

Hardy: God, Man and Fate

Introduction

We must distinguish between the stated beliefs of the author of the autobiography where Hardy tells us that in the 1860s, influenced by contemporary philosophers and scientists, he lost his belief in God and the various statements that are made about God in different poems. We must also recognise that Hardy never stopped daily reading of the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer which are perhaps the strongest influences on his prose style and versification.

In the poems God is variously portrayed as an angry, vengeful God; as a weaver of man's Fate; as a pitying, forgiving God; as a mystical life force which animals and birds are perhaps closer to than man or as the personification of patient suffering embodied in St Paul's description of charity in 1 Corinthians. 13.

'At A Lunar Eclipse'

Hardy's awe at the momentousness of the event, in which the shadow of the earth "from Pole to Central Sea" passes across the face of the "Moon's meek shine / Of imperturbable serenity" is conveyed by the Augustan vocabulary: "monochrome", "imperturbable", "serenity".

He then ponders the calm and peaceful shadow that the earth casts, "placid as a brow divine" and compares it with the "troubled form " he knows.

In the third verse he finds incongruity between the smallness of the shadow and the immensity of Mortality (i.e. mortal men) and again between the immensity of "Heaven's high human schemes" (for did not God create man in his own image) and the confined space silhouetted on the moon's face. If God created the Earth as his special project, what about the rest of the universe? Is Hardy dubious about the Genesis account?

In the final verse we find a typical inversion of thought, progressing from seeming proof that God is not in control of his creation "Nations at war with nation" to the magnificence of humanity: "brains that teem, / Heroes, and women fairer than the skies." The final irony is that the Trojan Wars were started over a woman reputed to be the most beautiful in the world. Hardy seems to suggest that a beautiful woman is worth more than "the skies" which is a metaphysical conceit similar to John Donne's "She is all states; all princes I; / Nothing else is." But then the association with Helen of Troy reminds us of "Nation at war with nation" and the imperfection of mankind.

In this complex poem Hardy grapples with the nature of God's creation, placing mankind in the perspective of the immensity of space. The conclusion he comes to is ambiguous; it could loosely be summarised "Man is a magnificent mess". Whether God actually created it and is in control of it are questions raised but left unanswered.

'The Impercipient'

The thought in this poem is quite straight-forward: Hardy, attending a cathedral service, ponders his own lack of faith. The Christian faith seems to him to be "fantasies" and heaven is described as "mirage mists" and "a strange destiny" which he is unable to imagine.

Yet in the second verse he characterises his own intellectual position as "infelicity" and, using religious concepts in which presumably he does not believe, he asks why his soul should be "consigned / To infelicity". This is curious as, if he does not believe in God or in the human soul, he can hardly blame God for consigning his soul to unhappiness. He further describes his insight as blindness and complains that he is unable to find the joys of religion found by believers. If he believes that they are illusions, he should not be so concerned at not sharing those illusions.

He continues to want it both ways in verse three where he suggests that his lack of faith should move Christians to pity him:

"My lack might move their sympathies
And Christian charity!"

The picture he paints in verse four is of a man standing on a sea-shore, presumably on the brink of eternity, unable to hear "the distant glorious sea" which is the afterlife; to him death is like a cold wind blowing through trees "'yon dark / And wind-swept pine to me!" Both metaphors seem to me to be a long way from the belief in the finality of death of an atheist.

In verse five he expresses resentment that people should think that he would prefer there to be no "blessed things". Having lost his faith he describes as being like a bird that has lost its wings:

"O, doth a bird deprived of wings
Go earth-bound willingly!"

The final idea of death he provides which will apply to both atheist and believer is "rest". You may remember "Chanel Firing" in which a pitying God kindly postpones the Day of Judgement because mankind sorely needs "rest".

'The Darkling Thrush'

This poem, designed to mark and characterise the end of the nineteenth century, provides a picture of almost unremitting gloom. The scene is spectral, like a "corpse outleant" and it is the corpse of the nineteenth century. In verse two the death of the century is likened to the shrinking of life in the winter season and the lack of "fervour" extends to the poet.

The song of the thrush is associated with a religious anthem through the words "full-hearted evensong" and "carollings" and that the bird chooses to "fling his soul / Upon the glowing gloom." suggests that this is a soul calling on God.

Typically, the poet is the outsider, unable to share the thrushes ecstasy. The nearest he can get to this is to hope that the bird knows something that Hardy is unable to perceive. As in 'The Imprecipient' and 'The Oxen' Hardy seems to regret badly his inability to perceive God in His creation. Unable to share the ecstasy of the bird, at least Hardy is able to convey it and recreate it in the vigorously stressed rhythms and open sounds of the third verse. In fact the word "pulse" in verse two is significant. The poem's rhythmic pattern resembles a slow heart-beat which quickens and pulses in the third verse. We move from short monosyllabic sounds associated with the tatty appearance of the bird to the broad alliterating rhythms associated with its song:

"An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom."

