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Hardy's Lines on the Titanic: A View from a Technical Stance

by JOSEPH E. GRENNEN

THE RECENT discovery of the wreck of the *Titanic* and the ghostly television footage brought back by the joint French-American marine archaeological expedition provide an apt occasion for reconsidering contemporary reactions to that famous disaster. The deep-diving submarine *Nautilus*, with video cameras able to scan long sections of the hull and to home in on such opulent details as a crystal chandelier which once graced the main ballroom, and its mechanical arms capable of retrieving a range of objects from delicate chinoiserie to massive leaded glass windows, has provided a visual focus for latter-day ruminations on the vanity of human wishes.¹ Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain"² remains one of the more memorable literary responses, and though the tragedy at sea might be thought eerily opportune for an expression of Hardy's fatalistic credo, the subtlety and virtuosity of his language and imagery has not, to judge from the published criticism, been adequately appreciated. My aim here is to indicate something of the richness of imagination with which the poet plays off a body of received moral-theological attitudes, partly as reflected in scriptural motifs and partly in traditional (medieval) formulas of contempt for human arrogance, against a modern technological boosterism mirrored in faint echoes of contemporary scientific jargon.

The particular style of the poem is created through a chiseled formality fraught with magisterial pronouncement and stilted archaism firmly rooted in biblical tradition. Terms like "human vanity," "pride of life," and "vaingloriousness," uttered within a context of frustrated aims and thwarted powers, of human presence represented only by the devalORIZED tokens of affluence (men as such not once being mentioned), cannot help but evoke powerful overtones of the cynical stance of the author of *Eccelesiastes* and its reverberations down the years.³ It is to some extent a cynicism shared by such New Testament writers as St. John the Apostle, the ultimate source of the "Pride of Life" motif, although St. John's outlook is qualified by positive images of the glorious kingdom of the

1. Buckley's major concern ("Great Ship," passim) is with the legal and political ramifications of the salvage operation, but as one who made the dive to the wreck in *Nautilus* the vivid account of his direct observations is valuable.

2. I follow the poem as printed in *Norton*, pp. 1751-52. References in my text will be by stanza number.

3. References to the Latin Bible are to the Vulgate text. Both the King James and the Douay-Rheims English versions have been consulted and cited where appropriate.

Father which awaits all men at the end of time: "For all that is in the world is the concupiscence of the flesh and the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life, which is not of the Father but is of the world."⁴ It goes without saying that this *contemptus mundi* theme, perhaps somewhat modified towards stoicism and divested of its otherworldly Christian correlative, is a theme quite congenial to Hardy.

One of the advantages to an author, especially a novelist who has made himself a master of regional dialect, is the capacity for creating characters who in their homespun expression of folk truths embody the wisdom of perennial philosophy in a form that seems in its richly imaginative concreteness to be incontrovertible. Hardy's Wessex novels abound in instances. Alliteration makes a powerful contribution to this effect, as proverbs, especially in their medieval forms, frequently attest. Often enough, in medieval poetry, we find what appears to be an intuitive grasp of the process of social leveling (death, of course, being the great leveler) underscored by home truths couched in otherwise unvarnished alliterative phrasing. The ghost of the murdered son of the wealthy wife of Usher's Well (a random instance) says to his brother as cockcrow drives them back to the grave (*Popular Ballads*, p. 168):

'The cock doth crow, the day doth daw,
The channerin' worm doth chide;
Gin we be mist out o' our place,
A sair pain we maun bide.'

