# A JOURNEY INTO THOMAS HARDY'S POETRY

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'One can read him for years and years and still be surprised, and I think that's a marvellous thing to find in any poet.'

*Philip Larkin.*

# WHY HARDY'S POETRY?

Thomas Hardy is a twentieth-century best-seller. People who like very different kinds of reading seem to get fascinated by his novels. Many, in recent years, have begun to turn their eyes to his poems.

But Hardy was a very private and complex person, and a man who, though his feelings were deep and intense, prized understatement and reticence. The riches of his poetry, and his ideal of human life, often become apparent only as one reads below the surface of his poems. There one finds not only his honesty, as he constantly explored and faced up to truth and reality, but his compassion for the disadvantaged, his joy in living, his wit and irony and sense of the absurd – and a surprisingly modern approach to life that confronts many of the dilemmas of twentieth-century men and women. Those who look for beauty will also be satisfied.

This is a guidebook for any reader who wants to make the journey of understanding into Hardy's poems. They will not disappoint.

# NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Poem titles are given in italics. The text is taken from *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed Samuel Hynes (3 vols, Oxford 1982–5.) Hardy's letters can be found in several books, but have been collected so far (up to 1925) in 6 volumes, ed Purdy and Millgate (Oxford 1978–87). Abbreviations for titles of books frequently mentioned are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Life* | F.E. Hardy *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1928* (in one volume, London 1962) |
| *Notebooks* | *The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed R.H. Taylor (London 1978); original documents in the Dorset County Museum. |
| *Lit. Notes* | *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed Björk (London 1985); original documents in the Dorset County Museum. |
| *Orel* | *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed H. Orel (Kansas 1966, London 1977) |
| *Millgate* | Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (Oxford 1982) |
| *Dennis Taylor* | Dennis Taylor: *Hardy's Poetry, 1860–1928* (London 1981) |
| *PTH* | *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, ed Clements and Grindle (London 1980). |
| *Casebook* | *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, ed Gibson and Johnson. (Casebook Series, London 1979) |
| *Agenda* | Thomas Hardy Special Issue, Vol 10, Nos 2–3, 1972 ed Davie. |

Many other books or essays on Hardy's poetry which I find helpful or illuminating are referred to, but I have deliberately excluded a long (and perhaps daunting) separate bibliography, which may easily be found elsewhere.

Thanks are due to the following for permission to quote:

Oxford University Press for passages from *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed Purdy and Millgate (1978–87); E.L. Hardy, *Some Recollections*, ed Hardy and Gittings, (1961); Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (1982);

Edinburgh University Press for Graham Dunstan Martin, *Language, Truth and Poetry* (1975);

Macmillan Publishers Ltd, for *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed Lennart Björk; *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, ed Gibson and Johnson; F.E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*; Tom Paulin, *The Poetry of Perception; Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed R.H. Taylor; Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry*, 1860–1928; *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed Harold Orel;

Penguin Books Ltd for A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (1962);

Chatto and Windus/Hogarth Press, and the Estate of Marcel Proust, for Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, tr C.K. Scott-Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (1981);

Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd for Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*;

Vision Press, London; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980 for *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, ed Patricia Clements and Juliet Grindle;

Grafton Books, a division of the Collins Publishing Group, for quotation from Jean Brooks, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure*;

*Agenda* for articles by Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, David Wright and William Pritchard; *Victorian Poetry* for articles by FR Giordano, Jr, and William Buckler;

Faber and Faber Ltd for Douglas Dunn, *Elegies*;

SPCK for Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*.

I should like to thank my fellow students of St Hilda's College, Oxford for their studentship, granted me for 1982–3, which first gave me space to work on Thomas Hardy's poetry.

I am grateful to my husband Bernard for his help with the index – and for so much besides.

