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Thomas Hardy: 'The Inestimably Subtle Man of Letters'

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Today, Thomas Hardy's position as a poet is as secure as his position as a novelist. Critics and scholars have started approaching his creative genius in the two different literary genres differently. It would be unreasonable to trust anyone who may still believe that Hardy, the novelist, was more Victorian than Hardy the poet, who allegedly was closer to the moderns. It has been established that Hardy had started writing poems even before he tried his hand at novel writing. Indeed, even when his career as a novelist was soaring, Hardy, the poet, wrote as a contemporary to Hardy the novelist. Many of his poems, that have been dated, confirm this. Hardy scholars have also tried to find similarities between the themes of his novels and poems. They seem to have overlooked the fact that similar emotions expressed in two different literary genres yield distinct effects, both for the author and the reader. That Hardy found more solace while expressing himself in poetry needs no proof due to his disowning the tag of a novelist and his desire to be remembered as a poet. Thus while approaching Hardy's poetry one needs to purposefully digress from the traditional path of viewing him as a popular novelist who also wrote poems or a poet at heart who considered his novel writing as 'pot-boiler'. This neat dissection of Hardy's literary genius, into two separate parts, may hinder a comprehensive analysis. On the other hand, a see-saw approach that alternatively draws inspiration and instances from both the novels and the poems, at will, can also persuade scholars to seek identical perceptions in the two distinct genres.

Critics are discovering daily just what an inestimably subtle man of letters Thomas Hardy really was. He positioned himself so inconspicuously and aptly and deferentially in relation to both his creative work and the world around him, public as well as private that, like the butterfly on the hourglass in his illustration of Amabel he threatens to escape even our lightest touch and to be crushed by heavy handedness.¹

Research activity and dedicated scholarship, initially, devoted an astonishing amount of energy to the task of deciphering the elements of truth in 'Life'.² It has in some ways enabled the contemporary generation to see the poet more plainly. The emphasis of biographically oriented studies, initially, fell on matters of demonstrable facts, primarily because Hardy had allegedly chosen to fictionalize them. Early biographers often assumed that Hardy saw, as his primary duty, the transcription of things around him. He was believed to have written a kind of fictionalized journalism, of a high calibre, rather than genuine creative fiction. Hardy was, as a result, often involved as an authority on questions related to women, agricultural labourers, and small market towns. In other words he was treated more as a social historian, whose writings indicated that Dorset deserved better recognition.

The second phase began more or less with the publication of Carl J Weber's discreet biography *Thomas Hardy in Maine*, in 1940. The emphasis saw a welcome shift. Till the

same time there had appeared numerous books that used Hardy's knowledge of topology and folklore as their base. More important amongst these were books written by Lionel Johnson *The Art of Thomas Hardy* 1894, F.A. Hedgecock's *Essai de Critique: Thomas Hardy, Penseur et Artiste* 1911, Lascelles Abercrombie *Thomas Hardy a Critical Study* 1912, a shorter version of which became the entry used in the encyclopaedia Britannica for the next half century. This was followed by Harold Child's *Thomas Hardy* 1916, H.C Duffin's *A Study on Wessex Novels* 1921, S.C. Chew wrote *Thomas Hardy Poet and novelist* 1921, Joseph Beach *The Technique of Thomas Hardy* 1922, Earnest Brennecke *Thomas Hardy's Universe: A Study of a Poet's Mind* 1924, which left Hardy deeply offended. H.B. Grimsditch's *Character and Environment in Novels of Thomas Hardy-The man, His Works the Land of Wessex* 1933, A.P. Elliott's *Fatalism in the Work of Thomas Hardy* 1935. A.C. Chakravarty's *The Dynasts and the Post war Age in Poetry* 1938, And W.R. Rutland's *Thomas Hardy* 1938. These books were important in various ways. But instead of stressing the basic data of his life, these works chose to examine more closely Hardy's views on man's relation to the Immanent will³, marriage, divorce, and capital punishment, to name a few. Though these works did not do much to illuminate Hardy's art they successfully kept his name academically respectable while scores of other books demystified the reputations of other Victorian writers.