Perhaps a more telling instance is to be found in the character of Midill-Elde in the alliterative poem known as *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*; Midill-Elde, a hoarder and skinflint, spends his time reckoning "of mukking, of marleling, and mendynge of houses" (*Parlement*, v. 142) oblivious to the inexorable passage to Elde (Old Age) and death. Hardy's description of the fish gazing at the "gilded gear" lying on the ocean floor finds medieval precedent in a poem like the alliterative *Alexander and Dindimus*, where in a similar context the author refers to the "guldene ger" of aristocratic victims (*Alexander*, v. 522), or *The Siege of Jerusalem*, in which the "pride of life" theme is underscored by reference to the "gilden ger" of the doomed denizens of the city (*Siege*, v. 546). Similarly, Hardy's picture of the lightless gems, with their sparkles "bleared and black and blind," catches up another medieval alliterating phrase, found in a poem such as *The Destruction of Troy*, in which fair, aristocratic countenances are smudged with the dirt and dust of a battle that "blaknet with bleryng all hir ble qwite" (*Destruction*, v. 9134). Whether this kind of phrasing came to Hardy's attention through its having survived in contemporary dialects of English, or whether he encountered it directly in his reading of medieval texts, is really irrelevant.

4. There was a medieval play entitled *The Pride of Life*, available in modern editions published in 1891 and 1909. In it a boastful and defiant King is finally slain by Death.

Either way, the notion of the appurtenances of a prideful social class forced to confront the ravages of time and chance is a powerful implication he would have recognized as pertinent to his theme.

The best example Hardy's poem has to offer of a medieval alliterating idiom echoed yet imaginatively transformed so as to blend almost imperceptibly with his purposes occurs in the seventh stanza. Here the speaker avers that as the ship is a-building, the Immanent Will

Prepared a sinister mate
For her—so gaily great—
A shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

The medieval idiom underlying the phrase is "gayly greyt." The phrase means, however, "handsomely prepared." It occurs a number of times, for example, in the alliterative poem *William of Palerne* (or *William and the Werwolf*), in one notable instance as descriptive of a ship superbly readied and victualled for the voyage:

þe werwolf waited wíztly • which schip was 3arest,
to fare forþ at þat flod • & fond on sone,
þat was gayly greyt • to go to the seile,
& feiþliche frau3t • ful of fine wines. (*Palerne*, 2729–32)

("the werwolf watched astutely to see which ship was readiest
to fare forth on that sea, and soon found one
that was handsomely prepared to set sail,
and scrupulously provisioned full of fine wines.")

"Greyt" survives in this sense in the dialect of Somersetshire,⁵ but the phrase taken as a whole strongly suggests that Hardy may have been familiar with its medieval form, likely enough from an acquaintance with this very poem. True, the meaning of the modern phrase brings it into accord with the fact of the huge size of the *Titanic*, but the insinuation of human inflation about to be punctured still hangs about it.

Generally speaking, in those lyrics of Hardy's which express attitudes concerning the nature of ultimate reality, the agnostic and pessimistic poses struck by the speakers, as in "Hap," with its doctrine of a world ruled by "Crass Casualty" and "purblind Doomsters" (*Norton*, p. 1740), are occasionally relieved by hints that there may be some sort of cosmic process underlying the random show of things. The song of "The Darkling Thrush" (*Norton*, p. 1743), after all, is some basis, even if it is a dim basis, for hope. So utterly without cause is the bird's caroling,

That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

5. See the *EDD*, s.v. "greyt." All of the medieval works cited above were available in modern editions well before 1912, the date of Hardy's poem.

Often, however, Hardy's spokesmen take a stance which reveals them to be impatient (at worst cynical) about the smug confidence of churchmen in the moral perfectibility of man and the inexorable working out of the curve of sacred history. Despite unremitting evidence opposing it, the voice of institutionalized religion is perceived as expressing a naive faith in an underlying design which will culminate in the eternal kingdom of God. Hardy's skepticism (that of his poetic *persona*, obviously) is often conveyed through allusions which align scriptural formulations evocative of a sense of a loving God and Redeemer with human events perceived rather as projections of the baleful providence of a cosmic *malin genie*. Holy Scripture, as Hardy was certainly aware, has traditionally been viewed as the revelation of the stages in the process of the Creative and Redemptive Work, the Old Testament dealing principally with the *opus divinum* on the macrocosmic scale—creation, fall, exile, prophecy—and the New Testament with that same work on the microcosmic level, with the birth of the Redeemer, His earthly mission, His sacrificial death, and the foundation of the Church. Chapter 2 of Luke (fifty-two verses in all) sums up that mission from the Incarnation to the confounding of the doctors in the temple, that is, the life of Christ to the age of twelve. That chapter, a progress report as it were, ends with the well-known epitome: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).⁶ That Hardy ironically alludes to this text seems clear enough:

