UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
NOTTINGHAM

Byron Foundation Lecture
1946

THE LYRICAL POETRY OF THOMAS HARDY

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The twenty-third Byron Foundation Lecture was delivered on Friday, 29th November, 1946, the Chairman being Professor Vivian de Sola Pinto, M.A., D.Phil., F.R.S.L.

Second Impression

ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

This lecture was founded in 1912 by public subscription. In accordance with the terms of the Foundation, the subject of the lecture need not be confined to Byron, but must be on some aspect of English literature.

Published in 2009 by The Byron Centre for the Study of Literature and Social Change
School of English Studies, University of Nottingham,
University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD
http://byron.nottingham.ac.uk

This is a revised version of the Byron Foundation Lecture delivered by Professor C. M. Bowra in 1946
This electronic edition digitized and edited by Nicola Bowring
Byron Foundation Lectures Online
Series Editor, Matthew J.A. Green

ISBN: 978-0-9555740-2-3

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THE LYRICAL POETRY OF THOMAS HARDY

When in 1895 Thomas Hardy published his last serious novel, *Jude the Obscure*, he is said to have been so distressed by the abuse which greeted it that he turned to writing poetry instead of prose. In the next thirty-four years, until his death at the age of eighty-seven in 1928, Hardy published not only his epic-drama *The Dynasts* but eight volumes of lyrical verse. He began to be known as a poet at an age when most poets find inspiration faint and fitful, and he pursued his task with unremitting vigour into extreme old age. His career falls so decisively into two halves that we cannot treat his verse as a by-product of his novels or his last years as a time when he sought refuge from the stupidity of critics in an art which was beyond their range. Today Hardy is honoured equally as a novelist and a poet. We may prefer his poems or his novels, but each class stands on its own as a triumphant achievement of creative genius. To have written both is unique. No other novelist of Hardy's stature equals him as a poet. Perhaps Meredith might be cited as a rival, but however highly some may prize Meredith's novels, his poetry lacks Hardy's abundance and scope. If Emily Brontë had lived, she might have written poetry comparable in intensity and constructive skill to *Wuthering Heights*—but that is only a speculation with the might-have-been. Hardy's twofold performance is unique. At his best the most powerful of the later Victorian novelists, he is the most representative English poet between Tennyson and Yeats. Born twenty-one years after the one and twenty-five years before the other, he speaks with authority for the generation which reached manhood in the 'sixties, when industrialism was destroying the old structure of society and Darwinism its system of beliefs.

Hardy's poetry is no mere appendage to his novels, but it is closely related to them in a special way; or rather, they are closely related to it. Hardy began by being a poet. His first poem, *Domicilium*, a meditative piece in the manner of Wordsworth, was written before 1860. Before he published *Desperate Remedies* in 1877, he wrote a number of verses which did not see the light till thirty years after their first rejection by London editors. Even when he was at work on his great novels, he never quite abandoned poetry, but composed pieces which he put aside and published many years later. The truth is that Hardy was always a poet, and, when he was not writing verse, he put his poetry into his novels and gave them a special quality through it. Like Emily Brontë, Hardy wrote novels because they were the best means of expression

available to a writer who felt the poetry of action in a contemporary world. In an earlier age he might have written narrative-poetry, but the conventions of Victorian narrative-poetry were too narrow and too staid for his peculiar gifts. He put his poetry into his novels, until the time came when even that did not satisfy him and he obeyed the call to be a poet and nothing else. The storm over *Jude the Obscure* was certainly the occasion for his change and may well have accelerated it, but sooner or later Hardy would have returned to poetry. It was his first love and his final means of saying certain things that he had to say.