The next stage of commentaries, which began with the publication of southern Review's *Thomas Hardy: Centennial Edition*, conclusively established Hardy as a modern. His thoughts and attitudes towards ethical and moral problems were recognizably closer to the then contemporaries. W.H. Auden's *A Literary transference* acknowledged a profound debt to Hardy. Hardy the artist, for the first time, became the primary concern of poets, professional bookmen and general readers. In his essay Howard Baker identifies 'Simple Humanity' as Hardy's fundamental quality. More ideological aspects of Hardy's verse found a profound treatment in Delmore Schwartz and Jacques Barzen's essays. John Crowe Ransom F.R. Levis and P.R. Blackmur, each tried to qualify his praise for Hardy's verse quite sharply. These essays cleared the path for viewing Hardy's verse as a separate entity, divorced from his novels. J.G. Southworth's *Poetry of Hardy*, 1947, was the first attempt that concerned itself wholly with Hardy's verse. In spite of comments like:

. . .the achievement is confusing and lukewarm at best, and offers no sustained attempt to examine meaningfully earlier strictures, and cannot be said to have done much to increase understanding and enthusiasm,⁴

it must be confessed that this book, for the first time made an attempt to free Hardy the poet from the shadows of Hardy the novelist. Ever since, the trickle of books and articles on Hardy have grown into a river but the thin line of demarcation that seemed to separate Hardy the poet from Hardy the novelist has become more prominent and visible. Moreover, this trend also encouraged the publication of a good deal of background material. *The Toucan Press Monographs*, edited and published by J. S. Cox collected in 1970-71 ran to over seventy titles. It includes personal interviews with a large number of people who knew or remembered encountering Hardy, sometimes in surprising circumstances. Those interviewed include Hardy's gardener, barber, parlour-maid, driver, secretary, musical accompanist, and cook apart from numerous residents of Dorchester. A sampling of more recent works that followed include Denys Kay Robinson's *The First Mrs. Thomas Hardy* 1979. Desmond Hawkins's *Hardy; Novelist and Poet* 1976 emphasizes regionalism in fiction and poetry written by Hardy. It also strongly maintains that Hardy had a surer grasp on the elements of

tragedy than any other English novelist in the nineteenth century. Lance St. John Butler's anthology *Thomas Hardy: After Fifty-years* 1977 endeavours to look at Hardy and his work in a variety of ways and provide a range of new ideas and interpretations. The steady flow of full length studies on the life and works of Hardy has successfully sieved the abundant information on Hardy into channels of fresh ideas leading into ever new directions. Though the new biographies, published by Martin Seymour Smith⁵ in 1994 and Paul Turner⁶ in 2001, added little that could be called unknown regarding the facts pertaining to Hardy's life these studies did generate new interest. 'Seeing Hardy: Film and Television Adaptations of the Fiction of Thomas Hardy'⁷, by Paul J. Niemeyer 2003 and 'Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies'⁸, edited by Tim Dolin & Peter Widdowson in 2004 re-evaluated Hardy in the light of contemporary modes of expressions and literary theories. Like Shakespeare Hardy has stood to the test of time. Research from newer perspectives shed new lights in the exploration of human emotions and perceptions analysed in his works.

Taking note of more recent quality work on Hardy, one may say that the term the 'growth industry' as applied to Hardy scholarship seems most appropriate. Loads and loads of work published in the last two decades, is still waiting to be adequately analyzed. Again, with the advent of cyber world it has on the one hand become easier to get access to good work on Hardy whereas on the other it has become very difficult to go to every available site and genuinely read every line of what is offered. This clearly goes to show that Hardy readers may be found in all classes, doing all kinds of jobs, living in different, at times even contradictory socio-cultural environments. In both England and the United States, Hardy still remains the second most popular writer of fiction who lived during the entire nineteenth century. All his works, including novels, poems, drama, short-stories, and more recently even letters are in print. In Asia he is one of the most widely read English authors in India, Japan and China apart from other smaller countries.

II

We do not judge the artist with fairness unless we say to him, 'Oh', I grant you your starting point.⁹

Hardy has been denied this, for long. Even during his lifetime he was annoyed by this fact and constantly complained that his work had not received fair reading 'and fair judgment'. Most critics then and even after have failed to acknowledge this. They happily assigned such grievances to 'the grand old man's' bitterness towards literary criticism. Hardy considered himself to be primarily a poet. So, any serious endeavour of analysing his poetic genius should necessarily commence from this starting point. He himself tells us that [a] "sense of the truth of poetry, of its supreme place in literature had awakened itself in me" (*life*, 385). Such statements, in *Life*, attributed to the early 1860s and frequently subordinated by similar statements, consistently recurring at intervals, attempt to build and validate Hardy's image as above all else, a poet. With the help of both implicit and explicit statements *Life* tries to persistently relegate the novels and portray Hardy as a poet. The author, for instance, had called, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, Hardy's unsuccessful initial attempt at novel writing as "A story without plot containing some original verse" (*Life*, 57). Plot, that is, the essential part of any novel, is absent whereas original verse has been emphasized. Similarly, his endeavours in writing prose were limited to a "wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial" (*Life*, 100). When *Far From the Madding Crowd* was appearing in Cornhill is fully indicative of his lack of earnestness regarding his novels. And looking at it otherwise one may rightly feel that for purely practical reasons Hardy might have intentionally contrived

