

THOMAS HARDY, RELUCTANT AGNOSTIC: A STUDY  
OF THE RELIGIOUS MOTIF IN HIS WRITINGS

**CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES**

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A STUDY OF THE RELIGIOUS MOTIF  
IN HIS WRITINGS

by



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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Department of English Language and Literature

Memorial University of Newfoundland

March 1974

## ABSTRACT

This study purports to show that Thomas Hardy's use of the religious motif in all genres reflects his preoccupation with the problem of Christian belief versus doubt, and his resulting ambivalent attitude towards the Church, an institution close to him emotionally, yet often antithetic to his questioning mind, fed by nineteenth-century Rationalism, Darwinian science, and his own tragic view of life.

His early association with Stinsford Parish, his later experiences as a church architect and his familiarity with the language of the Bible and Prayer Book lent a distinct colouring to his fiction and a wealth of Biblical imagery and allusion to all his work. Earlier novels reflect the kindly nostalgia of a half-sceptical 'believer', but as his tragic view deepened there emerged a concern for the moral dilemmas of individuals and a fear that conventional religious teachings were inadequate to cope with them.

Later major novels show a growing bitterness as scepticism moved nearer agnosticism. The difficulty of reconciling tragic events with the Christian belief in an anthropomorphic, benevolent Deity underlies his emphasis on the 'Unfulfilled Intention' in The Woodlanders, on the

'Character-is-Fate' theory in The Mayor of Casterbridge, on man's futile 'outreach for joy' in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and on the hollow intellectualism of the Church depicted in Jude the Obscure.

Hardy's indefatigable search for meaning is the primary focus of his epic-drama, The Dynasts. War becomes the universal tragedy; mankind, the persona; and debating Intelligences, Hardy's divided feelings. The power of the drama resides in the pull of forces between the theory of the Immanent Will, and the Christian concept voiced by the Pities; its weakness in the inconclusiveness of its emergent 'meliorist' philosophy. Similar tensions pervade his poems, many of which, through 'God-Man' dialogues, reiterate the themes of The Dynasts.

In his contemplation of life's absurdity Hardy foreshadowed the modern existentialist. Finding a basis for artistic commitment in the chaos of his own ambivalence, he imposed upon it an order cathartic both for himself and for fellow-agnostics of all time.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Alison Feder for her guidance and encouragement as the supervisor of this study. Her criticisms combined kindness with firmness and a meticulous attention to detail with a challenging breadth of thought. To her go my grateful thanks for her unfailing patience and concern.

My attendance at the Thomas Hardy Summer School at Weymouth, England, was made possible through the cooperation of the Graduate Studies Department and Dr. D.G. Pitt, Head of the Department of English Language and Literature at Memorial University. Valuable insights were gained from the consultants and participants in this study session, and I am most appreciative of the opportunity to attend.

To Mrs. Margaret Rose who so capably translated my hieroglyphics into typescript, I express both admiration and sincere gratitude.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his comprehensive coverage of Thomas Hardy's life and works, Carl J. Weber makes the following comment:

As a young man Hardy had thought of entering the Church. This purpose had never been carried out, but the Church had entered him.<sup>1</sup>

That simple but telling statement aroused a particular interest which resulted in the present study, for, in addition to the obvious effects on style and expression growing out of Hardy's familiarity with Church liturgy, hymnody, and the Bible, there are deeper implications underlying his almost consistent use of religious reference and motif in setting, character, situation, and image throughout his writing.

A strange duality existed in the mind and heart of Thomas Hardy. On the one hand there were his love for and allegiance to the things of the past, reflected in his interest in his family lineage and background; his loyalty to rural customs and traditions; his desire to make his

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<sup>1</sup>Carl J. Weber, Hardy of Wessex: His Life and Literary Career, Revised Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 234. (Italics mine).



permanent home in the seclusion of the 'Wessex' countryside; and the attraction which drew him week after week to join in the familiar patterns of traditional Christian worship. On the other hand, Thomas Hardy represented as strongly as any of his contemporaries, and expressed more courageously than most, the scepticism of late Victorian thinkers. Just as Hardy, the unsophisticated rural countryman, found a kind of satisfaction from his acceptance into the social realm of London's fashionable, titled and literary coterie, so the man of sentiment whose emotions longed for some transcendental religious experience was compelled by his own intellectual honesty and rational mind to join forces with the Sceptics of his age. The resulting ambivalent attitude towards an institution which was so much a part of him traditionally and emotionally cannot, I think, be considered as hypocrisy, for to the end of his life he firmly believed that the Church had an important part to play in human society, and was disappointed that it had not fulfilled its role. Apropos of this, Edmund Blunden reports a conversation between Hardy and Brigadier-General J.H. Morgan as late as 1922:

The two men walked to Stinsford Churchyard, talking of many things -- the eternal riddles of human destiny, chance, free-will, immortality, -- and finally arrived at the subject of religion, whereupon Hardy said, "I believe in going to Church. It is a moral drill and people must have something. If there is no church in a country village there

is nothing. I believe in the reformation coming from within the Church. The clergymen are growing more rationalist and that is the best way of changing." He would not thereupon charge the Clergy with casuistry in subscribing to articles they did not believe, but looked upon it as a necessity in practical reform. "The liturgy of the Church," he said, "is a noble thing. So are Tate and Brady's Psalms. These are things that people need and should have."<sup>2</sup>

One rather regrets, with Edmund Blunden, that Hardy did not submit, along with his fiction, drama and poetry, "one other genre, a 'Religio' in ordered prose such as that of Sir Thomas Browne."<sup>3</sup> The present study will not attempt to re-create through a perusal of his writings such a definitive statement. Indeed, Hardy himself did not think that a writer's literary productions should be construed as primarily a statement of his philosophy; he insisted always that they should be viewed first and foremost as works of art, the writer's province being the 'application of ideas to life,'<sup>4</sup> rather than the formulation of a creed. The closest Hardy came to expressing his own 'Religio' was perhaps in his 'Apology,' prefacing Late Lyrics and Earlier, where he dreams rather forlornly of

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Blunden, Thomas Hardy (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1962), pp. 164-65,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Apology', Preface to Late Lyrics and Earlier, Collected Poems, 4th Edit. (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1930), p. 528.

"an alliance between religion which must be retained unless the world is to perish, and complete rationality, which must come, unless also the world is to perish, by means of the interfusing effect of poetry."<sup>5</sup>

The difficulty of effecting such a happy relationship between orthodox religion and rationality accounts for much of the conflict and tension characteristic of Thomas Hardy's work, giving it a depth and power which can still grip today's readers, emotionally and intellectually, as strongly as it did his own contemporaries. The late twentieth century is facing up to situations, including its difficulties of belief, which the Victorian public 'in their periodical fits of morality' (to quote Hardy) were willing to sweep under the carpet of respectability, and the relevance of his themes is attested to by the continued interest of students and critics in his work. It is to trace the pattern of his conflicts and to show the effect of his preoccupation with the problems of doubt and belief, faith and scepticism upon his poetry and fiction, that this study of a strong and sensitive literary figure has been undertaken. The kindly humanity of the man, as revealed in his writings and through his biography, would, I feel, have forgiven one's presumption in attempting to make some

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 531.



assessment of his ultimate position, and have responded sympathetically to an interest in both the questionings which he himself raised and the artistry with which he presented them.

It will be noted that in the following survey I have made no reference to Hardy's verse-play The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall (published in 1923), since I felt it had little relationship to the subject. I have also omitted one genre which nevertheless forms an important segment of Hardy's writings -- the many short stories which appeared from time to time in periodicals and were later published in several volumes. They deserve a far more individual treatment than could be given in this general study, and could themselves form the basis of a similar investigation. The same philosophical trends are revealed as in the novels; indeed, many contain what might be considered the embryos of the characters and plots in the more comprehensive works. However, I shall leave that interesting field of research to others, and concentrate on the novels, The Dynasts, and such poems as are relevant to this study.

## CHAPTER I

### RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES: EARLY AND LATER

Hardy was always most insistent in declaring that his fictional works were not to be considered autobiography, an idea that obsessed many of his readers, possibly as a consequence of the realism of his presentations. For example, to a question concerning Jude the Obscure he had Mrs. Hardy send the following reply:

To your inquiry if Jude the Obscure is autobiographical, I have to answer that there is not a scrap of personal detail in it, it having the least to do with his own life of all his books. The rumour, if it still persists, was started some years ago. Speaking generally, there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of Mr. Hardy's poetry than in all the novels.<sup>1</sup>

While respecting Hardy's statements regarding narrative content, one is nevertheless very much aware, as Hardy himself must have been, that the shaping influences of a particular environment and family background upon a sensitive mind and personality would inevitably be reflected in his imaginative creations. Hardy may not

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<sup>1</sup>Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1962). Combines The Early Life, published 1928, and The Later Years, published 1930. P. 392.

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have suffered the 'crass casualties' of a Jude Fawley, but the boy who carefully tiptoed his way along the footpath to avoid crushing the coupled earthworms was expressing the sensibilities of the country lad Hardy who in his childhood identified so closely with the lowliest creatures of Nature around him that they later became major symbols for the mature author's thoughts on life and human destiny.

In a similar way the frequent use of the religious motif had its beginning in the formative influences of a traditional life-style within a rural Church of England parish in the early nineteenth century. The little old Stinsford parish church, still standing near the graves of long-dead Hardys, was a focal point for the villagers nearly two miles away at Higher Bockhampton where Hardy was born in 1840. His parents, faithful, but not narrow, adherents to their traditional creed, saw to it that Thomas, his brother, and his two sisters attended the services every Sunday and, his biography reveals:

If wet weather prevented them from going, Tommy would wrap himself in a white tablecloth and read the Morning Service standing in a chair, his cousin playing the clerk with loud Amens and his grandmother representing the congregation.<sup>2</sup>

His fascination for the language of the Prayer Book and the Bible grew out of these childhood experiences and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

led to a familiarity which enabled him later to quote them instinctively and extensively in conversation, letters, poetry and prose. Good research has been done by Kenneth Phelps on the marginalia in Hardy's Bibles and Prayer Books,<sup>3</sup> where he frequently underlined passages which particularly impressed him, or were relevant to some happening or period in his life. Often he would mark the date and the name of the church where he had heard a certain Psalm or lesson read. Similarly, excerpts from his note books, such as: "At Salisbury Cathedral, Aug. 10, 1877. Jer. VI., a beautiful chapter, beautifully read by the old Canon"<sup>4</sup> bear testimony to his continuing love for the literature of the Bible.

Hardy was later to immortalize the strong personal link between his family and their Church life in the poem "A Church Romance. (Mellstock circa 1835)", relating the story of his parents' love affair which began with his mother's first sight of his father in the Stinsford Church Quire, Mellstock being the fictitious name given to the

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<sup>3</sup>Mr. Phelps' findings are recorded in No. 32 of the Toucan Press monographs on the Life, Times and Works of Thomas Hardy: Annotations by Thomas Hardy in His Bibles and Prayer Books. St. Peter Port, Guernsey, 1966.

<sup>4</sup>Florence Hardy, Life, p. 296.

parish in Under the Greenwood Tree. A love of music was traditional in the Hardy family and for forty years his grandfather, father and uncles were members of the Stinsford Church 'players', when the chanting of the services was accompanied by 'cellos, violins and bass fiddles rather than the organ. Hardy recaptures the atmosphere in his depiction of 'The Mellstock Quire' (the original title given to the novel); one of his rare humourous short stories, "Absent-Mindedness in a Church Choir," also deals with a parish furore accompanying the change from the old-fashioned 'bowing' to the modern organ playing.<sup>5</sup> He inherited the family love of music, particularly for the 'strings,' and the words and melodies of the familiar liturgy, Psalms and hymns created much of the aesthetic attraction which kept drawing him to the services throughout his life. In this connection, however, we later find his honest mental reservations coming through. In a letter to his understanding confidante, Mrs. Florence Henniker, he comments on a request from W.T. Stead for a list of his favourite hymns to be included in an article "Hymns that have Helped". Hardy sent along his list, but admitted to his friend that he had 'never found help from them in the

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<sup>5</sup>One of the Colloquial Sketches entitled "A Few Crusted Characters" in Life's Little Ironies (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952. First pub. 1894.)

sense intended.' His letter continued:

Stead should have drawn a distinction between people who liked particular hymns, and those who had really been assisted in life by them - if anybody ever was. I think the word 'soothed' should have been used instead of 'helped'.<sup>6</sup>

Such a reaction typifies the 'mind versus spirit' conflict which Hardy expressed in much of his writing.

The author's schooling began in his eighth year at a dame-school in the village, but it is indicative of the broad-mindedness of his parents and their interest in their son's educational welfare that when after a year he had outgrown its teaching, he was sent to a school in nearby Dorchester, run by Mr. Last, a Non-Conformist, in recognition of the latter's superiority as teacher over his counterpart in the parochial village school. The respect of the student for his master's ability resulted in his later enrolling in the "Academy for Young Gentlemen", a new grammar school opened by the same teacher, where Hardy finished his formal schooling, and excelled in Latin, his proficiency prize being a copy of the Latin Testament. Any Non-Conformist tendencies that might have been undermining his orthodoxy by the disappearance of the Church Catechism from his daily studies were counteracted by his continuing

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<sup>6</sup>Evelyn Hardy and F.B. Pinion, 'One Rare Fair Woman': Thomas Hardy's Letters to Florence Henniker (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1972), p. 57.



strict church attendance on Sundays. At fifteen he began to teach in the Stinsford Sunday School, and made a more intimate acquaintance with the vicar and his sons, the first of many ecclesiastical friends who were to touch his life, some of whom find their counterparts in the pages of his novels. Generally Hardy was to keep his 'respect for the cloth', shown for example in his obituary for the poet-clergyman, Rev. William Barnes,<sup>7</sup> even though in some cases he was to discover their 'feet of clay', morally and intellectually, and had later to suffer the indignity of having one of his finest novels burned and interdicted by a spiritual head, the Bishop of Wakefield.

It was probably a sentimental attachment to the Church and its association with scholarly pursuits, rather than religious fervour, that made the early Hardy incline towards the Church as a vocation. Practical considerations -- lack of available funds for university study, and the need to provide himself with some income -- overruled his inclinations, and he acquiesced in his father's plans to apprentice him to a local architect. Had he not, he might later have found himself in the position of his literary

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<sup>7</sup>See Thomas Hardy - Life and Art - A collection of Essays etc. Edited by Ernest Brennecke. (New York: Book for Libraries Press, 1925), p. 48. (First appeared as an Obituary notice in the Athenaeum, Oct. 1886.)

friend, Leslie Stephen, whose formal deed 'renunciatory of Holy Orders under the Act of 1870' Hardy was to be called upon to witness.<sup>8</sup> Hardy later acknowledged that when at the age of twenty-five he could have attended university and taken Orders, he had dropped the idea 'less because of its difficulty than from a conscientious feeling after some theological study that he could hardly take the step with honour while holding the views which on examination he found himself to hold.'<sup>9</sup> The inner tensions had thus begun long before they were reflected in his writings, and the closest Hardy came to holding ecclesiastical office was to be occasionally a lay-reader in his brother-in-law's parish church in Cornwall.

The hand of Chance, Fate or Providence, however, so ordained it that Hardy's architectural pursuits were to strengthen rather than weaken his religious associations. It so happened that Mr. Hicks of Dorchester, to whom he was apprenticed in his sixteenth year, was primarily engaged in Church restoration, and Hardy's training involved many visits to old Gothic churches, arousing a love for the old

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<sup>8</sup> Hardy's own account of this incident was printed in Maitland's Life of Leslie Stephen and reprinted in his own Life, ed. Florence Hardy, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> Florence Hardy, op. cit., p. 50.

buildings which never left him, and at the same time an aversion to the changes which the modernizing restoration process inevitably brought. A notebook entry records his feelings of horror on finding that on one occasion some of the discarded fittings of an old church had found their way to a local farmer's hen-house! Long after he had forsaken architecture for literature, Hardy spent many of his spare moments visiting cathedrals in England and on the Continent. Edmund Blunden has said of him:

Those who have entered a Church in Hardy's company may remember the immediate sense of his mastery of all its various material detail, as of its spiritual and emotional appeal which his look and manner and movement showed.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that a notebook entry on his eightieth birthday records his meditations on a recent visit to several cathedrals: "I could not help feeling that if we could get a little more of the reposefulness and peace of these buildings into our lives how much better it would be for them."<sup>11</sup>

Hardy's architectural career brought him eventually to London where he studied and worked as assistant-architect with the well-known Church-designer Sir Arthur Blomfield,

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<sup>10</sup>Blunden, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>11</sup>Florence Hardy, op. cit., p. 405.

son of a deceased Bishop of London. Here, as in Dorchester, he combined his professional studies with prolific reading in English literature, and the Latin and Greek classics, both Christian and pagan. He had earlier mastered the rudiments of Greek on his own, with some aid from his master, Mr. Hicks, his friend the Dorset poet, Rev. Barnes, and in company with other students at the office. One of the latter, a young adherent to the Baptist faith, involved Hardy in one of his earliest theological discussions. On hearing that his friend was about to undergo adult baptism, Hardy became very concerned over the validity of his own baptism as an infant, to the extent that he sought advice from his vicar, who appeared from his vague, unsatisfying statements to be a rather inadequate theological adviser for this young questioner. Subsequently Hardy read avidly all he could find on the subject, was finally unconvinced either way, and although he attended some Baptist meetings with his friend, decided to accept the practices of his own church, arguing that 'Christianity did not hang on temporary details that expediency could modify'<sup>12</sup> -- an early foreshadowing of his later views. The fruits of this experience and his readings on Paedo-Baptism are to be seen in his novel A Laodicean. This interest in theological and philosophical

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

argument remained with Hardy throughout his life. It has sometimes lent a rather ponderous and didactic tone to his fiction, for example, in parts of The Return of the Native. In his meditative poetry it has given rise to such stimulating and provocative themes as those in "A Plaint to Man" and "God's Funeral". As in his youthful debate, however, rarely does Hardy end with a definitive conclusion. He poses the question, suggests his own bewilderment and leaves us, intrigued and confused, to find our own answers. His own seeking led him into many paths of thought. In addition to the traditional sources, -- The Bible, Shakespeare, the English, Greek and Latin classics -- he read widely among his own contemporaries; admired Browning, for example, but could not share his optimism; sympathized strongly with Swinburne, whose works, like his own, were severely maligned; and found a very responsive chord in Fitzgerald's translation of The Rubaiyat, significant lines from which were to be the last in his consciousness.<sup>13</sup> He explored the varying philosophies of many minds, those of

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<sup>13</sup> Shortly before his death he requested Mrs. Hardy to read the stanza:

O Thou who Man of baser Earth didst make  
 And even in Paradise devised the snake!  
 For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man  
 Is blacken'd -- Man's forgiveness give -- and take!

Carlyle, Arnold, Spencer, Mill, Ruskin; Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, etc., sharing some of their ideas, rejecting others. In this regard the following comment is significant:

After reading various philosophical systems and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this: Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience. He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseologies from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories, if he values his own mental life. Let him remember the fate of Coleridge ...<sup>14</sup>

As a writer, he was averse to joining philosophical societies. On being invited by Leslie Stephen to become a member of the Rationalist Press Association he declined, replying:

By belonging to a philosophical association, imaginative writers place themselves in this difficulty -- that they are mis-read as propagandists when they mean to be simply artistic and delineative.<sup>15</sup>

It was thus most ironic that his 'philosophy' rather than his art should have been taken to task by the critics; his resulting and well-known sensitiveness to criticism lay primarily in the misinterpretation to which he felt he was being subjected.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 304.



It seemed fated that the major decisions of Hardy's life should all be linked in some way with things ecclesiastical. This was true also of his marriage to Emma Lavinia Gifford whom he met while supervising church restoration at St. Juliot's, Cornwall. She was the sister-in-law of the vicar, and organist of the church where Hardy worked. Their friendship ripened into love and marriage but the seemingly idyllic relationship did not survive the eventual incompatibility of two very different minds and outlooks. The contrast between Hardy's views and those of his wife is given mute testimony in her memoirs, found by Hardy after her death in 1911, and published as Some Recollections of Emma Hardy in 1961 by Evelyn Hardy and Robert Gittings. In the concluding paragraph she expounds her simple faith in a benevolent Deity, a belief so much at variance with Hardy's own troubled views:

I have had various experiences, interesting some, sad others, ... but all showing that an unseen Power of great benevolence directs my way; I have some philosophy and mysticism and an ardent belief in Christianity and the life beyond this present one, all which makes my existence curiously interesting. As one watches happenings (and even if should occur unhappy happenings) outward circumstances are of less importance if Christ is our highest ideal. A strange unearthly brilliance shines around our path, penetrating and dispersing difficulties with its warmth and glow.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Evelyn Hardy and Robert Gittings, Some Recollections by Emma Hardy (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 60-61.

Hardy's letters to his literary friend, Mrs. Henniker, show a much closer meeting of minds and a stronger desire to communicate ideas than do his matter-of-fact epistles to his "Dearest Emmie".<sup>17</sup> In one of the former he expresses feelings against Mrs. Henniker's apparent orthodoxy which might well be construed as a subconscious denunciation of himself for the same leanings. He regrets that

...one who is pre-eminently the child of the Shelleyan tradition should have allowed herself to be enfeebled by a belief in ritualistic ecclesiasticism. You feel the need of emotional expression of some sort, and being surrounded by the conventional society form of such expression you have mechanically adopted it. Depend upon it there are other valves for feeling than the ordinances of Mother Church -- my Mother Church no less than yours.<sup>18</sup>

Here speaks the defiant mind that was to produce Jude the Obscure, create a Sue Bridehead, and bring upon himself the opprobrium of critics and clerics.

A passage from a conversation as recorded by his second -- and more compatible -- wife, Florence Dugdale, is revealing, and close to the subject of this study:

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<sup>17</sup>Edited by Carl J. Weber, 'Dearest Emmie': Thomas Hardy's Letters to his First Wife (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1963).

<sup>18</sup>E. Hardy and F. Pinion, One Rare Fair Woman, p. 15.

... he said once -- perhaps oftener -- that although invidious critics had cast slurs upon him as Non-Conformist, Agnostic, Atheist, Infidel, Immoralist, Heretic, Pessimist, or something else equally opprobrious, in their eyes, they had never thought of calling him what they might have called him much more plausibly -- Churchy; not in an intellectual sense, but in so far as instincts and emotions ruled.<sup>19</sup>

In the writings to be discussed in following chapters -- the early and later novels, The Dynasts, and several representative poems -- there is ample proof of this aesthetic and emotional involvement of Hardy with the religious element in man's existence, and of his own spiritual loneliness in realizing that his unorthodox philosophical views kept him forever from being wholly a part of that 'bright, believing band',<sup>20</sup> with whom he nevertheless instinctively worshipped.

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<sup>19</sup>Florence Hardy, op. cit., p. 376.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Hardy, "The Imprecipient", Collected Poems (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1930), p. 59.

Native -- which are ranked with the productions of his great tragic period, 1886-1895, as noteworthy contributions to English literature. This early period produced also the delightful idyll, Under the Greenwood Tree, which, although too slight in its matter to be generally accepted as a major novel, gives such a kindly, humorous and nostalgic picture of English rustic life that it has gained a special place in the affection of readers.

A combination of this same nostalgia, and the awakening perceptions of his rational mind, fed by the scientific findings of Darwin and Huxley and the philosophic ideas of the more agnostic thinkers of his day, produced the pervading tone of these early novels. The religious influences which had 'entered' Hardy during his boyhood and youth in Dorset are an integral part of what he calls the 'Wessex' setting in these tales, as indigenous to the life as the rigid social structure against which the middle-class Hardy often directs his pen. Just as this class system is an accepted fact of life to the unsophisticated rustics, so the traditional church is there, its tenets seemingly unquestioned, its ritual and liturgy woven into their pattern of living, its feasts and fasts as basic to the passing year as the seasonal cycle upon which their livelihood depends. But behind the monolithic structures of church and class system are the individual human beings,

with their human passions and moral dilemmas, the forces of nature, time, chance and destiny pressing in upon them, and it is with these that Hardy is concerned. There is little that is outright denunciatory of the Church and Christian religion in these early novels, but a growing agnosticism is apparent. The occasional touches of scepticism -- often expressed in the casual, unreasoned utterances of some illiterate rustic -- and the dark patterns of his plots, seem to imply the unspoken questions: To what degree does the accepted teaching really affect the individual decisions of mankind in crises of passion and temptation, and what relation is there between the actual human condition and the Christian belief in a benevolent Providence that would make good eventually triumph over evil? Before the end of his prose period Hardy was to express these doubts openly in his own meditations as a narrator, and embody them in the tragic personae who were to be victims both of Fate and of their own characters. His scepticism is at first the normal scepticism of most thinking 'believers', and his attitude to his self-styled 'Mother Church' (to recall his letter to Mrs. Henniker) a mixture of allegiance and tolerance towards an institution which he may inwardly feel is obsolescent and out of touch with the times. At the same time its importance as a pivotal point and stable influence in the drama of village life is

recognized by the prominence given it in setting, character, dialogue and imagery throughout the novels. Church buildings and their environs are frequently the stage for important developments; vicars and curates almost inevitably appear in the casts of characters, the church services provide the occasions for local romances and news-sharing, and the language of the Bible and Prayer Book is reflected in both the erudite discussions of the intellectuals and the garbled quotations of the illiterates. Rarely, however, is the Church depicted as a real spiritual resource for the characters. Its presence is familiar, but at the same time remote, like the features of Egdon Heath, and the many macro-cosmic views of indifferent nature against which Hardy so often contrasts the littleness of man.

The first published novel, Desperate Remedies, with all its technical weaknesses -- sensational melodrama, over-use of coincidence, and lack of character development -- gave nevertheless some promise of his latent ability, and illustrated the interweaving of the religious motif with the secular which was to be characteristic of his works. The inciting action of the novel is an interesting example. The heroine, Cytherea Graye, notes through the window the curious and striking picture of a tall church spire upon which five human figures engaged in architectural restoration



seem to be "indifferent to -- even unconscious of -- the distracted world beneath them, and all that moved upon it."<sup>2</sup> As she watches, one of the figures -- her father, the supervising architect -- moves too carelessly and falls from the scaffold to his death. It is an early example of Hardy's frequent juxtaposition of the beautiful and the tragic, while the irony is symbolic of the visionary versus the realist view of life, so typical of Hardy's later tragedies.

Frequently throughout this early novel, Hardy uses the church as a setting for the action, sometimes with lightly ironic comment. The villain Manston, determined to enslave the heart of Cytherea, realizes that "coming and going from Church was his grand opportunity." Comments Hardy:

It is commonly said that no man was ever converted by argument, but there is a single one which will make any Laodicean in England, let him be once love-sick, wear prayer-books and become a zealous Episcopalian -- the argument that his sweetheart can be seen from his pew."<sup>3</sup>

The humorous little barb against hypocrisy and insincerity is unmistakable, and he puts a deeper touch into the mouth of the drunken postman whom Manston has

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Hardy, Desperate Remedies (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1951), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

suborned:

Believing in God is a mistake made by very few people after all... Not one Christian in our parish would walk half a mile in rain like this to know whether the Scripture had concluded him under sin or grace... You may depend upon it, they'll do away wi' Goda'Mighty altogether before long, although we've had him over us so many years.<sup>4</sup>

The embittered Miss Aldclyffe, mother of the illegitimate Manston, who had thought of such matters as prayers as 'humbug' for years, and yet "in the code of the polite world subscribes regularly to Missionary Societies", is set over against the innocent Cytherea who justifies saying her nightly prayers with the facile argument that she has "always done so, and it would seem strange not to."<sup>5</sup> The latter, however, feels more strongly the compunctions of her faith when, seeing her lover Springrove in church with a rival for his affection, she exercises "an illogical power... not only of kissing But of delighting to kiss the rod by a punctilious observance of the self-immolating doctrines in the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>6</sup> When her self-abnegation carries her to the point of accepting Manston's unwelcome marriage-proposal for her brother's sake, she

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 357-358.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

can persuade herself that "Christianity urges her to do it," but the engagement takes place symbolically in an old church building where "everything ... is the embodiment of decay ... the mildewed walls, the uneven paving-stones, the wormy pews, ... the dank air of death which had gathered in the evening."<sup>7</sup> It is Hardy's earliest suggestion of the obsolescence of an institution which was having to face the challenge of changing times.

In general, the nobler characters of the novel reflect a life in which the religious element has some meaning and imparts a sense of stability to human affairs. The Vicar, Mr. Raunbaum, is a respected, exemplary character who responds to the needs of his flock physically as well as spiritually, shows decisive leadership in village emergencies and is a confessor in whom the villagers, for example the conscience-stricken porter, feel impelled to confide. The admirable Farmer Springrove, using his own brand of existentialism, tries to justify the unexpected vagaries of destiny which occupy so much of Hardy's thoughts:

"... there's no difference in their nature between sudden death and death of any other sort. There's no such thing as a random snapping off of what was laid down to last longer ... unexpected is not as to the thing but as to our sight."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 430-431.

Farmer Baker suggests it might therefore be better to stand still, not push on with the threshing and winnowing, and "fling a quiet eye upon the Whys and Wherefores", but Springrove replies in a typically Hardyian comment: "... 'twon't bear looking into. There's a back'ard current in the world, and we must do our utmost to advance in order just to bide where we be."<sup>9</sup> His philosophy contrasts, however, with the nihilism of the desperate Manston, driven to suicide by the disclosure of his crimes so that he writes in his confession:

I am now about to enter on my normal condition. For people are almost always in their graves. When we survey the long race of men, it is strange... to find that they are mainly dead men, who have scarcely ever been otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

Undoubtedly Manston and Miss Aldclyffe are the two most interesting studies in the novel, but Hardy had yet to acquire the art of combining the sense of the tragic with sympathetic character portrayal. The romantically happy ending suggests either an acquiescence in the literary mode of the time on the part of an inexperienced writer, or a mind less conscious "at this stage of the tragic dimensions of existence. Thus the first novel is little more than a typically Victorian moral treatise on the 'good-conquering-evil' theme.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 438.

Hardy's next production, Under the Greenwood Tree, in the simplicity of its plot the very antithesis of Desperate Remedies, is a delightfully warm and tender story, more a descriptive prose lyric than a novel. It is written with sensitivity and sympathy, out of nostalgic memories, not only of his own boyhood, but of the reminiscences of his immediate ancestors, the prototypes of the Mellstock Quire members whose activities provide the backdrop for the story. Romantic interest is provided by having a young player in the quire, Dick Dewy, fall in love with Fancy Day, the school-mistress whose organ music is to supplant the old-fashioned strings in Mellstock church. The chagrin of the quire is unbounded, and concern is expressed for the spiritual welfare of the parish:

"If you'd thrive in musical religion, stick to strings," says I" ... "Strings be safe soul-lifters, as far as that do go" ... "Nothing will spak to your heart wi' the sweetness o' the man o' strings."<sup>11</sup>

In Hardy's words:

Whether from prejudice or unbiassed judgment, the venerable body of musicians could not help thinking that the simpler notes they had been wont to bring forth were more in keeping with the simplicity of their old church than the crowded chords and interludes it was [Miss Day's] pleasure to produce.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hardy, Under The Greenwood Tree (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1951), pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

Kindly, but cryptic, fun is continually being poked by Hardy at the actual underlying passivity of the church-centred village to things ecclesiastical. From the vantage point of the quire-gallery much can be seen during the services -- the clerk busily chewing tobacco between his Amens; young girls reading "nothing so mild as the marriage service but the one following it" -- the evocative 'Churching of Women after Childbirth'; lovers touching fingers through knot-holes in the pews; the farmer's wife counting her money and reckoning her market expenses during the lesson. Similarly, the conversation of the rustics regarding their new and energetic young vicar is revealing. They find his reforming ardour somewhat disturbing and compare him unfavourably with the old vicar who had left them comfortably alone:

"Ah, Mr. Grinham was the man!" said Bowman.  
 "Why, he never troubled us wi' a visit from  
 year's end to year's end. You might go anywhere,  
 do anything; you'd be sure never to see him."

.....  
 "And there's this here man never letting us  
 have a bit o' peace; but keeping on about being  
 good and upright till 'tis carried to such a  
 pitch as I never see the like afore nor since!"

But the thoughtful, respected Tranter Dewy has the final  
 authoritative word:



"Maybe's a hearty feller enough ... and will spak to you be you dirty or be you clane."<sup>13</sup>

(Certain elements of the Established Church of the time, faced with the threat of Non-Conformity, were endeavouring to reform the Church from within. Rev. Mr. Maybold is a representative of this reforming zeal.)

Hardy's picture of what he terms the rustics' 'quaint Christianity' is drawn with much more humour than bitterness, and with a degree of respect for their homely philosophy. He notes how they prepare themselves for services with 'Sunday particularity,' and have developed their own pattern of disciplines. Much as they love to dance, for example, there are times and seasons for it:

"If you do have a party on Christmas night, 'tis only fair and honourable to the sky-folk to have it a sit-still party. Jigging parties be all very well on the Devil's holidays, but a jigging party looks suspicious now. O yes, stop 'till the clock strikes, young folk - so say I."<sup>14</sup>

The words come from old William, the grandfather of the tranter's family, by whom "though Reuben and his wife ruled on social points, the religious questions were mostly disposed of". However, "when at length the clock had

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-73.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

whizzed forth the last stroke", the old man is the first to reach for his bass-viol, "touching the strings as irreligiously as could be desired" in the 'jigging' numbers that follow. Similarly ecclesiastical respect is combined with rustic independence when the delegation visit the vicarage to express their dissident views on the matter of church music. Kindly tolerance is also a part of their nature. Farmer Shiner, the church-warden, is forgiven for his invective when the choir disturb him with their caroling on Christmas Eve:

"Only a drap o'drink got into his head....  
Man's well enough when he's in his religious  
frame. He's in his worldly frame now... We bear  
no mortal man ill-will."<sup>15</sup>

Underneath the happy rusticity of the scene, however, one can perceive touches of pathos that make the idyll something of a farewell to a passing scene. The break-up of the choir suggests symbolically what Jean R. Brooks has called "the loss of communal involvement in religion that deepens in the later novels to a tragic alienation from the stabilities of a religious and natural harmony."<sup>16</sup>

The opening paragraph of the novel had created such an atmosphere of pathos, with Hardy's ear attuned to the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Jean R. Brooks, Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 156.

tragic under-tones of the sounds of nature:

At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees  
sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock;  
the holly whistles as it battles with itself;  
the ash hisses amid its quiverings...<sup>17</sup>

It seems fitting that the romantic ending should present, as well as the happy lovers, the lonely figure of Rev. Maybold, who, in the renunciation of his own happiness, not only foreshadows the tragic personae of later novels, but also symbolizes the growing remoteness of the institution which he represents.

In A Pair of Blue Eyes Hardy returns to the melodramatic, plot-oriented structure of Desperate Remedies, but the novel gains interest from its increasingly philosophical content, showing typical meditations on Fate, Chance and human Destiny. The setting is that of his own Cornish romance, and the hero's involvement in church restoration echoes Hardy's own experience. A comment in the Preface expresses Hardy's divided feelings on the business:

...the wild and tragic features of the coast had long combined in perfect harmony with the crude Gothic Art of the ecclesiastical buildings scattered along it, throwing into extraordinary discord, all architectural attempts at newness there.

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<sup>17</sup> Hardy, Greenwood Tree, p. 3.

