. Of course, the parents of any lost child suffer immeasurable pain. But Judy doesn't concern herself with parents; she has at heart exclusively the interests of infants, and *their* capacity (as it would appear) to suffer on this stony shore. Why shouldn't infants, both actual and possible, have a spokeswoman? Incidentally, the phrase "a babe or twain" strikes my ear as conspicuously cavalier. This ought to qualify the fellowship a reader might otherwise have with our rustic speaker. I like to think that's why Hardy chose the phrase over "neighbor swain" (in addition to the reasons given already). The tone of the poem is complex.

Lest anyone recoil in disgust at Judy's song-singing by her brands, I'd point out that we often commend such sentiments as she expresses, if not such festivity as she entertains while expressing them. We commend them

in Ben Jonson’s elegy “On My First Son,” for example, which marshals the same arguments made by the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus* in the passage taken as epigraph to the present essay:

> O, could I lose all father now! For why
> Will man lament the state he should envy?
> To have so soon ’scap’d world’s and flesh’s rage,
> And if no other misery, yet age? (48)

Jonson doesn’t say it were better had his son never been. He says—and the consolation is conventional—that it’s better the boy made his exit before the miseries that attend lives more durable affected him. Judy entertains the same sentiments. [23] The idea so blithely advanced by the speaker (hale rustic of the hamlet) is that births and the ceremonies that sanctify, produce, and attend them (marriages, christenings) are unqualified and perfect goods. Who can object, after all, to what the Republican Party in the United States now calls “the culture of life” (a phrasing that inadvertently calls to mind a petri dish)? Well, under certain circumstances, Ben Jonson might. Under certain circumstances so might we all. Why do Christians lament a state they should envy—an early death, the earlier the better? [24] And this even as Jonson expresses so well the pain of the parent in the strange grammar of that exclamation, “O, could I lose all father now!” (“O, that I’d never had, and never again will have, *any* part in fatherhood,” etc.).

I will now go a bit afield, but only a bit. Some Christians prefer not to dwell on the world-denying, antinatalist strain in the Pauline epistles. [25] “Christianity gave Eros poison to drink,” says Nietzsche: “he did not die of it but degenerated—into a vice” (92). Saint Paul not only chose to be

celibate but *commended* it to all who could say no to sexuality. The only way to redeem sexual desire—which, in the Pauline epistles, is an evil—is of course to marry. We have, here, to do with redemption as control. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." So far, he is with Mad Judy. "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." Is that what marriage is chiefly for—to avoid fornication? What were those Corinthians up to? [26]

Paul and Judy now begin to part company, though not absolutely. Paul regards marriage less as a positive good than as a lesser evil. Marriage is chiefly a way to manage sexual incontinence, not an occasion to be fruitful and multiply. Lest his preference for celibacy (and, by default, antinatalism) be lost on the congregants at Corinth, Paul adds the following codicil: "But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment. For I would that all men were even as I myself," that is, celibate: "But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide [in celibacy] even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." Here again, marriage is valued more for what it allows you to avoid than for what it makes possible. Men and women who "cannot contain" are *permitted* to marry, the alternative being damnation. [27] Marriage is not a "commandment" but a licensed last resort. Even within marriage, each spouse must police the other, and both must atone: "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for

your incontinency."

Matthew Henry, a 17th century expositor of the Bible, makes 1 Corinthians 7 a bit more pro-natalist than it likely is: "The apostle tells the Corinthians that it was good, *in that juncture of time*, for Christians to keep themselves single. Yet he says that marriage, and the comforts of that state, are settled by Divine wisdom" (my emphasis, 175-76). I'm unsure how Henry finds his restrictive "in *that* juncture of time" in 1 Corinthians 7—at least as regards celibacy. Nor do I hear any proto-bourgeois note as to "the comforts" of the marital "state" in it. I wish I could read the Koine Greek to test Henry out, but of course I can't. Enough! I mean only to second what far better scholars have asserted: the Pauline epistles possess an element of antinatalism. Sexuality troubles Paul deeply—the Whitmanesque "procreant urge of the world" and all that. Why? Because deliverance from the body ("sold," as it is, "under sin"), and from the world, are Paul's stated aims (*vide* Romans 7:14-25). The world, as Paul gives it to us, is a very stony shore. Mad Judy is closer to Paul than to the hale swain who "humours" her "aberrancy." He doesn't *celebrate* marriage. He "permits" it to those who "cannot contain." In short, the carnival festivity attending marriage and birth in Judy's hamlet is not necessarily "Christian" in character. It savors more of the vestigially pagan May-Day air of chapter two in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. And all readers of *Tess* know what *that* portends.

