

Article

Surprised by Hope: Possibilities of Spiritual Experience in Victorian Lyric Poetry

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Abstract: This article reconsiders literature's capacity to express and evoke spiritual experiences by turning to William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, especially his discussion of mysticism and his suggestion that poetry can bring about such states. James's ideas are especially promising given recent developments in postsecular and post-critical scholarship that problematize a religious/secular divide and call into question a hermeneutics of suspicion. Bringing James into conversation with Paul Ricoeur, I aim to show how receptivity to spiritual experiences in literature might generate expansive models of both poetics and hermeneutics. To pursue these possibilities, my study analyzes three examples of Victorian lyric poems that probe the edges of wonder: Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Nondum" and Dollie Radford's "A Dream of 'Dreams'". These case studies strategically select work by writers of various belief or unbelief positions, highlighting the dynamism of the late nineteenth-century moment from which James's writings emerged. I argue that this poetry facilitates a re-imagination of hope, beyond a faith/doubt dichotomy, as well as a re-framing of revelation, from proclamation to invitation. Building on insights from both James and Ricoeur, my discussion concludes by making the case for cultivating an interpretive disposition that does not guard against but opens toward poetry's latent potential to take readers by surprise.

Keywords: spiritual experience; mysticism; hermeneutics; hope; Victorian poetry; William James; Paul Ricoeur; Thomas Hardy; Gerard Manley Hopkins; Dollie Radford



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1. Introduction

Can reading poetry awaken a spiritual experience? Although personal anecdotes might well indicate the affirmative—Simone Weil, for one, recalled that it was during a recitation of George Herbert's "Love (III)" that "Christ himself came down and took possession of [her]"—entertaining this idea within the context of an academic argument risks sounding altogether too whimsical, not only because of subjective variables but also because spirituality itself remains a vexed concept even within religious studies scholarship.¹ Recent ventures exploring interconnections between literary studies and cognitive neuroscience, however, invite us to approach this prospect from new angles. Studies have shown how poetic language activates circuits within the brain's right hemisphere—the center concerned with aesthetics, emotions, and pleasure—and gives rise to feelings that can result in new forms of thought. In his recent book, *The Spider's Thread: Metaphor in Mind, Brain, and Poetry*, neuroscientist and poet Keith J. Holyoak considers directions in literary psychology that integrate art and science, including renewed attention to interconnections between the creative process and the states of consciousness celebrated by mystics.² The emerging field of cognitive science of religion, including pioneering work by Andrew B.

Newberg, Patrick McNamara, and Wesley J. Wildman, has further called attention to the relationship between brain states and spiritual experiences, using neuroimaging technologies to study the processes involved in activities such as prayer or meditation.³

In 1902, physiologist, psychologist, and philosopher William James would have answered this question with a resounding “yes”. His *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, originally given as his Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, considers interconnections between poetry and mysticism. One hundred and twenty years later, David B. Yaden and Andrew B. Newberg’s study *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience* paid homage to and reinvigorated the central questions posed by James, showing how developments in contemporary neuroscience attest to the insight and enduring relevance of this foundational work (Yaden and Newberg 2022, pp. 7–12). James defines the “simplest rudiment” of mysticism as a “deepened sense” of significance often felt through imagination and literature. He reflects, “Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them”. He goes so far as to suggest, “we are alive or dead to the inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility” (James [1902] 2012, p. 383). For James, poetry has the capacity not merely to represent such moments of inward illumination but, more profoundly, to inculcate them.

These remarks emerge within the context of James’s broader examination of distinctions and intersections between institutional and personal religion, a discussion that has much to offer to today’s scholarship on religion and secularization. In Lectures XVI and XVII (“Mysticism”), James outlines the hallmarks of mystical experiences as fourfold: ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity (James [1902] 2012, pp. 380–81). The first two qualities underscore the paradox that insights arising from such experiences exceed translation into language, even though it is through language that this transcendence can best be evoked, a conundrum that James confronts in his discussion of poetry. His emphasis on transience invites particular attention to poetic forms that encapsulate brief moments of emotional intensity, such as the lyric. Insofar as James identifies passivity as the fourth and final defining characteristic, he opens an opportunity to consider questions regarding not only *what* but also *how* one reads. According to James, “single words” or “conjunctions of words” bring forth such experiences only “when the mind is tuned aright” (James [1902] 2012, p. 383). He further describes this mental tuning in terms of relinquishing individual power, commenting that “when the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (James [1902] 2012, p. 381). Put another way, passivity entails an immersive state, in which the reader ventures beyond disinterested objectivity to participate in something that exceeds the boundaries of the self. Following James’s lead, the present study considers how openness to spiritual experiences in literature might contribute to recent debates about both poetics and hermeneutics.

To the critical observer, James’s terms might well seem disquieting: this formulation seems to imply that, whether as the result of conquest or as a gesture of trust, the reader must suspend some of their own agency. Such a model sits uneasily with the distance and detachment that literary scholarship often presupposes. As Rita Felski observes in *Uses of Literature*, the discipline’s tendencies can be seen in its favored verbs: “subvert, interrogate, disrupt”, or perhaps even “unravel, demystify, take issue, and take umbrage” (Felski 2008, pp. 3, 5). Such language befits literary criticism’s important work of ideological critique; however, this implicitly adversarial stance does not do justice to the full range of intellectual and aesthetic responses available to readers. Both in this book and in her subsequent studies *The Limits of Critique* and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Felski

challenges literary criticism's habitual enshrinement of the suspicious mind (Felski 2015; Felski 2020). Instead, she advocates for cultivating a broader set of interpretive methods that include attention to "wonder, reverence, exaltation" (Felski 2008, p. 32). Such terms clearly participate in a religious register, and several recent clusters of articles have brought into conversation the methodology that Felski brands as "postcritical" and the scholarly turn often known as "postsecular"—that is, an effort to show how modernity's secular/religious binary all too often embeds a false dichotomy that obscures the wide spectrum of human experiences associated with believing, doubting, questioning, or seeking.⁴