such remarks in order to imply his intense desire “to follow the pursuit of poetry” (*Life*, 99). During the publication of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* likewise, he viewed novel writing as “mere journey work” and clearly said that “he cares little about it as art” (*Life*, 179). Again, he had no hesitation to affirm that novel writing was for him nothing more than a “trade” and that he “went about the business mechanically”. (*Life*, 182-3) Other than these very explicit statements ‘*Life*’ through implicit statements throughout very constructively projects the portrait of the poet. Despite such remarks Hardy was considered, for decades after his death, primarily a novelist. Scholars and critics on Hardy, overlooking the above statements have often tread the oft tread path forcing Hardy’s poems to still be seen in similar perspectives as was manifest in the early 20th century.

On the other hand, today, far greater number of scholars are willingly beginning to see Hardy the poet detached from Hardy the novelist. No clear periodic or developmental split in Hardy’s two rewarding careers – both as novelist and a poet – is intended here. But the belief that has gained recognition, of late, is that in Hardy

Poetry was not adjunct or secondary to novel writing rather the novels are suffused and characterized by the poetic note that Hardy in despair of recognition and acceptance as poet in 1870s and 1880s made sub textual, so to speak in his prose fiction (Buckler 48).

Such a view was slow to come; it seems, primarily because it demanded a total reversal of approach to Hardy. Today his novels need to be closely scrutinized and the elements of poetry to be detected and studied.

Another grave misunderstanding regarding Hardy’s poetry is the assumption that his poetry is transparently personal. With regards to a very small number of poems an analogy with the poet’s life may be possible, that too in a very limited way. In several introductory statements in his volumes of verse Hardy very significantly claims that he does not often speak as himself in the poems. Out of the eight volumes of poetry Hardy supplied prefaces or introductions in five. While introducing *Poems of the Past and the Present* he uses almost the same words that went into the introduction of *Wessex poems*. He says on both occasions that:

Of the subject matter of this volume - even that which is in other than narrative form - much is dramatic or impersonative even where not explicitly so.¹⁰

Again after eight years *Preface to Times Laughingstocks* reads:

. . . some lack of concord in pieces written at widely several dates, and in contrasting moods and circumstances will be obvious enough. This I cannot help, but the sense of disconnection particularly in respect to those lyrics penned in the first person, will be immaterial when it is born in mind that they are to be regarded, in the main as dramatic monologues by different characters (Preface Hardy, CP, 175).

Hardy thus very emphatically states that his poems despite being in some sense personal utterances should largely be regarded as statements of poetic personae. In other words,

serious criticism of Hardy's poetry should not be limited to criticism organized around biographical principles only.

As a whole, Hardy's poetry thus becomes 'unadjusted' impressions of different characters realized in the form of dramatic monologues. It positions the reader in relation to the poems at a vantage point as closely analogous to the author as possible. It relieves the author of an imaginatively intolerable burden of self-reference. At the same time the reader is set free to recognize the world around him in the depicted poems. The peer relationship thus established between the poet and the reader enhances the possibility of seeing the poems as they are and of their working as Hardy hoped they would. Hardy believed that every writer has something 'unequal' 'a specialty'¹¹ that was the essential thing about his work. It is unfortunately possible that even the most appreciative precarious reader might overlook or fail to discern this specialty. He says that "to read the most elevating work of imagination by fixing the regards on the wrong side of the subject" (Orel, 125) is always a possibility.

Similarly, Hardy's success as a poet should be evaluated, first and foremost, with regards to his own perception of a poet. He maintains:

. . . the business of the poet and novelist is to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things (*Life*, 171).

It was this discrepancy between the truth of things and their public perception that defined Hardy's role as a poet. Agreeing with Leslie Stephen, Hardy quotes the following sentence from him, in his notebook bearing the date 1st July 1879:

The ultimate aim of a poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own, and not to exhibit his learning or his fine taste or his skill in mimicking the notes of his predecessors (*Life*, 128).