'To An Unknown Pauper Child'

It was this sort of poem that really excited the anger of churchmen. Basically he is suggesting that, if he were able to see the "terrestrial chart" or later history on earth of an unborn pauper child he would advise it not to be born. The idea that life is charted and predestined also appears in the phrase "Life's pending plan" in verse two. If the child's life is already planned then surely God, the planner, must take some responsibility for the misery that Hardy anticipates?

In verse three Hardy wishes he could bury the baby in some shut plot "Of earth's wide wold" (using the dialect word "wold" suggests that he sees the earth as a familiar local place, comforting and homely).

In the penultimate verse he concludes that he is just as powerless to prevent his fate as the child. Unexpectedly in the last verse he describes human beings as "Unreasoning, sanguine,

visionary", the totally unexpected accolade "visionary" turning the whole poem on its head. If humans might be "visionary" then surely the child has something exciting to look forward to! He ends by wishing the child good health and "Joys seldom yet attained by humankind."

'The Convergence of The Twain'

Hardy's poem about the sinking of 'The Titanic' (on 15 April, 1912) is full of polysyllabic august words which give the feeling of something momentous happening, as if we are truly in the presence of the working out of God's will. "Salamandrine" suggests mystical transformation (the salamander came out of the fire just as the ship's plated body is cast and welded at high temperatures) and "rhythmic tidal lyres" carry epic classical connotations as if the sea, flowing through the wreckage, is playing an ancient song about Fate.

The God in this poem weaves the web of Life; he is "The Spinner of the Years". He is also showing forth his power and purpose; he is "The Immanent Will". This is the God of Judgement, bringing retribution to the hubristic engineers who believed they had designed the unsinkable ship and to the wealthy and vain-glorious passengers bedecked with jewels. They lie on the bottom of the ocean "Deep from human vanity" where the sea-worms crawl over the mirrors and the jewels lie dull and lightless. Fish seem to ask what all this tawdry stuff is doing down there:

"Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here."

Following the pivotal and curiously colloquial word "Well", Hardy then answers the question of the fishes. The preparation of the iceberg for the ship is suggestive of preparing a groom for the female ship, "a sinister mate". Unknown to her as she grows "in stature, grace and hue", he grows in size to match her for the moment of their "consummation".

The actual moment when the ship strikes the iceberg is described as a response to a command:

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

Each of the "twin halves of this one august event" responds to the command of God. This classic statement of God's retribution for vanity and hubris is theologically sound and an extraordinary assertion of the power of a God in whom Hardy claimed no longer to believe.

'Channel Firing'

This comic poem is deadly serious. While it is ludicrous to imagine a conversation between Dorset rustics and their parson who have woken from "the sleep of death" in the belief that gunnery practice off the coast is the Day of Judgement and even more comical to hear God shouting at man like some demented schoolmaster, Hardy's satirical object is to berate the men who create wars. Incidentally, the land around Lulworth Cove on the Isle of Purbeck is still used by the Ministry of Defence for tank training (plus ca change!).

The details of the mouse on the altar dropping a crumb (presumably a crumb of communion wafer, i.e. Christ's body), the worms drawing back into their mounds and the Glebe cow drooling are also two-edged, mocking the transubstantiation, a God who creates man to rot in the earth and suggesting the wealth of the church. The phrase "For Christes sake" with its sixteenth century genitive spelling is a quotation from the English translation of the popular Dutch morality play, 'Everyman' in which God calls Everyman to make an account of his life (the only surviving morality play in English).

The characterisation of God is also comic. He berates man for his violence and then threatens him with having to scour the floor of Hell. The malicious "Ha, ha. It will be warmer when I blow my trumpet" is a splendidly dramatic touch, but what he says in parenthesis is immensely serious. Suddenly the angry vengeful God is seen in a new light, not scolding but pitying the human lot, recognising that man, having put up with the pains of life needs the rest of death.

Parson Thirdly's wry comment that instead of preaching forty year he wishes he had stuck to pipes and beer is pretty much Hardy's view of the ineffectuality of the church in altering human behaviour. There is a similarly comic conversation which takes place in 'The Buck's Head', Troytown (in 'Far From The Madding Crowd') in which Parson Thirdly (named as a comic dig at the Trinity) appears. After much drinking and hilarious talk about the relative merits of church and chapel Jan Coggan praises the parson for sharing his seed potatoes in a year when the crop failed. Outside in the rain on the Spring cart lie the mortal remains of Fanny Robin and her dead baby, a reminder of the sort of harsh realities of life and death which emerge in this similarly dramatic satire.

'Night in The Old Home'

In this contemplative poem Hardy imagines sitting at the end of the day in his study by the dying embers of the fire (clearly emblematic of his own old age) and hearing the comments of ancestors, the "perished people" who have gone to their rest. Hardy is in a bleak mood, his life stretching out like a bare pathway, a desert track.

There is an element of macabre humour in having them "come and seat them around in their mouldy places" and each looks at the poet with a sad upbraiding wistfulness which moves him to question them in the third verse. He blames them for keeping him still alive "lingering and languishing here" and he characterises himself as "A thinker of crooked thoughts upon Life in the sere" (the word "sere" recalls Macbeth's "I have fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf") "And on That which consigns men to night after showing the day to them". The capital letter for "That" makes it quite clear that Hardy holds God responsible for giving man a taste of Life and then snatching it away.

