

Thomas Hardy, Yet and Again

Louise Dauner

FIVE MINUTES BEFORE he died, Thomas Hardy posed his last question to the universe. "What is this?" He had been asking it for most of his 88 years. It epitomizes his lifelong intellectual and spiritual efforts to understand "Life with the sad seared face."¹ The question, with its many variations, like a revolving mirror trained on the human predicament, is treated in his many prose works (14 novels, numerous short stories, essays, and sketches), in his over 800 short lyrics, and in the massive three-part verse drama, *The Dynasts*. The "answers" that Hardy worked out did not make him happy. Indeed, his naturalism, with its bleak philosophy, exposed him to negative, often harsh criticism until nearly the end of his life.

Nevertheless, his death, on January 12, 1928, was an international news event. British literature, said the *London Times*, had been deprived of its "most eminent figure"—a sentiment echoed worldwide. The burial in Westminster Abbey of the ashes of the country boy from the poor county of Dorset was a national rite. The Abbey was crowded with the famous in politics, the arts, education, and society, while crowds waited in pouring rain to file past the open grave in Poet's Corner.

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He was the first novelist to be buried there since Dickens, in 1870, and the first poet since Tennyson, in 1892. Leading the list of the distinguished participants were the Heads of Magdalene and Queens Colleges, of Cambridge and Oxford, of which Hardy was an Honorary Fellow, and the pallbearers included Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the Opposition, and six of the most eminent men of letters of the day. Simultaneously, in a "divided funeral," in Stinsford Churchyard, at Hunsford, where Hardy's grandparents, parents, and first wife, Emma, were buried, Hardy's heart was returned to his native earth.²

For by then, though he was one of the most controversial writers of his time, this gentle, soft-voiced, self-effacing little man was the acknowledged master of the English novel in his age. He had also become an astounding poet. Born in 1840, he is the third Victorian poet with Browning and Tennyson. And now, in comparison, he seems more comprehensive, more dynamic, technically more original and ingenious, and philosophically more uncompromising.

Hardy's poetry suggests an eclectic landscape, with several varieties of "plants" growing out of differing kinds of soil. First, there was his rural heritage, his detailed knowledge of the flora and

fauna of the countryside, its dialect and rustic characters. That gave him not only an authentic voice, but such a keen knowledge of nature that, for example, he was able to identify by their calls not only many species of birds but also their characteristic environs. Then, exceptionally sensitive to music, both instrumental and vocal, he early became an amateur violinist, often accompanying his stone-mason father, Thomas, also a violinist, as a second fiddler at weddings, dances, and other rural occasions. That gave him a sense of rhythm and meter, in poetry. From the age of fifteen, and for a number of years thereafter, he studied and practiced architecture, repairing Gothic churches, an interest he maintained during his life. That gave him a sense of design and structure. At the same time, he was sketching and painting in watercolor. That made him aware of visual patterns and tone color. Meanwhile, financially unable to attend Cambridge, a dream he held for many years, he educated himself, reading in the Greek and Roman classics, English and French literature, and philosophy. Moving to London in 1861, he had access to great paintings, music, and the theater. During these years, he often read in his room from six o'clock in the evening until midnight. In a touching gesture, a few hours after his death the scarlet robe of his honorary D. Litt. from Cambridge (1913) was fitted over his nightshirt. His favorite Spirit of Irony, of which he was the most eloquent voice of his age, must have smiled.

The year 1998 marked the centennial of the publication of Hardy's first volume of verse, *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*. Hardy's poetic career covered the second half of his life, from the 1890s, when he abandoned fiction, following his critical bludgeoning after the publication of *Tess* (1891) and *Jude* (1895), to his death. But for many years he had been studying poetry—Greek, Latin, French, and English poetics—and he had already pub-

lished a few poems. His often-printed "Hap" dates from 1866 when he was 26.³ Here, with a note of unmerited suffering, he complains, like Job, on the source of his pain. We have here an early suggestion of Hardy's concept of an indifferent cosmos and an uncaring Primal Cause. Life, it seems, is a matter of blind Chance:

...How arrives its joy lies slain,
 And why unblooms the best hope ever
 sown?
 Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a
 moan....
 These purblind Doomsters had as readily
 strown
 Bliss about my pilgrimage as pain....⁴

Hardy's basic philosophy only grew darker with the years. And though he lived to see the end of World War I, the so-called Jazz Age, and especially the changes in subject-matter, style, and technique in poetry, under the aegis of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and their followers, and the French Symbolists, Hardy's poetry did not change in content or form. He remained consistent with his own individuality.

