

A SELECTIVE STUDY OF THE NATURE AND CONTENT
OF THOMAS HARDY'S POETRY

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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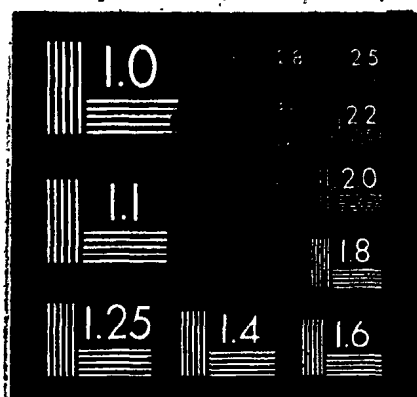
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ABSTRACT

My main purpose in this thesis is to present a selection of Thomas Hardy's poetry which seems to represent his personal philosophy, "evolutionary meliorism". While other aspects of his poetry have seldom been central to the discussions, neither his achievements as a stylist nor his position as a poetic technician have been neglected entirely.

The line on which my attention has constantly focused and to which the poems I have chosen all relate, was chosen from Hardy's poem "In Tenebris" II (1895-96). It reads: "... if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst," and is perhaps the clearest and most concise expression of his poetic intentions and indeed his stated philosophy of life. No other line from his writings so thoroughly epitomizes the poet's tragic view together with his hope, however forlorn, for man's eventual ennoblement. Furthermore it represents his special type of realism, his grim honest confrontation with man's disagreeable position.

I believe all Hardy's poems are reflections of his feelings and beliefs. However, I feel that the satires, the war poems and those dealing specifically with philosophy or religion best elucidate his antinomial view of the universe with their dual concentration on the "Better" and the "Worst".

Chapter I deals with the origins and meaning of "evolutionary meliorism", but, some semblance of balance is attempted by references to various charges of pessimism. Chapters II, III and IV are really a unit in themselves, a sort of progression forming the main body of the thesis. The order is important because one finds a gradually intensifying approach towards the realities of existence. For example, in the poems discussed in Chapter II one finds a blend of irony and humor as the author chooses a satirical approach to certain social problems. In Chapter III there is no ironic humor for the subject is war. The poetry of Chapter IV is grim indeed with its almost total concentration on the "Worst" - the grave possibility that no God exists.

Whereas in Chapter I, poems from Hardy's first volume are considered, so in Chapter V poems from his last-published Winter Words are discussed, thus attempting coherency and unity. It is here that we have his final word. Despite the sparks of hope observed earlier in the thesis, in the final analysis the poet's view is tinged with a sense of tragedy. The positive images, the meliorism and the hope cannot be denied, but the grey shades and the darker tones cause Hardy's poetic gift to the ages to be in harmony with the tragic view in the Greek sense.

"...If way to the Better there be,
it exacts a full look at the worst..."

A SELECTIVE STUDY OF THE NATURE AND
CONTENT OF THOMAS HARDY'S POETRY

by



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INTRODUCTION

Where precisely does Thomas Hardy stand in relation to his contemporaries? What phase, if any, in the world of philosophy and literature, does he represent? Does he fit at all into the nineteenth century? These I believe are valid questions and although the subject of my thesis is a specific one which attempts to analyse certain aspects of the poet's uniqueness and individualism, it seems appropriate to indicate in an introduction how he relates to the diversified century in which he writes. In an age where changing patterns of thought met head on with tradition, it becomes necessary to position him as a writer, in a kind of literary and philosophical space. I feel, for example, that one must come to grips with his obvious Romantic taste, for his roots lie deep in that tradition. I believe his association with Late Victorian trends is also important, though he is more often different than typical. Not the least important is his affinity with a few early-twentieth century writers. But it needs to be made quite clear that though he was still writing during the first three decades of this century, he neither reflects the Edwardian stability nor the Georgian "mossy quietness". The stern accent and the searching quality of his verse link him to poets like D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot both of whom studied "the abysmal depths of personality" and its relation to the cosmos.

It also becomes increasingly apparent therefore that Hardy is neither entirely a Romantic nor exclusively a Victorian. He transcends both, and his "enlightened" views make him an early contributor to the modernist theory of an absurd universe. In fact, it might be said that his remarkable intuitive response causes him to be not only a contributor but a fore-runner, or indicator of this recent philosophy which finds a certain logic in an illogical existence. Immediately, then, he becomes anomalistic perhaps even existentialist. This expansiveness in his own milieu isolates him as irregular and exceptional, quite alone, an enigma in his own time certainly among fellow English writers. He may be described as a kind of literary Galileo whose profoundly new idea of the universe placed that early unsuspecting progenitor in the somewhat precarious position of being a paradoxical, yet harmonizing transition between the old and the new. Hardy, too, is in a similar situation, for while his style often clings to the past, his vision signals change.

Unlike the Neo-Classic eighteenth century when "the spirit of the age" resisted change, the Romantic period has come to be associated with extreme radicalism. Literature, politics, industry, social mores, and religion came under fierce scrutiny from various quarters. Paradoxically, literature proved a most useful weapon for change rather than reaction. No one reads Romantic literature without

recognition of the intense preoccupation with the revolutionary idea. Wordsworth himself admits that his new school of poetry originated with it. The Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads and some of the ballads themselves are adequate testimony that he is indeed breaking new ground in literature. His actual involvement with the revolution in France reveals a similar spirit in politics. Coleridge, too, became a radical in politics and religion and although he, like most of his contemporaries, achieved a kind of equilibrium later, a kind of "glorious renovation" pervades his early work.

Because Hardy appeared on the scene later than the above writers, and after many social changes had been effected one does not find in his work any overwhelming political ferment or intense longing for reforms. We do find some, however, and Hardy's attitude is often close to Blake's. One recalls, for example, the emphasis placed on Los's mending powers. And of course the great plea Blake makes for the "Resurrection to Unity" of his universal man is really equivalent to Hardy's longing for the Brotherhood of Man. But though Hardy is very much concerned about man's improvement of his own lot, he does not in any of his writings stress the necessity for political upheaval. He does not see that violence is all that purifying. Nevertheless the 918 collected poems often demand a change in the status quo. The satires, though the irony cuts deep,

express the belief that personal decisions can change outcomes and prevent the destructive results of fate. Taking the unfortunate road can be prevented. By refusing in the war poems to filter his pity for war's victims, he is somehow hoping that his solid realism will lead to global improvement. In the philosophical poems, though his probing causes him much agony and though there is a tendency to focus on gradually dissolving beliefs and diminishing expectations, the door is always left open.

Like all the Romantics Hardy realized the need for a social transfusion. But like Blake and quite unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge whose poems do not always contain acute sensitivity for the plight of suffering humanity, Hardy's intensity is compelling, his concentration unswerving, his sights seldom lowered. It is probable that he would never have become a freedom-fighter as Wordsworth, Byron or Shelley for his grim caution would have imposed a more reserved approach, subduing any kind of excited optimism for quick remedies. Nevertheless, his poetry does have some degree of affinity with the spirit of the former age. He does have melioristic dreams though they are evolutionary and not revolutionary. He does desire changes in many areas but he never uses apocalyptic imagery or proposes a fully worked out personal philosophy as Blake does. Neither does he see God in nature in the Wordsworthian manner, though he does seem to work toward a Blakean "Human Form Divine". He

never captures the political spirit that Godwin is famous for, nor does he become as socially philosophic as Godwin, but his disgust with man's generally unsatisfactory conditions and his despair over man's blighted planet indicate a mood very like theirs. Nor is it different from the traditional Christian view. Hardy's basic difference here is the experimental and exploratory nature of his thought. Since his poems are more impressions than argument, he is seldom dogmatic, and although he never allows systems to cripple him neither does he boldly create substitutes as Blake does. Hardy has fewer pretensions than Blake and is more accessible to the reader than either he or Shelley.

The skepticism in Hardy's grim vision of man's destiny and the toughness which characterizes its acceptance shows a kindred relation with Shelley. Steeped in philosophy, though it brought no comfort to either, they both developed non-conformist attitudes. Both have become widely known partially because of their contempt for traditional religion and codified morality, postures assumed by many of their fictional creations. Although Hardy allows Angel Clare in Tess of the d'Urbervilles to read "A Counterblast to Agnosticism", that character never follows suit by delivering a blast in return. Shelley of course collaborated with Thomas Jefferson Hogg on a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism", and Queen Mab cries "there is no God". Both poets are similar, too, in their

avowed knowledge of what to them often seemed a tragic fact, that evidence proving the authenticity of Christianity simply did not exist. This is a fundamental premise to any understanding of their relative positions. Nevertheless, there are differences in their responses. For whereas both men appear to glimpse a dark abyss and eternal nothingness as man's final state, Shelley is much more blatant and extreme, more dogmatic in his conclusions. Shelley is unequivocal; Hardy, like Clough, is less sure. For Shelley, there was no God to bury. Hardy reluctantly went to the funeral.

A resulting feature of Hardy's indeterminate vision is the tension produced in his poetry by ironic contrasts. Though these are given further treatment throughout the thesis they should be mentioned here because they relate to his Romanticism. Coleridge, for example, saw a nature that consisted of two contrary forces in which the dynamic conflict of opposites merged through the thesis-antithesis-synthesis process. In fact he states that the greatest poetry reconciles these two opposites of nature and art. Blake too was conscious of this kind of operation in nature for his system was, indeed a "fearful symmetry", his poems a unified resolution of the contraries of innocence and experience. He was very much aware that reality consisted of both the Tyger and the Lamb and that there must needs be a marriage of Heaven and Hell. Keats, too, recognized

the paradoxical quality of experience as he wrestled with the problem of evil and suffering in the world. The "tangled bine-stems" of Hardy's Thrush song are really no different. In this image that typifies Hardy's view of the world one discovers how life is indeed a tangled mixture of unity and the irreconcilables of pain and pleasure, despair and delight, the positive and the negative.

In addition to his general vision, Hardy's Romanticism can be detected in his style. First of all, his poetry is basically lyrical, and do not Wordsworth and Coleridge both venerate the lyric as the essential poetic form, making it a veritable cornerstone of the Romantic temple of art? How else, they reasoned, could spontaneous feelings and personal emotion be expressed? And what of the famous metaphors of the creative mind in this period, the lamp, wind-harp and fountain? How very adequate the lyric was for the fullest use of these. Secondly, like Wordsworth, Hardy was of the opinion that rural life and the manners of the folk provided adequate subject matter for poetry. To him their elementary feelings reflected truths seldom found elsewhere; they provided what the Romantics called "essential passions". Thus it is that Hardy wrote with equal intensity about a mad girl, a pauper child, and Napoleon. Thus it is that his explorations into love, death, and eternity were effected through the rustic population. Thirdly, although Wordsworth did not always succeed, his

insistence that the diction of poetry should be a selection of the "real language of men", or "the language really spoken by men", found favour with Hardy in his novels and the poetry. For him, real language was passionate and the further down the social ladder a Wessex rustic happened to be, the more intense his speech might be. Mad Judy, for example, speaks with a truth more intense than Parson Tringham is capable of. And there may be some truth in the statement that Hardy was a "village atheist brooding over the village idiot", for like most Romantics, Hardy attributed to village "idiots", truths, genuineness and a natural purity that could not be found elsewhere.

Hardy's work is saturated with irony, satire and the macabre, and is often tragic. With his cynicism and doubts in this respect, he is outside of the Romantic main-stream. In fact he has much more in common with Swift, Pope, Voltaire, Byron and some later Victorians such as the Thackeray of "Vanity Fair", the Clough of "Dipsychus" or "The Latest Decalogue", and even the Tennyson of "Saint Simeon Stylites", than with the so-called representative Romantics. Again, like Byron's, Hardy's heroes and heroines are often saturnine and moody, making decisions based on purely personal rather than socially oriented reasons. They actually reflect a temperament which was to become a phenomenon in the twentieth century when the Nietzschean concept of the superman was in vogue, and when the Renaissance-type man

again stands proudly separated from traditional values. But unlike the gradual de-emphasis of God during the Renaissance, God is now dead; values become meaningless; existence is absurd and only the self is important.

Even though 1832 is usually the designated dividing line between the Romantic period and the Victorian, it is not always applicable because while Romanticism is a very general term used to describe literary and philosophical tendencies prominent during a period of about fifty years, the term Victorian is more political than literary. Besides, even though the great literary men of the Romantic era from Blake to Wordsworth did most of their writing before the middle of the nineteenth century, their styles were not always totally different from those of the latter half. The only real change in subject matter was the result of Darwin and evolution. In fact it is not at all difficult to find parallels on either side of the 1832 boundary. For example, Tennyson's imagery is often as lush and sensuous as Keats's. He is certainly as form-conscious. Arnold is frequently as pensive and melancholy as Wordsworth. And Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" is little different from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children".

Hardy's most prolific period as a writer came during the late Victorian period (1870 - 1901) and it is here that we must also observe him operating. In many ways of course he is no different from writers of the early period. He is

especially like Tennyson and Arnold in his belief that the price of progress was too great. Though he does not compromise as Tennyson does, he faces the same great moment in the history of thought, and the same dilemma, when Darwin challenges the Bible. The same doubt, melancholy and tremulous cadence permeate all their work, as they react, often in unison, to "the ache of modernism". But one detects a more mature strength and an almost invincible endurance in Hardy that is not always visible in his contemporaries. This response he shares with writers like Samuel Butler, Edward Fitzgerald, Oscar Wilde and Wilfred Owen, none of whom is blinded by the false golden glow of Victoria's last decades. They did not comply with the general attitude that because Britannia ruled the waves, all was secure. In fact quite often they satirized such complacency. Hardy had begun his career with satire so he fitted well into this kind of revival. From the beginning he had seen through clear glasses the distorted social structures and an unfriendly cosmos. He had always made clear the other side of love, the disgusting side of war, and the emptiness on the other side of the grave. And like Browning, who was rarely "typically" Victorian, Hardy saw that Victorian standards could be stifling. Both were unconcerned about raising eyebrows.

Yet, Hardy is different even from some of these later writers. Just as he had done in his novels of the 1870's and 80's when in addition to focussing on man's relation to man, he had also considered man's relation to the universe where fate plays a most prominent role, now, too, in the later philosophic poetry, he explores man, reality, and existence on the same high level. While many of his contemporaries, including the earlier Dickens, were exposing the dehumanizing effects of industrialism, and Victorian morality, Hardy in addition was peering further into the depths of reality. This is significant and not to be overlooked, for whenever he writes this is the essence of his individualism. He always seems surging ahead grappling with the Darwinian implication and the Nietzschean theory that God is dead. And it is likely that Hardy's grim conclusions though they may not be quite so definite as Nietzsche's, sprang from the same kind of chaos that society has supplied. It perhaps explains the extensive use of the macabre in his work, for what is more horrible to contemplate, what produces more horrible images than total acceptance of a meaningless existence? Yet if one accepts existentialist theories this is perhaps the only conclusion. Hardy's poetry moves toward such a conclusion. And if indeed he is not as certain about the puzzle of reality as D.H. Lawrence is, it is because more positive philosophers such as Comte influenced Hardy. Furthermore, it is plain,

I think, that Hardy represents what one might call a near-nihilism, or an earlier stage of the same experiment that D.H. Lawrence pursued and Samuel Beckett concluded in that Ghastly room in Endgame where the human condition reduces even humans to nausea.

Part of the general attitude reflected in Hardy's poetry does come very close to the disgust that permeates the thought of those who see the universe as incomprehensible. However, the main portion of this thesis attempts to signify that such a description is not a complete one for the poet. For while he does come face to face with the human condition and looks upon it with grave displeasure, the mere fact that his poetry seems a kind of moral and metaphysical search indicates that he is not totally immersed in pessimism. Besides, I feel that even though his poetry and his writing in general do take an extended look at the "Worst", there is time, if only for brief moments, to consider the "Better".

Hardy masculinity, nothing, not even death can "apall/
 One who, past doubtings all,/ Waits in unhope". This poem,
 of course, points toward a favourite Hardy stance: man
 slighted, but stern, in the face of a bitterly cold
 universe. It has the ring of the great novels, The Return
of the Native, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Jude the
Obscure, where the main characters, trapped by circumstances,
 unfriendly environments and their own metabolism grow
 sublime in tragic resilience. Thus, although one
 immediately acknowledges the toughness and stoicism of the
 first part of "In Tenebris", yet another note is sounded
 far less formidable than wintry despair.

In most of Hardy's poetry the lighter note may seem
 less emphasized, and quantitatively the brooding darkness
 does tend to overshadow all else. However, a brighter vein
 is seldom absent. For, says the poet, in this early poem,
 "Tempests may scath", not will scath; and "unhope" is more
 neutral-tinted than pessimistic. It is a kind of
 resignation, a neutral response to an indifferent universe.
 Hardy's universe was, one remembers, full of "neutral-tinted
 haps".² But the most important feature of the early poem
 from the point of view of this discussion is the one line
 chosen by Hardy twenty years after he had first used it to
 represent the view of life really expressed in his poetry as

²Ibid., p. 846.

a whole. It is found in the second part of "In Tenebris" and reads:

"... if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst"³.

Needless to say, Hardy realizes the significance of this line and it is the focal point in my consideration of Hardy's best poetry. For, not only does it epitomize the sentiments of the poem which contains it, it also indicates the general tenor of his poetry. No other line crystallizes more precisely the apparent philosophy of the man and the message of the poems. Furthermore, it is difficult to find another statement which so adequately reflects the inherent tensions of that philosophy. In short, it contains Hardy's poetic description of "evolutionary meliorism", his belief, for a time, in man's eventual ennoblement.

In an article dealing with Hardy's impressions of reality, J.O. Bailey describes the meliorism this way:

...This meliorism is a hope, at least, that human action can make the circumstances of life and life itself better in ethical quality and in happiness than they have been. His adjective evolutionary means that improvement may take an extremely long time, proceeding in minute stages over thousands of years, in processes of adaption like those of biological evolution.⁴

³Ibid., p. 154.

⁴J.O. Bailey, "Evolutionary Meliorism in the poetry of Thomas Hardy", Studies in Philology, Vol. 60 (1963), p. 570.

Bailey's description of the poet's philosophy is an adequate one, for not only does it recognize Hardy's knowledge of Darwin, which is considerable, but it also mentions "human action" as a necessary requirement to insure improvement. Hardy most certainly agrees with this latter emphasis on human effort. For as Roy Morrell points out, Hardy places great stress on man's need to exploit the vast store of unused capabilities that he possesses. Like the creeping plant which struggles to assert itself amongst a growth of much sturdier build, it must utilize

... in a special way, and in time of special need, something which all plants possess. In the same way Hardy is not suggesting that for the achievement of happiness we must look forward to a change in human nature, but rather use resources we already possess.⁵

If human nature is to improve, suggests Hardy, we must expend some of our energy.⁷ It is no good for us to expect help from a force, a supreme being or a will that may not even exist. Analysis of the "Worst" is part of that task.

By 1922, Hardy's opinion about man's general development becomes formalized in the "Apology", the preface to the Late Lyrics and Earlier, published in that year. I am not suggesting, as Bailey does, that Hardy's arrival at this stage of seeming conviction was the product

⁵Roy Morrell, The Will and The Way (Kuala Lumpur: 1965), p. 98.

of "a gradual growth to a definite theory".⁶ I do not believe this late admission of meliorism was preceded by a step-by-step progress in orderly fashion. The poems of the First World War era attest to the truth of this statement. In fact, Florence Emily Hardy makes quite clear Hardy's position when the War broke out. She insists that the conflict "destroyed all Hardy's belief in the gradual ennoblement of man".⁷ By 1922, however, this temporary melancholy had passed and he could write more hopefully again. One could of course question the author's consistency and sincerity. He might have anticipated the possibilities of such criticisms because in his preface to Winter Words, his last volume of poetry, he wrote this:

I also repeat what I have often stated on such occasions, that no harmonious philosophy is attempted in these pages--or in any bygone pages of mine, for that matter.⁸

Like many Hardy commentators, I, too, have regarded as philosophic the poet's reflections concerning existence and his attempts to account for the problem of evil. As the last paragraph in the preface to Winter Words explains,

⁶Bailey, p. 570.

⁷Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928, Papermac (New York: 1965), p. 348.

⁸Collected Poems, p. 796.

the poet would probably not have agreed. To argue, of course, is futile. However, a view from another angle might be fruitful.

In The Life of Thomas Hardy, Hardy's second wife records this from her husband's notes of July 8, 1901:

After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this: Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience. He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseology from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories if he values his own mental life...⁹

I do not suppose Hardy can justifiably be called a philosopher as say, Auguste Comte can, because of the former's obvious suspicions of any specific dogmatic approach, and also because his own profundities, for the most part, come to us as poems and novels. He cannot be said to have a system, except perhaps in The Dynasts, which investigates universal truths, principles, and knowledge. But systematic or not, he does investigate such things. The preface to Winter Words says that philosophy was not attempted in any of his writings, however, philosophy is most certainly the result. For who can read Jude the Obscure without being struck by Hardy's investigation of, and comment on, institutionalized religion? Who can ponder

⁹F.E. Hardy, p. 310.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles without recognizing the author's musings on the "President of the Immortals"? Furthermore, what of the queries about destiny in "Hap", or the Immanent Will in The Dynasts? No one can deny the "obstinate questionings" and "blank misgivings" here. Hardy once said that what is called philosophy in his poems could be referred to as impressions of the moment. But when impressions over the span of some sixty years are reasonably consistent, they approach the realm of philosophy.

The philosophy that Hardy revealed in 1922 represented perhaps a crystallization of various beliefs he had been working toward or wished to believe all his life. That crystallization he called "evolutionary meliorism". Even though such a philosophy is prefaced by a kind of development, one is reminded that much of the "Apology" is an answer to the then rampant charges of pessimism levelled against him. Hardy replies, however, with

... what is to-day, in allusions to the present author's pages, alleged to be "pessimism" is, in truth, only such "questionings" in the exploration of reality, and is the first step towards the soul's betterment, and the body's also.¹⁰

He then continues:

If I may be forgiven for quoting my own old words, let me repeat what I printed in this relation more than twenty years ago, and

¹⁰Collected Poems, p. 526.

wrote much earlier, in a poem entitled
"In Tenebris":

If way to the Better there be, it exacts a
full look at the Worst:

that is to say, by the exploration of reality,
and its frank recognition stage by stage
along the survey, with an eye to the best
consummation possible: briefly, evolutionary
meliorism.¹¹

Hardy's critics before 1922 can perhaps be forgiven
for not having penetrated the author's essential thought.
But what is inexcusable is the constant barrage of attacks
on the gloom in his poetry, leaving untouched the other
note. If one is to reach any kind of reasonable assessment
of the poetry, the melioristic tendency cannot be ignored.
Hardy is not merely a preacher of darkness. He does indeed
analyse the sorrier side of man's existence, yet he does so
because he feels obligated to be truthful. This
"exploration of reality", this "frank recognition", is
necessary, he believes, if we are to improve our lot. What
has to be made quite clear, though, is that while a survey
of the difficult road is being taken, the author never loses
sight of his ultimate goal, or the possibilities for
mankind, namely "the best consummation possible: briefly,
evolutionary meliorism". This dual concentration, or seeming
contradiction between means and end is the cause of the
tensions so evident from the earliest poetry to the latest.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 526-527.

