

JAGDISH CHANDRA DAVE

THE HUMAN
PREDICAMENT
IN HARDY'S
NOVELS



❧ MACMILLAN ❧
HARDY ❧ STUDIES

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT IN HARDY'S NOVELS

Jagdish Chandra Dave

Foreword by
Lance St. John Butler

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Foreword

The most obvious things are sometimes the hardest to say. In Hardy's case we are confronted by his extraordinary grasp of reality and his deeply commonsense view of life and yet we struggle to find simple critical ways of expressing this. In my own work on the novels and poems I have often felt that I have been digging down towards the deepest stratum, and that it is a stratum of absolute obviousness, but that the right way of bringing it to light has eluded me.

When I first read Jagdish Dave's book, in another form, I realized at once that what I, in common with many Hardy critics, had been lacking was the correct habit of thought. By chance (and only by chance, for Hardy was surely not directly influenced by the east) it requires an oriental cast of mind, eastern habits of thought and a good knowledge of the philosophies of both west *and* east to see clearly the deepest structures of Hardy's work. Viewed from the position of Buddhist atheist resignation and compassion the complex elements of his moral and metaphysical world fall easily into place.

Jagdish Dave is wonderfully uncompromising – he will not allow himself to deviate from his initial lucid insight into Hardy and the result, for a western reader, is a shock followed by a sense of relieved acquiescence. That at least is how it has been for me.

And perhaps this is not so surprising. One has only to think about the withdrawn but somehow radiant Guru of Max Gate, with his concern for the lives of trees, birds and men, to see the eastern wisdom in the western novelist and poet. One has only to recall the absolute lack of personal condemnation in the novels to see in Hardy something parallel to the all-embracing compassion of the Buddha. Here, at last, is the commonsense solution to the conundrum as to whether Hardy 'has a philosophy' or not: in so far as a clear-sighted facing up to the Absurd or an ethic of social harmony is a philosophy then Hardy has one; in so far as these are

a rejection of metaphysics and an abandonment of systems and speculations then Hardy has no 'philosophy'. Either way it matters little: Hardy sees life as it is, that is all.

Stirling

LANCE ST. JOHN BUTLER

Preface

A creative artist does not always have intellectual awareness of what he intuitively sees and spontaneously shows. He may leave to critics the task of formulating his vision into clear concepts and coherent argument. When Dr S. Radhakrishnan requested Rabindranath Tagore to write an introduction to his book entitled *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, the latter humbly declined and wrote back:

It is difficult for me to write an introduction to your book, for I do not know what my duties are in writing it. . . . For about my philosophy I am like M. Jourdain who had been talking prose all his life without knowing it. It may tickle my vanity to be told that my writings carry dissolved in their stream pure gold of philosophical speculation and that gold bricks can be made by washing its sands and melting the precious fragments – but yet it is for the readers to find it out and it would be perilous responsibility on my part to give assurance to seekers and stand guarantee for its realisation. If a doctor writes a scientific paper on some disease which I harbour in my constitution it would be ludicrously presumptuous on my part to vouch for its truth, for only sufferings are for me and their pathology is for the doctor.¹

Hardy admitted as much when he wrote in the Postscript to the Preface to *Jude the Obscure*: ‘And no doubt there can be more in a book than the author consciously puts there, which will help either to its profit or to its disadvantage as the case may be.’² He never had claims on philosophy. Still, if we observe some sort of philosophy issuing from the complex pattern of his artistic creation, it is for us to gather it with critical sympathy and detachment. The ‘precious fragments’ lying strewn through the pages of his novels have to be carefully sifted, collected, melted and crystallized into the ‘pure gold of philosophical speculation’. I have attempted to do so here. This book is the revised and

abridged version of my PhD thesis accepted by Gujarat University in 1981.