It cannot be denied that Hardy very closely adhered to this principle, throughout his poetic career. Thus, expression of emotion takes precedence to thought in Hardy's poetry. And when Hardy describes poetry in equations like:

Emotions three quarters plus Expression one quarter or
Emotion one quarter plus Expression three quarters (*Life*, 311),

the rash generalization had its validity largely for his own work. Elsewhere, he says, "the poet takes note of nothing that he cannot tell emotively" (*Life*, 342). Further clarifying his view on the concept of a poet, Hardy says:

My opinion is that a poet should express the emotion of all ages and the thought of his own (*Life*, 386).

This concept of Hardy found elaboration in T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent'¹². The term 'emotion of all the ages' as used by Hardy, represents tradition 'and the thought of one's own' age suggests the contributions of the author to the ever flowing river of tradition. This statement by Hardy confirms for him proximity to a classical poetic perspective held by the lineage of critics from Aristotle to Matthew Arnold before T.S. Eliot.

Arnold refers to this concept of “emotion of all the ages” in “those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time.”¹³ Similarly, when Hardy speaks of the thoughts of the poet’s age, it is clearly implied that his thoughts must bear a generic relationship to the mind of the age in order to qualify for the imaginative transformation by which poems are made, as the mind of the age has a generic relationship to the minds of all ages. In this context, while approaching Hardy, one may do well to consider the proximity with which he viewed the thought content of his poetry. Hardy repeatedly insisted that thoughts expressed in his poetry should be viewed as “seemings” or “provisional impressions”. He used them for artistic purposes because they represent, approximately, the impressions of the age, and are plausible till somebody produces better theories of the universe (*Life*, 375).

Here, Hardy was attempting to give “modern expression” [to] “modern outlook.”¹⁴ As a representative of his time amalgamating the poetic tradition of all ages, he attempted to carry the flame of poetry further. In his verse, generally including *The Dynasts*, Hardy was attempting to explore the presence and implications of philosophies and feelings as yet not well established or formally adopted into the general teachings of the contemporary literary world. He persisted in this mythic process of imaginative discovery even though he had recognized that his efforts would be stultified for a very long time by the unwilling minds of most contemporary readers of poetry. He was aware of this fact and rightly stated:

. . . the very fact of my having tried to spread over art,
the latest illumination of the time has darkened counsel
in respect to me (*Life*, 320).

But Hardy was not much worried about this ‘darkened counsel’. He was convinced, even before the abandonment of his fruitful novel writing career, that ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion if expressed in passionate poetry:

. . . will cause merely a shake of head. . . . If
Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the
inquisition might have left him alone (*Life*, 284-5).

Poetry, he says:

is emotion put into measure. The emotion must
come by nature but the measure can be acquired by
art (*Life* 300).

Thus according to him, poetry is primarily ‘emotion’ bearing more proximity to feeling or the heart than thought or the mind. This emotion should be natural, that is, instinctive or inborn. On the other hand, the expression of this emotion can be learned or acquired. It would suggest that according to Hardy a poet is born. If a person possesses this inborn quality, it may be perfected by learning the art of expression:

Thought is perceived as aesthetically unworthy until it
triggers in the poet, not just a private emotional response,
but an emphatic synchronization that enables him to project
the emotional stimulus of thought into a mimetic structure,
an organic form and symmetry. Until then even the
intensity with which thought is held endows it with no
poetic qualification. It must be converted through form to

an impressionistic state, the significance of conviction awaiting the imaginative insight that will transform it into a structural metaphor of humanization (Buckler, 50).

Another aspect that was not discerned for a very long time, by scholars and critics of Hardy, pertains to the fact that the author liked the art of concealing art. Very early in his career he had decided that too regular a beat symbolized bad art. He saw an analogy to exist between poetry and architecture. His certain perception that “poetry like architecture had to carry a rational content inside (its) artistic form” (*Life*, 301) was new to his contemporary critics. Hardy, mainly due to his training in architecture, was aware of the enormous worth of a crafty irregularity. Hardy carried this Goethic art principle into poetry under the name of ‘constructed ornament’. He, at a more mature level of writing poetry, very consciously shaped his poetry with a demonstrable irregularity in form. Thus, as far as Hardy’s poetry is concerned bearing proximity to architecture, it endeavours to equate form with the statement. He seemed to agree with Coleridge that “a versification of any length neither can be nor ought to be all poetry.”¹⁵ Moreover he believed that “poetry must also be revealed in the structure, the force of reserve, and the emphasis of understatement” (*Life*, 363). He experimented extensively with stanza forms and usually these stanza forms combined with the other parts of the poem to reveal a more complete meaning. On the contrary, his attempts to introduce a deliberate irregularity in his poems through unconventional metrical pauses and reversed beats evaded the comprehension of his early reviewers who greeted his experiments with emphatically negative remarks like—such a line “did not make for immortality” (*Life*, 79).

