

Hardy's Poetic Response to Contemporary Thought

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It seems inevitable now in retrospect that Thomas Hardy, who had spent the first fifty-eight years of life in writing and publishing novels, should have devoted himself exclusively to writing poetry during the last thirty years of his life. He had always been aware that the novel-form was not suited to the expression of the new sensibility of his age. Florence Hardy quoted a note-book entry made by Hardy as early as March 1886: "Novel-writing as an art cannot go backwards. Having reached the analytic stage it must transcend it by going still further in the same direction. Why not by rendering as noble essences, spectres etc the abstract thoughts of the analytic school?" and goes on to remark that "this notion was approximately carried out, not in the novel, but through the much more appropriate medium of poetry, in the supernatural framework of *The Dynasts* as also in the smaller poems." (*Early Life*[§] p. 232) She went on to record later on that her husband had a personal distaste for the demands that the existing novel-form made on him. She explained that Hardy feared that he would be driven to writing "social novels and hence, as has been seen, he had kept, at casual times, a record of his experiences in social life, though doing it had always been a drudgery to him." (*Later Life*[§] p. 66) There were at least two more reasons—one personal and the other artistic—for Hardy's change-over from fiction to poetry. The success of his novels had brought him the financial security and literary reputation that made it possible for him to devote himself to writing poetry which had always been his first love. Secondly, the persistent attacks directed against the "ideas" contained in his novels led him to adopt the verse-form because he believed that he could express with impunity unconventional views in poetry:

Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the new crystallized opinion—hard as rock—which the vast body of men have vested interest in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing or cruel—which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries—will cause them merely a shake of the head: but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless

§ Quotations under these headings have been taken from *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1891* (Macmillan, 1928) and *The Later Life of Thomas Hardy 1891-1928* (Macmillan, 1930) respectively. Both the volumes were edited by F E Hardy.

agnostic, as if I were a clamouring atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have left him alone. (*Later Life*, pp. 57–8)

It was ironical that writing in verse did not give Hardy the immunity that he had hoped for, so that we find him writing in the last decade of his life: “. . . it has always been my misfortune to presuppose a too intelligent reading public, and no doubt people will go on thinking that I really believe the Prime Mover to be a malignant old gentleman, a sort of King of Dahomey—an idea which, so far from holding it, is to me irresistibly comic. ‘What a fool I must have been to write for such a public!’ is the inevitable reflection at the end of one’s life.” (*Later Life*, p. 217) There is little doubt that Hardy was to be blamed, at least partly, for creating such an impression in his readers. Throughout his writings—prose, verse, letters, prefaces, even in the private entries in his note-books and journals—he felt obliged to explain and rationalize his “philosophy” but then he went on to claim immunity against criticism by pleading that he was writing only as a poet. For instance, in reply to a correspondent’s letter about the “philosophy of *The Dynasts*” Hardy gave a detailed account of his thought in the poem and concluded by remarking that the “first and the second parts [of *The Dynasts*] already published, and some of the poems in *Poems of the Past and the Present*, exhibit fairly enough the whole philosophy.” This was followed by a rider which Hardy had “ghosted” through his wife: “Concerning Hardy’s remark in this letter on the Unconscious Will being an idea already current, though that its growing aware of Itself might be newer, and that there might be discrepancies in the Spirit’s philosophy, it might be stated that he had felt such questions of priority and discrepancy to be immaterial where the work was offered as a poem and not as a system of thought.” (*Later Life*, pp. 126–6) This would seem to indicate a basic dilemma that Hardy was faced with: on the one hand he felt the urge to philosophize about the nature of life which he was beginning to discover with the aid of the scientific and philosophical thinkers of the time, and on the other hand he did not feel any obligation either to present his philosophy in a consistent, systematic manner or indeed to defend it intellectually. However, Hardy did not see any contradiction in this. It was not that he was intellectually deficient: his interest in life and ideas was mainly as a poet. That is to say, he was concerned with the emotional implications of the ideas about life. He believed that human actions were not “ruled by reason at all,” (*Later Life*, p. 210) and therefore the methods of rational discourse could not lead to a full comprehension of the multifarious realities of the human condition. But there is no doubt that Hardy greatly benefitted from his active interest in the controversial ideas and polemical writings of his time, and that his poetic vision was in many ways shaped by the intellectual climate of nineteenth-century England.