Critical responses to his *Wessex Poems* were mixed, ranging from somewhat favorable to puzzlement to harshly negative. "What induces Hardy to commit himself to verse?" exclaimed Meredith. The *Saturday Review* noted "this curious and wearisome volume, these many slovenly, slipshod, uncouth verses, stilted in sentiment, poorly conceived, and worse wrought.... It is impossible to understand why the bulk of this volume was published at all." A more sympathetic critic, Lionel Johnson, who had already written on an early Hardy novel, noted "the arresting, strenuous, sometimes admirable poems," but regretted their "almost uniform grimness and absence of Humour."⁵ Hardy himself complained not of the critics' unkindnesses, but that their comments had shown "such depths of

imperceptivity.”⁶

But there were some alleviating comments. Although reviews tended to focus upon the technique of the poetry rather than the content, one reviewer complaining of “the unmusical expression,” another found “little to please the ear, but much to please the mind that is capable of the charm of melancholy.” One reviewer wrote in *The Bookman* that Hardy was “essentially a poet.... What justifies Mr. Hardy’s verse to the full is his gift of a peculiar intensity of expression which could hardly find legitimate use in prose.” And even reviewers disturbed by Hardy’s pessimism found the poems “challenging.” *The Athenaeum* found that Hardy’s poems “voiced a matured and deliberate judgment of life.”⁷

Of course the repeated note on Hardy’s pessimism resonated again. Hardy rejected the term, insisting that he was only “a harmless agnostic” or, as he called himself, an “evolutionary meliorist,” implying a hope that as human intelligence and conscience developed, conditions in the world must improve. In an interview in January 1901 he said, “My practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but a plea against man’s inhumanity to man—to woman—and to the lower animals?” As Michael Millgate observes

Fundamentally pessimistic about the human condition, in the sense that he believed birth and coming to consciousness to be a kind of original doom, Hardy could nevertheless respond with compassion to human and animal suffering, and bring a reformist zeal to bear upon evils perceived as social and hence as potentially susceptible to amelioration or even eradication.... Abstractly, theoretically, generally, he could only see an incomprehensible and probably meaningless universe; concretely, practically, specifically he cared deeply about the human condition, perceived value in individual lives, supported humanitarian causes, and thought that things could and indeed did get better.⁸

The opening poem of Hardy’s first volume, “The Temporary The All,” is typically Hardian, with “the dense stresses, the strict yet unfamiliar forms, the inverted syntax, the archaisms and odd coinages.”⁹ But we may find two other surprising aspects. First, there is a link to the complex, often inverted, jammed-up, oddly-worded poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). Contemporary with Hardy, Hopkins’s poems were not published until 1918, ten years before Hardy’s death; and Hardy’s first volume of poetry was published nine years after Hopkins’s death. Of course, spiritually they were widely disjunct: Hardy, the agnostic, and Hopkins, the anguished Jesuit priest. But the stylistic echoes are intriguing. Another bit of shadow-casting links Hardy and Robert Frost. Both are acute depictees of nature and human nature, and of a specific locale—Hardy, of the “Wessex” country of south-western England (the country around Dorchester), and Frost, of New England.

But more important is the fact that both poets profit aesthetically from being read aloud. In Hardy’s poems, the oral tradition is especially evident. He grew up with gifted narrators in his family, with their stores of local legends and country sayings. He was “probably England’s last and greatest product of the oral tradition.”¹⁰ In the style of oral rendering, Hardy often uses ballad-measures, narratives of love betrayed or lost, and folk legends. Further, the poems of both Hardy and Frost frequently contain rough metrical lines or passages, that create a bumpy effect. When such lines are read aloud, however, the metrical roughness easily absorbs into the natural stresses and pauses of a conversational tone—a principle Frost was later to describe as “the sound of sense.” Hardy may or may not have known the poetry of Hopkins. Frost did know Hardy’s work, once commenting, in another context, that “Hardy has planted himself upon the

wrongs that can't be righted."¹¹

Hardy's second volume of poetry, *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901), received generally more positive reviews. In his *Preface* to this volume, anticipating criticism about "a lack of cohesion and thought or harmony of coloring," he wrote, "I do not greatly regret this. Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to me to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of phenomena as they are forced upon us by time and chance."¹² There is much essential Hardy here, particularly in the shaping and often fateful forces of Coincidence and Time.