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# 1

# HARDY'S WORLD:

## Inexplicable Relations

I recently met a Modern Languages student who through his leisure reading had become hooked on Hardy's poetry. It spilled out in most of his conversations because he could not help it. The poem that at that stage was never far from his mind, and which he thought was one of the finest poems ever written, was "I Look into my Glass". I was moved by this, because although I think this too, I was almost surprised that a man in his early twenties could share the feelings of a man nearer sixty. (Philip Larkin also thought Hardy was not a young person's poet; yet he too discovered Hardy's poems when he was a young man.)

This is the poem.

### I LOOK INTO MY GLASS

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, "Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"

For then, I, undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide,
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

We must, I think, be stirred by this poem, even at a first reading. Yet in many ways it could seem unpromising. The first stanza is

almost nothing but bare, ordinary monosyllables, which only gradually give way later to a handful of words of a more lyrical quality. It appears so simple, the metre so regular, in a way so bald, that no great craft may seem (unless we try to rewrite it ourselves) to have been necessary to put it together. There is no melodrama, and no rhetoric trying to persuade us how we should feel. Perhaps these are virtues. In those simple opening monosyllables there is truthfulness unadorned, experience unedited, an emotion laid bare, offered with dignity and restraint but no self-pity. Read again, the very simplicity of the opening lines takes on a power from that dignity, and from the long vowels, and the lift given by "into" and "wasting" among the single syllables. The deep emotion carries us straight over to the second stanza, where everything begins to open out: though still without self-pity, there is more explanation. There are longer words, like "lonely" and "endless", with liquid "l's" and feminine (unstressed) endings which soften the earlier harshness – until the lines broaden out into the full space and poise of "equanimity". The reader is surprised by this unexpected, unique word of five syllables: but it transforms the poem and seems to bring in the music of the spheres. It is this glimpse of equanimity, of a fate accepted with what Donald Davie in another context calls "the reposefulness of the irremediable",[1] that makes the last stanza so unbearable. The grief and the longing are drawn out in the lines' patient pauses:

> But Time, to make me grieve,
> Part steals, lets part abide.

They sing in the long meditative vowels of "grieve" and "steals" and "eve", which then mingle with the slow "i" of "Time", "abide", "noontide", and "fragile" so that these vowels, and the liquid consonants, seem to surround us wherever we turn; and the trill of the "fragile frame" catches sadly with the trill of "throbbings" in a controlled intensity.

The strength of the emotion, undoctored, and its evident sincerity, is something in Hardy which appeals to all ages. The theme of the poem – "this curse of his heart not ageing while his frame moved naturally onward", as he put it in *The Well-Beloved*, – might only appeal to those who have begun to experience the phenomenon. One day Hardy recorded in his diary an occasion

when he felt it himself: it may have been the germ of the poem.

> *Oct 18* Hurt my tooth at breakfast-time. I look in the glass. Am conscious of the humiliating sorriness of my earthly tabernacle, and of the sad fact that the best of parents could do no better for me... Why should a man's mind have been thrown into such close, sad, sensational, inexplicable relations with such a precarious object as his own body![2]

In 1892, when he wrote this, Hardy was 52. (His birth date, in June 1840, makes quick reckoning easy.) Six years were to pass before he astonished English-speaking readers by publishing his first volume of poems: most had pigeon-holed him for ever as a rustic, and increasingly tragic, novelist. Although he had begun to write poems as early as the 1860s, and continued to include some of these, often revised, with newer ones in every succeeding volume until his death in 1928, most of his greatest poetry was written after about 1912, when he was already in his seventies – an unusual achievement in itself. Yet even from the first, in the 1860s, questions like this about the "inexplicable relations" between mind and body and their setting within time had begun to exercise him. He was to spend the rest of his long life pondering them, constantly exploring the nature of reality and the paradoxes of the human condition.

An understanding of this dawns gradually as one reads and re-reads among Hardy's hundreds of poems. But first the reader is caught up into his world: a world distinct enough, rich enough in depths and contrasts and patterns and landscapes, for one to be able to draw it, walk in it, feel its freshness, sun, wind and rain, light and darkness, green and gray, hear its sounds – and begin to see some of its implications. No less distinct are his domestic interiors: rooms where clocks and old furniture gleam in mirrors and candlelight, where stairways mount and descend almost hypnotically, where closed doors mask the sounds of music and laughter or "shaken words bitter to madness." The floors, witness to long past scenes, are "footworn and hollowed and thin", and in the hearth embers glow like memories.