As a growing body of both postsecular and postcritical scholarship calls into question these disciplinary predilections, what has emerged is an urgent need for multisided interpretive practices that work across theoretical approaches, renew attention to the potential resources afforded by theological models, and reconsider the concept of spirituality itself. Difficult to define beyond a broad association with religious feeling that is itself often treated with suspicion even by humanities scholars interested in religion, spirituality remains an "undertheorized, and therefore, widely misunderstood category", as Matthew Wickman highlights. Even so, Wickman argues convincingly that postsecular scholarship can and should attend to how spirituality pervades contemporary thought, not least insofar as the language of spirituality often undergirds expressions of ideals and values (Wickman 2020, pp. 328–29). In pursuit of such goals, I propose that the questions Felski has galvanized might be taken up by engaging more rigorously with several thinkers that her studies invoke only briefly. These include both James, whom she cites to bolster her argument for a more capacious concept of *use* that encompasses both the pragmatic and the poetic, and Paul Ricoeur, whose phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" Felski appropriates to describe what she identifies as literary criticism's *modus operandi*, applying this concept in ways that, by her own admission, drift from its original context (Felski 2008, pp. 8, 32; see also Felski 2015, pp. 1–4). Within Ricoeur's own formulation, this "hermeneutics of suspicion" is but one part of a dialectic, the other side of which is a "hermeneutics of restoration" whereby interpretation operates not as a process of demystification but rather as "the manifestation of a message". He describes the field of hermeneutics in the post-Marxist, post-Nietzschean, and post-Freudian age as "internally at variance", split between a "double motivation of willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience" (Ricoeur 1970, p. 27). For Ricoeur, "the contrary of suspicion" is "faith", though not "the first faith of the simple soul" but rather "faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith" (Ricoeur 1970, p. 28). I argue that the task of moving beyond a narrowly suspicious orientation might be furthered by turning to another theological virtue: hope. Such an approach responds to the theology of reading posited by Alan Jacobs, whereby suspicion appears as the "shadow side" of "loving discernment" (A. Jacobs 2001, p. 67). Jacobs further suggests that working in a hopeful spirit might be the means by which excesses of doubt and distrust can be "overcome" (A. Jacobs 2001, p. 89). Building on this line of thought, I aim to consider how the negative impulse that often operates as suspicion might be productively integrated within a robust concept of hope. Here again, Ricoeur's theoretical writings have much to offer, especially his meditations in an essay entitled "Freedom in the Light of Hope". This essay advances a model that exceeds a faith/doubt dichotomy, insofar as hope constitutes "the living contradiction of what it proceeds from" (Ricoeur 1980a, p. 165). Hope, then, incorporates its own internal dialectic, circumventing naiveté by enfolding an element of questioning.

What is implicit in James's remarks on poetry and mysticism but can be more clearly seen throughout Ricoeur's theoretical writings is a simple yet profound point about figurative language and metaphor. For Ricoeur, language's poetic functions give rise to a nuanced theory of truth, which he defines not in terms of verification or falsification but

rather in terms of manifestation—that is, the capacity to see the world anew (Ricoeur 1980b, pp. 100–3). To explore these possibilities, the present study analyzes three Victorian lyric poems that probe the edges of wonder, across a variety of belief/unbelief positions: Thomas Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” (1900), Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Nondum” (composed in 1866 but not published until 1918) and Dollie Radford’s “A Dream of ‘Dreams’” (1891). I argue that this poetry facilitates a re-imagination of hope, across and beyond a religious/secular divide, as well as a re-framing of revelation, from proclamation to invitation. Building on insights from both James and Ricoeur, my discussion concludes by making the case for cultivating an interpretive disposition that does not guard against but opens toward poetry’s latent capacity to take readers by surprise.

2. Varieties of Spiritual Poetics

Appreciating the imaginative potential of Victorian lyric poetry requires careful reconsideration of the dynamic moment in intellectual and literary history from which James himself emerged. Although James tends to be remembered more for his theories of pragmatism and stream of consciousness than his writings on religion, his Gifford lectures provide a useful “interpretive framework through which critics can better understand the heterogeneous forms of mystical experience”, as Graham H. Jensen puts it (Jensen 2023, p. 250). Whereas Jensen applies this framework to modernist texts published in succeeding decades, I argue that this paradigm might also provide a meaningful avenue into the nineteenth-century literature that came before. As Jensen acknowledges, scholars including David E. Leary have highlighted the extent to which James’s writings reflect a broad Romantic sensibility, drawing connections, for instance, between his philosophy and William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (Jensen 2023, p. 260). Within his lectures on mysticism, James himself cites not Wordsworth but his successor Tennyson, poet laureate of the Victorian era. He quotes from Tennyson’s “The Two Voices” (1842) to underscore the point that mystical experiences involve an ineffability surpassing words: “glimpses of forgotten dreams” that “no language may declare”.⁵ Composed after the death of his dear friend Arthur Henry Hallam’s death, Tennyson’s poem explores the tensions between belief and skepticism that find their fullest expression within his later masterpiece *In Memoriam* (1850), an elegy that engages at once with personal griefs and philosophical questions about the order of the cosmos and the purpose of suffering. Calling attention to the poem’s depth of engagement with darkness and despair, T. S. Eliot claims, “its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience” (Eliot 1936, p. 187). Rather than pit one against the other, however, a postsecular approach might help to illuminate the intertwining of faith and doubt. Such, indeed, is the model invited by some of the most memorable turns of phrase throughout *In Memoriam*: refuting the idea that “doubt is Devil-born”, Tennyson declares, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds” (Tennyson [1850] 2007a, p. 441, XCVI.11–12). Troubling reductive dichotomies, he wrestles with both the inadequacy of human words—“the petty cobwebs we have spun”—and the prospect that divine power “dwells not in the light alone” (Tennyson [1850] 2007a, pp. 470, CXXIV.9; 441 XCVI.20). His elegy epitomizes the complex, even convoluted, crossings of belief and skepticism that reverberate throughout Victorian poetry.

Although it was once fashionable to regard the Victorian era as an age of doubt, recent scholarship has proposed that the period might be more accurately and more effectively understood as an age of seeking. Since the publication of Charles Taylor’s widely influential *A Secular Age* (2007), Victorian studies has begun to reject models of secularization that posit religion’s linear and inevitable downfall.⁶ Revised historical narratives view the nineteenth century’s overarching intellectual trajectory not as the decline of faith but as the proliferation of various belief positions, from the institutional to the idiosyncratic.⁷

Although literary studies has been a relative latecomer to these interdisciplinary conversations, recent ventures have perceptively highlighted how changing religious ideas were mediated through literary forms, including poetry: Charles LaPorte's *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011), Joshua King's *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print* (2015), and Michael D. Hurley's *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief* (2017), to name but a few (LaPorte 2011; King 2015; Hurley 2017). Even as secularist societies gained cultural currency in the Victorian era, traditional modes of religious expression continued to hold sway. That secular and religious forms were often mutually constitutive can be seen, for instance, in *The Secular Song and Hymn Book* (1875), edited by Annie Besant, who left her husband, an Anglican minister, to work with the first avowedly atheist Member of Parliament Charles Bradlaugh in founding the Freethought Press and later became president of the Theosophical Society.⁸ As Besant's example attests, the final decades of the century saw increased interest in new religious movements and alternative spiritualities, from the resurgence of interest in the mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg to the rise of spiritualism, Theosophy, and other occult societies. At the close of the Victorian age, what later became conventional categories for the organization, legitimation, and division of knowledge were yet much more fluid and indeterminate.⁹ Returning to this period, then, provides opportunities to explore roads not taken, beyond twentieth- or twenty-first-century polarizations.