So, for nearly thirty years Hardy wrote poetry: love poems and narratives, dramatic monologues and dialogues, occasional poems, and philosophical and theological speculations. *The Dynasts*, his epical three-part verse drama of the Napoleonic Wars, first conceived in 1875, was completed in 1908. It entailed reading history and military history, plus invoking family and regional legends, as well as contacts with old men who had lived through some of the campaigns. Never intended for stage production, parts of *The Dynasts* have nevertheless been staged. Hardy had planned to publish his last poems, *Winter Words*, on his ninetieth birthday. It was posthumously published in 1928 by his second wife, Florence, who noted that even in his old age she had seen no decrease in his poetic powers.

The inner and outer freedoms of Hardy's poems, plus tonal and stylistic links to such poets as Hopkins and Frost, suggest this poetry is definitely pre-modern. Increasingly a significant presence, since the 1970s and notably in the last fifteen years, Hardy's work has engaged fulsome and various literary scholarship. There are new biographies and interpretive volumes. Critics of diverse stances have discovered unsuspected depths and dimensions. Exponents of structuralism,

post-structuralism, and semiotics have offered new insights.¹³ Detailed studies have focused upon Hardy's repetitions; on his use of prosopoeia; the "gaps" in time and perspective in the poems. And literary psychologists have invoked Freud in discussing the *Poems of 1912-1913*, the 21-poem elegiac sequence written after the death of his first wife, Emma, in 1912.

Nor should we forget the recent emergence of Hardy novels on television, responding to Hardy's powerful and characteristic dramatic impulse. We have seen stagings of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Far From The Madding Crowd*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Several versions of several novels, some of which Hardy himself adapted for the stage, were produced in London and Dorchester during his lifetime; and in the twenties a proposal to publish all of the novels as dramas was seriously considered.

I wish now to consider six poems, suggestive of Hardy's poetic art and of various states of mind and heart, youthful and aged. I am primarily concerned here not with contemporary technical exegesis, but with the poems as they show Hardy's capacities for lyrical expression, and as they document particular situations and emotions that become universally moving.

Hardy was one of the most autobiographical of poets. For years he carried pocket notebooks in which he recorded acute observations of natural scenes, rural characters and events, animals, ideas for poems, moods and moments of the human drama. Anything might become the basis for a poem; and judging from the massive corpus of his *Collected Poems*, nearly anything did. Often the poems were specifically dated—day, month, or year. But since many of them suggest a kind of inherited "peasant caution," background information is sometimes necessary. "When I Set Out For Lyonesse" profits from such knowledge.

In 1870, Hardy was assigned by his employer, an ecclesiastical architect, to design the re-building of an old church at St. Joliet, a tiny hamlet in Cornwall, near the fabled Lyonesse, known in Celtic mythology as the birthplace of Tristram. Immediately, we have a highly appropriate and romantic setting. Calling on the rector of the old church, he was met by the rector's sister-in-law, Emma Lavinia Gifford, a niece of the Archdeacon of London. It was a fateful meeting, for it involved the following 42 years of their lives. Hardy's visit lasted four days; their marriage, in 1874, lasted 38 years.

"When I Set Out for Lyonesse"

*When I set out for Lyonesse
A hundred miles away,
The rime was on the spray,
And starlight lit my lonesomeness
When I set out for Lyonesse
A hundred miles away.*

*What would bechance at Lyonesse
While I should sojourn there
No prophet durst declare,
Nor did the wisest wizard guess
What would bechance at Lyonesse
While I should sojourn there.*

*When I came back from Lyonesse
With magic in my eyes,
All marked with mute surmise,
My radiance rare and fathomless,
When I came back from Lyonesse
With magic in my eyes!¹⁴*

This poem records a journey, a departure and a return. It is also a record of a transforming experience. The "lightness" of tone contrasts sharply with the deep and permanent significance of the event. The first stanza gives a nighttime departure, in a mood of characteristic Hardian "loneliness." In the second stanza, we feel a mysterious immanence. In the third stanza, a transformation has occurred. But we did not see it. It has happened between the second and third verses—

an example of one of Hardy's "gaps"—a shift in time or perspective, here, from loneliness to "rapture," and from past to present. This poem "feels" as though the opening two lines came "ready-made," out of an intense emotion. The development needed only to follow the given direction.

The form is a Hardy "original." The basic ballad-form is individualized in both rhyme and metrical patterns. In each stanza, the first and fifth, and the second and sixth lines are identical. This both emphasizes the opening line, and also forms a "frame" for the inner lines that tell the "story." And the repetition enhances the overall lyrical effect. The lyricism is increased by the phoneme "s" which ends 12 of the 18 lines of the poem. The melodic word "Lyonesse" gives the initial pattern, which Hardy intuitively followed. I say "intuitively," because we have here an interesting example of "sound symbolism" or articulatory gesture,¹⁵ in which the movement of the speech organs echoes or imitates or reproduces a quality or characteristic or feature of the referend. Here, the referend is a journey, which embodies movement. "S" is a fricative, like "f" or "v," and here the movement aspect of the letter "s" underlines the basic fact of the poem, namely, movement. The total effect of all the elements here makes this one of Hardy's most graceful, and charming love lyrics. Hardy did have "magic in his eyes," because he had fallen deeply in love with Emma.