Hardy’s complain that he had not received “fair reading and fair judgment” (*Life*, 402) holds good here. ‘On Sturminster Foot Bridge’ (CP, 454) presents an apt illustration. Unable to recognize that the intended meter in the poem was onomatopoeic one of its reviewers remarked “one could make as good music as that out of a milk cart” (Gibson & Johnson, 32). Hardy was keenly sensitive to every nuance of sound within the provenance of movement. He took pleasure in employing onomatopoeia organically, practicing many conventional prosodic effects, and searching both theory and out of the way practices for original or adaptive measures.

Hardy was a highly conscious craftsman. Among the first things, which the readers of his poems notice, is the idiosyncrasy of style. Strangeness, in terms of diction, syntax, and movement leads his work to be compared to Browning’s. The much-revised opening stanza of the first of Wessex Poems, ‘The Temporary the All’, points towards Hardy’s art for concealing art:

"Cherish him can I while the true one forthcome -
Come the rich fulfiller of my prevision;
Life is roomy yet, and the odds unbounded."
So self-communed I¹⁶ (CP, 5).

Such deliberate use of style prompts readers to work their way back, through a poem in search of the grammatical thread. This strangeness, or harshness when combined with the highly wrought nature of the poems, their elaborate rhyme-schemes, sound patterning, and other symmetrical effects, is part of an unmistakable style. Hardy’s own defence of his style is rested on the relationship between his work and the Gothic revival movement in architecture, which is elaborated in his autobiography. He knew that cunning irregularity is of enormous worth in architecture, and it is obvious that he carried into his verse, perhaps in part

unconsciously, the Gothic art-principle in which he had been trained. The principle of spontaneity, found in mouldings, tracery, and the like become perceptible in the unforeseen character of his metres and stanzas, emphasis on stress rather than syllable, poetic texture rather than poetic veneer, under the name of 'constructed ornament' (*Life*, 78-79). The art of concealing art was one of the constant illusive strategies by which his imagination worked. Quoting the authority of Coleridge, in early 1882, Hardy noted: "January 26. Coleridge says aim at *illusion* in audience or readers" (*Life*, 152). Hardy further clarifies his concept of illusion as:

. . . the mental state of dreaming, intermediate between the complete delusion and clear perception of falsity (*Life*, 152).

Elsewhere he says that the gratification of

. . . the love of the uncommon in human experience is achieved all the more perfectly in proportion as the reader is eluded to believe the personages true as himself. The uncommonness must be in the event not in the characters, and the writer's art lies in shaping that uncommonness while disguising its unlikelihood, if it be unlikely (*Life*, 150).

Poetry, Hardy believes, "should record impressions not conceptions" (*Life*, 377). But the perceptions that individual personae in his poems represent have nearly always been labelled as conceptions of the author. Hardy perceived non – rationality to be the governing principle of the universe. And his interest towards the non rationalistic subjects, the multitude of manipulative strategies they adopt, helps to catalyze the emotive feelings necessary to the creation of poems and to wash them in irony, pathos and diminutive heroism with which Hardy's poems are repeatedly and so variously marked. He himself says, that he wrote poetry:

. . . entirely because he liked doing them, without any ulterior thought; because he wanted to say the things they contained and would contain (*Life*, 302).

Thus his poetry should be seen as the product of pleasure and not of pain. Whatever pain is seen or felt in his poems is largely inflicted by the contemporary conflicting thought of his generation passing through a transitional phase in everything including faith. Hardy very aptly transformed the pain into emotional purgation through the joys of creation. A poet could only say the things he had to say because they are said in poetry's way. Hardy recognized that an epoch had emerged during his lifetime with his own array of metaphors. It was an era in transit and the shape and meaning regarding the future could only be conjured in fragments and that too very uncertainly. But all that seemed to happen on the cutting edge of time demanded assertion and Hardy was intuitively inspired to provide words. He said it without adversely affecting the peculiar strength and integrity of poetry. This is perhaps one of the reasons for the steady magnification of his stature as a poet. Hardy as an interpreter of modern age has steadily acquired the position of the ideal poet of the generation he belonged to.