Then his thoughts go deeper than the exterior and his statement recalls the elegiac tone of Under the Greenwood Tree:

To restore the grey carcasses of a medievalism whose spirit had fled, seemed a not less incongruous act than to set about renovating the adjoining crags themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Again the milieu is the local parish; the capricious heroine, Elfride, is the daughter of the widowed rector, and the visiting architect is a guest at the rectory -- until his lowly parentage and his love for Elfride are disclosed. For the first time Hardy presents an ecclesiastical figure who is less than admirable, obviously one who has little feeling for his vocation and admits to having "this bother of Church restoration" done more in self-defence "on account of those d. ——— Dissenters!"<sup>19</sup> As a half-comic character, he might be forgiven his worldliness, his rather sacrilegious sense of humour, his gouty short temper, but not his un-Christian snobbery! Interested more in people's genealogies than their worth as human beings, he denounces Stephen Smith as a peasant, yet adds unctuously, remembering that he is 'a Christian': "I would not, for the world, seem to turn him out of doors."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hardy, A Pair of Blue Eyes (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1952), Preface, p. v.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

Elfride's criticism of her father's hypocritical stance is biting. With reference to Stephen's employer who had entrusted him with important responsibilities she reminds her father: "He acts by faith, and not by sight, as those you claim succession from directed."<sup>21</sup>

There is an unaccustomed note of bitterness here as Hardy combines two themes -- the self-condemnatory class structure, and hypocrisy within the Church itself. The crumbling church tower is kept before us continually, as a symbol of decadence, not only of the Church as an institution but also of the instability of human relationships. Elfride's love for Stephen shifts during his absence to his intellectual friend, Henry Knight. He, in turn, a lesser prototype of a later character, Tess's Angel Clare, finds that his love cannot brook the thought of an earlier rival, and he cools towards her. Just at the moment when Elfride, who has become more and more mentally dependent on her lover's ideas, says to Henry: "Thou hast been my hope, and a strong tower for me against the enemy",<sup>22</sup> the church tower, at which they are gazing, sways, sinks and vanishes in a cloud of dust.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 356.

Some of the strongest passages of the novel are those which describe the rescue of Knight by Elfride after his perilous slip over the 'Cliff-Without-a-Name'. As the agonized Knight, clinging to the cliff-side, faces the thought of imminent death, the great cosmic voids of indifferent Time and Space, imaged in the trilobite embedded in the rock and the huge sweep of sea, sky and cliff, magnify his sense of human littleness. His thoughts begin to take the shape of Hardy's developing fatalistic philosophy -- of Man subjected to lawless caprice rather than governed by a thinking, feeling Power. Nevertheless, the novel fails to reach tragic proportions, for the concluding episodes in its sad, but logical ending -- both lovers return only to find Elfride dead from childbirth, having married the wealthy Lord Luxellian in the interim -- are tinged with the absurdity of melodrama, in sharp contrast to the novel's brief moments of sublimity.

Most critics agree that in his next novel, Far From the Madding Crowd, Hardy created his first real success, both as an expression of philosophy and as a work of art. With its setting in a rural parish under the kindly influence of Parson Thirdly, whose name -- probably a pun on sermon patterns -- is a familiar one in several of Hardy's later poems, it evokes much of the simple charm of Under the Greenwood Tree. Like generations before them,

Parson Thirdly's rustic flock time their seasonal occupations as much by the church calendar as by the secular: "We shan't have done [with lambing] by Lady Day... Last year 'tw'er all over by Sexajessamine Sunday."<sup>23</sup> A kind of theocentric awareness pervades their daily living, although over the years the ritual observances have taken on much of the aspect of superstition and folk-lore; and the colourful local conversations are liberally sprinkled with Biblical allusion. Joseph Poorgrass, in his cups at the inn, admits to seeing two of everything, "as if I were some holy man living in the times of King Noah and entering into the ark."<sup>24</sup> He relates how once he had trouble finding his way home, but

... said the Lord's Prayer and then the Belief right through, and then the Ten Commandments in earnest prayer... Then I went on with Dearly Beloved Brethren, ... and when I got to Saying After Me, ... found the gate would open.<sup>25</sup>

Young girls tell their marital fortunes using the key and the Bible; but rather than toss money on a Sunday -- that would be tempting the devil, indeed; -- toss the hymnbook instead, to see if it will fall open or shut! The

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hardy, Far From the Madding Crowd (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952), p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 66.



relative values of High Church and Chapel are seriously debated, but Parson Thirdly's benevolence tips the scales in favour of the former, although they admit that perhaps "Chapel folk be more hand-in-glove with them above than we."<sup>26</sup> Their quaint mixture of allegiance to, and criticism of, a weakening established order reflects Hardy's own, and adds more than local colour to the novel.

It is, however, in the portrayal of the major characters that Far From the Madding Crowd shows Hardy's increasing literary power. Although some of the plot developments recall the macabre elements of Desperate Remedies and A Pair of Blue Eyes, they have more credibility, and the effect is not one of crude melodrama but of an intelligent inquiry into the effects of Circumstance and Character in the working out of one's destiny. The strong characters of Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba Everdene dominate and eventually conquer circumstance in a drama whose development is affected by the quixotry of Sergeant Troy, the unrestrained passion of Farmer Boldwood, and the pathetic weakness of little Fanny Robin, a victim of chance and environment.

It is indicative of Hardy's interest in the moral and philosophic view of man that he introduces Gabriel Oak,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 328.

whose very name symbolizes decision and strength, in terms of his parochial image:

On working days he was a young man of sound judgment ... and general good character. On Sundays ... a man of misty views, ... who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean neutrality which lay between the Communion people of the parish, and the drunken section... he went to church, but yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene Creed, and thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon.<sup>27</sup>

To further intensify this neutral stance, Hardy uses a familiar Biblical analogy in his physical description of the shepherd:

Gabriel's features adhered ... exactly to the middle line between the beauty of St. John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot, as represented in a window of the church he attended.<sup>28</sup>

In short, the personal 'religion' of Gabriel Oak, reflecting the rational views of Hardy himself, suggests a moralistic compromise between the old ecclesiastical dogma, and modern enlightenment.

Certainly Christian humaneness is central to Gabriel's moral code, extending not only to his fellow man but to the animals under his care. "A shadow in his life had always been that his flock ended in mutton -- that a day

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

came and found every shepherd an arrant traitor to his defenceless sheep",<sup>29</sup> and his reactions as a successful sheep farmer to the tragic loss of his flock reveal his strength of mind and character. His first feeling was one of pity for the untimely fate of those gentle ewes and their unborn lambs; it was second to remember that his sheep were not insured, and his first thought after this latter awareness was to thank God that he was not married and that his beloved Bathsheba would not have to share his poverty. Hardy's glorification of this strong rational man facing adversity is expressed in passages that are almost Scriptural in tone, their undulating parallelisms and antitheses echoing his familiarity with the much-quoted Ecclesiastes:

He had sunk from his modest elevation as pastoral king into the very slime-pits of Siddim; but there was left to him a dignified calm he had never before known, and that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man, is the basis of his sublimity when it does not. And thus the abasement had been exaltation and the loss gain.<sup>30</sup>

The secret of Gabriel's inner strength is contrasted with the tragic flaw of Farmer Boldwood in terms of the primary

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-44.

Christian virtue -- "among the multitude of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes."<sup>31</sup> Yet the unselfishness of Gabriel Oak as shown in his faithful concern for Bathsheba's interests, is not the masochistic delight in self-immolation subtly ridiculed as illogical in Cytherea Graye of Desperate Remedies. Gabriel's own inner self-respect transcends the lowliness of his external state, and makes him master of Bathsheba even when he becomes her servant.

Bathsheba is a forerunner of the modern woman and is far from being the conventional parish type. She has the beauty and individuality of her Biblical counterpart, but her desire to control her destiny, like that of the later Eustacia Vye in The Return of the Native, is circumscribed by her feminine weaknesses. Envyng Gabriel's stability, she cries, "I shall never forgive God for making me a woman,"<sup>32</sup> but fortified and ennobled by his strength she, unlike Eustacia, reaches her greatest heights under the stress of personal tragedy. She is less moved by the priestly admonitions of Parson Thirdly that

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

Fanny Robin "though she may have erred, ... is still our sister ... and a member of the flock of Christ,"<sup>33</sup> than by her instinctive sympathy towards the woman whom Bathsheba's own husband, Sergeant Troy, has wronged. Finally her enlarging vision of the human dilemma brings also an understanding of her husband's moral predicament, so that when Troy returns and is murdered in a fit of jealous madness by Bathsheba's passionate admirer, Boldwood, she accepts her responsibilities as his widow with the courage and fortitude of a Greek stoic. Indeed her maidservant's description of her instinctive reaction recalls Antigone:

"It was hinted to her that she had better wait 'till the law was known. But she said law was nothing to her, and she wouldn't let her dear husband's corpse bide neglected for folks to stare at for all the crowners in England."<sup>34</sup>

This implied conflict between the natural, moral law and the imposed order of the establishment emerges also in the references to the complicated spiritual and legal aspects of marriage. When the distraught Troy, an often disarming character in spite of his sexual weaknesses, faces the consequences of his sin in the dead faces of Fanny and their child, Bathsheba has to listen to the truth:

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 438-9.

"This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be. If Satan had not tempted me with that face of yours, and those cursed coqueties, I should have married her... A ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage. I am not morally yours."<sup>35</sup>

Bathsheba's tacit acceptance of the innate truth of this statement is symbolized by her later interment of his body in Fanny's grave. This is Hardy's earliest treatment of a moral problem which he was to probe more and more deeply in his last great novels, and his views were to gain him the unsavoury reputation by some critics of instigating an 'anti-marriage League'.<sup>36</sup>

The eventual union of Gabriel and Bathsheba has little of the romantic quality of a Victorian happy ending, but is a logical conclusion to the character development of these two well-drawn protagonists. In terms of Hardy's own philosophy, the novel presents a rational compromise between the pessimistic view of man, the helpless victim, and his 'Character is Fate' theory, to be developed more fully in The Mayor of Casterbridge.

Possibly the tone of this most optimistic of Hardy's novels reflected his own personal content, for it was published in the year of his marriage to Emma Gifford,

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>36</sup>Weber, Hardy of Wessex, p. 211.

although this event was not without its problems, her father being strongly opposed to the match, on the usual social grounds.

Four years later, Hardy was to publish The Return of the Native, which though far more sombre, can be logically compared with Far From the Madding Crowd in character portrayal and philosophical intent. In the interim, however, he had written The Hand of Ethelberta: A Comedy in Chapters, which has so much of the nature of an unfortunate experiment -- dealing with an unfamiliar, sophisticated drawing-room milieu -- that it has little relevance to this study. As a rather unamusing satire on the class structure it contains much less of the religious motif than his other works, although Hardy's instinctive use of Biblical reference and image is often apparent; for example, the ambitious but lowly-born Ethelberta as the wife of the aging Lord Mountclere is aptly seen as "Abishag beside King David".<sup>37</sup>

It is also significant that any reference to the church or clergy suggests their declining power. Christopher, although the son of a bishop, and a church musician, is rather outside the pale of society because of his limited finances.<sup>8</sup> Hardy also makes a somewhat cryptic

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hardy, The Hand of Ethelberta (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1951), p. 419.



inference in his description of Melchester Cathedral, when he sees "the sunset shadow of the tall steeple, reaching further into the town than the good bishop's teaching."<sup>38</sup>

Ethelberta, portrayed as an independent thinker, seeking in various systems of thought -- Utilitarianism, Casuistry, Romanticism, distorted Benthamism<sup>39</sup> -- some guide to her decision-making, has some of the characteristics of Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye, or perhaps more so, of Paula Power in the later A Laodicean, but beside these realistic characters, she is a much more artificial creation. Obviously Hardy was much less at home in the medium of social criticism and satirical comedy than in the study of man's solitary soul in its conflicts with destiny. His own 'return' to the Wessex scene in his next novel marked also a return to his primary concern where we can again pick up the thread of his developing religious and philosophical thought.

The growing alienation of man from the more spiritual element of the Church, foreshadowed in Under the Greenwood Tree, is strikingly apparent in the world of Egdon Heath, the sublime, lonely setting of The Return of The Native. While the shepherds and farmers of Weatherbury

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 357.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 318-321.

still feel secure in their own little parochial world 'far from the madding crowd', the inhabitants of the Heath lack this communal tie. No benevolent Parson Thirdly appears, and in their scattered isolation there is little direct influence of the church upon their lives. It is simply there in the distance as a necessity for baptisms, banns and burials. Mrs. Yeobright, as a curate's daughter, is respected as somehow apart from her neighbours and is described as one who, like Moses, "seemed to be regarding issues from a Nebo denied to others around".<sup>40</sup> The parson is a similarly remote figure. One of the rustics is greatly surprised that, when Mrs. Yeobright forbids Thomasin's banns at a service, the priest has a normal reaction of shock, "turning all at once into a common man, no holier than you or I."<sup>41</sup> Another is horrified to find out that the parson wears a suit of clothes under his surplice! Humphrey, the furze-cutter, on the subject of church-going, admits:

"I ha'n't been these three years, ... for I'm so dead sleepy of a Sunday; and 'tis so terrible far to get there; and when you do ... 'tis such a mortal poor chance that you'll be chose for up above, when so many bain't, that I bide at home and don't go at all".<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

In the illiterate mind, as shown also in Far From the Madding Crowd, superstition seems to have supplanted religion.

Susan Nunsuch seizes the opportunity of catching Eustacia Vye in one of her rare appearances at church to prick her with a knitting needle, believing the strange Eustacia to be exerting a witch's influence on her child; later when Susan burns Eustacia's effigy in wax she makes a pagan incantation of the Lord's Prayer by saying it backwards. It is perhaps with sad and subtle irony that Hardy has given the name of 'Christian' to the most pathetic character in the novel -- the 'slack-twisted, slim-looking maphrotight fool' who moans that "I be only the rames of a man, and no good for my race at all."<sup>43</sup>

The picture of the enlightened Clym Yeobright returning with reforming zeal to revitalize and re-educate the decadent moral and cultural element in his native heath country is clearly symbolic of the needs of nineteenth century England as Hardy sees it, and suggests the moral rationalist approach as an alternative to out-moded ecclesiasticism. At the same time Hardy's pessimism as to the outcome even of this solution is reflected in Clym's failure, for, as he had said of Bathsheba Everdene, Hardy realizes "how entirely the soul is the slave of the body,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

the ethereal spirit dependent for its quality upon the tangible flesh and blood."<sup>44</sup>

The Promethean Clym, beguiled by the sexual attraction of the beautiful, love-starved Eustacia, saddled with an Oedipal dependence upon his strong-willed mother, and completely blind both to his own and Eustacia's nature, stumbles helplessly in his search for truth. The high aspirations of Clym who 'loves his kind', and wants to do 'some worthy thing' before his death are best portrayed in his early conversations with his mother, whose more practical though intelligent mind cannot comprehend his desire to give up the lucrative diamond business for more altruistic pursuits. She is not convinced even by his rhetoric:

"... can any man deserving the name waste his time in that effeminate way, when he sees half the world going to ruin for want of somebody to buckle to and teach them how to breast the misery they are born to? I get up every morning and see the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain, as St. Paul says, and yet there am I, ... pandering to the meanest vanities."<sup>45</sup>

Her use of the phrase 'doing well' in a materialistic sense sparks his philosophic, "What is doing well?" which Hardy categorizes with Socrates' "What is Wisdom?" and

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<sup>44</sup> Hardy, Far From the Madding Crowd, p. 407.

<sup>45</sup> Hardy, The Return of the Native, p. 207.

Pilate's "What is truth?" as the unanswerable questions of existence.

Christian Cantle's account of the needle-jabbing of Eustacia in church comes at the right psychological moment, but Clym's query "Do you think I have turned teacher too soon?"<sup>46</sup> fails to allay his mother's doubts. She knows Clym, and she knows the unreadiness of the rural mind for change, as revealed in the words of a rustic: "'Tis good-hearted of the young man, ... But, for my part, I think he had better mind his business."<sup>47</sup>

Both Clym and Eustacia are in their own ways rebels against the status quo, but her rebellion is expressed more in terms of self-assertion than in enlightened altruism. The novel has been termed the 'most pagan of Hardy's works, and the literary motif throughout is a mixture of the Hellenic and the Christian. Eustacia is described as 'the raw material of a divinity'; she is compared with Olympian goddesses, and seen as one who has a "true Tartarean dignity" on her brow, for "Egdon was her Hades".<sup>48</sup> A

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

Corfiote by birth, with her unconventional background, and proud independent spirit, she is inhibited and circumscribed by the rustic environment; thus she expresses her frustrations in deliberate social non-conformity. She hates Sundays, for example, when others are at rest, and relieves their tedium by doing unnecessary chores and humming ballads; "But on Saturday nights she would frequently sing a psalm, and it was always on a week-day that she read the Bible, that she might be unoppressed with a sense of doing her duty." She often prays, but 'like the unaffectedly devout', only when she desires to. Far from 'kissing the rod' like Cytherea Graye, she prays in complete self-centeredness "O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die."<sup>49</sup>

Eustacia has no capacity to understand the kind of love felt for Thomasin Yeobright by Diggory Venn, the strange 'Ishmaelitish' character who haunts the Heath like a ubiquitous Fate. "What a strange sort of love", she thinks, "to be entirely free from that quality of selfishness which is frequently the chief constituent of the passion, and sometimes its only one!"<sup>50</sup> Her feelings, both

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

for Clym who is to her merely the idealization of her romantic longings, and for Wildeve, whose passionate, self-centered nature is akin to her own, are the antithesis of such self-effacement, and in each case the object of her love is enhanced more by the possibility of her losing him to a rival than by joy in his nearness. Wildeve's desire for the gentle Thomasin is similar. Thus the two 'mismatings', so typical of Hardy's plots, come to pass -- of Eustacia and Clym, Thomasin and Wildeve.

Although much chance and coincidence play their part in the ensuing tragedy, Hardy makes it clear that the very natures of the victims are, in the last analysis, the inciting cause. For example, Hardy notes that "Even the receipt of Clym's letter would not have stopped her now", when Eustacia, driven to desperation, makes her decision to escape with Wildeve, only to stumble by accident or design into the foaming weir. Whether the actual drowning is meant to be suicide or not is really an irrelevant point, for Eustacia's driving force from the beginning has been a self-destroying one. Clym's final recognition of the truth about himself, his mother and Eustacia, and his resulting guilt, over their deaths, finds expression in what is closer to the self-expiatory acts of Christian practice, although he often indulges in self-pity for his own isolation.



Symbolically, Hardy makes of the broken failure at the end, a kind of Christ-figure "preaching Sermons on the Mount", his years "still numbering less than thirty-three", but the public response to his appeal is one more of pity than of understanding.

Although "beyond creeds and dogma", Clym, the patient moralist, is no more effective than the remote church in softening the stony ground of man's indifference, which, like Egdon Heath, resists cultivation. Obviously Hardy sees man as not yet ready for the modern 'enlightenment' that was to shake the Victorian Age out of its complacency.

One can perhaps see Hardy's own inner philosophical conflict reflected in the contrasting views and reactions of Eustacia and Clym. He has leanings towards the fatalistic belief of Eustacia -- that one's ills can be blamed on some "indistinct, colossal Prince of the World";<sup>51</sup> yet one finds a sympathy on his part for the more Christian-existential view of Clym, who in spite of tragedy, feels, like Gabriel Oak of the earlier novel, that one can rise above ills and effect some kind of remedy through works of amelioration. There is both doubt and hope in Hardy's statement:

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 353.

Human beings, in their generous endeavour to construct a hypothesis that shall not degrade a First Cause, have always hesitated to conceive a dominant power of lower moral quality than their own; and, even while they sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon, invent excuses for the oppression which prompts their tears.<sup>52</sup>

The hope exists mainly in man's potential moral quality, and ability to accept the inevitable, whatever its source; thus the novel, though sombre, is not completely pessimistic. Hardy had yet to experience his darkest night of the soul.

Only a brief reference need be made to Hardy's next production, The Trumpet Major, which, like The Hand of Ethelberta, marked a digression from his general philosophical pattern. The novel deals with a period that had always fired Hardy's interest, that of the Napoleonic Wars, particularly because of the association of his 'Wessex' scene with the possibilities of French invasion at that time. Later he was to use the same momentous period as the background for his verse-drama, The Dynasts -- the most extensive treatment of his philosophy -- at a time when the Boer War of 1899-1902 was bringing the reality of war to his social consciousness.

The Trumpet Major is more an illustration of Hardy's historical interest -- upon which a rather weak plot is

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 455.

superimposed. -- than a treatment of war as a serious theme. There are, however, some observations which are relevant to this study. Although the time setting is much earlier in the nineteenth century than that of his other novels, he portrays a society whose attitude toward religion already shows some of that superficiality which he always sees behind the conventional façade. Pointed satire emerges in the picture of the church building and grounds, dedicated to the love of God and humanity, being used as an arsenal and training ground for war. The unmilitary rustics are urged to become 'Associated Volunteers' in case of the threatened invasion, and "even the sacred edifice was affected by the agitation of the times."<sup>53</sup> Training pikes are kept in the church of each parish. Sunday is the only convenient time for assembling the farmers for drilling-practice, and between services the "tender chiming of the church-bell" contrasts grotesquely with the sharp voice of the sergeant giving commands. Hardy's comedy is both stringent and subtle, as he portrays the awkward farmers going through their paces. The master-player in the choir, anxious to get away in time for the service, receives a severe reprimand: "How can you think of such trifles as church-going at such a time as this...?"

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<sup>53</sup> Hardy, The Trumpet Major (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 203.

Now, at the word Prime shake the powder into the priming-pan ..."<sup>54</sup> (To those acquainted with the names of the ancient daily offices of the Liturgy, the word 'Prime' has more than military significance!) "In fact," Hardy observes, "the religion of the country had changed from love of God to hatred of Napoleon Bonaparte."<sup>55</sup>

A typical Hardyan note of pathos is reflected in the person of the trumpeter, John Loveday, who not only sacrifices his life to the national cause, but also relinquishes his chance of happiness with the vacillating heroine, Anne Garland, to his brother's interests. Although in the same tradition as Gabriel Oak and Rev. Mr. Maybold of earlier novels, he does not seem quite as credible, and the novel cannot be considered as of great importance in the Hardy canon.

Two other novels remain in this earlier period which, while not ranked artistically with his best works, have nevertheless some ideational importance. They are A Laodicean, published in 1881, and Two on a Tower, appearing the following year. The former is sub-titled A novel of Today and the contrasting titles suggest the ideological conflicts within the novel. The Biblical reference to the

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

Laodicean Church, which in St. John's vision (Rev. 3:14-16) was condemned as 'neither hot nor cold', implies a corresponding ambivalence in the religious and social attitudes of the two modern protagonists, Paula Power, and George Somerset. Although the setting is a Wessex neighbourhood, and minor rural characters appear occasionally, the tone of the novel is one of sophisticated modernity rather than rusticity. Trains and telegraph communications contrast with the medievalism of Castle de Stancy, whose occupation by Paula, the rich daughter of a railway magnate, while the titled descendants of the original owners live in a modest cottage, reflects a changing social scene. Somerset, the poet-philosopher-architect, who is engaged to oversee its reconstruction, sees Miss Power as one of the "incongruities that were daily shaping themselves in the world under the great modern fluctuations of classes and creeds."<sup>56</sup> She is a "modern flower in a medieval flower-pot" whose new aesthetic interest in medievalism and her own 'free-thinking' combine to weaken her allegiance to her deceased father's strong Non-Conformist faith. For the first time Hardy makes an exploration of the tenets of a dissenting sect. In the figure of the Baptist minister who condemns Paula as

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<sup>56</sup> Hardy, *A Laodicean* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1951), p. 41.

Laodicean because she refuses to undergo adult baptism, he recreates the Baptist acquaintances of his youth. Similarly, in Somerset's reasoned, intellectual defence of the Church's traditional infant rites there is a reflection of Hardy's own youthful debates with his colleague. Somerset, a thorough but kindly sceptic whose religious practices have become "irregular and uncongregational" and who has "travelled through a great many beliefs and doctrines without feeling himself much better than when he set out",<sup>57</sup> is actually uncommitted to the cause. He undertakes to challenge Mr. Woodwell's charge against the "trumpety ceremony of infant baptism" mainly through his interest in Paula and as an exercise of his wits. Although he impresses her with his scholarly approach, they both recognize that the faithful old minister's charge of insincerity is deserved. Paula and Somerset, in admitting they "would give a great deal to possess real logical dogmatism", echo Hardy's own desire to reconcile reason and faith. His portrayal of the iconoclastic Baptist minister is no less honest or kindly than that of Parson Thirdly, but it is obvious that he finds neither Puritanism nor High Church Ecclesiasticism the answer to his philosophical questioning.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

Cynical little touches appear occasionally, characteristically in cryptic comments showing general attitudes toward religion, per se. Somerset's landlord allows that Baptists are increasing in the neighbourhood because they save the expense of Christian burial for their children. The sexton can bury them at night for a shilling a head "in a little box any journeyman could nail together, whereas 'twould cost a couple of pounds each if they'd been christened."<sup>58</sup> The landlord admits he had joined the Methodists himself once when he lived close to a chapel, because "it saved umbrellas on wet Sundays", but when he found his business suffered, moved back to his old religion ! "Faith, I don't zee much difference -- be you one or be you 'tother."<sup>59</sup>

As the novel progresses the interesting issue of Paula's religious dilemma is pushed into the background, and her Laodicean tendencies express themselves more in her vacillations regarding marriage with the middle-class architect or with a scion of the titled de Stancys. A series of melodramatic coincidences finally resolves this issue in Somerset's favour and the symbolic burning of the castle by a fanatic illegitimate de Stancy cures her of her

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.



romantic medievalism.

There is a return to the original theme in a concluding conversation between Paula and her husband. "What do you call yourself, since you are not of your father's creed?" he asks. Her answer is that she is "one of that body to whom luke-warmth is not an accident but a provisional necessity, till they see a little more clearly."<sup>60</sup> She describes the 'modern spirit' which she accepts as "representing neither the senses and understanding, nor the heart and imagination; but what a finished writer [i.e. Matthew Arnold] calls the 'imaginative reason'."<sup>61</sup>

It is on this eclectic note that Hardy ends the novel, one which reflects an interesting stage in his thinking but fails to give that insight into the heart and soul of man which is characteristic of his best works.

Having explored this 'middle way' in The Laodicean, Hardy appears to stand aside and take a more telescopic view of the human situation in his next novel, Two on a Tower. Here he attempts to combine several themes -- the incisive moral dilemma of a passionate individual; the effects of a class structure which contributes to this dilemma; and the inefficacy of traditional religiosity to solve it -- all of which are shown against a scientifically-

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 478.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 481.

oriented background, thus inviting us to think of the nineteenth-century 'religion vs. science' problem. In spite of its ambitious schema, the novel has never been considered particularly successful, perhaps because it attempts too much. George Wing says of it: "It is about astronomy, but it fails in its astronomical purpose",<sup>62</sup> an apt assessment, for the melodramatic contrivances of the plot are without doubt unworthy of its magnificent backdrop, justifying Hardy's own admission that it was a 'slightly-built romance'.<sup>63</sup>

In many ways it is an exercise in comic incongruity, its plot moving between the sublimities of the heavens, and the earthiness of sexual reality; its protagonists a mature, titled beauty, frustrated by a lonely, loveless marriage to an absent, safari-loving husband; and a young, sexually-innocent Adonis who is alienated by circumstances from both levels of society, and who escapes into the isolation of astronomy. Its 'deus ex machina' in the resulting complications is a learned, elderly bishop, whose sudden marital ambitions make him the unsuspecting dupe in a marriage of convenience. Nevertheless, the novel does have

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<sup>62</sup>George Wing, Hardy (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 36.

<sup>63</sup>Hardy, Two on a Tower (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952), Preface, p. v.

some moments of sublimity, partly fulfilling Hardy's aim as expressed in a later explanatory preface:

to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe, and to impart to readers the sentiment that of those contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men.<sup>64</sup>

The tower setting, where the two ill-matched lovers find a temporary reprieve from the exigencies of conventional existence, is a well-sustained symbolic touch, while the descriptions of illimitable space as portrayed to Lady Viviette Constantine by her young astronomer, Swithin St. Cleeve, are typically Hardyan in their evocation of the sublimely tragic.

In the same preface, Hardy deplores that many readers saw the novel as 'improper' and as a satire on the Established Church. He hastens to remind them that "there is hardly a single caress in the book outside legal matrimony, or what was intended so to be", and on the second point, insists that "the Bishop is every inch a gentleman", and the priest an "estimable character."<sup>65</sup> Hardy is surely speaking here with tongue in cheek! The sexual undertones are obvious, although the question of their impropriety is no longer, to today's readers, a matter for critical concern.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Preface, p. v.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Preface, p. vi.

and the gentlemanly Bishop can hardly sustain his dignified character when he is made such a gull of circumstance.

Actually three ecclesiastical figures have importance in the novel, the first by implication only, since he is the deceased father of Swithin, St. Cleeve. As curate in a remote Wessex parish he had loved and married a farmer's daughter, who was promptly cut by the social class in which the clergy moved. St. Cleeve's reaction to this social injustice had been one of cynical disillusionment with his vocation. Amos Fry relates the story to Lady Constantine in typical rustic terms and with the usual touch of scepticism:

"He dropped a cuss or two, and said he'd no longer get his living by curing their twopenny souls o' such d——nonsense as that...and took to farming...Then 'a dropped down dead in a nor'west thunderstorm; it being said...that Master God was in tantrums wi' 'en for leaving his service...But be dazed if I believe in such trumpery about folks in the sky, nor anything else that's said on 'em, good or bad."<sup>66</sup>

The son Swithin was educated at a grammar school, where according to Amos,

"they hit so much learning into 'en, that 'a could talk like the Day of Pentecost ... but what with having two stations of life in his blood, he's good for nothing."

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

This young alienated orphan, living with his lowly grandmother on Lady Constantine's estate, arouses her interest, benevolence and finally passionate sexual love. He, in his inexperience, mistakes his feelings of gratitude and admiration for a corresponding passion. When news of her husband's supposed death is received, he is drawn into a secret marriage with her, not to be disclosed for social reasons until Swithin has gained prestige through his scientific studies.

The vicar, Rev. Torkingham, is indeed, to echo Hardy's preface, 'an estimable man'. He is first introduced in the humorous chapter depicting a village choir practice in Gammer Martin's kitchen where he exercises his talent, tact and good humour "in the strenuously sanguine tones of a man who got his living by discovering a bright side in things where it was not very perceptible to other people"<sup>67</sup>— a supremely Hardyian touch! There is here a note of sarcasm in Hardy's interpretation of the priestly vocation, but the vicar is seen in "the higher branch of his profession" when Lady Constantine confers with him on a matter of conscience, and his advice is firm, orthodox and kindly. Hardy dwells at some length on Lady Constantine's persistent, but fruitless, attempts to solve her problems by recourse to her

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

faith. She is a religious woman in a dogmatic sense, and when she first realizes the true nature of her feelings for Swithin, her pangs of conscience as a mature and religious married woman, are genuine. Her spiritual conflict is well-portrayed in her solitary visit to the church, an old building in a depopulated village, which is symbolically "standing alone, like a standard without an army." Her guilt feelings are enhanced by the illuminated tablet of the Ten Commandments on the wall -- "she" watched a certain one...till its thunder broke her spirit with blank contrition."<sup>68</sup> But her self-mortifying vow is forgotten when she thinks she is freed by the presumed death of her husband.

Her secret marriage to Swithin evokes another attack of guilt, partly over their age discrepancy, and also her feeling that they had treated the sacrament of marriage with too much levity by making it clandestine. Thus they must atone "by a due seriousness in other points of religious observance."<sup>69</sup> Hence her insistence that Swithin be confirmed on the occasion of the Bishop's visit. She is somewhat disturbed over a parson's son being so indifferent to religious concerns: "Without the Church to cling to,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

what have we?"<sup>70</sup> To please her, Swithin gives in to her coaxing "to be a good boy and observe the Church's ordinances". Hardy's comment here is revealing:

To be led into difficulties by those mastering emotions of hers, to aim at escape by turning round and seizing the apparatus of religion -- which could only rightly be worked by the very emotions already bestowed elsewhere -- was ... but Convention's palpitating attempt to preserve the comfort of her creature's conscience in the trying quandary to which the conditions of sex had given rise.<sup>71</sup>

This idea of religion used as a receptacle for emotional transference recalls the bitter passage quoted previously from Hardy's letter to Mrs. Henniker.

Hardy makes use of the Confirmation episode to insert some half-comic, half-serious comments by the rustics on the traditional rite, the burden of which seems to be the Church's attempt to revive its waning influence by a less impersonal treatment of its flock.

Nowadays, yer Bishop gives both hands to every Jack-Rag and Tom-Straw that drops the knee afore him; but 'twas six chaps to one blessing when we was boys.<sup>72</sup>

The same point was made with less levity at the vicarage

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-8.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 165.



dinner-table with the talk of new synod decisions -- lay elements in church councils, the reconstituting of, ecclesiastical courts, etc. -- showing Hardy's awareness of attempted Church reform.

Viviette's emotional reactions at Swithin's Confirmation are in strong contrast to his own 'utter lack of high enthusiasm', typical of the pragmatic scientist. Her prick of conscience at hearing the Bishop use the phrase "This Thy child", 'as the great episcopal ring glistened in the sun among Swithin's curls' foreshadows her conflict when the invalidity of her marriage to Swithin is realized -- the date of her husband's death having been incorrectly stated. When in a burst of renunciatory guilt, and as a test of his love, she sends him away on a scientific expedition without a forwarding address, she is unaware of the terrible truth -- that she, the widowed Lady Constantine, is carrying Swithin's, actually illegitimate, child.

In the moral dilemma that follows, all her carefully fostered religious compunctions are finally abandoned to the elemental need of self-protection, and the unsuspecting Bishop's proposal of marriage becomes the long arm of Circumstance which she grasps.

There may not have been any deliberate attempt on Hardy's part to satirize the Church in this final

melodramatic development, but certainly the irony of his choice of victim is superbly effective. After all, any other eligible male would have done! Hardy's characterization of the Bishop throughout has been something less than flattering. In the eyes of Swithin: "Tho' he may be as virtuous as his prototype Timothy, he is an opinionated old fogey!"<sup>73</sup> Even the discerning Mr. Torkingham, who has "nine thoughts to one word", recognizes his feet of clay, and after the Bishop's death makes a frank appraisal to the returned Swithin:

"He was not a Ken or a Heber. To speak candidly, he had his faults, of which arrogance was not the least."<sup>74</sup>

The whole portrayal adds to the growing satirical image of a weakening ecclesiasticism immanent throughout the novel.

The clergyman's final description of the erstwhile religiously orthodox Viviette, prior to her convulsive death in Swithin's arms in the tower, is one of 'troubled melancholy, which no man's ministry can reach... Neither religion nor philosophy avails with her now."<sup>75</sup>


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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

Although voiced in satiric-comic form under the trappings of pseudo-tragedy, disillusionment with an institution ineffective in terms of real moral crises is the stage Hardy seems to have reached in this the last of his early 'minor' novels. It has been given extensive treatment here, because although artistically a lesser novel than others preceding it, it has expressed more openly than elsewhere in its wide use of the Church motif juxtaposed against the scientific background, the essential conflict of the age. From the more kindly, tolerant view of the Church shown in the early novels, Hardy has moved to satiric disenchantment with an orthodoxy he is beginning to see as even a dangerous influence on the society it is designed to serve.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE LATE NOVELS, 1886-1896:

#### TOWARDS A BITTER SCEPTICISM

The last stage of Hardy's career as novelist produced the four acknowledged masterpieces, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders, Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, as well as the very different and seldom-read The Well-Beloved which has much less relevance to this study. Within the four 'greats' certain common elements emerge, reflecting Hardy's concerns: a preoccupation with the complicated moral questions of marriage and sexuality and their conflicting aspects; a deeper probing into the psychology of human nature as shown in the increasing complexity of his characters and their moral dilemmas; a more bitter indictment of established religion as no longer viable for amelioration of the human condition; and an endeavour to find some more rational philosophy than the Christian to give meaning to existence.

The first concern, regarding marriage, might have had some relationship to the widening rift between Hardy and his wife whose differing philosophies, social attitudes and general incompatibility had taken much of the bloom from

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their early romance. Poems written at the time and later published show the saddening effects of this situation on the sensitive writer. Although no open breach ever came, the cloud cast its shadow over his novels as well as his later poetry.

