

Nature's Eschatological Transcendence in Hardy's "Aquae Sulis"

And the olden dark hid the cavities late laid bare,
And all was suspended and soundless as before,
Except for a gossamery noise fading off in the air,
And the boiling voice of the waters' medicinal pour. ("Aquae
Sulis" lines 29-32)

That was the closing stanza of Thomas Hardy's poem, "Aquae Sulis." Situated in Bath, the poem features a dialogue at the Abbey Church of St. Peter and St. Paul between Christ and the early British water goddess, Sul-Minerva. In this talk, I will examine the ecotheological potential of the waters' "medicinal pour" that outlasts the divine dialogue, suggesting an eschatological coherence to the natural world that endures beyond the cultural-linguistic systems of the pagan past and Victorian Christian present [I should say, I know that this is a 20th century poem, but it works through themes and liturgical forms consistent with his novels]. The pouring water continues with redemptive potential as the only remnant of a fragmented cosmic liturgy [and we will take a deep dive into what cosmic liturgy is and what liturgical theology can do with it later in the talk] a cosmic liturgy untouched by the powers of time as creeds and liturgical spaces decay, suggesting the natural world not as a post-pagan or even a post-Christian but a post-secular sacrament.

We often discuss how Thomas Hardy puts the pagan and Christian in dialogue in the context of ecocriticism. At times, he may present pagan theology as caring more for the natural world than Christian theology. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, we enter a world not only where Tess transfigures into a pagan goddess, but also where a Cistercian abbey has "perished, creeds being transient," while "the mill still worked on, food being a perennial necessity" (*Tess* 304, 303). Like the "mediævalism of Christminster" in *Jude the Obscure*, it seems that for Hardy creeds too "must go" in an evolutionary temporality where human development outpaces metaphysical

belief but never physical need, reliant on the endurance of the natural world (*Jude* 120). Hardy's poem, "Aequae Sulis," performs the same gradual burial of past creeds through a dialogue, but suggests an immanent eschatological yearning beyond the pagan/Christian dichotomy through the recalcitrance of the local bioregion where "the boiling voice of the waters' medicinal pour" continues beyond the ending of the poem into the eschaton.

The temporal setting for the divine dialogue is the liminal darkness of midnight and interlune, an important time of cosmic praise according to *The Apostolic Tradition* as identified by Elizabeth Theokritoff, when Sul arises as "a filmy shape unsepulchred" by archaeological excavation (lines 1, 5-6). Within this liturgical moment and liturgical space, Sul, "the Goddess whose shrine was beneath the pile / Of the God with the baldachined altar," complains about the Christian church in architectural and liturgical detail. Though beset by a temporality of decline, Sul's shrine has a dignity through preexisting the abbey church and being "stately and shining once." Sul even raises herself over the Sarum and Anglican priests for "despising the joys of man" and linking herself to mankind through the bond of love. The decay of her priests to dust and her shrine to "earth-clogged wrecks," contrasts with the solidity of the abbey church. Despite Sul's decline and Christianity's rise, however, her springs are a temporal constant that still "boil on by" the "Gothic arcades" of the church. Even with Sul buried, the waters continue.

In the dialogue, Christ soon reveals that the apparent solidity of his liturgical space is tenuous. Creating a further bond of temporal decline between himself and Sul, Christ declares that both deities are subject to the ever-changing divine projections of the human imagination:

Repress, O lady proud, your traditional ires;

You know not by what a frail thread we equally hang;

It is said we are images both – twitched by people's desires;

And that I, as you, fail like a song men yesterday sang! (lines 21-24)

Christ presents himself as something that fails “like a song men yesterday sang” in the evolutionary temporality of human development. Christ and Sul are voiced by that imagined song, while the waters have a communal “boiling voice.” Time becomes an eternally returning carnival that reduces all sacred sites to dust and couples contraries like these two deities. The layers of sediment link past to present and Sul to Christ, but not the bubbling waters. Both Sul and Christ are beset by the natural world and humans; they are “worm-eaten, times ago twitched at Humanity’s bid” (line 26). The “frail thread” by which the gods “equally hang” suggests a carnivalistic *mésalliance* between the two, and Dennis Taylor even proposes that this moment amounts to an “interchangeability between Christian God and pagan goddess” (96). But Sul and her waters are no longer interchangeable.

If we interpret the ambiguous relationship between Sul and Christ in the end—does he accept her offer to be friends or not?—then there is a fascinating mixture of fragmentation and communion. Sul, Christ, and the bubbling water are all separate in the end. Though the water is associated with Sul by name, she seems to have as little temporal access to it in the end as it bubbles on, getting the last word, while Sul and Christ fall into silence. But Sul, Christ, and the water are all linked by the shared earth, whether interred in it or bubbling from it. And all three are associated with the neo-Gothic architecture of the abbey. Whether pagan past and Christian present are reconciled through their shared obsolescence or further estranged through Christ’s silence, each is firmly linked to the other through burial in the shared earth, which also links worms and humanity as agents of divine decay. Rather than following the power of ritual to bond disparate communities, time and its attendants, decay and burial, constitute the new bond. Hardy

uncovers time as that which has power over all other gods. Time inters everyone and everything like an ancient deity. Just as “Time / Devoured our prime” in “Quid Hic Agis,” it also devours the gods and their ritual spaces, whether pagan or Christian (lines 51-52).