The idea that human nature might make a positive development had apparently been with the poet quite early in his career, a point made quite clear in the "Apology". What he intimates there is that despite the obvious tendency in his poetry to highlight despair, the notion of meliorism appears early and dates back much further than 1901 when "In Tenebris" was published. One can indeed detect budding meliorism in the earliest volumes, and although it is difficult to say when all these poems were written, Hardy having dated only a few, some go back to 1866. At that time the poet was twenty-six years of age and had most certainly not completely solidified a permanent philosophy. While that conclusion may be true, close analysis of certain early poems uncovers what may have been the germ of meliorism in its earliest stages. This foetal thought seems to be tugging at the ominous darker tones and it supplies the tensions typical of Hardy's best poems, early and late.

Like all of Hardy's separate volumes, the first published, Wessex Poems (1898) is a heterogeneous mixture. There is variety in type, form, and subject but more especially in tone. For example "Hap" and its "purblind doomsters" is totally unrelieved; "In a Wood" with its "poison drip" and "life loyalties" is full of tensions; the final part of "She to Him", ending with a plea for friendship, is rather optimistic. Consequently, as in the

other volumes, overall tension is evident. But the intention here is to indicate a note reflecting, if nothing else, the author's desire for a world better than the one he is in. It is his first attempt in poetry to find "a way to the Better". The fulfillment of that desire may not yet be in sight but hope for it is frequently present. There is indeed an early note that does not spell gloom.

In "A Meeting with Despair",¹² a poem that compares favourably with the now much-appreciated "The Darkling Thrush", the setting is "The black lean land, of featureless contour/. . . where many glooms abide." The prevailing atmosphere is of course dark and brooding like Egdon Heath yet lighter tones are evident as well. For even though at the end of the poem the glimmer of hope is unrealized, and "Heaven's radiant show/ Had gone" that had "heartened" the poet, he had indeed been "heartened" and the radiant show did appear, if only briefly, in the form of "ray-lit clouds" which "gleamed glory". There was for a time "solace everywhere" and the opposition it supplies to the dominating darkling atmosphere cannot be ignored.

Likewise, in "The Impercipient (at a cathedral service)",¹³ it is obvious that the speaker is an unbeliever.

¹²Ibid., p. 51.

¹³Ibid., pp. 59-60.

This unbelief is not that of a man who simply will not believe, but that of one who, under the circumstances, feels he cannot. The poet's intellectual insights, inadequate though they appear to others, will not permit adherence to the orthodox code. He desires a vision of "The glorious distant sea" and the "Shining Land" which his comrades see; he craves the faith of his brethren but he is not granted either. What is a glorious hereafter to them is a "yon dark/ And wind-swept pine" to the poet. It is not however his will to be an outcast. "doth a bird deprived of wings/ Go earth-bound wilfully!", he asks. As in "A Meeting with Despair", the almost pathetic desire for a happier, more comforting belief rings loud and clear, despite the denial of that request in both poems.

"Nature's Questioning"¹⁴ echoes a similar note. For despite his reference to the creator of the universe as an "Automaton" and "some Vast Imbecility", may it not be possible he asks,

"... that some high Plan betides,
As yet not understood,
Of Evil stormed by Good,
We the Forlorn Hope over which Achievement strides?"

The earliest poetry, then, forces one to conclude that there is evidence of more than darkness, despair and

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 58-59.

unbelief in the mind of the poet. Although twilight, faint hope and agnosticism may not be entirely positive qualities, they sometimes seem so in Hardy. Such a dual concentration of course gives the poems a kind of uncertainty or ambiguity, an elasticity, typical of all his best poems. And it comes from that difficult fusion, in one breath, of the "Better", and the "Worst".

To speak of The Dynasts is to speak of Hardy's fullest poetic expression of his meliorism. The poem is many things, of course. Besides giving vent to his life-long interest in Napoleon "Struggling alone toward his own conception of his destiny - but helpless to alter his predetermined end",¹⁵ it is the author's attempt at an epic in which his feelings about the universe are discussed on a grand scale. Samuel Hynes calls it Hardy's "most ambitious philosophical statement",¹⁶ and it is with this philosophical aspect only that I wish to deal here. Treating such a gigantic work in such a limited way may seem to play down its intellectual strength and comprehensiveness, but this is not intended. Its power and significance, representing as it does Hardy's most optimistic view of life, has been treated with considerable depth by several critics,

¹⁵Samuel Hynes, The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry (Chapel Hill: 1961), p. 156.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 153.

especially J.O. Bailey in Thomas Hardy and The Cosmic Mind. Besides, in the context of this thesis my sole purpose is merely to indicate that The Dynasts is the poet's finest example of his tension-filled vision of the universe. I am not concentrating on this work which is major enough for a full dissertation. I am stating, however, that what seems to be a melioristic beginning in his first volume of poetry mushrooms here. As Samuel Hynes clearly states, such a quality is not a flaw because it goes contrary to what has been called earlier expressions of pessimism, for my conclusion, having interpreted Hardy in his prefaces, poetry and letters, is that total pessimism is rarely found by itself in any individual poem or volume of poems. That other note is there, however faint its earliest expressions. Not to recognize this note in the early poems and more especially in The Dynasts as Hynes points out is to miss completely the significance of Hardy's apparently antinomial or paradoxical vision of reality which stresses the suffering while seeking a remedy. In the second part of this immense poem, Act VI, Scene V, The Spirit of the Pities echoes that dual-structured view:

Something within me aches to pray
To some Great Heart, to take away
This evil day, this evil day!¹⁷

¹⁷Thomas Hardy, The Dynasts, Papermac (London: 1965), p. 306.

One cannot fail to notice the strangely poignant stresses on fatalism and pity, or hope that the Will, unconscious though it be, may develop consciousness. It is really the heart, the very quintessence of Hardy's thought as a letter of 1901 makes clear where he states that his view of the universe lies "at the indifference point between rationality and irrationally",¹⁸ a position that emanates from tensions. Again, Hardy's comment recorded in his notebook while preparing The Dynasts, is not irrelevant: "The human race to be shown as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part ..."¹⁹ The most intense expression of this feeling in The Dynasts issues from the various dialogues between The Choruses, The Spirit of the Pities, and the Spirits Irony and Years. From the opening Fore Scene the sympathy and hope of the former is countered by the determination of the latter:

SPIRIT OF THE PITIES

Meet is it, none the less,
To bear in thought that though Its consciousness
May be estranged, engrossed afar, or sealed,
Sublunar shocks may wake Its watch anon?

¹⁸F.E. Hardy, p. 309.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 177.

SPIRIT OF THE YEARS

Nay. In the Foretime, even to the germ of Being,
 Nothing appears of shape to indicate
 That cognizance has marshalled things terrene,
 Or will (such is my thinking) in my span.
 Rather they show that, like a knitter drowsed,
 Whose fingers play in skilled unmindfulness,
 The Will has woven with an absent heed
 Since life first was; and ever will so weave.²⁰

How much the "knitter drowsed" and the fingerplay of unmindfulness remind one of the "crass causality", and "dicing Time" of "Hap"! But of course the hope that "sublunar shocks may wake" the unconscious mind, forces one to recall lines from "A Meeting with Despair", in which the poet, intent on his new reasoning glimpses "The ray-lit clouds" and thinks there is "solace everywhere"! The tension between the various spirits is apparent throughout this great epic. As the wars are fought and men killed; as Napoleon is drawn magnetically by the Immanent Will to his pre-determined destruction, the spirits, individually and in chorus, comment on the action revealing what must be the author's own mental dilemma. Thought and feeling, intellect and emotion are represented by the Spirit of the Pities and the Spirit Ironical, and in their verbal interaction, reveal Hardy's determination to believe that a kind of mending would be possible in the world. The Spirit of the Years insists that the individual will of Napoleon and indeed the wills of all men count for nothing;

²⁰The Dynasts, p. 2.

individual wills are overpowered by the Unconscious Mind
that will remain unconscious. But the Spirit of the Pities
asks:

But, even so, shall blankness be for aye?
Men gained cognition with the flux of time,
And wherefore not the Force informing them,
When far-ranged aions past all fathoming
Shall have swung by, and stand as backward
years?²¹

The Spirit of the Years insists that such men as Napoleon,
such Dynasts,

... who wade across the world
To make an epoch, bless, confuse, appal,
Are in the elemental ages' chart
Like meanest insects on Obscurest leaves.²²

But the Spirit of the Pities continues in its familiar strain:

So did we evermore sublimely sing;
So would we now, despite thy forthshadowing!²³

Then comes what Hynes calls the final burst of evolutionary
meliorism. As the poem ends, the spirits combine in a
vibrant outburst of emotion:

But-a stirring thrills the air
Like to sounds of joyance there
That the rages
Of the ages
Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from
the darts that were,

²¹Ibid., p. 522.

²²Ibid., p. 521.

²³Ibid., p. 523.

Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashion
all things fair!²⁴

As the chapter on the war poetry will indicate, Hardy did have a change of heart between the publication of The Dynasts in 1907 and the 1922 "Apology". But when he wrote the concluding lines of the drama of Napoleon he felt that the "great heart" was awakening:

Promptly tending
To Its mending
In a genial germinating purpose, and for loving-kindness' sake?²⁵

Although no one can with justice doubt the melioristic mood here, there are some critics who would suggest that not only is there no evidence of meliorism in The Dynasts, but that there is none in any of Hardy's poems. John Crowe Ransom is one who sings this tune:

The author's philosophical remarks about his poetic intentions seem after the event, and unrelated to his actual poetic occasions. For what is evolutionary meliorism? It is 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. There may be some of it in the Hardy Novels, I do not know; there is none in the verse, and there could scarcely be any of its getting there. The ironic poems never tell us about evolutionary meliorism, nor do they exemplify this or anything evolutionary, but just continue to be ironic...²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., p. 525.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 525.

²⁶ John Crowe Ransom, "Honey and Gall", The Southern Review, Volume 6 (Baton Rouge: 1940), p. 6.

No one denies the presence of the dark ironist in Hardy's poetry. But Ransom's decision not to admit a note of meliorism, especially in The Dynasts, which he calls "the worst poetry that Hardy wrote",²⁷ is simply not sound judgement. Frequently when the poetic views of an author are analyzed, critics seem to be blinded by a particular bias. They tend to close their minds to all but their own narrow ideas.

Although one cannot agree with all his conclusions, J.O. Bailey in his article "Evolutionary meliorism in the poetry of Thomas Hardy", is thorough. He sees the poems after 1900 as distinctly melioristic but describes the early poems of the 1860's as bleakly pessimistic. Hardy's path to meliorism he concludes, develops through a series of stages:

Thus Hardy's poetry reveals his thought in three phases: first a phase of bleak pessimism when he read Darwin in the 1860's and reluctantly rejected religious faith; second, influenced by Schopenhauer and Von Hartman, a phase of meditation about an Unconscious Will that might become conscious and amend the world; and third, the phase of evolutionary meliorism. In this phase Hardy accepted the conditions of natural law; he believed that in slow adaption man can find, and perhaps is finding, the upward-way.²⁸

This article on the poet's philosophy is no doubt an in-depth

²⁷Ibid., p. 14.

²⁸Bailey, p. 587.

study by a noted critic but it is unlikely that Hardy's philosophy can be categorized so neatly. For one of the most obvious findings in any Hardy study should be the tensions resulting from his concentration on a darker tone here, while at the same time pointing to a lighter one there; the despairing mood in one line, the hopeful mood in the next, and tensions prevent regular development.

Hardy's scope in both prose and verse has been called narrow. It has been intimated that whatever he concluded about human nature, destiny, and the like, came about because of a thorough knowledge of his own particular area, his Wessex. I find this difficult to accept since one's philosophical conclusions must always be the product of experience plus natural tendencies. And Hardy's nature was paradoxical like his own tension-filled beliefs. He was at once compassionate, and grim; kindly, but stern. Hardy was indeed a keen observer of the countryside and its inhabitants as his poems show. Thus, his in-depth speculations about the universe, in part, originated there. In fact the poet's own words in his preface to Poems of the Past and the Present reinforce this idea:

... the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.²⁹

²⁹ Collected Poems, p. 75.

His intense feeling for Wessex obviously contributed to his conclusions, but the man's reading cannot be ignored. He was always an avid reader and The Life records a staggering list of authors read in one year, 1887. Among the most prominent were Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and Virgil. He digested them so well, it is not remarkable that Carl Weber accused him of plagiarism and that Hardy himself should point out the inevitability of his using some of the terms and phraseology of those authors he read. However, it is not so much that he read widely that is so important here, as that he was influenced by that reading.

Mr. Bailey quite adequately traces Hardy's expressed views of the world from Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Mill in the first phase, through the metaphysics of Schopenhauer and Von Hartman in the second, to the scientific influence of the third. These influences are unquestionable. But what this critic fails to mention are the quite definite traces of Auguste Comte's theories that seem to permeate even the earliest poems.

Tracing influences can sometimes be frustrating, and often fruitless, but one feels safe in linking Hardy's meliorism with Auguste Comte whose Positivism echoes a kind of belief in man's improvement by an evolutionary process. Comte was most certainly not the only direct philosophical influence on Hardy because in the "Apology" he speaks of his respect for Einstein as well as thinkers

dealt with by Bailey. Besides, Hardy's readings took him back further still. For he suggested that although people felt his melioristic tendency to be "some pernicious new thing", it was really "so old as to underlie the Gospel scheme, and even to permeate the Greek drama".³⁰

Comte's influence was nevertheless strong according to The Life, for Hardy was reading Comte as early as 1870 and was thinking about Positivism in 1880. This becomes significant when one realizes that by the latter date he had written eight novels and had published seven. Also, a great bulk of poetry was written during this ten year period. He may not have adopted the entire philosophy that Comte had propounded but the essence of his meliorism reflects the essence of Comte's positivism. Both men may have come under the influence of G.F.W. Hegel (1770-1831) whose system of thought Henry D. Aiken comments on. It was, he says,

.... one of the most influential systems of thought in the nineteenth century. Without Hegel, Marxism would be unthinkable; without him, therefore, the ideological conflicts of our own age would be hard to imagine.³¹

Life and reality for Hegel, as for other Romantics, were a process of becoming, of change and development. For Darwin,

³⁰Ibid., p. 527.

³¹Henry D. Aiken, The Age of Ideology (New York: 1956), p. 71.

too, continuous life meant continuous evolution. The present depended very much on the past; the future would reflect the present. As Aiken explains, historical development for Hegel was "a progressive development in which every stage or "moment" is viewed ... as a necessary consequence of its predecessor".³² It is perhaps Hegel's reference to life as a process of becoming that Hardy echoes in his "Apology". He talks about the fundamental sameness or oneness of poetry, pure literature and religion in its undogmatic sense. They are, he says, "often but different names for the same thing, ... visible signs of mental and emotional life".³³ What is particularly significant in this context, however, is his insistence that all three must "keep moving" and continue to be "becoming". On closer analysis though, it is, in my opinion, Comte whom Hardy reflects most, with regard to human progress. He writes this in his "Apology":

... But if it be true, as Comte argued, that advance is never in a straight line, but in a looped orbit, we may, in the aforesaid ominous moving backward, be doing it pour mieux sauter, drawing back for a spring.³⁴

³² Ibid., p. 73

³³ Collected Poems, pp. 530, ff.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 531-532.

Comte sees the history of human development as a continuous forward movement divided into three stages, each stage representing the birth or demise of specific philosophical and religious notions. During the first, the human mind in a theological state seeks "the essential nature of beings". In the second, a metaphysical state is imagined, where the mind supposes abstract forces "... instead of supernatural beings ..."³⁵ Finally, in the third stage, the search after absolute notions is abandoned. The origin and destination of the universe is sought for now, knowledge of which will come only through reasoning and observing.

This sounds very much like Hardy's dictum, quoted earlier, in which his own concept of human development becomes an exploration and recognition of reality, "... stage by stage along the survey ...". In other words, in a manner quite similar to Hegel and Comte, Hardy treats these developmental stages as "... inescapable 'moments' in the historical development of human thought towards its ideal consummation in the positive philosophy".³⁶

Even in the earliest poetry, Hardy seems to have passed Comte's theological stage in which humanity is

³⁵ Aiken, p. 125.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

obsessed with a supernatural God. In "Hap" (1866) for example, not even a vengeful God looks down and sneers. In fact there is no real god, merely "purblind Doomsters" who are more neutral than supernatural and who leave earth's creatures to chance. Also, "Dicing time" and "Crass Casualty" are really abstractions and it is because of Hardy's emphasis on such qualities that I find him often very close to Comte's second stage where abstract forces replace supernatural phenomena. However, knowing the influence that Darwin and the progress of science had on Hardy there is no doubt that he also operates within the reason and observation of the third stage.

Having rejected, or so it appeared, the idea of a preternatural providence and a god of mercy, Hardy tended to see a force or an energy back of the universe that was neither good nor bad. He saw, as The Life records "an indifferent and unconscious force at the back of things" "which neither good nor evil knows".³⁷ And in all seriousness he states:

... I might say that the Good-God theory having, after some thousands of years of trial, produced the present infamous and disgraceful state of Europe - that most Christian Continent! - a theory of a Goodless -and-Badless God (as in The Dynasts) might perhaps be given a trial with advantage.³⁸

³⁷F.E. Hardy, p. 409.

³⁸Ibid., p. 375-376.

Florence Emily Hardy suggests that in this respect he may have been close to Spinoza's and Einstein's theory which sees that "neither Chance nor Purpose governs the universe, but Necessity".³⁹

It is in The Dynasts that Hardy most thoroughly focuses on an impersonated abstraction that supposedly governs the universe. In his preface to that work written in September of 1903, he calls it the "First or Fundamental Energy"⁴⁰ and he feels justified in using an abstraction, he says, because "of the long abandonment by thinkers of the anthropomorphic conception of the same".⁴¹ His name for that abstraction of course eventually becomes the Immanent Will, whose developing consciousness is hoped for.

Equating and paralleling Comte and Hardy will not work at all times. For one thing Comte is a philosopher with a system; Hardy is a poet and novelist whose expressed views are seemings, provisional impressions only, mere impressions of the moment and not convictions, he tells us. However, the influence of Comte's Positivism on Hardy can scarcely be denied. It is plain that the emphasis in both

³⁹Ibid., p. 337.

⁴⁰The Dynasts, p. xxiv.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxv.

is on human development and improvement through stages. There is, too, in both, a general moving away from traditional religious dogma as an aid in reaching the better world. Failure to consider these points has resulted in the charge of pessimism.

The most common definition of pessimism centers around its disposition to look at the worst aspect of things. It is the practice by various philosophers and poets to take the gloomiest view in all circumstances. Normally, the definition given by dictionaries mentions Schopenhauer, whose work Hardy knew well. There is, however, one significant difference between Schopenhauer and Hardy and it is in their reactions relative to an evil world. Both saw, no doubt, a world they little admired, but whereas Hardy's and Comte's desire to view mankind's history as "an inevitable march of progress",⁴² produced tensions, Schopenhauer's pessimism was unalleviated. As Aiken surmises, reality was for Schopenhauer "inherently malignant"⁴³ and he saw no road other than that of pessimism.

For Hardy also, reality was malignant. He could not adopt the eighteenth century's easy "best-of-all possible-worlds" philosophy or Pope's optimistic tone

⁴²Aiken, p. 99.

⁴³Ibid.

expressed in his "Essay on Man". He could never write

All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony not understood;
All partial Evil, universal Good:
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever Is, Is Right.⁴⁴

Although at times, especially in the philosophic poetry, he poises on the brink of absolute pessimism, his meliorism keeps him from tumbling into the abyss. His view, no matter how specifically tragic it is, nearly always interfuses itself with a kind of hopeful desire. Things can change, he seems to say; men's actions and the actions of the Unconscious Will may tend to be evil and useless, but improvement may be possible. Nevertheless countless critics have called his position totally pessimistic.

It was Hardy himself who indicated that some natures react more definitely to tragedy than others, and there can be no doubting that the dominant tone in much of his own work is colored by his impulse to rail at the tragedy of human suffering. It is such a concentration, even in his earliest publications, that has resulted in his being called a pessimist. His first novel, The Poor Man and The Lady was never published because the publishers felt that such a vicious attack on the upper classes would bring a storm of censure. His great novels, Jude the Obscure and

⁴⁴William K. Wimsatt, Jr., Alexander Pope - Selected Poetry and Prose (New York: 1951), p. 137.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles met with a similar reaction and also his first poetic contribution, Wessex Poems (1898). In other words, because Hardy chose to be something less than optimistic about obvious social ills, the charge was pessimism.

One of the earliest attacks on his poetry came in 1898. Hardy's vocabulary took the first blow, and reference was made to the prosaic quality of his verse, the awkwardness of his style and form and the unrelieved pessimism.⁴⁵ Another article quickly moved to the main business and soundly thrashed him and his first poems because of "the cloud of dreary pessimism"⁴⁶ which had gathered more and more thickly of late years over Mr. Hardy's prose writings. Still another article referred to his "bitter humor", "sardonic comedy" and "desolating sadness", and finally ended by questioning the sense of Hardy's decision to write poetry at all. "Why not prose?", it asks. The fatuity of this critical approach is obvious.

Now some of the queries in these articles are justified. The gloom that tinges all but a few of the

⁴⁵ R.G. Cox, ed., Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage (London: 1970), p. xxxvii.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. xxxviii.

poems is there. All readers recognize this fact. But what puzzles the modern reader is the complete absence of any comment whatsoever on the lighter note which is also there. They see, the "grin of bitterness" of "Neutral Tones" but do not see the "life loyalties" of "In a Wood".

May Kendall wrote in 1899, what must be the best example of critical inanity that the nineteenth century produced. Rather than dealing with the pessimism which the title states as being the subject of the piece, she devotes paragraph after paragraph to denouncing Hardy's sin of finding the Creator wanting. It becomes, not a critique of Hardy's poems, but vehement expressions of a biased moralist whose main aim is to sell her own Victorian idea of the Truth. She does somehow find time to talk of the doomsters, of Hap's hopelessness in "A Meeting with Despair" and the gloomy solution to the riddle of the universe in "Nature's Questioning". But caught up in her frenzied desire to make her own case known she fails to recognize that this latter poem is not Hardy's last word. It is not at all a statement of fact. It is simply a question:

Has some Vast Imbecility,
Mighty to build and blend,
But impotent to tend,
Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardry?⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Collected Poems, p. 59.

In her condescending way she continues:

This sheaf of mournful poems is a mere trifle, compared with all his other contributions to literature, and his pessimism is the graver problem. It is a challenge, perhaps an unconscious challenge, but no less grim and weighty, to the whole of Christendom.⁴⁸

The moralizing and sermonizing now take over:

Faith is greater than we dream. We do not realize sufficiently the many aspects of the Christ of God, the many paths by which He calls on men to follow Him.⁴⁹

This holier-than-thou tone is maintained throughout this long review. Her last paragraphs deal with optimism, the kind of view, she believes, all of us should have. Whereas, pessimism has its roots in selfishness and egotism, optimism is "the belief of all our worthiest moments". She ends by choosing Tennyson as her hero since for him God is love, and she calls for more Sir Galahads to seek the Grail.