Hardy had also reached a stage in his literary career when he was acknowledged as a major writer, and felt secure enough to portray human nature frankly in all its reality as he himself saw it. His strong views on this frankness as a necessary prerogative of the novelist were expressed in an article "Candour in English Fiction" which appeared in The New Review in January, 1890, and might well be seen as his 'Apologia' for his last great controversial novels, although it did little to stem the tide of protest with which they were greeted in some quarters.

This desire for candour and freedom led him also to the exposure, at times subtly, at others very openly, of what he saw as the outmoded inadequacies and misguided direction of his Mother Church. His own need for a more satisfying philosophy led him to explore the German writers, particularly Schopenhauer and Von Hartmann and their theories of the Unconscious Will. Much of their influence can be seen in the novels, but it is expressed much more fully later in his epic-drama, The Dynasts.

It was his reading of the German poet-novelist, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg) that sparked his study of a human soul moving towards tragic self-awareness as found in The Mayor of Casterbridge. 'Character is Fate', says Novalis, and the novel is an exploration of that theory. It differs from the kind of fatalism usually attributed to Hardy, that of humanity caught helplessly in a trap of circumstance governed by 'Chance' -- a view predicated mainly on his well-known little poem "Hap". But just as in that poem Hardy himself reacts angrily to this possibility, so his characters make their own varying responses to chances and conditions, based on their own idiosyncrasies, strengths and weaknesses, and so determine their own good or ill. The Mayor of Casterbridge is not a completely new departure in this sense, for in the best of his earlier novels, particularly Far From the Madding Crowd and The Return of the Native this view emerges clearly despite the strong emphasis on chance. In the beautifully symmetrical pattern of Mayor Henchard's rise and fall, the ever-familiar pattern of coincidence would often strain our credibility and threaten our 'suspension of disbelief', were we not so much caught up in the over-riding emphasis on character that we can dismiss the 'machinery' of the plot as a necessary evil. The consciousness of impending tragedy comes not so much from the 'uplifted arm' of some conscious supernatural

agency, or indifferent dice-thrower, as from the elemental driving force within the man himself, and ironically, as in Shakesperian tragedy, the very traits that govern the rise of this 'self-made' man combine to bring about his self-destruction.

It is in the irony of its treatment that this novel can be seen in relation to the religious motif which is the concern of this survey. We have little here of the parochial flavour of the earlier novels. No ecclesiastical figures loom large as in Two on a Tower, and in the urban, industrial setting with the rural farmers on the periphery of the action we are less conscious of the rustic theocentric view of things. But the proud, energetic, passionate Henchard who drags himself up by his bootstraps to become the Town-Mayor, and most respectable citizen, and then falls from favour into a state of utter isolation, is also portrayed by Hardy as part of a system whose religious aspirations are more superstitious than spiritual. In exposing what he deems the fallacies of Henchard's beliefs he is negating the thought of an anthropomorphic, judgmental God who metes out mercy or punishment as He sees fit for erring man. For in Henchard's blindness to his own personal responsibility for his fate, that is what he basically believes, until in his final self-awareness he becomes his own judge, meting out his own punishment.



Four major episodes of the novel need to be examined in the working out of this theory: Henchard's vow following his drunken action at the Fair; his use of the old Testament Psalm to curse his enemy after his obligation has been fulfilled; the 'skimmityride' and Henchard's near-suicide; and finally his making of his last will and testament at his death.

In the introductory scene Hardy's unprepossessing picture of the marital state foreshadows the inciting event of wife-selling which will take place when accepted conventionality gives way to drunken logic.

That the man and woman were husband and wife, and the parents of the girl in arms, there could be little doubt. No other than such relationship would have accounted for the atmosphere of stale familiarity which the trio carried along with them like a nimbus as they moved down the road.<sup>1</sup>

The use of the word 'nimbus' has a subtle incongruity here, as it immediately conjures up an imaginary 'holy' family, contrasting harshly with the actuality -- a husband to whom his wife is merely his 'goods' to be sold to the highest bidder; a wife to whom marriage has been a trial from which, in her naïveté she thinks she can escape by a legal 'sale'; and a child begotten of an obvious mis-mating.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1964), pp. 2-3.

The immediate reaction of the sobered Henchard is to lay the blame for his rash deed, firstly on the 'idiotic simplicity' and meekness of his wife Susan, only secondly on his own drunkenness. But he is assaulted with a sense of guilt, and with it comes the instinctive need of ritual reparation -- of offering appeasement to some power beyond himself. Hardy's comment "... there was something fetichistic in this man's beliefs"<sup>2</sup> is the revealing key-sentence. Obviously not a conventionally religious man, Henchard nevertheless 'required a fit place and imagery' for the registering of his vow, and characteristically Hardy makes the church his vehicle. All the solemnity and dignity of the age-old institution become part of the scene as Hardy describes it:

The hay-trusser deposited his basket by the font, went up the nave till he reached the altar-rails, and opening the gate entered the sacrarium, where he seemed to feel a sense of the strangeness for a moment; then he knelt upon the foot-pace. Dropping his head upon the clamped book which lay on the Communion Table, he said aloud --

'I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived. And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be strook dumb, blind, and helpless, if I break this my oath'.

When he had said it and kissed the big book, the hay-trusser arose, and seemed relieved at having made a start in a new direction.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

The impulsive energy and purposefulness of this man who spends the five guineas 'wife-money' in a vain attempt to locate Susan, the child and the sailor Newson who had 'bought' them, are the qualities which awaken our sympathies, which bring him to the height of power and influence in Casterbridge, but which are as powerful in hastening his downfall as in effecting his rise.

The stern sense of justice which he associates with his ritual vow makes him as implacable with others as with himself. Solomon Longways says of him:

I know that 'a's a bonded teetotaller, and that if any of his men be ever so little overtaken by a drop he's down upon 'em as stern as the Lord upon the jovial Jews.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand it makes him accept kindly the Susan who returns eighteen years later with her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, and also feel a sense of responsibility for Lucetta, the woman who in the interim, through her kindness, has compromised herself for him. On the other hand, it causes the beginning of his deprivation, for his high-handed judgmental treatment of the unfortunate Abel Whittle's weakness sparks the division between himself and Donald Farfrae, his confidant and business associate, who is to rise correspondingly as Henchard falls. When the past, in

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

the form of the old 'furmity-woman' comes before him as he sits in the magistrate's seat, there is for Henchard no question of evasion. To her emphatic statement "... he's no better than I, and has no right to sit in judgment upon me,"<sup>5</sup> his answer can be no other than: "'Tis true. 'Tis as true as the light ... And to keep out of any temptation to treat her hard for her revenge, I'll leave her to you."<sup>6</sup>

The sequence of unfortunate events which is hounding Henchard -- Susan's death, the disclosure that Elizabeth-Jane is not his child but the sailor Newson's, business losses -- all confirm in him the kind of superstitious belief that had prompted his early vow. "... he could not help thinking that the concatenation of events ... was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him."<sup>7</sup> Like others, he also turns to the supernatural in the form of the local weather prophet when hesitating over an investment in the corn market. Hardy makes use of this instance to insert a bitter little comment on the state of religion: He notes that people consulted the weather man 'just for fancy', pretending not to take him seriously, but

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

he cryptically remarks:

He [the weather prophet] would have preferred more honesty in his clients, and less sham ridicule; but fundamental belief consoled him for superficial irony ... He was sometimes astonished that men could profess so little and believe so much at his house, when at church they professed so much and believed so little.<sup>8</sup>

The expiry of Henchard's twenty-one-year abstinence vow finds him battered and disillusioned, lashing out at the punitive force which has scorned his reparation. To him Farfrae now becomes the embodiment of this sinister power on whom he vents his rage, and Hardy portrays a terrifying travesty of Christian ritual in the episode at the Three Mariner's Inn. As the choir members gather with their instruments after Sunday service for their half-pint, Henchard, a lover of music, joins them, and begs the choir to sing from the church psalter to cheer his depression. They agree, but when Henchard, stung by the sight of Farfrae passing by with his wife Luccetta, once Henchard's own love, chooses the comminatory verses of the one hundred and ninth psalm, the choir-leader demurs:

"I know the Psalms ... but I would as lief not sing it. 'Twasn't made for singing. We chose it once when the gypsy stole the pa'son's mare, thinking to please him, but pa'son were quite upset. Whatever Servant David were thinking about when he made a Psalm that nobody can sing without disgracing himself, I can't fathom!"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

Henchard, threatening them in his rage, forces them to sing the terrible words with him. Then, pointing out Farfrae as he and Lucetta again pass by on their return walk, he horrifies the choir by saying: "There's the man we've been singing about!"<sup>10</sup> Thus the ritual curse has supplanted the ritual sacrifice of twenty-one years earlier, but now in a pseudo-religious rather than a religious milieu.

Earlier in the novel Hardy had found an apt analogy for Henchard's situation in the description given to Faust by Goethe, that of

a vehement, gloomy being who had quitted the ways of vulgar men without light to guide him on a better way.<sup>11</sup>

As ever, Hardy acknowledges the need of man for 'light', and when, as in his own case, the 'visionary help' of accepted religion dies, the 'light' of reason and of self-knowledge must fill the vacuum. In Henchard's case, the wrestling in the barn between himself and Farfrae is a highly symbolic and significant turning-point, marking the beginning of Henchard's self-awareness. In essence the real struggle is within, as his better instincts move him to spare rather than to destroy his antagonist, and yet ironically he creates out of Farfrae a distrustful enemy where there had

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

formerly been a friend. Again it is ironic that the change in Henchard, resulting also in his new love for and need of Elizabeth-Jane, leads him to what is the only really deceitful act of his career - the quick, desperate lie which he tells the returned Newson who comes to seek his daughter. Although Henchard quickly attempts to undo his action, it is too late, and the impulsive decision to lie, like others in his life, brings its own retribution in his eventual rejection by Elizabeth-Jane.

On every count Henchard's actions return to haunt him, for it is his past relationship with Lucetta, and his unintentional carelessness in entrusting her letters to Jopp, the only really malignant figure in the novel, that perpetrate the 'skimmity-ride'. Hardy uses this episode for his most bitter satire on conventional religion. Originating in the most unsavoury quarter of Casterbridge, the making of the effigies is an illustration of the kind of superstitious mores that Clym Yeobright sought to eradicate in The Return of the Native. Paradoxically it becomes an overt expression of the same narrow-minded morality that would unthinkingly condemn its victims behind the closed doors of the dignified Victorian drawing-room. It is significant that Hardy terms 'Peter's Finger', the inn where the horror is instigated, the 'church' of Mixen Lane, its name being another ironic touch, subtly suggesting the



judgmental attitude of a narrow ecclesiasticism towards erring man. The devotees of 'Peter's Finger' may be socially far removed from the practising religious who worship in a sacred edifice, but cruelty and inhumanity exist in both 'churches'. There must be more than coincidence in the fact that the main church of Dorchester, the prototype of Hardy's Casterbridge, is named St. Peter's!

Even more bitter is the implication regarding Henchard's 'salvation' from his near-suicide. Gazing into the weir, he is about to end it all when he sees the miraculous vision of his dead self, actually the floating effigy, and his superstitious faith is restored:

The sense of the supernatural was strong in this unhappy man, and he turned away as one might have done in the actual presence of an appalling miracle. He covered his eyes and bowed his head.<sup>12</sup>

Admitting the validity of this scene as an apt symbol of Henchard's developing self-awareness, we are also struck by its ironic incongruity. The same demonic, sinister rite that has brought about Lucetta's death -- a perverted form of Henchard's 'sacred' curse on Farfrae -- has provided the 'miracle' that moves Henchard to his confession of guilt, and profession of faith:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 342.



'Who is such a reprobate as I! And yet it seems that even I be in Somebody's hand!'<sup>13</sup>

The implied satire, together with the insistence that Character is Fate, suggests Hardy's doubts regarding an anthropomorphic God. In Henchard's case "the emotional conviction that he was in Somebody's hand began to die ... as time slowly removed into distance the event which had given that Feeling birth."<sup>14</sup> He still finds himself subject to 'visitations of the devil', however, as he fights the temptation to destroy Farfrae's chance of a new happiness with Elizabeth-Jane by disclosing to him the bastardry of her birth. But again, he wrestles inwardly and triumphs, shuddering at his own self-image. In his renunciatory gesture of leaving Casterbridge he recognizes both his own strength and weakness. Seeing himself as Cain, alienated through his own errors, he can still cry: "My punishment is not greater than I can bear!"<sup>15</sup> But in his love for Elizabeth-Jane he leaves himself open for that final quintessence of self-inflicted pain, when he returns on the day of her marriage to Farfrae. The withdrawal of her love

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

in that last painful interview could have been softened by an explanation of his earlier lie to Newson, but 'waiving his privilege of self-defence', as he had on the day of the furmity-woman's disclosure, he accepts the ultimate rejection, and the little dead bird in the cage -- all that is left of his lowly wedding gift -- becomes the symbol of both his love and his self-imposed penance.

The words of his Will bespeak his utter alienation from God and Man as he rejects all meaningless ritual -- no consecrated burial, no tolling bell, no flowers -- though his very cry for forgetfulness echoes his despairing need for what he has renounced, and is, in the words of Elizabeth-Jane "a piece of the same stuff his whole life was made of."<sup>16</sup>

There is more than a touch of the old morality play in the final story of Henchard's end, as told by Abel Whittle, Henchard's last link with humanity, who, like Good Deeds, follows this Everyman to the brink of Death:

"...Because, sir, I see things be bad with'ee, and ye were kind-like to mother if ye were rough to me, and I would fain be kind-like to you."<sup>17</sup>

Hardy, while questioning the supernatural aspect of Christianity and disillusioned with its superficial expression in the society of his time, is far from denying the 'agape'

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 384-85.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

which claims to be the fundamental tenet of Christian teaching. As he was to express in his later poems, he felt that, in human relationships, one could but rely

On the human heart's resource alone,  
In brotherhood bonded close and graced

With loving-kindness fully blown,  
And visioned help unsought, unknown.<sup>18</sup>

The quiet tone of the ending with Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae settling into a subdued tranquility serves only to enhance Hardy's final view as seen through Elizabeth-Jane's eyes, that in this "brief transit through a sorry world" happiness is but "the occasional episode in a general drama of pain."<sup>19</sup>

In Hardy's next novel The Woodlanders, the religious motif is less evident, although the theme with which he is concerned -- 'given the man and woman, how to find a basis for their sexual relation',<sup>20</sup> to quote from his preface of 1895 -- raises interesting social, moral and theological problems, which were to be explored in greater depths in Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hardy, "A Plaint to Man", Collected Poems (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1930), p. 306.

<sup>19</sup> Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge, pp. 385-86.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hardy, The Woodlanders (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1967), Preface, p. v.

The inter-relationships of the five important characters, Giles Winterborne, Marty South, Grace Melbury, Dr. Fitzpiers, and Felice Charmond are worked out in the confining rustic setting of isolated Little Hintock which Hardy sees as a microcosmic setting for universal tragedy. Further confusing these relationships are the futile, ironic attempts of Mr. Melbury, Grace's father, to impose his will upon both the social and natural laws operating in this little universe. Hardy describes the village as

... one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where ... dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein.<sup>21</sup>

Of Marty and Giles, the two characters closest to their natural environment he says:

... Hardly anything could be more isolated or more self-contained than the lives of these two ... And yet their lonely courses formed no detached design at all, but were part of the pattern in the great web of human doings then weaving in both hemispheres from the White Sea to Cape Horn.<sup>22</sup>

By all the rules of logic it would appear intended that these two, so at one in their responses to, and understanding of, nature's processes as shown in the cyclic pattern of life in the woodland, should mutually attract each other, yet Marty's love for Giles is unreciprocated,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

and Giles finds only suffering in his devotion to Grace. For the world of nature, Hardy shows, does not operate on a pattern of peaceful co-existence, but rather, it is through a process of struggle, violence and individual pain that species survive. The apparent quiet placidity of the woodland is belied by what Hardy terms "the vocalized sorrows of the trees", with "overcrowded branches ... rubbing each other into wounds".<sup>23</sup> Everywhere he sees examples of the "Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is",<sup>24</sup> -- in the deformed leaf, the crippled curve of a tree-trunk, the lichen eating the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangling to death the promising sapling.

Similarly in the involved relationships of human beings the attempts of individuals to find fulfilment twist the lives of others into grotesque and tragic patterns, aided by chance, natural law and social institutions. In this novel 'the immortal puzzle' of which Hardy speaks in his Preface is further compounded by clashes between rustic and urban culture, between simple practical-mindedness and ideological philosophy, between self-sacrificing devotion and self-interest.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

Representing the simple practical rustic culture with its long-suffering acceptance of natural law, its vicissitudes and lack of fulfilment, are Marty South and Giles Winterborne. Marty, realizing the hopelessness of her devotion to Giles, makes her symbolic renunciation in the selling to Felice Charmond of her lovely hair, her one pretension to beauty. Giles is close to the character of Gabriel Oak of Far From the Madding Crowd, in his humanitarian ethics, but unlike Gabriel, lacks the incentive to impose his will on situations and dominate them. His deliberate denial of himself when Grace comes to him at the end is, like Marty's sacrificial rãpe of her locks, a denial of the attribute of sex for "the loftier quality of abstract humanism."<sup>25</sup>

Contrasting with these two and representing an alien culture are Dr. Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond. The doctor is a mixture of libidinous desires running the gamut from coarse sexuality to a longing for the ideal, with metaphysical yearnings for insight into the meaning of existence. At one point he tries to assimilate the passive philosophy of the woodlanders, that "The secret of happiness lay in limiting the aspirations",<sup>26</sup> and thinks he can find this happiness in

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

marriage to the lowly-born but educated Grace Melbury. But such acceptance is foreign to the volatile nature of one who thinks: "There's only Me and Not Me in the whole world."<sup>27</sup> Thus he is drawn from Grace both by the coarse charm of Suke Damson, and by the near-hedonistic lady of the manor Felice Charmond, morbid and erratic, who wonders, "... O! why were we given hungry hearts and wild desires if we have to live in a world like this? ...."<sup>28</sup>

Caught between the two worlds, and a product of both, is Grace Melbury. Her conflicting desires and a natural vanity fed by her father's ambition to lift her above her station make her unable either to accept or completely reject the love of Giles and the culture of her birth. Her ambivalent position is shown most clearly in the discussion with Fitzpiers over their wedding plans. He has no desire to be married "at the horrid little church here, with all the yokels staring round at us, and a droning parson reading."<sup>29</sup> He counters her real distress with the view that "Marriage is a civil contract, and the shorter and simpler it is made the better."<sup>30</sup> He eventually capitulates when it is to his

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.



advantage: "To holy church we'll go -- and much good may it do us."<sup>31</sup>

Grace has reason later to doubt the sacramental nature of the union. When she leaves him to go to Giles she feels she is not bound by any 'Divine law' after Fitzpiers's unfaithfulness, but still feels she must honour her pledged word. Re-reading the marriage service, she finds the words "whom God hath joined together", a staggering thought for a woman of "strong devotional sentiment", but paradoxically would gladly accept her release if the divorce laws were more lenient. When her husband's behaviour makes her momentarily abandon her acquired values, she can accept the self-sacrificing love of Giles, who would die rather than compromise her; yet she can return to Fitzpiers, using her innocent relationship with Giles as a subtle weapon with which to meet him on his own grounds. In the end both she and Fitzpiers learn to "limit their aspirations", and neither in all probability expects real happiness.

Of them all Marty South probably finds the greatest fulfilment. In her final moving eulogy to the dead Giles her single-minded devotion and loyalty find a kind of sublime realization that Grace and Fitzpiers can never experience.

Hardy's philosophy in this novel is an exploration of both Darwinian natural law, and the Schopenhauerian idea of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 204.



the 'Unfulfilled Intention', with overtones also of the 'Character-is-Fate' theory as expressed in The Mayor of Casterbridge. At the same time he makes the novel a commentary on human institutions, for example, the class system and marital traditions, which he sees as being as much in opposition to man's chances of fulfilment as the natural laws inherent in the universe.

As he contemplates the intricacies of man's relationships in the interweaving pattern of existence, Hardy uses a relatively minor, yet significant, character to underscore the ironic twisting of individual lives by those whose intentions are fated to be unfulfilled under existing conditions. George Melbury, Grace's father, is a prosperous rustic business man, but socially as much a part of his habitat as Marty and Giles. Conscious of his own inferior status in society and of his lack of education, he sends his beloved daughter to a finishing school which inevitably instils new values and outlooks, alienating her to a degree from the little world to which she returns. Melbury in the past had ruined the happiness of Giles Winterborne's father, and from a sense of guilt has promised to make amends by uniting Grace to Giles, who loves her so much. Now he feels that to marry her to a lowly woodlander would be to sacrifice her on the altar of his own guilt feelings, and he deliberately encourages her affair with the more socially

acceptable Dr. Fitzpiers. Disillusioned by the disastrous results of their marriage, he again tries to mend matters by fostering her re-awakening love for Giles, in the naive belief that the new divorce laws will set her free. Thus he helps to precipitate the train of events which will end in the tragedy of Giles's death. Melbury's aspirations and endeavours for Grace's happiness and his own peace of mind provide a typical example of the 'Unfulfilled Intention' in human affairs and make of him a somewhat tragic figure, albeit a prosaic one. His acceptance of her reunion with Fitzpiers at the end expresses the fatalistic philosophy of one who has learned through experience the futility of human planning:

"Well - he's her husband, and let her take him back to her bed if she will! ... But ... it's a forlorn hope for her; and God knows how it will end!"<sup>32</sup>

Although there are few direct references, the life portrayed in the novel puts little emphasis on traditional Christianity as an effective force for human happiness, or antidote for human pain. When Grace and Marty find a psalter in Giles's cottage after his death, they read a psalm over him, and in their need to express their own sentimental feelings, pray for his soul "with supplicatory murmurs that

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<sup>32</sup> ibid., pp. 439-40.

a Calvinist might have countenanced."<sup>33</sup> Grace says of Giles: "He was not an outwardly religious man; but he was pure and perfect in his heart."<sup>34</sup> Then, with typical irony, Hardy dissipates the religious aura of the episode by revealing that Giles had kept the psalter in his cottage, not for any real devotional purpose, but "mainly for the convenience of whetting his pen-knife upon its leather covers".<sup>35</sup>

Felice Charmond, as the lady of the manor, attends service perfunctorily at times, and the rustics measure her morality in terms of their own narrow codes. In the words of Robert Creedle:

"... she'll sit down to her dinner with a gown hardly higher than her elbows.... go to the Table o' Sundays, and kneel, as if [her] knee-joints were greased with very saint's anointment, and tell off [her] hear-us-good-Lords as pat as a business-man counting money; and yet ... eat [her] victuals a-stript to such a wanton figure as that."<sup>36</sup>

Fitzpiers is thought to be atheistic by conventional standards, less by dint of his amoral behaviour than by his advanced scientific and philosophical views. In the eyes of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 391.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 390-1.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

the rustics he is a "strange, deep, perusing gentleman; and there's good reason for supposing he has sold his soul to the wicked one."<sup>37</sup> Even the parson, receiving the doctor's books by mistake, writes "Beware" on the package when he sends them on, while the parson's good wife "went into hysterics when she read 'em, thinking her husband had turned heathen, and 'twould be the ruin of the children!"<sup>38</sup>

The shock registered in the local minds by such alien characters in their little world is tantamount to the outcry in Victorian society denouncing those who dealt in the new science and Higher Criticism, for example, the so-called 'Seven Against Christ'.

Hardy does not make Fitzpiers a particularly engaging figure in the novel, but he does make him a human one, and the 'man-trap' set for him by another jealous husband whose wife's heart he had entangled, is symbolic of the complex problem -- the difficulty of reconciling natural instincts with the traditional Christian view of marriage. Hardy implies that the question needs a more understanding approach. Thus in his public statement in The New Review he pleads for more candour in its treatment:

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

Nothing in such literature should for a moment exhibit lax views of that purity of life upon which the well-being of society depends; but the position of man and woman in nature, and the position of belief in the minds of man and woman - things which everybody is thinking but nobody is saying - might be taken up and treated frankly.<sup>39</sup>

These are the two questions which Hardy deals with in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and later in Jude the Obscure, with significant results. Waves of criticism followed their publication. The sensitive author, feeling that he had been vastly misinterpreted, and also, perhaps, that he had fulfilled his mission in this genre, forsook novel-writing for poetry. The two works, however, made a deep impression on the more thoughtful reading public and established him for all time as a major English novelist.

The magazine version of Tess's story, somewhat mangled by the publishers to pass the censorious eye of Mrs. Grundy, was followed in 1891 by an unexpurgated edition of the novel. Hardy's explanatory note to the first edition reveals his "sincerity of purpose" in his attempt "to give artistic form to a true sequence of things":

I would ask any too genteel reader, who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Hardy, Life and Art, ed. Ernest Brennecke, Jr. (New York: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1925), p. 84. From "Candour in English Fiction", published in The New Review, Jan. 1890.

St. Jerome's: If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless he maintains in the later preface that it was not intended to be "didactic or aggressive", but "oftener charged with impressions than with convictions". His aim is to present a new view, "holding that there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe."<sup>41</sup>

The two aspects of the novel which upset the Victorian public are those closest to this study: firstly, the 'immoral' assumption by Hardy that Tess, after her experiences, could be deserving of the epithet in the subtitle, 'a pure woman', and secondly, the frank and generally unflattering picture given of contemporary religion as shown at all levels, from the iconoclastic evangelical sign-painter and the 'reformed' Alex D'Urberville, to the stuffy, scholarly representation of High Church Anglicanism depicted in the brothers Clare. The pernicious effects of a tradition which had forgotten the basic element of its Christianity -- forgiving love -- are shown much more subtly in Angel Clare, the enlightened thinker, who, mentally freed from the

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1967), p. v.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Preface to Fifth Edition, p. vii.

orthodox theology of the 'establishment', is nevertheless subconsciously governed by the basically un-Christian strictures of its morality in his reactions to Tess's past.

Rev. Tringham, the parish priest, with more ardour for his antiquarian research than for his parochial duties, instigates the unhappy train of events by relating to Tess's father his discovery regarding the latter's aristocratic lineage. Admitting his doubts about the wisdom of what he has done, the priest makes a significant statement which has far-reaching application to later events: "... our impulses are too strong for our judgment sometimes",<sup>42</sup> and compensates by giving priestly advice to 'Sir John' about chastening himself with the thought of "how are the mighty fallen". But the wheel has begun to turn, and Tess's involvement with the D'Urbervilles, both real and spurious, must work out to its tragic end.

The introduction of Tess in the May-Day 'club-walking' has an interesting symbolic touch, as Hardy describes the varying 'whiteness' of their processional frocks:

... though the whole troop wore white garments, no two whites were alike among them. Some approached pure blanching; some had a bluish pallor; some ... inclined to a cadaverous tint ...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 11.



So the assessment of Tess's 'purity' leaves itself open to various interpretations, but Hardy leaves no doubt as to where he stands. As he traces the whole sad story of Tess's fall from innocence through Alex D'Urberville's exploitation of her helplessness; of her motherhood and bereavement; of her idyllic interlude in the second Eden of the Great Valley of the Dairies under the influence of Angel Clare's love and philosophy; of her rejection by Angel; of her suffering in the 'wasteland' of Flintcomb-Ash; until the final mixture of tragedy and ecstasy that completes the archetypal pattern, it is done with a tenderness and sympathy which shows how very real this character has become to her creator.

The fatalistic tone of the novel is set in the conversation between Tess and her little brother Abraham as they drive in the early dawn to the Casterbridge market:

'Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?'

'Yes.'

'All like ours?'

'I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubbard-tree. Most of them splendid and sound - a few blighted.'

'Which do we live on - a splendid one or a blighted one?'

'A blighted one.'<sup>44</sup>

Tess's experience of the 'blighted' world has been narrow up to this point, based on the poverty and shiftlessness of her parents, and the difficulty of maintaining the family -- in Hardy's words "six helpless creatures, who had never been

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 33-34.



asked if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield."<sup>45</sup> Tess's sense of responsibility to the family is the element that drives her unwillingly to the ill-fated encounter with the D'Urbervilles, just as it is later to make her in desperation become Alex D'Urberville's mistress. Her innocent struggle for existence with her tipsy father and amoral mother has ill-prepared her for the moral predicament with which she must cope, as leaving behind her the "green valley of her birth", she enters the "gray country of which she knew nothing."<sup>46</sup>

The subsequent 'raping' of Tess takes place, ironically, when she is desperately seeking to escape from the decadence of the Trantridge Saturday-night drunken orgy. Her unfortunate reference to the party as a 'whorage' precipitates the quarrel with the other revellers from which Alex rescues her, only to take her, in the coarse words of Mrs. Darch, "Out of the frying-pan into the fire!"<sup>47</sup> Hardy handles the scene with masterful understatement, making controversial the question of whether Alex's physical

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

possession of Tess was a complete rape, or more a seduction. Hers was a human body with human impulses, caught at a vulnerable moment. Hardy later admits that she "temporarily blinded by [Alex's] ardent manners, had been stirred to confused surrender awhile",<sup>48</sup> but there is no doubt as to the rape of her innocence. Perhaps that is why Hardy uncharacteristically gives Alex so often the image of the melodramatic villain. Tess's words to her mother reveal her wounded sensitivity, her naiveté, and her despair at the loss of her virginity:

... "How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!"<sup>49</sup>

Her sense of sin is devastating to her, yet she strives to keep pristine the inviolability of her soul, even if her body is desecrated, and thus she spurns Alex's offer of amends:

"I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not - I cannot! I should be your creature to go on doing that, and I won't."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

She steadily refuses to sell her soul by telling the lie of saying that she loves him.

Many times throughout the novel Hardy keeps insisting that in our judgment of Tess we make the distinction between the physical element of man subject to the natural law, and the soul or psyche which inhabits the body. Tess's feeling of disharmony with the natural world, which she saw as innocent, was, in Hardy's opinion, unfounded:

... She looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly.<sup>51</sup>

Tess gradually comes to an awareness and an acceptance of her dual nature of flesh and spirit. Much later when she is trying to re-make her life in the Valley of the Great Dairies, Angel Clare is first attracted to her as a "fresh and virginal daughter of nature", when he overhears her comment in the conversation about ghosts:

"I don't know about ghosts," she was saying; "but I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive."

"A very easy way to feel 'em go," continued Tess, "is to lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star; and, by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds o'miles away from your body,

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

which you don't seem to want at all.<sup>52</sup>

Many of Hardy's readers could accept his theory of Tess's purity after her earlier fall from innocence, but were revolted by her second 'fall' when, in her desperation over Angel's desertion and her family's financial straits, she becomes Alex's mistress. But again Hardy emphasizes that dichotomy of nature by which the soul can be inviolate while the body surrenders. Even Angel comes to a consciousness at the end

... that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers - allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will.<sup>53</sup>

It is only in the idyllic period at the dairy that Tess approaches being the harmonious person that she could have been under the right conditions. Her love for Angel is an aggregate of all three elements of her being, and she becomes a complete woman -- her mind nurtured by his philosophy, so acceptable to her serious nature; her soul reaching out in a kind of adoration, for he becomes almost a God whom she worships; and her sexuality able to respond as naturally and instinctively to his love as the fecund nature around them to its laws, were she not inhibited by the haunting thoughts of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-55.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 484.

her past. The warm, vital part of Tess's nature, with its innate capacity for happiness and joy finds its symbolic expression in what is close to an 'Earth-Mother' image, as her natural deft touch with the milking-cows releases the warm, life-giving stream while the propinquity of Angel Clare, sharing her tasks, arouses all her woman's tenderness, her urge to love, and the desire to please him with her beauty. The picture is in bitter contrast to the joyless death-imagery portrayed in the later drudgery of her sojourn at Flintcomb-Ash, hacking the turnips from the hard, frozen soil and fearfully trying to hide the physical charms which might tempt men to a further desecration of her body and consequent erosion of her spirit.

After her terrible rejection by Angel on their wedding night, when she discloses her past; during the ensuing period of hardship and deprivation, her attempt to reject her body, is symbolized by this pitiful attempt to disguise her beauty, so that, as she says to her friend Marion, she would not run the risk of being "clipsed or colled."<sup>54</sup> Her desperate letters to Angel, her attempts to contact his family, her repulse of Alex, all reveal her fight for both physical and spiritual integrity. The final break comes at the moment when, outside the D'Urberville burial vault at the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

old church where she and her displaced family have taken shelter, all hope surrenders to the death-wish: "Why am I on the wrong side of this door?"<sup>55</sup> At this point her body, as an integral part of her real self, is completely rejected, becoming merely the commodity which saves her helpless family in their poverty. Her decision to sell herself to Alex is of a piece with her later instinctive act of killing, when, after Angel's unexpected return, she sees Alex's body as only a 'thing' -- an intrusion between her and the now-repentant husband.

In Hardy's view Tess's tragic story is less an indictment of her 'purity' than of the social conditions and attitudes which determine her fate -- the decadent effect of time on an old curse-ridden family, the lascivious selfishness of the newly-rich, the divisive class-system, the breakdown of a peasant economy and its attendant poverty, the social ostracism of the unfortunate. To these factors must be added another -- the inadequacy of orthodox religion to deal with such a 'fact' as Tess. The cross-section of religious life portrayed in the novel reveals Hardy's disillusionment and typifies the chaotic spiritual turbulence of the nineteenth century, beginning to feel what Hardy terms "the ache of modernism." It is significant that in the first brief

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 465.

appearance of the Clare brothers, Felix, the embryo ecclesiastic, is discouraging Angel from "dancing in public with a group of country hoydens", and reminding him that they must get on with their reading of "A Counterblast to Agnosticism" -- an interesting reference to the Higher Criticism whose effects were still rocking the Establishment in Hardy's time.