Yet the mere and obvious fact that Hardy's novels and poems come from the same source and aim at very similar ends makes his poetry all the more remarkable. In his novels Hardy belongs to a good English tradition. In his complicated plots, his ingenious exploitation of the love-interest, his contrasts of characters, his interplay of comedy and tragedy, his feeling for the countryside, his sense of period and of place, he has his precedents and parallels in other writers. He does much that other novelists cannot do, but his kind of writing belongs to many. He was a Victorian novelist who wrote in the Victorian way, though he happened to be a master in it. But as a poet he is a singular figure. The poets whom he most loved, Scott, Shelley, Keats and Swinburne, left no trace on his work. Even Crabbe, whom he greatly admired, belongs to a different world and shows no points of resemblance to what is most characteristic m Hardy. It is usual to say that he owed something to the Dorset poet, William Barnes. Hardy knew Barnes and honoured him as a master in the use of language. But while Barnes' best poems were written in dialect, Hardy hardly touched dialect after one or two early poems like *Valenciennes* and *The Bride Night Fire.* And though it is possible that Hardy learned his interest in ingenious metres from Barnes, he was never a metrist in the sense that Barnes was. For Barnes was an accomplished scholar, who tried to adapt the metres of Welsh and Persian poetry to the Dorset dialect and succeeded because he was an extremely deliberate and conscious craftsman. Hardy profited by some of his experiments and had a natural love for new effects in metre and rhythm, but he sought them not as a scholar but as a poet who enjoyed any means which helped him to express himself in an unusual and striking way.

Hardy's origins did much to determine his work and outlook. He was the son of a country builder. Though he was legitimately proud of his ancestors, he was much closer to the soil and to its workers than any other English poet of his century. Indeed, though he was not a true peasant like Burns, he was nearer to the peasantry than any English poet since Langland. His knowledge of the country is exact and detailed with the special experience that comes from living in close contact with the earth. He is too familiar with nature to cherish any Wordsworthian ideals about it. Most of his long life was spent in

Dorset, and he knew it with a special, specialist intimacy. He was in touch with men who knew the English countryside before the building of railways, and through them he absorbed the rich, traditional life of Wessex before education and communications had spoiled much of its originality. Hardy is a true countryman not merely in his knowledge but in his tastes. Like other countrymen, he likes the violent and the peculiar. He has a Gothic taste for ghosts, for crime, for stories which combine the horrible with the grotesque. But he was a countryman who came of a good stock and went to a good school. At home he read the Bible and Shakespeare: at school he learned Latin, and later, like his own Jude, he taught himself Greek. He loved history and conducted considerable researches into it. So the situation arose that Hardy, who was in many ways a true son of the soil and shared the interests and knowledge of farmers and labourers, was also able through his education to see much more than they could and to express himself on matters upon which they would be dumb. He was sufficiently above and outside his circumstances to have an artist's detachment from them and to make the most of them in his poetry.

Hardy seems to have known almost from the start what kind of poetry he wished to write. There is little evidence that he experimented with styles or that he copied the manners of other recognized writers. The Wordsworthian air of *Domicilium* has quite disappeared from the poems which he wrote in the 'sixties, and such a poem as *Postponement,* written in 1866, shows no indebtedness to any predecessor but much that was to be characteristic of Hardy's mature style forty years later:

> Snow-bound in woodland, a mournful word
> Dropt now and then from the bill of a bird,
> Reached me on wind-wafts; and this I heard,
> Wearily waiting.
>
> "I planned her a nest in a leafless tree,
> But the passers eyed and twitted me,
> And said: 'How reckless a bird is he,
> Cheerily mating!'
>
> "Fear-filled, I stayed till summer-tide,
> In lewth of leaves to throne her bride;
> But alas! her love for me waned and died,
> Wearily waiting.
>
> "Ah, had I been like some I see,
> Born to an evergreen nesting-tree,
> None had eyed and twitted me,
> Cheerily mating!"

The main features of Hardy's familiar full manner are nearly all here, — the ironical sense of the frustrated situation, the respect for humble creatures as if they had the feelings and the dignity of human

beings, the lilting rhythm with its ingenious repetitions and interlocking rhymes, the genuine pathos which lurks behind the apparently careless exterior. This poem was written within a few years of *Goblin Market, Atalanta in Calydon, Modern Love* and *Enoch Arden,* but it has no affinity to any of them. It belongs to another world and speaks in a different tongue. This gap between Hardy and other poets was to last through his life. He went his own way, respecting the performances of others but never in the least influenced by them or eager to compete with them.