Any estimate of Thomas Hardy must also include an appreciation of his tendency to find the greatest values in the homely relationships of people. His poetic personae are more

inclined towards an intense yearning for 'life loyalties' that 'now and then' (CP, 57) appear in his poems. His insistence on the phrase 'now and then' is a mark of his peculiar temperament, which to some readers seems repellent. But who could substitute this phrase with 'always' – not many poets who write passionately. Though 'more often' could be a desirable phrase but whether loyalties appear 'now and then' or more often, we can only agree that they should be praised and their breaches regretted. At the same time the infinitely complex nature of human loyalties demand close study. These, in fact, are the very concerns that provide Hardy's poetry with principal material. Moreover, more than any other poet, he tried to trace the concerns for these 'life loyalties' in everyday histories of simple people. In comparison with William Wordsworth, Hardy is more realistic. He is less interested in tracing the primary laws of nature, in the incidents of our situation, from common life merely for a theme. On the contrary, he savours the incident and then extracts the theme from it. The procedure does not vary even when the personages are ghosts or personifications. This explains the reasons for the especially dramatic quality of his lyrics. For Hardy, everything, in our everyday life is a possible subject for poetry.

III

Hardy looks back upon Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, and Arnold, as he looks back upon the Bible, the Greek dramatists and Shakespeare, for inspiration. He went to them less for their faith and more for their sustained belief that poetry could be man's last hope. Viewing the modern world from the vantage point of a man of letters concerned to keep poetry alive, Hardy critically views Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Hardy's concept of poetry lays emphasis on the imaginative intuition that initiates it. Even his perception of Nature as perceptible in, 'The Year's Awakening' (CP, 315), 'In the Wood' (CP, 56), 'Before and After Summer' (CP, 314), 'At Day Close in November' (CP, 314), 'Under the Waterfall' (CP, 315) was different from that held by Wordsworth. Wordsworth's definition of 'imagination and fancy' was unacceptable to him. The difference is clearly apparent when we consider Hardy's views:

The confusion of thought to be observed in Wordsworth's teaching in his essay, in the Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads*, seems to arise chiefly out of his use of the word 'imagination'. He should have put the matter somewhat like this: In works of passion and sentiment (not imagination and sentiment) the language of verse is the language of prose. In works of fancy (or imagination) poetic diction (of the real kind) is proper and even necessary (*Life*, 306).

Thus Hardy reserves the term 'imagination' for a more enveloping, all poetic usage that parallels fancy in differing orders of poetry. At the same time an imaginative conceit of a lighter sort would admit of an authentic poetic diction while a conceit of a more profoundly passionate kind would reject as poetically intolerable because it would threaten the sincerity indispensable to deep emotion. Such a way of examining the issue was crucial to Hardy, because to him the generation of deep emotion in poetry was an aesthetic rather than a personal process, the very integrity of poetry depending on it.

Wordsworth seems to uphold a romantic hope through a publicly redemptive poetry. He propagated the creation of *Lyrical Ballads*, through the 1800 preface, as an antidote to the malaise of the times and the diminishing literary tastes. Speaking about the multitude of causes unknown to the former times Wordsworth says that these causes are:

. . . now acting with the combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a stage of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupation presents a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communications of intelligence gratifies.¹⁷

Wordsworth associates this metropolitan temper for the literature in the form of “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluge of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (Preface Wordsworth, 166). Wordsworth sees the *Lyrical Ballads* as “the feeble endeavour . . . to counteract” (Preface Wordsworth, 167) this prevailing psycho-cultural condition along with his:

. . . deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible (Preface Wordsworth, 167).

Further he believes that “the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed, by men of great powers, and with far more distinguished success” (Preface Wordsworth, 167).

Hardy, on the contrary, feels that with this degrading thrust:

. . . owing to the barbarizing of taste in the younger minds by the dark madness of the late war, the unabashed cultivation of selfishness in all classes, the plethoric growth of knowledge simultaneously with the stunning of wisdom, . . . we seem threatened with a new Dark Age (Apology Hardy, 530).

Hardy’s comment is less hopeful than his nineteenth century predecessor. His emphatically understated lament over the ultimate untenableness of romantic dreams for poetry when confronted with ‘the dark madness’ of worldwide conflict, the socially antagonistic results of aggressive personal and institutional selfishness, and the philosophical incoherence of a vast knowledge explosion wholly undirected by ethical values is of enormous significance to a conscientious reader’s assumptions about what is actually going on in his poetry. Hardy’s tentativeness throughout his career had provided wholly adequate space for such a conclusion, and it is consistent with his general literary procedures. It should be seen as a generic rather than a merely personal statement, as a lament for poets and poetry, not just for Thomas Hardy. This perception gained further validity during the First World War and those in touch with reality could no longer frankly and honestly ignore it. That Hardy had kept his options fluid, while assigning a convincing role for himself:

through the exploration of reality, and its frank recognition stage by stage along the survey, with an eye to the best consummation possible (Apology Hardy, 526-27)

defines the purpose of poetry.