I've been larking with Saint Paul. Still, who knows but that the apostle might find our rustic speaker's celebration of marriage and fertility in bad taste, and visit a chastening epistle on him? These "sons and daughters" certainly aren't marrying *not to burn*. I do not contend that the New Testament, *toto coelo*, is "antinatalist." I'm unqualified to weigh in on the question. [28] The New Testament is, among everything else it is, a collection

of great stories and parables (in the synoptic gospels, anyway). I only mean to show that any reader who rejects out of hand, or recoils from, such antinatalist sentiments as occasionally inform *Poems of the Past and Present* forgets the severity of the Pauline teachings that inform the culture out of which the book came, and which it, in turn, addresses. Of course, as for Pauline antinatalism—such as it is, and if it is—let's bear in mind a point Schopenhauer makes in *The World as Will and Idea*: "To the hope also of immortality of the soul is always added that of a 'better world'; an indication that the present world is not much good" (254). Such antinatalist sentiments as turn up in *Poems of the Past and Present*—through whatever conduits, "impersonative" or "individual"—never assume another and better world, only that it is likely better never to have entered the only stony world we'll ever know. *Poems of the Past and Present* is thoroughly naturalist.

All I would claim is that Mad Judy is certainly less mad than our rustic interlocutor makes out. The poet may not fully align himself with Judy, but he by no means aligns himself with the randy swagger of its rustic speaker. Judy says, or believes, nothing for which we can't find culturally accredited counterparts, whether in the writings of the Church Fathers, in philosophy, in Buddhism, or in such poems as Jonson's "On My First Son." The closer we look at Judy the less "aberrant" she appears and the more inclined we should be to distrust the speaker's account of her peculiarities. The poem that bears her name compels us to say as much. And against Judy's "aberrancy," Hardy sets the (equally?) unpalatable complacency of the hale swain of the hamlet, and indeed of the hamlet for whom he speaks. We recognize that voice at once as the voice of unreflective common sense and truth self-evident—the voice of the Amazon "reviewers" I quote at the head of this essay. Human life is good, our speaker supposes, simply because he has a healthy one—

at *present*. He is the unpaid spokesman of the Immanent Will. He may live in a hamlet, he may speak for the hamlet, but Hamlet he is not. If we are to decide either for him or for Judy, the jury is out.

The book leaves one with precisely what Hardy's preface to it anticipates: a multi-vocal, nuanced, and never cooked up attempt to front the hardest questions, which include that hardest question of all: whether it is better never to have been; whether (in fact) the world would somehow be better off without us. *Poems of the Past and Present* is hardly programmatic. Any view as to whether yet more persons ought to be brought to these stony shores may be carried to absurdity, if not insanity. Hardy, in entertaining antinatalist positions in so many guises ("Mad Judy," "To an Unborn Pauper Child," "By the Earth's Corpse," and so on), undertakes a valuable, affecting, and not un-anguished thought experiment. If nothing else, that experiment forces upon us one point: we have no grounds to suppose that humanity, or sentient life as such, is an unqualified good, let alone grounds to suppose that human life, or life of any other kind, is somehow "central" to the world (or to some larger realm). We must consider, if not concede, that the world and the cosmos wouldn't be impoverished had we never come into being and left not a rack behind.