In the early simple life of Tess, religion has little more relevance, other than being an accepted part of the pattern of rural life, than her mother's superstitious preoccupation with the fortune-telling book. Her first real encounter comes when her strong sense of sin is increased by the lurid accusatory signs of the evangelical painter, termed by Hardy the "last grotesque phase of a creed which, had served mankind well in its time."<sup>56</sup> Tess's instinctive reaction to such a judgmental Deity as he implies is rebellious: "I don't believe God said such things!"<sup>57</sup> Her attendance at the church service is another trial to her sensitive spirit. At the head-turnings and whisperings of her fellow-worshippers who "deposited themselves in rows before her and rested three-quarters of a minute on their foreheads as if they were praying, though they were not,"<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

she grows sick at heart, and feels she can come to church no more. Her first real sense of religious need sweeps over her at her baby's illness and death. Realizing he had not been baptized she conjures up visions of hell based on "details of torment sometimes taught the young in this Christian country."<sup>59</sup> Thus she performs the sacrament herself and feels a profound sense of spiritual ecstasy in the thought that she has saved his soul, but she has a confrontation with the hard rock of doctrinal dogma when the question of his burial arises. When the new vicar is approached regarding the validity of the baby's baptism his nobler instincts are reached (in Hardy's words "those that he had left in him after ten years of endeavour to graft technical belief on actual scepticism")<sup>60</sup> and he admits that her invocation of the Spirit in lay baptism was as efficacious as his would have been. But his humanity loses the final battle with orthodoxy, for he refuses the baby the rite of Christian burial. "Will it be the same to him if you don't?" she insists, and again his better self has to say: "It will be just the same."<sup>61</sup> All Hardy's humanity and all his bitterness

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 122.



come through in his description of little Sorrow's interment:

... by lantern-light, at the cost of a shilling and a pint of beer to the sexton, in that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid.<sup>62</sup>

Tess's movement to the Valley of the Great Dairies, where "the world was drawn to a larger pattern" is analagous to the broadening effect of Angel Clare's philosophy on her religious outlook. Her instinctive joy in the prospects of a new life in this lush, pleasant spot is expressed half-unconsciously in the familiar ritual words of the Benedicite, "O, all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord!", but the new maturity gained from her experience makes her stop and question her own belief: "Perhaps I don't quite know the Lord as yet!"<sup>63</sup> In the person of Angel Clare, Hardy depicts the typical religious sceptic of his day, torn between a filial affection for the traditional Church and his conscientious objection to what he calls her "untenable redemptive theolatriy." Angel reads *The Higher Criticism*, and rejects certain Articles of Religion as set forth in the Prayer Book, but, like Hardy, does not feel himself to be irreligious. He can quote Scripture as readily as his

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

father, the respected evangelical Vicar of Emminster, and gives St. Paul as his authority in defence of 'reconstruction', as essential to Church reform: "the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain."<sup>64</sup> Unable to enter the Church with such views he has decided to study agriculture and the rustic life at Talbothays Dairy. In discussing Angel's problems Hardy gives us insights into his own, particularly with his reference to the "chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent Power."<sup>65</sup> Angel feels that he has shaken himself free of orthodoxy. Intellectually he has done so, and his influence over the impressionable mind of Tess grows as strongly as their fervid passion for each other during the warm summer days in the lush valley. His brief visit home to the Vicarage intensifies his divergence from his family's life, both culturally and philosophically:

Its transcendental aspirations - still unconsciously based on the geocentric view of things, a zenithal paradise, a nadiral hell - were as foreign to his own as if they had been the dreams of people on another planet. Latterly he had seen only Life, felt only the great passionate pulse of existence, unwarped, uncontorted, untrammelled by those creeds which futilely attempt to check what wisdom would be content to regulate.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., pp. 152-53.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

Hardy shows respect for the religious type represented by the sincere, unworldly old Mr. Clare, but none for the superficiality typified in Angel's brothers, "non-evangelical, well-educated, hall-marked young men, correct to their remotest fibre",<sup>67</sup> and foreshadows his later bitterness in Jude the Obscure, with his reference to them as "such unimpeachable models as are turned out yearly by the lathe of a systematic tuition."<sup>68</sup> Felix, the curate of an adjoining parish seems to Angel to be "all Church", while Cuthbert, the classical scholar, Fellow and Dean at Cambridge, is "all College", and the "few unimportant scores of millions of outsiders" elsewhere were only tolerated by them rather than helped. The unsuitability of Tess for this family milieu is borne in upon Angel when he compares her with Miss Mercy Chant, the 'suitable wife' his parents would choose for him, whose only drawback in his father's eyes is that she calls the Communion Table an 'altar', and decorates it with flowers! His return to Tess convinces him of their mutual love -- "she regarded him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam."<sup>69</sup> In the conflict of "two ardent hearts against one poor little conscience", the "appetite for joy

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

which pervades all creation" wins the battle, and Tess makes her fatal decision to marry Angel Clare.

It is noticeable that at the highest points of his narratives Hardy instinctively resorts to Biblical imagery for his aptest expression. Tess, on her wedding-day, in spite of her fatalistic distrust of her good fortune, feels "glorified by an irradiation not her own, like the angel whom St. John saw in the sun".<sup>70</sup> Similarly the foreshadowing of tragedy is conveyed in the familiar religious symbol of betrayal -- the unnatural three crowings of the cock on the afternoon of their wedding journey. Tess had knelt down to pray before leaving, but although "She tried to pray to God, ... it was her husband who really had her supplication."<sup>71</sup> In the excess of love and trust which prompts the revelation to him of her past involvement with Alex D'Urberville, she sees Angel as her Saviour who, particularly since he has confessed and been forgiven the one moral aberration in his own past, will understand her own fall from grace, and redeem her by his forgiveness. His betrayal of her faith, by his violent rejection of her as his wife, reveals him as a false Christ, and in typically Hardyan symbolism the red-coaled glow of the fire before which they are sitting takes on the awful luridness of a judgmental Last Day.

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

It is difficult not to completely abhor the person of Angel Clare at this juncture, but Hardy endeavours to analyze his uncompromising attitude:

Within the remote depths of his constitution, so gentle and affectionate as he was in general, there lay hidden a hard logical deposit, like a vein of metal in a soft loam, which turned the edge of everything that attempted to traverse it. It had blocked his acceptance of the Church; it blocked his acceptance of Tess.<sup>72</sup>

To Tess he argues that it is not a question of respectability, but of principle; however, underneath the enlightened heterodoxy of Angel's supposed enfranchisement lurk the mores of his traditional upbringing, which make him as much a product of his past as Tess is of hers.

With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings.<sup>73</sup>

His bitter gibes regarding Tess's upbringing and station are worthy of the most priggish, class-conscious Victorian. He is, indeed, a 'fallen Angel', falser in a sense to his own Credo than is the sinister Alex D'Urberville when encountered in his role of soul-saving preacher.

It is one of the many coincidences and ironies of the novel that the worthy Rev. Clare should have been the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 308.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

vessel of Alex's 'conversion', and that Angel, through his influence on Tess, should become the means of Alex's back-sliding, and thus of their final tragedy. The forlorn Tess, now eking out a miserable existence at Flintcomb-Ash, meets Alex after her abortive attempt to contact Angel's parents, and the chilling impression gained of her glimpse of his haughty, ecclesiastical brothers. She is little disposed to believe in Alex's new religious fervour and sees in his zeal to convert her soul the same destructive passion that had seduced her body. Her bitterness and shame, together with Angel's teachings, make her spurn his protestations of sincerity regarding both his religion and his love, with a derision that recalls her encounter with the religious sign-painter. Ironically it is her convincing relaying of Angel's philosophy, as much as her physical attraction, that brings about a reversal of their previous roles. She now becomes his temptress, mocking his beliefs -- in his words, his "dear, damned witch of Babylon".<sup>74</sup> For a little while Hardy makes of Alex an almost appealing character, whose inner conflict arouses some sympathy, and whose desire to make reparation to Tess seems sincere. After his rejection of his new faith, however, he quickly reverses into his melodramatic villain's rôle when he again exploits her helplessness, and she, to help her poverty-stricken family,

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

becomes his mistress. In the somewhat unnatural theological debate between Alex and Tess, Hardy manages to insert a sizeable portion of current controversy regarding ethical systems, dogma, moral theology, etc., and incidentally to show how far removed such cogitations are from the real, pulsing questions and problems facing the human soul.

One of the most moving moments during the tragic finale, following the enlightened Angel's return and Tess's desperate murder of Alex, is that in which Tess, having experienced the brief interlude of happiness with Angel before her arrest at the old sacrificial altar of Stonehenge, asks him the great universal question whose positive answer could give meaning to a larger pattern of existence: "... do you think we shall meet again after we are dead?"<sup>75</sup> Tess had earlier insisted to Alex that her 'religion' precluded a belief in anything supernatural, but she is entirely dependent upon Angel's polemics, and an affirmative answer from him would have reassured her. Although it adds the last bitter drop to her cup, such reassurance, Angel, in all conscience, cannot give, in spite of the complete renaissance of his love for her. "Like a greater than himself, to the critical question at the critical time, he did not answer ..." <sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 503.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 504.

So Tess Durbeyfield meets her death on the scaffold, in accordance with the dictates of the moral law, as uncomforted in her last moments as she has been throughout the whole sad chapter of her existence. Few characters in literature have evoked a more sympathetic response from readers than she, and a reflection back to the early 'tragic' characters of Hardy -- for example, Miss Aldclyffe of Desperate Remedies, Elfride of A Pair of Blue Eyes, Viviette Constantine of Two on a Tower, even the much more highly-developed Eustacia Vye of The Return of the Native -- will show what a broadening and deepening of Hardy's tragic vision has taken place. Tess is essentially the tragic 'sufferer', conscious from the beginning of the 'blighted world', yet making from time to time her pathetic but noble efforts to achieve some kind of order out of its chaos. Subconsciously aware of her own individuality as a person, with a sense of strong commitment and responsibility to those she loves -- her family, her baby, Angel Clare -- she attempts desperately to right the wrongs -- to protect her family in their helplessness, to save her own integrity, to assure her child's salvation, to have Angel know the truth and accept her as the real person she is, not as an idealized vision. But the destructive forces are too strong. Chance, circumstance, environmental factors, the hereditary taint from the passionate, violent D'Urberville nature, the



demands of the natural law and the strictures of the moral law, all combine to push her towards inevitable death. Hardy, I think, does not see life's tragedy in the completely absurdist light of some of the moderns, nor view existence as the nihilistic 'nada' of others, for he is profoundly conscious of the capacity of mankind for happiness, "that appetite for joy which pervades all creation", but also is terribly aware of the tragic irony which by and large prevents man from attaining such fulfilment, in spite of all rational or irrational efforts. In a tragedy of this stature there is little thought of praise or blame or of 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of the effort; we are aware of Tess at the end, not as a condemned murderess, but as an embodiment of suffering humanity, victim of both its own nature and of external situations. Hardy makes a strong plea for such awareness on the part of his contemporaries, and it was partly because the Christian Church and society of his day seemed to have lost the humanitarian feeling which should be its very essence that his faith in it was shaken.

In the poignancy and bitterness of this novel Hardy has again made his plea for a 'religion' of loving-kindness and tolerance in a world where both the laws of nature and of man, and whatever power controls them, would seem, like Aeschylus's President of the Immortals to "use us for their sport".

The final and most bitter expression of Hardy's disenchantment was to come four years later in Jude the Obscure, but in the interim there appeared in magazine instalments a strange and uncharacteristic story, The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved, not published in novel form until 1897, after the appearance of Jude the Obscure, and then entitled simply The Well-Beloved.

On the literal level, the novel is an exploration of a Platonic idea which had always intrigued Hardy and had been introduced earlier in the view of love expressed by Dr. Fitzpiers in The Woodlanders:

... Human love is a subjective thing ... joy accompanied by an idea which we project against any suitable object in the line of our vision ...<sup>77</sup>

The same thought was reflected also by Angel Clare's statement in Tess of the D'Urbervilles that the woman he had been loving was an idealized vision in Tess's shape.

The link between the search for this ideal but elusive love object and the search for the Unattainable in art is established by the identity of the protagonist in The Well-Beloved. Jocelyn Pierston is a sculptor whose genius finds expression in his art when the elusive inspiration for his creations is flitting from woman to woman or even transmigrating from one generation to the next. He falls

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas Hardy, The Woodlanders, p. 138.

momentarily in love with each manifestation of the ideal, only to have the vision fade in the reality of the flesh.<sup>78</sup> The gradual withdrawal of the vision from his imagination is accompanied by aging, loss of creativity, and eventually a sterile marriage of convenience after which the protagonist settles for such mundane pursuits as improving conditions on the primitive Isle of Slingers whose romantic isolation from conventional modern patterns of existence had hitherto been its charm.

Hardy's avowal in a letter to Swinburne that his "fantastic little tale" was "a fanciful exhibition of the artistic nature"<sup>79</sup> leaves little doubt as to his purpose in writing the novel. Read on this level, it would appear to be outside the scope of the present study. Some critics, however, have interpreted the lover's search for the ideal, both in this novel and in others, in the light of Hardy's religious and philosophical views, and their approach merits consideration. Writing in Hardy's own day, Patrick Braybrooke saw The Well-Beloved as depicting "a hopeless

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<sup>78</sup>The same theme is worked through in Hardy's poem "The Well-Beloved". Collected Poems, p. 121.

<sup>79</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 287.

quest for the spiritual",<sup>80</sup> and a recent writer, J. Hillis Miller, exploring the theory in much greater depth, similarly equates the search for ideal love with man's instinctive outreach for some mystical divinity as an object of worship and devotion. He sees Hardy's lovers as eternal seekers after spiritual reality and joy in a joyless universe. The love affair is thus a displacement of, or a substitution for, the denied religious experience.

This religious theme [says Miller] is not limited to the oddest of Hardy's novels, plus a fanciful poem or two. A religious dimension is integral to the theme of love throughout his work.<sup>81</sup>

Miller's thesis is most interesting, particularly in relation to the novels as a whole, but as a conscious 'raison d'etre' for The Well-Beloved it seems rather extreme in view of Hardy's own stated purpose. It is true that Hardy did not want the novel to be viewed too flippantly, and Miller's contention that Jocelyn Pierston is "the victim of a displaced religious desire which focusses itself on one woman after another"<sup>82</sup> gains some validity from another comment made by Hardy regarding the work:

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<sup>80</sup>Patrick Braybrooke, Thomas Hardy and His Philosophy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1928), p. 83.

<sup>81</sup>J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1970), p. 130.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

There is underlying the fantasy ... the truth that all men are pursuing a shadow, the Unattainable, and I venture to hope that this may redeem the tragi-comedy from the charge of frivolity.<sup>83</sup>

Viewed in this light there is not such a wide gap between the 'tragi-comic' treatment of Pierston's predicament and the darkly tragic view of man's unattainable visions which was to emerge in Hardy's last controversial novel.

Hardy's own identification with the creative artist whose reach, in Browning's phrase, must ever "exceed his grasp", is echoed in his comment to a reviewer friend regarding Jude the Obscure, his attempt to portray an idealized vision of life doomed to failure because of the strictures of man's nature and an alien social code. "What a miserable accomplishment it is," says Hardy, "compared with what I wanted to make it."<sup>84</sup> He notes also that the one point of which he felt sure was that the novel made for morality. Hence his disillusionment with the Bishop who claimed to have burnt his copy, and Hardy's sad reflection that had the Bishop known him "he would have found a man whose personal conduct, views of morality and of the vital facts of religion hardly differed from his own".<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 286.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

Nevertheless, the Bishop could not but have seen that Jude the Obscure did expose the feet of clay of the Establishment, and ~~his~~ reaction was perhaps understandable.

The two areas in which the visionary Jude is doomed to failure are both institutions of the Established Church -- marriage, and the ecclesiastical Oxford tradition. It is significant that in the two travesties of marriage which occur in the novel, that of Jude and Arabella, and of Sue and Phillotson, the secular law grants release, although Hardy points out that the legally admitted grounds for divorce are not the most valid ones. The essential thing in a successful marriage in Hardy's view is mutual affection; thus loss of affection should be regarded as the most logical grounds for dissolution. Yet even when the law has sanctioned separation, the church frowns on the action on social and ethical grounds. Phillotson is ostracized by the parish authorities because he agrees to let Sue leave him, a gesture expressing the unselfishness which is at the heart of the Christian code. The vicar's pleasure at the remarriages of the ill-matched pairs, greater travesties of the sacrament than the first, is indicative of the Church's attitude. The furore in the parish meeting over the matter of Phillotson's dismissal as teacher, out of which even the parson emerges with a bloody nose, gives a picture of a Church that is forced to acknowledge, among others, the

problems inherent in the marriage relationship, but is slow to rid itself of its moribund outlook.

Hardy introduces the rector of the parish of Marygreen as "a man who disliked the sight of changes",<sup>86</sup> but the image of the tall new church building of modern Gothic design replacing the original "hump-backed, wood-turreted, quaintly-hipped" structure of the old gives evidence of the inevitable march of time and imminent mutability. So also the two chief characters of the novel, Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, foreshadow the intellectual free-thinkers of a new age, but like Tess and Angel Clare, both are broken on the wheel of prejudice and convention. Jude's vision of a Christminster that could recognize ability and accept intellectual promise in lieu of status and wealth is shattered by disapproving dons, shackled to traditional practice; Sue allows her unconventional code of ethics to be submerged in a reversal to dogmatic principles which destroy her as a person, so that her fate is essentially even more tragic than Jude's.

... to tell, without a mincing of words, of a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit; and to point the tragedy of unfulfilled aims ...<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Preface, p. vi.

Such is the grand design behind the novel, and very few critics, even those who attacked it most bitterly, would deny the power with which the themes were handled. Jude Fawley epitomizes both motifs, from his introduction as a sensitive, visionary boy to "the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life", so near to, and yet so far from, the great institution of his dreams.

The closeness of the boy Jude to the things of the earth is symbolically shown in his attitude towards the birds which he was paid to frighten away from Farmer Troutham's corn. Ceasing his noisy clacking he invites them to have their share of the earth's produce, and perceives "the flaw in the terrestrial scheme, by which what was good for God's birds was bad for God's gardener".<sup>88</sup> As he was to prove throughout his life, obedience to nature's laws brings its own unhappy rewards. Farmer Troutham's vigorous blows with the clacker on Jude's posterior were re-echoed from the new church tower to whose building the farmer had generously subscribed "to testify his love for God and man."<sup>89</sup>

The same visionary imagination that finds the terrestrial scheme so disillusioning is able to conjure up an image of Christminster University (alias Oxford), the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 12.



centre of learning, culture and theological pursuits, as "the heavenly Jerusalem". As he views the night lights of the city from his vantage point on top of the barn ladder, the effect of the mist creates a symbolic halo over the town against the black heavens -- a mirage which is analogous to his dreams. The carter who relays his knowledge of the place only enhances Jude's desire to become a part of that "city of light", but his comments carry Hardy's own irony:

... 'Tis all learning there - nothing but learning, except religion. And that's learning too, for I never could understand it. Yes, 'tis a serious-minded place. Not but there's wenches in the streets o' nights... they raise pa'sons there like radishes in a bed... five years to turn a lirrumping, hobble-de-hoy chap into a solemn preaching man with no corrupt passions ..."<sup>90</sup>

Jude's war between those passions and his visionary spirit is effectively introduced with the incongruous symbolism of the 'pizzle-throwing' by Arabella, the coarse beauty who epitomizes the sexual urges that are part of Jude's nature. The hitting of his ear with the pig's phallus interrupts his meditations just as he is thinking: "Yes, Christminster shall be my Alma Mater; and I'll be her beloved son, in whom she shall be well-pleased."<sup>91</sup>

Arabella is described as a "complete and substantial human animal", and the innocent Jude is aware as he converses

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

with her of the "unnoticed call of woman to man". He sees with his intellectual eye their incompatibility, but the call of the flesh is insistent, and his books and dreams are relegated to second place in his intimacies with Arabella. Of the unfortunate marriage that 'conveniently' follows Hardy makes a typical comment:

And so, standing before the ... officiator, the two swore that at every other time of their lives till death took them, they would assuredly believe, feel and desire precisely as they had believed, felt and desired during the few preceding weeks. What was as remarkable as the undertaking itself was the fact that nobody seemed at all surprised at what they swore.<sup>92</sup>

After discovering Arabella's mistake -- or duplicity -- regarding her condition, Jude cogitates on the sexual impulse which had brought about the fiasco of a marriage lacking any stabilizing asexual bond. He sees sex as "a new and transitory instinct which had nothing in it of the nature of vice, and could be only at the most called weakness."<sup>93</sup> Again, as in the episode of Farmer Troutham and the birds, there is a rebellion against the kind of justice that would catch them both in a crippling gin because of nature's physical laws. Jude is beginning to see the world as a tragically misplanned universe, one in which no omniscient mind, but a vague First Cause or Immanent Will, is to blame

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-66.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-71.

for blindly leading human beings into unhappiness through their own human impulses.

It is the symbolic pig-killing episode that highlights the terrible incompatibility of the two natures, and it is interesting that Hardy gives Arabella a kind of dignity and insight here that she achieves only once more -- when she makes her telling comment on Sue and Jude at the end of the novel. Jude's sensitivity and idealism are juxtaposed against Arabella's practicality and acceptance of the pig-killing as one of the necessary evils in a world of violence. Jude shudders at the "hateful business", but for Arabella the situation is simple: "Pigs must be killed." ... "Poor folks must live."<sup>94</sup> To Jude's "Thank God" on hearing the last of the animal's cries her instant response is: "What's God got to do with such a messy job as a pig-killing, I should like to know!"<sup>95</sup> Arabella can accept the messiness, as she does her own sexuality, on the basis of a natural law which it is futile to question, and to which it is much more pleasant to submit.

Had Jude's idealism been as single-minded as Arabella's lack of it, he might have come closer to its realization, but his ambivalence in both rejecting and at

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

the same time clinging to his sexual impulses keeps him on the periphery of both worlds -- the earthy existence of physical satisfaction with Arabella, and the spiritual and intellectual life embodied by Sue Bridehead and Christminster. His relief at his eventual separation from Arabella, and the revival of his ambition to enter the University are in sharp contrast to the ease with which he is later to accept gratuitously his marital rights when Arabella returns unexpectedly from Australia where, in the interim, she has been the illegal wife of another man. Indeed, Jude's attraction to Sue Bridehead, the very antithesis of Arabella in her ethereality, is also as much sensual as intellectual, and ironically it is only when Sue sees the danger of losing Jude to Arabella's sexuality that she submits to his physical needs and they form the family relationship which is to precipitate their tragedy.

Hardy writes feelingly and sympathetically of the protagonists' sexual and marital problems, neither condoning nor judging, but always with what he feels is a futile plea for understanding. A telling line in the earlier part of the story speaks volumes:

Somebody might have come along that way who would have asked him his trouble, and might have cheered him ...<sup>96</sup> But nobody did come, because nobody does ...

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., pp. 31-32

It is in his comments regarding Jude's broken dreams of Christminster that Hardy's own disenchantment with the social and ecclesiastical milieu is expressed, and he becomes the embittered social reformer. In a note-book entry the germ of the idea of Jude the Obscure had been mentioned:

A short story of a young man - "who could not go to Oxford" - His struggles and ultimate failure... There is something in this the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them - <sup>97</sup>

What Hardy has to show is a centre of Christian learning that has been prostituted from its real aim by convention, materialism and artificiality. In its intellectual and social snobbery it rejects such a genuine, dedicated scholar as Jude could have been, and yet has admitted the types shown in the public-house where Jude makes his defiant, drunken protestation by reciting, to his own later disgust, the Latin creed as proof of his ability.

The alienation of the University from the humanity it was designed to serve, is shown in Jude's awareness of the contrast between the Christminster of the cloisters and the Christminster outside. On the day he receives the note of rejection from the master of Biblioll, he makes a disconsolate visit to the observation theatre from which he

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<sup>97</sup> Florence Hardy, Life, pp. 207-8.

can view the "unrivalled panorama" of spires, halls, chapels and quadrangles which are forever closed to the lowly stonemason. Then he descends to the streets, taps the real Christminster life, "without whose denizens the hard readers could not read nor the high thinkers live."<sup>98</sup>

Jude's defiant chalk-marking from the Book of Job on the wall of Bibliolli: "I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these?"<sup>99</sup> was, as well, the outcry of a new generation, rejecting the out-worn conventions of society and a restrictive Church.

Something of this was behind Jude's second attempt to enter the Church by another door -- that of the licentiate. His disappointment over the loss of his scholarly dream and his remorse at his sacrilegious behaviour in the tavern (which had also cost him his job), so depress him that he returns to Marygreen where he confesses his feelings to the curate: "... I do feel I should like to do some good thing; and I bitterly regret the Church, and the loss of my chance of being her ordained minister."<sup>100</sup> Encouraged by the curate Jude thus resolves on a more purgatorial course

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<sup>98</sup> Hardy, Jude the Obscure, p. 137.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

"that might have a touch of goodness and greatness in it; that might be true religion"<sup>101</sup> -- that of the unscholarly humble curate wearing his life out in an obscure village or city slum. Recognizing that his earlier aim had been more intellectual and social than spiritual, he embarks on his new mission, as stone-cutter-cum-divinity-student, by reading the ancient divines and modern theologians, even hiring a harmonium to practise his chanting. There is something very satisfying to his imaginative sense in that he might be ready to begin his ministry at the age of thirty -- "an age which much attracted him as being that of his exemplar when he first began to teach in Galilee."<sup>102</sup>

In his choice of locale for his theological training, however, he is guided by something other than altruism and spirituality for it is to Melchester that his attractive cousin, Sue Bridehead, has gone to pursue her teacher's course. Jude's war between flesh and spirit is more insidious now than in the case of Arabella, for he feels a sense of false security in the fact that she is his cousin, that he himself is already married, and that Sue is promised to Mr. Phillotson. Though he persuades himself that he loves her only as a friend, a kinswoman and an

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

intellectual companion, his feelings are strongly sexual. Her influence over his mind, like that of Angel Clare over Tess, and Tess's over Alex, is predicated largely on her physical attraction for him. "If he could only get over the sense of her sex, as she seemed to be able to do so easily of his, what a comrade she would make..."<sup>103</sup>

Hardy's characterization of Sue Bridehead, the unconventional, sexless agnostic and free-thinker, anticipates the twentieth-century woman, and it is through her that most of Hardy's scepticism is expressed. At Melchester Jude is at first shocked that she should prefer to sit in the railway station rather than in the beautiful Cathedral. Her defence is apropos:

"That's the centre of the town life now. The Cathedral has had its day!"

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"It was a very good place four or five centuries ago; but it is played out now..."<sup>104</sup>

Sue's apostasy had begun with her surfeit of the 'business' of the church in her former employment in the church 'shop' at Christminster, but, like Hardy himself, she has her inner conflicts:

"... at times one couldn't help having a sneaking liking for the traditions of the old faith, as

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 160.



preserved by a section of the thinkers there in touching and simple sincerity ..."<sup>105</sup>

But for Christminster she had little respect -- some for its intellect, none for its 'religion' -- and her criticisms are biting and painful to Jude:

"... intellect at Christminster is new wine in old bottles. The medievalism ... must go, be sloughed off, or Christminster itself will have to go."

"At present intellect in Christminster is pushing one way, and religion the other; and so they stand stock-still, like two rams butting each other."

"It is a place full of fetichists and ghost-seers!"<sup>106</sup>

She is likewise disgusted with its materialism and snobbery:

"You are one of the very men Christminster was intended for when the colleges were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or opportunities, or friends. But you were elbowed off the pavement by the millionaires' sons."<sup>107</sup>

Jude, on the other hand, has not lost his illusions completely:-

"I still think Christminster has much that is glorious; though I was resentful because I couldn't get there."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., pp. 180-81.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., pp. 180-81.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

"... I suppose one must take some things on trust. Life isn't long enough to work out everything in Euclid problems before you believe it. I take Christianity."<sup>109</sup>

The divergence of their views is shown in many ways. At the Art Gallery Jude is reverent and abstracted in the presence of the Christian art -- devotional pictures, Virgins, Holy Families, saints -- while Sue "waits for him before a Lely or a Reynolds". On the night she spends in Jude's room, after her disgrace at the Training School, Sue cannot "be such a hypocrite" as to join Jude at his Evening Prayer, feeling as she does about religion.

Again, Jude finds it difficult to understand her former Platonic relationship with the scholar-friend whom she described as "the most irreligious man I ever knew and the most moral."<sup>110</sup> Conscious of his own sexuality Jude has secret sympathy with the man whose mistress she had refused to be, but whose home she had shared, and whose heart she had broken. Sue's views on marriage are likewise mystifying to Jude. She feels that the conventional view of the relationship of man and woman is limited, recognizing only "relations based on animal desire". Thus she cannot accept marriage as a sacrament. At her marriage to Phillotson, entered into partly in naiveté, partly in pique because of

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

her knowledge of Jude's marriage, and partly in gratitude for Phillotson's kindness, she is horrified at the thought that she must be "given away". Her sarcasm against the rite finds vent in her note asking Jude to perform that degrading function: "Bless your exalted views of woman, O Churchman!"<sup>111</sup>

Whether Sue's attitudes are part of her 'enlightenment' or more indicative of her own physical makeup is debatable, for Sue's sexuality, or lack of it, is one of the puzzles of the novel which Hardy leaves unsolved. She denies Phillotson whom she does not love, but likewise Jude, whom she does, when eventually her aversion to her married state drives her in desperation to him.

Jude in the meantime has had serious thoughts about his vocation. Troubled by his passion for Sue, his one-night abandonment of himself to Arabella on their brief meeting at Melchester, his tendency to drink when depressed, he can only hope that "in a life of constant internal warfare between flesh and spirit the former might not always be victorious."<sup>112</sup> Undoubtedly Sue's beliefs have affected him as well; thus he is thoroughly disillusioned when he meets the composer of some religious music which had particularly stirred him and finds that he "who was brought up and educated in Christminster"

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 231-32.

traditions" is nothing more than a charlatan, mercenarily exploiting religious fervour. Finally, in desperation, Jude burns his books in a symbolic abjuration and his ambitions for the religious life are at an end.

Like Clym Yeobright, Jude had desired to become a prophet to his fellow-creatures and he ponders long over what is to blame for his failure -- whether it is women, per se, or an artificial system "under which the normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springes to noose and hold back those who want to progress".<sup>113</sup>

Sue's attitude towards Jude in their new life together is as much a conundrum to him as the former episode in her life with the student. She has left her husband Phillotson on the principle that "for a man and woman to live on intimate terms when one feels as I do is adultery, in any circumstances, however legal",<sup>114</sup> but either her own limited feelings towards sex or subconscious moral compunctions prevent her from following her premise to its logical conclusion and being a wife to Jude whom she does love.

Phillotson's reaction to the situation also raises interesting moral and social questions. He has to a degree

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

become affected by Sue's principles as well, and in his perturbation and despair decides to act on humanitarian instinct by releasing his wife to Jude. His friend Gillingham's argument that by doing so he is condoning behaviour that could bring about general domestic disintegration and destroy the family as a social unit, is countered by Phillotson's defence that his decision is an act of charity that could injure no morals. Hardy is here getting embroiled in some of the most complex problems of human existence in an age which is beginning to recognize the right of individuals, particularly of women, to be regarded as persons, and yet knows that society must have certain basic structures for stability some of which could militate against individuality.

The double divorces of Jude from Arabella, and Sue from Phillotson, seem to provide a solution for Jude, but are abortive in the light of Sue's nature and philosophy. To be "licensed to be loved on the premises by a man" is anathema to her, and she declines formal marriage with Jude. Though spiritually she and Jude are so much one she resists his sexuality, and he, in his love, respects her wishes. Only Arabella's advent drives Sue into a natural marriage with Jude, while still refusing legality whose obligations she considers "destructive to a passion whose essence is its

gratuitousness."<sup>115</sup>

The coming into their lives of the strange little 'Father Time', child of Jude and Arabella, raises tender feelings in both Sue and Jude, and they want to provide a normal family situation, but still hounded by fears of marriage evoked by their own former unhappy experiences and those of their parents, they again postpone the legal sanction.

The brief happiness of their new relationship is imaged in their day at the Fair, particularly at the pavilion of flowers -- "an enchanted palace to their appreciative taste" -- and Hardy shows by contrast the relationship of Arabella and her now-legal husband who quarrel and spat "in the antipathetic recriminatory mood of the average husband and wife of Christendom."<sup>116</sup>

Sue's question, "If we are happy as we are what does it matter to anybody?" is, however, like a defiant flinging of the gauntlet at convention, for it is on the altar of public opinion that they are finally sacrificed.

Gradually their marital position is questioned and gossiped about. Finally when Jude and the now-pregnant Sue undertake restoration work at the church, ironically repainting the words of the Ten Commandments on the Church

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 357.

wall, righteous ire erupts; Jude is dismissed and their wanderings in poverty, illness and child-bearing begin.

Jude's compulsive need to return to the city of Christminster brings him there, poor, ill, with Father Time, two other children and Sue again pregnant, at the time of the annual Remembrance Day ceremony. Hardy again uses the occasion to highlight both the problem of Christminster and the problem of Jude. In his 'sermon' to Tinker Taylor and the other lowly listeners, Jude elucidates the ills of modern man -- "in a chaos of principles - groping in the dark - acting by instinct and not after example."<sup>117</sup>

As the novel approaches its most tragic moments Hardy again instinctively adopts his familiar Biblical imagery. The blood-red robes of the doctors in procession, against the background of overcast skies, rain and thunder remind Father Time of the 'Judgment Day'; the bedraggled group seeking vainly for lodgings in the crowded town suggests the rejected pair who could find 'no room at the inn'; while the final horrors of Father Time's sacrificial killing of his brothers and sisters and his subsequent suicide recall the innocent 'scape-goats' of the Old Testament.

The pathos of Father Time's suicide note, "Done because we are too menny",<sup>118</sup> highlights the complicated

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 394.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., p. 405.

problem of children's unhappy place in a chaotic social and domestic scheme. As Jude had said in his impromptu sermon:

"I perceive there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas: what it is can only be discovered by men and women with greater insights than mine, ... 'For who knoweth what is good for man in this life?'"<sup>119</sup>

Hardy anticipates the thinking of the modern nihilist in the doctor's appraisal of Father Time's trauma as reported by Jude:

... there are such boys springing up amongst us - boys of a sort unknown in the last generation - the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live.<sup>120</sup>

Sue has earlier expressed negative views about child-bearing -- that it is a tragic and presumptuous thing, perhaps, to bring children into such a troubled world.<sup>121</sup> To her growing feeling of guilt about her effect on Jude's career she now adds the obsession that her own nihilistic views have perpetrated Father Time's action. He had heard her speak of 'butchery' as being 'nature's law', and their conversation regarding the coming child, she thinks, had

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 394.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 406. (The inclusion of the doctor's scientific explanation was artistically a master-stroke by Hardy, since it lessens the macabre, over-dramatic nature of a development difficult to accept.)

<sup>121</sup> A related thought is expressed in Hardy's poem "To, An Unborn Pauper Child". See Collected Poems, p. 116.



convinced his tortured mind that the act of murder was justifiable.

Hardy injects one of his bitterest touches of irony as Jude and Sue endure their hell. The sound of the seventy-third Psalm is wafted to them from the College Chapel -- "Truly God is loving unto Israel" -- and outside two clergymen, remote from the sufferings of the humanity they profess to serve, hold a heated debate about the merits of the "eastward position" (presumably a reference to some current argument over liturgy), as if outward forms were the essence of their Christian faith!

Sue's earlier subconscious feelings of guilt, and her instinctive leanings towards the old dogma, so antithetic to her rational mind, emerge to overwhelm her in the closing chapters of her tragedy. Her earlier views that 'the First Cause worked automatically like a somnambulist, and not reflectively like a sage',<sup>122</sup> were now replaced by a feeling that there was an anthropomorphic power opposing her and Jude, whose ancient wrath had been vented upon them and to whom they must submit and conform. Flesh must be mortified, anger appeased by self-abnegation. As Jude's thinking moves away from narrow dogma, understanding more of Sue's nature through experience, she moves in an opposite direction,

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<sup>122</sup> Hardy, Jude the Obscure, p. 413.

believing her suffering to have been the first stage of a purification which she must complete by fulfilling her obligations to Phillotson. Prostrating herself in the chancel at St. Silas, she tears herself from Jude, using a new kind of logic to justify her self-centred mania for salvation at Jude's expense.

Her re-marriage to Phillotson by the vicar who highly approves and thinks it will bring their lives "to a triumphant and satisfactory issue",<sup>123</sup> is completely sacrificial and as useless in bringing happiness, other than that of a masochistic self-mortification, as the desperate ritual of Father Time. Her 'creed-drunk' torturous submission to Phillotson is paralleled by the 'gin-drunk' seduction of Jude by Arabella, now a widow, who drags him again to the altar in his demoralized state. Again the clergyman's expression of satisfaction at the farcical re-marriage is indicative of Hardy's bitter feelings regarding the misunderstanding attitude of the church towards marital relationships. Of secular attitudes, Hardy's depiction of their landlord's quandary speaks satirical volumes. Since the landlord had seen Arabella kiss Jude one evening when she had taken a little cordial, he doubted if they were married at all! But by chance overhearing her "haranguing Jude in

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 439.

rattling terms and flinging a shoe at his head", he recognized the note of genuine wedlock, and concluded they must be respectable!<sup>124</sup> (Small wonder that the first Mrs. Hardy hated the book, and like the Bishop, tried her best to prevent its circulation!)

In his solitary last moments, while Arabella is flirting with the lascivious Dr. Vilbert, Jude repeats the terrible verses from the Book of Job: "Let the day perish wherein I was born ... Wherefore is light given unto him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul?"<sup>125</sup> while the Hurrahs from the Christminster games outside form an ironic chorus to his tragedy.

