

# THE DARK HORSE: THOMAS HARDY

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The years immediately preceding the first world war, I was working in the London publishing office of Chapman & Hall, who then owned the *Fortnightly Review*, still in its prime. As copies of each new issue reached us from the printers, I could snatch one from the parcel. Apart from those directly concerned with the production of the magazine, I was thus the first person to read certain contributions that were to take permanent place in English literature; and in this manner I encountered Hardy's poem "God's Funeral".

The title shocked me. I was still a very young man, and had been brought up in what would now be deemed a "narrow" evangelical home. As standards then went, it was only moderately strict. Even so, there was such respect for "God's Word" that we thought it sin to place another book on top of the Bible. Now I was confronted with "God's Funeral". Curiosity prompted me to read this "blasphemy"; then something more than curiosity compelled me to read it again. The suggestion that God was an exploded myth still scandalised me; but I was even more strongly impressed by the poet's manifestly sincere regret that such, in his opinion, was the case, and by the tender nostalgia in stanzas like this:

How sweet it was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of life with trustful prayers,  
To lie down liegely at the eventide,  
And feel the blest assurance he was there!

Legend though God might be, Hardy (it was clear) loved the legend; and he described the supposedly non-existent Deity—"Potency vast and loving-kindness strong"—in terms that seemed more fundamentally true to me than did, at that time, the conception of many orthodox believers!

I was forced to ask myself a question. Is it possible to deny the fact of truth, yet keep its essence? Is it equally possible to cling to the letter, yet lose the spirit? A tragedy, no doubt, that one should do either. But, of the two, which is the sorrier mistake? Such was the challenge Hardy brought to many of my generation, trained in the religious atmosphere that widely

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prevailed before 1914; and even to-day there remains the interesting speculation as to why the Wessex laureate took an attitude that made him appear, in his own words, "the Dark Horse of contemporary English literature". Why did he reject Christianity with his intellect, while retaining it emotionally? And why, since his position was so anomalous in his own day, did he express such pained surprise at the misunderstanding he provoked?

## I

During his early phase as novelist—a phase that ended with the century, to be followed, though he was already sixty, by twenty-eight years devoted to poetry—he was often called "atheist". This charge he stoutly denied, while repeatedly he declined overtures from the Rationalist Association. And though he made the "Immanent Will" the presiding genius of *The Dynasts* and many shorter poems, he protested that this Will—neither benevolent nor cruel, but automatic, like "a knitter drowsed, whose fingers play in skilled unmindfulness"—represented tentative speculation, which, so far from being a "philosophy", was merely an artistic device invented to fill the "interim" void left by the decay of religion, and to give background and unity to his work. He cared little for his literary reputation as such, and was so humble and courteous that, to the end of his days, he enclosed a stamped-addressed envelope when offering a contribution to an editor. But he was moved to grief and anger when dubbed "pessimist", and (even more) when books like *Tess of the D'urbervilles* or *Jude the Obscure* were called "immoral".

This latter accusation was certainly false. Hardy, as realist, may have been before his time in writing frankly about physical passion; but his attitude was far removed from Swinburne's openly pagan revolt or from the mere naughtiness of the 'nineties. The havoc wrought by passion was a favourite theme of Hardy's, which he treated grimly, ironically, and humourously by turn. Yet two things he never did. Merciful as was his judgment of human frailty—and here he was nearer to the spirit of Christ than were most respectable Christians—he never condoned laxity; nor did he equate passion with love. He is one of the comparatively few English poets—Mr. Walter de la Mare is among the company—who, it has been well said, have turned "from the outer courts of romantic love to the shrine, which is domesticity". Romantic or not as it might

Hardy judged love by the fruits of self-discipline, honesty, loyalty, and loving kindness. How often that last word occurs in his writings!

He lived long enough—in greatly changed times—to be universally respected. No longer was he thought immoral, while his pessimism was now viewed more tolerantly and from a different angle. Victorian opinion was so outraged by his lack of orthodoxy as to be blind to his passionately warm and sincere Christian values. Later opinion, itself turning from formal piety and disillusioned by events, recognized his Christian ethics, but was tempted sometimes to regard them as a Victorian survival, inconsistent with his determinist tenets? Whether his pessimism was condemned or approved, he continued, with more heat than logic, to disavow it; and though his fine character and moral purpose are now established beyond dispute, a challenge persists. Despite his denials, Hardy was certainly a theoretical pessimist. Why did he find it impossible to embrace intellectual faith when he was so filled with Christian light and charity? Conversely, having renounced the aid and solace of faith, how did he contrive to grow steadily more mellow and Christian in spirit?

## II

Nothing moved him to occasional bitterness so much as the suggestion that he enjoyed being miserable.

O, doth a bird deprived of wings  
Go earth-bound wilfully?