But we stand on the stony shore notwithstanding. "Must come and bide." The question most worth asking, then, and Hardy asks it in so many ways, is how to mitigate suffering. He doesn't rule antinatalism out any more than he rules it in. He simply asks that we modify our idea as to what "sanity" is to include it. We will never know just how "mad" Judy is. Hardy's genius diffuses the most challenging of his notions—in poems both "impersonative" and "individual"—so as to make them as inescapable as they are haunting. Just try to get away from his books untutored. [29]

Notes

1 Frost is writing to none other than a stripling B.F. Skinner. His apothegm applies generally to Hardy; still, I can't resist the suspicion that Frost may have had the following sentences from *Jude the Obscure* particularly in mind. They come in Chapter VIII of Part Third, after Sue Bridehead has married Mr. Phillotson, once a mentor to Jude but now his rival: "It was a new beginning of Sue's history. [Jude] projected his mind into the future, and saw her with children more or less in her own likeness around her. But the consolation of regarding them as a continuation of her identity was denied to him, as to all such dreamers, by the wilfulness of Nature in not allowing issue from one parent alone. Every desired renewal of an existence is debased by being half alloy. 'If at the estrangement or death of my lost love, I could go and see her child—hers solely—there would be comfort in it!' said Jude. And then he again uneasily saw, as he had latterly seen with more and more frequency, the scorn of Nature for man's finer emotions, and her lack of interest in his aspirations" (177). Strange, jealous, parthenogenetic musings, Jude Fawley—and not only in despite of an old schoolmaster's seed: cf. Hardy's poem, "To an Orphan Child: a Whimsey" (*Wessex Poems*, 163-64), later retitled "To a Motherless Child."

It's worth quoting, for sheer interest, the paragraph I pilfer my epigraph from. Skinner had sent Frost a sheaf of short stories to judge: "You ask me if there is enough in the stories to warrant your going on. I wish I knew the answer to that half as well as you probably know it in your heart. Right at this moment you are very likely setting your determination to go on, regardless of anything I say, and provided only you can find within a reasonable time someone to buy and read you. I'd never quarrel with that spirit. I've a sneaking sympathy with it. My attempt to get to the bottom of a fellow writer's stuff this time put this into my head: All that makes a writer is the ability to write strongly and directly from some unaccountable and almost invincible personal prejudice like Stevenson's in favor of all being as happy as kings no matter if consumptive, or Hardy's against God for the blunder of sex, or Sinclair Lewis's against small American towns or Shakespeare's mixed, at once against and in favor of life itself. I take it that everybody has the prejudice and spends some time feeling for it to speak and write from. But most people end as they begin by acting out the prejudices of other people" (521).

2 "Expat Mommy" has since changed her screenname, though not her review. I retain the original for obvious reasons. Screennames at Amazon often change, or become

"real names," as reviewers alter their profiles and levels of engagement. Citations of these "reviews," though the MLA sanctions the practice, will always be dicey and involve printing ugly URLs that, unlike DOIs, aren't stable. I harvested the reviews quoted here over a span of years. They are a matter of public interest: Amazon is not a social media company in which persons privately interact, and "reader reviews" often have a performative quality. NB: The reviews here quoted are not representative of those Benatar got from readers with a serious stake in philosophy; those readers generally accord his book praise.

3 I don't consider myself an antinatalist. But antinatalism deserves a hearing and I find it difficult to refute, maybe because I'm not a philosopher, maybe not. As regards Benatar: my interest in his work is restricted to *Better Never to Have Been*. For one serious challenge to his arguments, see Christine Overall, *Why Have Children?: the Ethical Debate* (2012): 95-116. (*Why Have Children?* is the 30th volume in the Basic Bioethics series, inaugurated in 1998 by Arthur Caplan and Glen McGee.) Of interest in connection with philosophical antinatalism is the legal concept of "wrongful life," which permits a child, or more typically his or her parents or guardians, to file suit in civil court, usually against physicians or other medical care providers, alleging that the latter failed properly to advise the parents that the child would be born with truly catastrophic defects—defects rendering the child's life one of unredeemable pain. The legal principle involved presumes that the parents, had they been responsibly advised, could have chosen to end the pregnancy. See Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm" (1999). Do the works of Thomas Hardy, *tout court*, amount to a suit filed against the Immanent Will for "wrongful life"? No. But *Jude the Obscure*, and a great many of the poems, might do for an amicus brief on behalf of a plaintiff. Shiffrin, incidentally, is Professor of Philosophy and Pete Kameron Professor of Law and Social Justice at UCLA. She finds Benatar more persuasive than does Overall. I'm incompetent to judge Overall's arguments on their merits, but the rhetoric with which she advances them cocks my eyebrow. She calls the *title* to Benatar's book "chilling," for example (96). Really? A line from Sophocles yoked to a phrase that the line implies should frighten or alarm no one. Say what one will about Benatar, but he's no Edgar Allan Poe.