In his study of Thomas Hardy, published in 1894, Lionel Johnson saw Hardy the novelist as a direct descendant of George Eliot in whose work Johnson detected a blend

of the old and the new: "Not that I see any violent break with the past; no sudden discovery of new form or matter: the old is not obsolete and outworn, the new is not perfect and complete: they touch at countless points, and are not antagonistic."¹ It is true that Hardy remained deeply attached to the traditional ways of life even though he was strongly drawn towards new ideas. His poetry attempts to preserve the past and absorb the present, and the dramatic tension and power in his poetry come from an emergent vision of life in which the past and the present, reality and desire, frustrations and hope constantly shape and define the nature and quality of human existence. Thus merely to say that Hardy lived in an age of transition is to state the obvious. One ought to realize also that the changing currents of the time evoked complex reactions in his mind. An example of this was his attitude to the effect on agricultural life of growing industrialization. Rider Haggard, who was investigating "the conditions of agriculture and agricultural labourers" was informed by Hardy that life and the working conditions of farm-labourers had improved considerably in the recent past, but Hardy went to add:

But the changes at which we must all rejoice have brought other changes which are not so attractive. The labourers have become more and more migratory—the younger families in especial, who enjoy nothing so much as fresh scenery and new acquaintance. The consequences are curious and unexpected. For one thing, village tradition—a vast mass of unwritten folk-lore, local chronicle, local topography, and nomenclature—is absolutely sinking, has nearly sunk, into eternal oblivion. I cannot recall a single instance of a labourer who still lives in the farm where he was born, and I can only recall a few who have been five years on their present farms. Then you see, there being no continuity of environment in their lives, there is no continuity of information, the names, stories and relics of one place being speedily forgotten under the incoming facts of the next. (*Later Life*, p. 96)

Hardy could neither reject (in fact, he rejoiced over) the benefits that had accrued to the farm-labourers from the changes that had been taking place in agriculture, nor could he turn a blind eye to "the evils of instability" that had resulted from the loss of traditional folk culture. While this kind of dilemma is often reflected, one way or another, in his novels (for example, in *The Return of the Native*) this theme of loss and gain is expressed more directly, and in moving personal terms, in his poetry. When as a poet he reacted to the historical changes from a personal perspective he felt that they were beginning to yield intimations of human life generally. Thus the shattering of his faith after a Christian upbringing was neither an occasion for lamentation nor a cause for satisfaction over the fact that man had freed himself from superstitions, ignorance etc. It gave him a deeper insight into life which, he found, was balanced on hope and

desire, failure and disappointment, opposites which constituted the whole. The justly celebrated poem "The Oxen" is more than what Edmund Blunden beautifully describes as an embodiment of the feelings of a pagan who was "a Christian in desire."² It is, in fact, a poem of complex responses. What Hardy does here is to start with the traditional idea of a Christian universe, motivated and ruled by a benevolent God, and sets beside it the universe of the modern scientists. The opening stages of the poem describe the traditional belief that on Christmas Eve the oxen kneel at prayer (there is an earlier reference to this belief in his novel, *Tess*³

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,

but as the poem develops, the falsity of such a view is made apparent:

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.

It is a poem of complex responses in which the poet realizes, on the one hand, that "In these years" it is impossible to maintain such a simple faith, and on the other there is the poignant wish that "it might be so." It is an example of Hardy's poetic triumph that he is able to accommodate within a simple, short poem the cry of the human heart which is revealed as strong even when its futility is undeniable when viewed from the perspective of nineteenth-century science and philosophy.

Middleton Murry was among the first critics who noted this quality in Hardy's poetry when he pointed out that "the poet's reaction has behind it a reaction to the universe."⁴ But one must also note how this "universal reaction" was enriched by Hardy's active interest in the scientific and philosophical speculations of the time. That is to say, the tension in his poetry comes from his wrestling with the unsettling ideas that challenged the world-view which he had inherited from his forefathers. Hardy's supposed poetic heir in our times, Philip Larkin, stands in sharp contrast to his master in this respect. Donald Davie notices this point but fails to recognize how Larkin's static world-view severely limits his poetic achievement: "There is in [Larkin's poetry] no meaning, no 'placing' in the way preindustrial things like farms, cattle, hedges, and grass are interspersed with industrial things like chemical froth and dismantled cars . . . Canals and smashed cars come along like that in any railway

journey through England as we all know.”⁵ Hardy’s range, on the other hand, was much wider, primarily because he was not just a passive onlooker on life. Irving Howe has convincingly brought out this particular artistic quality in Hardy by comparing him with Crabbe and William Barnes:

When Barnes died, Hardy printed a tribute which suggests in passing the difference in scope between the two poets:

Mr Barnes never assumed the high conventional style; he entirely leaves alone ambition, pride, despair, defiance and other of the grander passions . . . His rustics are, as a rule, happy people, and very seldom feel the sting of the rest of modern markind—the disproportion between the desire for serenity and the power of obtaining it. One naturally thinks of Crabbe in this connection; but though they touch at points, Crabbe goes much farther than Barnes in questioning the justice of circumstance. Their pathos, after all, is the attribute upon which the poems must depend for their endurance . . .