The child of a Swedenborgian theologian and a founding member of the American Society for Psychical Research, James emphasizes multiplicity throughout his discussion of religious experience, as underscored by the title given to his collected lectures.¹⁰ His discussion works, albeit imperfectly and tinged with Eurocentric and imperialist biases, toward a capacious perspective that considers Buddhist and Vedantic traditions alongside a broad array of Christian thinkers, including St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. John of the Cross, Dionysius the Areopagite, and St. Teresa of Avila. Consequently, he offers what Jensen describes as a "pluralistic framing of religion" that "allows for minute gradations between religious and secular positions, as well as for highly idiosyncratic and syncretistic forms of religious and non-religious expression" (Jensen 2023, p. 257). In an effort to achieve both range and nuance, my analysis selects texts by Victorian poets across a variety of belief and unbelief positions, opting for the more personal connotations of "spiritual" rather than "religious" poetics, even as the ensuing discussion also aims to locate individual expressions in relation to broader communities. Taken together, these examples illustrate a broad spectrum of nineteenth-century efforts to articulate hope, engaging in creative dialogue with faith traditions both from the outside and from within. Both canonical poets, Hardy and Hopkins have conventionally been seen as representing very different (indeed, even opposing) stances: though both were raised Anglican, Hardy became deeply critical of religious institutions and adopted a form of agnosticism, whereas Hopkins converted to Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest. Radford, by contrast, remained largely neglected until recent ventures in reassessing late Victorian literary culture by recovering women's writing; furthermore, as a radical freethinker who was open to heterodox mysticism, Radford herself might be seen as an unstable third term that undoes habitual binaries. By attending to this heterogeneity, my analysis aims to model what might be accomplished by deliberately transgressing a faith/doubt dichotomy, reading across secular and religious contexts with both sensitivity to differences and openness to surprising continuities.

One vital element that the three poems selected have in common, in addition to their short lyric form, is their meditation on waiting—for the turn from winter to spring, in the space between prayer and answer, or through the passage whereby night becomes day. They thereby invite a reconsideration of the tensions between the *already* and the *not yet* that Ricoeur investigates in his essay "Freedom in the Light of Hope". Drawing on Jürgen

Moltmann's systemic theology as well as Søren Kierkegaard's resonant description of hope as a "*passion for the possible*", Ricoeur defines his central concept in both psychological and ethical terms: psychologically, as a "creative imagination", and ethically, as a mission of reconciliation concerned with "social and political justice" (Ricoeur 1980a, pp. 160, 162). Another twofold aspect within hope, for Ricoeur, concerns the conjunction of "in spite of" and "how much more", which he sees as corresponding to *freedom from* and *freedom to*. Meditating on Romans 5: 12–20, he construes the former category as the "contrary appearance of death" and the latter as the "aspiration of the whole creation for redemption" that come together in the idea of the resurrection (Ricoeur 1980a, pp. 164–65). Taken together, this capacious definition holds together several seeming contradictions, which Ricoeur acknowledges when he describes hope as "aporetic"; however, he qualifies that it is so "not by reason of lack of meaning but by excess of meaning" (Ricoeur 1980a, p. 165). This excess becomes productive insofar as hope operates as a force that opens, having "a fissuring power with regard to closed systems" and "a power of reorganizing meaning" (Ricoeur 1980a, p. 167). It is by virtue of its paradoxically close relation to its inverse that hope remains generative and resistant to the "pathology" that Ricoeur describes as a "totalization" that might be put to ill use by either church or state (Ricoeur 1980a, p. 180). Hope, then, must operate in close conjunction with its antithesis to avoid becoming stagnant or subject to coercion—much as, for Ricoeur, revelation itself consists of partial, finite glimpses into a transcendence that is always at least partly concealed. As Ricoeur reflects in the conclusion to another piece collected within *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, "to say that the God who reveals himself is a hidden God is to confess that revelation can never constitute a body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing" (Ricoeur 1980b, p. 95). Such admission of limits constitutes the precondition for dialogue in a postsecular society, whereby scholarly hospitality might unfold as a continuous process of searching and listening, not only for glimpses of transcendent insight but also to divergent voices.

In the discussion that follows, I locate this concept of hope within the formal and thematic patterning of Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", Hopkins's "Nondum", and Radford's "A Dream of 'Dreams'". Although these three examples emerge from very different quadrants of nineteenth-century literature, they all evoke spiritual experiences in ways that reach from representation to presentation, calling for the reader's active engagement. Moreover, all three incorporate an element of negation that goes beyond suspicion, modeling alternative forms of unknowing, unsaying, and undoing. Adapting liturgical formulae and swerving from disenchantment to re-enchantment, Hardy's agnosticism integrates irony and sincerity vis-à-vis epistemic finitude. Hopkins's apophysis draws from Christian mysticism to probe the limits of language, while simultaneously revitalizing the discourse of prayer. Finally, Radford's freethinking refashioning of religious symbolism dissolves conventional dichotomies in favor of mystical unity. These transformations, in turn, prompt further reflection on the dispositional aspects of poetic language and the practice of its interpretation. Recognizing a shared condition of limited knowledge and imperfect language, counterbalanced by attention to the workings of metaphor, might provide a starting point for a more hospitable mode of literary criticism.

3. Unknowing Insight in Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush"

Originally published in *The Graphic* on 29 December 1900 and reprinted in *The Times* on 1 January 1901, Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" is a quintessential New Year's Eve poem that not only marks the threshold of the calendar year but also stands at the end of the Victorian era. The opening stanzas foreground the speaker's immersion within a bleak and barren landscape, finding the "Century's corpse" within the "sharp features" of the earth

itself.¹¹ Hardy thus portrays the desolate affects evoked by a menacing, post-Darwinian concept of nature, akin to what his earlier fiction had memorably described as “the ache of modernism” (Hardy [1891] 2008, p. 140). Although Hardy himself did not identify as a believer for most of his adult life, in his early days he had entertained ideas of becoming an Anglican clergyman, and the lingering effects of his investment in church tradition and scriptural allusion can be seen throughout his later works.¹²

This poem’s interpretive crux concerns the encounter with the bird named in the title: is the prospect that this creature’s song participates in a hope beyond the speaker’s ken, as suggested in the final lines, to be taken ironically or sincerely? As Philip V. Allingham sees it, both optimistic and pessimistic potentials lurk within the connotations of the word “darkling”, which tend alternatively toward “darling” or “gloom-producing”.¹³ Rather than resolve this ambivalence, he transfers the word’s application, concluding, “it is, in fact, not the bird who is darkling, but the observer, torn between the dark despair of agnosticism and the comforting light of conventional belief” (Allingham 1991, p. 48). To refine critical understanding, I consider the poem’s exploration of a nuanced concept of agnosticism that is in keeping with the nebulous frameworks evolving during Hardy’s own time. In this paradigm, agnosticism entails not an anti-religious stance but a more fundamental recognition of the limits of human knowledge. “The Darkling Thrush”, then, is not a poem about a contest between faith versus doubt but a poem about the speaker’s process of coming to terms with his own finitude. The text figures forth this process through its stanzaic and syntactic constructions, as well as through patterns and ruptures within its constellation of images.