From such beginnings Hardy passed with long hesitations and delays but without any obvious break or change to the great poetry of his last forty years. The language of this poetry, already present in *Postponement,* is undeniably unusual. It bears no relation to the sensitive and refined manner of the great Victorians. Hardy writes poetry not with a special vocabulary but almost with the words that he uses in prose. Just as his prose combines a sublime simplicity which seems to be born from his native soil with a complicated literary manner which aims at a rhetorical rotunditv, so his verse seems to combine natural ease with conscious elaboration. And this elaboration is very much of his own kind. Hardy supplements a body of simple, direct English with resonant and unusual Latin words, and with Anglo-Saxon words which have passed out of common currency and have an archaic air. Thus on the one hand he introduces into quite simple surroundings words like “fulgid”, “subtrude”, “interlune”, “flexure”, “frus-trance”, and “lucency”: on the other hand “third”, “scrabble”, “prink”, “wanze”, “fresh” as a verb, “vamp” in the sense of “walk”. Nor did Hardy limit his enterprise to these two directions. He coined compound adjectives with the confidence of a Greek or an Elizabethan; he formed new abstract nouns from Latin or English roots ; he enjoyed periphrasis and long words used half-humorously to secure surprise. He was not in the least an uncritical stylist who put down the first words that came into his head. He was a conscious artist who adapted his vocabulary to his situations and often revised his first texts if he thought that they failed to secure the right result. Hardy’s style is always original, always his own, and though it is often surprising, it secures its special ends in a way that no other style could.

Hardy differed from the great Victorians other than Browning in not wishing to write poetry like that of Keats. For Tennyson, for Rossetti, and even for Arnold, Keats had set a standard of how poetry should be written, and in their different manners they all tried to live up to it. What counted with them was the heavily loaded verse, where each word does its full work and contributes to a musical harmony. Theirs is a poetry of keen visual sensibility and emotional fullness. Hardy aims at something quite different. His poetry is that of the dramatic situation. This is what he tries to catch and perpetuate in

the depth and width of its human appeal. Many of his poems deal with subjects which would be interesting even in a newspaper, and when Hardy transformed them into poetry, he tried to keep their reality, their varied character, their contact with common life. Such subjects and such an aim required a treatment quite different from that of Keats and his admirers. The poetry lay in the dramatic situation, and the poet must not omit those elements of the grotesque and the horrible which many dramatic situations contain but which lie outside the reach of a vocabulary which is concerned only with the strictly beautiful. Hardy's style is necessary to him because it reflects his realism, his interest in what really happens, his awareness of the odd and unexpected elements in almost every human crisis. With such an aim in mind Hardy wrote in his own special way, and in this he shows a real sense of how to adapt it to different occasions and to make it serve a variety of needs. A good example can be seen in the poem which he wrote in 1913 on the loss of the 'Titanic' and characteristically called *The Convergence of the Twain:*

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity
And the Pride of Life that planned her, still couches she.

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrid and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls - grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" . . .

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

Prepared a sinister mate
For her - so gaily great -
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be :
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes and jars two hemispheres.

This noble poem shows the range of Hardy's vocabulary from words like "third" and "couches" to "moon-eyed" and "vaingloriousness." But the uncommon words are used with a proper sense of their effectiveness in strange surroundings and fit the weird, tragic spectacle of the great ship lying in the depths of the Atlantic. These words are not elegant or charming, but they catch the mood of enthralled horror which the loss of the "Titanic" evoked. Then, when Hardy leaves the description of the sunk ship for the events which have led to its loss, he simplifies his vocabulary and writes with plain words which are all the more powerful because they are used for so vast and so strange a catastrophe. There is much more than description in the deftly chosen adjectives for the "Titanic", — "so gaily great", "the smart ship": there is a great reserve of emotion in this quiet manner which echoes the pride of man in his achievements and by an implied contrast hints at the hideous end that is coming. There is more than this quiet effect in the tremendous line:

"In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too".

That is the central idea of the whole poem, and it comes with irresistible force and relevance in its unelaborated words.