But, alas, romance does not always last. Our second poem, "The Walk," written 42 years later, belongs to the 21-poem sequence, *Poems of 1912-1913*, which Hardy began only a few weeks after Emma's death. Responses to this group move from "some of the most unconventional and impressive elegies in English," to "one of the best three series of love poems in English," to "some of the finest love poetry in our language."¹⁶ In con-

trast, however, a fulsome amount of Freudian interpretation suggests that in these poems Hardy expiates years of neglect and indifference to Emma, his self-reproach being intensified on reading her diaries of 20 years, in which she complained bitterly of his indifference. This theme is critically expanded into indifference, neglect, anger, guilt, self-reproach.

Probably there is much to be said on both sides. Hardy was determined to do his writing, and artists are not the most easy people to live with. Emma had literary aspirations of her own, wrote some essays and poems, and often assisted Hardy with his manuscripts. She resented his growing fame, and her own subordination. Also, there were several women to whom Hardy was attracted, and whose literary aspirations he encouraged and assisted. One of these was Florence Dugdale, first his secretary, and later, his second wife, whom he married in 1914, and who published the *Life* (1928-1930) and *Winter Words* (1928). All of this, then, the bitter sense of a failed marriage which had begun so rosilily, inspired the Emma-sequence. Altogether, over the years, Hardy wrote more than 100 elegies for Emma, memorializing his courtship and idealizing the early relationship.

The Walk

You did not walk with me
Of late to the hill-top tree
By the gated ways,
As in earlier days;
You were weak and lame.
So you never came,
And I went alone, and I did not mind,
Not thinking of you as left behind.

I walked up there to-day
Just in the former way;
Surveyed around
The familiar ground
By myself again;
What difference, then?
Only that underlying sense
Of the look of a room on returning
thence.¹⁷

"The Walk" seems not to have attracted much attention. It is short and poignant, and lacks the dramatic "anger" or "self-reproach" now so often read into other poems in the sequence. Between the stanzas we sense the frequent time-shift from past to present. The poet recalls that often in the evening he and Emma had walked a spiral path from the end of the garden to a "hilltop tree." Later, for physical reasons, his companion did not accompany him; but he "did not mind," having still the sense of her presence. In the second stanza, now a present moment, he walks again the familiar path. Nothing has changed. "What difference, then?" he asks.

Only that underlying sense
Of the look of a room on returning thence.

It does not take Freud to define the peculiar impact of this brief poem. But this poem is not for everyone. It is only for one who has known that painful moment of entering a place haunted by the sense of a beloved personality, now lost. There is a moment of starkness. One does not want to enter. It is as simple as that. As simple as the difference between Life and Death.

In keeping with the situation, the diction is flat, prosaic, with the colloquial, "I did not mind." In 1914, Lytton Strachey commented on "the flat undistinguished poetry of Mr. Hardy," but added, "Hardy has found out the secret of touching our marrow-bone."¹⁸ This is another example of Hardy's intuitive power.

The visual pattern of the poem is created by its varied metrics, the first two lines being trimeter, the next four, dimeter, and the last two, tetrameter. With his keen structural sensitivity, enhanced by his architectural experience, Hardy designed his poems for the eye as well as for the ear. Further, I suggest that this rhythmical variation may have been

an instinctive response to the physical situation. The walk covered a slightly uphill path. The varied meters may reflect the physical “pull” as the walker adapted to the varying levels. And the ground is “familiar”—physical and psychic. He has done it all before. But the sting is in the last two lines. This poem is a special kind of human document, for a special kind of reader.

Hardy has a genius for last lines. We see it repeatedly, as in our next poem, “The Oxen”:

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

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

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

*“In the lonely barton by yonder coomb,¹⁹
Our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.²⁰*

This poem is dated 1915, when Hardy was 75. Its four stanzas carry the poet back to the lost certainties of childhood and youth. Each half of two stanzas marks a time period: past and present. The first half presents a rural meeting on Christmas Eve, a group gathered in a “flock,” recalling a folk belief of cattle kneeling at midnight. The second half contrasts this “fair fancy,” which no one there doubted, with “these years,” a twentieth-century world now in the second year of World War I. The poem conveys a sense of profound wistfulness, and regret.