The first two stanzas adopt the language of mourning to remark not only the Century’s deceased body, as highlighted previously, but also “His crypt the cloudy canopy,/The wind his death-lament” (ll. 11–12). The “spectre-grey” Frost and the “weakening eye of day” rendered “desolate” by the “dregs” of Winter, likewise capitalized, reflect a keen consciousness of monochromatic mortality (ll. 2–4). That these images are a projection of the speaker’s inner emotional state—in effect, that Hardy’s personifications are a textbook example of what the Victorian cultural critic John Ruskin theorized as a *pathetic fallacy*—becomes clear in the second stanza’s closing observation: “every spirit upon earth/Seemed fervourless as I” (l. 16).¹⁴ Unable to escape such morbid observation, the second stanza concludes with the same word on which the poem begins, the “I” of the individual beholder.

The song of the thrush, which arises in the third stanza, effectively breaks the speaker out of his solipsism. Although this bird is once again personified, this creature is described in terms of tensions and contradictions, unlike the homogenous aspects of nature the speaker had observed previously. On the one hand, the thrush, who is notably not dignified with a capital letter, appears as “frail, gaunt, and small/In blast-beruffled plume” (ll. 21–22). On the other hand, the bird gives voice to “a full-hearted evensong/Of joy illimited” (ll. 19–20). Throughout the only one of the four stanzas not to foreground the speaker’s perceptions or conjectures by means of the first-person pronoun, the thrush embodies a striking combination of weakness and strength: his choice “to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom” might be construed as an expression not of grief or desperation but exuberance, even celebration (ll. 23–24). The text inclines toward this latter possibility in describing the bird’s melody in terms of both “evensong” and, in the next stanza, “carolings” (l. 25). Moreover, the poem’s very structure—eight-line stanzas of alternating tetrameter/trimeter rhymed ABABCD CD—seems clearly indebted to hymn meter. In addition to their shared association with Christian churches, all three of these musical forms are distinctly communal. Regardless of whether its engagement with religion is seen in terms of a nostalgia for a bygone age of faith, a rejection of conventional belief, or (as

I have suggested) an effort to rewrite religion, the poem figures forth the speaker's shift away from egocentric isolation.

As the final stanza emphasizes, the thrush's arrival carries with it the prospect of hope, if only a hope that is qualified by the subjunctive formulation:

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware. (ll. 25–32)

Remarking the poem's textual variations, Susan Swier notes that the version that appeared in *The Graphic* capitalized the word "blessed", a distinction that she argues "would put the emphasis on the entire phrase" and thus the line might more recognizably be seen as a reference to Titus 2:13 ("Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of our Great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ").¹⁵ Norman Vance similarly reads Hardy's poem in relation to "St. Paul's suggestion that Hope is blind", invoking Romans 8:24, "but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" Even so, Vance observes that Hardy's biblical allusions have their limits, reminding readers that "there is no instance of the word 'thrush' in the King James Bible".¹⁶ By reaching beyond a scriptural register and instead identifying a bird well-known to his British public, Hardy insinuates that familiar, quotidian things may have the greatest potential for transcendence. The effort to decode what has been "written on terrestrial things", an implicit nod to the Book of Nature as another primary source of revelation, concludes with the possibility of limits, encoded within the syntactic variation of the very last line that shifts the emphasis away from the individual speaker: "And I was unaware".

Hardy's exploration of unknowing insight aligns with several late Victorian intellectual and cultural shifts, wherein agnosticism occupied a complex position in relation to Christian thought. Introduced in 1869 by Thomas Henry Huxley, popularly known as "Darwin's bulldog" for his famous defense of the author of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the term *agnosticism* originally stood for what Bernard Lightman describes as "a confession of ignorance" (Lightman 2019, p. 13). Tracing this framework's origins, Lightman cautions against the scholarly propensity to see Victorian agnosticism as monolithic, observing that an inquiry into its sources results in "the strange discovery that agnosticism owes a profound debt to an epistemological position put forth by a number of Christian thinkers" (Lightman 2019, p. 5). He shows that the agnosticism of thinkers such as Darwin, Huxley, and Herbert Spencer emerged in dialogue with a theistic tradition that included William Hamilton, Robert Flint, Henry Mansel, and Immanuel Kant, concluding that the former variety emerged as a reaction against a "rigid dogmatism" that the latter group likewise saw as a "perversion of the original, pure religion as founded by Christ" (Lightman 2019, p. 121). The religious genealogy of agnosticism might be traced even further, to the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius), wherein unknowing God as wrongly construed by imperfect human language becomes the precondition for true revelation.¹⁷ Hardy, who described his own writings as displaying a "harmony of view with Darwin, Huxley, Spencer", similarly explores a capacious form of agnosticism that opens toward the prospect of hope beyond human knowledge.¹⁸

Spiritual experience in “The Darkling Thrush” stands at some remove: it is not the speaker but the thrush who seems to participate in a divine chorus. As an outside observer, the speaker acknowledges hope only in terms of a speculation—yet that in itself is no small feat, as James underscores in his discussion of mystical experiences. James emphasizes that he himself occupies the position of a spectator where such experiences are concerned and grants that “non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature” (James [1902] 2012, p. 427). Still, he concludes that the issue of whether such states offer a higher or deeper vantage point “must always remain an open question”, positing that they “might, in spite of all the perplexity, be indispensable stages in our approach to the final fullness of the truth” (James [1902] 2012, p. 428). A genuinely hospitable pluralism would necessarily encompass skepticism, just as it would also include those more mystical modes of apprehension that convention deems illegitimate. Hardy’s own formulation of hope as possibility holds together paradoxical tensions, encapsulated in his description of this hope as that which “trembled through” the thrush’s song (l. 29). In other words, if hope comes, it comes trembling, in weak and fragile bodies. That the speaker apprehends this prospect through hearing rather than sight underscores the phenomenological reorientation whereby he moves away from the solipsistic “I” (eye) and toward a more integrated, relational mode of perceiving his place within the world.