This kind of criticism just will not stand up today. In fact it was balanced even in the last decade of the nineteenth century by a body of sane, mature discussion. For example although one article in the Saturday Review of January 7, 1889 talks about the "many slovenly, slipshod,

⁴⁸ May Kendall, "Pessimism in the poems of Thomas Hardy", London Quarterly and Holborn Review, Volume 91 (London: 1899), p. 224.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 226.

uncouth verses, stilted in sentiment, poorly conceived and worse wrought...."⁵⁰ yet it does not fail to mention some few poems that show "forecast of Mr. Hardy's mature strength".⁵¹ Likewise, the Academy on January 14, 1899, speaks of "the lack of metrical finish" in the Wessex Poems but is alert enough to recognize the imaginative and subtle use of the imagery in a poem like "Neutral Tones". In the same year E.K. Chambers saw the "somewhat grim mortuary imagination"⁵² of the poet but also mentioned that certain verses contained much poetry. Like most early critics, Chambers emphasized the stiff and awkward diction that was also regrettably inflated. He saw the "somewhat dismal vision of life" and the uncompromising pessimism of "Friends Beyond", but his overall impression was that such a strenuous note "should help to give backbone to a literature which certainly errs on the side of flabbiness".⁵³ There is no doubt that "mature strength" and a "strenuous note" are present. But it is simply Hardy's way of facing the truth about life.

⁵⁰ R.G. Cox, p. 319.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 320.

⁵² Ibid., p. 325.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 327.

Poems of the Past and the Present (1901) and Satires of Circumstance (1914) came in for the same type of review. Critics tended to see Hardy as an enigma, twisted and cumbersome. His crowding of syllables together meant nothing more than inharmoniousness.

Edmund Gosse must surely be the most sensible of the early Hardy critics. In his "Mr. Hardy's Lyrical Poems", of April, 1918, he says:

The conception of life revealed in his verses by this careful artist is one which displays very exactly the bent of his temperament. During the whole of his long career Mr. Hardy has not budged an inch from his original line of direction. He holds that, abandoned by God, treated with scorn by Nature, man lies helpless at the mercy of 'those purblind Doomsters', accident, chance, and time, from whom he had to endure injury and insult from the cradle to the grave. This is stating the Hardy doctrine in its extreme form, but it is not stating it too strongly. This has been called his 'pessimism', a phrase to which some admirers, unwilling to give things their true name, have objected. But, of course, Mr. Hardy is a pessimist, just as Browning is an optimist, just as white is not black, and day is not night. Our juggling with words in paradox is too often apt to disguise a want of decision in thought. Let us admit that Mr. Hardy's conception of the fatal forces which beleaguer human life is a 'pessimistic' one, or else words have no meaning.⁵⁴

Having described Hardy as a pessimist, Gosse goes on to make what seems to me a most significant observation. Hardy's pessimism is not, he says, the effeminate or the sickly kind sometimes found amongst the romantically peevish poets. It is rather, he insists, an "imaginative study of useless

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 454-455.

suffering in the world";⁵⁵ a world in which man himself is often responsible for his own suffering. This is really the essence of Hardy. Whether the term "pessimism" is the correct one or not, Gosse's study of Hardy's is nearly impeccable. For did not Hardy himself indicate in The Woodlanders that man fails because he does not make use of all that is available to him, and that suffering is often brought on by people themselves? "Unfulfilled intentions", he calls it. Roy Morrell links Hardy's theories at times to those of J.S. Mill. He indicates that something quite different might have been made to happen had characters like Tess or Jude, and, we might add, The Trampwoman, in the poem, "The Trampwoman's Tragedy", made use of their full potential. It is really a matter of controlling, of channelling the vast store of possibilities within a person, that could ensure a measure of success while offsetting the power of chance and coincidence and a gloomy fate. But of course neither the Trampwoman nor her prose counterparts make full use of their energies or their talents. They might have made other decisions but they did not, hence their tragedies, and the critics' charge of pessimism against Hardy.

Gosse's article is interesting from another point of view. He refers to Browning's optimism as opposed to Hardy's

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 455.

pessimism. But one is reminded of the following lines from Browning's "The Statue and The Bust":

... And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost,

Is--the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.⁵⁶

Note how, like Hardy, Browning is insisting that the sin lies in the absence of proper action. Action on the part of the lady and the Duke might have resulted in a scandal, but action, whatever its nature, was necessary. Note too that Hardy does not condemn Tess. Nor does he denounce the Trampwoman for her promiscuity, but for her inability to admit the truth, and her flippant attitude toward the men in her life. She, simply to tease, told her husband that the child she carried was not his. The result was a murder, an execution, a still-born baby, and the trampwoman haunting the western moor. No wonder the poet called this poem his most successful; it probably epitomizes for him the root cause of man's suffering and tragedy. People just do not take time and thought to ward off the disastrous events caused by their "... passions, prejudices and ambitions",⁵⁷ says Hardy.

⁵⁶J.W. Bowyer and J.L. Brookes, The Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry and Drama, 2nd ed. (New York: 1954), p. 290.

⁵⁷F.E. Hardy, p. 120.

Among recent critics, Samuel Hynes has produced in his award-winning book a similarly sane approach to Hardy's so-called pessimism. He has recognized the traditional need to call Hardy's view pessimistic, but he, like Gosse, penetrates deeper into the Hardy puzzle. He sees Hardy's vision grappling with "the irreconcilable disparity between the way things ought to be and the way they are; the failure of the universe to answer man's need for order".⁵⁸ In his chapter on Hardy's imagery he dwells at length on the poet's dark world and sees it as "a complex projection of his pessimism". But, like Gosse, he refuses to condemn the vision or the rough diction that is often its medium. Instead, he realized that like many modern poets including Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Hardy strove to find a diction appropriate to a clear expression of his vision. Pope's dictum, "the Sound must seem an Eccho to the sense",⁵⁹ does not always suit Hardy.

No critic since Hardy's death treats his literary accomplishments more thoroughly and more sympathetically than Carl J. Weber. Especially is this true of his book Hardy in America in which he compares Hardy's often-cited,

⁵⁸ Samuel Hynes, p. 61.

⁵⁹ Peter Porter, ed., A Choice of Pope's Verse (London: 1971), p. 50.

pessimism with James Thomson's "most completely and unrelievedly pessimistic utterance",⁶⁰ "The City of Dreadful Night". Weber quotes from the poem, and while it resembles The Dynasts, certainly in its emphasis on an indifferent world, there is seldom any thing in Hardy to compare with this:

The World rolls round for ever like a mill;
It grinds out death and life and good and ill;
... It grinds him some slow years of bitter breath,
Then grinds him back into eternal death.⁶¹

Weber noticed that Hardy knew what a silver lining was.

Thomson (1834-1882), he claims, did not. He simply did not experience any kind of happiness. Therefore he could write

Speak not of comfort where no comfort is,
Speak not at all: Can words make foul things fair?
Our life's a cheat, our death a black abyss:
Hush and be mute, envisaging despair.⁶²

The validity, then, of calling Hardy pessimistic becomes questionable. He is never as bitterly painful as those like Thomson. Besides, his most consistent undercurrent, both in the prose and the poetry, is pity, pity for suffering humanity which takes little advantage of

⁶⁰ Hardy in America (New York: 1966), p. 234.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 235.

⁶² Ibid., p. 236.

its natural endowments. This is neither passive nor pessimistic, but merely realistic. At the heart of all the Hardy darkness there is sympathy. But the charge has consistently been pessimism.

However, Weber's final word on Hardy is hopeful. This much discussed pessimism, he concludes is "largely mythical, and much of it depends... on what kind of spectacles the reader uses, rather than on the books themselves".⁶³ He strongly advises his readers that to get a valid picture of the poet one must first make a distinction "between philosophical pessimism and sympathy at the sight of human suffering". When this is done, he claims, there will be "no more talk about Thomas Hardy's pessimism".⁶⁴ This, of course, is a logical extension of Gosse's view and clarifies things considerably although one can never describe Hardy's views with complete accuracy.

Even the best and most respected critics with their most mature explications are sometimes several removes from the original intention of the poems. The key to their content may perhaps be found in his own comments on the

⁶³ Ibid., p. 247.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 242.

charge of pessimism levelled against him. One of the first recorded comments comes from Hardy's notes:

'January 1 (1902)

A pessimist's apology. Pessimism (or rather what is called such) is, in brief, playing the sure game. You cannot lose at it; you may gain. It is the only view of life in which you can never be disappointed. Having reckoned what to do in the worst possible circumstances, when better arise, as they may, life becomes child's play'.⁶⁵

What makes this statement so significant is its closeness to the theme of this thesis, -if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst. Both the line of poetry and the pessimist's apology make practically identical implications: know the worst so that whatever comes may be properly prepared for, whenever it comes. Whether or not Hardy is being ironic in his suggestion that life can become child's play, is difficult to say. Life was seldom that simple to the poet, nor is it to anyone.

Hardy is most consistent in his various denials of pessimism. In 1918 he writes:

'As to pessimism. My motto is, first correctly diagnose the complaint - in this case human ills - and ascertain the cause: then set about finding a remedy if one exists.' The motto or practice of the optimists is: Blind the eyes to the real malady, and use empirical panaceas to suppress the symptoms'.⁶⁶

⁶⁵F.E. Hardy, p. 311.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 383.

These statements by Hardy are, to a degree, positive, not negative. Whatever the flavor, they must be given considerable weight. Hardy must be allowed to speak. And when he does speak it is a sincere attempt to explain the lighter aspect of his work to those who would see only the darker.

By 1922, not only did Hardy deny pessimism, he could, after years of thought crystallize his real philosophy in the "Apology" prefacing Late Lyrics and Earlier discussed earlier. This was not his first mention of meliorism, but there is unusual force behind it now equalled only in The Dynasts. Especially is this true when one realizes his relapse into undiluted pessimism during the war years. But this was only a temporary loss of faith in mankind. Hardy's poetry as a whole is not merely dark and foreboding. His verse is not always "brooding, obscure, tremulous, half-inarticulate meditations over man, nature and destiny"⁶⁷ as the unsigned article in the Saturday Review of January 11, 1902 would have us believe. For this is but half truth. Not only does Hardy write poetry containing a light vein but the purpose behind the dark indicates hope. He could indeed look at love askance, war with bitterness, and at an indifferent First Cause with a degree of scorn (later

⁶⁷R.G. Cox, p. 329.

chapters will deal with these points) but he did so because he felt that the key to man's improvement lay within man himself. In order for improvement to be effected, reality must be faced. Facing reality meant taking "a full look at the Worst". The result is not in my opinion, pessimism. Does a serious penetration to avoid future calamities necessarily entail pessimism? Surely there is no pessimism in calculating how to avoid future calamities. Certain individual poems taken out of the context of the whole collection may well be tagged pessimistic. "Hap" and others of this nature, to be further discussed in the fourth chapter may well deserve to be called expressions of unrelieved gloom. At any rate, it is my contention that the philosophic poems are the only real look at the Worst. Only when dealing with such topics as the ultimate meaning of God and the universe does Hardy come close to the genuine pessimism of a Schopenhauer or a Thomson.

It is my belief that Hardy's clearest definition of what the critics choose to call pessimism in his poetry is found, not in poetry, but in the brilliant prose of The Return of the Native. With the same emphasis on evolving and becoming that one finds in the "Apology", Hardy gives the impression that sombreness, sadness and what to many is a distasteful rule of life, is really a more mature and learned experience. Like Egdon Heath this attitude may suggest tragical possibilities; it may indeed be

monotonous and strange, but truth may well be the product of such solemnity. For, Haggard Egdon, "like his own concentration on the worst

... appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter. The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule: human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony with external things wearing a sombreness distasteful to our race when it was young. The time seems near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind...⁶⁸

An equally revealing comment by Hardy on the subject of pessimism is in a recorded conversation with William Archer:

Mr. Hardy. John Stuart Mill somewhere expresses surprise that Manichaeism was not more widely accepted. But is not all popular religion in essence Manichaeism? Does not it always postulate a struggle between a principle of good and an independent, if not equally powerful, principle of evil?

W.A. And the pessimist holds, I take it, that the principle of evil is the stronger.

Mr. Hardy. No, I should not put it precisely in that way. For instance, people call me a pessimist; and if it is pessimism to think, with Sophocles, that "not to have been born is best," then I do not reject the designation. I never could understand why the word

⁶⁸ Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native, Papermac (London: 1965), pp. 12-13. First published 1878.

"pessimism" should be such a red rag to many worthy people; and I believe, indeed, that a good deal of the robustious, swaggering optimism of recent literature is at bottom cowardly and insincere. I do not see that we are likely to improve the world by asseverating, however loudly, that black is white, or at least that black is but a necessary contrast and foil, without which white would be white no longer. That is mere juggling with a metaphor. . . But my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs; and that Ahriman is winning all along the line. On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but one plea against "man's inhumanity to man"--to woman--and to the lower animals? (By the way, my opposition to "sport" is the one point on which I am at all in conflict with my neighbors hereabouts.) Whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be. When we have got rid of a thousand remediable ills, it will be time enough to determine whether the ill that is irremediable outweighs the good.⁶⁹

One may make several deductions from this discussion of meliorism, pessimism and certain early poems. First of all, Hardy is rarely, in my opinion a pure pessimist. For why should he consistently defend meliorism and deny pessimism, except perhaps the Sophoclean kind? Why is it we do not find the same kind of dark grinding that we find in Thomson? Again, should not the poet's own words be given considerable weight. There is in much of the poetry simply too much tension caused by a kind of polarity the poet sets up between the desired "Better" and the "Worst" which is reality. Hynes calls the tensions, inconsistencies. To a

⁶⁹William Archer, "Real Conversations with Thomas Hardy", The Critic (New York: 1901), v. 38, p. 316.

point, the critic is correct. The tone of the satires often varies greatly from that found in the philosophic poems. The tenor and atmosphere may often vary within an individual poem. Says Hynes of Hardy "--in his poetry he could not be true to his pessimistic vision".⁷⁰ But one asks, why should he not be inconsistent; all life is a see-saw of hope and despair, faith and doubt. It is my feeling that the poet only very rarely comes close to unrelieved despair except in some early love poetry and certain poems of destiny. Even in these poems the tensions often destroy any possibility of expressing a totally pessimistic view.

I must reiterate what I have emphasized earlier. Some poems in all eight volumes of Hardy's verse do reveal a gloomy aspect. Yet it is the reason for that concentration that is often forgotten. This persistent tendency is not the result of a feeling that man's condition cannot improve, or that there is nothing but a dark abyss after the grave. Hardy questions, he explores, he is often obstinate, but the desired result is an improved lot, physically and spiritually, for the suffering human. What is often termed pessimism in his literature is simply an expression of his search for that elusive quality which all men seek - truth. Again, his own words verify this:

⁷⁰Samuel Hynes, p. 45.

... It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics - which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize.⁷¹

Nor is Hardy's conversation with William Archer unimportant with respect to the question of tensions. The poet speaks of "a principle of good" and "a principle of evil" at odds in the world. We have a reference to his desire for a better world, indicating his displeasure with the quality of existence as it is now. And we have his "distinctly melioristic" declaration repeated so often during his long life. In a word, what many critics term pessimism is simply the poet's suggested method, derived partially from Comte, of coming to grips with an inferior existence in an indifferent universe. This kind of altruistic design, this concern for the human sufferer is hardly pessimistic.

⁷¹Harold Orel, ed., Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings (Lawrence: 1966), p. 49.

CHAPTER II

THE SATIRES

Thomas Hardy's inclination to write satire was evident early in his career. His first novel, written between 1867 and 1870 was never published by Macmillan's because it had in the publisher's words, "drawbacks fatal to its success".¹ According to the records there was an uneasiness about its possible reception. Chapman agreed to print the book but George Meredith "... strongly advised its author not to 'nail his colors to the mast' so definitely in a first book ..."² Mrs. Hardy tells us that The Poor Man and The Lady was

... a sweeping dramatic satire of the squirearchy and nobility, London society, the vulgarity of the middle class, modern Christianity, church-restoration, and political and domestic morals in general, the author's views, in fact, being obviously those of a young man with a passion for reforming the world...."³

Mrs. Grundy had dampened the critical spirit in this young writer, for in the next decade and a half one,

¹F.E. Hardy, p. 58.

²Ibid., p. 61.

³Ibid.

could not find anything, it seems, that might resemble the condemned book. It was not until the appearance of Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure at the end of his novel-writing career that sustained satire and irony of an extreme nature appeared.

While it is true that most of Hardy's poetry is mildly satiric, of the nine hundred and eighteen poems in the collected edition, less than a hundred are strict satires. There are undoubtedly touches of satire all the way from gentle ridicule to stern invective found in a great deal of his poetry, but only a small portion give evidence of concentrated satire. The Satires of Circumstance (in fifteen glimpses) form the core of these. But rarely are they vicious. In fact Hardy castigates vices and exposes human follies without vitriol. There is some humor, although he is seldom playful. Men may indeed become laughingstocks for the gods; they may, it is true, become mere "puppets in a playing hand", but Hardy rarely laughs. In these poems dialogue is common. In fact he makes both the quick and the dead speak, and the predominant tone of the various conversations is ironical. In fact it is on irony that his satire thrives. Since his satire is seldom scathing his master is surely Horace. Unlike Hardy's, Swift's invective is akin to Juvenal, and while it may be said that Swift always wields a mighty flail, Hardy's satire is seldom flagellant. The circumstances in which

he places his various characters may be disagreeable to him, but they are not cause for the kind of vehemence found in Pope's Dunciad or the spew and poison of Swift's "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed".

While Hardy's literary greatness does not necessarily depend on his satirical output in either the novels or the poetry, verse in which that quality appears is, in my estimation, good enough to be placed beside his best. There are several reasons for such a belief, the elaboration of which forms the basis for this chapter.

First of all, this small group of poems serves as a forum which demonstrates some of the poet's very definite poetic theories. One of these theories is the insistence that emotion should be exploited in poetry. In her biography, F.E. Hardy records at least four of her husband's relevant references. "Poetry is emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art."⁴ From his notes of March 1, 1902, she prints this:

'March. Poetry. There is a latent music in the sincere utterance of deep emotion, however expressed, which fills the place of the actual word-music in rhythmic phraseology on thinner emotive subjects, or on subjects with next to none at all. And supposing a total poetic effect to be represented by a unit, its component fractions may be either, say:

⁴Ibid., p. 300.

'Emotion three-quarters, plus Expression one-quarter, or

'Emotion one quarter, plus Expression three-quarters.

'This suggested conception seems to me to be the only one which explains all cases, including those instances of verse that apparently infringe all rules, and yet bring unreasoned convictions that they are poetry.⁵

In his notes dated August 18, 1908, these sentiments are revealed: "The poet takes note of nothing that he cannot feel emotively".⁶ As late as 1918, he wrote, "my opinion is that a poet should express the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own".⁷ With his eye on universality he did indeed try to express the emotion of all the ages, for it is with intense feeling that he writes about life, love and death. But there is a difference between Hardy's treatment of these themes and that of most earlier poets because it is with a unique stroke of a masculine pen that he sounds his grim new note; a note that rings simultaneously with despair and hope, darkness and light, the positive and the negative. Like Wordsworth, Hardy sometimes suggests that good poetry is the overflow of powerful feelings. Such

⁵ Ibid., p. 311.

⁶ Ibid., p. 342.

⁷ Ibid., p. 386.

feelings emotionally expressed tend to be the soul of poetry for both poets. In all of Hardy's verse, whether the mood is cynical or sad, bitter or nostalgic, a sense of the author's deep involvement is always present. The satires are no exception. They seem lyrical as well as caustic thus, they are unique. In spite of J.I.M. Stewart's harsh words that these poems are petty and violent and contain a kind of "ruthless mechanical ingenuity",⁸ I feel they express a touch of the poet's overall sympathy for the suffering human race. It is superficial to say these poems are merely mechanical. True, they all seem to focus on the "small" events of human experience and in this sense mechanical may well be a partially-correct description. "In The Restaurant" sees a lover propose elopement with another's spouse who is pregnant by him; three people sit and chat over tea in "At Tea"; an aspiring male hopeful leaves his walking stick behind and returns to find his fiancée a virago rather than the gentle girl he thought her to be. The action in these poems varies little from poem to poem, but that is not to say they are nothing but mechanical. Quite the contrary; one cannot help but notice the emotion, however ironically it may be used, in "In Church" when at the end of a powerful sermon; in which exaggerated gestures and speech were used;

⁸J.I.M. Stewart, Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography (New York: 1971), p. 223.

"Each listener chokes as he bows and bends
And emotion pervades the crowded aisles."⁹

And what of the words, "upset", "cold", "ashen" and "distress" in "At The Draper's"? Like the reddened face of the suitor who is ashamed of the vixen-like girl of his choice in "Outside the Window", or the vehemence of "she in the wedding dress" in "In The Room of the Bride-Elect", all these poems contain strong manifestations of unusual or disturbed human relations. Exaggerated emotions one may charge! There may well be some distortion, but is not this appropriate for satire? And Hardy, like all satirists wants his work given more than a casual glance. Besides he does not necessarily equate realism and art. But more important, he sees the so-called "unimportant" events of our lives as integral steps in our destiny. For good or bad, people do engage in "little" activities, but it is a pity many times, says the poet, that they fail to act properly. These ironies, these seemingly isolated and petty activities of his characters are really not so strange and mechanical after all. They do indeed express "the emotion of the ages". Birth and death, love and marriage and all the intricacies that they involve are not trivial. They are important for they affect all of us profoundly.

⁹Collected Poems, p. 391.

Hardy's thoughts on poetry are not restricted to the treatment of emotion. In The Life, it is supposed that architecture affected his poetry. He knew, says his wife,

.... that in architecture cunning irregularity is of enormous worth, and it is obvious that he carried on into his verse, perhaps in part unconsciously, the Gothic art - principle in which he had been trained - the principle of spontaneity, found in mouldings, tracery, and such like - resulting in the 'unforeseen' (as it has been called) character of his metres and stanzas, that of stress rather than of syllable, poetic texture rather than poetic veneer; the latter kind of thing, under the name of 'constructed ornament', being what he, in common with every Gothic student, had been taught to avoid as the plague....¹⁰

Irregularity in rhythm, metre, rhyme and stanza form is a trademark of Hardy and though he is often condemned for it, it is essentially nothing more than his putting into practice what he believed poetry should do. He believed that the

... whole secret of a living style and the difference between it and a dead style, lies in not having too much style - being, in fact, a little careless, or rather seeming to be, here and there. It brings wonderful life into the writing:

A sweet disorder in the dress...
A careless shoe-string, in whose tie
I see a wild civility,
Do more bewitch me than when art
Is too precise in every part!¹¹

¹⁰F.E. Hardy, p. 301.