4 Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford, 2004): 343-344. Hardy was of course aware of this. He responded in a preface to the 1912 Wessex

edition of *Jude*. After citing the harshest reviews the novel had won, he adds: "So much for the unhappy beginning of *Jude's* career as a book. After these verdicts from the press its next misfortune was to be burnt by a bishop—probably in his despair at not being able to burn me" (Jude, 466). Years before, in a letter dated June 1896, he had, in response to the good bishop's act, pointed out that "theology & burning (spiritual & temporal) have been associated for so many centuries that I suppose they will continue allies till the end" *(Letters* II, 125).

5 As Aaron Matz puts it, in "Hardy and the Vanity of Procreation": "It's difficult not to sense an instinctive antinatalism in Hardy, for while there may be no minatory decree as in [Philip] Larkin [and his "This Be the Verse"], no absolute pronouncement, as in [David] Benatar, that creating new life is always a harm, there is nonetheless an austere and consistent skepticism about the morality of ever having children" (10). Matz concerns himself with Hardy's novels (and among those, chiefly *Jude the Obscure*), though he devotes several pages to the poems. I hope to complement his work by looking more closely at the poetry, confining myself further to poems Matz does not discuss. Admirable though Matz's essay is, I quibble with his characterization here of Larkin (though I may miss his tone). "This Be the Verse" is "minatory" chiefly for kicks; and Larkin, to broaden the point, is less an *anti*-natalist than an *a*-natalist. The business of nativity for the most part leaves him befuddled, as in "Dockery & Son."

6 All information regarding variant readings, here and below, derives from Samuel Hynes' variorum edition of Hardy's poems.

7 In fact, Hardy underlined this passage in his copy of Sophocles' *Tragedies* (1855; trans. Theodore Buckley) (see *Jude*, 416n9).

8 Cf. the following exchange between Sue Bridehead and Jude Fawley. They've just withdrawn (again!) from the "sordid" (286) brink of marriage, having seen one couple wed in a civil service—a soldier with a pregnant bride (wearing a black eye as wicked auspice)—and a second wed in a church. Sue speaks first, quoting Shelley (*The Revolt of Islam*):

> "Everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that's all. In fifty, a hundred, years the descendants of these two will act and feel worse than we. They will see weltering humanity still more vividly than we do now, as
>
> Shapes like our own selves hideously multiplied,
> *and will be afraid to reproduce them*."

"What a terrible line of poetry! … though I have felt it myself about my fellow-creatures, at morbid times." (my emphasis; 287)

9 From Pound's "The Garden," collected in his 1916 volume, *Lustra*.

10 I concur with Aaron Matz: "It is true that there is at least one similarity between contemporary theories of antinatalism and nineteenth-century eugenics: their shared idea that in discouraging an act of procreation (selectively, in eugenics; always, in antinatalism) we are trying to prevent future suffering. But in an important sense, antinatalism is the very opposite of eugenics, as eugenics proposes to sort the right kind of procreation from the wrong, and is built on the positivistic thinking and rectitude of figures like Francis Galton" (13).

