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Hardy's Poetry and the Rhetoric of Negation

The spirit of protest and negation that characterizes Hardy's treatment of Victorian attitudes is the expression of a divided response to the intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century. Hardy, his first biographer records, both "expanded with triumph" and "shrank into nothing"¹ at his confrontation with rationalism. The triumphant expansions are seldom recorded in his poetry, for the same knowledge that inspired Swinburne to enthusiastic song and that prompted Meredith to construct a naturalistic allegory of salvation produced in Hardy a spiritual paralysis and a numbing awareness of isolation. Although comforting old creeds were, to Hardy's mind, "as dead as Pterodactyls" (*LY*, p. 121), the new knowledge brought with it, after all, "only sadness, as the Preacher saith."²

The several conflicts in Hardy's thought have been divorced from his poetic technique and given searching attention in a number of articles and isolated chapters. The elements of his versification, too, have been statistically analyzed, the categories of diction and imagery tabulated and the rhyme schemes charted and graphed.³ Yet, of some half-dozen full-length studies of Hardy's poetry, only one explores the relationship between Hardy's divided vision and the elements of his poetic style.⁴

The conflict in Hardy's poetry is most accessible in the many clashing disparities, the "almost unimaginable contrasts"⁵ of both theme and poetic technique. In what Samuel Hynes defines as the most characteristic of Hardy's "antinomial patterns", thesis is set against antithesis "to form an ironic complex, which is left unresolved."⁶ Hardy's ability to hold opposites together without interpretive comment or final synthesis can be illustrated by several debate poems that treat the apparently irreconcilable internal conflict of the mind "in dialogue with itself". In "At a Seaside Town in 1869"⁷ the objective and subjective faculties make their respective journeys outward and inward, but the speaker arrives at no synthesis:

I went and stood outside myself,
 Spelled the dark sky
 And the ship-lights nigh,
 And grumbling winds that passed thereby.

Then next inside myself I looked
 And there, above
 All, shone my love,
 That nothing matched the image of.

The disparity between inner and outer, and the speaker's inability to reconcile the two, is the theme of several poems, notably "The Dream is—Which?" and "A Dream or No".

The clashing antinomies—whether between reason and emotion or between dream and reality—are one expression of the intellectual conflict and emotional paralysis that are present in Hardy's poetry, and they provide a useful rubric for the subordination of poetic technique to thematic statement, for the assessment of what Hardy, in praise of William Barnes, called "closeness of phrase to vision".⁸ But the motif of unreconciled antinomies is not, as has been suggested, "the single pattern which alone does no violence to (Hardy's) vision."⁹ What one discovers about the majority of Hardy's essentially "antinomial" poems is that the positive value, the thesis, is negated, undercut, or ironically qualified through a great variety of techniques. There is less frequently an "ironic complex" of incongruities jostling together indiscriminately, than a consistent pattern and tone of negation. The negating impulse, working through such devices as the debate, the cumulative sequence of negatives, the negative particle, the subjunctive mood, and through a spare and unmellifluous idiom of fatigue steadily undercuts the voice of hope and expectation.

The structure of negation that conforms most closely to the antinomial pattern is the relatively perfunctory two-part poem in which expectation or hope is abruptly cancelled by unfulfillment or "unhope". No ironic tension stiffens these poems; they accept without protest the message of Yell'ham Wood, that "Life offers—to deny!" ("Yell'ham Wood's Story," *CP*, p. 280) "Expectation and Experience"¹⁰ is typical of the two-part negation. The old woman in the poem does not ask much of life; she would spend her one holiday at a country fair, for "Of all the places for being jolly, / And getting rid of melancholy" the fair seems the likeliest place. The "Experience" rather facilely cancels "Expectation,"
 for

it rained in torrents,
drenching
Every horse, and sheep, and yeoman . . .
Everything was spirit-quenching.

When experience does not contradict expectation in the narrative, Hardy's personae are nevertheless conditioned to think of life as an alternation of destructive opposites, as in the playfully ironic "First or Last" (*CP*, p. 616):

If grief comes early
Joy comes late,
If joy comes early,
Grief will wait;
Aye, my dear and tender!