The abbey church at Bath, with all its ritual instruments listed by Sul, will become “earth-clogged wrecks” like the shrine it usurped. The Anglican priests of the abbey church will become dust like the Benedictines before them and Sul’s priests before them. Sul’s liturgical space becomes the ritual sediment awaiting the burial of the Christian layer, with each religion fading against the recalcitrance of “the boiling voice of the waters’ medicinal pour,” which, as Laurence Estanove notes, exists “outside of any mythologization before and after all passing creeds” (Estanove 7; Hardy *Complete Poems* line 32). If time has power over the gods of the past and the present, the water of the bioregion continues alongside time as a coequal transcendental. Sul may be as powerless as Christ, but her “medicinal” water persists beyond even her own voice. Reminiscent of the medieval model of Christ as physician and medical metaphors for the sacraments, the natural world as earthly sacrament offers enduring healing into the future beyond the poem, untouched by the powers of Time.

But how can the waters be a sacrament when they don’t accomplish anything besides enduring? Sacraments are efficacious and accomplish what they signify. But the waters of Sul are as unable as the decaying liturgical space to preserve the two gods. What could a dying god need more than medicinal waters?

With the detailed emphasis on liturgical architecture and ornamentation of the setting, I want to take seriously the sacramental and liturgical potential of the water as it continues into the future. To do so, I will put the poem in dialogue with the theology of the cosmic liturgy. Coined by Hans Urs von Balthasar following the writings of Maximus the Confessor, the cosmic liturgy

is the unified song and dance of praise arising from all creation, with humans, problematically of course, operating as priests for the natural world as laity. If the Victorian era can be characterized as one where industrialization threatened to rupture the connection between humanity and the natural world—and even “incrementally separated past from present” as Deborah Collins notes—then the cosmic liturgy could potentially heal the rift between humans and nature, past and present, or be completely untenable because the rift is unbridgeable (Collins 7).

We discuss fragmentation and atomization often in the context of Victorian ecocriticism. Liturgical theology, in Alexander Schmemmann’s formulation and in David Fagerberg’s promotion of it, emphasizes the possibility of intellectual holism and interdisciplinary communion much as the cosmic liturgy does for the created universe. But what would that mean for Hardy’s death of God project that we find across multiple poems and novels?

“Aequae Sulis” contains many markers of the cosmic liturgy. The natural sanctity of the water coexists with the crafted sanctity of the church. The midnight hour, when “all was suspended and soundless,” resonates with the claim in *The Apostolic Tradition* [as Theokritoff notes] that nature, humans, and angels all stop to give a moment of unified praise (Dix and Chadwick). And, most tellingly, voiceless water having a “bubbling voice” resonates with the Hopkinsian exhortation for “dappled things” to “praise Him” (Hopkins “Pied Beauty” line 11). But the cosmic liturgy falls short of doxological unity and communion by the end of this poem. Perhaps this is a very pessimistic liturgical allusion where Hardy engages ritual to show how it necessarily falls short of its purpose. There’s even precedence for this within liturgical theology. If the cosmos is the site of a harmonious liturgy, the Fall is then recast as a rejection of that priestly vocation, changing the relationship between humans and nature from one of unified praise to one of consumption (Chryssavgis 316). As Schmemmann explains, after the Fall,

humanity “forgot the priesthood which was the purpose and meaning of his life. He came to see himself as a dying organism in a cold, alien universe” (223). “A cold, alien universe” sure sounds like what we’re left with at the end of a Hardy novel or poem.

But, as a reader, I feel joy that the “bubbling voice” continues, that in a more Hopkinsian vein, “nature is never spent” (“God’s Grandeur” line 9). That ending suggests another line of thought in cosmic liturgy. In liturgical theology, matter gains a metaphysical purpose beyond merely surviving or existing. As Daniel Munteanu proposes, a cosmic understanding of the natural world suggests that “the whole creation has an internal vocation to become an icon of divine beauty,” and “the main aim of matter is to become a vehicle of love” (Munteanu 333, 335).

By giving the waters the last word within the liturgical setting of the abbey church, Hardy works against the potential clericalism lurking behind a simple view of the cosmic liturgy. Rather than a one-sided relationship where matter and the natural world waits for humanity to graciously offer it a voice for praise, the waters continue to have a voice even after deities fade into silence. And the image of enduring water with the imagined sound gives meaning to the words of the human speaker of the poem. As Munteanu reminds us,

The world is not an object of possession for human beings but an invitation toward a dialogue . . . Matter is not looked upon as a barrier, but rather as a bridge to love and communication.

(Munteanu 343)

The two gods in the poem may fade to silence, but the reader experiences the “boiling voice of the waters’ medicinal pour”

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