The mention of Crabbe is very much to the point, since at least part of Hardy’s verse can be regarded as, roughly, a bringing together of Barnes and Crabbe (who was, Hardy later told a friend, “the earliest influence in the direction of realism” upon him). When Hardy remarks that Crabbe goes further than Barnes “in questioning the justice of circumstance,” he is also tacitly noting the extent of his own enlargement upon Barnes.⁶

That Hardy had started to question “the justice of circumstance” right from his childhood is fairly obvious to anyone who has read *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*. And it was this questioning tendency in him that took him, in the first place, to the contemporary thought in the hope that the philosophical writers would help him to understand the world better. While preparing a career in architecture, he was reading in private, often at the encouragement of his Cambridge-educated friend Horace Moule, not only ancient classical literature in Latin and Greek but also the unorthodox and controversial philosophical and religious books and pamphlets. The polemical essays, written by dissident churchmen, and collected under the heading *Essays and Reviews*, and Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* convinced Hardy that he could not give his intellectual assent to the doctrines of conventional Christianity. Instead, he formulated his own ideas about the Immanent Will or the Emergent Consciousness and in this he was aided by his understanding of contemporary philosophy. He felt himself more in sympathy with the philosophical ideas of Spencer, Huxley, Mill, Schopenhauer and von Hartmann rather than with the comparatively “optimistic” views of Maeterlinck and Nietzsche both of whom he criticized in his letters and note-books. Throughout his life he pondered over such ideas and we find him writing as late as in his eighty-first

year, explaining his "sober opinion" to Alfred Noyes:

. . . my sober opinion—in so far as I have a definite one—of the Cause of Things, has been defined in scores of places, and is that of a great many ordinary thinkers: that the said Cause is neither moral nor immoral, but *unmoral*: "loveless and hateless" I have called it, "which neither good nor evil knows" etc. etc.—you will find plenty of these definitions in *The Dynasts* as well as in short poems, and I am surprised that you have not taken them in. (*Later Life*, p. 217)

But though he retained his interest in the philosophical ideas, and indeed formulated his own philosophy (in the manner quoted above) at a number of places, it is not on the basis of the consistency or originality of his ideas that he asks to be judged. In fact, he can be often, and justly, accused of philosophical failure but his interest in the philosophical ideas had always been that of a poet. He was constantly trying to see how far the philosophical ideas truly reflected actual human experience. For instance, both as man and poet, he had clung to some kind of "hope" despite his melancholy broodings, and hence he expressed (in his famous "Apology" of 1922) his sense of sadness over "the supercilious regard of hope by Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, and the philosophers down to Einstein who have my respect." This clearly suggests that Hardy was never interested in the abstract speculations of the philosophers. He was more concerned about the reality of human experience that those speculations might contain. Since the philosophers did not satisfy this especial need of his, Hardy began to distrust their methods and modes of thinking. Soon after he turned to poetry after abandoning a successful career as a novelist, he noted in his journal on the last day of 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. Let him remember the fate of Coleridge, and save years of labour by working out his own views as given him by his surroundings. (*Later Life*, p. 91)

I do not think that this amounts to a rejection of the philosophical ideas but it does mean a turning away from the methods the philosophers use for arriving at those or similar conclusions. Hardy owed a great deal to contemporary philosophers like Huxley, Spencer and Mill, and he may even have come to believe that "if a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst" from the example set by the philosophers who looked unflinchingly at the harsh and uncomfortable realities of the world. As I have stated, he was interested in the emotional and human response to the world as he

and the philosophers saw it, and man's place in it. Poetry was obviously the ideal medium for him. His genius was essentially poetic in so far as he was interested in the personal and emotional rather than rational reaction to life. In fact, he was distrustful of a rational approach to life and he considered himself to be an "irrationalist" and for that very reason he did not allow himself to be included in the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Rationalists*: in reply to such a request he asked his wife to write:

He [Hardy] says he thinks he is rather an irrationalist than a rationalist, on account of his inconsistencies. He has, in fact, declared as much in prefaces to some of his poems, where he explains his views as being mere impressions that frequently change. Moreover, he could show that no man is a rationalist . . . (*Later Life*, pp. 209-10)