Hardy found situations for poetry everywhere, in his own life, in the lives of others, in history, in legends. To each he brought the same penetrating eye for the dramatic situation, for the crucial moment when some conjunction of persons or circumstances produces a conflict and a crisis. In his choice of situations he was guided by his own nature and his own tastes. He is often called gloomy and pessimistic, and it is true that in some ways and at some times he is the most tragic English poet since Shakespeare. But his poetry is by no means universally gloomy, and pessimism is not the clue to its real character. Hardy was no Palladas or Leopardi. He did not always or usually feel that life is an unmixed evil or that it is better not to be born. His poetry arose from a more complex and more interesting state of mind. At some time he seems to have suffered a terrible shock or disappointment which left an enduring scar. Before this he was relatively self-

contained and confident; after it he believed that he had lost something for ever. Of this he seems never to have spoken even to his most intimate friends, but its reality is undeniable, and two poems tell all that we are likely to know about it. *In the Seventies* gives one side of the picture: it recalls from a later date the unbroken harmony which was once his but which, by implication, he has lost, since he speaks in the past tense of something which he once enjoyed:

> In the seventies I was bearing in my breast,
> Penned tight,
> Certain starry thoughts that threw a magic light
> On the worktimes and the soundless hours of rest
> In the seventies; aye, I bore them in my breast
> Penned tight.
>
> In the seventies, when my neighbours—even my friend—
> Saw me pass,
> Heads were shaken, and I heard the words "Alas,
> For his onward years and name unless he mend!"
> In the seventies, when my neighbours and my friend
> Saw me pass.
>
> In the seventies those who met me did not know
> Of the vision
> That immuned me from the chillings of misprison
> And the damps that choked my goings to and fro
> In the seventies; yea, those nodders did not know
> Of the vision.
>
> In the seventies nought could darken or destroy it,
> Locked in me,
> Thought as delicate as lamp-worm's lucency;
> Neither mist nor murk could weaken or alloy it
> In the seventies!—could not darken or destroy it,
> Locked in me.

This recalls a real state of mind, when Hardy in the first years of his creative energy, had some special strength which sustained and guided him. It is the period of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and we can understand that at this time Hardy was different from what he was twenty years later. He says that he had "certain starry thoughts", an inner light. He does not analyse it or describe it, but he shows what it did for him.

This period came to an end. By *In the Seventies* we may set another poem, *He fears his Good Fortune*, and the chapter of spiritual history is as complete as we can hope for in a writer so shy and reticent as Hardy. Both poems were written late in life and published in 1917, when Hardy could look back with a certain degree of detachment over the

intervening years, but their intensity shows how strongly he felt, even in retrospect, what had happened. The second poem supplements the first:

There was a glorious time
At an epoch of my prime;
Mornings beryl-bespread,
And evenings golden-red;
Nothing gray;
And in my heart I said,
"However this chanced to be,
It is too full for me,
Too rare, too rapturous, rash,
Its spell must close with a crash
Some day!"

The radiance went on
Anon and yet anon,
And sweetness fell around
Like manna on the ground.
"I have no claim,"
Said I, "to be thus crowned;
I am not worthy this:— .
Must it not go amiss?
Well . . . let the end foreseen
Come duly! I am serene."
—And it came.

At some time in his life, probably when he was in his thirties, Hardy passed through a crisis and felt that in it he had lost past recall something which had irradiated and strengthened his whole being. This was not the crisis, known to many writers, in which their powers to create become slower and more uncertain: nor was it an intellectual crisis in his beliefs. It was a collapse of confidence and harmony in himself, the loss of an inner contentment which inspired his early work and carried him through doubt and opposition. To it we may attribute something that was henceforward to mark almost everything that Hardy wrote.

Hardy was a simple character, capable of happiness, and much of his poetry shows his delight in ordinary things. No one has written with more charm about old-fashioned dances or church-music or the weather or first love. But though these were the things that he liked, and though he often praised them, he was drawn irresistibly to other, more disturbing subjects. His visual sensibility was more than matched by his sensibility of heart. He was uncommonly tender and compassionate. Sights which would leave other men cold struck him in the centre of his being and remained painfully in his memory. This