¹¹ibid., p. 105.

The Satires of Circumstance are irregular in many ways. First of all, while they give the illusion, on first glance, of being regular sonnets, in actual fact only two come close to meeting traditional requirements. They are "In The Cemetery" and "Over The Coffin", and the only real resemblances to the English or Italian versions are the number of lines. Both of Hardy's would-be sonnets have fourteen but their stanza forms are somewhat irregular. Only one follows the strict Italian form, dividing the poem into one group of eight lines (the octave) followed by another of six lines (the sestet). The other poem is exactly opposite. The rhyme schemes of these and the other poems in this group are also examples of irregularity. In the two European traditions rhymes are arranged according to certain definite schemes. Hardy uses his own which only faintly resemble these. Indeed in many poems one does not find 'rime suffisante', but rather approximate rhymes. The first stanza of "In the Moonlight" is an example:

"O Lonely workman, standing there
In a dream, why do you stare and stare
At her grave, as no other grave there were?"¹²

Finally, Hardy chooses not to use the iambic pentameter-metre usual in sonnets. But his poems, with their variety of situation, conversation and tone do not lend themselves

¹² Collected Poems, p. 398.

to such restricting regularity. Thus, there is no doubt that in most satires it is the element of "sweet disorder", that architectural spontaneity, rather than 'constructed ornament' and uniformity that are given high priority by the poet. That is not to say, however, that he cannot be systematic. For rarely does one find in poetry such discipline as one finds in his strict adherence to the maxim that a lyric should be properly expressive of a single, complete thought, idea, or sentiment.

Most writers, it is supposed, expect a kind of "truth" to permeate their work. In the General Preface to his novels and poems, Hardy leaves absolutely no doubt about his position. We are told, for example, that the main aim in his work is not to be optimistic or pessimistic, not even melioristic but rather to be truthful. The Life reminds us that in his later years he was more convinced than ever that poetry overflowed with truth and of its supreme place in literature. It is thought that he is attempting to express a kind of truth in the satires of Moments of Vision when he describes the poems as mortifying "the human sense of self-importance by showing, or suggesting, that human beings are of no matter or appreciable value in this nonchalant universe".¹³ Many of

¹³F.E. Hardy, p. 378.

the poems do just that. For how realistic are the sentiments of "Ah, Are you Digging on my Grave?" People are often forgotten when they die. People do change their minds and their morals as the characters of "Over the Coffin" do. Sexual freedom does quite often set off a chain of events that spell disaster. Without exception, all Hardy's satires are realistic, dealing with real life just as it appears to him.

Much has been written about Hardy's philosophy or lack of it. There has been much talk of his beliefs about Time's erosion, the mocking stars and a neutral god. The satires, it is true, are adequate vehicles for all of these ideas. Yet there is one belief of no mean import, for which the satires, as exponents, are specially suited. Like Shakespeare, Hardy seems to say that the human condition can improve, but only if we take advantage of that "...tide in the affairs of man ...", only if we take the trouble to effect the calculated move in a given situation. He also believes that people ignore possibilities. They have too many of the "unfulfilled intentions" of the characters in the great novels, and their destinies often become tragic accordingly. For like Michael Henchard, Sue Bridehead, and Tess, the people of the satires are able, if they would only take time, to stem the tide of disaster that only seems irreversible. The pity of it is that they seldom do, and

the satires form what might be termed poetic crystallizations of these human failings. In "By Her Aunt's Grave", the girl should have bought the headstone. Instead, she passively nods assent to her male companion who hints of his desire to spend the money at a dance. Is not the young husband in "At Tea" asking for trouble as he throws at her who was his first choice "a stray glance yearningly" in the presence of his unsuspecting wife? It is a pity, insists Hardy, that people often act irresponsibly and do not feel themselves liable for the consequences of their actions. What is so tragic about mankind's plight is the needlessness of their miseries and lost ventures. Fate does seem to be involved; destiny does seem to keep the ball rolling and set off a chain reaction which nearly always leads to tragedy, but the "shallows" that most of Hardy's characters experience are not so much the result of a malignant force, as they are the products of human failure to grasp opportunities. They seldom "... take the current when it serves ..." ¹⁴

Mouth-pieces for philosophy, vehicles for poetic theories, these poems deserve attention for yet another reason. They have the qualities of good poetry, comprising as they do some of the poet's favourite poetic techniques. Indeed, these curt satires, in terms of compression, are

¹⁴ W.G. Clarke & W.A. Wright, editors, The Works of William Shakespeare (London, 1956), p. 832.

examples of Hardy's best efforts, for his style is extremely terse and bold. In this respect they remind one of certain folk and minstrel-ballads whose brevity is no indication of their import. For, like "The Twa Corbies", though they contain the ingredients of expansion into short stories or novels, their various moods and situations are explored by scrupulous adherence to precision and economy of diction. The effect is similar to good camera work. The picture is sharp without diffusion. "At A Watering Place" is a case in point.

They sit and smoke on the esplanade,
The man and his friend, and regard the bay
Where the far chalk cliffs, to the left displayed,
Smile sallowly in the decline of day.
And saunterers pass with laugh and jest--
A handsome couple among the rest.

"That smart proud pair," says the man to his friend,
"Are to marry next week. . . . How little he thinks
That dozens of days and nights on end
I have stroked her neck, unhooked the links
Of her sleeve to get at her upper arm. . . .
Well, bliss is in ignorance: what's the harm!"¹⁵

In this poem the author obviously feels no obligation to give any background to the "dozens of days and nights" when the sly observer of the pair sowed his wild oats. Neither does he deem it necessary to ponder the "harm" of such a discovery. He simply wishes to exploit the use of concentrated irony in a single action; he wishes to

¹⁵ Collected Poems, p. 393.

intensify the emotion, to zero in on the quality of the intrigue as a man and his friend watch a "smart proud pair", one of whom is ignorant of the other's previous dallying, both of whom are ignorant of the third party's presence. The intensity of such precision is noted by several critics including Lawrence Binyon,¹⁶ one of the few early appreciators. He recognizes that these silent but profound little poems exemplify the "most crystallized expression". They have, he continues, "the effect of little, deeply-bitten etchings". He also sees that the author is "striving to mould his haunting theme into this shape or to that, with the utmost suppression of irrelevance and ornament, the utmost economy of condensation". J.I.M. Stewart speaks of the poet's "ingenious economy".¹⁷ And Trevor Johnson, whose aptly-phrased remarks are always trenchant, views the best of the satires as having "a concentrated venom and a polished, icy-wit which is unique for the period".¹⁸ The crystallization, the economy, the concentration - they are all here. And if as Pope decreed, "Brevity is the soul of wit", Hardy captures that elusive quality in his satires:

¹⁶R.G. Cox, pp. 441 ff.

¹⁷J.I.M. Stewart, p. 221.

¹⁸Trevor Johnson, Thomas Hardy (London: 1968), p. 46.

With the skillful use of contrast and irony that often create tensions, the satires also illustrate the Hardy technique of emotionally charged beginnings that lead to ever intenser finales. An example is the poem "In Church".¹⁹ It begins with the emotional intensity often achieved at the end of a sermon, and the poet obviously intends us to feel this emotion since the preacher's voice "thrills up to the topmost tiles:" and each member of the congregation "chokes" as their pastor, gliding like a snake, "bows and bends", in the supposed privacy of his vestry. But what a contrast, and what a disillusionment when the self-satisfied preacher, overwhelmed by his ability to sway his hearers, is seen by an idol of his, re-enacting his pulpit gesture like an actor practising to captivate a theatrical audience! Similar emotional polarities are juxtaposed in "In The Nuptial Chamber",²⁰ a truly psychological study. What a devastating let down occurs when the bridegroom discovers that his bride is more excited by the tune being played outside, a favourite of an earlier lover, than she is by the embraces of her husband! How very suitable are some of the words and phrases used to create the resulting tensions between the real and imagined state of things! Besides

¹⁹ Collected Poems, pp. 391-392.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 395-396.

being cleverly placed "mastering tune" and "passionate air" have the same kind of force as the mastering kiss placed on Tess's cheek by Alex d'Urberville during that unforgettable first horse ride. And what of the emotional shock received by that utterly destroyed man, indicated by the again cleverly-placed words "my Innocent" and the plain colorless "you" in the last line! The emotional deflation caused by the ironic contrasts is sharp indeed. "At Tea" uses a similar technique.

The kettle descants in a cosy drone,
And the young wife looks in her husband's face,
And then at her guest's, and shows in her own
Her sense that she fills an envied place;
And the visiting lady is all abloom,
And says there was never so sweet a room.

And the happy young housewife does not know
That the woman beside her was first his choice,
Till the fates ordained it could not be so. . . .
Betraying nothing in look or voice
The guest sits smiling and sips her tea,
And he throws her a stray glance yearningly.²¹

How ironic it is in this poem that a recently-married couple dines with the husband's former lover. How pitifully ironic it is that the happy young housewife is completely ignorant of her husband's continued attraction for the demure guest. How typical of Hardy's irony to signify at the start of a poem, the opposite of what is expressed at the end. For the kettle cosily drones; everything approaches perfection, but later the young husband shows his desire for his old

²¹Ibid., p. 391.

flame and "throws her a stray glance yearningly".

One of the most popular satires is "Ah, Are you Digging On My Grave?" If "In The Moonlight" and "At The Draper's" are predominantly ironic, this one is more bitterly cynical. It needs, I think, full quotation.

"Ah, are you digging on my grave,
My loved one?--planting rue?"
--"No: yesterday he went to wed
One of the brightest wealth has bred.
'It cannot hurt her now,' he said,
'That I should not be true.'"

"Then who is digging on my grave?
My nearest dearest kin?"
--"Ah, no: they sit and think, 'What use!
What good will planting flowers produce?
No tendance of her mound can loose
Her spirit from Death's gin.'"

"But some one digs upon my grave?
My enemy?--prodding sly?"
--"Nay: when she heard you had passed the Gate
That shuts on all flesh soon or late,
She thought you no more worth her hate,
And cares not where you lie."

"Then, who is digging on my grave?
Say--since I have not guessed!"
--"O it is I, my mistress dear,
Your little dog, who still lives near,
And much I hope my movements here
Have not disturbed your rest?"

"Ah, yes! You dig upon my grave . . .
Why flashed it not on me
That one true heart was left behind!
What feeling do we ever find
To equal among human kind
A dog's fidelity!"

"Mistress, I dug upon your grave
To bury a bone, in case
I should be hungry near this spot

When passing on my daily trot.
 I am sorry, but I quite forgot
 It was your resting-place."²²

In a situation that resembles Housman's, "Is My Team Ploughing?", the poet again uses the technique of contrasting or changing emotional states by leading the somewhat naïve ghost from optimism to deep despair, from hope to "the fathomless regions of myriads forgot". Each stanza, in this way, leads inexorably to disillusionment, yet the most stunning jolt, in a streak of black humor is reserved for the end of the poem. The statement made by the poem is indeed a gloomy one, indicating an extremely cynical but perhaps sensible attitude toward the disappearing relationship between the living and the dead. Once we die, says Hardy, we are soon forgotten. In the poem, no one remembers, not even the little dog. Loved one, dearest kin, enemies all react in the same way. They all forget, not only that she is dead but also where she lies and the implication is it is even forgotten that she ever lived at all. The dead one makes no reply to the last insult, the dog's apology being so serene and unruffled. The blow is severe. It is all the more calamitous in its sincerity when one realizes that Hardy, in several other poems, indicates his belief that remembrance by the living is the only form of immortality there is. Such

²²Ibid., pp. 310-311.

a poem is "Her Immortality"²³ where we find the dead one realizing the very sad fact, "Few now remember me". What is even more saddening to the speaker is the revelation that when the one who now remembers is gone, "Her spirit ends its living lease, /Never again to be!"

Thomas Hardy's personal experiences with love were nearly always perplexing. But through this perplexity he achieved a kind of poetic perfection. Through the problems of the human pair, which inevitably became the eternal triangle, "... qualities of Hardy's special genius reach their full expression,"²⁴ to use Pierre D'Exideuil's words. It is true, as he states in another context, that for Hardy, life, with all its joys and pain, tragedy and comedy, most often had its poignant edge at the point of sex. This poignancy in his work is nowhere more skillfully expressed than in the satires. It is here that he achieves utmost compression by using the precisest words. It is here, through the use of ironic contrasts, and with great force, he reveals the normal tensions of everyday living.

Significant changes in the work of any author are nearly always interesting and worthy of recognition. One

²³ Ibid., pp. 48-50:

²⁴ Pierre D'Exideuil, The Human Pair in The Works of Thomas Hardy (Port Washington, New York and London: 1970), p. xvi.

reason for my emphasis on the satires in this thesis is that one finds such changes. For example, despite the fact that there is nearly always a thin balance between cynicism and irony in the great bulk of Hardy's collected poems, the early love-satires stress bitterness whereas the late ones stress irony.

Treating love in such a contemptuous manner while still a young man, cynical though it seems to us, may be to the poet a kind of facing up to the facts of experience. His earliest love affairs are not enviable; hence the strong reluctance to acknowledge love in the very early verse.

Two Wessex Poems in this vein are "Amabel" (1865), and "Revulsion", a sonnet dated 1866. These, quite possibly, reflect one or more of his unfortunate love affairs with Elizabeth Browne, Louisa Harding or Tryphena Sparks.

In "Amabel",²⁵ the poet marks his love's "ruined hues", her faded gown, her disappearing smile, and as is usual in Hardy, the blame is placed on "That Time the tyrant". He has recognized certain facts about his loved one; they are anything but pleasant. In "At a Bridal (Nature's Indifference)",²⁶ the cynicism growing, he asks,

²⁵ Collected Poems, p. 6.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

"Should I, too, wed as slave to Mode's decree", when the brilliance and fascination of youth eventually fade? The answer comes often in these early poems but no more emphatically than in "Revulsion" where rather than run the risk of losing love, he decides rather caustically that Tennyson's trim maxim, "it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all", will not pacify him:

Let me then never feel the fateful thrilling
That devastates the love-worn wooer's frame,
The hot ado of fevered hopes, the chilling
That agonizes disappointed aim!
So may I live no junctive law fulfilling,
And my heart's table bear no woman's name. 27

A similar kind of tone is detected in the strained relationships between the human pairs throughout all the early volumes of the collected poems. In "She, to Him I",²⁸ we see that the lover's eyes are no longer "... stars as in their prime". Often, the woman marries beneath her, as Hardy's first wife thought she did. In "The Well Beloved",²⁹ "Brides are not what they seem". Brides are never what they seem and "Neutral Tones" makes such a point forcefully. It

²⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 121 ff.

is perhaps Hardy's finest in this particular vein. It is certainly the most piercing of the Wessex Poems:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
--They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove
Over tedious riddles of years ago;
And some words played between us to and fro
On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
Alive enough to have strength to die;
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
Like an ominous bird a-wing. . . .

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.³⁰

If "Revulsion" is coherent, smooth and lacks emotion, this dramatic monologue with its depth of feeling ranks with "The Darkling Thrush" and the love poems written after the death of his first wife. It is indeed a brilliant display by a man who is in complete control of himself. From beginning to end, the whiteness and grayness of the wintry day blend perfectly with the dying love affair. "Winter day", "starving sod", "grayish leaves", not only unify the poem but sustain the dark atmosphere that a dead love is bound to have, for certainly the relationship has no spark remaining. Even the smile is not a smile in those strange paradoxical

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

lines:

"The smile on your mouth was the dearest thing
Alive enough to have the strength to die."

And the "grin of bitterness" proves something to the poet that he never forgot - the "keen lesson that love deceives". Finally one notices the regularity and proportion of the poem. It begins by a pond with gray leaves falling from an ash tree. The sun is white as if "chidden by God". The poem ends with a similar focus on "the God-curst sun" and "a pond edged with grayish leaves". What could be more bitter?

In 1901 Hardy published Poems of The Past and The Present. He describes the volume in his preface as "... a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances...."³¹ It might have been a description of all his poetry. They may indeed differ slightly in mood and circumstance but in subject matter they vary little. As in Wessex Poems, love and the human pair are surrounded by an aura of distrust. Love lost, love frustrated, and love changed are typical themes in them. An example is the ballad "The Well Beloved" in which an aspiring bridegroom goes to meet his bride-to-be, but discovers:

"... her look was pinched and thin,
As if her soul had shrunk and died;
And left a waste within."

³¹Ibid., p. 75.

In "Her Reproach" the speaker decides that

"It surely is far sweeter and more wise
To water love, than toil to leave anon
A name whose glory-gleam will but advise
Invidious minds to eclipse it with their own, ...³²

"Mad Judy", with its Sophoclean belief that not to have been born is best, is extremely bleak. It is, however, an acceptable kind of bleakness not only to Hardy but to many readers because of their own awareness of the overwhelming flood of twentieth-century plagues, famines and wars. In a subtle twist at the end of the poem, Judy, instead of being mad, represents a kind of sanity as she laments any action taken to continue the species:

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

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

When old Headsman Death laid hands
On a babe or twain,
She would feast, and by her brands
Sing her songs again.
What she liked we let her do,
Judy was insane, we knew,³³

³² Ibid., p. 123.

³³ Ibid., p. 138.

Thus with devastating irony Hardy ridicules the traditional Christian emphasis on the blessedness of birth and matrimony. No summary of this poem could indicate its almost Shakespearian quality. Judy is a kind of philosophic clown, a female Edmund.

Much of Hardy's poetry, early and late, treats unconventionally the question of marriage and premarital sex. The tone in most is the same - acute distaste for the prudery of the Victorian mind. It reflects a belief of his, put very succinctly by Macaulay in his essay on Byron, that, "we know of no spectacle so ridiculous as the British public in one of its periodic fits of morality".³⁴ Several poems support this. In "The Christening", the whole congregation is shocked as a young and scared, unmarried mother, "... peeps/ From the gallery ...",³⁵ while her child is offered at the Font. This is a skillfully-written poem for paradoxically, out of deepest sympathy for the illegitimate child, the "ruined" mother and the "irresponsible" father, the poet lashes out at the shocked congregation and Victorian narrow-mindedness. It is the same kind of technique used in certain poems of "belief" where a new freshness (the Better) issues directly from the dead

³⁴F.E. Hardy, p. 270.

³⁵Collected Poems, p. 244.

traditional creeds (the Worst). He displays sympathy for the father after the question is asked "Where is the baby's father?" The answer given by the mother, who has gradually become more confident, is, "'In the woods afar'". Hardy may simply be suggesting his occupation, however, I feel he is using the forest as Hawthorne does in The Scarlet Letter, where it becomes among other things, a symbol for pristine naturalness. It is also a refuge from the trap of marriage for Hardy. There is the indication here of a degree of rightness about the so called "illegitimate" affair. Moreover, the father is also associated in the poem with the moon, and stars and "lovelike weather", all of which make him the "blest of men". Sympathy is also extended to this subdued young mother. One notices the pity for the pale girl who weeps because of the scorn of those "decent" souls who would "smother" the baby and "disgrace" her. The poet's sympathy goes out especially to the baby who is described tenderly in stern defiance of horrified Victorians. The bright eyes of blue, the rosy cheeks, "this paragon", all go to prove Hardy's compassionate concern. Marriage has become, then, a sepulchre, a burial ground for love; Blake's marriage hearse has become Hardy's. Though the poet's marriage, at the time of writing had deteriorated considerably, personal "Love's sepulchring" may have been secondary in his attack on the nation's despicable code of

morality. His well known sympathy for suffering humanity, his concern for man's inhumanity to man is at work here also. That society should scorn a baby whether it was born in or out of wedlock was absolutely outrageous to this concerned man. Of course his personal life is involved. For the notion that true love existed only within the framework of marriage was equally obnoxious to him. He could tell them another story. Here, one recognizes again some of the complexities that appear in Jude the Obscure. Sue Bridehead is not unlike the lover..

A similar disdain for conventional rules of morality appears in "One Ralph Blossom Soliloquizes".³⁶ Here, none of the girls whom Ralph seduces frowns on her affair. While Jane indicates that she might properly have "learnt to hold aloof", Rosa feels no hostility because she herself had shown readiness to comply with his wishes. In her words, she "lent facility". Lizzy, who now realizes her deed's "notoriousness", remembers only that she "knew Love once and all its gloriousness". Finally Patience and Anne feel that their yielding "was worth the ache" and they see no need for Ralph to burn in hell.

Love, with all its implications of illegitimacy and marriage, birth and death, joy and sorrow, is a favourite

³⁶Ibid., p. 271.

subject of Hardy's. Ridicule and cynicism, sarcasm and disdain, all ingredients of satire are frequent tones and the zest with which these tones are presented indicates the author's seriousness. There is also a "truth" here, a refusal not to judge people that the Victorian public thought scandalous and unorthodox. For the modern reader, this poet recognizes an injustice and is working out poetically some sort of personal solution to the problem of platitudes. He may be disenchanted but not pessimistic for there is a kind of meliorism at work here. These satires are mainly the outpourings of a man who, if he is not always attempting to reform, hopes for a change by pointing to the evils.

By all accounts, "The Ruined Maid" is Hardy's best in the satirical vein. In a clever Swiftian blend of humor and irony, the poet "... knocks out that keystone of Victorian sexual morality, the idea that a 'fallen woman' must be both unhappy and ultimately doomed to a miserable death."³⁷

"O 'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?"--
"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.

--"You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!"--
"Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined," said she.

³⁷ Trevor Johnson, p. 46.

--"At home in the barton you said 'thee' and 'thou,'
And 'thik oon,' and 'theas oon,' and 't'other'; but now
Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!"--
"Some polish is gained with one's ruin," said she.

--"Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak
But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek,
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!"--
"We never do work when we're ruined," said she.

--"You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream.
And you'd sigh, and you'd sock; but at present you seem
To know not of megrims or melancho-ly!"--
"True. One's pretty lively when ruined," said she.

--"I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!"--
"My dear--a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined," said she.³⁸

The poem is a conversation between two women, a "ruined maid", Melia, and a country woman whom she had known at an earlier time. One of the interesting techniques used in this poem is the Swiftian fusion mentioned above. This fusion which is characteristic of his best satires is skillfully executed here. It stems from the completely unsuspecting, almost naive attitude of the friend who cannot understand how this unmarried girl having lost her virginity, "can dress so fashionably, speak in so educated a manner, and show no remorse in her "state of corruption". In fact the whole tone of the poem from the "lady's" point of view is one of puzzlement; quite the opposite of Melia's who is collected and confident. The complete reversal of positions is also

³⁸ Collected Poems, pp. 145-146.

an interesting feature of the poem. At the start, Melia, in the eyes of the other lady, is a fallen woman. Toward the end, it is the heretofore "unspoiled" friend who is "a raw country girl". In addition, this almost impeccable poem has impressive control, with a nearly perfect rhyme scheme in waltz-time which seems very appropriate for Hardy's jaunty irony. The poem does indeed knock the keystone from the arch of Victorian moral conceit and the result in the poem is the collapse of human self-righteousness. Besides, Hardy is a superb technician in this poem. One notices the skillfully-managed fusion of ridicule and laughter in the devastatingly funny last lines spoken by the not-so-ruined maid.