Elsewhere she had noted that "Thomas Hardy was always a person with an unconscious, or rather unreasoning *tendency*, and the poetic tendency had been his from the earliest." (*Later Life*, p. 185) Hardy therefore decided that the emotional approach that poetry offered, indeed demanded, was the best means of exploring the human condition. He felt that in their attempt to present a rational, coherent and systematic view of life, philosophers had failed in such an exploration which could be effectively carried out by noting the "impressions" that life made on a sensitive mind. By adopting the "poetic" method Hardy succeeded in projecting a comprehensive philosophy of human experience which not only showed that pain and suffering were built into the very fabric of human existence but also that such knowledge led man to cultivate qualities of endurance, patience and compassion.

According to such a way of thinking, the poet's own personality played a crucial role. But personal experiences and impressions were to be used, not for self-revelation but for the revelation of truths of human life. Hardy was, in some ways, a deeply personal poet but on the other hand he was an impenetrably reticent man. These contradictory elements in his personality were perfectly natural, in fact necessary, for the kind of poems he wrote. He used only those of his personal experiences which seemed to him to be poetically meaningful. It is for this reason that even when he came to write his autobiography he "ghosted" it through his second wife as if to suggest that he needed the objectivity that came from narrative voice in order to sift and present only those details of his personal life which might help readers and critics in their understanding of his writings. For instance, there is no significant record of his feelings for and experiences with his first wife in the book but there is a brief reference to the lasting effect that her death made on him: "Sunday, November 27 [1927]. The fifteenth anniversary of the death of Emma Lavinia Hardy; Thursday was the anniversary of the death of Mary, his elder sister. For two or three days he has been wearing a black hat as a token of mourning, and carries a black walking stick that belonged to his first wife, all strangely moving." (*Later Life*, p. 262) I do not think one can make much critical use of this information but it is related to the central theme of regret

and mourning that came over him after his first wife died. Hardy lived most of his married life with his first wife in bitterness and estrangement, as his biographers rightly speculate and many of his poems clearly suggest, but that fact was not chosen by Hardy for detailed poetic treatment. Unlike so many “confessional” poets of our time who seem to lay bare their searing and agonizing personal experiences with masochistic intensity, Hardy chose to dwell on only those of his personal experiences which enabled him to write poetry that was, to use Thom Gunn’s words of appreciation, “almost always robust, never fretful or neurotic. He particularly records his own losses as only important because they are a part of other people’s losses.”⁷

Hardy was able to achieve such results because of his philosophic interests and his attempt to “*make a philosophy for himself out of his own experiences.*” In almost all poems of personal experience he went back to his past and recalled buried emotions which, when filtered through his present poetic consciousness, acquired a certain timeless quality suggesting that the past and the present interpenetrate and that any attempt to see one in violation with the other is to distort the reality of human life. He was thus able to avoid the sentimentalism of nostalgia for youthful joy and happiness of the past as well as despair over the losses felt in the present. A recollection of the past as a living presence invested the present (despite all feelings of regret and frustration) with something positive. “After a Journey” for instance embodies such complex responses to the past and the present. The poem is based on a personal incident and experience. Soon after his first wife died Hardy re-visited the scene of their courtship forty years before, and he wrote the poem, probably on returning to Max Gate, his home. In the poem he tries to commune with the “ghost” of his wife. He is “lonely, lost” amidst the scene where they walked together as young lovers, and he hopes that he will encounter her again in all her former youthful beauty and freshness:

With your nut-coloured hair,
And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.

But when he does find her, she seems to remind him of the unhappiness of their married life in later years:

Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?
Things were not lastly as firstly well
With us twain, you tell?

Characteristically, the poet sees (or more accurately, is *made* to see) the sadness and the disappointment in their now past life but, one may add, equally characteristically he is drawn to the past happiness as the “ghost” of his wife takes him through “the spots we knew when we haunted here together.” This comprehensive vision of the past whose happiness as well as sorrow are given equal and full recognition is brilliantly concentrated in the image of the woman who is “all aglow” as well as “the thin ghost” at the same

time:

. . . it seems to call out to me from forty years ago,
When you were all aglow,
And not the thin ghost that I frailly follow!

The adverb “frailly” not only indicates the nature of the pursuit of the “thin ghost” but also suggests that frail old man the pursuer now is. I think it is important to note the poet’s recognition of the effects of the passage of time on both his wife and on his own self as a frail old man because in its final movement the poem achieves a triumphant note as he claims that the evocation of their past as a living presence makes him feel “just the same” despite the fact that “Life lours:”

Trust me, I mind not; though Life lours,
The bringing me here; nay, bring me here again!
I am just the same as when
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers!