For, arriving in London, in 1861, at the beginning of the turbulent 1860s, Hardy

had gradually lost his youthful religious faith. Traditionalism was under various assaults; from Darwinism, the scientism and agnosticism of T.H. Huxley, the agnostic oratory of Robert Ingersoll, the Oxford Movement, especially the voice of the future Cardinal Newman, and Liberalism, the “Higher Criticism,” lately arrived from Europe. Plunged into this ideational vortex, Hardy, like many English intellectuals such as Matthew Arnold, whom he knew and whose influence he noted, was unable to maintain his early beliefs. He continued, however, to respond to the music and rituals of religious service, which answered both his emotional and his aesthetic needs, and which had given direction to his early social ambition, when his dream was to be a parson. Indeed, he once amazed a group of both Christians and agnostics, when he shyly admitted to being a believing communicant of the Church of England.²¹ This apparent inconsistency is really a matter of different levels of intellectual and emotional involvements. Millgate notes that much of Hardy’s best work “emerged directly from the juxtaposition of deeply traditional attitudes and intensely localized country lore, with an emotional susceptibility to the music and ritual of the Church of England, and a subsequent intellectual acceptance of some of the more radical and skeptical trends in late nineteenth-century thought. Remarkably, these influences did not supersede each other, but co-existed.”²²

The appropriate ballad form, with its lyrical rhymes and meters, makes this poem especially touching. But there are some significant metrical variations in which the basic iambic pattern becomes trochaic: as in “Christmas Eve,” “Now,” in the second line, “in these years” in the third stanza, followed by a caesural pause. “Yet” another heavy accent, “Come, see,” both accented, and the last line, “Hoping.” The heavily accented words are all

key words. "Might," the subjunctive verb, emphasizes the contrary-to-fact impulse of the poem. We are left with the sad knowledge that this lovely folk-belief is indeed a "fairy tale." The diction is appropriately simple, most of the words being of one syllable, with the dialectical "barton" and "coomb." "Gloom" is metaphoric, suggesting both the darkness of midnight and the poet's aging spirit. The integration of all the elements—situation, form, diction, theme, metrics, and tone—makes this one of Hardy's memorable poems.

For a change of key, here is "Starlings on the Roof":

*"No smoke spreads out of this chimney-pot,
The people who lived here have left the
spot,
And others are coming who knew them
not....*

*"If you listen anon, with an ear intent,
The voices, you'll find, will be different
From the well-known ones of those who
went."*

*"Why did they go? Their tones so bland
Were quite familiar to our band;
The comers we shall not understand."*

*"They look for a new life, rich and strange;
They do not know that, let them range
Wherever they may, they will get no change.*

*"They will drag their house-gear ever so far
In their search for a home no miseries mar;
They will find that as they were they are,*

*"That every hearth has a ghost, alack,
And can be but the scene of a bivouac
Till they move their last—no care to pack!"²³*

This is an avian dialogue that may remind us of an Aesop's fable in the bird's comment on a perennially foolish humanity. The theme, a domestic "moving," notes an empty house, the occupants having left in hope of bettering their situation. "Why did they go?" asks

the second bird. The first three stanzas simply offer casual comment. But with the fourth stanza an ominous note develops. "Seeking a new life," answers the first bird. But, he continues, wherever they go, "They will get no change," nor will they find a home with "no miseries," until their final move. There can be no real change for the movers, for they must take themselves with them. The "answers" are uttered with a flat calmness, the fatalistic equations brooking neither addition nor subtraction. It is not a comforting observation.

We must not overlook the poem's title. It is starlings that sit on the roof and make their sardonic comments. Hardy knows his birds. It is not robins, or mourning doves, or some other species of quite friendly birds. Starlings are chatty, noisy, greedy, aggressive. They are well cast here as doom-sayers. This poem could appear in a collection of Frost's poems. Both Frost and Hardy are fond of conversational, philosophical birds, and both can make their birds suggest doom-like implications.

We continue with a darkly contrasting "bird poem," possibly the most anthologized Hardy poem. Originally titled "By the Century's Deathbed," it is known and loved as "The Darkling Thrush," and even our cursory sampling must include it. The poem is dated December 31, 1900, and marks the hour of transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Perhaps it may hold special meaning now as we enter a new millennium.