This *cri-de-coeur* comes at the end of a poem called "The Imprecipient", with its sub-title "At a Cathedral Service". Hardy, throughout life, continued occasionally to attend church, drawn thither partly by fond memories of early days, and partly by an abiding love of church architecture and music. In this poem he sits, a stranger, among the congregation:

That from this bright believing band  
An outcast I should be  
That faith by which my comrades stand  
Seem fantasies to me,  
And mirage-mists that Shining Land,  
Is a drear destiny.

He muses on this mystery; then whimsically reflects that his happier brethren might show him more Christian sympathy;

and, before concluding with the couplet already quoted,

Yet would I bear my shortcomings  
With meet tranquillity,  
But for the charge that blessed things  
I'd liefer have unbe.

Many poems—including, of course, "The Oxen"—express the same sentiment.

O Memory, where is now my faith,  
One time a champion, now a wraith?

he asks in "Memory and I"; and Memory replies:

I saw her in a ravaged aisle,  
Bowed down on bended knee;  
That her poor ghost outflickers there  
Is known to none but me.

Here, indeed, was no wilful iconoclast; and though the content of this case is not explicitly religious, "The Darkling" is deservedly one of Hardy's best known lyrics—reflects this lament at being shut out from the common heritage

So little cause for carrolings  
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, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware!

### III

What, then, of this riddle? I suggest that certain clues which have not perhaps received the attention they deserve may be found in Hardy's biography and private journal, and still more in his poems, which give us the most direct revelation of himself. He was so delicate at birth—in 1840—that he was at first taken for dead. As a child he was abnormally sensitive, and thoughtful. The gay element in him responded ecstatically to dancing; but, with precocious eyes, he soon began noting "the mournful many-sidedness of things". Pain, poverty, cruelty, injustice: these, as he looked out on that microcosm of the world—his Wessex village—deeply impressed him; while

the tombstones in the churchyard gave him an acute sense of human impermanence. This sense was also fostered by his feeling for history, which, setting the race against a larger background, dwarfed the individual. Relics of Roman days were around him, and his mother fired his fancy with her memories of the time when Wessex was threatened with invasion by Napoleon. Stories of the war, told him by surviving soldiers and sailors, thrilled him as stories, but prematurely horrified him with "man's inhumanity to man". As he grew sturdier, he roamed with delight the Dorset lanes, while on Sundays he attended the parish church, listening so lovingly to the Bible, the Liturgy, and the music that they haunted him till death and set indelible mark on his work. Having intense inward satisfactions, however, he shrank from what he saw and heard of outward conditions. He felt unfitted for the struggle of life, and, while quite small, expressed the wish never to grow up.

Here was an ultra-tender youngster, needing the most sympathetic understanding and encouragement. That he received normal affection and care seems certain enough; but one thing, nevertheless, if there was anyone in that village to give this inquiring lad—so earnestly pining for beauty and love in all things, so eagerly craving spiritual assurance—the necessary help. Warmly as he writes of his family, in "Night in the Old Home", there is a suggestion that as a boy he felt lonely and something of a misfit. He pictures his dead relatives returning to the familiar scene:

They come and seat them around in their mouldy places,  
Now and then bending towards me a glance of wistfulness,  
A strange upbraiding smile upon all their faces,  
And in the bearing of each a passive tristfulness.

"Do you uphold me, lingering and languishing here,  
A pale late plant of your once strong stock?" I say to them;  
A thinker of crooked thoughts upon Life in the sere.  
And on That which consigns men to night after showing the day  
to them?"

And the ghostly figures answer the poet—as, we may safely infer, they did in his youth—not unkindly, yet without approval. They advise him to "let be the Wherefore" and to find contentment, like themselves, in the daily routine: "satisfied, placid, unfretting".

It is plain that the young Hardy, retiring and pensive beyond his years, was an enigma to his family; that he lacked self-

confidence; that he was torn by the seeming gulf between ideal and real. It is equally plain that, having suffered successive disillusionments, he resolved—as a kind of insurance policy—not to expect too much of life:

There was a glorious time  
 At an epoch of my prime,  
 Mornings beryl-bespread,  
 And evenings golden-red;  
 Nothing grey:  
 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 end with a crash  
 Some day!"

So begins "He Fears His Good Fortune", and the concluding stanza tells how a vow was registered to soften the inevitable "crash" by imaginatively forestalling it. This fixed determination to anticipate disappointment, and thus to maintain some degree of serenity, is a recurring theme in the poems:

For what, what can touch  
 One whom, riven of all  
 That makes life gay  
 No hints can appal  
 Of more takings-away!

There was weakness, no doubt, in this attitude; yet from it also came strength. Hardy never played the ostrich, but was one

Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full  
 look at the Worst.

That full look—however much it distressed him—he never shirked.

#### IV

It was unfortunate, again, that he had only just reached manhood when *The Origin of Species* broke upon the world. His temperament was fruitful soil for Darwinism, which to him, as to many other fine minds and choice spirits, appeared finally to disprove the supernatural claims of religion. Hardy was humble and too honest not to accept "facts" that seemed conclusive to his intellect, especially as they confirmed his own reasoning, loth as his heart was to follow it.