David Cecil is right when he states that Hardy's 'subject is not men, but man. His theme is mankind's predicament in the universe.'³ But he fails to note that Hardy also considers man's being in the midst of society, and that more important than the *perception* of these two elements (the cosmic and the social absurd) is Hardy's ameliorative ethical *reaction* to them. Hardy's philosophy as manifested in the novels is highly original. To think that it is merely a restatement of the ideas and opinions current in his times, as Irving Howe does,⁴ is to miss its essential uniqueness which I have endeavoured to bring out by comparison and contrast, wherever necessary, with some thinkers, ancient and modern.

The purpose of this book is to systematize Hardy's thought as it issues from the novels, not to consider how it gradually developed and what influences contributed to its making. All biographical interest is, therefore, held irrelevant, and excluded.

All the trends of his thought are manifest in each one of his philosophically important novels. But the trends predominant in one do not appear so striking in the others. The study of these novels is attempted in this book thematically, not in chronological sequence. The novels which seem to be little more than plain narrative are omitted.

I am deeply grateful to my parents' blessings, Guru's constant grace, and the good wishes of family and friends. I am indebted also to Dr T.P. Chitanand who encouraged me to undertake my doctoral research and guided it throughout. I am particularly obliged to Dr Lance St. John Butler who has generously appreciated my work and indulgently overlooked its shortcomings. He has, at the expense of his precious time, carefully corrected numerous linguistic errors which my laboriously learnt English could not altogether avoid, and kindly written a Foreword to the book which, without his disinterested help, would not have seen the light.

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Part I
The Nature of Hardy's
Thought

1 Was Hardy a Philosopher?

Hardy's vision of the world as manifested in a series of his novels, culminating in *Jude the Obscure*, seemed hopelessly dark, and his views of morality profoundly disturbing, both to lay-readers of his fiction and literary critics. He was, consequently, disparaged as an atheist or a heretic, a determinist or a pessimist. He was castigated for doing what he did as well as for not doing what he never intended to do. His naturalistic metaphysics which is, in fact, the beginning of his melioristic ethics, has been mistaken for the conclusion of his thought, and his unique position as a thinker has eluded the grasp of his critics so far. The basic question, therefore, which we have to ask ourselves and answer is whether or how far Hardy was a philosopher, before we attempt to study his philosophy as it issues from his novels.

Hardy cannot be regarded as a philosopher in the traditional academic sense of the term. He never attempted in the manner of Hegel or Herbert Spencer a complete and coherent system of philosophy, seeking to comprehend the totality of existence as conditioned by causal laws within time and space, nor subscribed to any such system worked out by others. He did not delight in the inquisitive game of inferences regarding the ultimate stuff of phenomenal reality. He wondered why people read more metaphysics into his novels than was really there. Hardy wrote in his *General Preface to the Novels and Poems* of 1912:

Positive views on the Whence and the Wherefore of things have never been advanced by this pen as a consistent philosophy. Nor is it likely, indeed, that imaginative writings extending over more than forty years would exhibit a coherent scientific theory of the universe even if it had been attempted – of that universe concerning which Spencer owns to the 'paralysing thought' that possibly there exists no comprehension of it anywhere. But such objectless consistency never has been attempted, and the sentiments in the following pages have been

stated truly to be mere impressions of the moment, and not convictions or arguments.¹

He writes, again, in his diary on 31 December 1901:

After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this: let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience. He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseology from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories if he values his own mental life. Let him remember the fate of Coleridge, and save years of labour by working out his own views as given him by his surroundings.²

It is obvious that Hardy asks everyone here to work out, not an elaborate system of metaphysics, but a simple philosophy of life and action. His distrust of the theoretical enterprise of abstract reasoning is patent again when he writes:

Since I discovered, several years ago, that I was living in a world where nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently, I have troubled myself very little about theories. . . . Where development according to perfect reason is limited to the narrow region of pure mathematics, I am content with tentativeness from day to day.³

It cannot, of course, be denied that Hardy was deeply interested in philosophy, and that the chief currents of contemporary thought influenced and shaped his mind considerably. But he had sworn no allegiance to any one particular system, and had none of his own to offer. It is a mistake to treat him as a philosopher in the traditional sense and then to complain that he is crude and inconsistent.