4. Unsayings Prayer in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Nondum”

Tracing a parallel journey from desolation to consolation, Gerard Manley Hopkins advances a sensuous mysticism from within an avowedly Christian framework. Hopkins, who converted to Catholicism following the influence of John Henry Newman and burned his early poems upon entering the Jesuit priesthood, is most often remembered for his prosodic and metrical innovations (including his theories of inscape, instress, and sprung rhythm), as well as his clusters of “nature sonnets” and “terrible sonnets”. Early forays into the tropes and themes that came to define his poetic oeuvre can be found within “Nondum”, the manuscript of which is dated Lent 1866, the year of his conversion.¹⁹ Like most of Hopkins’s surviving poetry, this poem was published only posthumously, by his friend Robert Bridges, who was named poet laureate in 1913. Both the images and the modes of utterance explored in this early poem anticipate some of Hopkins’s formulations in more canonical works such as “God’s Grandeur” and “Carrion Comfort”. Although “Nondum” has received comparatively little attention from scholars and lacks the prosodic complexity that characterizes his later verses, the poem’s artistic imperfections underscore its spiritual insights. As Hopkins shows, the attempt to use words to evoke a God who transcends symbolic representation is in itself a manifestation of hope.

“Nondum” depicts a state of longing for divine presence, at once attending to anguished expectation and discovering hope amid emptiness. The title, the Latin adverb for “not yet”, signals this interplay between present absence and anticipated presence. From its prefatory epigram, the poem establishes itself as explicitly in dialogue with biblical traditions and immediately invested in the problem of divine hiddenness: “*Verily thou art a God that hidest Thyself*”, a quotation of Isaiah 45:15 (KJV).²⁰ Hopkins emphasizes silence and invisibility throughout the first seven of his sestet stanzas but turns, in the last two, toward metaphors of heeding the unheard and beholding the unseen. He thereby advances a poetics of negation that transfigures the experience of waiting, engaging with the apophatic/kataphatic dialectic within mystical theology. Dennis Sobolev has made the case for examining Hopkins’s poetry within the context of mysticism, from the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola reflected in his “nature sonnets” to the dark night of the soul suggested by his “terrible sonnets” (Sobolev 2004, pp. 464–66). Throughout “Nondum”,

Hopkins twins apophatic and kataphatic expressions in a dialectical fashion, foregrounding divine ineffability while also making affirmative statements about divine majesty.

In a marked departure from what would become the pattern of later poems such as “The Windhover” and “As kingfishers catch fire”, where the wonders of the natural world prompt spiritual meditation, this poem’s opening stanzas employ the imagery of creation to underscore the experience of divine absence: “We see the glories of the earth/But not the hand that wrought them all” (ll. 7–8). Hopkins’s combination of wilderness and mountainous imagery recalls the biblical traditions associated with both apophatic and kataphatic mysticism. In line 5, the lament “our prayer seems lost in desert ways” evokes the forty-year period of wandering before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, an echo of Exodus heightened by a subsequent reference to Moses’s encounter with the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–21). Calling attention to the inadequacy of language, the speaker reflects,

We guess; we clothe Thee, unseen King,
With attributes we deem are meet;
Each in his own imagining
Sets up a shadow in Thy seat;
Yet know not how our gifts to bring,
Where seek thee with unsandalled feet. (ll. 12–17)

The emphasis on speculation and adumbration throughout these lines accords with the apophatic conviction that God cannot be defined through words and images. In his commentary on this *via negativa*, James discusses this tradition as finding its most powerful expression in Dionysius the Areopagite, whom he describes as “the fountain-head of Christian mysticism” (James [1902] 2012, p. 416). He underscores that the apophatic way of negation entails not rejection of meaning but excess of it, positioning “negation as a mode of passage toward a higher kind of affirmation” (James [1902] 2012, pp. 417–48). Hopkins effectively encapsulates the twofold dynamics of this negation in this stanza’s two negated adjectives: “unseen”, which indicates the stripping away of all illusion, and “unsandalled”, which underscores the intimacy of unveiling that this stripping away makes possible.

By following these allusions to the book of Exodus with a description of a mountainous peak in the next stanza, Hopkins evokes Mount Sinai, associated with apophatic spirituality in Christian traditions. The counterpart of Sinai is Tabor, the mountain of Jesus’s transfiguration in the gospel narratives, aligned with the kataphatic way of affirmation.²¹ Although “Nondum” does not reference the transfiguration directly, the poem’s closing lines evoke a similar scene of glorious illumination. The poet aspires “to behold Thee as Thou art” (l. 52)—not merely the backside of God, as in the partial theophany granted to Moses, but something closer to the shining figure revealed to Peter, James, and John, or perhaps akin to the Pauline hope of overcoming the limitations of looking “through a glass, darkly” and instead seeing “face to face” (Exodus 33:18–13; Matthew 17:1–5; 1 Corinthians 13:13 [KJV]). The extent to which the speaker experiences himself as poised between emptiness and fullness becomes apparent in the fifth stanza, when he confronts an overpowering sense of dejection upon turning his gaze within himself:

Deep calls to deep and blackest night
Giddies the soul with blinding daze
That dares to cast its searching sight
On being’s dread and vacant maze. (ll. 26–29)

Echoing the cry of Psalm 42, Hopkins puts darkness and light into paradoxical relation, anticipating the sensory conceits developed in later sonnets such as “No worst, there is none” and “I wake and feel”.²² Yet this very bleakness allows him to receive guidance.

In the penultimate stanza, he appeals to patience to “lead me child-like by the hand;/If still in darkness not in fear” (ll. 47–48), recalling at once Milton’s Sonnet XIX (“On His Blindness”), Newman’s hymn “Lead, kindly Light”, and Christ’s injunction to become like little children to enter the kingdom of God.²³

The final stanzas make space for an epiphanic moment, combining the faculties of sight, sound, and touch woven throughout the previous lines. The speaker beseeches God to bestow on him a gentle whisper as a mother would her newborn baby, turning to maternal imagery to convey both divine tenderness and human weakness. These lines reflect the preference for metaphors of reciprocal touch as expressions of intimacy that Duc Dau has traced throughout Hopkins’s work, as well as the poetics that she describes as “a composition of sighs and a series of stresses that dwell upon God’s creative ‘inspiration’ and offer him the author’s ‘aspiration’” (Dau 2013, p. 87). The last two stanzas both begin with a spondaic substitution that disrupts the poem’s iambic meter and concentrates the speaker’s longings into single words: the exclamation “Oh!” and the imperative “Speak!” (ll. 42, 48). In Hopkins’s poem, unlike Hardy’s, modes of sensation are integrated and situated in relation to a transcendent insight—what the poem describes as “that sense beyond”—yet that other sense is itself presented in terms that bring together immanence and transcendence, condensed within the closing line’s beautifully oxymoronic construction “morn eternal” (l. 54). As Hopkins reaches for heaven on earth, what begins as an imperative that God speak becomes an admonition to himself to listen, to hearken to revelation that is still in the process of unfolding.