Thus the poem, far from being sentimentally nostalgic, measures life in its entirety. One may say that it views life from the perspective of nineteenth-century “thought” as being subject to “Time’s derision.” Nature goes on as usual—“The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily”—unmindful of the pain, disappointment and suffering through which human life must pass. But what stamps the poem with Hardy’s original poetic vision is his conviction—expressed with disarming simplicity, “I am just the same”—that however much man may be battered by time and ignored by the impersonal natural world, his loved memory can restore him to love and faith of his early years. “After a Journey” is of course one of Hardy’s best poems but in some scores of other poems his method is the same: start with a personal experience, view it from the perspective of history, thought of the times, human life in general and see how far man can adjust himself to the relentless tragic processes of life. In “A Broken Appointment” the lover’s failure to keep an appointment is seen as just one more disappointment that Time brings on its trail:

You did not come,
And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb.—

But, it is suggested what can redeem the human predicament is the possession on the part of the lovers of “high compassion” and “pure loving-kindness.” Sometimes in poems that are less obviously positive but highly evocative, Hardy looks at human experience in terms of the rhythms of seasonal cycle:

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.
(“Neutral Tones”)

While in a poem like this one the implication is that man must accept the waning of love as he must accept the falling leaves in autumn, the poem on his mother’s death (“After the Last Breath”) finds “numb relief” on realizing that

Our well-beloved is prisoner in the cell
Of Time no more.

In all such personal poems deeply subjective emotions acquire universal significance through the poet’s attempt, not at self revelation but rather, at placing his own experiences in the larger context governing human existence. The vision of human life that emerges from such poems bears close resemblance to the “thought” of the age but it also embodies the poet’s emotional response to the qualities of patience and endurance, even joy and hope that lay at the heart of suffering humanity. Hardy’s faith in humanity rings true because his philosophic mind was able to view the tragic nature of life with unsentimental and unrelenting sincerity and honesty.

Hardy displayed similar traits when he dealt with social, political and historical themes. Though many of his poems—and sometimes the best of them—are born of personal experiences, an equally large number are concerned with life and world outside him. But the aim everywhere is the same: to render human experience, and the vision that his poetry as a whole projects embodies the brooding, melancholy, yet robust, view that one must associate with Hardy. As a man of letters he was involved in, and often respected for his opinions on, the various political and social events and happenings in his time. He was, for instance, greatly exercised by the various wars, especially the Boer War and the Great War, but he treated the subject, not as an arm-chair patriot nor as a “participating denouncer” (like Sassoon and Owen). Rather, it was as a “philosopher-poet” that he saw war’s catastrophe as just one more instance of the meaningless processes of life which offers no answer to the question, “Why?”

Calm fell. From Heaven distilled a clemency;
There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky;
Some could, some could not, shake off misery;
The Sinister Spirit sneered: “It had to be!”
And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, “Why?”
(“And There Was a Great Calm”)

The belief that “It had to be” and that the “Immanent Will” was deaf to human agonies or complaints had come to Hardy from his own personal experiences, his understanding

of life as he saw it, the philosophic thinkers of his time and from his reading of history. This last resulted in his poem *The Dynasts*. He felt that the "old theologies" had been exhausted by writers in the past and that he must therefore go to contemporary subject and thought for epic or dramatic treatment:

The old theologies may or may not have worked for good in their time. But they will not bear stretching further in epic or dramatic art. The Greeks used up theirs: the Christians have used up theirs. So that one must make an independent plunge, embodying the real, if only temporary, thought of the age. But I expect that I shall catch it hot and strong for attempting it! (*Later Life*, p. 104)

He went on to add that he was aware of the inevitable criticism that would be brought against him for introducing the unsettling and controversial thought of his age: "The very fact of my having tried to spread over art the latest illumination of the time has darkened counsel in respect of me." (*Later Life*, p. 104) *The Dynasts* shows the Immanent Will working its way through and finally shaping historical events. It presents drama on two levels: historical and supernatural and what happens on the historical-material plane is interpreted by the supernatural characters who discover that the Immanent Will controls all human actions. Napoleon emerges as a character who symbolizes human power which, however, is accompanied by helplessness and loneliness in an alien world. Thus what Hardy does in this poem is to illuminate human life in terms of the contemporary philosophical thinking. But he tries to do more. In the first place, he expresses hope based on "evolutionary meliorism"—"Consciousness the Will Informing, till it fashion all things fair!" This is perhaps not entirely convincing, certainly not philosophically, nor poetically. But when Hardy juxtaposes determinism with human hope, compassion and endurance, he is more impressive. The Spirit of the Pities which Hardy saw as symbolizing "the Universal Sympathy of human nature" has the last word, and as Hardy himself said, he "left off on a note of hope!" (*Later Life*, p. 267) In poems that deal with less exalted subjects, the lives of ordinary people, their disappointments in love, infidelities, losses and deaths, Hardy adopted a similar method. Taken together, all these poems project a vision of life in which pain, suffering and disappointment are conditions of human existence.