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Given the theological and psychological connotations of the phrase, it is perhaps tendentious to speak of the convergence of these "aliens" (Hardy's term) as a conjunction of opposites, let alone to invoke any suggestion of the Jungian principle of the importance of the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the need to assimilate such psychic antinomies as appetency and instability in the search for psychic wholeness, often accompanied by the unconscious projection of this psychic process into the symbols of dream, art, and other social configurations. For instance, Jung conceives of the alchemists, who attempt to amalgamate the elements of sulphur (the principle of fire) and mercury (the principle of liquidity) and to temper this compound in the heat of the alchemical retort, as projecting the contents of the unconscious mind into the concrete, visible work in the crucible before them. They are, that is to say, unwittingly trying to bring about a personal, spiritual transformation—to achieve psychic individuation. Such a conception also underlies Jung's understanding of the Christian Eucharist (and hence of the Christian *opus divinum*, a work of

6. King James version. The Vulgate text reads: Et Jesus proficiebat sapientia, et aetate, et gratia apud Deum, et homines. Douay-Rheims translates: And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace with God and men.

sacrifice in which the opposites are perhaps best understood as Christ and Judas).⁷ Suffice it to say that when either the alchemical or the Christian salvific Work reaches its consummation, a new and richer life of the spirit is anticipated.

I bring this issue up not to suggest a conscious adherence on Hardy's part to any sort of pre-Jungian notion of process, psychic or otherwise, as being dependent upon a conjunction of opposites. Rather, it is to invoke Jung as a way of emphasizing that Hardy's understanding—the traditional understanding—of the Christian myth rests upon the solid basis of the idea of the clash of opposites. The upshot is that the pseudotheology of this poem emanates from the replacement of one set of opposites by another. Broadly and anthropomorphically considered, the salvific Christian process consisted of the work of the Incarnation along with the parallel development of a race of antagonists, issuing finally in the bloody encounter of the Crucifixion. Whether Hardy's personal experiences made his perception of this pattern explicit or whether it rested at some more intuitive level does not seem a matter of great consequence. His "Immanent Will," presumably as responsible for the ship as for the iceberg, accomplishes its malign purposes through an analogous clash of opposites. It is a consummation, however, devoutly to be decried.

The historical correlative to the individual Christian renewal is, of course, the foundation of the Church upon the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. What is important to note is that "consummation," as the Christian understands it, is the moment of simultaneous defeat and triumph when Christ, the victor-victim, yields up the spirit with the full understanding that the great Work of the Father has been accomplished, and with the words (as the Vulgate has it, John 19:30) "Consummatum est" (*Biblia Sacra*, N.T., p. 83). The Douay-Rheims English version has "It is consummated," the King James version and *The Book of Common Prayer*, "It is finished."⁸ The reported quaking of the earth at the moment of Christ's death, although a sign of divine displeasure, quite clearly heralds not an end but a new beginning.

In such a light it can be instructive to look closely at Hardy's final stanza:

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

The meaning is clear. A traditional religious conception of a loving God who brings about the incarnation of His divine Son for the accomplishment, the consummation, of the work of salvation is better replaced by that of a malicious deity for whom consummation is vengeful destruction—a cosmic comeuppance for incorrigible arrogance. Undercutting to

7. The conception is dealt with passim in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*.

8. Even though Hardy's greater familiarity was probably with the King James version, the phrase "It is consummated" was sufficiently hallowed in tradition for him to have been familiar with it.

some extent the analogy between the biblical quaking of the earth and Hardy's jarring of the "two hemispheres," we are given a hint of the comfortable consternation of the denizens of New York and London reading the tabloids over morning coffee.

