CHAPTER-III

'WHO TOUCHES THIS BOOK TOUCHES A MAN'

Thomas Hardy, a prolific poet, needed in a high degree the quality we commonly designate as 'courage to live.' His writing has almost nothing of the dream about it, and in his rare evocations of childhood it is never the magic that he emphasizes. His sense of change and of bereavement was exceptionally acute; furthermore he was dogged by a view of life which could afford him no illusory comforts. And the power of these agencies in his life was the stronger because his interest in humanity and in phenomena was great and lasting. He was a humane, sensitive man who could not entertain any suggestion of a Deity, and who did not believe in any form of personal survival as it is usually understood. He had deep loves in his life and he keenly observed and seriously pondered. Out of his beliefs and the tensions generated between his beliefs and his intimate feelings sprang his poetry, first-rate and third-rate alike.[1] The bent of Hardy's mind is ultimately conditioned by a sympathy for human and animal suffering. There are many poems which show a steady progression of thought which is impressive.

Hardy's poems provide an abudance of people and incident and perceptions. They are the work of a man who is also a novelist. He notes 'the smooth sealine with a metal shine', and

May's 'glad green leaves....Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk'. In 'Old Furniture', where he thinks with characteristic affection of the hands that have owned and handled the 'relics of householdry', he imagines a finger setting the hands of the clock right -

> With tentative touches that lift and linger
> In the want of a moth on a summer night.[2]

He had intimate knowledge of village and small town life, rendered as it is with a deep regard for its value simply as life, is one of the 'positives' in Hardy's poetry. He does not of course attempt, as he does in some of the novels, any big or sustained account of the rural civilization which he saw changing and decaying. But there is enough of church and churchyard and music gallery, ballroom and pub, lovers' walks,sea-port, watering-place, tea under the trees, fields and woods and barns, and it is given in such a way as to impress itself on us as a profound element in Hardy's personal History. An ancient way of life is woven into the poet's feeling and habit of thought. When Beeny Cliff, Yell' ham Wood, Mellstock Churchyard, and so on c ome into Hardy's poetry it is normally with a strong personal note: places are important to him, his feelings for them is one of his buttresses against the gloom of his general view of life and the universe. The middle range of Hardy's poetry is lying between patriotic-jingles, banal-darksome tales, simplified love-idylls, heavy explicit

statements of his 'philosophy' and the small number of his wonderful best poems which display in general the Hardy stoicism and truthfulness in the face of uncomforting experience. The poem 'Afterwards', speculating on what people will say about him after death. It makes the quietest of claims for the gifts of loving observation and kindness to living things. In 'An Acient to Ancient's, tone and movement are more formal, but there remains a distinctive pathos in his account of the changes of fashion in dancing, opera, painting and poetry.

The extraordinary power and originality with which Hardy records in his best poems a tragic sense derived from intense personal experience. In these poems of 1912-13, we have the stoicism which has not involved any evasion of the felt multiplicity and force of life. There is none of the simplifying division into ideal and actual which Hardy was prone to full into, no over-spiritualization of women. The actual in these poems is imbued by the fineness of Hardy's spirit with a profound significance. Most of the poems concern a man-woman relationship. All are an outcome of intensely pondered experience. There is simultaneously a vivid evocation of the past and a vivid rendering of the feeling of the present moment. In 'The Voice' -

The breeze, in its listlessness,

Travelling across the wet mead to me here.[3]

are powerful agents of feeling.