As J.I.M. Stewart correctly observes, "alike in love and marriage, the characters of Hardy's poems are perpetually getting themselves into luckless situations..."³⁹ This is particularly true of the fifteen glimpses entitled Satires of Circumstance and others which I have discussed above:

But if cynicism is the dominant attitude towards love in some early poems, irony reigns in these. Distrust is still present, however, and dilemmas are still as insoluble as ever. There is yet another difference. Each poem of this latter group contains substantially more action and intrigue.

³⁹J.I.M. Stewart, p. 221.

Vivid, emotional and conflicting scenes frequently occur, giving the poems the dramatic qualities of short stories or novels. Each poem becomes a kernel full of the meat of genuine pathos. What is most obvious is the emphasis on irony as each poem is made to rotate on an ironic roundabout of fate. "At the Draper's" is an example.

"I stood at the back of the shop, my dear,
But you did not perceive me.
Well, when they deliver what you were shown
I shall know nothing of it, believe me!"

And he coughed and coughed as she paled and said,
"O, I didn't see you come in there--
Why couldn't you speak?"--"Well, I didn't. I left
That you should not notice I'd been there."

"You were viewing some lovely things. 'Soon required
For a widow, of latest fashion';
And I knew 'twould upset you to meet the man
Who had to be cold and ashen

"And screwed in a box before they could dress you
'In the last new note in mourning,'
As they defined it. So, not to distress you,
I left you to your adorning."⁴⁰

Hardy may be sneering at the wife who tactlessly buys mourning clothes before her dying husband is confined to bed, but it is the severest tragic irony that the husband should be watching the purchase. Although the poem seems to one critic an improbable melodramatic vignette it is nevertheless a very suggestive, even symbolic poem of deception. Another poem of this group which depends on irony is "In The Moonlight".

⁴⁰ Collected Poems, pp. 396-397.

"O Lonely workman, standing there
In a dream, why do you stare and stare
At her grave, as no other grave there were!"

"If your great gaunt eyes so importune
Her soul, by the shine of this corpse-cold moon
Maybe you'll raise her phantom soon!"

"Why, fool, it is what I would rather see
Than all the living folk there be;
But alas, there is no such joy for me!"

"Ah--she was one you loved, no doubt,
Through good and evil, through rain and drought,
And when she passed, all your sun went out?"

"Nay: she was the woman I did not love,
Whom all the others were ranked above,
Whom during her life I thought nothing of."⁴¹

Here, the poet may be casting a wary eye on the stupidity or lack of foresight represented by the man's actions, but it is the force of the uncanny irony which takes precedence over all other features of the poem, as the lonely workman first discovers his love for a woman now that she is dead.

Improbabilities and ironies do occur in real life, sometimes more frightening than in fiction. The second Mrs. Hardy tells us, her husband experienced more of these unusual occurrences than is usual for one man. For example in his notes of 1876 one finds blood-curdling excerpts of stories he had heard; of a doctor who insisted on keeping his patient's dead baby on his mantelpiece as payment for services rendered; or of a farmer who

⁴¹Ibid., p. 398.

'used to take the heart of every calf that died, and, sticking it full of black thorns, hang it on the cotterel, or cross-bar, of his chimney: this was done to prevent the spread of the disease that had killed the calf. When the next tenant came the chimney smoked very much, and examining it, they found it choked with hearts treated in the manner described - by that time dry and parched.'⁴²

But Hardy's personal experiences often matched such stories. For example, several times he watched the exhuming of human skeletons as graveyards succumbed to progress. Oftentimes pieces of skeletons, skulls, legs, and arms fell from the jaws of the great earth-removing machines, adding to the gruesome spectacle. It was no doubt such a scene that occasioned this next ironic poem, "In The Cemetery".⁴³

"You see those mothers squabbling there?"
Remarks the man of the cemetery.
"One says in tears, ''Tis mine lies here!'"
Another, 'Nay, mine, you Pharisee!'"
Another, 'How dare you move my flowers
And put your own on this grave of ours!'"
But all their children were laid therein
At different times, like sprats in a tin.

"And then the main drain had to cross,
And we moved the lot some nights ago,
And packed them away in the general foss
With hundreds more. But their folks don't know,
And as well cry over a new-laid drain
As anything else, to ease your pain!"

There are many fierce cutting edges in this poem but the most merciless comes in the last two lines. It is just as

⁴²F.E. Hardy, p. 112.

⁴³Collected Poems, pp. 393-394.

well, says Hardy, to cry over "a new-laid drain", for the implication is that there will be no help forthcoming; if the pain is to be eased crying beside drain pipes will serve the purpose as well as crying beside neat little 'plots'. Hardy's unique twist is evident here also. For how very vicious is this little poem! How it mocks! How sardonic is the tone! The mothers are not sad mothers who mourn their dear departed. They are "squabbling" mothers more concerned about placing flowers over the correct grave than lamenting the eternal absence of their children. Besides, how cruel is the irony that sees one mother crying over "a new-laid drain"! For unknown to the parents, their children have recently been moved and packed "... away in the general foss" to make room for the main drain. The macabre humor, the gruesome picture of humanity and the hammer-blows of irony are stunning. The disregard for the dignity of the dead obviously sickened him.

Although it is surprising, the cynical tones and the ironic overflows have not always met with favourable response. Critics seldom appreciate the realism that Hardy pictures in the wild melodrama of everyday living. Lytton Strachey,⁴⁴ representative of early critics, condemns the Satires of Circumstance because they do not teach the

⁴⁴R.G. Cox, pp. 435 ff.

Confucian "... divine truths of filial affection, patriotism, and natural history". He is for noblest thoughts and finest feelings but these he suggests cannot come from Mr. Hardy because he has no "harmony of sound", "mastery of rhythm", or "the exact and exquisite employment of words". He condemns the subject matter and technique as if he is incapable of distinguishing the two. Like so many of the early critics, Strachey sees nothing but ugliness, "... cumbrous expressions, clumsy metres, and flat prosaic turns of speech". Of his comments on these poems perhaps the most naïve refer to "Ah, Who is Digging On My Grave?". This poem, he says should have ended with the fifth stanza when the poem's ghost believes that her little dog does indeed remember. One recalls how the voice from the grave is deluded into believing in the fidelity of the "one true heart". "And so", says Mr. Strachey, "... with this comforting conclusion the poem might have ended". Enough has been said in Chapter I about the charge of roughness in Hardy's style and tone. That Strachey thought the poem should have ended sweetly is, in the manner of May Kendall's criticism, merely moralistic and sentimental. One will not find anywhere in Hardy's poetry, overt optimism. But if he is not cheerful and robust he is honest, a position which when it involves facing the realities of life, rarely includes comfort.

The early reviewers were not all insipid. Edmund Gosse's precise evaluation of the satires recognizes that "the ugliness of experience is more accentuated than it is elsewhere, and is flung in our face with less compunction",⁴⁵ yet, as always, his critique is a balanced one. He realizes that despite the disillusionment, the monotony and the "cruel shafts of searchlight",⁴⁶ these sinister poems have their merits. He fails, however, to elaborate.

The later critics express no greater degree of unison regarding the satires than the earlier ones. Babette Deutsch informs us that when the poet "dealt with what he liked to call life's little ironies and satires of circumstance, he was apt to overweight the irony and stress the satire in a way that cheapened the poem".⁴⁷ On the contrary, says Arthur Pollard, "satire ever demands the point concisely or the power intensely".⁴⁸ R.P. Blackmur speaks of Hardy's bad writing. J.I.M. Stewart sees the ingenuity of the satires but focuses his remarks on the melancholic temperament and concludes that there are too many poems. One questions the validity of his statement when one

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 450.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 451.

⁴⁷ Babette Deutsch, This Modern Poetry (New York: 1969), p. 99.

⁴⁸ Arthur Pollard, Satire (London, 1970), p. 24.

recognizes its inconsistency with a later comment of his in which he compliments Hardy for his poetic technique. Yet in another place he can say,

... and the poet has then looked round,
 peeped round, peered inside his own head,
 for material upon which a resulting emotional
 state may be projected to some rather privately
 cathartic end.⁴⁹

Irving Howe believes that these "regular drops into irony"⁵⁰ have received too much applause. He believes that these dramatic vignettes are crowded with melodrama and disaster and nothing else. There is simply not enough in these poems, he claims. He does, however, give credit to one satire entitled "Over The Coffin", for its "Sharpness of Conception" but cannot fail to remind the reader that the language is "puffy and slack".

To find modern critical sanity one should go to Trevor Johnson.⁵¹ In his brief but conclusive treatment of Hardy's satirical poems, he realizes, first of all, that these, like all good satires, set out "... to expose folly and humbug by ruthlessly stripping away all its

⁴⁹ J.I.M. Stewart, Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography (New York, 1971), p. 224.

⁵⁰ Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York & London, 1967), pp. 171 ff.

⁵¹ Trevor Johnson, p. 46.

pretensions..." In these poems, he continues, the poet "deliberately" puts a fierce cutting-edge on his irony". Here, it is his "set intention to hurt and shock the conventionally minded". Furthermore, it is Johnson's opinion that these are the finest poems of their kind. He believes "The Ruined Maid" to be "a deeply sympathetic piece of social criticism". What is most important in the context of this thesis is his conviction that "... this small group of poems reveals Hardy as possessing both the precision of aim and the controlled strength of feeling for success in this difficult kind of work".

Being successful in achieving his intended purpose, is most important in the evaluation of any poet and it must be the chief criterion in judging Hardy's accomplishments. Thus, despite the less than complimentary reaction by so many critics, Johnson's assessment does the poet a great service and pays him a well-deserved compliment.

It is perhaps regrettable that Hardy wrote few satires of the kind discussed in this chapter. But had he lived in the eighteenth century when the satiric powers in English Literature were at their height, it seems clear that he would not have had to hang his head before the greatest of ironists - Jonathan Swift. If he does not, in these poems, take a full and complete look at the worst possible

he does, nevertheless, take a significant look. It is a serious and sympathetic look at ordinary events that surround ordinary people. The war poems of the next chapter will show that when ordinary events become extraordinary as in global warfare, the sympathy could be restrained, often suspended.

CHAPTER III

THE WAR POEMS

Thomas Hardy's association with and consequent interest in war began when he was a very young boy. In 1848, at the age of eight, he made a find. A History of The Wars subscribed to by his grandfather, an ex-volunteer - which became the first, if not the single most influential cause of his long fascination with and revulsion from war in general, and with Napoleon in particular. At nine, he came to know certain non-commissioned officers stationed near his home and later he was to see the funeral of Louis Napoleon - all of which kindled the poet's imagination to write his war novel, his epic drama and the small output of war poetry, all later work.

Although The Trumpet Major, Hardy's war novel of 1880, and The Dynasts, his epic drama of 1904-1908, deal extensively with war, the nature of this discussion demands that this chapter, except for a few brief comments, concern itself with Hardy's war poems. The early ballads, and the poems inspired by the wars of 1899 and 1914 are thus the chief concern. For while The Trumpet Major is in many ways poetic, it is a novel. The Dynasts is a war drama and though Napoleon's war with Europe is central, the book is not so

much a comment on war as it is a working out of the author's philosophy. Chapter I has dealt with certain aspects of that philosophy.

The Trumpet Major has not been regarded as one of its author's greatest novels. It does not contain Tolstoy's profundity. However, one of Hardy's obvious intents, even in this early work, was to denounce the ideology of war. Miss Anne's dread and the little boy's fright at the sight of Corporal Tullidge's smashed arm, "knocked to a pummy", that "produced a crunching among the bones at every motion..."¹ and his ghastly headwound still covered even after twenty-five years, hardly glorifies war. Nor is John Loveday's exit at the end of the novel simply a convenient ending. His love affair with Anne is over, but what is more important to Hardy in that basically sombre scene is that John is leaving for war never to return. The description of his departure is poetic in its intensity:

The candle held by his father shed its waving light upon John's face and uniform as with a farewell smile he turned on the doorstone, backed by the black night; and in another moment he had plunged into the darkness, the ring of his smart step dying away upon the bridge as he joined his companions-in-arms,

¹Thomas Hardy, The Trumpet Major (London: 1957), p. 31.

and went off to blow his trumpet till silenced
for ever upon one of the bloody battle-fields
of Spain.²

The condemnation of war here is more subtle than the early reference to the arm wounds and bashed head of Corporal Tullidge. Besides it is the pity and loneliness, the separation and emptiness, synonymous with war that emanates from this passage. The bloody battle-field is condemned but the impact of the dim candle with all its connotations of death, the pale smile, the plunge into the lonely blackness of the night, which becomes symbolic of war's abysmal waste and the later silencing, aptly define war's intrinsic nature. As in Owen's poetry, "the poetry is in the pity".

Throughout The Dynasts, while war dominates the action, the main focus is on Napoleon and the English heroes. For Hardy sees them as instruments and victims of a cruelly Unconscious Force, the receivers of a blind and merciless destiny. Through them the tragic fact is worked out, the fact that though the individual human will has some direction, it is limited and inevitably controlled by a purposeless Immanent Will which does not.

Some of Hardy's comments on war, as an example of global tyranny, emerge as the spirits react. Some are

²Ibid., p. 374.

ironic, a few sinister, others are sympathetic. The Shade of the Earth hears nothing but men's groans "... my dews are red;"³ is the lament. The song, "The Night of Trafalgar" which ends Scene VII, Part First, speaks of "Dead Man's Bay, where bones of thousands are ..." and as "the predestined plot proceeds",

The victors and the vanquished then the storm
it tossed and tore,
As hard they strove, those worn-out men, upon
that surly shore;
Dead Nelson and his half-dead crew, his foes
from near and far,
Were rolled together on the deep that night at
Trafalgar!⁴

These lines show war as a cruel logic that must, like Napoleon's continue on purposelessly towards inevitable tragedy. War to Hardy was not only "quaint and curious" but merciless and mysterious. The Spirit of the Pities crystallizes his abhorrence in a scene which shows the French cheering the surrounded English. As the "slanted steel" shrinks the tough lines, as the batteries fire "with a concussion that shakes the hill itself", the Spirit wonders, "Why should men's many-valued notions take/So barbarous a groove!"⁵

³The Dynasts, p. 272.

⁴Ibid., p. 108.

⁵Ibid., p. 497.

Hardy's hatred for war was constant throughout his career. To him there was a degree of incomprehensible barbarity about it all, and thus for him must solicit all the distaste and the pity the human breast could muster. It was the cruelty and inhumanity to man as well as the slaughtering of dumb submissive animals that appalled him. This sympathetic spirit, which permeates all his work, is easily discernible in a remark he made in 1899. W.T. Stead had written an article entitled "A Crusade of Peace" that was about to be published in the periodical War Against War. His request for a comment from Hardy resulted in the following:

'As a preliminary, all civilized nations might at least show their humanity by covenanting that no horses should be employed in battle except for transport. Soldiers, at worst, know what they are doing, but these animals are denied even the poor possibilities of glory and reward as a compensation for their sufferings.'⁶

Such expressed pity was likely inspired by a ghastly story he had heard from Dr. W.H. Russell, a war correspondent for The Times. Russell told Hardy of an incident that had taken place during the Franco-Prussian War - "of a horse with no under jaw, laying its head upon his thigh in a dumb appeal for sympathy"⁷ The lower jaw had apparently been

⁶F.E. Hardy, p. 303.

⁷Ibid., p. 265.

shattered by an explosive.

Hardy often made specific comments on particular wars that broke out during his lifetime. But his general attitude towards global conflict is no more clearly expressed than in a note published in The Times on June 28, 1904, in which he thoroughly agrees with Count Tolstoy's condemnation of war. Although it is not indicated which of Tolstoy's condemnations is referred to, any defects, says Hardy, that one might find in Tolstoy's sermon must surely be

"... hidden by the blaze of glory that shines from his masterly general indictment of war as a modern principle, with all its senseless and illogical crimes."⁸

That Russia was fighting a war with the Japanese at this time or that Tolstoy used theological terms for describing and illustrating the moral evolutions of the past could not be compared, in Hardy's view, with the "general indictment". Hardy's poetic discourse on war is not always as philosophic as Tolstoy's but he does have a "great argument". He too sees the senseless, illogical and criminal features, and there is no greater testament to this view than the shorter poems.

Cruelty, suffering, and pity are key words in any discussion of Hardy's war poems. Though he believed that

⁸Ibid., p. 322.

war was too absurd to continue indefinitely, some of his poetry insists that peace could be achieved by other means. A few poems suggest the dawning of a kind of Utopia when the common type of narrow patriotism will cease to exist and people will learn to forgive, a sentiment quite consistent with his emphasis on human effort in effecting a better world. While a melioristic hope for less viciousness is often obvious the bulk of the poems is full of the poet's inherent pity for the plight of those caught up in the savage fray. Some verse manifests utter despair, disillusionment, and condemnation. Taken together, the excitement, hope, pity, despair, etc., may seem the offspring of an inconsistent mind, but again it must be reiterated that this poetry is quite consistent with Hardy's paradoxical, perhaps irreconcilable view of the world.

Like The Trumpet Major and The Dynasts, the six early war poems recall a time that Hardy never witnessed, when "Buonaparte was the foe",⁹ a time full of excitement, intrigue and fear. The poems deal with particular battles fought during the Peninsular War (1808-1814) or those in which the British had taken part during the 1790's. Most of the successful operations were conducted by the British and their allies, the Spanish and Portuguese after 1808

⁹ Collected Poems, p. 23.

against the French in the Iberian Peninsula. The cause of this long war, from the point of view of the British, was Napoleon's endeavour to isolate them. They had only two friends in Europe: Sweden and Portugal, and Russia was taking care of Sweden. Thus it was toward the Portuguese that Napoleon directed his greatest efforts, for if Portugal should fall to him, he felt England must too.

Hardy was obsessed with this frenzied era. It is, however, only one of his concerns. For though touches of pity and a condemnation of war may be more sporadic than sustained, they are evident. Although his powers as a lyricist are not always given full expression in these early poems, they are apparent.

What is perhaps the earliest poem of this group, Hardy entitled "Valenciennes". Told by Corporal Tullidge of The Trumpet Major, it is a narrative, in the form of a monologue, about an allied siege of Napoleon's stronghold that took place under the command of the Duke of York in 1793. Speaking in local Wessex dialect, the old Corporal recalls the fierce battle in vivid patriotic tones. He is indeed excited about it all, he is even glad he fought at "Valencieen" despite the gaping wounds he received. The Duke of York was not far from great, he claims, even though many declared him mean. But of course these are the Corporal's own personal feelings. They are not Hardy's.

Even though there is a tinge of patriotic enthusiasm that finds its way into the poem's rhythm, as "We trenched, we trumpeted, and drummed", the gruesome picture of war and all its ugliness is far more graphic. The dominant image of war is that of destruction as the "... tons of iron hummed/ Ath'art the ditch..." It was the first time in the war, says the Corporal, "That French and English spilled each other's gore". It was a time when

Into the streets, ath'art the sky,
A hundred thousand balls and bombs were fleen;
And harmless townsfolk fell to die
Each hour at Valencieen.¹⁰

The poem moves from the terrible sights, the falling bombs, the spilling of gore and killing harmless towns-people to a description of the old Corporal's own wounds in a way that shows the old victim's acceptance but Hardy's condemnation:

And, sweatèn wi' the bombardiers,
A shell was slent to shards anighst my ears:
--'Twas nigh the end of hopes and fears
For me at Valencieen!

They bore my wounded frame to camp,
And shut my gapèn skull, and washed en cleàn,
And jined en wi' a zilver clamp
Thik night at Valencieen.

"We've fetched en back to quick from dead
But never more on earth while rose is red
Will drum rouse Corpel!" Doctor said
O' me at Valencieen.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 16.

'Twer true. No voice o' friend or foe
 Can reach me now, or any liven been;
 And little have I power to know
 Since then at Valencieën!¹¹

Hardy's emphasis that "never more on earth while rose is red/ Will drum rouse Corpel!" is pathetic, but the exploding shell, the flying shrapnel and the "gapen skull" which caused the Corpel to go deaf, point out more intensely the savagery of war. In a later stanza the intensity is increased when it is pointed out that even though the corporal cannot hear the "zummer hums/O bees", his memory is still haunted by the bombs. But perhaps the real poignancy of the poem lies in the old soldier's half-realization of the ironic discrepancy between his patriotic fervour before he was wounded and his new feeling of being in the limbo of the deaf.

A similar long poem is "Leipzig" in which old Norbert, a German "with the flat blue cap" - recalls his mother's description of the allies, bursting "on her home like flame". As in many of this group it is the fear of Napoleon's intended invasion that controls the action.

"---Twas a time of alarms", says Hardy. The poet's hatred for war, while not overpowering here, does appear in lines like these in which rocket flashes seem a "Judgment-Sign/ For bleeding Europe's woes". The picture of war in all its

¹¹Ibid., p. 16.

horrible details is evident in this stanza:

"--Five hundred guns began the affray
On next day morn at nine;
Such mad and mangling cannon-play
Had never torn human line.¹²

The madness that caused the "mangled" and torn human flesh is so vividly expressed that one would suppose the poet himself had been in the trenches. Actually, he saw war's legacy in hospital only, where the sights were pitiable. But it was tragically ironic to him that such numbers of sturdy, hopeful souls should have been cut down, and in their agony, been laid in such a "dark deathbed" in this "... so-called Christian time!" "When", he plaintively cries, "will men's swords to ploughshares turn?" The answer comes in a stanza near the end, where again countless numbers lie dead, "And every current rippled red/ With Marshal's blood and men's". There is simply nothing in this early poem to indicate that peace will come.

Neither is there a hopeful note in "The Peasant's Confession" in which

... war was waged anew
By great Napoleon, who for years had strewn
Men's bones all Europe through.¹³

¹²Ibid., p. 24.

¹³Ibid., p. 26.

or where "Two armies writhe in coils of red and blue,/ And brass and iron clang...", and where "dykes of dead/ Lay between vale and ridge". Great Napoleon is not really great to the poet. There are too many images of war's horrible features for him to make such an acknowledgment. When generals see red sunsets in these poems Hardy sees bloody sunsets.

Although none of these poems have ever to my knowledge been selected as examples of Hardy's best, they frequently contain examples of the author's skill with poetic techniques. For example, the use of particular rhyme patterns indicates control. His ability to create the desired atmosphere is clear in a poem like "The Alarm", written in memory of one of his family who was a volunteer in the war against Napoleon. It begins with the quiet of the morning, a single moment just before the break of dawn:

In a ferny byway
Near the great South-Wessex Highway,
A homestead raised its breakfast-smoke aloft;
The dew-damps still lay steamless, for the sun had made no skyway,
And twilight cloaked the croft.¹⁴

What accentuates the natural beauty portrayed here is the insertion of dissonant war images in the next stanza, where amongst the interweaving woodlines are the "hostile armaments", "a fair woman mutely grieving" and a "harnessed

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

Volunteer".. The juxtaposition of the early morning tranquility and the jarring connotations of war are skillfully handled. The polarity created makes more sharp the qualities of each. The twilight of the croft, the "breakfast-smoke" of the family homestead nestled snugly amongst the woodlines is perfectly natural. The grieving woman and the other symbols of war are not. War has no place amongst such pristine beauty. That Hardy fully realized the tremendous impact of war is revealed when he states that such dissonance among sheer beauty, "was almost past conceiving". Besides, as a lyricist, he cannot be outdone in moments like these. The capturing of a particular moment in time, the enclosing within a few lines, the essence of what he feels life might be without the discord of war is truly poetic and moving.