Hardy remarked on various occasions that he was not attempting to present a consistent, logical philosophy, and said in the preface to *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1902) that "the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change." Alert and receptive though he was to the views of the philosophical thinkers, he was constantly subjecting them to the human experience, as it were, and he ended up by evolving his own "*philosophy of human experience*" which, as I noted earlier, he believed was the "true philosophy." The value of this poetic performance lies in the fact that we are enabled to grasp, understand and imaginatively experience human reality in a manner that would

not have been possible if we had been presented instead with a set of abstract philosophical speculations. A very important result of his "human experience approach" (which is basically a poetic stance) is that we find a curiously strengthening quality of assurance, a certain "robustness" in Hardy's poetry. Far from being a proclaimer of doom he was a believer in human kindness and charity, courage and hope. In his "Apology" (1922) he had pointed out that "the true exploration of reality" (presumably such as the one he himself had attempted to carry out in his poetry) was "the first step towards the soul's betterment, and the body's also." He believed that an awareness of common suffering should bind people together in mutual sympathy. Not only this, the discoveries of science had shown the need to treat animals too as members of "one family:" "The discovery of the law of evolution, which revealed that all organic creatures are of one family, shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively." (*Later Life*, p. 138) Throughout his life he was a campaigner against cruelty to animals and in an *Who's Who* entry on Hardy this fact was given prominence:" Member of the Council of Justice to Animals; is against blood-sport, dog-chaining and the caging of birds." When he was asked "to express his opinion on the subject of "A Crusade of Peace" in a periodical, Hardy wrote:

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 suffering. (*Later Life*, p. 81)

He showed compassion for animals in a number of poems, and indeed in some he expressed his belief that animals embodied certain ethical virtues from which man had strayed:

Who hath charity? this bird
Who suffereth and is kind,
And is not provoked, though blind
And alive ensepulchered?
Who hopeth, endureth all things?
Who thinketh no evil, but sings?
Who is divine? this bird.
(*"The Blinded Bird"*)

Man was also criticized for his pompousness and other vices (for example, "The Convergence of the Twain" not only dramatizes the working of the Immanent Will, it also castigates the insolence of the civilization that produced the ship, "the *Pride of Life*." It is significant that Hardy does not concern himself in this poem with the tragedy of

human losses that the sinking of the *Titanic* had involved.) But more often Hardy showed positive qualities that emerged from an honest exploration of the tragic realities of human existence. This was perfectly in keeping with his fundamental attitude towards life and poetry: if one has the courage and sensitiveness to go into the very depths of reality one would have none of the false hopes and expectations that bring disappointment. On the other hand, one may achieve a peace of mind which would not only show patience and fortitude but may also lead to fellow-feeling and compassion. Edmund Blunden had remarked that Hardy “balanced his dismay at certain immense historical generalities with loving respect for man as a modest, enduring, trusting wayfarer.”⁸ Hardy was able to achieve this balance because he had prepared himself right from the beginning for a life that did not promise much. He wrote a poem on his eighty-sixth birthday in which his whole life and philosophy are, in a sense, contained:

Well, World, you have kept faith with me,
Kept faith with me;
Upon the whole you have proved to be
Much as you said you were.
Since as a child I used to lie
Upon the leaze and watch the sky,
Never, I own, expected I
That life would be all fair.
'Twas then you said, and since have said,
Times since have said,
In that mysterious voice you shed
From clouds and hills around:
'Many have loved me desperately,
Many with smooth serenity,
While some have shown contempt for me
Till they dropped underground.

'I do not promise overmuch,
Child; overmuch;
Just neutral-tinted haps and such,'
You said to minds like mine.
Wise warning for your credit's sake!
Which I for one failed not to take,
And hence could stem such strain and ache
As each year might assign.