experience was disturbing and distressing. Hardy felt the horror and shame of many unsuspected flaws in the scheme of things; he suffered acutely with the sufferings of other living beings, both human and animal. And this sensitiveness increased with the years. In his novels the gaiety of *Under the Greenwood Tree* yields gradually to a more sombre, more brooding, more wounded spirit, as Hardy moves to the grim horrors of *Jude the Obscure*, and it is perhaps not fanciful to connect this process with what he says in *In the Seventies* and *He fears his Good Fortune*. When some inner light and strength failed him, he became more and more vulnerable to the blows which events inflicted on his tender heart. His escape was to transform these into art. His poetry owes much to this release. Because of it Hardy shows a wide range of irony, which is his response to the contrasts and contradictions which distressed him in human life, and especially to the ugly gaps which he found between men's thoughts or desires and the hard actual facts. Again and again in different forms Hardy builds a poem on such contrasts. They may be very simple as between two kinds of weather, or they may have a tragic majesty, like that between the "Titanic" as her builders fashioned her and as she lies in the Atlantic. This far-reaching irony was Hardy's protection against the many painful experiences which burst in on him and tore his heart. He needed it to save him from his own extreme sensitiveness, and because it played a central part in his response to life, it became the mainspring of his art, guided him in the choice of his subjects and situations, helped him to interpret them, and gave a special unity and character to the whole body of his poetry.

This irony took different forms. Not all the discords of life are equally serious, and Hardy, with his generous nature and wide understanding, was capable of more than one kind of response. He had in him a strain of whimsical fancy, almost an elfin quality, which seems to belong to the English countryside with its love of ghosts and goblins and its pleasure in making the flesh creep. Hardy shared these tastes, but exploited them only when his subject was not of the first seriousness. For instance, most of us know the sense of anti-climax, of not being welcome, which may assail us when we revisit some place familiar in childhood. It is easy to be sentimental about this. But Hardy treats such an occasion with a delightful irony. In *He Revisits his Old School* he indulges in a charming fancy, which is none the less perfectly true to experience:

> I should not have gone in the flesh.
> I ought to have gone as a ghost;
> It was awkward, unseemly almost,
> Standing solidly there as when fresh,
> Pale, tiny, crisp-curled,
> My pinions yet furled
> From the winds of the world.

After waiting so many a year
To wait longer, and go as a sprite
From the tomb at the mid of some night
Was the right radiant way to appear;
Not as one wanzing weak
From life's roar and reek,
His rest still to seek:

Yea, beglimpsed through the green quarried glass .
Of green moonlight by me greener made,
When they'd cry, perhaps, "There sits his shade
In his olden haunt - just as he was
When in Walkingame he
Conned the grand Rule-of-Three
With the bent of a bee."

But to show in the afternoon sun,
With an aspect of hollow-eyed care,
When none wished to see me come there,
Was a garish thing better undone.
Yes, wrong was the way;
But, yet, let me say,
I may right it some day.

The situation, with its play between fact and fancy, is presented with playful malice, and Hardy, by his gay handling of a spectral visitation, conveys with perfect aptness his feelings after an unsuccessful outing.

This poem, and it by no means stands alone, reflects Hardy's lighter reactions to the imperfections of life. But he could not treat everything so gaily. When he was really distressed, he needed some more powerful solvent to free him from the burden of an intolerable situation. Like most tender-hearted men, he was sometimes so shocked and affronted by what he saw that his only escape was to be hardly less brutal and callous in his treatment of it. Hardy's elfin quality passed easily into a harsher kind of mockery which enabled him to dissect with unrelenting skill pretentiousness or humbug and to present it not with compassion but with ironical laughter. The Spirit Ironic, to whom he gave an important part in *The Dynasts*, was something that he knew in himself and treated with respect because it seems to make sense of what is intolerable nonsense if treated with reason or charity. When this spirit was active in him, Hardy's lyrical fancy was kept in strict abeyance, and a sharp realism dominated his work. It was his weapon particularly when he was shocked by the kind of imposture which cannot be dismissed with a laugh because it involves too serious issues and even breaks hearts. Then Hardy adopts a ruthless, satirical realism, as in the poem *In Church* –

"And now to God the Father," he ends,
And his voice thrills up to the topmost tiles:
Each listener chokes as he bows and bends,
And emotion pervades the crowded aisles.
Then the preacher glides to the vestry-door,
And shuts it, and thinks he is seen no more.