Both poems recall a notebook entry for October 25, 1870: "Mother's notion (and also mine)—that a figure stands in our van with arm up-lifted, to knock us back from any pleasant prospect we indulge in as probable."¹¹

An extension of the two-part negation structure is the "debate" poem in which the voice of irony systematically deflates expectation or replies sardonically to the questioner. The debate can be mechanical and dramatically static—a kind of Punch and Judy show—as in "Memory and I" (*CP*, p. 170). In successive stanzas Memory reports that youth, joy and love are phantoms, hope a spectre and faith a ghost. A more dynamic structure is that in which the voice of negation progressively reduces alternatives or systematically narrows the speaker's grounds for optimism. "Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave" (*CP*, p. 310) is perhaps the most representative of this structure, and it reminds the reader that Hardy's favourite poem by Housman ("Is My Team Ploughing?") is built on the same opposition of expectation and reality.¹²

The pattern of the individual life parallels the course of man's intellectual history. The ironic "Drinking Song" (*WW*, p. 155) telescopes the progressive disillusionment of the human race into the compass of nine stanzas. "Fill full your cups: feel no distress;/'Tis only one great thought the less!"—punctuates each instance of man's diminishing status and playfully suggests a cure. In at least three other poems the refrain alone tells the story of diminishing joy or mounting sorrow. By its own kind of incremental repetition the refrain of "John and Jane" (*CP*, p. 193) registers the gradual transformation of life as a "boisterous

place" to life as a "gruesome place,/Where fair looks fade to a skull's grimace" as parenthood follows irresponsible youth and happy courtship. The repetition of the slightly altered line is frequently the structural device by which Hardy enumerates the details of loss, as when "Five of us . . ." dwindle numerically to "One of us . . ." in five consecutive stanzas ("The Five Students," *CP*, p. 463), or when, conversely, the "One out there . . ." grows to "Five out there . . ." ("Looking Across," *CP*, p. 468).

The several structural patterns of negation are reinforced by a number of rhetorical devices, all of which negate or depress the positive values in Hardy's poetry. At the level of the single word Hardy can yet imply a destructive antithesis. The negative particle *un* serves as Hardy's tersest counter; it appears in his notes—"Experience unteaches"—and gets into many of his titles. Even where the language is rich in synonyms for the word he might use, Hardy prefers the privative: *unsight* for blindness, *undoubt* for faith, *unobscuring* for transparent. In some instances the usage may signify nothing more than a straining after eccentricity, or a determination to avoid the "poetic" or the positive word. Characteristically, however, it sets "ought to be" against "is" to reinforce this dramatic irony of the poem in which it operates. Thus Hope "unblooms" and Nature "unknows" or "unheeds" her creatures. It functions in much the same way as the many suspended negatives in Hardy's poetry: it summons in order that it may banish, and, in Alice Meynell's words, "keeps the living word present to hear sentence and denial, showing the word 'unloved' to be not less than archangel ruined."¹³

An effect of tentativeness, of tenuous or suspended affirmation, can be achieved also by the use of the subjunctive. The subjunctive moods of such poems as "The Oxen" and "The Darkling Thrush" are well known, but even Hardy's "believers", when confronted with inexplicable suffering, retreat behind the subjunctive. Hardy's bed-ridden peasant (*CP*, p. 113) invents excuses for the Maker: some disaster must surely have cleft God's scheme so that no human cry can cross the chasm, for God is "mild of heart". The desperate excuse-making culminates in self-conscious, subjunctive trust:

Then, since thou mak'st not these things be,
 But these things dost not know,
 I'll praise thee as were shown to me
 The mercies thou would'st show.

Perhaps only Butler's Theobald Pontifex, with his "Such a life let us pray God that it may please Him to enable us to pray that we may lead,"¹⁴ can match the timorous resolve of Hardy's peasant.

The spirit of negation can best be illustrated as it undermines the two potentially positive values in Hardy's universe. Hardy's synonym for happiness is "dream". The subjective world of "magic-minted conjurings" (*CP*, p. 603) is one defense against the eroding effects of Time and knowledge. The dream is in almost every instance associated with human love, the second positive value. However, most of Hardy's lovers have never known the assurance that love can provide. Instead of cataloguing the details of love's transforming power, they record their bafflement at crossed fidelities and missed opportunities. Typically they choose a sequence of negatives:

. . . the winters froze
 And grew no rose;
 No bridge bestrode
 The gap at all;
 No shape you showed
 And I heard no call!
 ("Before Knowledge," *CP*, p. 418)

The victims of missed opportunities cannot look back to comment elegiacally on the death of love; they can only remember that in their youth

no lures bewitched them
 No hand was stretched to raise,
 No gracious gifts enriched them,
 No voices sang their praise.
 ("Her Apotheosis," *CP*, p. 634)

They wait in anxious expectation, but, as one title suggests, "Nobody Comes" (*CP*, p. 708).