The poet, presumably on a walk, leans upon a coppice (a small wood) gate, from which he records a desolate winter scene: a generally deathlike aspect. The frost is "spectre"-like, the "dregs" of winter in the "darkling" (deepening) twilight increase the sense of desolation, and local "haunters" have retreated to fireside warmth. All aspects, "the sharp features" of the landscape, combine to suggest the century's "corpse"; the sky its "crypt"

and the wind is “death-lament.” The remains of vegetation, the “ancient pulse of germ and birth” is “shrunk hard and dry,” and Hardy (now at the age of 60), identifies in spirit with the depressive scene.

*I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day,
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.*

*The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunk hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.*

*At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.*

*So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, wherof he knew
And I was unaware.²⁴*

The poem is divided into two equal halves, the first presenting the winter scene. But the second half moves us from Death to Life. And now comes the wonderful third stanza. It marks a triple “transposition” into a different key, like moving from a minor to a major mode. First, the plane of action rises from ground-level to “overhead”; second, the

poet's vision moves from eyes to ears; third, we sense at least a suggestion of a “lightening” of the poet's spirit from his “fervourless” state. What has happened? From above, in the “bleak twigs” comes

*...a full-hearted even-song
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.*

This bird—not a starling—is a thrush, a bird with a particularly clear, sweet, liquid song. This is an old bird; and he is having a hard time. The physical details are pictorial: Not only is he markedly frail, but the sharp wind has ruffled his feathers, and we can almost see the tail-feathers blown nearly inside-out by the sharp blast. The contrast between his appearance and his song is noteworthy. How can that song project such joy into this “growing gloom”? The poet can see no reason for such brightness “on terrestrial things,” or near or far. But now he touches on “some blessed Hope,” “whereof he knew/ And I was unaware.”

Hardy is suggesting here that the bird, through its natural wisdom, brings comfort and relief from the present desolation which the poet himself, with all his obsession for knowledge, has so far not discovered. The thrush not only sings; he “flings his soul” upon this desolate world. He takes his place here like a small, death-defying soldier, confronting, with his sacred essence, an implacable death-dealing universe. Hardy would have known that for ages a bird has been a symbol for the soul. Here the bird seems illumined by a ray of special grace which throws Life against the Death-aura of the scene. As we feel the literal upsurge of the situation, I think we may regard this poem as one of the “permanent things” in the repertory of English poetry.

The ballad-like form is metrically flawless in its tetrameter/trimeter progression, with but one exception:

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small

The first two feet and the last are perfect lambs. But in the third foot, "frail" and "gaunt," each syllable is heavily accented, and further, each is set off by a caesura. This double emphasis heightens the contrast between the frail old bird and his life-giving message. We should also note that the marked regularity of the poem's movement is unusual for Hardy, who did not like too much "smoothness" in lines. But his basic response to experience is emotional (usually quickly moved to a rational level) and here the "gloom-to-joy" progression and the climactic song underlie the lyrical effect. The integration of all the elements—the subject, theme, the singable ballad-measure, the metaphors, gloom to joy, and death to hope—makes this a favored Hardy poem.

The characteristic "gloom," however, leads us now to Hardy's theological-philosophical poems of questioning and speculation. Hardy is not a philosopher. He is a poet. His speculative knowledge, based in his wide but not strictly organized reading, his supersensitive responses to experience, his intuitive powers, his deep compassion for human and animal suffering, his romantic temperament, and his keen social conscience contribute to his special genius, and to his basic attitude toward life and the universe. He was continually trying to explain to himself the mystery of the origin of Evil in its variety, and getting no answer except in his sense of a dark universe, created by some Primal Cause and then left to run itself, at the mercy of Time and Chance, exerting untold woes on sentient life. He had differing names for his Primal power: "It," the Prime Mover, the Immanent Will, Nature, the Spinner of the Years, the

Absolute, the Causer, God.

There is considerable variety in these poems, a variety that suggests aspects of Hardy's view of existence. Some, especially those of his last years, such as "The Absolute Answers," are long, 16 or 18 stanzas. Sometimes they are dialogues between the speaker (the poet) and Deity, who may answer in a voice that somewhat suggests the God who speaks to Man in Genesis. (Hardy had read the Bible through more than once, and he frequently annotated texts or passages, upon which later poems were based.) By the middle of his twenties, he had already established a kind of philosophical home base which did not essentially change over the years, except, perhaps, to darken. Most of these poems are too long for presentation here, but we can do quite well with a few sample quotations. Perhaps it is important to note that sometimes Hardy called these intellectual excursions "Phantasies," which gives them a sort of fable-quality.

In the early "Nature's Questioning," the poet perceives various aspects of Nature—"Field, flock, and lonely tree," sadly asking "why we find us here."

*"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, brains and
eye now gone?"²⁵*

This poem concludes, "No answerer I." But here we have most of the basic premises.