Hardy has become both famous and infamous for including an unusually large proportion of weirdly ironic situations in his poems. "San Sebastian", besides highlighting the evils of war has this quality also. The poem tells the story of the uncanny results of a moment's passion during the pillage and plunder of war. It is a memorable poem that depicts the sorry plight of a rapist, now an old man, who has been driven close to the brink of insanity by his daughter's spectral eyes, the eyes he saw when he wreaked his will, many years ago, on a "fair fresh

shape--/A woman, a sylph, or sprite". Since that terrible time the rapist has married, but to another woman who has borne him a lovely daughter. She it is whose spectral eyes are haunting him. Obviously, her eyes have become through his own guilt and remorse the eyes of the girl he seduced many years ago, for they bear no resemblance to his own or his wife's. No doubt Hardy intends us to see rape as one of the dark crimes synonymous with war, but what is most interesting is the perfect parallel he makes between the actual warfare and the seduction. There is no doubt that part of his aim is to describe the capture of a summit during a savage battle, but a dual purpose is evident for the images used are militaristic and sexual at the same time. He speaks for example of prating of "prowess in lusty times"; there is talk of topping breaches, climbing columns, and of leaping upon summits. Emphasis is placed upon "crashing balls of iron fire" as the soldiers cursed, groaned and cheered. Finally, a highpoint in the poem is reached, as the girl is raped.

"Afeard she fled, and with heated head
 I pursued to the chamber she called her own;
 --When might is right no qualms deter,
 And having her helpless and alone
 I wreaked my will on her.¹⁵

He is using the traditional image of woman as a fortress to be taken but the particular references he uses to make the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 19.

parallel are especially appropriate. War is associated with brutality, heat, fire and violence; so is the passion that rapes. Such extremes, of course, make the spectral qualities of the child's eyes seem more readily acceptable to the reader and not, as one would normally expect, too exceedingly abnormal to be believed.

When the next group of war poems appeared the balladry had disappeared and was replaced by a shorter, more compact expression, a more sustained lyricism. One mood, a particular feeling became much more prevalent. Consequently there was much more intensity in these poems. However, the main ingredients of the earlier verse remained, but were given more emphasis now. The suffering and pity evoked by war were given much more attention by the sympathetic poet. He still condemned war as the "Worst" of human ills; but here too the intensity was increased. The outstanding feature, though, to many readers is the prominence allotted to the cries of the loved ones left behind by the fallen soldiers. The inspiration for these poems was the Boer War of 1899.

Hardy's deeply personal feelings about the Boer War (1899-1902) appear in certain letters to Florence Henniker. On the seventeenth of September 1899 he writes:

"... It seems a justification of the extremest pessimism that at the end of the 19th cent[ur]y we settle an argument by the sword, just as they w[oul]d have done in the 19th cent[ur]y B.C."¹⁶

Approximately a month later he emphasizes a similar attitude.

"... I constantly deplore the fact that 'civilized' nations have not learnt some more excellent and apostolic way of settling disputes than the old and barbarous one, after all these centuries; ..." ¹⁷

The closest time that Hardy came to witnessing the reality of war was in October of 1899 when he visited Southampton docks to watch the departure of soldiers. Africa was their destination. This brief contact with future victims of war produced a number of extremely perceptive lyrics, some of which describe with stark realism, the mechanical, mindless manner in which soldiers are dispatched to the front. "Embarcation"¹⁸ puts on record "each host" as it "draws out upon the sea". In "Departure"¹⁹

¹⁶ Evelyn Hardy & F.B. Pinion, editors... One Rare Fair Woman: Thomas Hardy's Letters to Florence Henniker (London: 1972), p. 84.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁸ Collected Poems, p. 78.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

"the far farewell music thins and fails" as the ships are "smalling slowly to the gray sea-line--." Whether "the quay recedes" ... to the soldiers or whether the wives watch them move away "under the arch", there is a "keen sense of severance" that "everywhere prevails". Sorrow is the predominant mood in these lines. It finds a central place in each of these going-away poems. But individual features emerge also. "Embarcation" in true sonnet fashion sets up an image in each section. The first and second quatrains focus on "Vespasian's legions", Cerdic's Saxons and "Henry's army" and the present "Vaster battalions". As a group these historic references trace chronologically the traditional violence of war. All past armies, says Hardy, have argued "in the self-same bloody mode". The sonnet's third stanza sees the departing soldiers as tragically stoic in the complete acceptance of their fate. None is "dubious of the cause" none murmurs. All of us know only too well that though they appear "alive as spring" they are in reality as fragile as autumn leaves. The final stanza continues the image of fragility and touches on those left behind. They "wave white hands", foreshadowing the demise of their departing men. What adds most to the poem's success is the skillful handling of the awful truth, that history teaches nothing because wars have continued into the present. Present generations still seem fatefully

caught up and manipulated by some ever present and unexplainable viciousness. What is perhaps the most significant example of tension is the intense nervous anxiety and internal turbulence of the waving women and children stoically holding back the tears. The scene with all its emotion is captured with absolute accuracy. There is the timelessness and inevitability of violence juxtaposed against the fragility of the soldiers in the manner of The Return of The Native in which indestructible Egdon Heath is set against the resilient but be-fated Eustacia. Taken as a whole the tensions give evidence of the poet's dual purpose in these poems - to condemn the blood-letting and arguing and to pity those who suffer.

"Departure" suggests similar tensions but here they are between the "keen sense of severance" felt by the soldiers and those left behind, and a desire by the author for a "patriotism, grown Godlike" in which no severance and no divisions are apparent. This image of division is expressed quite clearly in the first stanza as the ships "broad bottoms rip the bearing brine" and in the second, by the "wroth reasonings" which "trade on lives like these". There is pity too in the sadness of the far farewells but pity here takes the form of a melioristic plea for "saner softer polities", a hope for a time when humanity will not be "puppets in a playing hand", a desire for universal harmony "whereof we dream".

In the first half of "The Colonel's Soliloquy"²⁰ it is an adventurous Colonel who speaks. Somewhat like Tennyson's Ulysses, he feels a certain urge to roam, not to "rust unburnished", but "to shine in use". His joints are getting rusty, he admits, but he feels, "there's not a little steel beneath the rust". He has great courage for an old man and still talks of war in terms of "ball and blade" and he wants one more confrontation with the enemy. The second half of the poem differs greatly from the first; for Hardy treats this universal soldier more subtly; he becomes more than a military robot. As the departing soldiers listen to the band playing "The Girl I've left behind me", he reflects on his aging wife who when younger could stand the strain and stress of war. Now, "palely grieving" she may not persevere. He prays that those who are left at home will console her in her need. Though one comes to recognize tensions a natural quality in Hardy's poetry, the appearance of these opposing forces within one character, a soldier, is quite unprecedented. Normally only those left behind grieve. Soldiers are stoic and unflinching, "Light in their loving as soldiers can be-". But of course this is a soliloquy, an ironic, psychological penetration by the author, which reveals the real paradox of the Colonel's plight. Torn between opposite poles, he is

²⁰Ibid., pp. 79-80.

fatefully manipulated, like Napoleon, by a demonic, unconscious force, but he reaches out in the other direction, because the human emotion of pity is strong.

Like "The Colonel's Soliloquy", a poem entitled "A Wife in London" deals with a particular couple -- a soldier and his wife. Also like the poem above, there are no throngs of people, no marching soldiers, no wives clinging lovingly. In the manner of the non-war poems there is an ironic contrast between what is and what seems. The dazed wife learns of her husband's death by telegram, only to receive in the next day's mail, a letter,

Fresh--firm--penned in highest feather--
Page-full of his hoped return,
And of home-planned jaunts by brake and burn
In the summer weather,
And of new love that they would learn.²¹

Unlike many poems of this group, the feelings of the saddened one are not explicitly revealed. They are, however, handled skillfully by implication, as hazy, atmospheric images are sustained throughout three stanzas. The "tawny vapour", the "webby fold", the cold glimmer of the street-lamp, and the thick fog, all suggest the puzzled state of the woman's mind. Then, of course, the sharp disparity between the high hopes of the letter, sharply opposed by the stunning definitiveness of the message, only helps to paint more

²¹Ibid., p. 84.

darkly, Hardy's view of war, and indeed of the power of pain in general.

Three poems of the 1899 group are written from the point of view of dead soldiers. They form what may be considered the poet's most severe criticism of war. Because of their brevity, they are also the poet's best examples of sustained emotion. "A Christmas Ghost-Story"²² is an example. What a tragic farce Christianity is seen to be, as the poet paints the picture of "a mouldering soldier" whose "gray bones" are scattered and his "puzzled phantom moans"! It is a bitter and ironic condemnation, but not so much of "that Man Crucified", as it is of the cause of his ineptness and the seeming uselessness of his sacrifice. Again, what a graphic picture is painted in that brilliant poem "Drummer Hodge".²³ Look, says Hardy, what war has done to this youth, "fresh from his Wessex home-". What viciousness, what unexplainable violence has thrown this innocent boy "Uncoffined" amid "foreign" and "strange-eyed" constellations?

In "The Souls of The Slain",²⁴ all former opinions and grand delusions of war held by the soldiers are swept

²²Ibid., p. 82.

²³Ibid., p. 83.

²⁴Ibid., p. 87.

away as their spirits learn the truth - their loved ones cherish, not their fame as dead military heroes, but their "homely acts". So great is the jolt of such a revelation that some spirits

...towering to seaward in legions,
They paused at a spot
Overbending the Race--
That engulfing, ghast, sinister place--
Whither headlong they plunged, to the fathomless regions
Of myriads forgot.

War became for Hardy, "a dire crusade" that helped make life "the darkest thinkable". It was simply unnatural. Peace should smile "unshent" he says in "At the War Office".²⁵ Death should wait for "Nature's wont". But war destroys such naturalness, for we witness pale wives scrambling to view the "hourly posted sheets of scheduled slaughter". Only a few, too few, feel the elation expressed in "Song of the Soldiers' Wives and Sweethearts".

There is a significant number of cautiously enthusiastic poems written after the turn of the century which are excellent specimens of his melioristic philosophy. For although the First World War shattered, for a time, the poet's hopeful expectations, he did periodically reiterate his confidence in man's ability to throw off the whole armour of darkness. "War is doomed", he told William Archer in 1901. "It is doomed" he continues by the "gradual growth

²⁵Ibid., p. 82.

of the introspective faculty in mankind".²⁶ How pitiful his optimism was, yet he gave other reasons why he sincerely believed wars would be eliminated. One is a conclusion he came to after studying a century of European wars. "Common sense had taken the place of bluster in men's minds..." he believed. The best example of this optimism among the short war poems is "The Sick Battle-God"²⁷ of 1901. The poem moves from a description of the fierce Battle-God of former times to the introduction of a saner god who seems to be holding sway. The essence of such a hope is not unlike the plea in The Dynasts for the unconscious Immanent Will to achieve a degree of consciousness. One finds no such consciousness nor compassion in the rather healthy battle-god of the early stanzas:

I

In days when men found joy in war,
A God of Battles sped each mortal jar;
The peoples pledged him heart and hand,
From Israel's land to isles afar.

II

His crimson form, with clang and chime,
Flashed on each murk and murderous meeting-time,
And kings invoked, for rape and raid,
His fearsome aid in rune and rhyme.

III

On bruise and blood-hole, scar and seam,
On blade and bolt, he flung his fulgid beam:
His haloes rayed the very gore,
And corpses wore his glory-gleam.

²⁶William Archer, p. 317.

²⁷Collected Poems, pp. 88-90.

As the poem proceeds, Hardy's strong censure of war's ferocity increases. Not even his own English leaders are protected, for even Wolfe and Nelson are chastized for catching war's sheen. Nevertheless a new day is dawning, new light spreads; the flushed form of the once great war tyrant²⁸ fades:

Let men rejoice, let men deplore,
The lurid Deity of heretofore
Succumbs to one of saner nod;
The Battle-god is god no more.

The poem is interesting not only for its melioristic tones, but also for its adroit use of imagery. In several poems of earlier and later composition, the color red is quite appropriately associated with war. In "Channel Firing",²⁸ we see:

All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder.

"Embarcation" effectively sets the "bloody mode" of settling arguments up against the waving "white hands". The "red sunsets" and the writhing "coils of red" in "The Peasants Confession" also place war in its proper perspective. But no poem sustains this color of fresh-spilled human blood like "The Sick Battle-God". In only one stanza between II and VIII does the poet see fit to omit such an image. The "crimson form", "the blood-holes", the "fulgid beam", the

²⁸Ibid., pp. 287-288.

"flushed form" and the "gore", all help to intensify Hardy's concept of war as brutal murder. Besides, they show his ability to make poetry out of ethics and philosophy.

Although he published "Channel Firing" several months before the First World War broke out in 1914, Hardy, even then, did not believe that war was imminent. It was true, nations were "striving strong to make/ Red war yet redder", but there was always a chance for a saner solution to the world's problems. However, the feeling expressed in the poem is that it will not, for "The world is as it used to be". They are still having gunnery practice, and it is precisely this action that the poem depends on for its meaning. It is indeed merely gunnery practice but this is so viciously conducted that terror strikes even the dead. This leads to a more important point. While this firing in the channel is the very proof to the ghosts and animals that the threat of war is growing, it does not affect the human community. No living humans speak in the poem thereby indicating their indifference and the apparent normalcy of the whole affair to them. It is biting sarcasm of course. And it supplies Hardy with an opportunity to pile image on top of image to make the point more poignant. Each image fits the theme perfectly. Red war is becoming redder. The roar of the great guns while it assumes thunderous proportions, gives the poet a chance to make use of two

qualities exploited in the satires - the grotesque and the macabre - as coffins shook, skeletons sat up, dogs awakened, mice dropped the altar crumbs, "worms drew back into the mounds" and the "glebe cow drooled". All were terrified. The last stanza points out that the roar could be heard as far inland as "Stourton Tower,/ And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge". As in "Embarcation", the poet is tracing war from earliest times to the present. All his references are in some way associated with war: The *Historia Britonum* of Nennius tells us that twelve battles were fought by Arthur at Camelot. That famous spot is also associated with Caerleon, a village of Monmouthshire, Wales, where it is supposed the main seat of Roman military power remained for 200 years. Besides, one of the Stonehenge slabs seems to have been a slaughter stone. One of the main implications of the poem is of course that if this uproar is mere practice, what gigantic and monstrous proportions would real war assume?

"Quicquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi,"²⁹

(whenever kings are mad, the Greeks are punished). This Hardy wrote when the "breaking of nations" did begin again in 1914. Used by the poet at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, it still applied, as it gave expression to his

²⁹The Life, p. 365.

general estimate of war. It was indeed the politicians who were mad, but only the populace suffered. Such an impact did the mass suffering of the war inflict at this time that a cloud of despair settled over him and gave the "...coup de grâce to any conception he may have nourished of a fundamental ultimate Wisdom at the back of things".³⁰ More and more he came to see the universe as a purposeless and "... irresponsible groping in the direction of the least resistance..."³¹ More and more he believed that it was useless to pray. God, if there was one, could not be swayed. Things happened by necessity. So strongly was this kind of attitude implanted in his mind, that he indicated a dissatisfaction with the ending of The Dynasts. Had he realized when that work was finished that war was inevitable, the ending would most certainly have been despairing.

Surprisingly enough, not all the poems written surrounding the First World War period are gloomy. Though they are few, certain of the Poems of War and Patriotism express confidence in humanity's ability to overcome the evils of war. Such a poem is "His Country"³² which resembles "The Sick Battle-God" in tone. In the poem, a

³⁰Ibid., p. 368.

³¹Ibid.

³²Collected Poems, pp. 507-508.

traveller discovers several revealing similarities between the people of other lands and himself. He notices that they suffer as he does; they have "heart strings fellow-made". In fact such a oneness is felt with his fellow man that boundaries disappear; citizenship becomes worldwide. This prompts him to ask:

... "Whom have I to fight,
And whom have I to dare,
And whom to weaken, crush, and blight?
My country seems to have kept in sight
On my way everywhere."

This rare optimism in the human capacity, this poetic picture of universal unity amongst peoples, reflects the strong tendency in Hardy towards a concrete, physical improvement in man's condition, without having the support of ethics and religion. It is simply the result of an innate desire for the brotherhood-of-man concept. Meliorism has surfaced again.

Some of these poems expressing a certain confidence in humanity are blatantly didactic. By his familiar method, of contrast the author makes more manifest the dissimilarities of the opposing elements as he places them side by side. He seems to be sharply defining the positive qualities of one and the negative qualities of the other, forcing the reader to choose the former. This two-stanza poem, "An Appeal to America on Behalf of the Belgian Destitute",³³ is an example.

³³Ibid., p. 509.

In the first stanza one image is dominant; it is that of the seven million lean Belgians, those forlorn naked souls who stand in endless line. The second stanza gives special emphasis to the immediate needs of these unfortunate peoples, placing the onus for meeting those needs on the Americans. Thus, the "throbbing conflicts" of the first stanza are set in opposition to the "lovingkindness" of the second. The reader, like the poet, pleads the Belgians' case. Someone must ease "their loud need".

Another of these humanitarian poems is the sonnet "Often When Warring"³⁴ in which

An enemy soldier, passing by one weak,
Has tendered water, wiped the burning cheek,
And cooled the lips so black and clammed and hot,

Here again, Hardy places considerable faith in mankind's compassion as a means of building a better world. How far above "policy's specious page/ That deals but with evasion, code, and pact..." does he set the deed of the Good Samaritan? How much larger than "victory's peal of pride" is the vision that prompted this "deed of grace"? In a manner that only the great sonneteers have achieved, Hardy solidifies in the first eight lines, an image of goodness, for the soldier who stoops to help is Christ-like. In the remaining six, the contrasting image is expressed as "throes of artificial

³⁴Ibid., p. 513.

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 rage". As always, each image by its extreme difference from another stands at opposite poles, creating again a reflection of the "Better" and the "Worst", the antipodes of the poet's world. The personnel of these poems, unlike the tragic characters in his novels, show the results when possibilities are taken advantage of.

Hardy's emphasis on human integrity does not always occupy such a prominent place in these poems. In at least two, hate for the instigators of war is the dominating note. In "Cry of the Homeless",³⁵ for example, he greets the "Instigator of the ruin" with "Conqueror, all hail to thee!", but it is a "wormwood-worded greeting", as we soon discover:

'May thy loved be slighted, blighted.
 And forsaken', be it said
 By thy victims,
 'And thy children beg their bread!'

The final stanza desires "a richer malediction" as the author ends with the ignominious image of drowning. He hopes that the dews of compassion will bedrench the instigator to such an extent that death will result.

In "The Pity of It",³⁶ there is only the slightest measure of pity. One does find a heart crying for the

³⁵Ibid., pp. 511-512.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 509-510.

peoples, who although they are "kin folk" and "kin tongued", continue to kill each other. But the heart, instead of crying tears of pity, savagely denounces "Whosoever they be/ At root and bottom of this ...". The poem ends on a similar note:

"Sinister, ugly, lurid, be their fame;
May their familiars grow to shun their name,
And their brood perish everlastingly."

All wars foster nationalism, sometimes in the form of verse. Hardy contributed several poems in this vein yet they are more than simply jingoistic, favouring an aggressive foreign policy. They are rather a plea to "women and men/ Of palace, ploughshare, easel, counter, pen;" to fight that England still may stand as in "A Call to National Service".³⁷ The poet seems intent on arousing the natural instincts of all citizens in a defensive cause. One could say, the sentiments are expressions of devotion to the nation in time of need, and there is no hint anywhere that the poet disagrees with such enthusiasm. He is not even a conscientious objector. In fact, he insists that if his age permitted, he would

... speed like yester wind that whirred
Through yielding pines; and serve with never a slack,
So loud for promptness all around outcries!

³⁷ Ibid., p. 514.

A poem of patriotism written three years earlier, however, does not speak of service in such glowing terms. His enthusiasm wanes. It is true, the soldiers in "Men Who March Away"³⁸ believe that

Victory crowns the just,
And that braggarts must
Surely bite the dust,

and they go off to war "ungrieving", filled with "faith and fire". But Hardy balances his poem by including the attitude of the "Friend with the musing eye", who, like the reader, finds all the fervour, the faith and the fire, a little disturbing. Although the contrasting feelings are not so polarized as in some other poems there is enough to keep the poem from becoming falsely patriotic. For whereas the soldiers in their heart of hearts sincerely believe that victory is imminent because their cause is just, the poet watches them march, "with doubt and dolorous sigh ...". He believes that it is they who are being hoodwinked and led to war by "a purblind prank".

Several poems of the First World War group are much more despairing than those discussed earlier in the chapter. In "Then and Now",³⁹ his favourite technique of using

³⁸ Ibid., p. 506.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 513-514.

contrasts is again revealed as the poet compares the vast difference between traditional and modern methods of conducting battle. In ages past, he suggests, men fought honorably, and with vigor; they played the game of death by rules. He may be slightly cynical here, since we all know that war is rarely honorable. War is war, and perfidy is never absent. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he wishes to paint modern warfare as vicious:

But now, behold, what
Is warfare wherein honor is not!
Rama laments
Its dead innocents:
Herod breathes: "Sly slaughter
Shall rule! Let us, by modes once called accurst,
Overhead, under water,
Stab first".

In "A New Year's Eve in War Time"⁴⁰ the despairing tone is rendered by timely references to the "spectral pines" which first foreshadow, then typify the phantasmal fears the moaning new year is likely to bring. Likewise in "I Met a Man",⁴¹ the "Moulder of Monarchies" does nothing about the "... Chartered armipotents lust-led/ To feuds...." Finally, in "I looked up from my Writing",⁴² with its excellent touch of sustained melancholy, "brutish battle" has caused a "sunken soul" to commit suicide and the spectral

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 516-517.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 517-518.

⁴² Ibid., p. 519.

moon believes the poet to be one who might also "put his life-light out", because of war.

I have already pointed out certain poetic qualities which some of these war poems possess. A number have arresting diction; some are impressive for their control of tone and atmosphere. Others exhibit a skillful handling of imagery. Most give evidence of Hardy's ability to effectively create tensions from the polarity of contrasting components. There are, however, certain other poems that deserve mention since they, too, measure high on the scale of accomplishment. One notices for example the scrupulously exact choice of words used in "Before Marching and After".⁴³ Orion and the Pleiads fit perfectly into the scheme of the poem, for in Greek and Roman mythology Orion was a great hunter killed while pursuing the Pleiads, daughters of Atlas. Orion also refers to a constellation of bright stars seen only in the Southern Hemisphere. The soldier in the poem, like Orion, is a kind of hunter who is about to play a "Game with Death" and who also attains a brightness that does not fade with death. Both propriety and balance is achieved by including the Pleiads, a feminine constellation.