But even more tragic is the living penance of Sue Bridehead, who, in the insightful words of Arabella "never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again until she's as he is now".<sup>126</sup>

Hardy's bitterness over the sorry scheme of things social and ecclesiastical might well have been echoed in Jude's mocking laugh on the morning of his second marriage to Arabella: "It is true religion!"<sup>127</sup> Yet it is important

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., p. 466.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., p. 488.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., p. 494.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., p. 464.

to remember that Hardy claims in this novel, as in others, to be only "a chronicler of moods and deeds", and maintains that his purpose does not require him to express his personal views upon the grave controversial issues.<sup>128</sup>

Nevertheless, this last novel has shown his increasing disenchantment with Church and religion and even his friend, Edmund Gosse, whose review of the novel Hardy felt to be the most discriminating, expressed regret that Hardy had moved from the "calm and lovely pantheism" of his earlier novels to a "jarring note of rebellion". "What has Providence done to Mr. Hardy," said Gosse, "that he should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his Creator?"<sup>129</sup>

Jude the Obscure was to be the last of his 'fist-shakings' in the novel form, his experience with the critics, according to Weber, having "completely cured him of further interest in novel-writing",<sup>130</sup> but the powerful treatments given to his tragic themes in this novel and in Tess of the D'Urbervilles established them both among the greater English

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>129</sup>Lawrence Lerner and John Holmstrom, eds., Thomas Hardy and his Readers (London: The Bodley Head, 1968), p. 121. From Cosmopolis 1896.

<sup>130</sup>Weber, op. cit., p. 214.

masterpieces. As tragic characters, however, Tess and Jude show some contrasts. Tess is more the Hellenic 'sufferer', whose fate is mainly determined by forces beyond her control, and she thus becomes the "sport of the gods". Although Jude's tragedy shares some of the same aspects, in that the external obstacles to his dream are insurmountable, his story lends itself more to a psychoanalytical reading with respect to the innate character traits of the two main protagonists. What Jude and Sue 'are', to a great degree determines their fate, and the tragedy is closer to the Shakespearean than to the Sophoclean. From another point of view, Jude the Obscure can be seen as a more specific social document in its indictment of a particular situation, while Tess's elemental tragedy is as universal as time itself. Although it is in Tess of the D'Urbervilles that Hardy introduces the term "the ache of modernism", it is in Jude the Obscure that he explores more fully the implications behind the phrase and the complexity of the moral problems facing the twentieth century.

In these late novels Hardy has plumbed the tragic view of life to the depths, for few characters in literature compare in their terrible isolation with the unforgettable Henchard, Tess, and Jude. Certainly, in the genre of tragic fiction he could go no further than that last agonizing portrayal of Jude's death. Perhaps that is one reason why

his genius now turned to the wider canvas possible in the epic-drama, where mankind as a whole becomes the protagonist.

There is a danger of over-generalizing when one attempts to assess the stage which Hardy has reached in his thinking at the end of this period which marks such an important point of departure. In his novels he has attempted many things -- psychological probings, philosophical debate, and underneath has run the continuous thread of religious questioning, in which the growing doubt of the earlier novels has moved along a continuum to the bitter scepticism of Jude the Obscure. But one does well to remember that Hardy is operating above all as an artist, and that any philosophical gleanings we may gather are to be seen as a secondary out-growth of the art which embodied them. Hence his continual insistence that we interpret his works as a series of "seemings", or artistic impressions of life as it might be, given certain circumstances, and postulated on certain, and sometimes divergent, views. This approach, in turn, can justify what has sometimes been seen as inconsistency in his philosophy, or casuistry in his religious outlook. The blackness of his late novels has, for example, labelled him forever as a pessimist - an epithet which he himself rejected - whereas that same sombre picture can be seen as an artistic presentation of his expressed

theory: "... if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst".<sup>131</sup>

Having looked both imaginatively and realistically at 'the Worst', and seen as one of those grim possibilities the failure of the conventional Christian philosophy to explain, for him at least, a seemingly meaningless existence, he attempts to postulate some theory that would give a degree of satisfaction to his rational mind and at the same time suggest some source of comfort to his humanitarian heart and desolate spirit. He finds this in the concept of 'evolutionary meliorism' which emerges from the dark imaginings and intellectual arguments found in his great epic-drama, The Dynasts.

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<sup>131</sup> Hardy, "In Tenebris II", Collected Poems, p. 154.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DYNASTS: HARDY'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

Hardy's farewell to novel-writing in 1895 marked also a return to what was really his first love -- the writing of poetry which he considered a much higher literary form than the novel and one that left him far less vulnerable to attack. Towards the end of the century when he was compiling his first collected edition of Wessex Poems (published 1898) to be followed by Poems of the Past and Present (1901), he wrote in his notebook:

'Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion - hard as a rock - which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in Power, unknowing or Cruel, - which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries - will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing ... If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt (Oct. 1896) is interesting on several counts. Being a private rather than a public statement its

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<sup>1</sup>Florence Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, pp. 284-85.



note of pique gives insight into Hardy's sensitivity, not only to literary criticism, but to criticism of his unorthodox religious views. His revulsion to being called an atheist was probably partly an emotional reaction reflecting the ambivalent relationship with the Church of one whose instincts were basically religious.

As a statement of Hardy's poetics, the passage proclaims his belief in the dialectical function of poetry, one that becomes increasingly obvious in his later writings. I quote it here primarily because it contains one of the many foreshadowings of the philosophical subject-matter of The Dynasts, his powerful verse-drama,actable only in the theatre of the mind, in which the continent of Europe becomes a focal-point of the cosmic universe, the Napoleonic era a brief interlude in cosmic time, and mankind, no matter how great or little the individuals, the unwitting victims of cosmic force beyond their cognition or control.

As shown by Florence Hardy in the Life, the seeds of The Dynasts had been in Hardy's mind decades before its composition, and it is interesting to trace from his notebook entries the growth and expansion of the embryonic idea. Originally his interest in the Napoleonic Wars would seem to have been mainly historical, his fascination for this particular period in history having been whetted by the association of Dorset with Napoleon's threatened invasion of

England, the tales handed down to him by his immediate forebears, and his personal acquaintance with aged veterans of the Napoleonic campaigns. The same historical interest had produced The Trumpet Major, in which, as was earlier pointed out, little emphasis was placed on the philosophical and religious problems posed by war and its wanton destruction of man's happiness. Gradually, as Hardy's vision of life darkened as seen in the increasingly tragic undertones of his novels, the existential questioning became more insistent, and he began to see this particular phenomenon of history as analogous, on a more cosmic scale, to the disruptions and tragedies within individual lives, and posing the same problems for the thinker and searcher after truth.

The earliest reference to his potential treatment of the historical theme, as far back as 1875, contained already some indication of its epical scope:

'Mem. A Ballad of the Hundred Days. Then another of Moscow. Others of earlier campaigns - forming together an Iliad of Europe from 1789 to 1815.<sup>2</sup>

The envisioned ballad-sequence had taken on dramatic form in his mind by the time of the next entry (June 1877), and from time to time during the next two decades references

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

appear in his notebooks, some hinting at a possible widening of the philosophical scope of his original idea, others suggesting the unique Hardyian mythology he would later create to give his drama cosmic proportions, and the 'web-image' which was to form the back-drop for the dramatic development.

Then in 1890 comes a most significant entry:

"View the Prime Cause or Invariable Antecedent as "It" and recount Its doings."<sup>3</sup>

Earlier in the same year he had written:

'I have been looking for God 50 years, and I think that if he had existed I should have discovered him. As an external personality, of course, - the only true meaning of the word.'<sup>4</sup>

This admitted rejection of an anthropomorphic God left Hardy, as it has left countless others, with a vacuum in his thinking, and a need to find another explanation for the meaning of existence to supply that which Christian dogmas, in Hardy's case, had failed to provide. He sought some answer to the problem of pain, one that would satisfy the need for rationality demanded by his intelligence and also the emotional need of one who felt deeply the vulnerability of man's condition.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

His rational mind conceded the fact that an Energy or Life-Force of some kind propelled the universe on its way through the operations of some natural law. What the rational mind failed to find was a discoverable purpose within this universe that would justify its existence and explain the violence and pain which resulted from its operations, both in the world of inanimate nature and in the lives of men. He could accept the scientific findings of Darwin -- of natural selection and survival of the fittest -- even though it meant a refutation of the religious faith inherent in his upbringing, but the huge question "why" loomed even larger than the "What" in the thinking of one whose temperament longed for faith and belief in some all-wise, benevolent Power. Albert Guérard speaks of Hardy's 'longing to discern more than natural agency behind and in the senseless revolution of things'.<sup>5</sup> This phrase could be interpreted as a desire on Hardy's part to believe in a supernatural agency on whom he could blame the human dilemma, but Hardy, as he shows in many poems, is revolted by the idea of a Power morally lower than its victims. What he is seeking is some theory, satisfying to both mind and

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<sup>5</sup>Albert J. Guérard, Thomas Hardy: The Novels and Stories (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 98.

temperament, that would explain and make sense of the seeming senselessness.

Such is the basic exploration of The Dynasts, underlying its more superficial purpose, the indictment of war. Important though that secondary motive is -- and the work has been termed "one of the most effective denunciations of war in all English literature"<sup>6</sup>-- attention is continually focussed on the larger question which the fact of war intensifies, and for which its senselessness, cruelty and inhumanity become such an apt vehicle. This essentially religious search makes The Dynasts one of the best illustrations of the motif which I find so basic to Hardy's writings.

The early ponderings culminated in the writing of the epic-drama during the years 1902 to 1908, a period suited to the task for several reasons. His renewed interest in poetry, his turning-away from fiction, and the scope of his theme were determinants in the form of his work -- poetic drama that combined the power and subjectivity of the lyric with the dramatic tension and narrative objectivity necessary for a treatment of historical material. Like Shakespeare, he frequently relieved the dignified blank verse and lyrical choruses with rustic prose, and thus retained a measure of

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<sup>6</sup>Harold Orel, Thomas Hardy's Epic-Drama: A Study of "The Dynasts" (New York: Greenwood Press, 1963), p. 89.

one feature which had lent much charm to his novels.

Contemporary events also helped to shape his treatment of the subject-matter. The impact of the Boer War at the close of the century must have given Hardy a heightened awareness of the actual horrors of war as well as of the callous economic and political expediency which often underlies its outbreak. What had earlier interested him as the military manoeuvres of a remote Napoleonic era now took on a more personal human aspect when he reflected on his own contemporaries as 'mouldering soldiers' -- "South of the Line, inland from far Durban".<sup>7</sup> The poems written during the Boer War and published as part of Poems of the Past and Present in 1901 bear witness to his humanitarian response to the suffering victims, his increasing bitterness over the illogicality of man's struggles with man, and particularly the irony of war's existence in a so-called Christian society:

And what of logic or of truth appears  
In tacking 'Anno Domini' to the years?  
Near twenty-hundred liveried thus have hied,<sup>8</sup>  
But tarries yet the Cause for which He died.

The deliberately harrowing descriptions, in The Dynasts, of earlier human destruction at Austerlitz, Albuera or Waterloo

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<sup>7</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "A Christmas Ghost Story", p. 82. Written Christmas Eve, 1899.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

grow, I believe, from this awareness, and speak clearly of Hardy's sensitiveness to war as a fact of his own times.

Contemporary modes of thought and enquiry also helped shape the pattern of The Dynasts. The opening speech "What of the Immanent Will and Its designs?" creates the questioning, argumentative tone which is carried throughout as the spectral characters debate the vast issues. There is evidence that in the years preceding the writing of the drama Hardy had explored in depth the ideas of the major philosophers of his day and critics have made much of his debt to Schopenhauer and von Hartmann. The former's theory of the Will, or Necessity, as the fundamental principle behind the workings of the Universe appealed to his logic, yet he was reluctant to posit a power completely necessitous and deterministic governing all human relationships, although he found little to justify the thought of any benevolent power behind the fact of existence. Von Hartmann's modification of the idea of the Will into that of an Unconscious Energy that is utterly impercipient in its workings -- in Hardy's words 'that neither Good nor Evil knows' -- came closer to Hardy's own thinking, such as he had expressed for example in an early poem "Hap", and he used it as the dialectic upon which to build the basic arguments of the drama.

Hardy claims as his own the idea of 'evolutionary meliorism' which is predicated on both the Von Hartmann philosophic theory and the Darwinian scientific concept. Firstly he sees man as one little part of that great network comprising the Unconscious Will or Energy, which is immanent rather than external, existing within the cosmos since there is nowhere else for it to exist. Secondly he conceives of man's consciousness as a phenomenon which has taken place in an evolutionary process through the flux of time. Is it not then possible, he argues, that in the illimitable reaches of the future the evolutionary process may continue until the Energy itself becomes a conscious logical force no longer fashioning illogicality?

In a letter written to Edward Wright in 1908 Hardy commented that 'some philosophy of life was necessary' in a dramatic epic, and explained his theory thus:

'That the Unconscious Will of the Universe is growing aware of Itself I believe I may claim as my own idea solely - at which I arrived by reflecting that what has already taken place in a fraction of the whole (i.e. so much of the world as has become conscious) is likely to take place in the mass; and there being no Will outside the mass - that is, the Universe - the whole Will becomes conscious thereby: and ultimately, it is to be hoped, sympathetic.

'I believe, too, that the Prime Cause, this Will, has never before been called "It" in any poetical literature, English or foreign.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 335.



The originality of this concept has been questioned by some scholars, who show that much of this was already inherent in Von Hartmann's writings, although the idea of a conscious Will that would effect amelioration in the Universe differs from the latter's theory which conceived of an evolved Consciousness becoming so aware of the pain of existence that it would will itself into quiescence and the world into non-existence. Hardy, it will be noted, used this as the other alternative if the awakened Consciousness failed to mend matters in what Tess saw as the 'blighted world'.

Again it must be remembered that Hardy's theories were never definitive statements, but explorations or 'seemings' as he termed them. Hardy felt that in the questioning climate of thought existing in the twentieth century, he was justified in setting forth 'tentative' doctrines, 'advanced with little eye to clear metaphysic, or systematized philosophy'.<sup>10</sup> Similarly in his comment that

the abandonment of the masculine pronoun in allusions to the First or Fundamental Energy seemed a logical consequence of the long abandonment by thinkers of the anthropomorphic conception of the samell

he was reacting to the temper of his times, when so many

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hardy, The Dynasts. In two volumes. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920). Preface to Vol. I, p. ix. All further quotations from The Dynasts will be from this two-volume edition.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

could no longer accept the idea of God as a revealed personality, the only concept of the word 'God' which at this time Hardy could countenance.<sup>12</sup>

In all epic art there has to be created a consciousness of two worlds -- that of the material and earthy existing in the flesh, and that of the mind and spirit. Traditionally, for the portrayal of the latter, the artist has drawn mainly from two sources or mythologies -- the Christian, with its concepts of Heaven and Hell, Good and Evil, as used by Milton, or Dante, and the classical, as seen, for example, in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. Others, such as William Blake, have found it necessary to create a new mythology in order to portray their own particular vision of existence. Thomas Hardy is one of the latter category, for he claimed that any conception of either Christian or classical deities was out of place in a modern epic. The literary scheme, he says, was 'shaped with a simple view to the modern expression of a modern outlook'.<sup>13</sup>

The wide acceptance of the Monist theory of the Universe forbade, in this twentieth century, the importation of Divine personages from any antique mythology as ready-made sources or channels of Causation, and excluded the celestial machinery of say Paradise Lost, as peremptorily as that of the Iliad or the Eddas.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>See reference previously quoted from Life, p. 224.

<sup>13</sup>Hardy, Dynasts, Preface, p. x.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. ix.

The Abstractions which Hardy creates, being a metaphor for a part of man himself -- his various aspects of thought -- are not inconsistent with the Monist doctrine, which explains man and the whole universe in terms of one substance or principle. Nevertheless, the 'impersonated Abstractions or Intelligences called Spirits', which Hardy introduces for his 'other-world' machinery, owe something in nature and function to both the classical and Christian traditions of his predecessors. In particular, as Hardy himself points out in the Preface, the Spirit of the Pities operates throughout as a kind of Greek Chorus, echoing the feelings of the victims, and objectifying the sympathies of the spectators, in this case, the readers, since The Dynasts is meant by Hardy to be 'closet-drama'.<sup>15</sup> Looked at from the Christian point of view, although Hardy does not suggest this openly, this Spirit becomes the incarnation of Love, taking upon himself the role of intercessor, pleading for the human victims in a kind of Christ-role, and at the end

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<sup>15</sup> An attempt to present The Dynasts on stage in an abridged form was made in November 1914 by Granville-Barker. It ran for seventy-two performances, receiving mixed reaction from critics. Rebecca West, writing in The New Republic at the time, praised it as 'one of the greatest plays that have been on the English stage', but admitted that it was not 'wholly successful' in that it 'mixed magic and clumsiness'. (Weber, Hardy of Wessex, p. 250).

preaching the gospel of loving-kindness, humility, and brotherhood. Although Hardy speaks of the Spirit of the Pities in the Preface as being 'impressionable and inconsistent in its views, which sway hither and thither as wrought on by events',<sup>16</sup> he nevertheless gives Pities an important place in the drama, and one feels that, in his prefatory comment, Hardy, the reluctant agnostic, might be playing the part of Devil's advocate!

The other Intelligences also have some traditional aspects. The Spirit of the Years, comparable to the 'Hours' of Shelley, represents the accumulated wisdom of Immeasurable Ages, and speaks with most authority. In his continuing debate with the Spirit of the Pities, he is the chief elucidator of the theory of the Immanent Will upon which the whole dramatic structure is based. He is thus the representative of rational, pragmatic thought, although at times he is less dispassionate in his approach than might be expected.

The Spirits Ironie and Sinister although generally paired in their appearances and dialogue, are not equivalent in their roles. The Spirit Ironie, as his name implies, can view the sufferings of man with amused detachment, and see through the hypocrisy and subterfuge of the earth-shapes who suppose they are acting with free will; yet he does not

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., Preface, p. ix.

delight in the contemplation. His detachment contrasts with the malignant satisfaction with which the Spirit Sinister watches human pain. Here again traditional mythologies impinge upon the modern, for Spirit Sinister suggests the Mephistophelian nature, or the proverbial Evil One of the Christian myth.

It is interesting that Hardy should also have borrowed from the Christian mythology in naming his recorders, 'Angels'. Their speeches, neutral in tone, and expressed antiphonally when the two appear together, are always presented in a kind of liturgical recitative. In a sense they are more 'supernatural' or abstract than the other figures, since, unlike the Spirits, they do not represent any particular human attitudes, but rather seem to characterize, with their books, the fatalistic aspect of life. What is written, is written, they imply, and nothing can change or erase from Time the events which they record and their inevitable results.

The Spirits of Rumour gravitate between the two worlds, commenting on the human scene, sometimes objectified in material form, and like the Spirit Messengers operating in the traditional and necessary dramatic role of news-bearers.

Accompanying the Intelligences are their Choruses, reiterating and emphasizing in choric song the particular

ideologies of their animating Spirits, while the pathetic Shade of the Earth, representing Mankind the Travailler, but in a supernatural form which has cognizance of the Will, keeps asking with the Spirit of the Pities the eternal question, 'Why?'.

In this study of The Dynasts, the discussion will revolve mainly around these Abstractions, since it is they who illustrate the religious motif, and carry the philosophical theme. Nevertheless its dimension as a realistic historical drama on which Hardy did painstaking research cannot be ignored. Published in three parts, in December, 1903, February, 1906 and December, 1908 respectively, and comprising nineteen acts and one hundred and thirty-three scenes, with a 'dramatis personae' of hundreds, it is prodigious in its scope. Ranging in time from 1805 to 1815 it involves the major figures of that historical decade -- military greats such as Lord Nelson, Sir John Moore, Marshal Ney, Admiral Villeneuve; political figures, for example, Pitt, Fox, Castlereagh, Decrès, Metternich; and dynastic leaders, including the ailing King of England George III, Austrian and Russian Emperors, Archdukes and Princes; while its human interest moves all the way from the domestic lives of the Empresses Josephine and Marie-Louise to the earthy relationships of soldiers and camp-followers at the battle-fronts. Unifying the whole is the central

figure of Napoléon Bonaparte driven by dynastic ambition and forces beyond his own understanding. The resulting external conflicts, the political and military engagements and the involvement of mankind collectively in his rise and fall provide the immediate cause of the debates among the Spirits which create the basic inner tensions of the drama.

Indicating the emphasis which he wishes to place on this inner dimension, Hardy introduces immediately the spectral personages in the opening Fore Scene, establishing their identities and functions. Following true epic convention, the General Chorus of Intelligences, which we may conclude to be Hardy's own speaking voice, set forth the epic purpose -- the study of Cause and Consequence. Significantly their speech ends with a statement conveying Hardy's attitude toward a mystery that 'we may muse on' but 'never learn'. Hardy once indicated, in a letter to Alfred Noyes, that 'Knowledge might be terrible.'<sup>17</sup> Still he is fascinated with a search which he acknowledges may never reach fulfilment.

The Fore Scene is balanced at the end of Part Three by a similar After Scene which finalizes the action, the two becoming a kind of frame for the panoramic sweep of time and place which they enclose. Only in these two scenes are the

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<sup>17</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 410.

Spirits in a sense remote from the human action, viewing the operations from the perspective of the 'Overworld'. In a cinematic technique worthy of the movie-spectacular of our own 1970's, Hardy in both these scenes provides an astronaut's eye-view of suffering Europe, symbolically portrayed as a prone and emaciated human-like figure over which the Spirits brood and converse with varying reactions. Throughout the other acts and scenes, the Spirits are amorously present in the midst of the human action, at times embodying themselves in material form and becoming actors in the scene. Always, however, they see the action from a cosmic point of view, and from time to time our limited vision as spectators is broadened by a 'Dumb Show' which projects a dwarfed image of armies, fleets, cities, countries, and humanity at large, like infinitesimal specks or insects on the face of the earth.

Referred to sometimes within the play as 'Showman', the Spirit of the Years, as part of his explicatory function, also frequently presents for the benefit of the other, sometimes dissenting Spirits, a visual image of what is variously called the Immanent Will, the Prime Mover, the Urging Immanence, the Absolute, to name only a few of Hardy's terms for a Power which he steadfastly refuses to call by



the name 'God'.<sup>18</sup>

The six visual presentations of the Will gain in intensity with each showing, always accompanied by a penetrating light 'enduing men and things with a seeming transparency, and exhibiting as one organism the anatomy of life and movement in all humanity and vitalized matter'.<sup>19</sup> (This recalls the 'web-imagery' which he has used so effectively in the opening chapter of The Woodlanders.)

Other stage directions present 'the interior of a brain which seems to manifest the volitions of a Universal Will, of whose tissues the personages of the action form portion',<sup>20</sup> or as 'a brain-like network of currents and ejections, twitching, interpenetrating, entangling and thrusting hither and thither the human forms'.<sup>21</sup> Reading these directions in the 1970's one instinctively thinks of Hardy's image in terms of a mighty computer, fed with the vast complexity of human beings and their relationships,

<sup>18</sup> One cryptic notation in Hardy's diary reads: "It is so easy nowadays to call any force above or under the sky by the name of "God" - and so pass as orthodox cheaply..." Life, p. 296.

<sup>19</sup> The Dynasts, Fore Scene, pp. 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act I, Sc. 6, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act VI, Sc. 3, p. 150.

from which data a blind mechanistic process produces inevitable results. Hardy himself suggests such a machine-image when he speaks of the 'clock-like' laws through which the Will operates, and of the 'writhing, crawling, heaving, vibrating' mass of Europe's peoples as 'Earth's jackaclocks'. Spokesman Yeaf's continually enlarges on his visual presentation with his descriptive analogies indicating the nescient nature of the Will as being, for example 'like a knitter drowsed, / Whose fingers play in skilled unmindfulness', and who 'has woven with an absent heed / ~~Since~~ Since life first was; and ever will so weave.'<sup>22</sup>

Having established this climate of thought against such a powerful imaginative background, Hardy proceeds to give his version of that period of history in which Napoléon Bonaparte and other warring dynasts of the times, driven by some of the strongest passions of that Immanent Force shake the sensitive 'Will-Webs', setting up vibrations which react on their own lives and those of every individual in the vast network. In tracing Napoléon's career, Hardy begins 'in medias res' with the dynast at the height of his power, threatening England with invasion and being crowned as Emperor at Milan; carries him through his victories and defeats by land and sea, into his abortive Russian campaign, his imprisonment and escape from Elba, the famous one Hundred

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Part I, Fore Scene, pp. 8-9.

Days of his return and his final defeat at Waterloo. But whether the pin-pointed action takes us to the Wessex downs with Hardy's inimitable rustics, to Parliamentary debates, to the most sordid or most enobling aspects of war, or to intimate moments of birth and death, we are always conscious of the brooding Intelligences, personifying as Samuel Hynes has expressed it "the ways in which man, if he were completely conscious of his place in the universe, might respond."<sup>23</sup>

Those who claim to find in The Dynasts a definitive expression of Hardy's views are apt to point to one or other of the Spirits, often the Spirit of the Years, as Hardy's spokesman. Writing in Hardy's own day, W.L. Courtney, for example, concludes: "There is no doubt that what the Spirit of the Years says is what Mr. Hardy thinks."<sup>24</sup> Writing many years later, John Laird concentrates his argument regarding the illogicality of Hardy's metaphysics on the ideas of the Spirit of the Years, and rejects the expressions of the Spirit of the Pities as 'not much more than sentimental bleats'.<sup>25</sup> Others identify Hardy's voice with that of the

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<sup>23</sup>Samuel Hynes, The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 163.

<sup>24</sup>W.L. Courtney, "Mr. Thomas Hardy and Aeschylus", Fortnightly, cvii, 1917, pp. 629-640; p. 633.

<sup>25</sup>John Laird, Philosophical Incursions into English Literature (Cambridge, England, University Press, 1946), p. 193.

Spirit of the Pities, for example, the reader from Australia who, as reported in the Life, wrote of the influence of The Dynasts on his own religious thought:

'You have carried me on to the mountain with Jesus of Nazareth, and, viewing with Him the great conflict below, one chooses with Him to side with the Spirit of the Pities in the belief that they will ultimately triumph....'<sup>26</sup>

A more acceptable view is that of the modern writer, J.O. Bailey, who warns that 'it blurs one's understanding of the drama to read it with the idea that the impressive views of any one Spirit express all that Hardy means.'<sup>27</sup> It seems reasonable to suppose that the complexity of Hardy's personality with his mind open to so many impressions might find its reflection in a composite collage to which all the Spirits, even that embodiment of evil, the Spirit Sinister, make their contribution. Thus, a detailed examination of the attributes of each Spirit should bring us closer to an understanding of his basic position.

The authoritative voice given to the Spirit of the Years, his distinctive explicatory role, and the fact that he has more to say than any of the other Intelligences, lend some support to those who see him as Hardy's interpreter. He expresses the determinism which underlies many of the

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<sup>26</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 337.

<sup>27</sup>J.O. Bailey, Thomas Hardy and the Cosmic Mind (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p. 33.

novels, particularly Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. He asserts continually that the Will -- used in the sense of a compulsive force rather than a purposeful ordering of events -- is the determining factor behind the march of human history. Conscious man, with all his intellectual capacity, may think that he uses his reason to control his destiny, but the use of what Christian theology conceives of as 'free-will' is, in the last analysis, only another aspect of the all-encompassing greater Immanent Will, and thus a contradiction in terms. In such a system man can bring about neither his own salvation nor his own destruction by acts of choice; only in-so-far as he thinks that he has this power can his decisions be regarded as responsible or irresponsible, or worthy of praise or blame. Like Oedipus, Tess, Jude or Sue, he may punish himself for his actions, but his self-flagellation is but the result of his assumption that he is in control, which is in turn an emanation of the same ceaseless Energy or Will underlying all.

By making the urgings of the Will an Unconscious force, as in the Von Hartmann theory, the philosophy expressed by the Spirit of the Years rejects both the Christian moral theology of 'Free-Will', and also the pagan Aeschylean view of Fate as the 'President of the Immortals' who would use man consciously and malignantly for his sport. (It will be remembered that Hardy strongly denied the latter belief

following the criticism of his closing line in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, claiming he used it as an artistic metaphor rather than as a view of life.) When the Rumours report the ominous doings on the stage of Europe, Years ironically suggests that the assembled Spirits

... watch the spectacle of Europe's moves  
In her embroil, as they were self-ordained  
According to the naive and liberal creed  
Of our great-hearted young Compassionates,  
Forgetting the Prime Mover of the gear,  
As puppet-watchers him who pulls the strings.<sup>28</sup>

Bonaparte's 'twitchings', Years remarks, using his attribute of prophecy, will 'twitch him into his lonely grave'.

Similarly

... the frail ones that his flings  
Have made gyrate like animalcula  
In tepid pools

may be subject to a greater material power than their own,  
yet that power must in turn gyrate to the urgings of the  
Immanent

the while unguessed  
Of those it stirs, who (even as ye do) dream,<sup>29</sup>  
Their motions free, their orderings supreme.

What Years seems to be positing here is a very 'limited' rather than a 'free' will on the part of humans. In their seeming freedom they are still un-free, since the desires and

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<sup>28</sup> Hardy, The Dynasts, Fore Scene, p. 13. This, and subsequent speeches given to the Intelligences, are printed in italics in all editions of The Dynasts.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Fore Scene, p. 14.

passions behind their actions came not of themselves, but existed within their own 'becoming', itself a product of the First Cause. Beyond this point neither Years, nor Hardy, nor the philosophers, can go, other than to say with Years:

... something hidden urged  
The giving matter motion ...<sup>30</sup>

and the ancient Spirit leaves his companions to make their own judgments, as must we all:

Hence to the precinct, then,  
.....  
So may ye judge Earth's jackaclocks to be  
Not fugged by one Will, but function-free.<sup>31</sup>

Hardy further elucidates his own views on the matter of the will versus necessity in the previously-quoted letter to Edward Wright, in which he suggests the interesting idea of a possible harmony when all aspects of the Will are in equilibrium:

'The will of a man is ... neither wholly free nor wholly unfree'. When swayed by the Universal Will (which he mostly must be as a subservient part of it) he is not individually free; but whenever it happens that all the rest of the Great Will is in equilibrium the minute portion called one person's will is free, just as a performer's fingers are free to go on playing the pianoforte of themselves when he talks or thinks of something else and the head does not rule them.'<sup>32</sup>

Here Hardy is thinking in terms of a 'collective' will. Since the whole 'Will-web' is made up of the individual

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<sup>30</sup> The Dynasts, Part I, Act I, Sc.. 2, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Part I, Fore Scene, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 335.



wills, each part must have a minute degree of the freedom of the Great Will which can be operative when the whole is in a state of balance.

J.O. Bailey interprets Hardy's term, 'equilibrium' as 'a poise of forces', possible when the impulses of the Will are either felt weakly or resisted:

They are ~~strong~~ in passion or frenzy. They are weakest when they are impeded by weariness or other listlessness of the human brain; and they are resisted by impulses that arise from full consciousness (reflective reason) or compassion strong enough to establish a poise of forces.<sup>33</sup>

Bailey's interpretation fits into the pattern of 'evolutionary meliorism' which emerges as the only possible solution for the dilemma of mankind, and is the one tentatively offered by the Spirit of the Pities. When all the 'limited' individual wills collectively exhibit reason and compassion, then only can the Great Universal Will take on the same attributes and exercise them through a transformed Energy composed of what Freud was later to term the impulses of the id, balanced by compassionate thought.

Even the Spirit of the Years can admit the possibility of change, but with little optimism:

Already change  
Hath played strange pranks since first I brooded here.  
But old Laws operate yet; and phase and phase  
Of men's dynastic and imperial moils  
Shape on accustomed lines....<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bailey, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>34</sup> The Dynasts, Fore Scene, p. 10.



In the Fore Scene the Spirit of the Years indeed shows little trace of feeling of any kind towards the human problem. His dispassionate comment: "I care not how they shape, or what they be", stirs an almost angry response in the Spirit of the Pities: "You seem to have small sense of mercy, Sire?", and a characteristic rejoinder:

Mercy I view, not urge; - nor more than mark  
What designate your titles Good and Ill.  
'Tis not in me to feel with, or against,  
These flesh-hinged mannikins Its hand upwinds  
To click-clack off Its preadjusted laws;<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless the Spirit of the Years humours his compassionate fellow-Spirit when the latter urges him to

... put on and suffer for the nonce  
The feverish fleshings of Humanity,  
.....  
So may thy soul be won to sympathy  
By donning their poor mould.<sup>36</sup>

But as they move, as material shapes, into the British House of Commons where leaders debate the future of Europe, Years reminds Pities: "... my unpassioned essence could not change/ Did I incarn in moulds of all mankind!"<sup>37</sup>

The tension between the Spirits here reflects a similar conflict within the compassionate Hardy when

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act I, Sc. 3, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

confronted with the dispassionate views of the logician and scientist. Mind can identify with the Spirit of the Years, but the heart must feel with the Spirit of the Pities.

It is significant that Years, like Hardy, can countenance views other than his own, though he cannot accept them. In his discussion with Pities as to whether there is any explanation for human suffering, Years defines the Christian doctrine of Original Sin separating man from God, as one of mankind's speculations on the problem:

As one sad story runs, It lends Its heed  
To other worlds, being wearied out with this;  
Wherefore Its mindlessness of earthly woes.  
Some, too, have told at whiles that rightfully  
Its warefulness, Its care, this planet lost  
When in her early growth and crudity  
By bad mad acts of severance men contrived,  
Working such nescience by their own device.-  
Yea, so it stands in certain chronicles,  
Though not in mine.<sup>38</sup>

That Hardy himself had speculated long on the doctrine of 'the Fall' is clear from many of his early poems, for example, "God-Forgotten" and "The Bed-Ridden Peasant - To an Unknown God". The speaker in the latter opines that 'some disaster cleft Thy scheme/ And tore us wide apart',<sup>39</sup> while to the persona in "God-Forgotten" the Lord Most High makes a grim statement regarding His created world:

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Fore Scene, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "The Bed-Ridden Peasant", p. 114.

"Dark, then, its life! For not a cry  
Of aught it bears do I now hear;  
Of its own act the threads were snapt whereby  
Its plaints had reached mine ear."<sup>40</sup>

This theory gives the Spirit of the Pities some hope that such an 'estranged, engrossed or sealed' consciousness could be awakened once more, but the impassive Years at this point is adamant in his negation of the whole argument.

Having rejected the Christian doctrines of 'free will' and 'original sin', the Spirit of the Years proceeds to dismiss Christianity, per se, as simply a 'local cult', one among divers others which have come and gone while the 'wild dramas of the wheeling spheres' were being enacted. The occasion for this rejection is the impressive enthronement of Napoléon as Emperor in the elaborate religious ceremony at the Cathedral of Milan. In their omniscience the Spirits recognize it for what it is -- a gesture of political expediency glossed over by religious rites to give it the semblance of Divine approval. Even the Spirit of the Pities speaks with uncharacteristic bitterness as he sees

... the self-styled servants of the Highest  
Constrained by earthly duress to embrace  
Mighty imperiousness as it were choice,<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., "God-Forgotten", p. 112.

<sup>41</sup>Hardy, The Dynasts, Part I, Act I, Sc. 6, p. 46.

This secularization of the Church's power has so distorted its original image that the Spirit of the Pities at first fails to recognize it

Though in its early, lovingkindly days  
Of gracious purpose it was much to me.<sup>42</sup>

The dichotomy between Christian practice and ethic, a theme which has been traced all through Hardy's novels, had long been eroding Hardy's faith in the efficacy of the Church's function, and probably contributed as much to Hardy's agnosticism as did the impact of Darwinian science and nineteenth-century rationalism. His introduction of the same subject in a work on the epic scale of The Dynasts is another indication of his preoccupation with the religious problem.