Yet Hardy can be regarded as a philosopher in the recent existential sense of the term. Instead of trying to resolve the mind-matter dichotomy of existence as we experience it into some abstract harmony of thought in the manner of Hegelian Idealists and Darwinian Naturalists, he boldly recognized the absurd confrontation between the aspirations of the human consciousness and the universe indifferent to them. His thought is driven on by the spur of anguished concern for man alienated in his only

homeland which is the earth. We can look upon him as a philosopher in the sense Dr Everett W. Knight looks upon Gide, Malraux, Saint-Exupéry and Sartre as philosophers in *Literature Considered as Philosophy*.⁴ All these in their own way tried not to propound a metaphysical system but to chalk out a path of right and responsible living, and to give meaning to life's transitory character in the context of its earthly career itself. They all laid great emphasis on the freedom of the human will, little and limited though it is, in creating a new kind of optimism from the ruins of customary faith and morals. Their ideas find expression not in well-reasoned treatises, but in fiction, drama and poetry. They are essentially literary artists who have, by their passionate message of revolt and reconstruction, compelled their recognition as philosophers from the academic circles unwilling to recognize them as such.

Epistemologically, Hardy may loosely be described as an agnostic. This is obvious in the passages quoted earlier and may clearly be seen in the thought pattern that issues from the study of his novels. But he often goes further and sounds even sceptical, as when he maintains that 'nothing is as it appears'.⁵ The ultimates of things had ceased to bother him. He never tried to go behind the concrete apparent to the abstract real or to wander beyond the limits of comprehension possible for our power of knowing. He accepted only the self-evident as truth.

One such truth which Hardy accepted was the non-existence of God. He wrote: '*January 29 (1890)*. I have been looking for God for 50 years, and I think that if he had existed I should have discovered him. As an external personality, of course – the only true meaning of the word.'⁶ His novels clearly reveal his unbelief to a careful reader. Many of his critics, however, think that he was a heretic who believed in a malevolent Deity rejoicing in human suffering rather than a sincere atheist who believed in no God at all. Edmund Gosse, for example, wonders: 'What has Providence done to Mr. Hardy that he should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his creator?'⁷ Mrs Oliphant writes similarly:

Mr. Hardy's indignant anti-religion becomes occasionally very droll, if not amusing. Against whom is he so angry? Against 'the divinities', who are so immoral – who punish the vices of the fathers on the children? Against God? – who does not ask us

whether we wish to be created; who gives us but one chance, etc. But then if there is no God? Why, in that case, should Mr. Hardy be angry? We know one man of fine mind whom we have always described as being angry with God for not existing. Is this perhaps Mr. Hardy's case? But then he ought not to put the blame of the evils which do exist upon this imaginary Being who does not.⁸

Hardy appears to be a heretic because (1) some of his characters have an anthropomorphic conception of a Godhead qualitatively different from that of Christianity and substitute revolt against for prayer to Him; (2) he himself of his authorial comments satirically lashes out at the God of traditional faith with a view to vexing pious believers in Him; (3) he asserted his unbelief emphatically, but often in the interrogative form, and (4) he frequently exercised a 'willing suspension of disbelief' and imagined a Deity, somewhat after the Hellenic notion, for the purposes of tragedy in his fiction. It is necessary to deal with each one of these points in some detail.