11 Hardy, as it were, revives "To an Unborn Pauper Child" in the penultimate stanza of a later poem: "Copying Architecture in an Old Minster," collected in *Moments of Vision* (1917). The copyist in question entertains a fancy, as he works and listens to the church bell toll, that it summons the dead, entombed around about, for a "parley," possibly to contrive a plan—as from the other world—to better "ail-stricken mankind"; or possibly, on the contrary, to "speak to the yet unborn, / And caution them not to come / To a world so ancient and trouble-torn, / Of foiled intents, vain lovingkindness, / And ardours chilled and numb" (23).

12 And here we find expressed a sentiment, and a fact, that Matz nicely catches: "hostility to procreation coexists in [Hardy's] writing with a compassion for procreators" (13). And I find an apt translation of that elliptical imperative, "Must come and bide," in a phrase of Matz's. He is speaking *Jude the Obscure*: "the novel is not quite saying, 'don't procreate!'; it is saying something closer to: 'What a pity it is that we keep procreating'" (14).

13 Cf. "Waiting Both," my candidate for Hardy's best short lyric. It opens *Human Shows, Far Phantasies, Songs and Trifles* (1925):

A star looks down at me,
And says: "Here I and you
Stand, each in our degree:
What do you mean to do,—
Mean to do?"

I say: "For all I know,
Wait, and let Time go by,

Till my change come." — "Just so,"
The star says, "So mean I,
So mean I." (1)

With that, Hardy puts us all in Time—heaven and earth alike. There's no getting outside it: Darwin's great message to the world. Consider the touching humor of the poem, too, where "here" is a place a star and a man might jointly occupy (as in "Well, here we are, old boy. What next?"); where you greet the greatest of all questions with a shrug ("For all I know..."); and where the star-stuff is in us such that we experience rueful fellow-feeling even with entities whose life cycles span billions of years as against our psalmist's three score and ten. Because, yes, indeed, stars also "change," which is to say die, the poor mortals. Consider "Waiting Both" an entry in the annals of ethno-astronomy: a reflection on (and of) the way people talk about the stars in a given time and place—in this case, in the years when Einstein's theories, and the new astrophysics derived from them, were first fully felt in Europe (the 1920s). Then there's the nice touch that allows for "waiting" as a thing we might "*mean* to do." (*Hurry up and wait*, says the Army.) Doesn't all this do away with our petty distinctions between action and passion, between doing a thing and having a thing done to us? Of course, Hardy uses "change" in the sense given it in the book of Job (14:14): "If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come." As for the field of ethno-astronomy: see Ruggles, Clive L.N., ed., *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy* (New York: Springer, 2015).

14 Maybe the idea is simply this: the best of all possible worlds would be one in which we never attained consciousness, and so became "human." Hardy suggests as much in "The Aerolite" (*Human Shows*, 145-46), and also in the voice of Sue Bridehead (*Jude the Obscure*): "Vague and quaint imaginings had haunted [her] in the days when her intellect scintillated like a star, that the world resembled a stanza or melody composed in a dream; it was wonderfully excellent to the half-aroused intelligence, but hopelessly absurd at the full waking; that the First Cause worked automatically like a somnambulist, and not reflectively like a sage; that at the framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a development of emotional perceptiveness among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity" (342). Hardy often sounded these ideas; their octave spans the key he pitched his works in.

15 As Hynes points out, the title is from Acts 17:23, which reads, as translated in the KJV: "For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with the inscription, TO THE UNKOWN GOD. Whom, therefore, ye ignorantly worship, him I declare unto you" (378).

16 For U.S. Steel and neo-slavery, see Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008): 3, 4, 51, 171, 292, 294, 295-96, 311, 312-13, 320, 335-37, 386, 389, 390-91, 402-03.

17 Cf. Hardy, in a journal entry dating to May 1881: "Law has produced in man a child who cannot but constantly reproach its parent for doing much and yet not all, and constantly say to such parent that it would have been better never to have begun doing than to have *over*done so indecisively; that is, than to have created so far beyond all apparent first intention (on the emotional side), without mending matters by a second intent and execution, to eliminate the evils of the blunder of overdoing" (quoted in Florence Hardy, *Early Life* 192). Or in 1883: "We have reached a degree of intelligence which nature never contemplated when framing her laws, and for which she consequently has provided no adequate satisfactions" (213). I owe a debt, again, to Aaron Matz for highlighting these passages in connection with Hardy's antinatalism.