These last two stanzas take the poem full circle, to the prayer invoked in the direct address of the opening lines, “God, though to Thee our psalm we raise/No answering voice comes from the skies” (ll. 1–2). Despite the apparently conflicting feelings that Hopkins himself appears to have had regarding his poetry, Catherine Phillips suggests that his poems partake in a devotional mode that often puts the speaker in the position of teaching or leading a congregation and takes the form of prayer (Phillips 2010, pp. 175–77). More particularly, “Nondum” recalls the petitions and laments expressed throughout the Psalms, both in its biblical allusions and in its structures of amplification. In keeping with biblical poetry’s parallel patterning, the first line of one stanza echoes and embellishes the first line of the previous: “We see” in the second stanza evolves into its logical conclusion “We guess” at the start of the third; the next two stanzas move from “And still th’unbroken silence broods” to the visual counterpart “And still th’abysses infinite”; and the final two stanzas begin with single-word exclamations (ll. 7, 12, 24, 32, 42, 48).

Much as the Oxford Movement that prompted Hopkins’s conversion regarded poetry as integral to religion, so James defined religion as nothing if not the living expression of prayer.²⁴ For James, prayer is “the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence” (James [1902] 2012, p. 464). Prayer, then, casts the self as a relational entity, speaking in supplication to or celebration of something greater. In addition to addressing God, the closing entreaty offers both an injunction to the speaker and an invitation to the reader to dwell within the tensions of things hoped for.

5. Undoing Opposition in Dollie Radford’s “A Dream of ‘Dreams’”

Dollie Radford’s short, meditative poem “A Dream of ‘Dreams’” similarly envisions a relational self, though her mode of utterance positions the speaker both as longing for divine presence and as engaging in dialogue with fellow artists. Whereas the epigraph to “Nondum” signals the theological questions raised by the prophet Isaiah, Radford’s paratext invokes not the Bible but the book of a radical freethinking woman engaged in the project of rewriting religion: her poem bears the dedicatory line “to Olive Schreiner”, and

her title alludes to *Dreams* (1890), a collection of fragmentary revelations that adapt both the themes and forms of biblical prophecy to advance the women's rights movement.²⁵ The author of five volumes of poetry, two fictional works, and four children's books, Dollie Radford began her literary career in 1883, when she released nine poems under "Caroline Maitland", her maiden name; she took up the pseudonym "Dollie Radford" after her marriage to fellow poet Ernest Radford later that year. She and her husband were well-connected within prominent socialist and aestheticist literary networks, and several of her early poems were published in *Progress*, a radical secularist journal edited by G. W. Foote, who succeeded Bradlaugh as president of Britain's National Secularist Society. Even so, as Ruth Livesey observes, "Dollie and Ernest Radford's ventures in secularism stopped short of a whole-hearted advocacy of rationalist atheism, and, like many of their peers at the *fin de siècle*, the couple explored alternative belief systems to supplement the spiritual void".²⁶ Evidence of this interest can be found throughout "A Dream of 'Dreams'", which repositions imagery from the creation myths in Genesis in service of an alternative spirituality characterized by a mystic undoing of oppositions, including active/passive, I/thou, and spirit/flesh.

Placed as the final piece within Radford's collection *A Light Load* (1891), "A Dream of 'Dreams'" echoes both the content and style of "The Lost Joy", arranged as the first vision within Schreiner's volume.²⁷ Schreiner opens with the allegorical figure of Life, personified as feminine, watching and waiting on a sunlit seashore until Love comes to her and their ecstatic union produces Joy. Their radiant and exuberant child seems mysteriously to disappear, replaced by "a little stranger, with wide-open eyes, very soft and sad"; however, after the trio journey into the wilderness in search of their lost child, this sorrowful yet caring being is revealed to be none other than "Joy grown older", matured into "Sympathy" and "Perfect Love" (Schreiner [1890] 2020, pp. 61–63). This story of loss and recovery reprises the biblical arc of fall and redemption, but Schreiner re-imagines suffering and privation not as the deserved result of sinful rebellion but rather as a willing acceptance of self-limitation, the better to bear the pain of others. Radford's poem similarly recalls the biblical creation stories, as her speaker remarks, "The great World-Spirit watching still/Broods over all with folded wings" (ll. 9–10). This image evokes the description of the spirit of God hovering over the primordial chaos in Genesis chapter 1, in much the same terms that Hopkins uses to evoke this very scene in the final line "God's Grandeur": "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings" (Hopkins [1918] 1970a, p. 66, ll. 13–14). Her final stanza's proclamation of the "new-born joy" that the speaker experiences when the morning brings a face-to-face encounter with this divine presence further anchors her poetry in Schreiner's allegory. Tracing interconnections between these two texts, Emily Harrington calls attention to how both writers engage with archetypal features and religious diction to transfigure the concept of waiting. As Harrington sees it, Radford represents waiting not as a passive experience but as an active, agential, and even empowering state, an attitude that she compares to that expressed in Hardy's *Wessex Poems* (1898) (Harrington 2014, p. 148). Radford partakes in both a secular agenda of repurposing religion and a devotional tradition of poetry as theology, as suggested by the poem's various intertextual echoes.

In addition to Schreiner, Radford appears to have another, though unacknowledged, muse: Christina Rossetti, whose "De Profundis", collected in *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881), provides the model for both Radford's rhyme scheme and her stanza form. "A Dream of 'Dreams'" and "De Profundis" alike offer quatrains of iambic tetrameter rhymed ABAB and truncate the final line of each stanza, one foot shorter than the rest. This pattern figures forth the speaker's keen sense of diminution and anticipation, limitation and aspiration. Rossetti concludes:

For I am bound with fleshly bands,
 Joy, beauty, lie beyond my scope;
 I strain my heart, I stretch my hands
 And catch at hope. (Rossetti [1881] 2005, p. 302, ll. 13–16)

The shortened final line visually suggests the act of reaching, and the enjambment heightens the poem's kinesthetic force. Much like Hopkins, Rossetti was deeply influenced by the Oxford Movement and its doctrines of analogy and reserve—that is, the convictions that the visible world offers a sacramental symbol of its Creator and that God's incomprehensibility means that divine truths remain at least partially hidden, approachable only by means of indirection.²⁸ This dialectical tension between revelation and concealment finds renewed expression in Radford's poem, with its layering of spiritual visions, though Radford puts more emphasis on the eventual dawning of perfect knowledge.