At the same time, unlike Wordsworth, Hardy does not read in the future any hope of the gradual amelioration of the human condition. *The Dynasts* although suggests such a probability along with several other options but that was much before the world war. The First World War had devastated Hardy's belief in the gradual ennoblement of man and had given "the coup de grace to any conception he may have nourished of a fundamental ultimate wisdom at the back of things" (*Life*, 368). At the same time Hardy did not share Wordsworth's faith regarding the 'powers' of even great men to alter substantially, and for the better, the psycho-cultural course of humanly regressive modernism. His experience of ordinary power-figures in his society was that they were the very ones who suffocated individuality, froze out original enquiry, and brought curiosity to a paralyzed intellectual stalemate. So, for a modern poet, in the early nineteen twenties, the depressing aspect of man's tendencies gave no real hope of betterment, survival itself was an issue. The most humane goal seemed to include an endeavour to keep the pain at a minimum.

Wordsworth's collaborator in the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge, influenced Hardy to a greater extent. His comment that "that a versification of any length neither can be nor ought to be all poetry," (Apology Hardy, 530) encouraged him in his faith that a poem depends for its aesthetic effect upon a conversion into form of the experimental intuition that initiated itself in the poet's imagination. Even the main elements of poem viz.; subject or action, structure or language, including diction, rhythm, tonal approximation and reversal, etc. are poetic in themselves, only to the degree to which they serve that intuition and absorb its imaginative energy. Moreover, Hardy also subscribes to Coleridge's characterization of poetic faith as "the willing suspension of disbelief".¹⁸ The fact that a very few of his conceits, at the centre of his poems, seem at first sight to make particularly heavy demands upon that faith, is another matter. Ironically speaking, it is the disbelief that belief itself is not the monitoring presence in his poems that must be primarily suspended. This will not be possible until individual readers discover through their own experience, on a poem to poem basis, that the import of the Hardy canon simply changes as soon as one perceives the imagination to be the master of its thought.

The next great poet critic was Matthew Arnold. Wordsworth's concept of poet and poetry is perceptible mainly in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Hardy's, on the other hand, becomes evident both in his prefaces and the *Life*. The critical comments of both Wordsworth and Hardy, in the main, assist us to evaluate the works of the authors concerned. Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, on the other hand, were poet critics whose comments were applicable to their own writing in a comparatively limited sense. They endeavoured to evaluate literature as a whole. Moreover, there is also a clear evidence of a hiatus in the theory and practice of Wordsworth. His comments in the preface, many a times, contradict his practice in poetry. Fortunately this is not entirely true about Thomas Hardy. His poems more consistently reveal a closer adherence to the comments in his prefaces and *Life*. Again both in his poetry and his comments on appreciating poetry he is closer to Coleridge and Arnold, than Wordsworth. Hardy refers to himself in the 'Apology' as an enthusiastic disciple of Arnold. Although the context, here was specific and therefore limited, but at the same time it was unique among Hardy's self-characterization and surely deserves all the amplification it can sustain. In the first place, no other nineteenth century poet characterized the motives of his poems in a way

analogous to Hardy's self-characterisation as Arnold did. Arnold said that his poems represented "the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century". He said:

It might be fairly urged that I have less poetic sentiment than Tennyson and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet, because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn as they have had theirs.¹⁹

The particular comparison with Tennyson and Browning and the forecast of increased reader attention included a unique fusion of sentiment and thought persistently applied to 'the main line of modern development' is as applicable to Hardy's poetry as it is to Arnold's. It suggests a direct line of succession from one to the other in the development of modern English poetry. No analogy or proximity is intended here regarding the personal cultural and intellectual background of the two poets or even between their so obviously distinct temperaments. Instead, the succession is perceptible in their notions regarding the essential nature of poetry and the kind of poems they wrote under this notion.

Both Arnold and Hardy were extremely reticent about their personal lives. They never wore their hearts on their sleeves even in private letters to intimate friends and members of their immediate families. In spite of this fact, commentators have repeatedly portrayed them as essentially autobiographical poets. Such a view of their work contradicts their very sense of themselves. At the same time it also points towards the poetic strategies important to both. Arnold and Hardy understood thoroughly the comparable uses of the autobiographical tradition. This tradition had been rekindled in the middle of the eighteenth century and had been adopted by the romantics almost from the beginning of their movement. Both Hardy and Arnold displayed a keen appreciation of the grand achievement of the chief romantic poets. But at the same time they were both very sceptical of romantic poetic theory and critical of romantic poetic practice. Arnold practiced poetry in accordance with his theory. This made his poems thoroughly confessional but substantively free of any peculiarly autobiographical content.

