

CHAPTER-I

HARDY'S POETIC CAREER

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born in Dorchester. His early education was in the classics and in architecture, and it was as an architect that he left his native Wessex - the name he gave in his fiction to an area of the West Country - for London in 1862. He worked and studied there and published his first novel 'Desperate Remedies' in 1871. From then on for more than twenty years he produced prose fiction and was recognized as one of the greatest Victorian novelists. Among his major novels are : Far From the Madding Crowd (1874), The Return of the Native (1878), The Mayor of Casterbridge (1887)', and Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891). By the time (1896) of the hostile reception of his great, last novel Jude the Obscure he had started to devote himself exclusively to the corpus of over nine hundred poems which occupied the rest of his long creative life.

Thomas Hardy is better known as a novelist, but he wrote poetry through-out his long life and thought of it as more important than his novels. He wrote nearly a thousand shorter poems and a long drama in verse, The Dynasts, which published between (1904 and 1908).

His poetry does not suggest that life is a bitter tragedy; Hardy knows that life is hard, but also that man has the strength to

bear its hardness and go on living. His poetry shows great joy in the natural beauty of the world, and also in the sudden touch of humour in events - although the humour is sometimes bitter - that helps man to go on living through hardship and suffering.¹

Hardy's greatness lies in his short lyrics. It is just that he seems an anomaly in the history of twentieth-century poetry.

His poems range widely over so many genres: narratives; dramatic lyrics; imitations of folksong and of regional balladry; brilliant, tough short stories condensed into carefully polished verse; satirical epigrams couched in un-expectedly intricate and seemingly irrelevant stanza forms; starkly personal evocations of sorrow or bitterness; occasional poems celebrating and distrusting local and international events - these and many more defy the challenge of the age to the poetic imagination to produce 'a *Suigeneris*' mode, a total kind of all-encompassing lyric, approaching the condition of music in its avoidance of exposition, argument, and prosaic truth.²

Hardy is often expository. His poetic language seems far less experimental than that of a genuinely Victorian poet like G.M.Hopkins.

Hardy's verse is traditional in almost every sense of the word : his experiments are with arrays of forms and patterns, and with the intensifications of language which come from an archaized vocabulary employed in advanced ways. He was much influenced by the Dorchester poet William Barnes (1800-1886), who wrote both in standard English and in the dialect of Dorset. Many of Hardy's poems were written during and about, World War I; the profound skepticism which marks the world of his novels and which late victorian readers, still anxious for their ebbing faith, dismissed as "Pessimistic"³, seems to some readers of today almost benign. It marks many of his poems, particularly the episodic pieces and condensed narratives fixed in a moment of time. It is when the past - a personal one, England's, the planet's - wells up in what Hardy himself calls a "Moment of Vision,"⁴ that the poems develop another dimension. And it is in this dimension that their unpredictable, sometimes arbitrary seeming, use of the intricate verse forms more usually associated with tripping" Society verse"⁵, or their constant echoing of the stanzas of church hymns and old songs, becomes most effective.

Hardy began writing poetry in his early youth, but he made his literary reputation at first as a novelist, and devoted his energies wholly to poetry after his

disappointment with the reception of his last novel. The bulk of his work as a poet was produced in the last thirty years of his long life, and he is, above all, a poet of crisis that followed the collapse of the Victorian comrosie. When Hardy was a boy, he attended one of the last Harvest Homes in Dorset where the old traditional ballads were sung, 'the railway having been extended to Dorchester just then, and the orally transmitted ditties of centuries being slain at a stroke by the London comic songs which were introduced.'⁶

O tell me no more, my pretty parrot,
Lay not the blame on me;
And your cage shall be made o' the
glittering gold,
Wi' a door of the white ivo-rie!'⁷

This passage from Mrs. Hardy's Early Life of Thomas Hardy gives a glimpse of a society with a true peasant culture descending from the Middle Ages and remaining intact till the middle of the nineteenth century. It was a world where, as Browning said of the Italians, the people were poetry. Hardy was not a peasant himself but he was brought up in close contact with the Dorset peasant folk with their rich country lore, their ballads and their love of local history and legends. He knew the life of the farmer and the field - worker at first hand. His education was a singularly fortunate one for a poet. He left school at the age of sixteen and entered the office of a

Dorchester architect as a pupil. He had acquired a considerable practical knowledge of the arts or architecture and music as well as some classical scholarship.