Since Love is too often Time's fool, Hardy writes poems on falling out of love. Although his most moving treatment of alienation-in-love can be found in the autobiographical "Poems of 1912-13", the motif of disillusionment and emotional withdrawal from love enters his poetry much earlier. The experience of love contradicts its literary reputation, and so Hardy's speaker ("I Said to Love," *CP*, p. 104) dismisses love in a sequence of negatives:

I said to Love,
 "Thou art not young, thou art not fair,
 No elfin darts, no cherub air
 Nor swan, nor dove
 Are thine; but features pitiless,
 And iron daggers of distress,
 I said to Love."

However, for all their resolutions to "live no junctive law fulfilling" ("Revulsion," *CP*, p. 220) and to abjure love once for all, Hardy's lovers are conscious that in renouncing love they are renouncing also the final potential cure for loneliness and despair:

But—after love what comes?
 A scene that lours
 A few sad vacant hours,
 And then, the Curtain.
 ("He Abjures Love," *CP*, p. 221)

The attitude of slack indifference that characterizes Hardy's treatment of the "few sad vacant hours" that remain as the residue of blighted happiness becomes itself a persistent expression of negation. A feeling of dryness, of extreme exhaustion, of an "undramatic nothingness"¹⁵ settles over many of Hardy's meditations. His word for the condition is *numbness*. Every aspect of experience either numbs the speaker or is itself benumbed by Time: "Affections and enthusiasms numb" (*CP*, p. 116); love is benumbed by knowledge or it "grows numbed" by Time as "the hope-hour strokes its sum" (*CP*, p. 124). Like T.S. Eliot's eternal Footman, Hardy's Time "snickers awry" as its numbing phantoms hide nigh (*CP*, p. 497).

Spiritual numbness and psychic fatigue are evident in Hardy's recurring prayers for "unfeeling" and in the apathy of his lovers at the prospect of normal emotional indulgence. An undercurrent of indifference pervades many of Hardy's poems on love:

I need not go
 Through sleet and snow
 To where I know
 She waits for me.
 ("I Need Not Go," *CP*, p. 125)

There will be time. The speaker will wait until he has "overgot/th world somewhat," and even then may decide that the journey is no worth his while. "Long Plighted" (*CP*, p. 128) is Hardy's most extended

inversion of the traditional *carpe-diem* appeal. In a refrain echoed several decades later by Eliot's Prufrock, Hardy's indifferent lover asks

Is it worth while, dear, now
To call for bells, and sally forth arrayed
For marriage-rites—discussed, descried, delayed
So many years?

Is it worth while, dear now
To stir desire for old fond purposings,
By feints that Time still serves for dallings,
Though quittance nears?

Since the day is far spent and their cheeks worn, and since in time the lovers can lie "as mates" in Mellstock churchyard, perhaps no emotional expenditure is any longer worthwhile.

The effect of utter hopelessness or emotional paralysis is achieved partly by rigid metrical patterns and consecutive major stresses, partly by the persistent use of monosyllables:

But she did not come,
And my heart grew numb
And dull my strum;
She did not come.
(*"Two Serenades," CP, p. 571*)

Fatigue and enervation are suggested also by the automatic conjunctions and the seemingly careless repetitions of sentence patterns:

Ah!—nobody's nigh! And my life is drearisome,
And this is the old house we lived in many a day
Before he went away!
And the salt fog mops me. And nobody's come.
(*"The Sailor's Mother," CP, p. 627*)

The same flatness sets in as Hardy's artist learns of a world of "foiled intents, vain loving kindness,/And ardours chilled and numb." He can only

stir and stand,
And move from the arched recess,
And pick up the drawing that slipped from (his) hand,
And feel for the pencil (he) dropped in the cranny.
(*"Copying Architecture In An Old Minster," CP, p. 412*)

A total lack of emotional demonstration at the critical moment is itself a reflection of numbness or emotional exhaustion. Hardy strengthens the effect of dramatic flatness through use of the simple interjection. The colloquial "Well . . ." or "Yes . . ." is frequently no more than a device for tale-telling—a signal for a narrative departure or for summary. At other times it merely establishes an informal tone, as in Hardy's confidential conversations with God, or in his periodic stock-taking of Life. It is more effective as it undercuts the vehement statement or the hopeful assertion:

And he is risen? Well, be it so . . .
 And still the pensive lands complain,
 And dead men wait as long ago . . .
 ("A Drizzling Easter Morning," *CP*, p. 623)

In much the same way, the interjection can deflate the potentially dramatic moment. When the catastrophe is on a cosmic scale and "jars two hemispheres" ("The Convergence of the Twain," *CP*, p. 28) Hardy refuses to demonstrate at the philosophical implications. The five stanzas of detail that he lavishes on the Titanic, that monument to "the Pride of Life," culminate in the question, "What does this vain-gloriousness down here?" The matter-of-fact response sharpens the cosmic irony:

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.