I say hint because the word "hemispheres" does function primarily within a context of technical references beginning with the very word "convergence" of the title, and continued in such terms as "steel chambers," "welding" (considering it as a metaphorical application of the primary sense of uniting steel parts by intense heat), "paths coincident," and finally, the word "event." As we can see, the pretense of a sanitized scientific aloofness is important to the meaning of the poem. First of all, it must be pointed out that two elementary theorems in spherical trigonometry are the basis for the science of navigation as practiced in Hardy's day. One establishes that the shortest distance between two points on the surface of a sphere (corresponding to a straight line on a plane surface) is the arc of a great circle, a great circle being the figure formed by the intersection of a plane passing through the center of a sphere with the surface of that sphere. The second demonstrates that any two great circles of the same sphere always intersect each other at two points. Hence, any two objects traveling along the arcs of different great circles will inevitably collide, provided that the factor of time (a function of speed) is properly adjusted. Now, I am far from suggesting that Hardy's *mise en scène* has been constructed with the care appropriate to a marine navigator; yet, the phrase "bent by paths coincident" seems to imply at one and the same time the fiction that the ship and the iceberg are moving according to what was known as the technique of "great circle sailing," that is that they were on a collision course along arcs ("bent," as arcs are, geometrically considered) of great circles, and that somehow the stirrings and urgings of the Immanent Will had imparted to them a "bent," or disposition of the will, to unite in "one august event." The word "bent" is a quite obvious pun, in any case, just as "welding" seems deliberately chosen for whatever irony might be produced by the consideration that the shipbuilding process depended in the final analysis upon the skill and care with which the ship's plates were welded (ultimately, however, no proof against the iceberg's mass and force).

The word "event" is perhaps of less certain technical connotation. As a result of Einstein's demolition of the concept of absolute time, the word did in fact achieve quite early the precise meaning which it has today in mathematical physics: A point in space-time specified by four coordinates, three of space and one of time. Although Einstein's theory of general relativity was not published until 1916, hence too late for Hardy to have been familiar with it, his theory of special relativity appeared in a paper published in 1905, for which, according to Hawking (*Brief History*, p. 20), he quickly became quite famous. There is no question here of Hardy's having employed the term in any very precise way, but

that a layman like Hardy might have found its connotation useful, as specifying an occurrence in cosmic, honorific fashion, is an interesting possibility. In any case, the technical terminology as a whole creates an impression that the human emotions involved, mainly pride, have been countered from the start by an abstract, geometrical pattern determinative of the tragic result though unknowable to the human agents enmeshed in it.

Perhaps a more modish way of describing Hardy's technique in this poem would be to speak of its intertextuality—of the subtexts laid under contribution in the service of an ironic vision. The linguistic echoes of the biblical myth, of the medieval penchant for viewing all things *sub specie aeternitatis*, and of a typical modern technological smugness may be thought clear enough. Another metaphorical pattern, more disturbing and more difficult to reconcile with the picture of an impersonal force urging the world fatalistically onward, is the sexual innuendo of the images evoked by such phrases as “stilly couches she,” “rhythmic tidal lyres,” “sinister mate,” and (in yet another sense) “consummation comes.” That ships are traditionally feminine may provide a slim basis for the idea, though some glummer Hardyesque version of the principles of *yin* and *yang* seems more likely. This force which urges and stirs is sexual, even if sexual in a sort of smoldering, malevolent way. The “couching” or sexual bedding down of the ship is also the “crouching” or cowering submission of a beast.⁹ Thus, there is victory and defeat in this consummation also, a somber sexualized version of the victory of the Immanent Will over human vanity. In short, Hardy's language in this fine poem is richly allusive, drawing upon a number of special lexicons capable of evoking a diversity of attitudes which are then mingled in surprising yet satisfying ways.

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9. See the *OED*, s.v. “couch,” where in illustration of its reflexive verbal use *William of Palerne* (v. 2240) is cited: “at witty werwolf . . . kouchid him under a kragge. The intransitive use in the sense of crouching or cowering in fear or obedience is illustrated by a line from Chaucer's “Clerk's Tale” (v. 1150): Thou shalt make him couche as doth a quaille.”

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