The Pleiads aloft seemed to pant
With the heather that twitched in the wind;

⁴³Ibid., pp. 512-513.

How appropriate, also, are "the fuchsia-bells, hot in the sun", hanging red by the door, signifying the death of the soldier.

Quite apart from such precision, the poem effectively engages interplay between the brightness of Orion and the dull negativism of war. For the contrast is sharp between the lustre of the constellation, no longer an active killer and the lack-lustre of internecine war. We have, it is true, the prominence of Orion, but he is now "aslant". There is "spring starlight" but underneath the stars a lonely mother sighs. And it is ironic that the soldier's brightness comes only with death. Like all great artists, Hardy saw a world of great complexity, a world where glory and death, joy and tragedy intermingled. The "Better" and the "Worst" are often fused.

Perhaps no poem about war has found so warm a spot in the hearts of sympathetic readers as "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'".⁴⁴ The title is taken from the Book of Jeremiah but the poem seems to have overtones of the New Testament's sacrificial "breaking". Juxtaposition of opposites is again the technique. As in "The Alarm", discussed earlier, war and all its implied legacy of destruction and death are set against the peace and

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 511.

tranquility associated with the scenes of rustic life. But though war is breaking up of national life in all its various parts it is, says Hardy, a temporary dismemberment. What endures as the stream of time moves on, is not the annals of war, but rather the honest labor of the inhabitants, and of course, love. When the remembrances of slaughter have been healed by time, the farmer will still continue to plough the earth, smoke, without the flame of war will continue to rise from the "heaps of couch-grass", and a "maid and her wight" will be seen "whispering by". All else "will cloud into night/Ere their story die".

No critic, to my knowledge, has placed any great significance on Hardy's war poems scattered throughout the Collected edition. Writing in 1918, Edmund Gosse mentions just one, "The Man He Killed", and sees Hardy "pondering on the philosophy of fighting". He feels that the "Poems of War and Patriotism" should be carefully examined by those who meditate on the tremendous problems of the moment",⁴⁵ but he himself shows no interest in doing so.

The same meagre attention is given them by Babette Deutsch whose only apparent insight into the poems is that there seems to be a change of heart by the author, between the time he composed the Boer War poems and those of the First World War.

⁴⁵R.G. Cox, p. 461.

M. Johnson, writing in 1902, feels that the early poems of the 1899 group are "... not equal to some of his other pieces ...", but at the same time he admits that they are interesting and patriotic. "They bear, as might be expected, rather upon those that are left behind than upon those who are at the front".⁴⁶ This of course, is partially true and points to one of the differences between Hardy and Wilfred Owen who paints a bloody picture of war from personal experience. In recent years, Ifor Evans, too, sees that the governing mood is different in many poems but gives little critical comment of value.

Carl Weber quickly dismisses them as mildly interesting, "as patriotic expressions of national feeling",⁴⁷ but as poetry they are quite unimportant. To me these war poems are important for several reasons. Like most of his poetry they reflect certain personal beliefs. Furthermore, whether it was Hardy's intent to sustain an image, mood, or feeling, or whether he wished to highlight the features of opposites for didactic purposes, his diverse treatment of the war phenomenon served as an adequate impetus to his creativity. And there is no doubt that the didacticism is

⁴⁶M. Johnson, "Mr. Hardy's Poetry and Philosophy of Life", Holborn Review, Vol. 3 (July, 1902), p. 385.

⁴⁷Carl J. Weber, Hardy of Wessex (New York: 1967), p. 280.

important, for many of the war poems are examples of what Shelley referred to in "The Skylark" as "unbidden hymns". The function of the poet says Shelley is to sing these hymns of deep thought:

... Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not...⁴⁸

Hardy is indeed singing Shelley's kind of hymn. In all his poetry he pleads for the world to change. In these poems he asks when will sanity finally prevail? When will men learn not to make "... skies spout fire and blood and nations quake"? When will we "find joys seldom yet attained by humankind!"?

One of the aims of this thesis is to suggest that much of Hardy's poetry is a reflection of his melioristic view of the world. The satires fit; so do the war poems. War was regarded by the poet as an example of man's worst action; the strongest impediment to an improved global situation. He deplored the causes and effects of "brutish battle" and he did take as complete a look at this human scar as a sensitive spectator could. There is no doubt that he saw war as a stumbling block to man's progress. He did believe the world was threatened by a new dark age if war's "dark madness" continued to barbarize the young. And he

⁴⁸ Carlos Baker, ed., Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley, Modern Library College Editions (New York: 1951), p. 398.

viewed the whole spectrum of war from its characteristic viciousness to the suffering it incurred and the pity it demanded. But it must not be forgotten that Hardy also paid close attention to Comte's Positivism and his belief in the "looped orbit" referred to in chapter one. Man might indeed progress by such a method of retrogression and rebound. If so, "the breaking of nations" represented one of those temporary doldrums; lulls in man's road to better things. I believe the war poetry with its focus on the horrors involved, its pity for the sufferers, its expression of hope for the final elimination of hatred and strife, is proof positive of the author's meliorism. War is a moving backwards, he would say, but it is a process he hopes will be reversed. Meliorism is also evident in the poems of destiny, but faced with greater odds, the poet shows signs of growing desperation.

CHAPTER IV

POEMS OF BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

It is perhaps inevitable and not ironic that Thomas Hardy the ironist should know and understand so thoroughly, the history, doctrine and worship of the Established Church in England, yet offer it so weighty a challenge. But it is ironic that the source of conflict which gave rise to his wrestling with ultimate causes should be inherent in what was being challenged. For as Carl Weber points out, Hardy's grim attitudes have been traced to the Bible, and not only does the author know considerable portions of basic Christian literature by heart, but he also records his favourite extracts. Some speak of man's brief stay on earth; a few equate man and vanity; one comments on humanity's suffering. The tone of all is melancholy but characteristically Christian and from Hardy's point of view, appropriate for a subject of such gravity. His concern in these poems is surely a grave one; whether or not a God exists is not a triviality. In fact to question eternity is perhaps as far as man can go. It may well be the most perplexing thought that mankind can ponder and it is in what one may call the poems of destiny that Hardy takes his fullest look at this

awful idea that God does not exist. There are moments of levity in the satires, times when fascination reigns in the earliest war poems, but in the poems involving man's destiny a more sombre note is struck. And whether one agrees with his eventual conclusions, or whether indeed he himself is able to draw conclusions at all, one must recognize the sincerity of his search for truth. The urge was strong to believe that there was no crossing of the line drawn at the grave. Being a meliorist, however, he admitted the other possibility also - that "crossing the bar" to another existence might be conceivable and that there might be, as paradoxical as it may seem, a disinterested omnipotence behind the universe.

The steps and influences that brought Hardy to the point where he could ask such probing questions is a study in itself. But there is no doubt, I think, that the boy who taught Sunday School and considered entering the Church was strongly influenced by his mother, whose skepticism taught him to ask very early in his life, as he did in "Hap";

... How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?¹

Then there was Darwin.

I have divided the poems involving belief into two sections which I feel reflect Hardy's dual concern. It is

¹Collected Poems, p. 7.

my opinion that these so-called "philosophic" poems should not be neatly classified under that one specific heading, for while part of the poet's quarrel is with the Creator, another part is with traditional Christianity.

As an introduction to a discussion of these "Christian" poems, a short section on the poet's relationship with the Church seems necessary. There is no doubt that he was far from satisfied with what he saw in the Church. For example, he felt the Church had not done enough to alleviate the ills of the world. Although he had expressed other sentiments earlier, in 1922 he footnoted his "Apology" by insisting that

... evidence that the Church will go far in the removal of 'things that are shaken' has not been, encouraging.²

The Church had "... lost its chance ...", he writes earlier in the article, "... to keep the shreds of morality together". Furthermore, he informs us that he could not accept the traditional Christian theory of a good-God, since that God, real or imaginary had permitted humanity to produce, by war "... the present infamous and disgraceful state of Europe - that most Christian Continent ..."³ His utter disgust at Christian ineptitude is evident in a letter

²Ibid., p. 531.

³F.E. Hardy, p. 375.

of 1919 written to his close friend, Mrs. Arthur Henniker:

... I should care more for my birthday if at each succeeding one I could see any sign of real improvement in the world - as at one time I fondly hoped there was; but I fear that what appears much more 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 and ameliorative. I almost think that 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.⁴

Neither could Hardy accept the artificiality of church-going, for he came to see that it had no positive function. Throngs of people were prevented from participating fully in any church or chapel because they still were required to recite in parrot fashion what their ancestors had recited sincerely:

'... We say the established words full of the historic sentiment only, mentally adding, 'how happy our ancestors were in repeating in all sincerity these articles of faith!'. But we perceive that none of the congregation recognizes that we repeat the words from an antiquarian interest in them, and in a historic sense, and solely in order to keep a church of some sort afoot - a thing indispensable; so that we are pretending what is not true: that we are believers...'⁵

Hardy's tone here is not unlike that of Samuel Butler's as he describes the hypocrisy of the Erewhonians. For though

⁴E. Hardy & F.B. Pinion, p. 185.

⁵The Life, pp. 332-333.

the stranger, Higgs, observed that the musical Banks were not so busy as they probably often were, Mrs. Nosnibor, like Hardy's Christians, insisted that he "... must not think there was any want of confidence in the bank..." People, she states, were still "... thoroughly devoted to these establishments..."⁶ Recitation of a ritual, purely out of habit, reluctance to admit the truth were simply dishonest and did not belong to Hardy's code of ethics. But more serious, in his view, than rote recitation was the meaninglessness of what was on the lips of 'the faithful'. Church liturgy, he felt, should reflect the needs of the people:

We enter church, and have to say, 'we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep', when what we want to say is 'why are we made to err and stray like lost sheep?' Then we have to sing, 'my soul doth magnify the Lord', when what we want to sing is 'O that my soul could find some Lord that it could magnify!....'⁷

Despite the obvious general discontent shown by his version of the "Magnificat", the plaintive cry to find a Lord to magnify is strong in the Christian poems. Although there is disbelief, it is nearly always countered by the deep and sincere wish to again embrace the faith of his fathers, a

⁶Samuel Butler, Erewhon (Signet Classis, New York: 1961), p. 117.

⁷Op. cit., p. 332.

point too often neglected by the critics. In a manner similar to that of poems treated in earlier chapters, here too, the tensions appear, perhaps more vibrantly.

It is quite likely that these poems reflect the inner Hardy although it is difficult to say and often dangerous to speculate about how much of his poetry is based on actual self-examination and personal belief. There is a tendency among many modern critics as F.B. Pinion warns, "... to ignore or minimize the possibility that the imagination can transmute for artistic ends".⁸ But I feel, in Hardy's case, and especially is this true of the poems in question, that the struggle for equilibrium in the verse reflects the struggle for truth in the poet's mind. That there was most certainly a struggle is indicated by this admission:

If belief were a matter of choice I should prefer to accept the spiritual hypothesis. I am most anxious to believe in what, roughly speaking, we may call the supernatural, but I find no evidence for it. People accuse me of scepticism, materialism, and so forth, but if the accusation is just at all, it is quite against my will.⁹

The fifth stanza of "The Impercipient (at a Cathedral service)", an early poem, verifies this kind of conflict.

⁸ Hardy and Pinion, op. cit., p. xxxiii.

⁹ M. Johnson, "Mr. Hardy's Poetry and Philosophy of Life", Holborn Review. (July, 1902), p. 394.

Yet I would bear my shortcomings
 With meet tranquillity,
 But for the charge that blessed things
 I'd liefer not have be.
 O, doth a bird deprived of wings
 Go earth-bound wilfully!¹⁰

Earlier in the poem we have the disbelief symbolized by the "wind-swept pine", while later on one finds the disquiet of a tormented soul crying for something to believe in. Each stanza contributes to the overall alienation and isolation the speaker of the poem finds himself faced with, and reflects what one accepts as normal in Hardy, the perplexing nature of his vision. In stanza one, the "Shining Land" of "this bright-believing band", his comrades, becomes "fantasies", "mirage-mists" and a "strange destiny" to the deprived observer. In stanza two, the sights and joys of the believers become blindness and "infelicity" to him. But the disparity is sharp in the two images of the fourth stanza. Whereas the faithful see their "glorious distant sea", the unhappy doubter still sees "yon dark/And wind-swept pine" which is the symbol of his predicament and cuts down his spiritual visibility. What adds to the complexity of the dilemma is that here is no wilful unbeliever. This is an unbeliever who realizes his "shortcomings". This may be an irony of course but here is a man who "lacks", who is presumably deprived by an outside force, a man who desires flight but whose wings are clipped. No belief is possible

¹⁰Collected Poems, p. 59.

under the circumstances, he insists. But what, one asks, does he wish as an alternative to disbelief? What would he adhere to if he could? Is it the glory of the "bright believing band"? Is it their shining eternity? "Rest shall we", he concludes, but one suspects it will not be in the serenity of the Cathedral's congregation. For like his own "Magnificat", there is a need to cling to something, but that need is unfulfilled. His vision, tragically enough, finds nothing to cling to. Vision is probably appropriate here because I feel Hardy's "shortcomings" are not really shortcomings, at least he doesn't think so. The poet speaks ironically here, for although he seems to be self-critical, he is not. Hence, it is his own vision that penetrates farthest, not the congregation's. At this point, he still has his own "Magnificat" without a Lord to magnify.

One could, I suppose, doubt the quality of thought in Hardy's rejections. He can choose to believe. He gives the impression one cannot. The validity of these musings may seem questionable. One could perhaps accuse him of falling easy prey to the "blame God" theory which is perhaps too facile to accept in a great writer. It is my view that the poet, in a way that resembles all of us, frequently experiences moments of mental confusion when to blame God seems proper. He, too, is often bothered by countless impressions, some of which are momentary; but, unlike many

of us, he hides none.

If not magnified, the "strange and mystic form" of "God's Funeral"¹¹ had been "prized" by those who now bury him, even by the seemingly objective and slightly "distant" observer in the poem. The scene in the poem is no ordinary one since it is not a human body that is being interred but God's. The mangled "Monarch of our fashioning" has now "ceased to be", and the onlooker muses on the history of this great "myth" who cannot any longer be kept alive, and describes the sombre scene with all the various reactions, as he gradually becomes a mourner himself. The modern God-is-dead idea is evoked and antedated in this poem but in a familiar Hardy fashion death does not take on its usual finality. For despite the atmosphere of mourning, the lined brows, languid lips and scooped eyes, despite the apparent rightness of the burial, there were some in the train of mourners who witnessed, in the manner of "The Darkling Thrush", "a pale yet positive gleam low down behind". Although, as the "Worst" is indicated, and each mourner shakes his head in sorrow, someone says "'See you upon the horizon that small light--/ Swelling somewhat?" Even in this poem where the darkest and most ominous knell is sounded "heaven's radiant show" of "The Impercipient" continues to

¹¹Ibid., pp. 307-309.

faintly penetrate. In fact the strange appeal that this poem has is due to the skillful blending of these two dissimilar notes. On the one hand there are obviously the "blurred eyes" and a sustained sorrow for the demise of their God. The "slowly-stepping train" of the first stanza is in a dilemma. It is still "dazed and puzzled" in the last. But, on the other hand, in order to be faithful to the complexities of human experience, Hardy allows an aura of certainty to surround the poem. No one repudiates the negative side but there is also a definite appropriateness in the mourners' witnessing, even causing, their "myth's oblivion". Somewhere amidst the frustrations and tensions, "twixt the gleam and gloom", one finds the author and his vacillations.

Hardy's ability to transfer his tension-filled vision of the universe to his poetry has become a hallmark of his style. It is genuine poetry. In fact some critics, including Yeats, insist that all good poetry must exhibit tensions. One thing is plain to serious readers of Hardy and that is, the conflicts give a peculiar unity to the structure. They organize and give a tightness to the verse. "God's Funeral", despite the relative length, is an example of this. The dreary funeral procession is depicted in the first five stanzas, the "sick thoughts" of the "moving columns" in the next seven, and the puzzled gaze of each

"languid-lipped" mourner in the last five. They are all different, yet all contribute to the total effect of intellectual and emotional uncertainty experienced by all persons in the poem.

"The Graveyard of Dead Creeds" is a similar poem, although of uneven quality and startling diction.

I lit upon the graveyard of dead creeds
In wistful wanderings through old wastes of thought,
Where bristled fennish fungi, fruiting nought,
Amid the sepulchres begirt with weeds,

Which stone by stone recorded sanct, deceased
Catholicons that had, in centuries flown,
Physicked created man through his long groan,
Ere they went under, all their potency ceased.

When in a breath-while, lo, their spectres rose
Like wakened winds that autumn summons up:--
"Out of us cometh an heir, that shall disclose
New promise!" cried they. "And the caustic cup

"We ignorantly upheld to men, be filled
With draughts more pure than those we ever distilled,
That shall make tolerable to sentient seers
The melancholy marching of the years."¹²

Circumscribed by the vivid graveyard images in the first line and the "'melancholy marching of the years'" in the last, it too is distinctly a product of the author's powers of integration and unification. This poem though, unlike some of the group in question, does not create a dichotomy between the two dissimilar elements, the old and the new, then attempt to fuse them. The positive energy of the poem emerges from the imagery of decay. From the "bristled

¹²Ibid., p. 687.

fennish fungi" and the "sepulchres begirt with weeds" arise "draughts more pure than those we ever distilled". Another feature which is particularly interesting is the continuous sense of movement which one becomes aware of, from the silent graveyard through the "wistful wanderings", the growing weeds, and the flying creatures of the first half, to the rising spectres, the "wakened winds" and the marching years of the second. It reminds one of the Romantic emphasis on "becoming". In fact, Hardy's ardent desire for fusion and synthesis, his persistent striving for order and harmony in a not so harmonious universe is essentially similar to the ideas of Wordsworth, Coleridge and their German counterparts.

"A Cathedral Facade at Midnight" is a hauntingly beautiful poem in which movement is exploited in a slightly different way.

Along the sculptures of the western wall
 I watched the moonlight creeping:
 It moved as if it hardly moved at all.
 Inch by inch thinly peeping
 Round on the pious figures of freestone, brought
 And poised there when the Universe was wrought
 To serve its centre, Earth, in mankind's thought.

The lunar look skimmed scanty toe, breast, arm,
 Then edged on slowly, slightly,
 To shoulder, hand, face; till each austere form
 Was blanched its whole length brightly
 Of prophet, king, queen, cardinal in state,
 That dead men's tools had striven to simulate;
 And the stiff images stood irradiate.

A frail moan from the martyred saints there set
 Mid others of the erection

Against the breeze, seemed sighings of regret
 At the ancient faith's rejection
 Under the sure, unhasting, steady stress
 Of Reason's movement, making meaningless
 The coded creeds of old-time godliness.¹³

There is continuous movement as in "The Graveyard of Dead Creeds" but here there are really two movements, one paralleling and enhancing the other. The poem begins as the moonlight slowly scans the sculptures on the western wall of the church until the stiff images "stood irradiate". It is ironic that it is only by the light of the pale moon that they even momentarily glow, now that religious fervour has dwindled. As the moon's faint light moves steadily onward, each prophet, priest and king of stone is erased. This skirting makes a perfect parallel with the movement of "Reason's" forward thrust. Both are slow and steady, but sure, and reduce religion to the remnants of 19th century agnosticism. But not only is the "steady stress" of "Reason's movement", and the slow but sure onward trek of the moon made to unify the poem, for inherent in the very fusion is a tension: Reason versus religion. The figures being bathed in moonlight are beautiful but the "frail moan from the martyred saints" is not. As if to reinforce the parallel, Hardy seems to emphasize that the inevitability of such an erosion of faith is as certain as the obliterations caused by the creeping moon.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 666-667.

Because of the First World War's "dark madness" and social degeneration Hardy may have felt drawn back to the Christian faith he once strongly held. He may have seen, however temporarily, that such a retraction was a means of reversing the horrible path "civilization" was taking. The desire of an unbeliever to believe is certainly one implication of "The Oxen", written in 1915:

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
 "Now they are all on their knees,"
 An elder said as we sat in a flock
 By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
 They dwelt in their strawy pen,
 Nor did it occur to one of us there
 To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
 In these years! Yet, I feel,
 If someone said on Christmas Eve,
 "Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
 Our childhood used to know,"
 I should go with him in the gloom,
 Hoping it might be so.¹⁴

Among other things, this poem is an example of what Hardy does so well. His is the happy art of creating precisely and with extreme brevity, the atmosphere of the event he is recalling. In this case it is the quiet setting of the first Christmas. Yet it is not so much his intent to capture the emotional impact and substance of that imposing event, although he does, as it is to focus our attention on the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 439.

legendary kneeling animals and the impact that scene would have on his belief were he able to witness it now.

In the first two stanzas the poem immediately captures the emotional coloring and meaning of Christ's birthday. It is Christmas Eve, at midnight during the poet's childhood when an "elder" asserts his faith. Legend and fact are one for him. The simplicity and humility, the real essence of Christianity, suggested by the use of "flock", to describe the family surrounding the fireside just as the shepherds and cattle had surrounded the manger, is effective. Like the elder who confidently asserts his faith, the animals too, are "meek mild creatures" who kneel at the "strawy pen" to offer their obeisance. However, this peace and contentment "few would weave/ In these years", says the poet as he introduces the doubting note of the poem. The gloom is there, as it always is, but so is the hope. One immediately recognizes the poem's calm unifying tone and the blend of soft sounds with a serenity appropriate for the Nativity, yet the poem's chief merit is brevity. Connotation is always an important tool for the poet and Hardy takes full advantage of it. For though many of the key words are fittingly rustic, as J.O. Bailey indicates, some have religious meanings too. Such words as "hearthside", "flock", "strawy pen", "barton" and "coomb", not only concentrate the poem but also enrich it. The poem glows at times with the peace

and serenity of Milton's "On The Morning of Christ's Nativity".

One might get the impression from other "Christian" poems that Hardy had found a Lord to pray to. Such a poem is "The Lost Pyx",¹⁵ an example of Hardy's infinite interest in storytelling and the legends which surround early Christian periods. The story takes place on a lonely tableland above the Vale of Blackmore, a spot associated with both pagan "deeds of hell" and Christian mysticism. The action is straightforward. A priest is called on during a howling nighttime storm to give the last rites to a dying man. He hesitates at first but falling asleep he dreams that Heaven frowns on his unpriestly behaviour. Thus it was "In a sweat he arose" and proceeded to plod through the "dark immense" but finds before he arrives at his destination that the Pyx which held the Host is missing. In "dolorous dread" he retraces his steps only to find "common beasts and rare" gathered in a circle around it. Finally the priest recovers the sacred vessel, reaches the dying man and the rite is performed.