Characteristically, however, the interjection is Hardy's device for understanding an emotional response to private crisis or disappointment. The sense of frustration at having been cheated by life seldom moves Hardy's lovers to gesticulate or to shed tears. Frequently the narrative of an entire poem builds towards the single line uttered at the dramatic moment; the understatement is concentrated in the interjection:

Well, happiness comes in full to none . . . (*CP*, p. 552)
 Well, husband, poor plain man; I've lost life's battle . . . (*CP*,
 p. 763)
 Well, the woeful neared, you needn't be told . . . (*CP*, p. 759)

In the instances cited, the interjection is more than a means to dramatic flatness. It is a sigh of resignation at the prospect of blighted fortunes, an acknowledgement that, as Hardy expresses the feeling in one title, "Nothing Matters Much" (*CP*, p. 787). The quiet acceptance reinforces the tone of hopeless finality; nothing matters much because nothing can be done:

Well, well! All's past amend,
Unchangeable. It must go. (*CP*, p. 319)

"Well . . . let the end foreseen
Come duly! — I am serene."
—And it came. (*CP*, p. 479)

The antinomial pattern suggested by Hynes is to be discovered in the structure and in the emotional and philosophic textures of a large number of Hardy's poems, but it is not the only pattern or even the most characteristic one. The student of Hardy's poetry is advised to heed the poet's own warning that by "clever manipulation" a volume of poetry ". . . can be made to support any *a priori* theory about its quality" (*LY*, p. 78); he does well also to recognize that the voice of negation—like the ironic consciousness from which that voice frequently derives—is likely to have more than one rhetorical strategy at its command.

NOTES

1. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* (N.Y., 1928), p. 72. All subsequent references to this volume and to *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy* (N.Y., 1930) by the same author will be acknowledged parenthetically. The abbreviations *EL* and *LY* will be used throughout.
2. Letter to Edward Clodd. Quoted in W.R. Rutland, *Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Writings and Their Background* (Oxford, 1938), p. 64.
3. See Elizabeth C. Hickson, *The Versification of Thomas Hardy* (Philadelphia, 1931), and Grace E. Vinson, "Diction and Imagery in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy," unpubl. diss. (Wisconsin, 1953).
4. See Samuel Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1956).
5. G.M. Young, *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1960), p. xxiv.
6. *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p. 44.
7. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (N.Y., 1925), p. 469. All subsequent quotations from this volume will be documented parenthetically. The abbreviation *CP* will be used throughout.
8. *Select Poems of William Barnes* (London, 1908), p. ix.
9. Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry*, p. 54.
10. *Winter Words* (London, 1928), p. 29. Subsequent quotations from this volume will be documented parenthetically. The abbreviation *WW* will be used throughout.

11. *Thomas Hardy's Notebooks* (London, 1955), p. 32.
12. A.E. Housman, "Hardy's 'favorite among my poems'," *Yale Review*, XXVI (1937), 302-3. Cf. Hardy's "Heiress and Architect" (*CP*, p. 67), in which the progressive erosion of expectation is tightly controlled by a rigid poetic structure.
13. Quoted in Morton D. Zabel, "Hardy in Defense of His Art: The Aesthetic of Incongruity," *Hardy, A Collection of Essays*, p. 44. Time can momentarily "unclose" an "unexpected door of bliss" (*CP*, p. 129) or "untouch" a lover "with a trace/Of soul-smart or despair" (*CP*, p. 547). Hardy's dreamers practise a 'daring undoubt' (*WW*, p. 83), they "unrecognize" reality (*CP*, P. 208) or they refuse to be "unvisioned" (*CP*, p. 498).
14. *The Way Of All Flesh* (Chicago, 1950), p. 73.
15. Albert J. Guerard, *Thomas Hardy* (N.Y., 1964), p. 175.