In "The Sleep-Worker," the poet addresses Nature as "the Mother" (in modern mythology, "The Great Mother") as having created "unwittingly"

Fair growths, foul cankers, right enmeshed
with wrong,
Strange orchestras of victim-shriek and
song....²⁶

and asks, should Nature some day “wake”
to her creations,

“How wilt thou bear thyself in thy sur-
prise?
Wilt thou destroy in one wild shock of
shame
The whole high heaving firmamental frame,
Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?”

Again, Hardy’s “last line” hits home.
The heavy iambic accents highlight the
conclusion, which offers a faint hope that
a suffering universe may one day be re-
lieved. The progression is meaningful.
There is a dim hope here for ultimate
betterment in the universal scheme.

A similar hope may be discerned in
“To the Unknown God” (the original title
is written in Greek), in which the poet
addresses a “Willer masked and dumb/
Who makest Life become,” and asks

*“How much of consciousness informs Thy will,
Thy biddings, as if blind,
Of death-inducing kind,
Nought shows to us ephemeral ones who fill
But moments in thy mind.”*

Perhaps, he suggests,

*“that listless effort tends
To grow percipient with advance of days,
And with percipience mends.”²⁷*

Perhaps this universal wrong may one
day be discerned as “a wrong/ Dying as of
self-slaughter...?”

These samples may imply Hardy’s fun-
damental attitudes toward universal life.
It is quite wrong to brand Hardy as an
“atheist.” Agnostic, yes. He does not
know. But who does? He is deeply reli-
gious in temperament, and simply be-

lieved that “if way to the Better there be/
It exacts a full look at the Worst.”²⁸ Hardy
observed, meditated, and wrote what he
believed to be truth—at least, for him-
self, at a time when such sentiments
were, to say the least, unfashionable, and
were often harshly criticized.

I select our final poem not because its
subject has captivated the public for 86
years—in the last several years almost to
the point of popular hysteria—but be-
cause this is an extraordinary, even an
amazing poem. Hardy titled it, “The Con-
vergence of the Twain,” and it was writ-
ten within two weeks of the catastrophe.
It was “made” for him, in its subject,
theme, instances of coincidence and
irony, and essential tragedy. I refer, of
course, to the sinking of the *Titanic*, on
April 14, 1912.

I

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

II

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

III

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

IV

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

V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: “What does this vain glorious-
ness down here?” ...

VI

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

VII

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

VIII

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

IX

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

X

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

XI

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two
hemispheres.²⁹

This is an "occasional" poem, one written for a special situation or occasion. Hardy is especially effective with this type of poem, another memorable one being "And There Was a Great Calm," written shortly after the end of World War I, and commemorating Armistice Day, November 11, 1918.

The Titanic disaster is toned by Hardy's favorite voice, Irony. The story is one of *hubris*, and Hardy saw in it the spirit of classical tragedy. Historically, this disaster came to symbolize the end of an era—when Victorian smugness and sense of certainty gave way to its opposite, a loss of certainty and confidence which has colored life ever since.

The poem is divided into eleven three-line stanzas, numbered in Roman numerals, suggesting formality and care. Stanzas one through five, and six through ten divide the poem neatly into two parts, with the final stanza acting as a kind of "summary," and stating the critical moment of the action.

The first stanza is itself extraordinary. In twenty words and three lines we are given the setting, the theme, and the situation. In "solitude," 12,460 feet deep in the North Atlantic, far removed from human vanity and pride, "stilly couches she." The inverted syntax puts the (female) subject of the poem and of the long sentence at the end, now calm, and as though she is resting. Contrasting the elegance of the ship and its passengers, "the opulent" with the dark subterranean depths, we meet again this theme of "vain gloriousness." (We remember that this ship was designated "unsinkable.")

In the second five stanzas we begin to sense a growing tension. Thousands of miles away, "a sinister mate for her," "so gaily great," a "Shape of Ice" is slowly developing:

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

Nothing, it would seem, could have been farther apart than these two *dramatis personae*.

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

Here again is Hardy's law of coincidence. And then the climax:

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

The imagery of the poem, the personification of the ship and the iceberg, She, feminine, "a creature of cleaving wing" half-bird and half-ship and the Shape, presumably masculine, but more effective for not being specifically described, are brought together for the main metaphor of the poem, a "consummation"—a kind of unholy marriage, an "intimate welding." And we know that never again will this ship and this iceberg be sundered.