Hardy's poems of 1912-13 are called his late flowering

for which he is most admired. His verse, until the overwhelming shock of his wife's death in November 1912, had nearly always maintained the stance of the onlooker, ironic, pitying or both. There are rare occasions when he speaks out for himself, as in 'I Look Into My Glass'. In the novels he had lived through imaginary situations that were deeply painful - the miseries. Now sudden bereavement compelled him to face some bitter truths in his life. Latterly there had been no communication between Emma and himself, but after her death he chanced on two things she had written. These were her resentful diaries of twenty years and a little volume entitled 'Some Recollections'. A more attentive husband might not have been so unprepared for her death as Hardy was. Now, after the initial numbness and forlorn sense of guilt, Emma appeared to be calling to him from the reopened past. His 'poems of 1912-13' were published with Dido's words as their epigraph,'Veteris' Vestigia Flammae', 'the signs of an old flame'. This flame burns again, more vividly even than it may have done in the 1870^{s}. His poetry pays our attention, as the sufficient record of an exploration which sought to harmonize his lacerated feelings in the impersonality of art. The 'poems of 1912-13' were called by him an 'expiation'. They are the result of a crisis in Hardy's own life. This crisis seems to have destroyed his idealism, but at the same time to have released remarkable powers of tragic and ironic vision. The 'schism in the soul' is symbolized in his poetry by the image of a lover's ' quarrel which has a universal significance reaching far beyond the experience of

any individual lovers and revealing a profound and sinister division in the human personality which has lost its old integration with the decay of traditional beliefs.[4]

Hardy's poetry is realistic, usually tragic or ironic and of cosmic contemplation. He treats nearly all the significant aspects of the modern crisis, the relationship between the sexes, the relationship between man and the animals, imperialism and war, the social question and the religious question. Underlying his treatment of all these themes is his tragic conception of the universe. His tragic view of the universe is expressed in the poem 'To an Unborn Papure Child'. His chief protection against the pain caused by his sensitiveness to suffering was his gift of irony. His irony arises from the bitter humour which he perceived in the contrast between human hopes and idealisms and his loves poems arises from a profound tenderness and compassion. He excels in poems like 'The Voice', wonderfully sensitive records of moments of consciousness. 'Unadjusted impressions', he wrote in his Preface to his second volume of verse, 'have their value and the road to true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance or change.'

In 'Poems of 1912-13', he is less argumentative and less irritable. The Mr.Hardy of the love poems of 1912-13 is not a man giving way to memory in poetry; he is a great poet uttering the cry of the universe.[5] These poems have already become part of our being; they have given shape to dumb and striving

elements in our soul; they have set free and purged mute, heart-devouring regrets. A vast range of acknowledged experience returns to weight each syllable; it is the quality of life that is vocal, gathered into a moment of time with a vista of years:[6]

Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see,
The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily;
Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me,
For the stars, close their shutters and the
dawn whitens hazily.
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.[7]

Hardy's most characteristic poems may expand and embrace all human experience. In it we may hear the sombre, ruthless rhythm of life itself - the dominant theme that gives individuation to the ripple of fragmentary joys and sorrows e.g. His poem 'A Broken Appointment' -

You love not me,
And love alone can lend you loyalty;
I know and knew it, But, unto the store
of human deeds divine in all but name,
Was it not worth a little hour or more
To add yet this: Once you, a woman, came
To soothe a time torn man; even though it be
You love not me?[8]

On such a fragment of personal experience lies the visible endorsement of the universe. The hopes not of a lover but of humanity are crushed beneath its rhythm.

Hardy's love-lyrics include the majority of his finest and most carefully elaborated poems. To say that on the whole Hardy expresses more profoundly the griefs than the joys of love is to utter the obvious half-truth which misleads more than falsehood. The real significance of Hardy's achievement lies in his expression of the grief of love remembered when it has gone by - whether through estrangement, disillusionment or bereavement.[9] It is a lover who, in the 'Inferno', speaks those famous words :

Nessun maggior dolore
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria.

('No greater grief than to remember days of joy, when

mistery is at hand:)

This bitter-sweet recollection of the joys of past love runs through dozens of Hardy's lyrics. Most frequently even in the briefest lyrics-the framework is narrative, and actual. Living scenes or events of the 'days when love was new' are recalled with an exact and pictorial particularity. Hardy is supremely the poet of memories, of individual recollections, carried in the mind often for many years before being recorded, with undiminished vividness and with a sort of added perspective which enhances their significance. Usually, though

not invaribly, it is the happy moments that are thus recalled at a time of grief or loneliness; and the contrast between the two moods seen together, as it were, in a single moment of time, sharpens the poignancy of both.[10] His memories are recalled in his poems like 'The Phantom Horsewoman', 'Your Last Drive', 'The Going', 'Where the Picnic Was', 'The Last Performance', 'On a Discovered Curl of Hair', 'The Last Time' and 'Days to Recollect' and so on. To Hardy the commonest object - a garden seat, a little old table, a signpost or an almanack - may have tremendous significance, may carry memories and associations of a lifetime's love, with all its joys and sorrows.[11] He says truly of himself: 'I only need the homeliest of heartstirrings'.