"A Dream of 'Dreams'" opens with a direct address to Schreiner, whose work is described as infusing Radford's own:

All day I read your book; at Eve
 Your dreams into my dark sleep stole,
 Through the unbroken hours to weave
 A picture for my soul. (ll. 1–4)

The speaker presents the act of reading as at once active and passive, making subject/object positions interchangeable. The capitalization and terminal placement of "Eve" suggests a pun, not only indicating a particular point within the diurnal cycle but also invoking the first woman, an association that is in keeping with the poem's broader allusions to the Genesis creation narratives. Here again, the influence of Schreiner's "The Lost Joy" can be seen: its opening scene casts Life in ways that foreground and celebrate women's desire, effectively reclaiming Eve, the original sinner blamed throughout centuries of patriarchal exegesis. Schreiner describes the wind as softly caressing Life's hair and calling attention to the "great shudder" that passes through her when she realizes that Love is the one she has yearned for all along (Schreiner [1890] 2020, p. 61). In keeping with this beatific portrayal of sexual awakening, Radford describes the creative process in the language of tender intimacy, as the two dreamers' images intertwine in the revelation that unfolds when the speaker wakes.

Throughout the next three stanzas, Radford presents "the deep inspired night" (l. 5) in terms that combine darkness and illumination. Her turn toward "the great World-Spirit" (l. 9) brings divinity within the creative sphere; moreover, though this Spirit is consistently given masculine pronouns, its embodiment is strikingly feminine. Not only is this Spirit a presence that "Broods" (l. 10), a verb that connotes the activities of a maternal bird, but He is also described as assuming the demur attitude of "folded wings" and "down-cast eyes" (ll. 10–11). The spondaic substitution in the first foot of the second line of three consecutive stanzas ("Broods over all", "Breaks with a new unnumbered day", and "Wait as he breathes") aligns the state of waiting—which in the final lines applies not to the Spirit but to the speaker—with both the Spirit's calm meditation and the sun's forceful arrival, effectively melding activity, passivity, heaven, earth, human, and divine (ll. 10, 14, 18).

This dissolution of apparent contraries provides an opportunity to reconsider the quality of passivity that James ascribes to mysticism: what is at stake is not merely the relinquishing of one's own will but the reconstitution of the self in relation to unity with a divine consciousness. James himself concludes that the "overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement", claiming that such a trajectory toward oneness can be found "in Hinduism, in Neoplatonism,

in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism” alike and that this striking commonality “ought to make a critic stop and think” (James [1902] 2012, p. 419). Furthermore, Radford’s imaginative undoing accords with what Ricoeur emphatically identifies as the fundamental function of poetic language. He asserts, “My deepest conviction is that poetic language alone restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject” (Ricoeur 1980b, p. 101). Such integration makes it possible to re-imagine the experience of reading not in terms of ideological demystification or intellectual mastery but rather as a transformative metamorphosis.

6. Conclusions Toward a Hermeneutics of Openness

These varied expressions of unknowing, unsaying, and undoing attest to late Victorian lyric poetry’s enduring preoccupation with the state that, earlier in the century, John Keats had defined as Negative Capability—that is, the mode in which the artist “is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”.²⁹ Keats draws a contrast between this state and the “irritable reaching after fact and reason”, but his very phrasing underscores that what is at stake is not an aversion to rationality but the cultivation of an open-handed attitude, whereby bewilderment might occasion another way of knowing. The potentials of negative capability, then, might be seen as twofold: dissolving accepted assumptions and cultivating a receptive disposition, rather as Wordsworth’s speaker exhorts his friend in the closing lines of “The Tables Turned” (1798) to “come forth, and bring with you a heart/that watches and receives” (Wordsworth [1798] 2013, p. 119, ll. 31–32). Once again, this entreaty is not against knowledge per se but against the clutches of intellectual greed.

This receptive disposition constitutes the precondition for experiencing the intense flashes of insight that James valorizes in lyric poetry as a conduit to mystical experiences. In other words, these experiences require readers to be open to receiving ideas that challenge their preconceptions. After all, the experience of being surprised undergirds both the pleasure and the power of poetic language, at least as Ricoeur sees it. Extrapolating from Aristotle, Ricoeur defines “the function of metaphor” as “to instruct by suddenly combining elements that have not been put together before”. By design, figurative expressions contravene or exceed the reader’s expectations: “Surprise, in conjunction with hiddenness, plays the decisive role” (Ricoeur 1977, p. 34). Studies of the intersection between poetry and neuroscience further support this theory. In *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, Paul B. Armstrong observes that metaphor teases “the brain’s contradictory need for both constancy and flexibility” (Armstrong 2014, p. 88). Insofar as this play disrupts “routine, automatic cognitive processes”, it creates an opportunity “to reflect about what typically happens beneath our notice” and engage in “playful, self-conscious hypothesis testing” (Armstrong 2014, p. 90). Through their novelty, metaphors startle readers out of habitual perceptions, creating space for the *as if* and the *what if*. McNamara’s pioneering work on the neuroscience of religion underscores the vital role of metaphor in cultivating cognitive flexibility and conceptualizing spiritual experiences (McNamara 2022, pp. 219–21). Furthermore, McNamara argues that the process of decentering the self that activates the more creative and transformative functions of religion is itself most often initiated by the experience of being surprised (McNamara 2022, pp. 20–25).

These insights might be brought forward not only to understand poetic explorations of mystical experiences but also to broaden critical vocabulary for theorizing ways of reading. Ultimately, James concludes his lectures on mysticism by remarking that though these states “wield no authority due simply to their being mystical states”, their value arises insofar as they “offer us *hypotheses*” that seem to “point in directions to which the religious sentiments of even non-mystical men incline” (James [1902] 2012, p. 428). Such would

seem to be a very modest gain, but the concept of the hypothesis appears to be a crucial part of what recent ventures in postsecular and postcritical studies are seeking, as they probe the affordances of religious ways of thinking and explore alternatives to suspicious, symptomatic reading. Mark Knight approaches this idea when he reflects on the “reliance on metaphorical language” that not only characterizes Thomas Aquinas’s convictions that talk about God is necessarily analogical but also informs much literary critical endeavor. He reflects, “writing about our reading entails conjectural patterns of thought that someone else might choose to believe, not philosophical claims that they have to believe” (Knight 2021, p. 15). Moreover, Knight positions such “conjectural patterns” as reflecting the reader’s finitude, while also situating them in relation to a larger excess of meaning: “our readings are partial, temporal glimpses of a much greater set of possibilities” (Knight 2021, p. 21). His discussion of the synchronicities between patristic models of revelation and postcritical theory calls attention to how literary scholars and theologians alike employ interpretive techniques that “shift the emphasis from reading as proof to reading as practice that tries to register the limits of our interpretation” (Knight 2021, p. 15). Such a shift results in a hermeneutics that aims not simply at avoiding error but rather at initiating a process of self-reflection, whereby readers might at once come to terms with their own limitations and aspire to expand their horizons through the pursuit of what Hans-Georg Gadamer would call authentic dialogue. For Gadamer, authentic dialogue begins with a consciousness of one’s own ignorance and insists on “the *priority of the question* in all knowledge and discourse” (Gadamer 1975, p. 357). Such a starting point would prevent dialogue from devolving into the mere winning or losing of an argument. As Gadamer puts it, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view but being transformed in a communication in which we do not remain what we were” (Gadamer 1975, p. 371). Dialogue, then, might sustain a twofold emphasis of building bridges and seeking nuance, pursuing common ground while also developing appreciation for difference both across and within religious and secular positions.