While the Spirit of the Pities sadly contemplates the falling-away of the Church's 'gracious purpose', the Spirit Sinister reacts to the hypocrisy of the coronation scene with the cynicism that Hardy himself was sometimes moved to express. Even the prelates, gloats Spirit Sinister, must have gotten some perverted delight out of the irony of the scene:

Do not the prelate's accents falter thin,  
His lips with inheld laughter grow deformed,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

While blessing one whose aim is but to win  
The golden seats that other b——s have warmed?<sup>43</sup>

Strangely enough, for one who claims to be passionless, and unable to 'more than mark/ What designate your titles Good and Ill', the Spirit of the Years shows a marked contrast in his attitudes towards the Spirit of the Pities and the Spirit Sinister. While the former is 'humoured' in his humanitarianism, the latter is rebuked by the serious Years for his 'jesting', bringing a prompt rebuttal that again reflects Hardy's darker moods:

.... if my casual scorn, Father Years, should set thee trying to prove that there is any right or reason in the Universe, thou wilt not accomplish it by Doomsday!<sup>44</sup>

'Father Years', in an uncharacteristic burst of feeling, thereupon equates Spirit Sinister with the concept of Evil as personified in Christian theology:

O would that I could move It to enchain thee,  
And shut thee up a thousand years! - (to cite  
A grim terrestrial tale of one thy like)  
Thou Dragon of the Incorporeal World,<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 46. The speech recalls an episode recorded in the Life. As a boy, listening to a vicar's sermon, Hardy was suddenly struck with the thought that the speaker was inwardly amused at what he was saying, and 'to his great consternation' he could imagine a smile playing over the vicar's countenance. The incident gave Hardy much 'mental distress'. Life, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

The gradual emergence of feeling in the Spirit of the Years, and his closer identification with the Spirit of the Pities as the play unfolds provide a developing thematic thread, foreshadowing the ending. As a unifying dramatic device it also refutes the argument of those who see the ending as a weak, unjustified manipulation, unworthy of the Hardyian style. The symbolic implication of giving this emerging role to the Spirit of the Years, representing interminable time, is unmistakable, and at most can be seen as comparable with the 'still small voice' of hope which pervades even Hardy's darkest writings.

One indication of Years' almost imperceptible movement away from the stasis of the Fore Scene lies in his repeated expression of the helplessness of the Spirits themselves in their relation to the Will. It is true that part of his function is to act as Its spokesman, and he roundly berates Spirit Sinister in the beginning of Act I for assuming to take unto himself a causative role rather than simply that of being a channel of Causation. When Spirit Sinister gloats over 'my Lisbon earthquake ... my French Terror', etc., Years reminds him: "Thinking thou will'st, thou dost but indicate."<sup>46</sup> and it is with a degree of satisfaction that Years sees the limitations of this malignant influence. As he and the Spirit of the Pities

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., Act I, Sc. 1, p. 16.

watch the varied sufferings of mankind, however, there is a less implacable, almost regretful, tone in his reiteration of the power of the Will. 'Why dost thou rack him thus?' asks Pities, as assuming the form of sea-birds, they watch the French Admiral Villeneuve being torn between two possible courses -- obedience to Napoleon's commands, and his own better naval judgment. To Pities' queries, Years replies:

I say, as I have said long heretofore,  
I know but narrow freedom: Feel'st thou not  
We are in Its hand, as he? - Here, as elsewhere,  
We do but as we may; no further dare.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea that the varied aspects of man's thought, as represented by the Spirits, are impelled by the same energizing force that animates his compelling emotions lends weight to the theory of emerging meliorism. Evolving, thinking, awareness grown to the point of reason, could establish the 'poise of forces' between thought and passion, necessary for stability in the universe. Years, indeed, shows some inconsistency in his expressed relationship to the Will, and stretches his own 'narrow freedom', when he himself takes on an acting function in the matter of Villeneuve's death. When the Admiral's fall from grace leads to the point of suicide which at other times he has resisted, it is Years who, using both compassion and logic, whispers 'Now' into his ear, granting him the coveted exit from a

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act II, Sc. 3, p. 57.



life grown intolerable.

A similar feeling for man's fate is shown at the moment when the English statesman Pitt, worn with cares of state and decision-making meets his troubled end. Again the Spirits hover round. Years' wish to

... leave him to pass out in peace,  
And seek the silence unperturbedly.

is mockingly viewed by Spirit Sinister:

Even ITS official Spirit can show ruth  
At man's fag end, when his destruction's sure!<sup>48</sup>

Years' answer: "It suits us ill to cavil each with each....

ITS slaves we are: ITS slaves must ever be!"<sup>49</sup> carries in its epithet an implied censure of the whole plan of existence.

Yet throughout the atrocities of war which Hardy portrays with such terrifying intensity and detail, the Spirit of the Years continues his role as official spokesman of the Will, reminding the suffering Pities over and over that as things are so must they be; that the Will is but a 'rapt Determinator', knowing neither good nor evil; and that the ability of Spirits and man to think and feel came 'unmeant', as a 'luckless, tragic chance', an 'unreckoned incident' of the All-Urging Will.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act VI, Sc. 8, p. 172.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 172.



Only towards the end of the After Scene does Years disclose in an expression of disillusionment that matches Hardy's own, how closely he can identify with Pitie's position. Listening to the latter's impassioned adoration of a possible Benevolence which might emerge with a Conscious Will, Years surprises his listeners:

You almost charm my long philosophy.  
Out of my strong-built thought, and bear me back  
To when I thanksgave thus.... Ay, start not, Shades;  
In the Foregone I knew what dreaming was,  
And could let raptures rule! But not so now.  
Yea, I psalmed thus and thus.... But not so now!<sup>50</sup>

Echoes of the same nostalgia that prompted Hardy's "Afternoon Service at Mellstock" in Moments of Vision can be sensed in the diction and atmosphere, while the repetition of negatives sounds the knell for a lost, but still longed-for faith.

Undeniably, then, much of the Hardyan vision of life comes through in the utterances of the Spirit of the Years, but the picture is incomplete without a more thorough study of what is represented by the Spirit of the Pitie's. Although he is referred to by the Spirit of the Years as 'the mild one ... too touched with human fate', this Spirit exhibits certain resilient characteristics. "Affection ever was illogical"<sup>51</sup> scoffs Years; but Pitie's is not lacking in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., Part III, After Scene, p. 254.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act I, Sc. 6, p. 50.

either logic or determination. We note, for example, his continued insistence on posing the question 'Why?' on every occasion when Years elucidates the 'What' of existence. At first the question is all-embracing, concerned with the overall working of the system: "Why doth It so and so, and ever so, / This viewless, voiceless Turner of the Wheel?"<sup>52</sup> and Years' explanation of Its impercipient nature fails to satisfy him. Even when shown again the surrealistic, visual image of the anatomized Will, like the interior of a brain laid open before a dissector's eye, he cannot accept it: "And yet, for very sorriness / I cannot own the weird phantasma real;"<sup>53</sup> Again, he counters, if this mechanistic concept of the universe is the true one, it only poses for him a still larger question, as to why, in such a system, cognizance and feeling should have been granted to such atoms of the universe as man, in Years' terms 'these flesh-hinged mannikins'. To Pities, this is the greatest illogicality of all. "They are shapes that bleed, mere mannikins or no, / And each has parcel in the total Will."<sup>54</sup> At one point, like a probing counsel for the defence of universal man, Pities

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Part I, Fore Scene, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Part I, Act I, Sc. 6, p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, Part I, Fore Scene, p. 10.

backs the Spirit of the Years into a corner with his 'Whys' and the latter's logic backfires into helplessness: "...ask the Immanent!// I am but an accessory of Its works," to which Pitie's rebuttal comes quickly:

How ask the aim of unrelaxing Will  
Tranced in Its purpose to unknowingness?  
(If thy words, Ancient Phantom, token true).<sup>55</sup>

Years can but respond, "Thou answerest well. But cease to ask of me." Thus rational thought is as helpless as Compassionate feeling in solving the riddle. Over and over, as the Spirits watch the battle campaigns, Pitie ponders the problem -- "... the intolerable antilogy/ Of making figments feel."<sup>56</sup> Even the Spirit Ironie, who sees as a 'comedy' what Pitie terms a 'tragedy', grants he has a point. "Logic's in that," says Ironie. "IT does not, I must own, quite play the game."<sup>57</sup>

Many times the views expressed by the Pitie reflect what has been termed the 'absurd' by the modern nihilistic existentialist, or from the Christian view-point, the 'dark night of the soul' experienced by every seeker after truth. Pitie, with her eternal Why's identifies with the travelling

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., Act I, Sc. 2, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Act IV, Sc. 6, p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

Shade of the Earth in her similar questionings:

What boots it, Sire,

When all such tedious conjuring could be shunned  
By uncreation? Howsoever wise  
The governance of these massed mortalities,  
A juster wisdom his who should have ruled  
They had not been.<sup>58</sup>

Later, watching the death of Nelson, Pitie makes the same criticism:

... out of tune, the Mode and meritless  
That quickens sense in shapes whom, thou hast said;  
Necessitation sways!<sup>59</sup>

The 'luckless, tragic chance' by which man has groped  
from impercipient to percipient is thought by Pitie to  
have been

... unneeded  
In the economy of Vitality,  
Which might have ever kept a sealed cognition  
As doth the Will Itself.<sup>60</sup>

The same negativism expressed by the Shade of the  
Earth and the Spirit of the Pitie is echoed by the earthling  
Villeneuve, contemplating suicide:

... Why not cease?  
When, as Shades whisper in the chasms' night,  
"Better, far better, no percipient here." -<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, Sc. 2, pp. 24-25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Act IV, Sc. 4, p. 127.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Part I, Act V, Sc. 6, p. 134.

It is found also in an early poem of Hardy's, when he bids the unborn child to 'Breathe not', but 'cease silently'.<sup>62</sup>

This negative attitude is, however, but one aspect of the thought pattern of Pities, whose final stand is so important to the dramatic development. Unsatisfied with Years' explanations, he considers other hypotheses. Could the Immanent Will be a malignant power, delighting in the pain of its own creations? Considering this possibility he quotes Sophocles who 'dubbed the Will, "the gods."':

Truly said he,  
"Such gross injustice to their own creation  
Burdens the time with mournfulness for us,  
And for themselves with shame."<sup>63</sup>

As the drama unfolds scene after scene of suffering man, this thought intensifies. For example, the pathetic sight of the dying, mentally-weakened King George III, surrounded with his ironic trappings of royal power, and trembling with fear at his doctors, evokes a later outburst from Pities:

The tears that lie about this plightful scene  
Of heavy travail in a suffering soul,  
Might drive Compassion past her patience  
To hold that some mean, monstrous ironist  
Had built this mistimed fabric of the Spheres  
To watch the throbbings of its captive lives,  
(The which may Truth forfend) ...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hardy, "To an Unborn Pauper Child", Collected Poems, p. 116.

<sup>63</sup> Hardy, The Dynasts, Part I, Act V, Sc. 4, p. 127.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Act VI, Sc. 5, p. 382.

It is in this state of desperate identification with human suffering that the mind of Pities reaches out, in a gesture paralleled by that of helpless humanity universally, to some indefinable, unknowable source of Good:

Something within me aches to pray  
To some Great Heart, to take away  
This evil day, this evil day!<sup>65</sup>

At other times Pities hypothesizes that even if the Will is, as Years insists, an unconscious entity, it has the possibility of evolving into consciousness like its atom, man. Surely such a conscious Will would be moved to compassion rather than evil. Pities then finds himself associating the Will with a possible source of Good, and instinctively calls upon It for help, as does man upon God. Contemplating the impending slaughter at Austerlitz, his Chorus pleads to such a Benevolence:

O Great Necessitator, heed us now!  
And dull to suffering those whom it befalls  
To quit their lodgment in a flesh that galls!<sup>66</sup>

But the music of the Pities is drowned by the counterpoise of the Chorus of Ironie spirits who, recalling and relating the varied pattern of history with its mixture of madness and sanity, can see nothing but 'choicess throws

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Act VI, Sc. 3, p. 149.

of good and bad' as the doom of mankind.

In the question of Necessity versus Free Will, as the motivating factor behind men's actions, the Spirit of the Pities cannot accept completely the doctrine of the older and more experienced Spirits. In the first Act he intimates his belief that man has to take some responsibility for his own decisions. As the Spirits discuss the diplomatic relationships between England and France, Pities remarks: "Ill-chanced it that the English monarch George/ Did not respond to the said Emperor!" -- a move which even Spirit Sinister admits might have "marred the European broil/ And sheathed all swords and silenced every gun."<sup>67</sup> Yet for not having spoiled such 'good sport' Sinister thanks the Will, and not King George!

Again, at the Coronation, Pities cannot help trying to warn Napoleon against his lust for power, and to guide him towards his better instincts, intimating a power of choice:

Would it not seemlier be to shut thy heart  
To these unhealthy splendours? -- helmet thee  
For her thou swar'st-to first, fair Liberty?<sup>68</sup>

Reproved as an 'Officious sprite' by the Spirit of the Years who maintains that Napoleon's acts 'do but outshape

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act I, Sc. 2, pp. 20-21.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act I, Sc. 6, pp. 48-49.



Its governing', Pitie bursts out in rebellious defiance:

"... This tale of Will/ And Life's impulsion by Incognizance/  
I cannot take."<sup>69</sup>

The giving of this point of view to the Spirit of the Pitie is another instance of Hardy's looking at all sides of the question. As a moral thinker, he knows the danger to society if man, per se, accepts unreservedly the doctrine of helplessness, justifying all actions in name of his utter impotence to resist forces beyond his control; and it is the figure of Napoléon Bonaparte, looming large over the face of Europe, that he makes the symbol of this helpless rationalization and its inherent danger. While the Spirit of the Years sees Napoléon as being

Moved like a figure on a lantern-slide,  
Which ...  
The all-compelling crystal pane but drags  
Whither the showman wills.<sup>70</sup>

Pitie sees within him a pull of forces in which his own original goal to 'level dynasts down to journeymen' has been displaced by his urge for power

... his active soul, fair Freedom's child,  
Makes strange decline, now labours to achieve  
The thing it overthrew.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act IV, Sc. 5, p. 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Part I, Act I, Sc. 6, p. 46.



In Part I of the drama, although Napoleon sees the fortunes of war as 'ordained by impish chance or destiny', which he must take in his stride, he has little real cognizance of himself as Years sees him -- merely a pawn in the hand of the Will. In Parts II and III, however, he begins to assume that role in his own thinking, and this acceptance is the beginning of his ultimate downfall:

Some force within me, baffling mine intent,  
Harries me onward, whether I will or no.  
My star, my star is what's to blame -- not I.  
It is unswervable!<sup>72</sup>

Harried by this thought, he continues his aggressions, until in Pitie's words: "... peoples are enmeshed in new calamity!" When Years comments that Napoleon is one of the few in Europe who discern the working of the Will, Pitie answers with deep insight: "If that be so, / Better for Europe lacked he such discerning!"<sup>73</sup> Pitie here recognizes that for man to renounce completely the idea of his freedom of choice is to give free rein within him to whatever passions are most compelling. He obviously sees Napoleon's acceptance of the theory as a diminution of his better instincts and a passive denial of responsibility for his actions. For example, when sacrificing Josephine on the altar of political expediency and dynastic hopes, Napoleon echoes Years' concept:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Part II, Act I, Sc. 8, p. 224.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

We are but thistle-globes on Heaven's high gales,  
And whither blown, or when, or how, or why,  
Can choose us not at all!...<sup>74</sup>

That Napoleon was himself conscious of the pull of forces within him is indicated in the opening scene of Part III, when contemplating the invasion of Russia he suddenly desponds:

Since Lodi Bridge  
The force I then felt move me moves me on  
Whether I will or no; and oftentimes  
Against my better mind. . . . Why am I here?  
- By laws imposed on me inexorably!<sup>75</sup>

But the concept helps assuage his sense of guilt prior to Quatre Bras and Waterloo when a vision of corpses and skeletons gazing reproachfully at him disturbs his sleep:

Why, why should this reproach be dealt me now?  
Why hold me my own master, if I be  
Ruled by the pitiless Planet of Destiny?<sup>76</sup>

Aptly, it is Spirit Sinister who sees the advantage that the evil aspect of man's mind can derive from the irresponsibility accompanying belief in man's impotency. When Napoleon at Waterloo uses tactics which Marshal Ney describes as 'not war-worthy', Napoleon's defence, given

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Part II, Act II, Sc. 6, p. 256.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., Part III, Act I, Sc. 1, p. 11 (Vol. II).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Act VI, Sc. 3, p. 183.

with a 'sour, sardonic scowl' is that he is 'choiceless'.

Nothing could please the Spirit Sinister more:

Excellent Emperor!

He tops all human greatness; in that he  
To lesser grounds of greatness adds the prime,  
Of being without a conscience.<sup>77</sup>

At Waterloo, powerless to send reinforcements to Marshal Ney, there is double meaning in Napoleon's comment: "Life's curse begins, I see, / With helplessness!", and his irony is reinforced by his final admission to the Spirit of the Years who comes to him as he drowns: "... 'tis true, I have ever known / That such a Will I passively obeyed!"<sup>78</sup>

The use of the adverb 'passively' implies on Napoleon's part some recognition of possible self-determining resistance as intimated by the Spirit of the Pities, but adamantly denied by the Spirit of the Years who sees such dynasts as he

... in the elemental ages' chart.  
Like meanest insects on obscurest leaves  
But incidents and grooves of Earth's unfolding;  
Or as the brazen rod that stirs the fire  
Because it must.<sup>79</sup>

The impasse between the Spirit of the Years and the Spirit of the Pities over the matter of freedom, non-freedom,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Part III, Act VII, Sc. 8, p. 237.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., Act VII, Sc. 9, p. 248.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Part III, Act VII, Sc. 9, p. 250.

or limited freedom of will is at the heart of Hardy's moral and philosophical dilemma. No one reading his novels and much of his poetry can deny that his inclinations lie strongly in the direction of deterministic belief. In The Dynasts that which is determined seems to be a state of continual and meaningless flux, the only purpose and result being "...to alter evermore/ Things from what they were before."<sup>80</sup> as the Chorus of Ironie Spirits express it. Yet to subscribe wholly to this deterministic theory would be to admit a society ever vulnerable to a destructive, conscienceless irresponsibility on man's part, as damaging as a consciously malignant Will. Can Hardy, then, with his concern for a society of man caught in this situation, and his strong leaning toward determinism find any answer to his dilemma other than a fatalistic, pessimistic acceptance? Again we must turn to the aspect of his thought as represented by the Pities, and a further interpretation of the nature of the Will.

In the Fore Scene when the first anatomized Will-web is displayed, the Spirit of Pities contemplates it thoughtfully, and after a pause, describing what he sees, comments that among the 'Twining and serpentining' coils there are

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Act VII, Sc. 7, p. 246.

Also retracting threads like gossamers -  
 Except in being irresistible -  
 Which complicate with some, and balance all.<sup>81</sup>

This idea of resisting elements within the nature of the Will itself, a metaphor for evolving compassion as part of man's emerging percipience, contains the seed of the philosophy of evolutionary meliorism which Pities develops in the After Scene. An awareness of compassion, pulling against other instinctive desires, can come about only in the presence of pain, for without pain, compassion itself could have no existence, as good can have no meaning where there is no concept of evil.

Occasionally throughout the drama, against the background of war's horror and cruelty, Hardy gives little close-ups of this positive force at work. At Talavera the Spirits react to the sight of enemy soldiers during a lull in the hostilities drinking from opposite sides of the same stream, in the process some of them 'grasping hands across the rill,/ Sealing their sameness as earth's sojourners.' Pities sees their actions as natural gestures -- 'unstudied piteous pantomimes!'; Spirit Ironie views it as a humorous accompaniment to the Will's illogicality; while Spirit Sinister fears that the ironic gesture might 'wake up the Unconscious Itself, and tempt It to let all the gory clock-work

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., Fore Scene, p. 14. (Italics mine.)

of the show run down ..."<sup>82</sup> -- an interesting and significant remark, for paradoxically, Hardy is here giving to the Spirit Sinister an admission that evolutionary meliorism can be the solution to the problem of war.

Again, in the tragedy of the French army at the Beresina Bridge, amid the scenes of havoc when the weak are pushed over by the strong, for a brief moment attention is focussed on the women camp-followers making last desperate efforts to protect their children -- "... motherhood, sheerly sublime in her last despairing, and lighting her darkest declension with limitless love."<sup>83</sup>

Napoléon, always seen by the Pities as a kind of tragic hero torn by conflicting impulses, is given also his moment of humanitarian sublimity. At the painful birth of his son to Marie-Louise, he is asked the soul-searing question: "Which life is to be saved?" Some instinct greater than his dynastic hope for an heir forces his reply: "Then save the mother, pray! Think but of her; / It is her privilege, and my command."<sup>84</sup>

Pain and tragedy then, on a universal scale, could constitute the series of necessary 'sub-lunar shocks' which,

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Part II, Act IV, Sc. 5, pp. 306-7.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Part III, Act I, Sc. 10, p. 43 (Vol. II).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Part II, Act VI, Sc. 3, p. 367.

Pities thinks, in aeons of time could break the nescience of the All-encompassing Will.

The idea of developing consciousness in the Will of the Universe is not unfraught with danger -- a danger comparable to that involved in the concept of complete freedom of the individual. Would total consciousness informing the Will necessarily bring about the desired poise of forces, destructive passions being kept in check by reason and compassionateness? A positive answer is suggested by the Chorus of the Pities who, hailing the envisioned Conscious Will as one 'Great and Good' claim that:

Thou hadst not shaped such souls as we  
If tendermercy lacked in Thee!<sup>85</sup>

Another aspect of Hardy's evolutionary meliorism underlies this speech. The very existence of the Pities as one aspect of man's thought suggests the role that individuals may play in the evolutionary process, a concept meditated on by Hardy in another poem:

Part is mine of the general Will,  
Cannot my share in the sum of sources  
Bend a digit the poise of forces,  
And a fair desire fulfil?<sup>86</sup>

This giving of a functional role to the individual has also its dangerous side, one which is contemplated

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., Part III, After Scene, p. 252 (Vol. II)

<sup>86</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "He Wonders About Himself", p. 480.



perhaps more facetiously than seriously by the Spirits Ironic who at one point see Napoleon's lust for dynastic power as being so strong that his very wishes are helping to shape events: "The Will grew conscious at command, / And ordered issue as he planned."<sup>87</sup>

Hardy can but hope that the nature of an emergent Conscious Will, comprising both the reason and compassion of its components, man, will be such as is hymned by the Spirit of the Pities in answer to Years' question in the After Scene: "What wouldst have hoped and had the Will to be?" Perhaps it is merely a throwback to Hardy's religious background, or nostalgia for his lost faith, but Pities' answer is couched in words paraphrasing one of the oldest canticles of the Christian Church's liturgy, the Magnificat, -- Mary's song of rejoicing at the impending Incarnation<sup>88</sup>:

To Thee whose eye all Nature owns,  
Who hurlest Dynasts from their thrones,  
And liftest those of low estate  
We sing, with Her men consecrate!<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>The Dynasts, Part II, Act VI, Sc. 3, p. 374.

<sup>88</sup>From the Magnificat: He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek.

<sup>89</sup>Hardy, The Dynasts, Part III, After Scene, p. 252.



Although Hardy claims he has failed to experience an external God, divinely revealed, he uses the Christian concept of a loving God as his metaphor for an envisioned 'Well-Willer', and Christ's code of loving kindness as the basis of a 'mended universe'.

Even the Pities, however, face the possibility that a Conscious Will might not result in amelioration. In their final Choric Song there is a significant antithesis, in which both eventualities are explored. The first Semichorus shows the positive hope, though still in questioning form:

Nay; - shall not Its blindness break?  
 Yea, must not Its heart awake,  
     Promptly tending  
     To Its mending  
 In a genial germinating purpose, and for loving-kindness'  
 sake?<sup>90</sup>

The second shows the negative alternative, and here Hardy voices all the pessimism of the twentieth-century nihilist, advocating as the only solution global suicide:

Should It never  
 Curb or cure  
 Aught whatever  
 Those endure  
 Whom It quickens, let them darkle to extinction swift  
 and sure.<sup>91</sup>

Even Father Time's suicide note in Jude the Obscure held not a darker solution to the problem of human pain.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., After Scene, p. 255.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

I have suggested earlier that a composite picture of Hardy the man might be gleaned from a study of the Spirits as a whole, for there is something of each of them in his thinking as expressed in his art. The deterministic view of the Spirit of the Years reveals his rational mind, seeking for scientific, non-emotional answers to the questions of existence. With seeming impassivity Years looks imperturbably at the pattern of the Ages, accepts its inevitability with stoicism, only at the end revealing his underlying feelings, his deadened hopes and disillusionment. As Carl Weber points out, the Spirit of the Years is close to the person Hardy wanted to be, but could not learn to be.<sup>92</sup> Hardy, too, attempts to take his "full look at the Worst" and to accept it stoically, but cold stoicism cannot long co-exist with strong compassion and even hope as expressed through the Spirit of the Pities. Paradoxically, in his actual relationships with people, biographers reveal, Hardy found it difficult to communicate this sensitivity and was thought by many to be, like Years, somewhat cold and unfeeling. Only through the medium of his art could his capacity for tenderness be fully expressed and never more clearly than in the voice of the Pities.

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<sup>92</sup>Carl J. Weber, Hardy of Wessex, p. 245.

Nevertheless at times Hardy attempts to expose with a kind of clinical detachment the real situations of life hidden behind the façade of the ordinary and conventional; as for example in his later volumes of poems Satires of Circumstances and Time's Laughing Stocks, and here his identification with the Spirit Ironic is unmistakable. Throughout his novels and short stories irony is one of the hall-marks of his style, but he suggests the tragedy of the ironic situation more than its comedy. Again, there are occasions when his detailed emphasis on horrors bespeaks almost a fascination recalling the Spirit Sinister's disposition and often resulting in touches of 'black humour'. Note, for example, the gusto with which Hardy has the British burghers tell the grotesque tale of Nelson's body being 'pickled in a cask of sperrits' which was broached by a group of thirsty sailors who 'drank him dry'!

Indeed this aspect of Hardy's mind has been interpreted by some critics, notably T.S. Eliot, as evidence of excessive morbidity. Discussing the intrusion of the diabolic into modern literature, Eliot sees Hardy's propensity for the bizarre and horrible as a symptom of decadence:

He seems to me, ... to have written as nearly for the sake of 'self-expression' as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome or

edifying matter of communication.<sup>93</sup>

Eliot, using one of Hardy's short stories<sup>94</sup> as an illustration, speaks of its author's tendency to create 'a world of pure Evil', in order to 'provide a satisfaction for some morbid emotion'. Although this extreme view can be refuted -- The Dynasts with its emphasis on the Pities is a case in point, as is also the compassionateness evinced in his novels -- Eliot has probed, but I think exaggerated, an area of Hardy's mind shown by the Spirit Sinister.

It is significant that in the last meeting of the Spirits in the After Scene, which logically should give us Hardy's own final view, Spirit Sinister, though present at the colloquy, is given no speaking part. This diminution of the evil aspect of man's mind in the final composite picture of the Intelligences parallels the dominant position given to the Spirit of the Pities throughout the scene as the drama moves towards its apocalyptic vision of hope.

Hardy indicates that the last stirring speech is spoken by a Chorus which he does not further identify. It follows, however, the Semichoruses of the Years and of the Pities in which they have debated the form, whether

<sup>93</sup>T.S. Eliot, After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy. One of the Page-Barbour Lectures given at the University of Virginia, 1933. (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1934), p. 54.

<sup>94</sup>"Barbara of the House of Grebe", from A Group of Noble Dames, 1891. First published in The Graphic, 1890. It is probably the best example of Hardy's 'Gothic' tendency.

restorative or indifferent, that an awakened Will might take. We can therefore, I believe, safely assume that the unnamed Chorus includes both the Years and the Pities blending at last into a mutual expression of hope

That the rages  
Of the ages  
Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from the  
darts that were,  
Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashion all  
things fair!<sup>95</sup>

Since Years, the embodiment of Reason, has finally in this scene admitted also his 'feeling', the assumption is logical. If, on the other hand, Hardy means the final Chorus to be that of the Pities only, it is still<sup>an</sup> indication of his own position that he has given them the last word.

It may be argued that Hardy has got nowhere in answering the question he has raised -- that he ends with merely a sentimental hope for better things. To some degree this is true, but at least he has advanced an hypothesis as a result of this exploration. His theory of evolutionary meliorism gives some rationale for the existence of pain and suffering as the necessary 'sub-lunar shocks' in a universe that in the pattern of illimitable ages may be moving imperceptibly nearer perfectibility. The concept of a collective Universal Will in which every individual will, activated by reason and

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<sup>95</sup>Hardy, The Dynasts, Part III, After Scene, p. 256.

compassion, can act as a little leaven for the whole is admittedly idealistic, but it is this same concept that lies behind every concerted effort for social betterment. Again, others may argue that the more optimistic stance of Hardy in The Dynasts is inconsistent with the tone of his novels. While this is true, there is no great anomaly regarding basic themes. The same plea echoes throughout Jude the Obscure, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and all the major works -- the plea for universal loving-kindness as the only 'way to the Better', and the only residue of the Christian faith that can remain and be operative when one has lost the vision of a supernatural God.

Regarding the particular problem of war, the tragedy around which The Dynasts is built, there is other evidence that Hardy sincerely felt some optimism regarding its final resolution. Though in his life-time the Boer War had broken the 'Pax Britannica' of the Victorian Age, the cessation of hostilities moved him to write a significant, and in view of later events, very poignant poem, "The Sick Battle God" (published 1901). He recalls the darker ages when men found joy in war, and contrasts them with a saner age: '... new light spread', '... modern meditation broke/ His spell ...', '... penmen's pleadings dealt a stroke', and 'seeds of' ... sympathy/Were sown ...'. Even though wars may arise, says Hardy, '... zest grows cold', so that he ends his poem on a

triumphant note: "The Battle-god is god no more."<sup>96</sup> Such convictions must have influenced the ending of The Dynasts. Yet in the poem there is one ominous and prophetic note -- that although the stirring glory of battle no longer 'gladdens champions', men may still 'do and dare' in a modern warfare that has lost its glamour.

The shock that came with the outbreak of World War I in 1914 meant for Hardy a second loss of faith -- that in evolutionary meliorism -- equally as traumatic as his earlier loss of belief in Christian dogmas. One of the saddest entries in the Life concerns this new disillusionment:

The war gave the 'coup-de-grace' to any conception he might have nourished of a fundamental ultimate wisdom at the back of things....<sup>97</sup>

War also lent an added bitterness to his meditations on a so-called 'Christian' society. He sees it once again as not being able to live up to its humanitarian tenets to which he, though an agnostic, could whole-heartedly subscribe. Many of his later poems express his two-fold disillusionment and there is often a note of cynicism paralleling that of Napoleon's speech at Borodino. On seeing the Russian ecclesiastics carrying their icons in a ritual

<sup>96</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 368.



procession among the troops before the battle, Napoleon reflects:

... Not content to stand on their own strength,  
They try to hire the enginry of Heaven.  
I am no theologian, but I laugh  
That men can be so grossly logicless,  
When war, defensive or aggressive either,  
Is in its essence Pagan, and opposed  
To the whole gist of Christianity!<sup>98</sup>

Hardy's assertion that 'he would probably not have ended The Dynasts as he did end it if he could have seen what was going to happen within a few years'<sup>99</sup> is tantamount to the sadness expressed in one of his last poems:

We are getting to the end of visioning  
The impossible within this universe,  
Such as that better whiles may follow worse,  
And that our race may mend by reasoning.<sup>100</sup>

But his final verdict in this poem is not an indictment of mankind, for, he continues, the carnage done to nation by nation which he prophetically suggests 'They may again', is not done 'warely, or from taste,' but 'tickled mad by some demonic force' against which even man's intelligence and compassionate instincts often wage a losing battle.

There is an implication in this acknowledgement which is not a complete refutation of the ending of The

<sup>98</sup> The Dynasts, Part III, Act I, Sc. 4, p. 26 (Vol. II).

<sup>99</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 368

<sup>100</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 886.



Dynasts, but certainly a modification of its idealism. His assumption, or hope, in The Dynasts, that evolving consciousness on the part of the Universal Will would lead to perfectibility -- an Edenic state in which It would 'fashion all things fair' -- has been modified to a recognition that a Conscious Will could have evil aspects as well as good, and that Reason may not necessarily go hand in hand with Compassion. Thus Hardy's final view of existence would seem to be one in which continuous tension rather than benignity is seen as the fundamental nature of the Life Force; a concept not far from the dualistic Christian view of life as a moral, though more individual, struggle between the evil and the good.

Notwithstanding his retractions, the importance of The Dynasts in the Hardy canon is undeniable, both as an expression of his art and of his philosophy. In no other of his works is there such a deliberate effort to draw together in coherent pattern his thoughts on the nature of life and of the universe; to share with his readers his own gleanings from philosophy; or to engage their minds in the provocative questions that so obsessed him. As a statement of his thought, though admittedly indefinite, it stands at the apex of his writing, for, as I shall attempt to show in the following chapter, the poems written before The Dynasts foreshadow, and those written after, grow out of and

reiterate its ponderings.

Yet in making a final appraisal of The Dynasts one must admit that in the greatness of its scope lies also its weakness. To attempt to build a work of such magnitude upon so tentative a philosophical base is to invite inconsistencies. For example, his endeavour to avoid anthropomorphism in his concept of the Will does not wholly succeed. To me, in spite of the neuter gender, 'It' comes through less as an immanence than as an external personality, not too different from the 'Great Disposer of events' to whom the orthodox Nelson entrusts his cause. Certainly the final picture of the Conscious Will as envisaged by the hopeful Spirits at the end is so close to the Christian-God-concept that one can almost conceive of Hardy as making the leap into faith!

Admittedly Hardy did his utmost to avoid ambiguity, and it was a masterful stroke to express his own ambivalence in the form of debating Spirits, yet the fluctuating nature of the argument grows tiresome at times. Since the drama is primarily philosophical in its focus, one looks for, but actually fails to find, a resolution in this area. At the same time the emphasis detracts from the interest in the vast historical pageant behind it. The real characters of the play are the Abstractions, and earthlings tend to lose their significance.

The one on whom he does focus, Napoléon Bonaparte, presents another anomaly, for if it is to be an epic, The Dynasts needs a hero rather than a puppet. Only if we see him through the eyes of Pities, and I have tried to present him partially in this light, does he take on any heroic stature. Is he, or is he not, a creature of some free-will? At times we glimpse him as a modern Macbeth, but his final moment of self-analysis in the wood of Bossu shows him still unsure of his role in the scheme of things. His ambiguity is apparent in his soliloquy when he almost petulantly blames Fate for not having made him a war-hero like Nelson, and for foiling his earlier effort at suicide: "Why did the death-drops fail to bite me close/ I took at Fontainebleau?"<sup>101</sup> Yet, recalling his own efforts and choices in the course of his life-history he assumes self-responsibility in his grandiloquent and somewhat Shakespearean lines: "Great men are meteors that consume themselves/ To light the earth. This is my burnt-out hour."<sup>102</sup> The question of Napoleon as hero or anti-hero is tantamount to Hardy's own religious problem -- the matter of humanity's 'free-will' -- and I feel that he never satisfactorily

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<sup>101</sup> Hardy, The Dynasts, Part III, Act VII, Sc. 9, p. 248.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

resolves it.

Nevertheless, if the drama fails, it is a magnificent failure, as even Hardy's most implacable critic, T.S. Eliot, has conceded:

This giant panorama is hardly to be called a success, but it is essentially to present a vision, and 'sacrifices' the philosophy to the vision, as all great dramas do. Mr. Hardy has apprehended his matter as a poet and an artist.<sup>103</sup>

In the main, Hardy's contemporaries recognized its worth, for it was primarily for The Dynasts that Hardy was awarded the Order of Merit in 1910. Another tribute from a group of one hundred and six young poets on his eighty-first birthday shows its impact on the newer literary thought of the age. Stating that he had "crowned a great prose with a noble poetry" it concludes:

We thank you, Sir, for all that you have written,  
... but, most of all, perhaps, for The Dynasts.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen & Co., 1920), Footnote to the essay "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama", p. 66.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., F. Hardy, Life, p. 413..