The door swings softly ajar meanwhile,
And a pupil of his in the Bible class,
Who adores him as one without gloss or guile,
Sees her idol stand with a satisfied smile
And re-enact at the vestry-glass
Each pulpit gesture in deft dumb-show
That had moved the congregation so.

The primary effect is of comedy. The actor is shown up when he least expects it. But Hardy is not merely a comedian even in this. His irony has a sharper edge and pierces deeper. The small pupil, whose illusions are suddenly shattered, is a human being, and her mere presence gives a new depth to the ludicrous situation. Even here Hardy's tenderness is the spring of his inspiration, though it is disguised and almost transformed by his mockery.

There are deeper and more sinister cracks in life than histrionic pretentions, and Hardy's finest poetry comes when he allows his compassion to well up and flow without diversion or hindrance. In the short compass of a poem he was able to find as keen a pathos as in the large scale of novel. Strange though some of his effects are, they are never false, and on the whole he avoids those errors of exaggeration which mar such episodes as the death of Jude's children. In his poetry Hardy often succeeds by concentrating on some central theme or final crisis which illuminates a whole story and shows what its real significance is. A characteristic example comes from the time, of the South African War. In *Drummer Hodge* Hardy touches on the ironical pathos of the young soldier who is buried in the veldt which means nothing to him, beneath stars whose names he does not know:

Young Hodge the drummer never knew—
    Fresh from his Wessex home—
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
    The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
    Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain
    Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
    Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
    His stars eternally.

The formative idea is hard and clean, and it comes out with all the more force because it is grasped so firmly. So, more strikingly, in *The Newcomer's Wife* the subject is a man who wishes to marry a woman whose past is known to everyone but himself and who accidentally hears the truth about her. Then comes the conclusion, brief and horrifying:

> That night there was the splash of a fall
> Over the slimy harbour-wall :
> They searched, and at the deepest place
> Found him with crabs upon his face.

There is no comment, no judgment. The poem succeeds through this final shock. It is story-telling reduced to a very small compass and charged with crisis.

Hardy is not always so objective as here, and there is no reason why he should be. Sometimes his themes are so personal and mean so much to him that he must pass some kind of comment on them. He does this with great tact, keeps his judgment until the end and prepares the way for it by his objective presentation of a situation in which every detail has none the less a tragic or pathetic relevance as in *At a Country Fair:*

> At a bygone Western country fair
> I saw a giant led by a dwarf
> With a red string like a long thin scarf;
> How much he was the stronger there
> The giant seemed unaware.
>
> And then I saw that the giant was blind
> And the dwarf a shrewd-eyed little thing ;
> The giant, mild, timid, obeyed the string
> As if he had no independent mind
> Or will of any kind.
>
> Wherever the dwarf decided to go
> At his heels the other trotted meekly,
> (Perhaps—I know not—reproaching weakly)
> Like one Fate made that it must be so,
> Whether he wished or no.
>
> Various sights in various climes
> I have seen and more I may see yet,
> But that sight never shall I forget,
> And have thought it the sorriest of pantomimes,
> If once, a hundred times.

The last verse, with its deliberate simplicity, clinches the question and pulls the whole poem into shape. Hardy's agonised pity comes out in its full force and gives a meaning to the careful, well observed

description which precedes it. Through these final lines the incident, isolated and remote though it is, takes on a symbolical significance. The domination of cunning over helpless innocence is seen in a concrete example which makes it extremely real and distressing.

Hardy's sensibility responded with the greatest power to quite humble and simple events, and from them he extracted poetry universal in its relevance. For instance, in *Beyond the Last Lamp* his subject is just a couple walking in the rain near Tooting Common. He does not know them or anything about them, but they have a tragic downcast look, and when some hours later he returns to the place, they are still there. This sight strikes Hardy with its inexplicable pathos and haunts him. He knows that so abiding a memory cannot be an accident, and he concludes with verses which are truly philosophical poetry because in them an idea and the imaginative appreciation of it are completely united:

> Though thirty years of blur and blot
> Have slid since I beheld that spot,
> And saw in curious converse there
> Moving slowly, moving sadly,
> That mysterious tragic pair,
> Its olden look may linger on—
> All but the couple; they have gone.
>
> Whither? Who knows, indeed. . . and yet
> To me, when nights are weird and wet,
> Without those comrades there at tryst
> Creeping slowly, creeping sadly.
> That lone lane does not exist.
> There they seem brooding on their pain,
> And will, while such a lane remain.