A marked use of alliteration in the poem can be discerned, for example, in stanza IV:

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

The metrical pattern is also interesting: basically iambic, and the accent on the last line falls heavily on "bleared" and "black" and "blind." The first two lines of each stanza are in trimeter, the last line being in hexameter. Twice three is six. It is easy to feel that each of the two short lines suggests one of the actors in this drama, and the last line, the coming together of the two. Also, if you look at the visual pattern of any stanza in the original publication, you see that the lines form an outline of a ship. Here again, Hardy's architectural sense seems to be working.

There is a significant shift in the tone of the poem, from the formal quality of the first half to the more relaxed conversational tone introduced by "Well." Then follows an answer to the question, "What does this vain gloriousness down here?" We note also that the first five stanzas—the first half—are all in the present tense. The next five shift to the past tense, which continues until the "Now!" of the last verse when, at the moment of the "consummation," the present tense comes, making the climax immediate and effective.

The poem is masterly, and a fitting conclusion to our sample consideration of Hardy's poetry. As analyses continue, we will increasingly find Hardy to be the poet he always was, and as he wished to be known.

Hardy is not Shakespeare or Milton or Wordsworth or Yeats, though he may have affinities with each. And in the massive corpus of his poetry there is some inevitable unevenness. Sometimes the polemic of a poem weighs too heavily on the "poetry." Sometimes the technical ingenuity becomes the major focus.

Nevertheless, today Hardy looms like a modern Colossus, bestriding the pages of English poetry, one foot firmly on the nineteenth century, the other on the shores of the twentieth, while beneath, the swirling waters of poetic fashions come and go. As Ezra Pound said of T.S. Eliot, "Read him!" It is a fitting epigraph.

1. "To Life," *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1937), 107. 2. Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy, A Biography* (New York, 1982), 575. 3. "Hap," a person's luck or fate. A happening. 4. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 7. 5. Quoted in *Thomas Hardy, A Biography*, 394. 6. *Ibid.* 7. Quoted in Neil Covey, "The Decline of Poetry and Hardy's Empty Hall," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 31 (Spring 1993), 63. 8. *Thomas Hardy, A Biography*, 410-411. 9. *Ibid.*, 392-393. 10. *Ibid.*, 36-37. 11. John E. Walsh, *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost* (New York, 1988), 224. 12. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 75. 13. Lance St. John Butler, *Alternative Hardy* (London,

1989), xi. 14. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 293. 15. See Otto Jespersen, Edward Sapir, Alexander Johannessen, E. Prokosh, Sir Richard Paget. 16. Quoted in Jahan Ramazani, "Hardy and the Poetics of Melancholia: Poems of 1912-13 and other Elegies of Emma," *English Literary History*, Vol. 58 (Winter 91), 957. 17. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 320. 18. In the *New Statesman*. Quoted in *Hardy, A Biography* (New York, 1994), 810. 19. "barton," dialect, a barnyard. "coomb," dialect, a small valley or hollow. 20. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 439. 21. Ford Madox Ford, "Thomas Hardy," *Portraits from Life* (New York, 1937), 137. 22. *Thomas*

Hardy, A Biography, 38-39. 23. *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 366. 24. *Ibid.*, 137. 25. *Ibid.*, 58. 26. *Ibid.*, 110. 27. *Ibid.*, 171. 28. *Ibid.*, "In Tenebris," II, 154. 29. *Ibid.*, 288.

The Light Does Not Change

Painting a neighborhood you paint the world.
Portraits of doctors, postmen, wives, daughters—

Figures who came to an atelier looking for God knows what,
but becoming companions, parts of dreams—look out

At us or at each other naturally, as they sit or stand,
being themselves even in the careful, long-held poses, playing

At being themselves, holding a glass, toweling off from a bath,
dancing a little, all a-wonder that "an artist would bother us

"To do such things, pay good money, talk to us afterwards,
in a while treat us as friends. Oh, and at times take us outdoors—

"Here, hold this watering-can. Look at your dog. Stay'—
until a cloud appears, and he throws up his brush, helpless,

"Complaining about the light. Why does light matter so much?
What's light? 'The one model that won't hold a pose.'

"That's what he says, peeved, then adds another daub:
'The painter's third eye. It's work to see anything well,

"But to see for years to come, to make others see, takes
light of a subtle kind, one that can—eventually—be made to stay."

Did they guess—they too were made of light? No painter
would insist, too strongly. Gentlemanly Renoir, courteous Sisley

Among floods and snows: nothing escaped them. Even the poses
radiate into movement. Monsieur, mademoiselle, le petit

Haven't gone anywhere, caught up in an eerily constant sun.
We follow their gestures, smiles—alive, more than many

Of the living. Casual as kisses, they're our neighbors, too.
We invite them into our lives. We invite the world.

—Robert Champ