Hardy's love-poems are the most personal and passionate they are also meditative, whimsical, tragic or bitterly ironical. The perspective of human life is always present in his love-poems. The sense of time passed or passing is always strong. So we feel that whether in Hardy the theme is love or something else. Most of the love-poems express his sweet and bitter feelings of love as a unity in memory. 'Benny Cliff', for instance, not only renders the radiance of that March day in 1870, but suggests the whole course of the poet's life since then. Hardy's mingling of passion and detachment bridges the smart antithesis. His manner as a tragic poet is so often that of a tragic ironist. The subtler element in his irony appears in the way in which he makes chaos itself into a pattern In'Satires of Circumstance', he is more curtly sardonic.

We see Hardy best as a poet of love. Like Browning he has left us a gallery of scenes and figures and constantly dramatic. Hardy's full-length figures are in his novels; but his notation of moods is perhaps subtler in the poems than in the novels, and the feeling is as poignant. He is really closer here to the hearts of men and women. So one lyric after another can breathe the passion or wistfulness of love.'Joy as well as suspense and disillusion has found a voice there; but what has most impressed him is the inexorable limit of things.'[12] We feel that with Hardy love can be the whole of happiness, but never, as with Browning, that happiness might make the whole of life. He knew, that love has its own bitterness:

> Love is long-suffering, brave,
> Sweet, prompt, precious as a jewel;
> But O, too, Love is cruel,
> Cruel as the grave.[13]

His sense of all human charities and loyalities does not falter. In pity and passion he is most human. His compassion and certitude of a larger understanding would move through a great lyric like 'A Broken Appointment'. 'A poet who could sing of'human deeds divine in all but name' can hardly be charged with an indifference to values. And so it is that the singer of so many thwartings and errancies of love is also, in a peculiar degree, the poet of fidelity. No one who reads him attentively can miss that deepest instinct of his, which breaths even where it is apparently denied, and was the source of those 'Poems of

1912-13', where memory lives with vividness of passion.'[14]

Hardy's love poems are clouded by personal experience. Almost certainly they had its sources in some real incident or flesh-and-blood-person. His poems of 1912-13' are addressed to his first wife. All these poems are composed on his personal experiences. His first marriage went wrong. There were faults, very possibly, on his side which made him a difficult man to live with. His wife, when the glamour of their cornish courtship faded,was seen to snobbish, small-minded, and incapable of living gracefully in the shadow of Hardy's genius. But a greater shadow fell upon her and darkened their relationship. Some mental derangement of hers has been hinted at, and veiled references may be found in a number of the poems.

Douglas Brown says, "We reach, the gathering point in Hardy's poetry: where elements of balladry and folk song, of the severe, consistent acknowledgement of all that open experience reports; of the poignant nostalgic impulse, and the peculiar response to the profound moment, all fuse in elegic poetry."[15] Hardy's love poems are infact elegies inspired mainly by the death of Hardy's first wife and by his memories afterwards. All his best writing takes its origin in immediate experiences and recollections. But the elegic poetry of Hardy is excellent because the grief is observed into the texture of the occasions and memories, measured and controlled by the dramatic situations. The grief is deep; the area of sorrow, the

sense of the transitoriness of human happiness, lone liness, are the field of these elegies. 'A Broken Appointment', 'After A.Journey', 'The Going', 'At Castle Boterel' and 'The Voice' are the great elegies that are the summit of Hardy's achievement. His best known 'poems of 1912-13' are to do with his personal loss. These poems deal with Hardy's own past. He was not self-absorbed or introspective but his works do reveal his personality fully and truthfully.