Their advice to the poet is to stop asking about the purpose of Life and Death "Let be the wherefore!" They tell him to "Enjoy, suffer, wait", to "spread the table here freely like us", to become placid and await death smiling at life, as they did. Whether the historical Thomas Hardy was able to take their advice is hardly the point of the poem (he was notoriously inhospitable and mean with money); the significant point is that Hardy can see both points of view and there is a strong tendency in Hardy critics to notice the gloomy aspects of his philosophy and to ignore the deep celebration of life's tasks, place and relationships in the poems and novels. There is some of that affection in the poem's title and the idea that the past is part of the present. The very different poet T S Eliot ends 'The Waste Land' with what the thunder bringing the rains said: "Give, sympathise, control". Both poets have a preoccupation with continuity of cultural tradition and a simultaneous awareness of the prescience of death. Hardy's "desert track" is not far from Eliot's "waste land".

'Afterwards'

Hardy contemplates his own death as a quiet shutting of a door. His life he describes as "my tremulous stay", the first of several instances which suggest the last frail flutters of human breath which is the moment of death. He imagines the different time when it might happen and in each verse paints a picture of some natural occurrence which is something he used to notice but which also carries suggestion of the moment of death: the fluttering of leaves on the trees in May; the swooping down onto an upland thorn tree of a hawk at evening (is this predator death and why is the thorn tree so stark and emblematic in folk song?); or a warm summer night with the moths and the furtive hedgehog travelling over the lawn. In the penultimate verse it is the stars he describes and staring up to the heavens inevitably poses questions of the mysteries of time, space and the afterlife. In the last verse the bell at his funeral is caught on the breeze, is briefly lost in the wind but then resumes, clear suggestion of resurrection after death.

There is so much of Hardy in this poem. He felt a close affinity with living creatures, an empathy with the furtive hedgehog, the darkling thrush whose evening song brings intimations of hope, the fallow deer at the lonely house, the rabbit caught in a gin trap or the bird caught in a clap-net, in bird lime or caged and blinded as a song bird. He was Honorary President of the RSPCA. He writes about these creatures as if they have some special knowledge of God. In 'The Blinded Bird' he asserts divinity through suffering in the words of St Paul in 1 Corinthians

13. I would suggest that his experience of God lies primarily in his understanding of suffering and his sense of the divinity of God's creation. The spirit is of Tess who, as she comes down into the Vale of Blackmore sings the *Benedicite*. Intellectually he spurns the idea of a God who allows suffering and he mercilessly mocks the posturing of the church but the poet in him, the man who feels, celebrates the numinous and even, in this poem, suggests the possibility of something after death.

'He Never Expected Much'

This consideration on his eighty-sixth birthday, two years before his death, is like 'Night In The Old Home' in that it is an assessment of his life since, as a boy he "used to lie upon the leaze and watch the sky". He imagines a conversation with the "World" and he hears its voice

"In that mysterious voice you shed
From clouds and hills around"

Many have had contempt for the World and many have loved it desperately. Hardy has heard the world's message that he will not receive much from life "Just neutral-tinted haps and such" and has consequently not been disappointed and been able to put up with the "strain and aches" of each successive year. The gloom is characteristic. Whereas Wordsworth hears intimations of immortality in Nature, Hardy hears intimations of mortality. Compare Hardy's poem with these lines from Wordsworth's 'Prelude Book 1, lines 401-414:

Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!
Thou soul that art the Eternity of Thought!
Thou giv'st to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion! not in vain,
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
Of Childhood did'st Thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human Soul,
Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man
But with high objects, with enduring things,
With life and nature, purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying by such discipline,
Both fear and pain, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart

'The Fallow Deer at The Lonely House'

There is nothing specifically religious in this poem and yet it feels religious to me. It is certainly deeply personal and carries the emotion Hardy feels for lonely isolated creatures out in the cold. There is contact between the warm scene inside the house and the deer through the reflection of the fire in its eyes "Lit by lamps of rosy dyes" but the poet and the people round the fire are not aware of his presence. Probably this is a memory of Hardy's childhood sitting round the fire in the cottage at Higher Bockhampton with his parents. Ironically, the poet is both inside the poem and outside it, unaware by the fire and yet as poet able to see the momentary glance of the deer. A sense of wonder is in the eyes of the deer

"Wondering, aglow,
Fourfooted, tiptoe."

The humans are unaware of what the deer sees, unaware even of its presence and yet the deer is connected to them. Just as in 'Afterwards' Hardy identified with the furtive hedgehog scuttling across the lawn in the warm Summer night, so here he identifies with the fallow deer: the outsider, in the snow, vulnerable and yet with a sense of wonderment. The dual perspective in this poem is quite distinctive and Hardy's identification with the plight of animals; compare the dying pheasants Tess wakes up with in 'Tess of The D'Urbervilles' or the rabbit caught in a gin-trap screaming in pain in the middle of the night in the centre of 'Jude The Obscure'!

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