## CHAPTER V

### THE POET'S VOICE

Hardy's earliest literary aspirations took the form of poetry which was not to see the light of publication until long after he had made his mark in prose. His return to this genre was occasioned, I feel, not so much by reaction to the criticism of his later novels as by the conviction that he had said all he could say in fiction, and by his instinctive need to impose a poetic form on ideas and feelings that had crystallized into strong definite themes during his intensive work as a novelist. Pervasive among these themes is the familiar religious questioning and debate which has been traced as a unifying element throughout his previous work.

When his first volume, Wessex Poems, appeared in 1898, according to R.G. Cox who has done considerable research into Hardy criticism, 'reviewers were at first inclined to treat these as the usual sort of indulgence by an established prose writer, not to be taken very seriously.'<sup>1</sup> This attitude

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<sup>1</sup>R.G. Cox (ed.), Thomas Hardy, The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), Intro. p. xxxvii.

was to be modified, partly since The Dynasts showed his versatility, and partly because the amazing burst of creative energy in his later years produced such a large body of poetry with an elusive quality and power that critics, who can easily spot all his weaknesses of style, have found hard to define. His recognition as a poet of relevance to our times has grown in the later decades of the century and modern critics see him, not only as a poet in his own right, but as a major influence on later twentieth-century poets. Donald Davie, for example, in a recent study claims that

... in British poetry of the last fifty years ...  
the most far-reaching influence, for good or ill,  
has not been Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound;  
not Lawrence, but Hardy.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of critics' views, there is no doubt that Hardy took himself seriously as a poet. It is significant that throughout the Life there are many references to the essential nature of poetry as he saw it, and to the importance of developing a technique that would adequately communicate his ideas in this genre. Taken together with his important 'Apology' prefacing Late Lyrics and Earlier, they form a kind of 'Ars Poetica', while his recorded comments regarding novel-writing are, by comparison, somewhat nonchalant and off-hand. Furthermore, as Jean Brooks has so well illustrated

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 3.

in Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure, there is throughout all Hardy's prose a response to life that is essentially a poetic vision, one that is expressed in the structural development of his novels, his recurring patterns of imagery, his creation of tone and atmosphere, and the many unforgettable prose passages which show that, in the words of C. Day-Lewis, 'the novelist and the poet were one'.<sup>3</sup> Hardy's own claim that poetry is the most effective medium for the sharing of philosophical ideas, and his admission that 'there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of ... poetry than in all the novels',<sup>4</sup> make his poems a rich source of insight into his heart and mind and their study a fitting and natural conclusion to this survey.

To choose representative poems for discussion from the over nine hundred titles presents a real problem, particularly since the same themes and attitudes are recurrent. In so large a collection there are bound to be many poems that are less than admirable artistically, even though Hardy carefully edited each group before publication and destroyed the manuscripts of many poems which he thought to be inferior. For the purpose of this study, intrinsic merit

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<sup>3</sup>C. Day Lewis, "The Lyrical Poetry" from Thomas Hardy, by R.A. Scott-James and C. Day-Lewis (London: The Longman Group, Ltd., 1965), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup>Florence Hardy, Life, p. 392.

will not be largely the criterion, but rather the subject matter; although it will be found, I believe, that the poems in which Hardy portrayed his own personal loss of God, disillusionment and search for meaning are generally the ones in which he reached his highest level as a poet. It is true that at times Hardy's 'philosophy' tends to get in the way of his poetry, giving it a ponderousness which is less appealing than the lighter tone of which he is capable.

However, Hardy's particular vision of life is not confined to his relatively few purely philosophical poems, but is implicit in the colouring given to even his simplest folk-tales, love poems or descriptive lyrics. Irving Howe has, I feel, put his finger on one of the secrets of Hardy's more successful poems in the following assessment:

He writes most effectively when his mind has been set in motion by some intellectual difficulty and turns back - though what I must put here as a sequence was in actuality simultaneous - to a remembered or imagined situation which serves him as an emblem of the difficulty. As the idea "melts" into the rendered experience, so that in the course of the poem the two seem as if one, there occurs a gradual upheaval of Hardy's deepest yearnings, pieties and sympathies.<sup>5</sup>

The poetry I have chosen represents what I see as the most effective merging of the imaginative poet, the

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<sup>5</sup>Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 176.



thinking philosopher and the feeling, experiencing human being. The order will be roughly, but not completely, chronological, for there is no strong developmental pattern, since the same basic themes persist. More emphasis will be given earlier poems whence these themes emerge, but later treatments will be studied for interesting comparisons and contrasts.

A great many of Hardy's poems are specifically of a religious nature, dealing nostalgically with his early loss of belief in an anthropomorphic God. This experience, traceable to the 1860's and linked with the influence of Darwinian science and his reading from Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill and other agnostics, coincides with his first attempts at lyric expression. Rejected by publishers, they reappeared in 1898 and reveal the origin of the views of life that developed through his prose period, culminating in the disillusionment and scepticism of his late novels, and the incisive probing for meaning in The Dynasts.

One of the most anthologized poems from this early volume is the sonnet "Hap", seen so often as the epitome of Hardy's outlook. It is an expression of intense mental suffering, and though perhaps specifically occasioned, as some biographers think, by publishers' rejection of his poetry, reveals an attitude that must have gone much deeper and is pervasive throughout his work. Here is shown the

personal isolation of one who can feel no sense of identity with any anthropomorphic power 'out there'. Even a belief in an Old Testament God meting out punishment would give some meaning to pain, and would be preferable to indifference. But indifference itself is an untenable explanation where there is no thinking Being 'powerfuller than I' to have even this reaction to suffering man. The abstractions of Time and Chance become the only reality and though the thinking pragmatist rejects the idea of anthropomorphism, the poet instinctively personifies them in the sestet as 'purblind Doomsters' dicing for his fate. Hardy's later philosophical journeyings were to develop his abstractions into the idea of a Will, immanent in the universe itself; thus the 'It' of The Dynasts had its origin in this early poem.

Another sonnet dated the same year (1866) "In Vision I Roamed", less despairing in tone, shows also one interesting relationship to The Dynasts, for it portrays the poet's vision of the vast cosmos that was to be the setting of the epic-drama, and recalls also St. Cleeve's unforgettable description in Two on a Tower. Again, the poet's sense of isolation is predominant in the octave, for the grandeur and sublimity of the 'flashing Firmament' is matched by its awfulness, as imagination carries him through

... ghaſt heights of ſky,  
 To the laſt chambers of the monſtrous Dome,  
 Where ſtars the brighteſt here are loſt to the eye:<sup>6</sup>

The ſeſtet, however, reveals the ſonnet to be a love-poem, addreſſed to ſome cloſe relative, friend or sweetheart, for the ſpeaker finds comfort in the thought that, though far away in terms of earth, the abſent loved one is ſtill cloſe in terms of the vaſt Universe, 'taciturn and drear'. This idea, ſimilar to Matthew Arnold's, of human relationships providing the only value in a meaningless void pervades much of Hardy's poetry, and in later, more theologically-oriented poems, for example "The Plaint to Man", emerges as a ſubſtitute for the loſt, or non-exiſtent, man-God relationship. It is 'agape', not 'eros', that Hardy looks to, however, for he ſees that physical, ſexual love is as much a prey to Chance and Time as other phenomena, bringing in its wake diſillusion, heartache, miſ-mating and pain where one looks for joy. The waſteland depicted in "Neutral Tones", the fear of love expreſſed in "Revulſion", the ravaging effects of 'Sportsman Time' who 'but rears his brood to kill' as ſhown in the "She to Him" ſequence and many other 'love-poems' of this early volume, all beſpeak a view of life governed only by Chance and Mutability.

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p. 7. <sup>6</sup>Hardy, "In Viſion I Roamed", Collected Poems,

Both reason and feeling demand some more satisfying answer to these problems of existence, and this search provides the focus for a number of poems, among them "Nature's Questioning". Here Hardy voices his own wonderings through the personified creatures of Nature who, 'Like chastened children sitting silent in a school' are moved to question their master: "We wonder, ever wonder, why we find us here!"<sup>7</sup> Hypotheses are raised -- were they formed in jest by some 'Vast Imbecility', or unconsciously by some 'Automaton'? Are they remnants of a dying 'Godhead' or do they represent a Good vs. Evil struggle in some 'high Plan' of ultimate 'Achievement'? Hardy's welter of questions encompasses various theological and philosophical views, but no answer is forthcoming at this stage, and Nature weeps with man in his gloomy sojourning through life towards death.

Hardy's preoccupation with Death as a poetic subject is a natural development from his questionings, for death represents the only inevitability in an existence of chance and change. One of his most striking treatments, among the many, is found in "Heiress and Architect", an allegory which juxtaposes the romanticism of an heiress planning her 'dream-castle' against the cold, clear practicality of the 'arch-designer' to whom she goes for advice. In a kind of

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., "Nature's Questioning", pp. 58-59.

'onion-peeling' pattern often used by Hardy. (see also, for example "Ah, are you Digging on my Grave?") all her illusions are gradually stripped away. Her plans to enjoy Nature's beauty through 'open ogive-work' and dainty 'tracery' are spoilt by the reminder of freezing winters; 'wide fronts of crystal glass' to show the world her 'laughter and ... light' are frowned upon by the architect who envisages a time when the inmate will want to hide her suffering soul from the sight of mankind; her plans for a paradisial love-nest meet the response that Love brings only disillusion when age shall have faded her beauty. Finally her plans shrink to that of a harrow winding turret' leading to a private chamber where at least she can enjoy her private grief. But this plan is doomed as well, for space must exist, says the architect, 'To hale a coffined corpse adown the stairs'; her death being the only phenomenon of which she can be sure. Morbid, perhaps, but an intriguing poem in style and structure -- one in which Hardy is early taking his 'full look at the Worst'.

Closely associated with this preoccupation are the many poems meditating upon the 'after-state' following death. Although Hardy's emotions cry out for faith in some form of immortality, there is no justification that his rational mind can find for any supernatural belief in an after-life. Like the prophets of old he vainly seeks some 'sign' and

envies the beliefs of those who 'Read radiant hints' of  
times to be -/ Of heart to heart returning after dust to  
dust.<sup>8</sup>

Such scope is granted not to lives like mine ...  
I have lain in dead men's beds, have walked  
The tombs of those with whom I had talked,  
Called many a gone and goodly one to shape a sign,

And panted for response. But none replies;  
No warnings loom, nor whisperings  
To open out my limitings,  
And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies.<sup>9</sup>

With poetical inconsistency Hardy often presents the dead  
as speaking and thinking, as in "Friends Beyond" -- 'They've  
a way of whispering to me - fellow-wight who yet abide -'  
but their total death is symbolized by the fact that they  
evince no care nor concern for the things and people that  
meant so much to them on earth.

With living memory as the only vehicle for immortality,  
forgetfulness or death on the part of the remembering ones  
becomes a kind of second mortality to which man is doomed --  
a thought projected by the dead speaker in "Her Immortality":

"A Shade but in its mindful ones  
Has immortality;  
By living, me you keep alive,  
By dying you slay me.

.....  
But grows my grief. When I surcease,  
Through whom alone lives she,  
Her spirit ends its living lease,  
Never again to be!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., "The Sign-Seeker", pp. 43-44.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., "Her Immortality", p. 50. From Wessex Poems.

A companion piece, "His Immortality", in a later volume Poems of the Past and the Present (1901) explores the same idea, while a more whimsical treatment is given in "Ah, are you Digging on my Grave?" (Satires of Circumstance) in which the 'second death' -- of forgetfulness of loved ones -- is portrayed, half-humorously, but poignantly. Hardy's musings upon mortality and immortality reappear in the series "Poems of 1912-13" when the death of his first wife evoked some of his most beautiful lyrics, his grief and regret being mainly for the earlier death of their love which had caused them both considerable pain. His attempt to keep her memory immortalized in poetry is part of the same attitude towards death which is antithetical to the expressed doctrines of the Church regarding life hereafter. A much later poem "A Drizzling Easter Morning" (Late Lyrics and Earlier) combines Hardy's scepticism over Christ's resurrection with his sympathy for toiling man to whom the 'endless rest' of death might be preferable to another existence. In "1967" he gives the subject a rather ghoulish twist -- the only possible kind of reunion with his loved one after death lies in the hope "That thy worm should be my worm, Love!"<sup>11</sup> While Hardy can accept the indestructibility of matter, like Angel Clare he balks at Article of

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., "1967", p. 204. From Time's Laughing-stocks, written in 1867.

# Religion, No. IV!

Hardy's nostalgia over his loss of the Christian beliefs in immortality and in the benevolent God is apparent in such poems as "A Meeting With Despair", and, perhaps the most poignant of all, "The Impercipient". In both poems contrasting images of light and darkness evoke a visual picture of the basic tension between faith and doubt and their accompanying happiness and despair. In the first, the persona, wandering in a 'black lean land, of featureless contour' catches glimpses of the 'ray-lit clouds' gleaming with glory, and finding solace in their beauty reproaches himself for his lapses into unbelief. But the croaking 'Thing', personifying nihilistic despair, appears, pointing out to him that the brief radiance is but a prelude to the approaching night which soon engulfs the reluctant unbeliever.

Even more revealing of the author's pain is "The Impercipient", for here the lack of faith alienates him not only from a God whom he cannot experience but also from the spiritual companionship of fellow-humans whose 'light' he cannot discern. The reality of the loss for Hardy who had such an aesthetic response to the Cathedral setting and to the music and liturgy of the service communicates itself in the cry of deprivation -- "... He who breathes All's Well to



these/ Breathes no All's-Well to me".<sup>12</sup> Again he makes the contrast between the 'glorious distant sea' which the eye of faith can visualize and the 'dark/ And wind-swept' landscape of his own narrower vision. His final bitter note condemns the un-Christian lack of sympathy of those who would see his agnosticism as deliberate -- "O, doth a bird deprived of wings/ Go earth-bound wilfully!"<sup>13</sup> possibly a reference to the reaction of his orthodox wife to his expressed views, one of the sources of their incompatibility.

The nostalgic strain of these early poems reappears intermittently throughout all his poetry, for although Hardy pragmatically accepts the loss of mystical belief, he never fully reconciles it with the emotional, imaginative and spiritual longings which make him as much a Romantic as a modern Rationalist. On this latter point his view is expressed in the Life:

'Romanticism will exist in human nature as long as human nature exists. The point is (in imaginative literature) to adopt that form of Romanticism which is the mood of the age.'<sup>14</sup>

The 'mood' of the Victorian-Edwardian age demanded the philosophical use of poetry, and, in this, Hardy is akin

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., "The Impercipient (At a Cathedral Service)", p. 60. From Wessex Poems.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>14</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 147.

to Shelley whom he so admired and whose influence is so obvious in his 'Apology' to Late Lyrics and Earlier. Like Shelley, who dedicated his creative powers to the 'awful loveliness of Intellectual Beauty', Hardy finds some emotional relief in pondering the human dilemma, if not with the intellectual power of a true philosopher, at least with the sensitivity of a poet.

His second volume, Poems of the Past and the Present published in 1901, contains much of this intellectual enquiry and foreshadows the questionings of The Dynasts, his lyrics often expressing in miniature form one or other of the divergent views found there. Hardy warns his readers in the preface to this volume not to be upset by its inconsistencies. His personal expressions, he says, comprise 'a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances'. They are 'unadjusted impressions', valuable in their diversity, if one is to find 'the road to a true philosophy of life'.<sup>15</sup>

His opening dedicatory poem to the Queen immediately points to such an inconsistency of thought. He speaks, for example, of the Absolute's pronouncing of 'the deedful word' which had ushered in Victoria's 'purposed life' and of her reign's contributions being hidden in 'the All-One's thought'

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<sup>15</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 75.

(the italics are mine) -- a concept at variance with the idea of either Crass Casualty or Unconscious Will behind the march of events. Veering to another angle in "The Departure" he depicts the enlisted soldiers as 'puppets in a playing hand', a familiar image, but here their strings are being pulled, not by the 'purblind Doomsters' of Time and Chance, but by the 'wroth reasonings' of 'striving' men. His plea for 'saner softer polities' on a universal scale foreshadows the dream of the Spirit of the Pities, and gives leaders a degree of responsibility for their actions.

Man's unique position as a 'reasoning' creature in the cosmos is the motif of several poems in which 'Mother' Nature becomes the persona. In "The Mother Mourns", she deplores the fact that her 'child', Mankind, is in a position to question the validity of her necessitous laws:

"Man's mountings of mindsight I checked not,  
Till range of his vision  
Now tops my intent, and finds blemish  
Throughout my domain.<sup>16</sup>

The 'blemishes' are given some explanation in "The Lacking Sense", which portrays the 'Mother' as blind, thus unaware of the 'fearful unfulfilments' by which 'she ... sets wounds on what she loves'.<sup>17</sup> In "Doom and She" the

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., "The Mother Mourns", p. 102.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., "The Lacking Sense", p. 107.

blind Mother is metaphorically shown as paired with an impercipient mate who has no feelings of Grief, Right or Wrong towards the creatures of their union. Another image portrays the Mother as "The Sleep-Worker", unwittingly creating 'coils' in which 'right [is] enmeshed with wrong' and sounds of 'ache and ecstasy' are curiously blended.

Then is pre-supposed an awakening in which the remorseful Mother will either

... destroy, in one wild shock of shame,  
Thy whole high heaving firmamental frame,  
Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?<sup>18</sup>

Such poems show the poet's attempts to impose upon the chaos of his conceptions some artistic order in imagistic terms which look forward to both the epic 'machinery' and the philosophical content of The Dynasts. The final poem in the volume, "Agnosto Theo", is, indeed, a concise summary of the views that were to be presented in that monumental work.

At times a retrogressive note is struck as the Romantic yearns for the state of early innocence before man's reason made him aware of the exigencies of his own condition:

Shall we conceal the Case, or tell it -  
We who believe the evidence?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., "The Sleep-Worker", p. 111.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., "The Problem", p. 109.

asks the pragmatist in "The Problem". Would not mankind be happier in letting the 'old view reign' which gave him some peace and comfort? -- obviously a reference to the disturbing effect of new scientific theories and the Higher Criticism on established religious beliefs. A similar note of regret is echoed in "To Life" where the results of 'knowing' become more than the speaker can bear:

I know what thou would'st tell  
Of Death, Time, Destiny -  
I have known it long, and know, too, well  
What it all means for me.

But canst thou not array  
Thyself in rare disguise,  
And feign like truth, for one mad day,  
That Earth is Paradise?

I'll tune me to the mood,  
And mumm with thee till eve,  
And maybe what as interlude  
I feign, I shall believe!<sup>20</sup>

The 'widely differing moods' spoken of in the Preface run the gamut from utter despair, to hope, to mild cynicism. At times there seems nothing to relieve the darkness, as in the bleak three-part sequence "In Tenebris", perhaps the most depressing of Hardy's poems. Here speaks one who 'past doubtings all,/ Waits in unhope.'<sup>21</sup> His 'full look at the Worst' alienates him from his fellows as 'one

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., "To Life", pp. 107-8.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., "In Tenebris" I, p. 153.

born out of due time, who has no calling here';<sup>22</sup> and he verges on nihilism, wishing that death had taken him before he became aware that 'the world was a welter of futile doing'.<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes Hardy's personae speak out of the conventional God-centred milieu, and their despair is expressed in Christian metaphor, God becoming a speaker or a listener in a debate regarding the problems of the human race. In "God-Forgotten" the questioner, representing the 'sons of Earth', gains audience with the 'Lord Most High' and hears the familiar theory of man's 'Fall' from grace -- by an act of severance 'self-entailed' he has lost touch with his Creator and made his little spot in the universe a 'tainted ball'. Man's irrational tendency, even in the face of deprivation and pain, to hold on to his faith in a benevolent Creator is shown in "The Bedridden Peasant - To an Unknowing God". In words echoing the patience of a long-suffering Job he maintains his belief in God's innate loving-kindness and in there being an explanation for the rift in the scheme which 'tore us wide apart'. But the same confused inquiry is there as is given allegorical treatment in the little triolet, "The Puzzled Game-Birds":

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., "In Tenebris" II, p. 154.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., "In Tenebris" III, p. 155.

They are not those who used to feed us  
 When we were young - they cannot be -  
 These shapes that now bereave and bleed us?  
 They are not those who used to feed us,  
 For did we then cry, they would heed us.  
 - If hearts can house such treachery  
 They are not those who used to feed us  
 When we were young - they cannot be!<sup>24</sup>

The range of moods, or interpretations of various attitudes which man takes towards his predicament, includes as well the instinct to hope which pervades so many poems, substantiating Hardy's claim of being a meliorist rather than a pessimist. Although the grey ghostliness of his settings in such poems as "A Commonplace Day" or "The Darkling Thrush" conveys the colouring of a pessimistic outlook, even the 'Dullest of dull-hued Days' still holds the possibility that

... maybe, in some soul,  
 In some spot undiscerned on sea or land, some impulse rose,  
 Or some intent upstole  
 Of that enkindling ardency from whose maturer glows  
 The world's amendment flows;<sup>25</sup>

while in the darkest of seasons, spreading its pall over the 'Century's corpse', the song of the aged thrush, though bewildering to the listener, breathes its tremulous 'blessed Hope' for better things. Even "To An Unborn Pauper Child", Hardy's well-known plea to the 'wombed soul' not to enter, if he could choose, the malfunctioning world,

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., "The Puzzled Game-Birds", p. 135.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., "A Commonplace Day", p. 105.

ends with what he admits is an irrational hope for well-being:

... 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!<sup>26</sup>

Although such poems may be somewhat simplistic in their imaginative approach in comparison with some of his more obliquely intellectualized treatments, they reach into the heart of human experience and evoke a most sympathetic response in his readers.

By contrast, so also do the ironically humorous poems, reflecting another differing, yet typical, mood of Hardy, bordering on cynicism, yet never quite hiding the hurt sensitivity which is so much a part of him. The whole ironic structure of existence, for example, is typified in the rational reaction to life of Mad Judy in the poem of that name. In the world as perceived by Hardy what would be more natural than to weep at births and weddings, and to feast at deaths? But the rank and file, in their naive unawareness, blithely reverse the process, humouring 'Mad Judy' because she is insane! A clever and subtle little gibe this at the critics who reviled him for his pessimism!

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., "To An Unborn Pauper Child", p. 117.



\* Ironical reversal also cloaks the subtle barb at conventional religiosity shown in "The Church-BUILDER". In the first four stanzas the speaker reflects on the enthusiasm and generosity with which he raised the noble fane, sparing nothing of priceless architecture, sculpture and craftsmanship in order 'With stintless pains/ To glorify the Lord.'

"Deathless the Creed/ Here substantiated!" said my soul.<sup>27</sup>

But the second half of the poem shows the builder, frustrated by personal misfortunes, by the futility of his gift to attract modern worshippers -- 'deeper thinkers [who] sneer and smirk' --, and by his own sinking faith, hanging himself from the costly rood-screen!

Hardy's implication regarding the diminishing influence of the established Church in the new age is plain. It is seen also in the response of "The Respectable Burgher" to the radicalism of the 'Reverend Doctors' who subscribe to the Higher Criticism and refute the familiar literal interpretations of the Scriptures:

- Since thus they hint, nor turn a hair,  
All churchgoing will I forswear,  
And sit on Sundays in my chair,  
And read that moderate man Voltaire.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., "The Church-BUILDER", p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> Hardy, "The Respectable Burgher - on 'the Higher Criticism'", Collected Poems, pp. 146-7.

The satirical treatment given throughout the whole poem is delightful -- quite daring and somewhat baffling! One wonders whether Hardy's satire is aimed most at the 'higher' critics, the 'Reverend Doctors', the respectable citizen, or equally at all three! I suspect that, like Matthew Arnold, he was somewhat concerned over the excesses of the critical movement, for he still saw the Church as filling an ethical need in society, and probably like some ecclesiastics of our own time regretted to see 'the baby thrown out with the bath-water'! Certainly the comfortable agnosticism of the practical burgher is in strong contrast to Hardy's own. Hardy's less realistic desire to live in the best of two possible worlds is explored further in his later "Apology".

The chaotic and divisive state of the Church is surely symbolized in "The Levelled Churchyard", the frankly-humorous voicings of long-dead parishioners 'mixed to human jam' (a horrible epithet!) by the changes and restorations taking place in their habitat:

"The wicked people have annexed  
The verses on the good;  
A roaring drunkard sports the text  
Teetotal Tommy should!

.....  
"Here's not a modest maiden elf  
But dreads the final Trumpet,  
Lest half of her should rise herself,  
And half some sturdy strumpet!"

Their final ejaculation is a parody on the ancient Litany so familiar to Hardy:

"From restorations of Thy fane,  
From smoothings of Thy sward,  
From zealous Churchmen's pick and plane  
Deliver us O Lord! Amen!"<sup>29</sup>

The disarming, though sacrilegious, tone of the above discloses the wryly humorous side of Hardy, not too often portrayed, but too often overlooked by the many who see in him only the bleak pessimist. That he could treat with humour as well as serious criticism the institution so close to him emotionally reflects something of the affection which still existed within the reluctant agnostic for his mother Church.

In later volumes following The Dynasts, as indicated by their titles Time's Laughingstocks (1909), and Satires of Circumstance (1914), the ironic note becomes stronger. There now seems to be a deliberate effort to stand aside and view life in a more detached impersonal way, suggestive of the Spirit Ironical. Typical of this is a group of poems entitled "Satires of Circumstances in Fifteen Glimpses" in which the poet reveals the sham underneath so many ordinary conventional situations -- the real feelings existing, for example, within many a nuptial chamber, seemingly happy home or at many funerals. It is to be expected that Churchmen

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., "The Levelled Churchyard", pp. 144-5.

would not escape this kind of X-ray treatment and one particularly biting caricature shows a clergyman, who has the oratorical power of moving his congregation to devotional tears, caught by one of his adoring neophytes, in the act of practising his gestures before the vestry looking-glass, wearing on his face a smile of self-satisfied vanity! It is as if the sensitive poet, like a wounded Spirit of Pities, is withdrawing to a less vulnerable distance, and like the later Yeats, finds self-protection in the 'mask'. In the Preface to Time's Laughingstocks, for example, he reminds his readers that 'those lyrics penned in the first person ... are to be regarded, in the main, as dramatic monologues by different characters.'<sup>30</sup> Another evidence of attempted impersonality is the number of narrative poems included in the volume, based on traditional Wessex tales. The material chosen for these reflects Hardy's preoccupation with the ironies of existence -- the futility of man's efforts to control his own destiny or alter the inevitable flux of time and chance when once the wheel has been set in motion. Whether cast in tragic mold as in "A Trampwoman's Tragedy", "A Sunday Morning Tragedy", "The Flirt's Tragedy", or in more humorous vein as in "The Curate's Kindness - A Workhouse Irony", Hardy, keeping himself at a remote narrative distance,

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

reiterates the familiar theme of the 'unfulfilled intention', the quixotry of fate, and man's inability to visualize the outcomes of his situations. Occasionally, as if to show that he looks at all the eventualities and possibilities in life's uncertainties, the unexpected reversal may take the form of happiness emerging from an event causing disillusion and regret, as in "The Dark-Eyed Gentleman", but the usual pattern is one of disappointment and frustration, of pain where the expectation was happiness. The greatest irony of all, these tales seem to say, is that we come into life having been given an innate capacity for joy, only to learn that the outreach for happiness must be thwarted, a thought summarized in the lyric, "Yell'ham-Wood's Story":

It says that Life would signify  
 A thwarted purposing:  
 That we come to live, and are called to die.  
 Yes,, that's the thing  
 In fall, in spring,  
 That Yell'ham says:-<sup>31</sup>  
 "Life offers - to deny!"<sup>31</sup>

Bitterness and frustration permeate the poems in which a metaphorical God is again questioned as to 'Why?' In "A Dream Question", for example, with its epigraph from the prophet Micah: "It shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine.", God himself is seen as deriding the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., "Yell'ham-Wood's Story", p. 280.

theologians who present him as wrathful at being censured by creatures who do not understand his ways. He cares not who moans or groans, for his 'ethic', he maintains, is beyond human comprehension, comparable to a fourth dimension in matter. The unsatisfactory nature of this answer recalls the last-ditch resource of puzzled theologians who can never find a solution for the ultimate mystery. It leads only to the further question in another God-man dialogue, "New Year's Eve", where the speaker reminds us of the Spirit of the Pities musing on the 'intolerable antilogy of making figments feel':

"And what's the good of it?" I said,  
 "What reasons made you call  
 From formless void this earth we tread,  
 When nine-and-ninety can be read,<sup>32</sup>  
 Why nought should be at all?"

This time the God who answers becomes the Unconscious Will, revealing himself as 'Sense-sealed' and his creative labours as 'logicless':

without a guess  
 That I evolved a Consciousness  
 To ask for reasons why.<sup>33</sup>

Further continuing the philosophy of The Dynasts, in "God's Education" this nescient power learns from man an awareness of what cruelty and suffering mean. That conscious man can become the teacher in a cosmic process of evolution

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., "New Year's Eve", p. 260.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

is again hypothesized as a basis for eventual amelioration.

Two very significant poems related to Hardy's 'theology' appear in Satires of Circumstance (1914). They are dated between 1908 and 1910, thus following closely on The Dynasts. In "A Plaint to Man" and "God's Funeral", obviously companion poems, Hardy makes his most outspoken and decisive public statement regarding the anthropomorphic God. There is irony in these poems, but no cynicism, for his purpose, as I see it, is not to satirize or ridicule the religious aspirations of man for with them he can sympathize and identify. Although 'honesty' and 'sincerity' are dangerous terms to use in literary criticism, I believe that these poems show both. It is as if the poet, after long cogitation, realizes the importance of answering the question he has raised in "The Problem" -- "Shall we conceal the Case, or tell it -?" -- and of following his own advice in a little poem he had written in 1899 -- "To Sincerity". There he had mused on how tempting it is to disown one's convictions through the pressures of custom and tradition, to "Believe, while unbelieving,/ Behold, without perceiving!", but he had also intimated a belief that an honest rejection of dogma with 'Its faiths to dust decaying' would clear the way for a new dispensation:

... would men look at true things,  
And unilluded view things,  
And count to bear undue things,

The real might mend the seeming,  
Facts better their foredeeming,  
And Life its disesteeming.<sup>34</sup>

"The Complaint to Man" introduces a new schema into the God-man colloquy, for here the questioner becomes the hypothetical man-made God, tracing his own origin from man's percipience, his awareness of his 'first despair', and his need to reach out in his helplessness to some Power whose form he can conceive of only in human terms. Thus the Biblical format of 'man shaped in God's image' is ironically reversed. God becomes a mere abstraction, an idea existing in the mind of man, symbolized in the poem as a 'phasm on a lantern-slide' given reality only by its 'showman' (the Church?), and disappearing when the bright light of 'reason' is seen through the 'deicide eyes of seers', the rational thinkers of a new age. Hardy here creates an intriguing antithetical parallel with The Dynasts. Instead of the Travailling Earth asking the Will 'Why did you create us to make us suffer?', God is now asking -- 'Why create me, to destroy me?' The whole poem is the answer to his question, and the dying God leaves man with the only alternative for

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., "To Sincerity", p. 262 (From Time's Laughingstocks).



'visioned help' -- a 'religion' of 'loving-kindness' and 'brotherhood', emanating from the human heart alone.

Both the trauma of the times and the personal sense of loss experienced by Hardy are voiced in "God's Funeral" where the dramatic monologue form is dropped and the persona becomes the unmasked poet, speaking for a confused and troubled society as well as for himself. Those of his contemporaries who damned Hardy for his atheism in "A Plaint to Man" must have been through this poem conscious also of his pain. A superb poem in terms of its imagery, structural development and consistency of thought, "God's Funeral", though intensely personal, is nevertheless controlled, and in its tension as vibrant as the notes from taut strings. As the allegorical funeral procession moves through the poem following the bier of the 'dead God', the poet joins them 'wrought/ To consciousness of sorrow even as they.' All that is good and beautiful in the Christian tradition is remembered as he broods on the 'man-like' shape 'At times endowed with wings of glorious range' symbolizing in its 'phantasmal variousness ...../Potency vast and loving-kindness strong.' The 'plaint' of the dying God in the previous poem is now echoed by the deicides: "Whence came it we were tempted to create/ One whom we can no longer keep alive?' For with the creation came also the mangling of 'the Monarch' and finally the 'myth's oblivion', leaving the

self-deceived adherents groping 'Sadlier than those who wept  
in Babylon, / Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.' Reactions  
to the disillusionment are varied; for some, a fear and  
nostalgia:

"How sweet it was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely at the eventide  
And feel a blest assurance he was there!

"And who or what shall fill his place?

For others it is incredulity:

... "This is a counterfeit of straw,  
This requiem mockery! Still he lives to us!"<sup>35</sup>

Only a few, standing aloof, can view the phenomenon  
as 'enlightenment', and be aware of the 'pale) yet positive  
gleam low down behind,' which I interpret as Hardy's vision  
of a rational religion in an altruistic society.

In his own mixed feelings the poet sympathizes with  
all, remembering that 'what was mourned for, I, too, long  
had prized', and he moves on with the crowd 'dazed and  
puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom' -- an apt metaphor for  
Arnold's view of twentieth-century society 'wandering between  
two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born'.

Notwithstanding his nostalgia, Hardy has firm views  
regarding the supernatural elements of the Christian creeds.  
Only rarely, however, does he actually attempt to explode  
the myths, possibly out of sensitivity for other people's

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., "God's Funeral", pp. 307-9.

faith, but in a few poems he dares to treat New Testament subjects in what was considered by his negative critics as a sacrilegious way. The chief of these is "Panthera", positioned in the volume immediately after "To Sincerity". It is Hardy's version of the legend (probably found in Strauss's Das Leben Jesu)-- whose sources and various forms he is careful to enumerate in his opening gloss -- that the seeming God-man crucified on Calvary was actually the son of a Roman soldier, Panthera, who had seduced an innocent maid of Nazareth. Hardy treats the legend with admirable finesse, leaving even the identities of the protagonists to our imagination. He stresses the 'immaculate modesty' and tenderness of Mary and omits any reference to the Biblical claim of miraculous conception. The naturalness of the relationship and the possibilities for myth-making are subtly implied, as if gently to remind his readers that time and circumstances could have given a non-rational interpretation to the tale. By distancing himself two removes, telling it as a story within a story, Hardy achieves a kind of narrative innocence, and leaves the option open as to whether Panthera's tale is 'fantasy or otherwise'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless his use of the legend as poetic material is significant, and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., "Panthera", pp. 262-8. (From Time's Laughing Stocks).

apropos of his belief that supernatural, or as he sometimes termed it, superstitious elements have no place in the religion of rational man. Another, less striking and to me -- possibly because of his more unflattering depiction of Mary -- less aesthetically acceptable treatment of the legend, is given in his last volume Winter Words. In it the musing Mary, remembering the past, contemplates the 'madness' of her son, and the tragic possibilities inherent in his claims.<sup>37</sup> As might be expected, critics -- even admirers of Hardy -- have reacted negatively to such poems. William Rutland, for example, termed "Panthera" 'offensive'.<sup>38</sup> But seen in the light of Hardy's total philosophy and together with the whole body of his 'religion-centered' poems, I found them less shattering to the sensibilities than I might have supposed.

Public reaction to "Panthera" may or may not have been related to Hardy's interesting, colloquial treatment of another New Testament story. "In the Servants' Quarters" shows Hardy's sympathy for the vacillating Peter in his mixture of fear, guilt, pain and defiance over his denial of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., "An Evening in Galilee", pp. 839-40.

<sup>38</sup> William Rutland, Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Writings and Their Background (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1938), p. 106. Rutland said of the poem 'it is the only one of Hardy's productions that dishonours him.'

Christ. "Must not I even warm my hands but I am charged with blasphemies?"<sup>39</sup> cries the suffering Peter, and the plea might have been Hardy's own.

In another approach to the theological problem Hardy views Christianity in perspective against the many other beliefs that have flourished and died through the ages, an approach briefly touched on in The Dynasts by the comment of the Spirit of the Years regarding the 'cult of Christianity'.