Imagining alternatives to the hermeneutics of suspicion, I suggest, requires a capacious orientation toward interpretation that aims to proliferate possibilities for understanding spirituality. This model of hopeful reading is not reducible to the realm of the intellect, but neither is it merely a matter of emotion. Rather, as my discussion has aimed to show, spirituality encompasses religious feeling yet extends beyond affect into embodied states that ultimately involve the exercise of the will in the formation of character. Translated into interpretive practice, this activity reflects a disposition that aims not to discard but to resituate the tools of critique, transforming the negativity of suspicion into a more self-reflexive readiness to take apart accepted ways of knowing, saying, and doing. Embracing such a capacious concept of spiritual experience might not provide easy answers, but it could go a long way toward generating more searching questions.

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Notes

- ¹ This story appears in a lengthy letter to Dominican priest Jean-Marie Perrin, composed circa 15 May 1942. See (Weil 2021, pp. 29–30).
- ² Holyoak (2019, pp. 140–41); see also (A. M. Jacobs 2015, p. 2). For recent literary scholarship that considers related questions, see (Lake 2022, pp. 474–83).

- 3 Together, neuroscientist Patrick McNamara and philosopher of religion Wesley J. Wildman co-founded the Institute for the BioCultural Study of Religion, which publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Religion, Brain, and Behavior*. See Wildman's discussion of how advances in neuroscience might be brought to bear on studies of religious and spiritual experiences, including thoughtful overviews of Newberg's interventions and as well as his own work with McNamara, in (Wildman 2011, pp. 57–64). See also (McNamara 2022, pp. 5–20).
- 4 The journal *Religion and Literature* featured a forum on "Religion, Literature, and *The Limits of Critique*" in 2016, and *Literature Interpretation Theory* ran a double special issue on "Religion, Criticism, and the Postcritical" in 2021. For a thought-provoking reflection on postsecular scholarship, see (Werner and Wiehl 2021, pp. 3–4); see also (Branch 2016, p. 162).
- 5 Tennyson ([1842] 2007b, p. 121, ll. 381, 384). For a discussion of the poem's composition history, see the editorial note on page 101.
- 6 See, for instance, Taylor's critique of subtraction stories and discussion of the "nova effect" that emerged in the aftermath of eighteenth-century deism (Taylor 2007, pp. 26–27, 377).
- 7 Examples of recent scholarship by historians advancing this revised narrative include (Dixon 2010, pp. 211–30; Nash 2011, pp. 65–82; Jacob 2021, pp. 6–9, 160–95).
- 8 See the well-rounded account of Besant's life story offered by (Nash 2011, pp. 71–82).
- 9 See the discussion of this fluidity offered by (Kontou and Wilburn 2017, pp. 1–2).
- 10 For details about James's background, see (Kontou and Wilburn 2017, p. 12).
- 11 Hardy ([1900] 1999, pp. 810–11, ll. 9–10). Subsequent references to this poem are cited parenthetically in text, by line number.
- 12 See the recent re-evaluation of Hardy's ongoing engagement with religious discourse offered by (Dau 2024, pp. 23–25, 32–41).
- 13 Allingham (1991, p. 46). His study works etymologically, with the gloss given in Johnson's dictionary, and traces prior uses in English poetry by William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Keats, and Matthew Arnold.
- 14 Ruskin introduces this term in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856), defining it as "a fallacy caused by an excited state of the feelings" and essentially an externalization of the poet or speaker's interiority. See John Ruskin (1903–1912, vol. 5, p. 10).
- 15 Swier (2010, p. 77). All biblical quotations in this paper are from the KJV.
- 16 In addition, Vance argues persuasively that Hardy's poem may have been inspired by George Frederic Watts's painting *Hope* (1886), itself a departure from established iconographic traditions. First exhibited in 1886, Watts's painting reached an even wider audience when a replica was presented to the Tate Gallery in 1897. Hardy surely would have seen it, especially given that he was personally acquainted with Watts. See (Vance 1995, p. 297).
- 17 For a thoughtful discussion of these mystical traditions, see (Lane 2008, p. 65).
- 18 These lines attributed to Hardy are quoted by Weber (1940, p. 203). Weber indicates that this quotation comes from one of Hardy's letters but does not specify the date or recipient.
- 19 See the editorial note in W. H. Gardner's edition of *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Hopkins [1918] 1970a, p. 252).
- 20 In *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Hopkins [1918] 1970d, p. 32). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line numbers.
- 21 For further discussion of these traditions, see (Lane 2008, pp. 106, 125).
- 22 Hopkins ([1918] 1970c, p. 100). This poem opens by describing the speaker's state of being "pitched past pitch of grief" (ll. 1). See also (Hopkins [1918] 1970b, p. 101). At the beginning of this poem, the speaker awakens to "the fell of dark, not day" (l. 1).
- 23 Milton ([1673] 2003, p. 168). Here, patience intervenes in the turn from octave to sestet. On the likely influence of Newman's "Lead Kindly Light" on Hopkins's poem, see the editorial note offered in W. H. Gardner's edition of *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* ([1918] 1970a, p. 168). For Christ's injunction, see Matthew 18:3 (KJV).
- 24 For a thoughtful overview of this movement, including the leadership of John Keble, John Henry Newman, and Edward Pusey and their ideas about the integral relationship between poetry and religion, see (King and Pond 2015, pp. 1232–36).
- 25 Schreiner's work found an enthusiastic reception among both British and American first-wave feminists, and several of the short parables within *Dreams* initially appeared in women's rights magazines. For discussions of this volume's publication contexts and its reconsideration of issues pertaining to gender and religion, see (Dyck 2023, pp. 73–76).
- 26 Livesey (2006, p. 502). See also the discussion of Radford's publishing history and movement in radical circles offered by (Richardson 2000, p. 109).
- 27 Radford (1891, pp. 63–64). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line numbers.
- 28 See the discussion of these doctrines offered by (King and Pond 2015, pp. 1233–34).
- 29 Keats (2006, p. 66). The quotation comes from a letter dated December 1817, addressed to his brothers George and Tom.

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