From this room we look out through the casement (our vision framed by our attitudes and preconceptions), and the world has two faces. One is the green and golden world of summer and lavish autumn, sweet piercing birdsong, love and happiness and

high-piled clouds. There are towers and spires in the landscape, fairgrounds and railways, and humble cottages where the stone threshold dips from the steady passage of feet over the centuries. Tracks cross the heathland, peopled with moving figures of all ages and conditions; in the distance a river glints on its way to the sea.

The other face of this world through which humans journey is sombre, a dun and dreary landscape. Storm clouds belly down, wind and rain scourge the traveller, the leafless trees thresh as if in bodily pain. Where the moon washes the scene with its greenish-yellow light, patterns of all kinds, patterns of life and understanding, emerge and grow and seem to crowd the mind – dappled moonshades, the intricate lacing of branches across the sky, the woven textures of leaves, cobwebs picked out by frost. The highroads and the telegraph wires criss-cross on the slopes, the railway cutting marks a gash across the valley. This is a real world, a world of contrasts and dissonance, where the technology that has built the *Titanic* for the favoured few meets the deceptive quiet of the hidden vales, where a horse may still plough at the speed of a man's walk.

Like the patterns, these pictures grow in the mind as one poem is added to another: one begins to be magnetised into Hardy's world. Here is a hint of its flavour.

## THE SHIVER

Five lone clangs from the house-clock nigh,
And I woke with a sigh;
Stars wore west like a slow tide flowing,
And my lover had told yesternight of his going, –
That at this gray hour he'd be hasting by,

Starting betimes on a journey afar: –
So, casement ajar,
I eyed in the upland pasture his figure,
A dim dumb speck, growing darker and bigger,
Then smalling to nought where the nut-trees are.

He could not bend his track to my window, he'd said,
Being hurried ahead:
But I wish he had tried to! – and then felt a shiver,
Corpse-cold, as he sank toward the town by the river;
And back I went sadly and slowly to bed.

What meant my shiver while seeing him pass
As a dot on the grass
I surmised not then. But later I knew it
When came again he; and my word outdrew it,
As said he: "It's hard for your bearing, alas!

"But I've seen, I have clasped, where the smart ships plough,
One of far brighter brow.
A sea-goddess. Shiver not. One far rarer
In gifts than I find thee: yea, warmer and fairer: –
I seek her again; and I love you not now."

Without lingering too long, one can observe some of the familiar features of Hardy's world: the window framing a figure in the landscape, the prophetic clock, the stars and tide, the gray hour that speaks of inner fears matching the outer setting, as the "corpse-cold" shiver images the rippling river's chill and the coming death of love. Here is the tragic belatedness of understanding – "I surmised not then. But later I knew it." Here is Hardy's characteristic noting of precise details, often in terms of parts of the body: "I *eyed*... his figure", and "One of far brighter *brow*." Here is the deliberately ordinary diction and tone seen in "I Look into my Glass" – "And back I went sadly and slowly to bed" – yet given piquancy by unusual words like "smalling", and favourite words which we come to add up, like "gray", "dim", "track", "sank", and the critical "smart".

Another glimpse of the Hardy scene comes in "The Prospect", a poem he wrote soon after the death of his first wife.

## THE PROSPECT

The twigs of the birch imprint the December sky
Like branching veins upon a thin old hand;
I think of summer-time, yes, of last July,
When she was beneath them, greeting a gathered band
Of the urban and bland.

Iced airs wheeze through the skeletoned hedge from the north,
With steady snores, and a numbing that threatens snow,
And skaters pass; and merry boys go forth
To look for slides. But well, well do I know
Whither I would go!

*December 1912*