Hardy's poems divide themselves into various categories representing different phases of his thought and feeling. He was born singer and story-teller. He once said, 'A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman'. Here he is speaking of his stories in prose. He meant it even more emphatically of his stories in verse. To write in metre is to sing rather than to speak. He generalises from small incidents to draw conclusions about the universal plan. These conslusions, apparent also in his novels, are grand and melancholy. They are grand because man's relation to the universe is the grandest possible subject. They are melancholy because Hardy took a melancholy view of such a relation. He was born-sad, tender-hearted and unhopeful. Temperamental sadness was increased by circumstances. He was brought up in nineteenth-century agricultural Dorset when the conditions of

life there were peculiarly hard. He grew up in a transitional period when England was changing from an agricultural to an industrial economy. This induced in his spirit a feeling of insecurity. Hardy lost faith and deeply regretted the loss. Man's instinctive feelings of love, and pity, which Hardy valued had no significance in the universal scheme. Hardy's view of the human predicament was tragic and ironic. His tragic sense comes from the tension, he feels between his sense of man's capacity for joy. He is pre-eminently a poet of memory, of personal memories by a tune, a picture, a page from an old book. These are often happy memories, so that the emotion expressed in the poems is characteristically mixed, blending pleasure in what is remembered with sadness that it is past. This mixed emotion shows at its most acute in his love poems. David Cecil in 'The Hardy Mood' says,"My title may be found misleading.My subject ....is Thomas Hardy's personality, its pervading mood and flavour, as revealed in his art. Such a survey should include his novels and poems:his genius appears in both. It is characterised by two strains. On the one hand he was a story-teller incurably interested in the human drama; on the other he was a poet whose temperament and views of life were of the heightened imaginative kind which more commonly utters itself in verse. His work exhibits both strains. The poems are often stories, too, and the novels are notable for scenes of a 'poetic' beauty and intensity."[16]

Hardy's philosophy of life was tragic. He was primarily

an artist and then a philosopher. He was one of those who think life by no menas a boon. For him 'Happiness is an occassional episode in a general drama of pain'. His attitude to life was melancholy and depressive. Hardy's interest in the novels shifts from the outer framework of experience to the inner world of feeling.His novels become moral dramas in which conflicts of wills, driven by passions. But these conflicts are not entirely determined from within: they are disturbed and complicated by the repeated workings of blind chance. His philosophy of life presupposes the idea of cruelty inherent in the pattern of the universe, and of a system with its own relentless laws that human beings ignore or deny until they are overtaken by an apparently hostile destiny and destroyed. Moral retribution is the law of Hardy's universe, and all unknowingly his characters and its workings. It exercises its remote control over their lives, and every careless and irresponsible action brings in the end a tragic harvest of pain and bitterness. Nothing can be avoided. The part played by mischance and fate in human life creats the peculiar atmosphere of hopelessness which overwhelms his heroes. In Hardy's outlook on life there are two important points-his sense of law, and his sense of pity. His verse is informed through out by his belief that the 'law of all life' is but poorly adapted to mankind's creeds or needs. His greatness, Dr.Leavis has well said,' lies in the integrity with which he accepted the conclusion, enforced, he believed, by science, that nature is indifferent to human values'.

Much has been written about Hardy's philosophy. But he vigorously disclaimed the little of pessimist, preferring to be thought of as a meliorist, and showing in his idea of an emergent consciousness in the universe a certain affinity with the doctrine of Emergent Evolution. Hardy was very often attaked by contemporary critics and readers because of unnecessarily gloomy attitudes to life, the stark pessimism. He justifies his view on life in a conversation with William Archer in 1904. He said, "I believe, indeed, that a good deal of the ro bustions, swaggering optimism, of recent literature it at bottom cowardly and insincere.....my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs.....on the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist...what are my books but one long plea against 'man's inhumanity against man - to woman - and to the lower animals? Whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be"[17]

Hardy's defence against the charge of pessimism is found in'General Preface to the Novels and Poems' in the following terms:

"One word on what has been called the present writer's philosophy of life,as exhibited more particularly in this metrical section of his compositions. Positive views on the Whence and the Wherefore of things have never been advanced by this pen as a consistent philosphy. Nor it is likely, indeed,

that imaginative writings extending over more than forty years would exhibit a conherent scientific theory of the universe even if it had been attempted..objectless consistency never has been attempted, and the sentiments in the following pages have been stated truly to be mere impressions of the moment, and not convictions or arguments. That these impressions have been condemned as pessimistic' - as if that were a very wicked adjective - shows a curious muddle-mindedness. 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."[18]

Howard Baker says in his 'Hardy's Poetic Certitude', 'His philosophy is concrete, rough, workable; it has a few more than ordinary limitations; it has somewhat more than ordinary powers because of its rude honesty. It is richly and rightly human."[19] Hardy's search for a faith, his rejection of the inhuman, and his return to the human is symbolised in 'In a Wood' -

... No grace I find
Taught me of trees,
Turn I back to my mind,
There at least smiles abound,
There discourse trills around,
There, now and then, are found
Life-loyalities.[20]

Jean Brooks in 'The Homelist of Heart-Stirrings(1971) says"

Whereas the best of Hardy's philosophical poetry is shaped by passionate personal feeling, the cry of unadulterated joy or sorrow which certain theories of poetry regard as indispensable to lyric form seems to be missing, or to ex ist at low tension, in many of his successful lyrics."[21] However, Hardy himself was no life-denier. Poems such as 'Let Me Enjoy', and 'Great Things' bear direct witness to his pleasure in the simple sensuous joys of the world as it is.

All his life he wrote poems, he enjoyed writing poetry than novels - and he wrote them for his own satisfaction. His 'pessimism' is called a tragic sense of life, perhaps it is because he faces and discharges the task of making poetry out of 'experience'. His love poetry is his 'laments for the past'. These are the memorable poems which he wrote to express the emotion that swept over him after his first wife's death. These are his autobiographical feelings. From the titles of his poems we came to know that 'I', 'me', 'he', 'she' or 'We', they refer either Thomas Hardy himself or his wife Emma or both. e.g.When I set out for Lyonnesse', 'A Man Was Drawing Near to Me', 'Why Did I sketch', 'I Rose and Went To Ron' Tor Town', 'We sat at the Window', 'Your Last Drive', 'My Spirit Will Not Haunt The Mound','I found Her Out There', 'If You Had known', 'She opened The Door', in these titles 'I', 'You', 'We' refer either Hardy himself or Emma or they both. All the love poems cover the life story of Thomas Hardy. The places described in the poems are places where Hardy had gone with Emma. What they had seen and

enjoyed there has given expression in these love-poems.

Douglas Brown in 'Hardy's Elegiac power' (1954) says" All these poems are dramatic, rather than personal, in form. The presence of the human person whatever may be growing to Hardy's own experience in his own person - is a part of the dramatic technique. The 'I' is rather a function of poetic impersonality than an assertion of the poet's self. Some of his poems offers no references to Hardy's own love, and no direct reference to his past. These are dramatic poems."[22] e.g. 'During Wind and Rain' 'Neutral Tones', 'Bereft'.

But it is sure that the feelings expressed in all these love poems are autobiographical. They express the personal grief of the poet himself. These poems are the result of 'a profoundly real experience'. What Arthur MacDowall was speaking about Hardy's poems can be applied to all the poems about Emma, for they 'condense almost every quality of Hardy's verse except the sardonic, and most, if not all, of his directest utterences of feeling'. Passion and tenderness, memory and regret, romance and realism. They are central among the poems...Almost any one of them, by itself, might take its place among the others, but they cling together with the unity and veracity of a profoundly real experience. Nowhere else, indeed, are the poet and man so completely one as in these intimate lyrics."[23] There is truthfulness and accuracy so to quote them in Walt Whitman's familiar Words: 'Who touches this book touches a man'. These love poems provide a clearer picture of Mrs.Hardy. They give all the information about the woman of whom Thomas Hardy remarked:'She opened the door of romance to me'.

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