The characters who blaspheme against God or Fate are just themselves, not the mouth-pieces of their author. Their utterances are to be judged in the light of their temperament and trying situation. Sue, for example, says in *Jude the Obscure*: 'We must conform! All the ancient wrath of the Power above us has been vented upon us, His poor creatures, and we must submit. There is no choice. We must. It is no use fighting against God!' But Jude immediately sets her straight by observing: 'It is only against man and senseless circumstance.' She admits: 'True! What have I been thinking of! I am getting as superstitious as a savage! . . . But whoever or whatever our foe may be, I am cowed into submission. I have no more fighting strength left; no more enterprise. I am beaten, beaten!'⁹ It is as natural for the beaten and grief-stricken Sue, when all her children are dead, to fix the blame for her misery on an Evil Controller of the World, as it is for the fortunate ones like Grace Melbury in *The Woodlanders* to read a kindly purpose in a crass accident when Fitzpiers, her husband, is saved from the fatal jaws of the man-trap, and to exclaim: 'O Edred, there has been an Eye watching us to-night, and we should be thankful indeed!'¹⁰ But Hardy, as is patent in the passages from *Jude* quoted above, regarded such a tendency as a temperamental weakness. Only his weaker characters exhibit it. His strong

characters, such as Clym, Oak, Elizabeth-Jane, Marty South, Ethelberta, stand unshaken like stoics through all their tribulations and see no God, good or evil, anywhere.

Hardy, then, directed satire in his authorial comments not so much against God as against the irrational and cowardly belief in Him. Andrew Lang observed of what he presumed to be Hardy's unbelief in *Tess*: 'If there is a God, who can seriously think of him as a malicious fiend?'¹¹ Hardy, on the contrary, would put it thus: if there is a God, who can seriously think of him as anything but a malicious fiend? The pagan notion of cruel gods was more reasonable than the Christian God of mercy in view of man's misery during his short span of life. His notorious remark – '“Justice” was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess'¹² – is not meant to be a theologically serious statement, and does not, as a satire, contradict his atheism. Hardy seems to be suggesting that the Deity, if real and omnipotent, must have sadistically sported with Tess's life, for otherwise He could have made her happy. Such an assumption is at least less absurd than the popular belief. Hardy used one to attack the other, though he had, for himself, consciously dismissed both as implausible.

Sometimes Hardy makes emphatic assertions of his unbelief in question form. For example, he speaks of the Durbeyfield family in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:

All these young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship – entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under the hatches compelled to sail with them – six helpless creatures, who had never been asked if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield. Some people would like to know whence the poet whose philosophy is in these days deemed as profound and trustworthy as his song is breezy and pure, gets his authority for speaking of 'Nature's holy plan'.¹³

Again, commenting on Alec stooping with lustful intentions over sleeping Tess, Hardy writes:

But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked.¹⁴

In the first of these passages Hardy states that the poet quoted has no authority for speaking of 'Nature's holy plan' in view of the helpless human misery as seen in the Durbeyfield household; in the second, that there is nowhere the Providence of Tess's simple faith who could intervene in time to save her from seduction. In both cases he uses the interrogative form to make the affirmations emphatic. The sense of outrage and irony is manifest in both passages.

Hardy, then, used his poet's prerogative (denied to philosophers) to suspend willingly his disbelief when working in the realm of creative literature, and 'to exclaim illogically against the gods, singular or plural'¹⁵ as in Greek and Shakespearian tragedy, in order to make the tragic conflict meaningful and the narrative more moving. This does not mean that Hardy – or Euripides or Shakespeare for that matter – believed in the actual existence of any such gods. He wrote in reply to an unknown critic who assumed that 'Hardy postulates an all-powerful being endowed with the baser human passions':¹⁶

As I need hardly inform any thinking reader, I do not hold, and never have held the ludicrous opinions here assumed to be mine – which are really, or approximately, those of the primitive believer in his man-shaped tribal god. And in seeking to ascertain how any exponent of English literature could have supposed that I held them I find that the writer of the estimate has harked back to a passage in a novel of mine, printed many years ago, in which forces opposed to the heroine were allegorized as a personality (a method not unusual in imaginative prose or poetry) by the use of a well-known trope, explained in that venerable work, Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, as 'one in which life, perception, activity, design, passion, or any property of sentient beings, is attributed to things inanimate.'