(“He Never Expected Much”)

This poem, with its repetitions intricate rhyme-scheme, lines of varying lengths and the blend of the elevated (“that mysterious voice you shed/From clouds and hills around”)

and the conversational (“Just neutral-tinted haps and such”) seem to compress the wide range of human responses to life that are possible. And the poet is grateful that with the assistance of “the World” (“Wise warning for your credit’s sake!”) he has developed the right attitude which has enabled him to “stem such strain and ache” that life’s suffering brings.

Critics have often spoken of a sense of serenity and calm, a sense of repose that they find in Hardy’s poetry. This feeling comes precisely from his honest and patient exploration not only of life but the whole of the universe. He examines with stern impartiality not only his own subjective experiences but also other people’s lives and the surrounding world, and he discovers that the same principle operates everywhere. The various “Spirits” in the poem “The Subalterns” reveal themselves as being subjected to the “same laws in force on high.” No wonder all these common victims of the same fate, even “Sickness” and “Death,” speak in a muted tone, and the realization that everybody and everything suffers in this world lightens the poet’s own burden:

We smiled upon each other then,
And life to me had less
Of that fell look it wore ere when
They owned their passiveness.

Hardy achieves similar results in, what is often collectively called, his “dramatic” poetry where he depicts the loves and losses of other people. It is true that many of these poems, when examined singly, would not stand up to critical scrutiny—mere anecdotes seem to assert previously thought-out ideas—but they constitute an important segment of Hardy’s canvas. In the context of his poetry taken as a whole, the “dramatic” poems form an integral part because they strike the Hardy reader as extending and enlarging the poet’s tragic vision which is projected so powerfully through his “personal” poems. What is more, they strengthen the feeling that human suffering is all-pervasive which, together with the knowledge that it is natural and inevitable, lead to the calm acceptance of life which Hardy’s poetry so impressively reflects.

It is not difficult to see why Hardy resented being called a “pessimist.” On the other hand, perhaps it is equally easy to understand, though not to defend, the feelings of his contemporary readers who still wanted to believe in the traditional views of life. Especially in his religious poems he went directly against the generally-held belief because the scientific and philosophical discoveries of the time had decisively shattered the very foundation of those views and beliefs. Hardy himself was of course deeply convinced and profoundly impressed by the new ideas, but at the same time he was generous enough to grant that other people might still be able to retain their traditional faith. In fact, in the poem “The Imprecipient” he even feels a sense of personal loss as he observes the faithful congregating at a cathedral service. He recognizes their faith but feels that he himself cannot have any:

Since heart of mine knows not that ease
Which they know; since it be
That He who breathes All's Well to these
Breathes no All's-Well to me,
My lack might move their sympathies
And Christian charity!

Unfortunately, the “faithful” among his readers also did not seem to extend a similar courtesy to him. However, the point to note in this connection is that his inability to accept the comfort of traditional religion did not drive him to rage or cynicism. In fact, he remained “churchy” throughout his life, often visiting churches and cathedrals “for the reposefulness and peace of those buildings.” (*Later Life*, p. 212) More importantly, he retained his faith in what he considered to be true Christian values. For example, he felt that though people pretended to believe in Christianity they did not lead a truly Christian life: “All development is of a material and scientific kind—and scarcely any addition to our knowledge is applied to objects philanthropic or ameliorative. I almost think that people were less pitiless towards their fellow creatures—human and animal—under the Roman Empire than they are now.” (*Later Life*, p. 192) He therefore noted down a new definition of religion: “[religion] is to be used . . . in its modern sense entirely, as being expressive of, nobler feelings towards humanity and emotional goodness and greatness.” (*Later Life*, p. 121) Thus the loss of traditional religion was balanced by his faith in a religion of human goodness and compassion. It is clear that Hardy’s poetic mind transmuted the “losses” which the intellectual opinions of the time had brought about into “gains.” But some critics have been curiously blind to this central aspect of Hardy’s poetry. Blackmur, for instance, felt that the “philosophy” ruined Hardy’s poetry, and that it led to charges (valid, in the eyes of Blackmur) of stoicism and pessimism against the poet:

His [Hardy’s] gain from the impact of the new sciences and the new democracy, and from the destruction of dead parts of religion by the Higher Criticism, was all loss in his work: a loss represented by what we feel as the privation of his humanity. To push the emphasis an inch, it sometimes seems that his sensibility had lost, on the excessive level, all discrimination of human value, human dignity, and inextricability in the trope of human life, of good and evil.⁹