Edmund Blunden wrote in his attractive English Men of Letters (Vol): 'There is a kind of friendly contention for the ownership of Hardy's true greatness as a writer, and hitherto it has swayed one way and another with the hours and the incidents of opinion.'⁸ On the Whole Blunden favours Hardy's poetry and is content to describe the novels in general terms, with numerous irresistible illustrations of his 'inartistic Knotiness', his 'remarkable spasms of contorted and stragglng English.'⁹ Ideally, Hardy's work should be regarded as the indivisible expression of a poet-novelist, but there are several good reasons for discussing the fiction separately. All the novels are strictly Victorian in date, whilst the verse, though often composed earlier, was collected between 1898-1928, and has become an indispensable part of any account of twentieth century poetry.

Hardy's father was a builder, his mother the daughter of a Dorsetshire small landowner: Hardy's Wessex is much more than a scenic setting for his stories and poems, it is the dominating character brooding constantly above his works, and Casting its changeless shadow upon the people in his books. He lays reiterated emphasis upon the unaltering aspects of large tracts of Wessex. Egdon Heath is a ' a face upon which time makes but little

impression,¹⁰' a tract of country unaltered from that sinister condition which made Caesar anxious every year to get clear of its glooms before the autumnal equinox.'¹¹ The men and women of Hardy's Wessex, though living in the nineteenth century, are subject to 'curious fetichistic fears' and touched by a 'lumber of superstitions, folk-lore dialect, and orally transmitted ballads.'¹² The tragedies that fall upon them are often due, in Hardy's interpretation, to the intrusion of modern customs and new habits of mind. Themselves the product of association between the past and the present, these Wessex people are 'harnessed by the irrepressible New.'¹³

Before his first novel was published (in 1871) Hardy had written poems which remained in manuscript until 1898. These early experiments belong to the years from 1865 to 1869, when he was practising as an architect, and before he turned to literature as a profession. He said he was compelled to give up poetry in 1868, no doubt under economic pressure, and his public career as a poet did not begin until Wessex Poems (1898) appeared. But Hardy's prose was always that of a man of acute poetic vision. When Wessex Poems first appeared in 1898, some critics, as Hardy drily observed, took umbrage at his 'having taken' the liberty to adopt another vehicle of expression than prose - fiction without consulting them.'¹⁴ He was to pursue a running skirmish for over twenty years with those who persisted in using his poetry as a stalking horse for

attacks on his supposed theological or philosophical positions, echoes of which can be heard in the extracts from his observations on poetry, including his own poetry.

In the Saturday Review, a Writer wrote : 'It is impossible to understand why the bulk of this volume was published at all - why Hardy did not himself burn the verse' ; and, in case that was insufficiently damnatory, proceeded to categorise some of the ballads as 'the most astounding balderdash that ever found its way into a book of Verse.' However, when Poems of the Past and the Present appeared in 1901, it was no longer possible to dismiss Hardy's verse as an aberration typical of an era when 'house-maids turn lady novelists and lady - journalists turn amateur housemaids,' as one reviewer of 'Wessex Poems' had sourly put it.¹⁵ Herbert Warren, a vice-chancellor of Oxford University summed up Poems of the Past and the Present as being 'of much the same size and character' as Wessex Poems.¹⁶ For virtually the whole of his poetic career, Hardy had to put up with the kind of comment exemplified in the anonymous 'Athenaeum'. In 1904, the publication of The Dynasts exacerbated the controversy about his philosophy and it tended to establish his reputation as a poet.

Edward Thomas speaks about 'Time's Laughingstocks' (1909) in the 'Daily Chronicle', Hardy's 'austere, condensed and fateful manner, observes his fascination with verse form and his pervading sense of the 'misery and

fraudulence of life', but concludes that, though 'the book contains ninety-nine reasons for non-living..... it is not a book of despair.'¹⁷ Satires of Circumstance appeared in 1914 when a literary event not unnaturally somewhat overshadowed by the out break of the First World War four months before. Lytton Strachey in his 'New Statesman' review says "The crux of his contention is that Hardy writes a kind of unpoetic verse, a flat and undistinguished and clumsy collection of vocables in which Cacophony is incarnate : a kind of verse which, against the grain of all previous assumptions about poetry, is nevertheless incongruously effective in solving the secret of touching our marrow-bones.