"Aquae Sulis", written at Bath, was inspired by the excavations there, which revealed a pagan temple close to the site of the Abbey Church. An imaginary conversation takes place between the Goddess of the pagan temple and the Christian God who has usurped her place in man's devotion. The Goddess complains:

"And what did you win by raising this nave and aisle  
Close on the site of the temple I tenanted?

.....

"Your priests have trampled the dust of mine without rueing,  
Despising the joys of man whom I so much loved;

God soothes her ire, reminding her of their similar positions:

"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!"<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "In the Servants' Quarters", pp. 359-60. (From Satires of Circumstance).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., "Aquae Sulis", pp. 353-4.

As the voices fade into oblivion, the listening poet comes back to an awareness of only "the waters' medicinal pour", a suggestion that man must find, not in metaphysical abstractions, but in the reality of the physical world, the only solace for his ills.

In Winter Words Hardy returns to the same Christian-Pagan juxtaposition in "Evening Shadows" and "Christmas in the Elgin Room". In the former, the shadows cast by the pagan barrows on the Heath mingling with the shadows of present-day things remind him of what time can do to beliefs. He foresees an era when '... men will no more heed/ The Gospel news than when the mound was made.'<sup>41</sup> The dialogue of the famous Elgin marbles<sup>42</sup> in the British Museum discusses the implication of the overthrow of pagan beliefs by the Christian; however, it leaves unvoiced, though perhaps implicit, the parallel which is so openly expressed in "Aequae Sulis". The thought seems to evoke a sadder tone from the elder Hardy than that used in the previous treatment.

During the last decade of his life, Hardy produced four new volumes of poetry: Moments of Vision (1917), Late Lyrics and Earlier (1922), Human Shows (1925) and Winter Words

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., "Evening Shadows", p. 814.

<sup>42</sup>"Christmas in the Elgin Room", pp. 885-6, was the last poem published by Hardy during his life-time. It appeared in The Times, December 1927. (Bailey, pp. 625-6).

(published posthumously in 1928). Although a number of the poems were gleaned from earlier manuscripts, the prevailing tone throughout these volumes makes us increasingly aware of an aging poet, looking back but without morbidity, recalling experiences both pleasurable and painful, as, for example, in "I Travel as a Phantom Now", and seeing them all in the light of his familiar wonderings.

In the best of these poems there is no lessening of his creative power, but little, perhaps, that is new in ideas, other than an admission that age has brought no great wisdom, or answers to the perplexing problems of existence. The same nostalgia persists as he writes, for example, an "Apostrophe to an old Psalm Tune"; pensively recalls the old Christmas superstition in "The Oxen" -- 'Hoping it might be so' --; or relives the quiet, drowsy services of his childhood at 'Mellstock':

So mindless were those outpourings! -  
 Though I am not aware  
 That I have gained by subtle thought on things  
 Since we stood psalming there.<sup>43</sup>

The 'subtle thought' still fascinates him; however, and in poem after poem Hardy relates the concepts he has developed in The Dynasts to life as he sees it from the point of view of age. Some traumatic personal event, for example, might have occasioned his meditation in "The Blow", or it

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<sup>43</sup>Hardy, Collected Poems, "Afternoon Service at Mellstock", p. 403. All three poems mentioned here are found in Moments of Vision.

might be a symbol for many painful experiences. Again he reiterates his idea of the Unconscious Immanent Will, postulating that no conscious force could possibly have deliberately designed such a stroke,

Since it would augur works and ways  
Below the lowest that man assays  
To have hurled that stone  
Into the sunshine of our days!<sup>44</sup>

This recalls his comment in The Return of the Native that "Human beings ... have always hesitated to conceive a dominant power of lower moral quality than their own...."<sup>45</sup> The concluding stanza expresses once more the thought of an evolutionary process that might bring awareness to the Inscrutable

Which in some age unguessed of us  
May lift its blinding incubus,  
And see, and own:  
"It grieves me I did thus and thus!"<sup>46</sup>

He develops the same thought with a different image in what I see as one of his least attractive poems, "Fragment". Here he visualizes mankind in a sort of purgatorial state between life and death

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., "The Blow", p. 449: (Moments of Vision).

<sup>45</sup> Hardy, The Return of the Native, p. 455.

<sup>46</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "The Blow", p. 449. Scholars have conjectured that the 'blow' might have been the mental aberration Mrs. Emma Hardy was said to have suffered. Others attribute the poem to the outbreak of World War I. See Bailey, Poetry, p. 380.



.... waiting for one called God,"  
 ... to see us before we are clay.  
 Yes; waiting, waiting, for God to know it<sup>47</sup>

(italics Hardy's). He makes it clear in stanza three that the power man calls 'God' is here equated with the one termed 'the Will, or Force, or Laws; And, vaguely, by some, the Ultimate Cause'. Having clarified the distinction between this kind of power and the anthropomorphic God, he is less concerned with terminology. Hardy had said earlier in his diary (1899)

It would be an amusing fact, if it were not one that leads to such bitter strife, that the conception of a First Cause which the theist calls 'God', and the conception of the same that the so-styled atheist calls 'no-God' are nowadays almost exactly identical. So that only a minor literary question of terminology prevents them shaking hands in agreement and dwelling together in unity ever after.<sup>48</sup>

Nearly two decades later he was writing in a similar vein:

Fifty meanings attach to the word 'God' nowadays, the only reasonable meaning being the Cause of Things, whatever that cause may be. Thus no modern thinker can be an atheist in the modern sense, while all modern thinkers are atheists in the ancient and exploded sense.<sup>49</sup>

There is some inconsistency here with an earlier statement quoted in the previous chapter, in which he notes

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., "Fragment", p. 482 (Moments of Vision).

<sup>48</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 303.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 376.

that the only true meaning of the word 'God' to him is the concept of an external personality. Obviously when he spoke of the 'God' whom he could not find, it was meant in this anthropomorphic sense.

It was possibly a fear of being misunderstood and considered inconsistent that led to his avoidance of the term 'God' in so much of his writing, particularly in The Dynasts, for Hardy knew, perhaps from his own ambivalence, how difficult it is for the human mind to conceive of God in any other than anthropomorphic terms. The 'religious' instinct and the 'poetic' outlook are so closely akin, as he points out in his 'Apology' to Date Lyrics and Earlier, that just as the poet thinks in metaphor, so the theist frames his concepts in terms of a living personality. This is the problem which Hardy treats in somewhat light vein in "Our Old Friend Dualism":

All hail to him, the Protean! A tough old chap is he:  
Spinoza and the Monists cannot make him cease to be.  
We pound him with our "Truth, Sir, please!" and quite  
appear to still him:  
He laughs; holds Bergson up, and James; and swears we  
cannot kill him.  
We argue them pragmatic cheats. "Aye," says he.  
"They're deceiving:  
But I must live; for flamens plead I am all that's  
worth believing!"<sup>50</sup>

One must agree with Bailey that Hardy 'seems more amused than disturbed' in this poem, but the critic's use of

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<sup>50</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "Our Old Friend Dualism", p. 852.

the word 'seems' is significant. Although Hardy clings to his monistic concept of the universe to the end, it is not without conflict. He admitted, for example, that he 'would gladly believe' Henri Bergson's theories concerning the struggle between good and evil in the universe, which, he says 'are much pleasanter than those they contest'. However, he rejects them on the grounds that

... his is rather an imaginative and political mind than a reasoner's, and that for all his charming and attractive assertions he does not deduce any proofs whatever.<sup>51</sup>

It is, of course, precisely because Hardy has himself this kind of 'imaginative and poetical mind' that he experiences such philosophical problems and expresses them in poetry rather than prosy dissertations!

Perhaps Hardy realized with age that all his 'subtle thought on things' was in the last analysis an exercise in futility. This might account for his last ironic and humorous treatment of the whole scheme in "A Philosophical Fantasy". It is again couched in the form of a man-God debate with the epigraph to the poem being a quotation from Walter Bagehot: "Milton ... made God argue". The speaker is not of course Milton's anthropomorphic God, but Hardy's concept of the Unconscious Immanent Will. Hardy may have

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<sup>51</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 369.

been so much struck with the incongruity of an Unconscious First Cause metaphorically arguing and debating the nature of its own existence, that humour replaces the tragically serious tone of his previous God-man colloquies. This God jokes at man's attempts to explain the nature of himself, of God and of the universe in

... dramatic stories  
Like ancient ones whose core is  
A mass of superstition<sup>52</sup>  
And monkish imposition

but, as in "God's Education", proclaims himself as 'not ... averse to be a learner' of what is meant by suffering.

Hardy's favourite concept of evolutionary meliorism again makes its appearance when God admits that

... mindlessness,  
Which state, though far from ending,  
May nevertheless be mending.<sup>53</sup>

It is possible that the aging Hardy, mellowed somewhat by the placidity of his later years with his more compatible second wife, Florence Dugdale, is now able to look more objectively and with less tragic seriousness upon himself and his philosophical struggles. The concepts whose profundity has awed and obsessed him through the years, have now become such familiar things that he can treat them with a lighter, more whimsical touch.

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<sup>52</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, "A Philosophical Fantasy", p. 855. (Winter Words).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 856.

Nevertheless, although Hardy's personal life was less traumatic in his later years, deep sadness was expressed when he looked out beyond the peaceful seclusion of his home, Max Gate, upon the world that was shaping in the twentieth century. The disillusionment of World War I had almost shaken his faith in his favourite theory, and in the world of scientific and industrial advancement he saw man's capacity for compassion, reason and loving-kindness lagging far behind his technology. Poison gas becomes the bitter symbol of scientific achievement in "Christmas, 1924" and the futility of his evolutionary dream assails him as he contemplates 'the end of visioning'.<sup>54</sup> In a sad letter to his friend Mrs. Henniker in 1919 he had voiced his worst forebodings:

I fear ... that what appears ... evident is that it is getting worse and worse. All development is of a material and scientific kind - and scarcely any addition to our knowledge is applied to objects philanthropic or ameliorative. I almost think people were less pitiless towards their fellow-creatures - human and animal - under the Roman Empire than they are now; so why does not Christianity throw up the sponge and say, I am beaten, and let another religion take its place?<sup>55</sup>

The problem which had earlier saddened Tennyson, writing "Locksley Hall - Sixty Years After" haunts the later

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., "We Are Getting to the End", p. 886.

<sup>55</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 389.

Hardy, and neither Tennyson's Christian faith nor Hardy's agnosticism could find a solution.

The nearest Hardy comes to postulating 'another religion' that would replace defeated Christianity is in his "Apology" to Late Lyrics and Earlier (1922). Here he expresses hope that the threatened 'new Dark Age' marked by a 'barbarizing of taste' and 'plethoric growth of knowledge simultaneously with the stunting of wisdom' can be lightened by an alliance between religion, in the non-dogmatic sense, and rationality through the 'interfusing effect of poetry'.<sup>56</sup> Man's religious instinct, he implies, is a kind of poetry, an evidence of his 'mental and emotional life', a part of his creative genius, which, unfettered by dogma, can co-exist with reason. In other words, he is asking us to look upon the 'myths' of religion as merely poetic metaphor. Acknowledging the place of the Christian Church with its aesthetic appeal, its dignity, and its opportunity for moral guidance, he dreams that, liberalizing itself from creeds, it can find room to gather 'many millions of waiting agnostics into its fold'. Hardy, like Angel Clare, visualizes a reconstructed Church in which the 'things that are shaken can be removed' but his desire to combine the best of two possible worlds, to keep, as it were, a foot in both camps can not be seen as a very realistic one. An ethical religion, based on the

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<sup>56</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 531.



thoughts and emotions a living poetry. "To find beauty in ugliness", Hardy had declared, "is the province of the poet",<sup>58</sup> and to have raised the horrors of his personal void sometimes to the level of sublimity must have given comfort to the soul of the poet, if not to the heart and mind of the man.

There is an enigmatic touch to the final piece in his Collected Poems -- "He Resolves to say no More". In it the symbolic pale horse of the Apocalypse neighs his warning, and in Hardy's desire to conceal any intimations of truth that might be coming to him through this experience, there is an echo of his own earlier statement to Alfred Noyes: "Knowledge might be terrible."<sup>59</sup> What fears or hopes are hidden within the last stanza we can only conjecture, but as, nearing death, he contemplates newer visions of his own, his phrasing instinctively goes back to the familiar Biblical source -- "You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free."

And if my vision range beyond  
The blinkered sight of souls in bond,  
-By truth made free-  
I'll let all be,  
And show to no man what I see.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 213.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>60</sup>Hardy, Collected Poems, "He Resolves to Say no More", p. 887. From Winter Words.



In this last statement, he would seem to be saying once more: 'Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience'.<sup>61</sup>

Every man's vision must indeed be his own, but our literature is enriched in that Thomas Hardy was moved to share in poetry, as well as in prose, the intellectual and spiritual unrest of his time and his own incessant search for truth within it.

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<sup>61</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 310.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: HARDY, IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF HIS TIMES

It might appear to readers of this survey that what I have termed a 'religious' motif in Hardy's writings could be better construed as 'irreligious', in that so many of his implications are in direct opposition to the familiar concepts of Christian theology. Indeed, as Delmore Schwartz points out in his essay "Poetry and Belief in Thomas Hardy":

There are moments when it seems that Hardy is merely taking the Christian idea of God and the world, and placing a negative prefix to each of God's attributes.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless I shall maintain the use of the former epithet, for detailed study of his work has convinced me, that in Thomas Hardy we have a writer who is fundamentally religious in temperament, struck by the awesomeness and wonder of the universe, and seeking, like the religious of all ages, to apprehend its mystery. I see as 'irreligious' the one who in his narrow hedonistic concept of life, and

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<sup>1</sup>Delmore Schwartz, "Poetry and Belief in Thomas Hardy", from Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Albert J. Guerard (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 125.

selfish concentration on his own personal existence, ignores the larger view, and as completely atheistic the one who, having rejected a belief in any kind of God, gives the matter no further concern. Hardy was the opposite of both, and gives his own definition of the terms 'religious' and 'religion' in notes on an article he was contemplating:

'Religious, religion, is to be used in its modern sense entirely, as being expressive of nobler feelings towards humanity and emotional goodness and greatness, the old meaning of the words - ceremony or ritual - having perished, or nearly.<sup>2</sup>

A contemporary of Hardy, Edward Mortimer Chapman, himself obviously a devout and orthodox believer, writing in 1910 and discussing the relationship of religion and literature in his age, makes a similar comment, showing that the narrower view of religion as dogma was giving way to a broader concept of the term:

... as the thought and life of last century developed, 'religion' in an increasing degree came to signify that faith or experience which should suffice to make life coherent and harmonious.<sup>3</sup>

Such an 'experience or faith' Hardy was continuously seeking, and in his evolutionary meliorism was expressing a

<sup>2</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Mortimer Chapman, English Literature in Account with Religion - 1800-1900 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), p. 7.

'belief' which in an earlier, less scientific and less rationalistic, age he might have translated in terms closer to those of the Christian theologian. Indeed, one Hardy critic, himself a poet, writing for Hardy's centenary in 1940, and impressed more with Hardy's art than with his metaphysic, has somewhat irreverently termed Hardy's concept of evolutionary meliorism.

... the synthetic oleomargarine which stern Darwinians used to spread over the bread of doctrine when they denied themselves the old-fashioned butter of belief in a moral order.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, Hardy's 'belief' also looks ahead of his time, for in his hope to find the 'God' of mercy, justice and love immanent within man, rather than externally -- existing in 'the human heart's resource alone,/ In brotherhood bonded close and graced/ With loving-kindness ...'<sup>5</sup> he is using an ethic similar to the "I-Thou" concept of modern theologians. However unrealistic may have been Hardy's vision in the Apology of marrying reason and religion, the fact that with his whole being, both emotionally and intellectually, he desired this union, speaks of the basic idealism of his nature, an idealism that has always been an essential characteristic of the truly religious man.

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<sup>4</sup>John Crowe Ransom, "Honey and Gall", The Southern Review, Hardy Centennial Edition, Vol. vi, 1940-41, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Hardy, "A Plaint to Man", Collected Poems, p. 306.

Hardy's temperament as expressed in his art gives him indeed an affinity with three worlds -- that of the visionary Romantic, that of the moral, socially-concerned Victorian, and that of the disillusioned post-war modernist. His unusually long life span made this, of course, a natural outcome. As he himself reflected in one of his meditations on Time, Wordsworth could have seen him in his cradle;<sup>6</sup> and yet two volumes of Hardy's poems were published after the appearance of Eliot's The Wasteland. To conclude this study, then, I should like to view Hardy as artist briefly in perspective against, to use his own metaphor, the 'Overworld' of these diverging times.

William Rutland, in his study of Hardy's literary background, has shown the influence of the Romantics, particularly of Wordsworth, upon his early thought and writings. His affinity with the great Romanticist has also been dealt with at some length by Lionel Johnson whom Rutland quotes:

Both men love to deal with the spiritual magnificence of man in a humble station; with the unadorned majesty of natural lives; with things immemorial, the oldest signs and tokens of an ancient world; with great passages of time, dissolutions, vanishings and vicissitudes; both impress upon us the 'magnalities' of the universe...

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<sup>6</sup>F. Hardy, Life, p. 386.

both are obedient to the visions of forms, laws, powers, ideas awful and august, among which men walk, mysterious and tragic.<sup>7</sup>

Hardy, with his great out-reach for 'knowing', and his half-century search for God, must have envied the spiritual experience of Wordsworth who, after the 'glory and the dream' of his early innocence had been lost, was able, through the beneficent influence of Nature and the growth of his own imaginative life and poetic vision, to find

Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought  
Of human Being, Eternity and God.<sup>8</sup>

Though Hardy had the same visionary longing, what Blake would have termed his 'descent into Ulro' where Reason usurped the place of the visionary imagination, kept him forever from the mystical experience. Neither Wordsworth's early unorthodoxy expressed in near animism, nor his later acceptance of conventional creeds which seemed to dissipate his poetic strength, were options for Hardy, whose Romanticism, as he himself intimated, was that of a different age. Hardy thus becomes, not only a 'reluctant agnostic', but a

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<sup>7</sup>Lionel Johnson, The Art of Thomas Hardy, as quoted in William Rutland, Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Writings and their Background (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1938), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>William Wordsworth, "The Prelude", Book XIV, ll. 204-5, Poetical Works (London: Oxford University Press, New Ed., 1936), p. 586.

"frustrated Romantic" as well. Just as the rationalism of his time made him rebel against the mysticism of the Church, so there was a turning-away from Wordsworthian Romanticism. It found bitter expression in the well-known reference from Tess of the D'Urbervilles:

... to Tess, as to not a few millions of others,  
there was ghastly satire in the poet's lines -

Not in utter nakedness,<sup>9</sup>  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come.

With his Darwinian view of the natural world, Hardy, unlike the earlier Romantics, was unable to find in nature, as did Wordsworth, or in the world of the imagination, as did Keats and Shelley, a substitute for lost divinity. Hardy's close identification with nature reveals to him only the same cruel illogicality and unfulfilled intention found in the lives of humans; thus its violence oppresses and saddens him, giving the 'would-be' Romantic a sense almost of betrayal:

Since, then, no grace I find  
Taught me of trees,  
Turn I back to my kind,  
Worthy as these.<sup>10</sup>

He cannot view Nature in Wordsworth's terms as the 'homely nurse' or 'foster-mother', exerting an educative and

<sup>9</sup>Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, p. 456.

<sup>10</sup>Hardy, "In a Wood", Collected Poems, p. 57.

ennobling influence on her children. When he personifies her, it is as a 'blind' or 'perplexed' Mother, one who, unwittingly perpetrates crimes upon her creatures. His relationship with this 'mother' is a reaching-out in sympathy rather than for solace, like that expressed by Jude in his reaction to the birds in Farmer Troutham's fields, or by Tess when she sees in the suffering pheasants an agony greater than her own. Similarly, that the natural, sexual instincts of human beings almost invariably in Hardy's novels bring pain and disillusionment, is another indication of his non-idealistic view of Nature. Thus in another passage he negates the famous Wordsworthian dictum:

Some people would like to know whence the poet whose philosophy is in these days deemed as profound and trustworthy as his song is breezy and pure, gets his authority for speaking of 'Nature's holy plan'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet beyond his rejection there still lurks the tantalizing suspicion that could he but be granted full insight there might be solacing and enlightening elements within the natural world, that could balance the pain and suffering. Such is the thought expressed in "The Year's Awakening" when the insistent question 'How do you know?' is posed to the 'vespering bird' returning to the uninviting landscape, and to the crocus root stirring beneath the cold

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<sup>11</sup> Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, p. 24.



exterior, though 'never as yet a tinct of spring/ Has shown in the Earth's apparelling'.<sup>12</sup> The same thought, that at fault is his own inability to apprehend -- his lack of what one might term 'spiritual insight' or, in Blake's words, 'four-fold vision' -- is echoed in "The Impercipient" and "The Darkling Thrush". The accompanying sense of deprivation is far from the more self-induced alienation of the early Romantics who, confident of the sustaining power of their imaginative vision could sublimate their isolation until it becomes the blend of pain and ecstasy experienced by Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" or Keats in his "Ode on Melancholy". The song of Shelley's Skylark or of Keats's Nightingale could carry them imaginatively into a higher realm of existence; Hardy hears just as distinctly the 'full-hearted evensong/ Of joy illimited' from his aged thrush, but he remains unwillingly earth-bound, 'deprived of wings', conscious more of the sadness within the 'Mundane Shell' of Reality and Reason (again to use Blake's terminology) than of the incipient joy. The same sense of impercipient cuts him off forever from the company of the Christian mystics.

It is not, however, sensitivity that he lacks, for it is Hardy's deep awareness of and identification with the human condition -- paradoxically another link with the

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<sup>12</sup> Hardy, "The Year's Awakening", Collected Poems, p. 315.

Romantics -- which keep him most bound to the earth. Again the mood of the age intervenes. The interest in the common man which the English Romantics had felt was, to a great degree, an idealistic philosophical concept, echoing Rousseau and expressed in their sympathy -- and later disillusionment -- with the French Revolution. The same interest became, in the Victorian Age, more action than feeling, a down-to-earth attempt to analyze humanity's ills and initiate reforms. This change of emphasis was as evident in the literature as in the new social legislation; indeed the degree to which the latter was sparked by the writers of the time may never be fully apprehended. Admittedly Thomas Hardy, except in the area of religious criticism, cannot be ranked as one of the great social analysts of the age. The great wave of social criticism from which emerged the delightful satires of Thackeray, the heart-stirring sympathy of Dickens, and the sociological insight of George Eliot was passing when Hardy came upon the literary scene. Although aspects of all three can be found in his work, it is primarily upon individuals rather than society at large that his subjective sympathy is focused, and novels like The Hand of Ethelberta, Two on a Tower, and A Laodicean, where he came closest to attempting social satire, particularly on the evils of the class system, have always been considered his weakest work..

It is, I believe, mainly because of his philosophical bias that Hardy differs from the social critics of his time. Generally the Victorians accepted as their premise the existence of dualistic forces of good and evil affecting the universe and reflected in the relationships of man to man within society. The promotion of the good and the diminution of the evil through broader education, a higher culture, more compassionate awareness and humane legislation became the goal of the reformers. Optimists, like Browning, 'never doubted good would triumph' in this struggle. Many shared Tennyson's belief that in a slowly-changing and evolving new order God would fulfill his purpose for the world. Others, like Matthew Arnold were less optimistic, yet hopeful, that the 'barbaric' and 'Philistine' elements in a society caught in changing times would eventually succumb to the 'sweetness and light' of imaginative reason and the will of a God whom Arnold, like Hardy, could not see in terms of the supernatural. Hardy's monistic view of life as being governed by an immanent force that 'neither good nor evil knows' makes him more concerned in his writings with the hapless individual victims of this life-force. With his doubt about 'free' or 'limited' will on the part of individuals, he can see them as almost powerless to effect their own well-being en masse. This is not to say that as a Victorian gentleman Hardy was anti-reform -- biographers show that in his own quiet way Hardy lent his

support to many causes -- but his monistic view colours his artistic purpose and literary structure. In his novels, for example, having once passed through the experimental stage of Desperate Remedies, he gradually moves in his own direction, and such dubious characters as Sergeant Troy of Far From the Madding Crowd, Damon Wildeve of The Return of the Native, and even Alex D'Urberville of Tess of the D'Urbervilles become more victims of elemental force than evil-hearted villains.

What Hardy does share with both his Romantic and Victorian counterparts is compassion, which becomes less pity for, than identification with, suffering man, as shown so poignantly in The Dynasts. Apropos of this feeling is an early observation in his notebook:

'Altruism, or the Golden Rule, or whatever "Love your neighbour as yourself" may be called, will ultimately be brought about I think by the pain we see in others reacting on ourselves, as if we and they were part of one body. Mankind, in fact, may be and possibly will be viewed as members of one corporeal frame.<sup>13</sup>

His strongest social 'message' for his public thus becomes his plea for humane understanding of man by his fellow-man, as expressed in each genre of his art, and epitomized in Jude the Obscure. He is as conscious of change as Matthew Arnold, and his desire to see a more

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<sup>13</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 224.

liberal Church is both a concern with man's personal problems with which he felt the Establishment was failing to cope, and also a reflection of his own need, for in spite of the strong negative feelings expressed, it is obvious that Hardy never wishes to cut himself off completely from the institution to which he was bound by ties of affection and tradition; nor can he visualize a society in which it ceases to exist.

One of the most interesting passages in the Life is that in which he records notes for what he calls 'an ephemeral article which might be written: "The Hard Case of the Would-be Religious. By Sinceritas."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately the article never materialized, but the brief jottings reveal clearly the difficult position in which he and many of his contemporaries find themselves, and his moral concern for a society in which he sees 'a church of some sort' as 'a thing indispensable'. With his hatred of pretence and hypocrisy he longs for church services in which 'there are no affirmations and no supplications', for 'the days of creeds are as dead and done as the days of Pterodactyls'. He feels that 'millions of thoughtful people'... are prevented entering any Church or chapel from year's end to year's end', and that those who do attend (like himself) 'repeat the words from an antiquarian interest in them'; that they are thus

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

'pretending what is not true' and 'should leave'. Yet, he continues, 'if we do, we reluctantly go out the door, and creep out as it creaks complainingly behind us'.

No better self-portrait of Hardy, the reluctant agnostic, could be given, nor of the Church of his times, swirling amid a sea of controversial ideas both within and without. With the Church's traditional association with intellectualism, it was inevitable that there should be within the ranks of the Clergy many who were as rational and scientific in their thinking as the philosophers and scientists themselves -- mentally accepting the Darwinian theory of evolution and the non-literal interpretation of the Bible. Thus the dichotomy of the age following the appearance of such disturbing books as Lyell's Principles of Geology, and Darwin's Origin of Species was not simply a theologian-versus-scientist cleavage, but the far more incisive conflict inside the Church itself. Sincere religious leaders of all persuasions found themselves as much torn as Thomas Hardy. Some clergymen, like Leslie Stephen and Stopford Brooke, were forced by their consciences to formally renounce allegiance to their ordination vows in the light of their secular beliefs. Sometimes the renunciation was in the other direction, as in the case of Philip Gosse, the Plymouth Brethren preacher-zoologist whose firm faith in his

fundamentalist beliefs necessitated a refutation of scientific principles after a futile effort to reconcile the two. The story of his bitter struggle as related in Father and Son with such pain and sympathy by his son Edmund, Hardy's friend and confidant, gives one of the best revelations of this particular trauma of the Victorian period.

Hardy himself remained nominally within the 'Via Media' of the Established Church. He may have felt alienated from the 'bright, believing band', but undoubtedly he was not without company to share his troubling, agnostic thoughts.

That 'Via Media' itself was a way of many diverging paths. It included at one end of the continuum the Evangelicals, those who, although unwilling to break with the Church, sympathized strongly with the fundamentalist theology of the Dissenters. Hardy gives a sympathetic view of such a figure in the person of the older Rev. Clare in Tess of the D'Urbervilles. At the other extreme, the intellectual Tractarians, or members of the Oxford Movement, led earlier by such men as Newman, Keble and Pusey, urged a greater emphasis on the more mystical elements of religion and the Sacramental life, stressing ancient authority and usage as a method of safeguarding the strength of the traditional Church. Many of these could find the answer to their spiritual difficulties only by moving out of the 'Via Media' completely and embracing Roman Catholicism. The most famous of these

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was the later Cardinal Newman, whose Apologia was one of the most remarkable documents of the times. It was said of it:

The book came upon some Anglicans with shattering effect - warmth instead of ice, generosity instead of narrowness, affection where they had looked for a sneer.<sup>15</sup>

Hardy records that in his youth he read Newman's Apologia, and 'had a great desire to be convinced by him', but again, his feelings gave way to the decision that 'there is no first link in his excellent chain of reasoning, and down you come headlong'.<sup>16</sup>

Hardy undoubtedly identified more closely with the 'Latitudinarians', a group within the Church who were ready to accept much of the new scientific thought and to give a very liberal interpretation to the Creed and Scriptures. To the shocked amazement of some churchmen and to the delight of others, the contributors to the startlingly unorthodox "Essays and Reviews" which appeared in 1860 were mainly intellectual divines.

The early years of the twentieth century saw attempts on the part of the Established Church to restate its basic

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<sup>15</sup> Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church, Vol. II (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1970), p. 415. (Quoted from Anglican Initiatives in Christian Unity, ed. E.G.W. Bill, 82-83.)

<sup>16</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 48.



principles, and to reform and revitalize the liturgy to meet what Hardy called the 'ache of modernity'. Therein lay Hardy's hope for the eventual reconciliation of religion and reason. One of his notebook entries comments:

'That the dogmatic superstitions read every Sunday are merely a commemorative recitation of old articles of faith held by our grandfather may not much matter ... as long as this is well understood. Still it would be more honest to make these points clearer, by recasting the liturgy, for their real meaning is often misapprehended.'<sup>17</sup>

It was thus with great disappointment that he greeted the appearance in 1927 of the new revised liturgy which he had hoped would make the Church

... comprehensive enough to include the majority of thinkers of the previous hundred years who had lost all belief in the supernatural.<sup>18</sup>

The changes were not sweeping enough to help Hardy in his moral quandary, and Mrs. Hardy sadly comments: 'From that time he lost all expectation of seeing the Church representative of modern thinking minds'.<sup>19</sup>

Hardy's vain endeavour to reconcile both worlds, like his conflicting dilemma over the matter of 'free-will', plagued him to the end of his life. These frustrations,

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

coupled with his World-War I disillusionment, his failure to see his 'evolutionary meliorism' operative in his time and his consciousness of a decadent materialism in the post-war world, gave a rather sad colouring to the last years of the 'grand old man of English letters', and explain the wistfulness of one of his last 'winter words': "We are getting to the end of dreams."<sup>20</sup>

One has a feeling that Hardy, the frustrated Romantic and troubled Victorian might be more at home in the company of the moderns, to whom as a poet he may be said to belong. Many of them including W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas and C. Day-Lewis acknowledge their debt to his influence. The world of Hardy's vision, peopled with 'flesh-hinged mannikins' propelled hither and yon by meaningless force is akin to the modern 'wasteland' envisaged by so many of the twentieth-century writers, although his characters have more appeal than the Sweeneys and Prufrocks of Eliot or the 'anti-heroes' of modern drama and fiction. The existentialist view of life, which has become so pervasive in literature since Hardy's day has much in common with Hardy's outlook in his grim awareness of 'the Worst'; and in his earnest endeavour to find some 'way to the Better' he shares the more positive aspect of the Christian existentialists. Indeed,

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<sup>20</sup> Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 887.

his whole literary achievement can be seen in terms of their concept of meaning through commitment.

Facing the absurdity of existence, as did both the nihilistic Sartre and the more positive Camus, they nevertheless attempt to create their own meaning and find in commitment to some cause or course of action a rationale for being, in contrast with the nihilist who, undermined by the terrible awareness of the void, can find meaning only in the nothingness of 'unbeing'. In some of his darker moments Hardy comes close to the nihilistic experience, for as Camus expresses it 'beginning to think is beginning to be undermined';<sup>21</sup> and it is Hardy the thinker who so often negates any elusive consciousness of happiness which his natural outreach for joy senses emotionally. That he is able to enter fully into the feelings of those who desperately want to 'undo' their existence is shown in many parts of The Dynasts, and also in the bitter lines of "Tess's Lament":

I cannot bear my fate as writ,  
I'd have my life unbe;  
Would turn my memory to a blot,  
Make every relic of me rot,  
My doings be as they were not,  
And gone all trace of me!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, Trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup>Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 162.

The early poet writing "Hap" has begun to experience the 'undermining' and has not yet found fulfilment in his art. The later poet of "In Tenebris" expressing most poignantly the existential despair is writing at a moment when one stage of his artistic career has closed behind him and what was to be his greatest effort is as yet as amorphous as the Will-Web out of which it was to be conceived. At both critical periods Hardy was to find his salvation -- or, to use existential terms, his commitment and fulfilment -- in his art. His mixture of belief and unbelief was the Sisyphan rock which he was condemned to roll up the mountain of existence, and as Camus says of Sisyphus, 'his rock is his thing', out of which Hardy chose to create something positive to fill the void. Camus describes this creative process in terms of the myth:

This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.<sup>23</sup>

Hardy himself must have been thinking of the myth of Sisyphus when, conscious of what he had both tried and failed to do in The Dynasts he made the following note on finishing the draft of Part III:

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<sup>23</sup>Camus, op. cit., p. 91.

'Critics can never be made to understand that the failure may be greater than the success.... To have strength to roll a stone weighing a hundred weight to the top of the mount is a success, and to have the strength to roll a stone of ten hundred weight only halfway up that mount is a failure. But the latter is two, or three times as strong a deed.'<sup>24</sup>

It is an interesting assessment of his artistic purpose, and his thinking here closely parallels that of Simone de Beauvoir whose writings have been so significant in the growth of the existentialist literary movement:

One can not start by saying that our earthly destiny has or has not importance, for it depends upon us to give it importance. It is up to man to make it important to be a man, and he alone can feel his success or failure.<sup>25</sup>

By accepting and coming to grips with his own ambivalence Hardy, like Camus, treats his awareness of the absurdity of existence 'not as a conclusion, but as a starting-point',<sup>26</sup> using it as the basis of his artistic endeavour. He, as it were, hammers it into literary shape on the anvil of his own pain and disillusionment, finding in the process his own catharsis and giving to others in the same predicament a similar though vicarious cathartic experience. Similarly it is the presence of both the belief

<sup>24</sup> F. Hardy, Life, p. 334.

<sup>25</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, Trans. from French by Bernard Frechtman (New York: The Citadel Press, 1948), p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Camus, op. cit., Preface, p. 2.

and the unbelief in Hardy that makes the reading of his work a satisfying aesthetic experience as well, for therein lies the tension, with its accompanying richness and strength.

The material for that art, as I have attempted to show, was rooted deeply in his own Christian environment and background, as much a part of him as the heaths and fields out of which he created the 'Wessex' world of his novels and poems.

It is fitting that his public, after alternately damning him for what some termed his atheistic and immoral influence, and praising him as a pioneer of enlightenment, should have interred the ashes of their eighty-eight-year-old man of letters in Westminster Abbey as a tribute to his intellect. It is even more fitting that, in a somewhat bizarre and grotesque gesture which probably would have delighted him, his heart was preserved and returned to the little Stinsford Churchyard where it rests in the shadow of the old Church in which his ancestors worshipped -- fitting, because during all the intellectual turmoil of his life, that is where his heart had always been. He would probably also like to know that in nineteen seventy-two there came to rest next to him by choice the Poet-Laureate C. Day-Lewis who had written of him:

We know, the moral courage without which a mind so sensitive as his might well have closed up against experience in despair, and the

integrity which insisted that what seemed true of life, however terrible, should not be excluded from art.<sup>27</sup>

The epitaph on Day-Lewis's own simple marker might speak as well for Thomas Hardy and his questionings:

Shall I be gone long?  
Forever and a day.  
To whom there belong?  
Ask the stone to say.  
Ask my song.

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<sup>27</sup>C. Day-Lewis, op. cit., p. 34.

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