18 Ralph Pite concurs. The optimism hinted at in "ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩι ΘΕΩι," however cautious, "does not always ring true," he writes; "instead, it sounds contrived, as if Hardy were trying to find some source of consolation for himself and for his audience in a time of unease and fear" (383).

19 In later editions Hardy changed "aberrancy" to "infirmity"; a third reading exists, cancelled, in the holograph manuscript: "sad fantasy."

20 For "stony" the holograph has, cancelled out, "sunless."

21 For "babe or twain" the holograph manuscript has "neighbor swain"; Hardy cancelled it.

22 Judy has for company the Thracians, as given us by Herodotus. Schopenhauer: "First of all, let me mention here that the Greeks, far as they were from the Christian and lofty Asiatic conception of the world, and although they decidedly stood at the point of view of the assertion of the will, were yet deeply affected by the wretchedness of existence. This is shown even by the invention of tragedy, which belongs to them. Another proof of it is afforded us by the custom of the Thracians, which is first mentioned by Herodotus, though often referred to afterwards—

the custom of welcoming the new-born child with lamentations, and recounting all the evils which now lie before it; and, on the other hand, burying the dead with mirth and jesting, because they are no longer exposed to so many and great sufferings" (398). Did Hardy have the Thracians in mind when he wrote "Mad Judy"? I wouldn't rule it out. Evidence suggests that he read Herodotus while at work on *The Trumpet-Major* (Turner, 70), and we know he'd read Schopenhauer. The natal and funereal customs of the Thracians are detailed in the widely read 1848 translation of Herodotus done by Henry Cary, an Oxford don (308). And for the record, Herodotus identifies the people in question as the Trausi, who lived in Thrace; he doesn't say *all* Thracians observed these rituals.

23 After "Father Time"/Jude (The Younger) kills his half-siblings, and then hangs himself, Sue Bridehead, mother to them all, says: "It is best, perhaps, that they should be gone. —Yes—I see it is! Better that they should be plucked fresh than stay to wither away miserably!" To which Jude (The Elder) adds: "Yes. … Some say that the elders should rejoice when their children die in infancy" (339).

24 Jonson offers a similar consolation in the elegy he wrote for his daughter Mary: "At six months' end, she parted hence / With safety of her innocence" (41), the implication being that, had she survived, she might not have retained the safety of it. The mood and movement of "On My First Daughter" differ utterly from those of "On My First Son"; where the latter is fraught and touched by colloquial notes, the former is unruffled, decidedly more musical—and also more generic, more "conventional" in idiom, argument, and diction.

25 Schopenhauer (of course!) twigs the world-denying drift of the Christian religion as a whole. He writes, in *The World as Will and Idea*: "For not only the religions of the East, but also true Christianity, has throughout that ascetic fundamental character which my philosophy explains as the denial of the will to live; although Protestantism, especially in its present form, seeks to conceal this" (436). I assume Schopenhauer has in mind Protestantism ("in its present form") as Max Weber would later see it. He continues: "In any case, the ascetic tendency is unmistakable in the genuine and original Christianity as it developed in the writings of the Church Fathers from its kernel in the New Testament; it is the summit towards which all strives upwards. As its chief doctrine we find the recommendation of genuine and pure celibacy (this first and most important step in the denial of the will to live), which is already expressed in the New Testament. … Marriage, in genuine Christianity, is merely a compromise with the sinful nature of man, as a

concession, something allowed to those who lack strength to aspire to the highest, an expedient to avoid greater evil: in this sense it receives the sanction of the Church in order that the bond may be indissoluble. But celibacy and virginity are set up as the higher consecration of Christianity through which one enters the ranks of the elect. Through these alone does one attain the victor's crown, which even at the present day is signified by the wreath upon the coffin of the unmarried" (437-38).