Shall we conceal the Case, or tell it—  
We who believe the evidence?

ne asked in one poem; and for him the question answered itself. Truth had to be served, even though it led to despair.

Predisposed as Hardy was to melancholy vision, Darwinism, coming at just the wrong moment, probably did more than anything else to fix his skeptical attitude. He never ceased to think of God in terms like these.

#### Beneficent

He is not for he orders pain;  
Or, if so, not onnipotent:  
To a mere child the thing is plain.

Still, the inner man remained troubled. Sometimes he put God, as it were, in the witness-box, accusing Him of being less merciful than man and ironically turning the tables by offering *Him* forgiveness! It was Hardy in this vein who seemed atheist and blasphemer. Far more common, however, are poems that recall happy memories of his own early years of faith or that exonerate God from blame on the score that, if He exists at all, He has lapsed, through no will of His own, into sleep. In occasional moods of tentative hope, he toyed with the idea that the Immanent Will might yet become conscious and friendly. Only seldom did he seem even to glimpse the possibility that God's purpose might itself be evolutionary, needing the free co-operation of man, to whom He had granted choice.

#### V

Two other points. We must not too glibly, of course, read autobiography into dramatic monologues; yet when certain ideas or situations figure repeatedly in an author's work, there seems reasonable ground for supposing that they have some origin in his own experience. A number of Hardy's poems—see, for example, "At a Bridal", "Her Death and After", and "To Lizzie Browne"—imply that he was disappointed in first love, or failed to declare himself before a rival snatched the prize. Be that as it may, we know that his first marriage did not prove happy. This emerges clearly—even if we lacked external evidence—from his "Poems of 1912—1913", written after his wife's death and included in *Satires of Circumstance*. These tender lyrics breathe loyalty and affection and are in perfect taste. They do not, however, disguise a sad incompata-

bility of temperament. Not only are there ample hints to this effect: the fact is directly stated, as in "The Voice":

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me  
Saying that now you are not as you were  
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
But as at first when our day was fair.

Again, in "After a Journey", we read:

Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division.  
Things were not lastly as firstly well.

And if we ask how came this dwindling of happiness, it is easy to read between the lines of these unique love poems, for such they remain despite their sorrow and disenchantment:

How she would have loved  
A party to-day!  
Brightly hatted and gloved,  
With table and tray  
And chairs on the lawn  
Her smile would have shone  
With welcomings.

It is a vivid and affectionate glimpse of one whom we know from other sources to have been a faithful and good wife, but a woman too conventional in her tastes and social values to mate well with a brooding genius, who, while nothing of a bohemian, detested formalities and functions. There is no need to blame either partner. Suffice it to note that Hardy's first marriage seems to have accentuated his belief that, while life's duties must be performed faithfully and always with compassion, one must not look for joy save as an occasional chance visitor.

Each of the clues above examined could be amplified with further quotations, and several of them are actually summarised in a single poem, "The Dead Man Walking":

I am but a shape that stands here,  
A pulseless mould,  
A pale past picture, screening  
Ashes gone cold.

Thus the poet describes himself, and, having said that "there was no tragic transit" from joy to woe, he tells, stanza by stanza, how faith and hope gradually waned. "A Troubadour-youth, with Life for lyre", he was "iced" and "perished a little" when first he



"practised eyeing the goal of men". Then came the death of relatives and friends, leaving him "standing bleakly":

And when my Love's heart kindled  
 In hate of me,  
 Wherefore I knew not, died I  
 One more degree.

Thus, if Darwinism may have played a leading part in determining Hardy's intellectual outlook, his own temperamental characteristics—having, perhaps a constitutional basis—made him specially susceptible to its impact; while at successive formative stages of his career, there seem to have been circumstances that drove back his hyper-sensitive nature upon itself.

## VI

Happily, if much professing optimism is superficial, pessimism is not always to be taken at its face value. We have it, on the testimony of all who knew him, that Hardy, if not sanguine, was never morose in himself. He was, on the contrary, warm and genial, and his work yields abundant evidence that he clung to Christian ethics—especially to such quintessentially Christian virtues as humility and charity—as ardently as he rejected Christian theology. The reader may prove this for himself by discovering how often in the poems—sometimes in the least likely places, as in semi-humourous ballads—the desirability of turning the other cheek, of heaping coals of fire on the enemy's head, of repaying hate with love is the *motif*. Hardy's grim view of life did not, in his opinion, absolve us from the duty of softening the lot of our fellows as much as our limited amount of free-will may render possible. He was, in his own word, a convinced "meliorist".

At times his generous nature gave even his obstinate head a jog. In *The Dynasts* and elsewhere he expressed, as we have noted, an occasional speculative hope for the future of mankind. Such moments, however, were comparatively rare, and we must continue to lament that—whatever may have caused the discrepancy—his mind and heart were normally at cross-purposes. Yet the more must we admire one who, forgoing all the comforts of Christianity, reflected so much of its spirit. Somewhere he speaks of

Losing myself in dream, till  
 Feigning become faith;

and—for love only, not for reward—he lived as though the "dream" were indeed true.