It is noticeable that nobody gave much attention to Satires of Circumstance', the Poems of 1912-13', which even those who care little for Hardy's verse would concede contains some of the greatest love-poetry in the language. The 'poems of 1912-13', in fact, exemplify that unobtrusiveness, that unwillingness to adopt, an opulent or, in his own phrase, 'jewelled', manner which was, we suspect, a powerful factor in the slowness of Hardy's climb to general public acceptance as a poet. Harold Child says, "the most musically and suggestively beautiful poems Hardy ever wrote." Though Child praises Hardy for his simplicity and intensity, he is uneasy about the diction that he fails. Lascelles Abercrombie, in an uncharacteristically loose and per-functory chapter of his book on Hardy¹⁸

(1912), complains about the poet's failure in the management of 'the nameless excitations' of words - a comment that must stem, one feels, from a view of poetry as pure sound or 'music.' And the same complaint is heard in an otherwise generous assessment by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Quiller gives perhaps the best account of Hardy as a countryman, 'most autochthonous of living writers.'¹⁹

But there was also a change of poetic climate. Hardy was no longer an innovator. His last three volumes display no signs of the times; if what was wanted in poetry was something an involved obscurity of manner, it was not to be found in the collections Hardy compiled in the last six years of his life : 'Late Lyrics and Earlier' (1922), 'Human Shows', 'Far Phantasies' and 'Winter Words'.

It is true that Hardy began to write verse when he was young and wrote his major poems so late in his life.

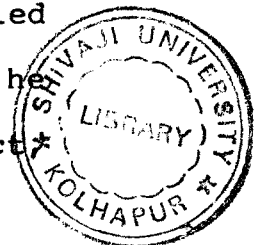
English writers who endeavour to appraise poets, and discriminate the sheep from the goats, are apt to consider that all true poets must be of one pattern in their lives and developments.... They must all be impractical in the conduct of their affairs; nay, they must almost, like Shelley or Marlowe, be drowned or done to death, or like Keats, die of consumption. They forget that in the ancient world no such necessity was

recognized; that Homer sang as a blind old man, that Aeschylus wrote his best up to his death at nearly seventy, that the best of Sophocles appeared between his fifty-fifth and nine-tieth years, the Euripides wrote up to Seventy. Among those who accomplished late, the poetic spark must always have been latent, but its outspringing may have been frozen and delayed for half a lifetime.'²⁰

From this extract we come to know that he placed himself as a poet, not among the Romantic young, but with the ancients, the old poets of the old, tragic world. His life as a poet did not really begin until he was well past fifty.

And then, in the 1890's the novel-writing ended, and the great flood of poems began, and continued for more than thirty years. What had happened, to cause such a fundamental change! Hardy's own explanation is set down in the biography written by his second wife. '

The misrepresentations of the last two or three years affected but little, if at all, the informed appreciation of Hardy's writings, being heeded almost entirely by those who had not read him; and turned out ultimately to be the best thing that could have happened; for they well-nigh compelled him, in his own judgement at any rate; if he wished to retain any shadow of self-respect



to abandon at once a form of literary art he had long intended to abandon at some indefinite time, and resume openly that form of it which had always been more instinctive with him, and which he had just been able to keep alive from his early years, half in secrecy, under the pressure of magazine writing.²¹

This is a tidy explanation, but not a convincing one; for the change that occurred in Hardy's career in the mid nineties was far more than simply a change of literary form : it was a radical change in his entire way of life.

Consider Hardy as he appeared to the world at the beginning and at the end of the nineties. In 1890 he was a successful, famous, admired English man-of-letters, wealthy enough to have built a country house, to take a flat in London for the season, to travel in Europe, and to move among fashionable and titled London society; a man who had dined with Matthew Arnold and with Browning, and who was regarded by critics as a novelist in the class of George Eliot and Meredith. Yet by the end of the decade he had withdrawn from that life, to lead a reclusive existence on the outskirts of a country town, and to write only verse for the rest of his life. The change is evident not only in the shift from prose to verse, but in the tone of the poems that he began to write. No one would ever have called Hardy a cheerful poet, but the poems of the nineties are noticeably darker than those of his early years.