26 Corinth "was a place of proverbial wickedness, energy, riches, noise," says A.N. Wilson in his book on Paul. "The verb 'to Corinth' (i.e., *Korinthiazesthai*) in popular Greek meant to fornicate; *Korinthiastes*, the title of one of Philetaerus's plays, means 'the whoremonger.' Corinth, 'the sacred hill-city of Aphrodite,' as Euripides called it, was a great centre of the worship of the goddess of love, whose temple, the Acrocorinthus, crowned the high mountain on which the city stood. The temple was staffed by a thousand female slaves, which according to Strabo was the reason for the great popularity of the place" (161). Such was the city's heritage. Time had tempered it by the date Paul arrived. Nevertheless, as Wilson points out, "Paul's letters to Corinth, more than the rest of his surviving work placed together, dwell most conspicuously on questions of marriage and sexual morality" (161). And as Robyn Faith Walsh notes, the epistles imply that the early Christians at Corinth were only "loosely affiliated" and likely "never possessed the kind of commonality in mind and practice characteristic of a community." In his capacity as a "religious and ethnopolitical entrepreneur functioning remotely in a competitive field," as Walsh memorably puts it, Paul was "only variously successful" in his attempts to keep the Corinthians in line (39-40).

27 Amid his crisis of faith, brought on when he kisses (a married) Sue Bridehead, Jude Fawley considers Christianity anew: he now sees it as "a religion in which sexual love was regarded as at its best a frailty, and at its worst damnation." How right he is, strictly speaking. He then muses: "'Is it,' he said, 'that … women are to blame; or is it the artificial system of things, under which the normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springs to noose and hold back those who want to progress?'" (217). Of course, in the chapter previous, both he and Sue remark on the devilish cruelty of the steel "gins" and springs used to snare rabbits, which they agree ought to be outlawed (213-214). So, Jude, the *latter*, "the artificial system of things," is to blame; but so is the Immanent Will. Sue, for her part, condemns "the universe," or "things in general, because they are so horrid and cruel!" (221). "All is trouble, adversity, and suffering!" she says (333). What's

a poor woman or a man to do?

28 Schopenhauer writes: "In the New Testament the world is represented as a valley of tears, life as a process of purifying or refining, and the symbol of Christianity is an instrument of torture. Therefore, when Leibnitz, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, and Pope brought forward optimism, the general offence which it gave depended principally upon the fact that optimism is irreconcilable with Christianity" (397).

29 As a postscript, I note that Peter Singer discusses (favorably) Benatar's arguments in "The Opinionator," a regular feature in the *New York Times*. His thoughtful article on Benatar and on antinatalism ends as follows:

> Is a world with people in it better than one without? Put aside what we do to other species—that's a different issue. Let's assume that the choice is between a world like ours and one with no sentient beings in it at all. And assume, too—here we have to get fictitious, as philosophers often do—that if we choose to bring about the world with no sentient beings at all, everyone will agree to do that. No one's rights will be violated—at least, not the rights of any existing people. Can non-existent people have a right to come into existence?
>
> I do think it would be wrong to choose the non-sentient universe. In my judgment, for most people, life is worth living. Even if that is not yet the case, I am enough of an optimist to believe that, should humans survive for another century or two, we will learn from our past mistakes and bring about a world in which there is far less suffering than there is now. But justifying that choice forces us to reconsider the deep issues with which I began [this column]. Is life worth living? Are the interests of a future child a reason for bringing that child into existence? And is the continuance of our species justifiable in the face of our knowledge that it will certainly bring suffering to innocent future human beings?

These claims elicited the following from a subscriber to the *Times*: "All this from Singer is words until I see him take his own life. As with charity, self-sacrifice must begin at home[;] otherwise it's nothing but posing. Moreover, Singer has absolutely no argument in support of these nutty notions. I have no idea what motivates him but the outcome is silly." We hear, in these remarks, the unreflective, self-satisfied speaker of "Mad Judy." So much as entertain antinatalist arguments, even in the hamlet that constitutes the readership of "The Opinionator"—and do so merely as a thought experiment, at that—and you may find yourself dismissed as "nutty."

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