The story is typically medieval with its emphasis on the miraculous while the devotional tone and the mystical portrayal of the Host's receptacle, recall, if only vaguely,

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 158-160.

the Baroque style of some Seventeenth century poets and Tennyson's "The Holy Grail". However, the extravagant imagery of the earlier poets is missing. It is true that when the priest arrives at the spot where he has lost the Pyx,

He noted a clear straight ray
Stretching down from the sky to a spot hard by,
Which shone with the light of day.

He does speak of the "ireful winds" that become "calm as in hermit's cell" within that "holy circle". But Hardy seems more interested in portraying the reverence of these "dumb" animals. He may indeed wish to present us with "That midnight miracle", but the actual Pyx itself is presented in a rather matter-of-fact way. Note for example how very unadorned Hardy's Pyx becomes when one compares it with the pulsating chalice in Tennyson's "The Holy Grail". The Nun describes her vision this way"

... and then
Stream'd thro' my cell a cold and silver beam,
And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail,
Rose-red with beatings in it, as if alive,
Till all the white walls of my cell were dyed
With rosy colors leaping on the Wall;
And then the music faded, and the Grail
Past, and the beam decay'd, and from the walls
The rosy quiverings died into the night.¹⁶

¹⁶ Bennett Cerf & Donald S. Klopfer ed., The Poems and Plays of Alfred Lord Tennyson. The Modern Library edition (New York: 1938), pp. 588-589.

Of poems in which belief and disbelief dissolve into a kind of search for truth, "The Graveyard of Dead Creeds" is an example, and so too is "The Lost Pyx" in which truth seems to have been found and accepted. These do not complete Hardy's treatments of Christianity, for in "An Evening in Galilee", "Panthera", and "The Wood Fire", one might conclude, as some have, that they contain a degree of blasphemy. No reader of these poems denies their startlingly unorthodox approach. They did and do seem blasphemous to ardent Christians. But their purpose seems to be without malice; they are merely poetic investigations, perhaps capricious notions by an agnostic who sees nothing unholy in his speculations. It is actually strange that Hardy should have been treated so harshly when Browning received no such criticism for writing Karsish, Cleon and Caliban upon Setebos.

In "An Evening in Galilee", Mary does ask "'Is my son mad?'"¹⁷ She does indicate that neither Joseph nor the Holy Ghost is Jesus' father. She is not sure herself. But one must take into account the ambiguity here. Mary asks questions, but she makes few statements. True, she suggests that Jesus' "firm faiths" are "... far too grotesque to be

¹⁷ Collected Poems, pp. 839-840.

true ..."; she cannot reconcile his "Keep the Commandments!" and his smiling "upon such as she", presumably Mary Magdalene. But Mary the Virgin seems to be at a critical point in her life and is being irrational and wilful in the manner of many of Hardy's heroines. The narrowness of her physical world is suggested by her boundaries, Carmel, Jordan, and Jezreel, so might not Hardy be implying her narrowness of thought? Might he not be suggesting that the "lack of coherency" attributed to Jesus in the poem is really the result of a kind of temporary madness on Mary's part? There are many possibilities. For example, the poet may feel that Victorian England needs this kind of jolting poem. He may be merely expressing a chagrin all of us feel because we know so little about Joseph and Mary. Perhaps the poem belongs to the cloak-trailing tradition of secularising the Christian myth. At any rate all these poems show a fascination with the story of Christianity and I find none of the "dishonor" William J. Rutland sees. Quite the contrary. The ambiguity and the various shades of meaning go far to make the poem a pleasing one, although a clear-cut interpretation is difficult.

In "Panthera"¹⁸ Hardy toys with the idea of Jesus being Mary's illegitimate son whose possible father, a Roman

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 262-268.

Centurion, tells the story of his intimate association with the "slim girl, coy/ Even as a fawn, meek, and as innocent". This coy girl is presumably Mary, their offspring presumably Jesus. But again there is the implication that Panthera's story is "half-conviction carried to a craze-", and whereas "malefactor", "Nazareth", and "Calvaria" all point to the scene of Jesus' Crucifixion, the woman who is now, years later, seen by the Centurion at the foot of the cross, does not recognize her presumed lover's face. There is indeed a vagueness of identity. Why should Hardy write such a poem? It is difficult to say. Perhaps he hoped by going against historical evidence to somehow clear away the cobwebs of his own disbelief.

"The Wood Fire" draws our attention to a scene that occurs soon after the Crucifixion. Two men are talking and one relates, quite innocently, but from the reader's position, quite ironically, that this "... has been the bleakest spring I have felt for years". The other points to the "brightsome blaze" of the three crosses which the two men are burning. The remark is made that the cross of the Carpenter's son "blazes up well", in spite of the "cuts and stains thereon". Here again the irony is keen because from the Christian standpoint, especially in the Medieval tradition, the wood of Christ's cross would have burned brightly because of the "stains and cuts", not in spite of them. Such irony erases any suggestion that Hardy is

overlooking the mysticism of the medieval tradition. With irony of this nature comes ambiguity and various shades of meaning, and there is here an extremely subtle use of words. For example, the word "shroff" (denoting waste) in the last line may well have been chosen as proof of Hardy's blasphemy, since the implication, though the speaker in the poem is innocent, is that it is only the simple, the very dregs of the populace, in fact the waste, that tend to ignite and keep alive the Christian "myth". But one suspects Hardy may be paying a tribute to Christianity and its beatitude of the blessedness of the poor in spirit who do more than anyone to keep the faith alive. It is also good poetry. Besides, the soft explosions of meaning are in keeping with the tensions of a normal Hardy poem.

The sum total of Hardy's treatment of Christianity touches on the ameliorative. Doubt and disbelief are strong but so is the ray of hope. He could, as a practical observer, and he did, in the letter referred to earlier in the chapter, tell Christianity to throw up the sponge because it had not done its job, yet there was an emotional attachment also. He often condemned what was taught in Cathedrals but he often wished more people would embrace the peace of these buildings. It is not, however, surprising that Evelyn Hardy sees curious anomalies in this poet. But one must recognize that anomalies are inevitable in the life

and art of a man who came to see man in an absurd universe. To disparage his anomalies is futile because Hardy's poetry is an anomaly and we are the richer for the irregularities of his thought.

Quite in contrast to the poems which are religious and represent a strong desire to believe in the "sweet reasonableness" of Jesus, are those which treat of an impersonal Will, or Force, that lurks behind the universe. These disclose more than any other group of poems their author's skeptical mind. Sometimes they speak of the Force as a God, but frequently he becomes a combination of purblind Doomsters as in "Hap", the Immanent Will as in The Dynasts, or The Causer as in "A Philosophical Fantasy". Whatever the distinctive appellation, he is not normally recognizable as being anthropomorphic. He is often blind and unconscious; he gropes for control. In dealing with this "Prime Mover", Hardy gives his most forceful poetic expression of the "Worst", for man in a painful reality becomes alienated, a theme constantly and fully treated here. From the very early "Hap" to the much later "A Philosophical Fantasy", the note is the same - man is left helplessly alone to struggle against an unavoidably tragic destiny - a destiny caused partially by the indifference and ineptitude of the fates. In "Hap", that most painful sonnet, there is tremendous emphasis on these attitudes.

If but some vengeful god would call to me
 From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
 Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
 That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
 Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
 Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
 Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
 And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
 --Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan....
 These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
 Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Man is indeed a "suffering thing", the victim of hate and lost love. He cannot, because of Crass Casualty's lack of sense, and chance occurrences, clench his fists or be "Steeled" by a feeling of "ire unmerited". He is not even "Half-eased", merely helpless at the hands of a careless victimizing power that often chooses or more correctly allows pain instead of joy.

Similarly, in "New Year's Eve",²⁰ a poem that comes close to epitomizing Hardy's general attitude towards the relationship between God and man, while man, that ephemeral creature treading a "formless void", groans, a "Sense-sealed" God performs his logicless labour and works on in his mindless way. In "A Philosophical Phantasy"²¹ man pleads but

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 260-261.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 853-856.

is very weak while the unconscious God continues to sadden existence by his "purposeless propension".

In several poems the traditional picture of the Creator and the created is reversed as in "A Plaint to Man".²² Here, as in so many of Hardy's poems, there is a sense of restlessness and continuous movement. Man is evolving. God is disintegrating. As he emerges from the "den of Time", man grows from "shapeless slime" in the first stanza to a kind of divine human in the last. He experiences growing pains, "a loaded heart" in a "wailful world" and by the middle stanzas he is in need of "a mercy-seat"; he needs a god for praying to. Gradually however, man, even when "shadows scare", loses the desire to be dependent except on "the human heart's resource alone" now that he has become a kind of Blakean "Human-Form Divine". As man moves up the evolutionary scale, God moves down and early in the poem, although he is a "forced device" in the mind of man, he is still a God for praying to. But gradually, as the ages pass, the image changes. He becomes but "a phasm on a lantern-slide". Finally he dwindles under "the deicide eyes of seers", and disappears.

In a few poems only does Hardy's most thorough treatment of the "Worst" indicate that there is no God. Even in "Hap", abstractions exist and operate as "Gods". In "New Year's Eve" though he is not to be admired or respected he

²²Ibid., p. 306.

exists, "sense-sealed" and "mindless". In most, man is indeed isolated in a cold, unfeeling universe run by a semi-conscious and blind mover. In a great many there is a kind of God who seems to have possibilities for attaining consciousness but who for unexplained reasons, remains impervious to man's plight. The tragedy of Hardy's view is closely associated with this idea, it seems. This God might do something, says Hardy, but he does nothing. This inexplicable and puzzling rigidity is central in several poems. For in "The Subalterns"²³ life takes on that "fell look" because on high there are laws that insist man's load not be lightened. In "New Year's Eve", God himself admits his own shortness of view and lack of logic.

To say only that man, while living, is to be forever alone, and that after death he is to be reduced to a mere "pinch of dust or two" is to foster unrelieved pain. It is fatalism and justifiably invites the term pessimism. There is no denying that Hardy's intellectual conclusions move that way. However, the emotion engendered by his Christian upbringing pulled in opposite directions. "By The Earth's Corpse"²⁴ does have dark overtones as the suggestion is made

²³Ibid., p. 110.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 114-115.

that complete annihilation of earth's creatures is inevitable. The only immortality we can expect, it suggests, lies amongst the "piteous dust" and "fossils". The description in "God-Forgotten",²⁵ of the earth as a "tainted ball" foreshadows a bleak destiny and a fatal demise. However, admission that evidence for immortality is lacking does not preclude the better prospect. And it is because the author does not dwell solely on this bleakness that he creates poetry of the highest order. Furthermore as was detected in other poetry, his meliorism, through the paradoxical alliance of brilliant contrasts, is again presented but with superb skill here. Hope and despair merge in these poems.

Just as there was an ardent desire to believe, in the Christian poems, so here, a similarly strong plea is noticeable, a plea that there will be a mending. There is the same forlorn hope that consciousness will evolve and the Immanent Will of The Dynasts will "fashion all things fair".

Almost without exception Hardy does three things in these poems of destiny. He concentrates on man's sad state, he blames the Will, and he questions. In "Nature's Questioning",²⁶ each

²⁵Ibid., pp. 112-113.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 58-59.

... pool
 Field, flock, and lonely tree,
 All seem to gaze at me
 Like chastened children sitting silent in a school;

Their faces dulled, constrained and worn,
 As though the master's ways
 Through the long teaching days
 Had cowed them till their early zest was overborne.

The poem continues with the dejected children of nature
 wondering

'Has some Vast Imbecility,
 Mighty to build and blend,
 But impotent to tend,
 Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazardous?

'Or come we of an Automaton
 Unconscious of our pains?...
 Or are we live remains
 Of Godhead dying downwards, brain and eye now gone?

The poem ends with an example of the now familiar tensions in
 the mind of the author as he translates them into impressive
 personifications.

'Or is it that some high Plan betides,
 As yet not understood,
 Of Evil stormed by Good,
 We the Forlorn Hope over which Achievement strides?'

Likewise in "The Sleep-worker",²⁷ mankind's plight so
 graphically described elsewhere as his "multitudinous moan"
 is anticipated in the line, "The coils that thou hast wrought
 unwittingly"; God's inactivity and "trance" are caused by his
 "vacant rote". The questioning hope for improvement comes in
 the last stanza:

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 110-111.

Wilt thou destroy, in one wild shock of shame,
Thy whole high heaving firmamental frame,
Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?

However, the high point of the tensions is reserved for the centre of the poem where "Life's palpitating tissues feel"

Fair growths, foul cankers, right enmeshed with wrong,
Strange orchestras of victim-shriek and song,
And curious blends of ache and ecstasy?--

The list of poems in which we get this definite movement from helplessness to hope is long. In "The Aerolite",²⁸ "a germ of Consciousness" temporarily "Fell wanderingly upon our sphere". In "A Philosophical Phantasy", God talks of his procrastination and unconscious doings but it is a state

...though far from ending,
May nevertheless be mending."

It is perhaps in "The Darkling Thrush"²⁹ that Hardy comes closest to writing a perfect poem. Not only does it bring into sharpest focus the struggle between his own reason and instinct but it is his greatest achievement in fusing Christian and Cosmic elements. The desire for faith in Christian teachings and a more philosophical search for the evolving conscious Will are one and the same here. The occasion is the end of the nineteenth century, however, one quickly surmises that it also represents Hardy's rational conclusions after a life-time struggle. No doubt the poet is recalling a century of controversy between religion and

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 731-732

²⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

science, but since as J.O. Bailey states, "Each of Hardy's poems was, in his feelings, an expression of himself", I feel the intellectual, emotional and religious confusions of the nineteenth century become all his own here.

No other poem displays the shadows and doubts of a questioning mind quite like this one. What has come to be symbolized by the "Worst" is elaborated on, yet synthesized and clarified in the best possible way. For example, what other phrases could more succinctly impress desolation on one's mind than choice images of winter? How totally effective is the "spectre-gray" frost with its connotations of coldness and dreariness in its reference to a future that looks bleak? The poet's isolation and alienation were never better expressed. How skillful is the movement in the first stanza from the mere feeling of desolation suggested by the frost and "Winter's dregs", through the continuous "weakening eye of day", to a complete breakdown and confusion of rationality in the "tangled bine-stems", "broken lyres", and the image of retreating mankind? The retreating, perhaps, to the warmth of "household fires", is a possible symbol for belief. The totality of the breakdown is crystallized and reinforced in the second stanza where we are given the image of a corpse. There is talk of a "crypt", something has made its "death-lament". Even the essence of life itself is "shrunk hard and dry"; all "fervourless". At this point

the grave is indeed the end. There is no "enkindling ardency", no apparent amendment taking place. But as frequently happens in Hardy's poems, some melioristic impulse arises amidst the gloom, in the manner of "The Graveyard of Dead Creeds". From the depths of despair and disbelief comes the voice of a bird, the darkling thrush. Now, as perhaps was hinted by "household fires", there is talk of "joy illimited". Beruffled though this small gaunt bird is, it has chosen "to fling his soul/ Upon the growing gloom". Although the speaker sees no "cause for carolings", the sounds of the thrush are ecstatic. Although he sees no reason for this creature's "happy good-night air", some blessed Hope appears that reminds us of "An August Midnight"³⁰ in which earth's creatures "know Earth-secrets that know not I".

The hope in these poems is undeniable, despite the perversity and malevolence the images of bleakness represent. But after this distinct ameliorative tendency in the mind of the poet, what follows? Does he finally rest on the "ray-lit clouds" of "A Meeting With Despair", the "new promise" of "The Graveyard of Dead Creeds" or "that small light" of "God's Funeral"? Or does he sink back into the labyrinth of spiritual chaos where the "dead spot" holds sway? Is pain ever eliminated for him? In short, does he have a solution for the riddle of the universe? From the poetic revelations, I cannot believe the poet's expectations for the "Better"

³⁰ Ibid., p. 134.

ever remain very high. The poems of the last volume clearly suggest this. It is doubtful if commitment will bring him peace of mind. Change, and a mending of the world's ills seem at the best of times remote. It seems out of reach now. In spite of the poetic artistry where sympathy for the human sufferer is strong, and where meliorism holds one rein, when all the dust of confused issues has settled a "way to the Better" is still only the minutest conceivability. Like his own creation, Stephen, in A Pair of Blue Eyes, "...his hopes for the best had been but periodic interruptions to a chronic fear of the worst".³¹ One must face the fact that there is in the poetry of Thomas Hardy a sense of tragedy in the glimmer of hope unrealized. He is still, at the end of his last poems, unsatisfied. In "'We are Getting to the End'"³² the tone is one of regret:

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.

Larks still sing, of course, but they remain in cages, and like them, mankind spasmodically or abnormally continues to hope for release from the "latticed hearse". There is really no way out. It is a dream to think otherwise. And I believe

³¹ (Library Edition, London: 1952), p. 275.

³² Ibid., pp. 886-887.

there is a significance here that gives added weight to the importance of the war poems in any study of Hardy, because the big stumbling block to progress, in his view, is war, that mad time "when nations set them to lay waste"; when men "hack their pleasant plains in festering seams". This last image is strong. The First World War had indeed given the coup de grace to his fondest dreams. The glimmer of hope is there but never realized. That is Hardy's tragedy. For there are times when his modified optimism looks more like doubtful flashes of brightness which have something painful in them.

4

CHAPTER V

A SENSE OF TRAGEDY

In one of his last letters to Mrs. Florence Henniker, Hardy remarks that "...bridegrooms always look as if they had got the worst of it ..." ¹ We need not explore the apparent truth of this statement nor the personal overtones it may suggest, but in the context of this discussion it is not unimportant. For not only does it touch on a subject explored by Hardy many times in his poetry, but it also refers to what I have called a key line from "In Tenebris". In the poet's estimation not only did bridegrooms get the worst of it, but as the years rolled on he came to realize that everybody was forced to participate in this dubious honor. It is my belief that more and more did he come to believe that life was essentially a cheat. More and more he realized with increasing bewilderment that not only did humanity have serious defects but more important to him there was no one to put the matter in order. Gradually, reality became essentially terrifying and absurd, because it was irreparable. This view is not unlike the one George

¹E. Hardy and F.B. Pinion, p. 200.

Steiner describes in his book, The Death of Tragedy. He claims that two traditions have issued from ancient times, the Hellenic and the Judaic. The first he believes to be the source of true Greek tragedy; the second is not tragic at all. The Greek version is true tragedy, he claims, because of its finality; also because as in the Iliad, "... the burning of Troy is brought about by the fierce sport of human hatreds and the wanton mysterious choice of destiny".² His belief is that the tragic condition deepens as the event occur, because man is more vulnerable at the end than at the beginning. Above all, the sense of tragedy involves catastrophe, brought about by "a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate and the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush at the crossroads. It mocks and destroys."³ Surely, to this tradition Thomas Hardy belongs. His whole being is attuned to and captivated by this tragic philosophy, this reality. Unlike the quieter, more comforting philosophy of Dickens where love and forgiveness repair, time runs out for Hardy, for fate decrees that circumstances, eroding time, and blind gods prevail. His poetry has shown, I think, strange antithetical elements which can be traced to the Apollonian

² (New York: 1961), p. 5.

³ Ibid., p. 9.

and the Dionysian traditions of Greek thought. Named after their respective gods they represent on the one hand a dreamlike sublimity, on the other primordial terror.

Although Hardy's characters in the novels and the poetry achieve sublimity in their tragedy, as time passes this sublimity or more correctly the positive element tends to make less and less impact. No doubt the poet's masculine endurance can still be detected, but more and more hope dwindles as he hovers closer to the brink of the ghastly abyss. The dread of obscurity looms large. Nature is "red in tooth and claw"; we are no more than "meanest insects on obscurest leaves". For whereas the satires emphasized the tragic ironies of everyday living, and the war poems overflowed with sadness and hate, the "Christian" and "philosophic" poems penetrated a deeper and more formidable reality. Here it is that the real sense of tragedy can be found, still portrayed with typical Hardy strength, but there is now a quiet desperation in his voice - a voice that allows tensions to ease, hope to dwindle but endurance and perhaps tranquillity to remain. The last poem in the collected edition reflects, I believe, all these qualities.

HE RESOLVES TO SAY NO MORE

O My soul, keep the rest unknown!
 It is too like a sound of moan
 When the charnel-eyed
 Pale Horse has nighed:
 Yea, none shall gather what I hide!

Why load men's minds with more to bear
 That bear already ails to spare?
 From now alway
 Till my last day
 What I discern I will not say.

Let Time roll backward if it will;
 (Magians who drive the midnight quill
 With brain aglow
 Can see it so,)
 What I have learnt no man shall know.

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.

He has finally discovered the truth he has long sought and although it makes him free, it is tragedy that stares him in the face. One finds here no degree of zestful positiveness, so common throughout his earlier poems. Like most of the poems in Winter Words, this one with its moans and "charnel-eyed/ Pale Horse" borders on the catastrophic. But there is no railing in the face of the gods now, simply a resignation and a humanitarian pledge to show no man what he sees.

In 1928, the year of Thomas Hardy's death, Patrick Braybrooke spoke of him as the "father of literature".⁴

⁴Patrick Braybrooke, Thomas Hardy and his Philosophy (New York: 1928), p. 162.

Whether or not one agrees with such a position of pre-eminence for the poet, one cannot deny the power and nobility of his verse. Samuel Hynes admires him for his fidelity to life and it is such a fidelity that reveals the difference between Hardy and some of his early contemporaries. Clough was afraid to face what he saw. Christ was not risen and yet he must be. Tennyson groped and doubted for a time but his final compromise found more than a faint hope in the hereafter. But Hardy, with his feet firmly planted on the ground, placed confidence in the brotherhood of man, and though like many he saw a blank at the edge of the grave, he was not afraid to say so.

At the end of his Warton lecture on English poetry C. Day Lewis honors Thomas Hardy by quoting in full the poem "Afterwards". It was quite appropriate. For in his life Hardy did indeed notice the mysteries of nature, "the glad green leaves" of May, as well as "... the full-starred heavens that Winter sees..." He did notice the innocent creatures and in sympathy strove to see that no harm came to them. But in his own words "he could do little". Nor did he effect a great change in humanity, though he tried, as he explains in "In Tenebris", a poem sounding an appropriate note on which to end this thesis. For it is here, I believe, we see the best comment by the poet on himself; what he had attempted in his poetry and what he had achieved. It points

to one who had seen the clashing forces of human existence and who had raised serious questions about human reality and worth. It points to one who had realized that since no help comes from above, man having outgrown Christianity, humanity must set about cleaning up its own house by first grappling with the less desirable aspects. And it points to one who saw man tragically reduced to Nietzsche's "human sand". And for this he was often condemned. He had disturbed the order.

Let him in whose ears the low-voiced Best is killed
by the clash of the First,
Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it
exacts a full look at the Worst,
Who feels that delight is a delicate growth cramped
by crookedness, custom, and fear,
Get him up and be gone as one shaped awry; he
disturbs the order here.⁵

⁵ Collected Poems, p. 154.

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