Hardy is right. The mysterious couple, so vividly seen and so tenaciously remembered, are more real than the apparently real world from which they have vanished, and by his reflective close Hardy gives a finality to the impression which they have made on him.

The metaphysics of this poem may not be orthodox, but they are not very controversial. But though Hardy disclaimed any consistent or single philosophy, he was extremely interested in philosophical speculations and used them to give point and emphasis to his broodings on the universe. In his beliefs he was a true child of his time. Darwinism and the scientific study of history had undermined the traditional Christianity of his childhood. He did not break absolutely with it, but kept a loyal affection for biblical stories and told of the denial of Christ by Peter and of the Virgin's anxious fears for her son, while in *Panthera* he made a fine use of the Jewish legend that Christ was the son of a Roman legionary. So vivid was his sense of the biblical past that when Allenby's soldiers entered Jezreel in 1918, Hardy

could not but connect them with events of long ago and imagine that they were haunted by the bloodstained ghosts of Israel:

On war-men at this end of time —even on Englishmen's eyes—
Who slay with their arms of new might in that long-ago place—
Flashed he who drove furiously? . . . Ah, did the phantom arise
Of that queen, of that proud Tyrian woman who painted her face?

Faintly marked they the words "Throw her down!" from the night eerily
Spectre-spots of the blood of her body on some rotten wall?
And the thin note of pity that came: "A King's daughter is she,"
As they passed where she trodden was once by the charger's footfall ?

But though the Bible and Christian legend had this strong hold on Hardy's imagination, he rejected Christianity because he thought its doctrines untrue and because he felt that its official exponents denied the essential message of their Master. His intellect and his conscience forced him to look for some other system which should keep the Christian ethic without its divine sanction and account more satisfactorily for a universe which science and his own observation revealed as a stage for hideous conflicts and heart-breaking failures.

To this search Hardy found no final solution. The philosopher with whom he had most in common was Schopenhauer. But Hardy was too genuine a poet to be much interested in argument. He knew that something was wrong with the scheme of things, and this conviction informed his whole outlook. He felt it without reference to any philosopher and turned it to purely poetical purposes. His controversy with official Christianity was part of his quarrel with the universe. His deeply compassionate nature was outraged by the wrongs inflicted on men and animals, and he laid part of the blame on the Christian system which, as he believed, had betrayed the teachings of its Founder. So in *The Blinded Bird* he speaks in the language of St Paul on behalf of a suffering creature against those who have tortured it :

So zestfully canst thou sing?
And all this indignity,
With God's consent on thee
Blinded ere yet a-wing
By the red-hot needle thou,
I stand and wonder how
So zestfully thou canst sing.

Resenting not such wrong,
Thy grievous pain forgot,
Eternal dark thy lot,
Groping thy whole life long,
After that stab of fire ;
Enjailed in pitiless wire ;
Resenting not such wrong.

Who hath charity? This bird.
Who suffereth long and is kind,
Is not provoked, though blind
And alive ensepulchred?
Who hopeth, endureth all things?
Who thinketh no evil, but sings?
Who is divine? This bird.

Hardy condemns a Christian society by its own standards, and his bold paradox succeeds because he is passionately sincere in his pity for humble creatures like this bird.

When he tries to write a more abstract and more purely philosophical poetry, Hardy is less successful. He could indeed give a fine form to ideas, as in three verses where he sets out various explanations of the faulty scheme of things:

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

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

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

This is powerful and impressive, especially when it is taken away from its context. But in its context it is a little exaggerated. For the words are supposed to be spoken by trees, whose melancholy look round a pool makes Hardy believe that they suffer and ask these searching questions. So too Hardy is not entirely successful when he tries to write directly on cosmic matters. He has his own mythology, his Doomsters and Immanent Will and Spinners of the Years, but in themselves these figures are too dim and too abstract to be very effective, and Hardy seldom creates a myth substantial enough to give body and character to them. His genius was essentially dramatic, and his cosmic personalities are convincing only when they take part in human actions and have the appeal of mysterious forces who shape human destinies. In *The Dynasts* he made a splendid use of them, but the scope of his lyrical poetry hardly allowed a similar success.