It is important to recognize that at the time Hardy turned from prose to poetry he was silently suffering deep feelings of personal loss, alienation, loneliness, and emotional and intellectual failure. For Hardy was essentially a lyric poet, and the sources of lyric poetry are personal. We would argue that the sources of Hardy's philosophy were personal too, and that the poems in which he argues with God and Nature rise from the same deeply personal sources. Hardy had lived under the reign of Queen Victoria and his mind had been shaped by the intellectual crisis of the Victorian period. Like many other Victorians, he accepted the new thought; but he felt it as a heavy human loss, for his sensibility remained essentially a religious one. He had been raised in the English church, and he remained, as he said, 'Churchy'; not in an intellectual sense, but in so far instincts and emotions ruled²², and though he had lost faith he went on haunting churches and churchyards, and smuggling hymn metres and Biblical quotations into his poems.

It is in philosophical poems that Hardy speaks in his most Victorian voice—the voice of a troubled Victorian myth-maker trying to mythologize the Post-Darwinian World. Such myth-making was an important part of the role that Hardy saw himself playing in poetry, as he turned away from fiction. The following extract from his biography makes his point very clearly.

Poetry Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion - hard as a rock-which the vast-body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that 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 sheer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing.....If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.²³

The best of Hardy's poems embody the essential qualities of his genius and are not philosophical. They are neither his occasional poems nor his narratives. All of these are essentially public kinds, addressed to some definable audience; but Hardy's greatest gift was a private one. It is expressed most purely in his short lyrics - poems written, as it seems, for himself alone, to give a private order to his feelings, so that he might live with them. These are poems of an ordinary and everyday reality,

small in scale and not usually very eventful ; they record a local world in which time passes, the eye observes, and age remembers. He wrote somewhere : 'There is no new poetry; but the new poet - if he carry the flame on further - comes with a new note. And that new note it is that troubles the critical waters : 'Poetry is emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art.'

Time passes in the poems. Time is the medium in which the present becomes the irrecoverable past, and in which observation becomes memory. In personal terms this sense of the pastness of the past finds its ultimate expression in the theme of Death. It is a subject to which Hardy returned again and again as he grieved for the loss of parents, friends, lovers, even family pets; and one isn't surprised that he did so, for death must become an ordinary, everyday presence for the old. There was one death, though, that was overwhelmingly, shatteringly important to him; in 1912 his first wife, Emma, died. Hardy responded to her death with a series of elegies that are his finest poems. All of the central themes of his poetry are in them - the persistence of memory, the denying power of the present, the passage of time, the finality of loss. Other great elegies idealize the dead one, and the speaker's relation to that person, and commonly end on a consoling note - But Hardy's elegies are not like that. They deal with his complex feelings: his guilt for his unkindness, his regret that his marriage had

failed, his need to believe that his first wife somehow still lived, and his bleak knowledge that she did not. These elegies are an extraordinary achievement. They are an old man's love poems to a dead woman - the love poems that he could not write while she lived - Full of love and desire, but honest, and therefore also full of loss, in them, one hears the essential voice of Hardy :

Well, Well! All's past amend,

Unchangeable. It must go.

I seem but a dead man held on end

To sink down soon....O you could not know

That such swift Fleeing

No Soul foreseeing

Not even I - would undo me so!²⁴

In this world of loss and death, loneliness is an inevitable condition. This is no doubt partly a fact of Hardy's age; but it is also the condition of man in Hardy's universe. His lyrics render an ordinary world - a present such as any old man might observe, and a past such as any old man might remember. The tragic sense of life is most obviously evident in ballad - like narratives.

Hardy's poems belong to an English tradition that goes back to Romantic poets like Wordsworth and John Clare. It is a poetry, essentially, of normative experience : plain, low-pitched, physical and abiding. It says that life goes on and that human beings think and feel in much the same way from one generation to another from one century to

another. It is the principal tradition in English verse. To the twentieth century, Hardy has been a principal example of the continuity and vitality of this tradition and that is why he has been important to poets who came after him. The younger poets whose work resembles Hardy in one way or another are Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Philip Larkin.

Content and technique : there are then, 'two' old man's roads by which younger poets have found their way through Hardy to their own poetry. Though he was not a visible model, he remained an example, an old poet faithful to his world, and to his personal vision of it. His poems are a record of how an honest old man came to terms with reality: with the actual, ordinary, rather humdrum dailiness of life; with the inevitable losses that time brings, and the irrecoverable nature of those losses, with the grief and regret, with a memory: and with his own approaching death. In his poems we find the unmediated voice of an old man, communing with himself: more than a kind of poetry, it is a way of enduring. That old man's road involves both honesty and craft : reality seen as it is, without consolations ; but mastered, and made undurable, through a fine and private art.

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