Thus it becomes important to understand the proper relationship of imagination to thought in Arnold and Hardy. Each one of them was closely attentive to the 'main movement of mind' in their respective era, and each sought to capture its chief individual co-ordinates in poetry. Though neither of them was the most representative mind of his age still both were enormously sensitive to the changing intellectual conditions with which persons of various temperaments in their generation had to cope. They created numerous brief episodes in poetry, as true as imagination could permit but no more autobiographical than any other poetic fable that a poet might prefer to select. The idea depicted in such brief dramas was important but this does not mean that the poetry of Arnold and Hardy was ideological. It was the result of the imaginative impression, transformed into action, structure, and language, intending to reveal as to how a persona with certain lineage of temperament would react under the conditions inherent in the simple fable created by the poet.

Hardy's poems demand a co-creative, active participating reader rather than non-indulgent passively contemplative reader for an appropriate comprehension. The reader must endeavour to perceive either within the poem itself or its experimental frame of reference, an alternative to the space the poem creates. A failure to do so may simply produce a soul-deadening identification with the persona's distress, instead of bringing to the experience an

imaginative intelligence of critical empathy. Reader may not be able to correct a crooked world or prevent its self-destruction but since he daily builds myths of human reconstruction in neglect or ignorance of awful truth, Hardy's poetry invites him to the austere task of human reconstruction in light of the worst. It is an imaginative echo of the epical and tragic peril to which the classical writers represented man as being exposed. Hardy's poetry requires a corresponding response. The great epic and tragic poetic structures of the ancients are fragmented into a thousand shards in his poetry. The pleasure they provide is also similarly the pleasure of tragic awareness requiring disciplined critical participation on the part of the reader.

Notes and Works Cited:

¹ William E Buckler, *The poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Study in Art and Ideas* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), p.18. (All further citations from this book are from this edition and are referred to as Buckler in parenthesis.)

² Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962). (All further citations from this book are from this edition and are referred to as *Life* in parenthesis.)

³ 'Imminent Will' refers to a concept propagated by Hardy in *The Dynasts* as also in many of his poems to portray a blind, purposeless and indifferent force governing life.

⁴ James Gibson and Trevor Johnson ed. *Thomas Hardy: Poems* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), p.19. (All further citations from this book are from this edition and are referred to as Gibson & Johnson in parenthesis.)

⁵ Martin Seymour Smith *Thomas Hardy* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994).

⁶ Paul Turner *The Life of Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000).

⁷ Paul J. Niemeyer *Seeing Hardy: Film and Television Adaptations of the Fiction of Thomas Hardy* (London: McFarland & Co., 2003).

⁸ Tim Dolin & Peter Widdowson ed. *Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Basingstoke [u.a.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁹ Cited in M. D.Zabel ed, *The Portable Henry James* (New York: Viking, 1951), p. 408.

¹⁰ Thomas Hardy 'Preface' in *The Works of Thomas Hardy* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), p.75. (All further citations from preface are from this edition and are referred to as Preface Hardy in parenthesis.)

¹¹ Harold Orel ed. *The Profitable Reading of Fiction; Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p.117. (All further citations from this book are from this edition and are referred to as Orel in parenthesis.)

¹² T.S. Eliot 'Tradition and Individual Talent' in D. J. Enright & Ernst De Chichera eds. *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 293.

¹³ R. H. Super ed, 'Preface to First Edition of Poems (1853)' in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 4.

¹⁴ Thomas Hardy, Preface to the Dynasts, London: Macmillan, 1965, p. xxv

¹⁵ Thomas Hardy 'Apology' in *The Works of Thomas Hardy* (Denmark: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), p.530. (All further citations from this preface are from this edition and are referred to as Apology Hardy in parenthesis.)

¹⁶ Thomas Hardy 'The Temporary the All' in *The Works of Thomas Hardy* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994) p.5. (All further citations to Thomas Hardy's poems refer to this edition, unless otherwise stated, and are referred to as CP, in parenthesis)

¹⁷ William Wordsworth 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' in D. J. Enright & Ernst De Chichera eds. *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 166. (All further citations from this preface are from this edition and are referred to as Preface Wordsworth in parenthesis.)

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge *Biographia Literaria* in D. J. Enright & Ernst De Chichera eds. *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 191.

¹⁹ Cited in G. W. E. Russell *Matthew Arnold* (www.echo-library.com, 2007), p. 9.