On the other hand Hardy found in Schopenhauer something which stood him in good stead. The conception of the world as governed by a blind Will which does not care for good or for evil, for happiness or for sorrow, for fulfilment or for failure, was something bred in Hardy's

own soul and needed only a little encouragement from outside to give it shape and confidence. Because he believed that the universe is senseless, he was able to give to his characters, no matter how humble, the tragic dignity which belongs to those who struggle in a hopeless cause. The qualities which he valued most highly were the fundamental charities. These he possessed himself, and he never questioned their worth. They meant everything to him, and he knew instinctively that they were right. So in his strange, eerie poem *To an Unborn Pauper Child* the grave accents in which he speaks of the hideous menaces of life are tempered and ennobled by the close where Hardy calls up some possibilities which none the less remain :

Fain would I, dear, find some shut plot
Of earth's wide wold for thee, where not
One tear, one qualm
Should break the calm.
But I am weak as thou and bare:
No man can change the common lot to rare.

Must come and bide. And such are we -
Unreasoning, sanguine, visionary -
That I can hope
Health, love, friends, scope
In full for three: can dream thou'lt find
Joys seldom yet attained by humankind.

It was in quiet simple things, in affection and quiet happiness, that Hardy sought a refuge from the failures and miseries of existence.

Hardy was not only tender and compassionate; he was almost incapable of hatred in any form or of the pious variations of it which sometimes pass for justice. Though he loved England and was proud of its history, and wrote moving poems on the war of 1914-1918, there is no trace of hatred in them. He admires the soldiers who go out to die because they believe that their cause is just, and that is enough for him. Indeed his conviction that men and women are hardly responsible for their own actions but are largely moved by forces outside their control made him regard even criminals as pathetic creatures of circumstance who deserve pity far more than condemnation. So at the time of the famous trial of Bywaters and Thompson, when a woman and her lover had murdered her husband, Hardy wrote *On the Portrait of a Woman about to be Hanged*:

Comely and capable, one of our race
Posing there in your gown of grace,
Plain, yet becoming;
Could subtlest breast
Ever have guessed
What was behind that innocent face,
Drumming, drumming!

Would that your Causer, ere knoll your knell
For this riot of passion, might deign to tell
Why, since it made you
Sound in the germ
It sent a worm
To madden Its handiwork, when It might well
Not have assayed you.

Not have implanted to your deep rue,
The Clytaemnestra spirit in you,
And with purblind vision
Sowed a tare
In a field so fair,
And a thing of symmetry to view,
Brought to derision.

For Hardy in the last resort the responsibility for evil lies not with human beings but with the system of things which makes them act as they do. For the poor agents of this blind Will he has nothing but compassion.

Hardy did not write poetry to exhibit a scheme of the universe, but he did in fact reveal such a scheme in the only way in which poetry can, that is in concrete instances where the individual case raises questions of vast import beyond itself and becomes an example and a symbol of universal laws. And whatever we may think of Hardy's religious and philosophical opinions, we cannot deny that they are indispensable to his poetry and rise from something in him which we cannot but admire and love, his charming, responsive, sensitive, tender personality. He was a countryman, affectionately at home not only with trees and flowers and waters but with all living creatures, human or animal, and the best last words that can be said about him are what he himself says in *Afterwards*:

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,
"He was a man who used to notice such things"?

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless blink,
The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, a gazer may think
"To him this must have been a familiar sight."

If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm,
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn,
One may say, "He strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm,
But he could do little for them; and now he is gone."

If when hearing that I have been stilled at the last, they stand at the door,
Watching the full-starred heavens that winter sees,
Will this thought rise on those who will meet my face no more,
"He was one who had an eye for such mysteries"?

And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,
"He hears it not now, but used to notice such things"?

Derry & Sons, Ltd.
Printers,
Canal St., Nottm.