It seems to me that Blackmur completely distorts the picture of Hardy, both as man and poet. I cannot see Hardy being self-satisfied with his “gains” resulting from “the destruction of the dead parts of religion by Higher Criticism.” On the contrary he was profoundly saddened by the loss of his faith: throughout his life he tried to emotionally retrieve the religion which his intellect had rejected. Similarly, to talk about “the privations of [Hardy’s] humanity” and to suggest his loss of “human value” and “human

dignity” (whether in his life or poetry) is to betray the absence of the kind of poetic response that Hardy demands. Hardy was a sensitive poet who lived through the gradual transformation that finally brought about the modern technological world we live in. And his poetic achievement is deeply related to his reaction to the changes in his time. F R Leavis felt that such an achievement was possible because Hardy was a Victorian: “Hardy is now seen to be truly Victorian—Victorian in his very pessimism which often implies positive assurances that have vanished. He inhabits a solid world, with the earth firm under his feet. He knows what he wants, what he values and what he is.”¹⁰ One must remember that Leavis made these remarks while trying to establish the poetry of the “modernists” like Pound and Eliot, and they suggest that Hardy’s poetry would seem to be “archaic” to most modern readers. Criticism in the subsequent decades has shown that Hardy is no more “archaic” than Milton or Wordsworth is, but Leavis’s remarks do point to the fundamental basis on which Hardy’s poetry was built. His mind was enriched by the controversial ideas of his time, and his poetry gained by his attempt “to spread over art the latest illumination of the time.” And that poetry is the poetry of tragic grandeur, the quality of which was well-defined by one hundred and six “younger writers” who said, in an address presented to Hardy on his eighty-first birthday:

. . . you have given us a tragic vision of life which is informed by your knowledge of character and relieved by the charity of your humour, and sweetened by your sympathy with human suffering and endurance. We have learned from you that the proud heart can subdue the hardest fate, even in submitting to it . . . In all that you have written you have shown the spirit of man, nourished by tradition and sustained by pride, persisting through defeat. (*Later Life*, p. 222)

Hardy persisted through defeat in his own life too, and at least towards the end of his life he achieved the peace and dignity and repose which he had imaginatively embodied in his poetry. T E Lawrence’s description of Hardy (contained in Lawrence’s now-famous letter to Robert Graves in 1923) sums up the feelings of so many people who have left records of their impressions of the poet:

There is an unbelievable dignity and ripeness about Hardy; he is waiting so tranquilly for his death, without a desire or ambition left in his spirit, as far as I can feel it: and yet he entertains so many illusions and hopes for the world, things which I, in my disillusioned middle age, feel to be illusory. They used to call this man a pessimist. While really he is full of fancy expectations . . . Also he is so assured.

And this was how the second Mrs Hardy described her husband’s death-face:

It was a look of radiant triumph such as imagination could never have conceived. Later the first radiance passed away, but dignity and peace remained as long as eyes could see the mortal features of Thomas Hardy. (*Later Life*, p. 266)

Any serious student of Hardy's poetry will immediately recognize in this account the author of the poems which viewed the world from the perspectives of nineteenth-century thought, and which explored life's pain and suffering with unsentimental honesty in order, finally, to assert human qualities of endurance, calm and dignity.

NOTES

1. Lionel Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (1894), p. 26.
2. Edmund Blunden, *Thomas Hardy* (1942), p. 153.
3. See Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Chapter XVII.
4. J Middleton Murry, *Aspects of Literature* (1934), p. 144.
5. Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), p. 65.
6. Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (1966), p. 9.
7. Thom Gunn, "Hardy and the Ballads," *Agenda* (Spring-Summer 1972), p. 34.
8. *op. cit.*, p. 164.
9. R P Blackmur, "The Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy," *The Southern Review*, Vol. VI (Summer 1940), 23.
10. F R Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (rev. ed. 1959), p. 60.

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Hardy's Poetic Response to Contemporary Thought

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Thomas Hardy was greatly interested in, and was influenced by, the ideas and theories of the philosophers and scientists of his time, British as well as Continental. There is reason to believe that Hardy's reading and understanding of the philosophical ideas helped him to formulate his own vision of life which he tried to express in his poetry and prose.

It is alleged that Hardy's interest in the contemporary philosophy had a damaging effect on his art: that it led not only to the so-called "pessimism" in his writings but also that Hardy failed to bring about a convincing fusion between the contradictory demands of philosophy and art. I have argued in this paper that such charges are unwarranted and that they are a result of a failure to appreciate Hardy's artistic strategy. Hardy was primarily a poet and his interest in philosophy was that of a poet: that is to say, he went to philosophy not for abstract intellectual speculations but for the intimations about the actual human experience. Thus the philosophers helped him to grasp the implications of human life in a changing world, and such an understanding also enabled him to accept the reality of the human condition with endurance, courage and dignity.