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Hardy's Valedictory: Final Thoughts of a Master Craftsman

by HAROLD OREL

ON JUNE 27, 1897, Hardy made a special point of visiting the garden in which Edward Gibbon, 110 years earlier, had exulted at the completion of his *History*. He discovered that the site—in Lausanne, Switzerland—differed markedly from the site that the historian had known, but he saw acacias very much like those which Gibbon had described as commanding “a prospect of the country, the lake and the mountains,” and, deeply satisfied with his moment of communion with a master-spirit, Hardy remained in the garden until midnight.

Gibbon was one of Hardy's models for stately and impressive literary style, even though Hardy appreciated John Ruskin's warning that emulating Gibbonian prose might endanger a sense of one's own writing personality. Hardy agreed, in general, with Gibbon's viewpoint, “so ironically civil to Christianity” (as he described it in *Jude the Obscure*). He owned a seven-volume set of Gibbon's *History*—the Bohn edition—and he marked several passages, perhaps most heavily Gibbon's discussion of the religion of the Emperor Julian and his analysis of the reasons for the defeat of paganism. When Hardy finished reading Edward Clodd's memorial lecture on Gibbon and Christianity (1916), he wrote a letter to Clodd announcing that, despite criticism of Gibbon's style, he personally had “always rather delighted in it.” At various times he quoted approvingly from Macaulay and Frederic Harrison to the effect that Gibbon's style deserved the closest kind of study. In his preface to *The Woodlanders*, he found highly useful Gibbon's remark that the study of an historian did not call upon him “to interpose his private judgment” in the controversy surrounding miracles. Thus he justified his own desire to be neutral in theological controversies. Hardy, like Gibbon, regarded an enthusiast with suspicion; the very term “enthusiast” connoted religious fanaticism; and the schemes of an enthusiast had to be examined critically.

Above all, Hardy admired Gibbon's ability to complete the major task of his life, the writing of the *History*, with a sense of satisfaction. “It is finished” (the words he puts into Gibbon's mouth in the poem “Lausanne: In Gibbon's Old Garden: 11-12 p.m.”) comes close to “*Consummatum est*,” words that suggest the sublimity of the moment when Christ's sacrifice on the cross becomes a fact of history. For Hardy that moment never came. A sense of satisfied completion remained permanently beyond his grasp. A remark he made, only two months before he died, is worth remembering in this connection. The comment is recorded in his thinly disguised autobiography, the *Life*, written in collaboration

with his second wife, Florence Emily: "November 28. Speaking about ambition T. said to-day that he had done all that he meant to do, but he did not know whether it had been worth doing." Hardy added, "His only ambition, so far as he could remember, was to have some poem or poems in a good anthology like the *Golden Treasury*," and he cited as the model he had set before him Ben Jonson's "Drink to me only. . . ."

This was not said in a spirit of self-mockery. From the 1860s on, Hardy had been greatly impressed by the quality of Francis Turner Palgrave's anthology; he used Palgrave as a major source for his transcribed quotations and word lists; he annotated his copy of the *Golden Treasury*; and he carefully marked in it Shakespeare's "Sonnet 32" within a few hours after learning of the suicide of Horace Moule, his closest friend (late September, 1873). He ransacked Palgrave's learned article, "The Decline of Art," published in *Nineteenth Century* in January 1888, for ten consecutive quotations in his own *Literary Notebooks*, a fact which provides ample evidence of his respect for Palgrave's critical powers.

Hardy was not saying that he looked back on his half-century of creative effort and regretted his failure as an artist. He did not believe that all his failures outweighed all his successes. He was certainly not repenting his choice of a literary career as *vanitas vanitatum*. He was not confessing to Florence—or to anybody else, for that matter—that he had neglected spiritual values. Nor was he saying that he had neglected to do his best with the opportunities he had been given; he did not feel constrained to say, as Milton had said in his seventeenth sonnet, that the "one talent which is death to hide" had been lodged with him "useless." Rather, Hardy's conviction was that he had done everything he could to earn the respect of future generations, but he now saw his life's work as less than what had been needed to satisfy his own high standards.

Florence believed, in the eight years that remained to her after her husband's death, that Hardy "had in fact experienced a great outburst of creativity late in 1927 and felt that he could have gone on writing almost indefinitely."¹ Moreover, Hardy certainly had not run out of good stories to tell when he renounced the craft of novel writing after the hostile reception given to *Jude the Obscure* in the mid-1890s. Florence's remark may be extended: only a reckless critic would argue that Hardy's final volume of poetry, *Winter Words*, published posthumously (he had planned to see it through the press and publish it on his ninetieth birthday), represents a serious falling-off of poetical skills from any of the previous seven volumes of collected poems.

By his eighth decade Hardy had decided which of his novels he believed to be best-conceived and most fully written. His choice fell on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. A full understanding of what the phrase "best novel" meant to Hardy will help us appreciate why Hardy reached so somber a final judgment of the value of his life's work.

1. Quoted by Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 568.

Hardy—near his deathbed—did not share the worldwide admiration of his mastery of the novel genre. His skepticism about the novel had little or nothing to do with the weariness of the flesh that overtakes many novelists who realize that the sands of time are running out and that vast ambitions must remain forever unrealized. Hardy had never entertained any illusions about himself as a potential rival to Henry Fielding or Charles Dickens; he was fully conscious of the role played by artifice in his fictions; he recognized the limitations of writers like Harrison Ainsworth and Wilkie Collins, whom he had deliberately imitated during his apprentice years. Hence, one part of Hardy's statement of November 27, 1927, is consistent with several remarks recorded earlier in the *Life*. He had succeeded in securing the attention of the reading public, which was what he had set out to do.

Still, a significant fraction of Hardy's audience does not understand the reasons for Hardy's diffidence about his art. Some readers do not even know that Hardy was diffident. The remainder of this essay lists—in a descending order of importance—three reasons why Hardy became increasingly modest in the final quarter-century of his life: his dismay at the critical reception given to *The Dynasts*, a work on which he had expended more than twenty years of thought and a full decade of concentrated work; his bleak recognition that the Great War of 1914-1918 did not settle the issues for which it had been fought and was apt to be repeated within a generation; and his growing impatience with the postwar cultural scene.

Hardy always resented the attempts by journalists and biographers to characterize him as a writer who lacked much in the way of formal education, but the fact remains that the efforts he exerted—from the 1850s on—to compensate for that lack were herculean. He was aided by the passionate interest of his mother in seeing that he learned from the best models. Before he was ten years old (he recalled in later years), his mother provided him with copies of Dryden's *Virgil*, Johnson's *Rasselas*, and *Paul and Virginia*; at the age of twelve he was given a grammar book used at Eton College, and his schoolmaster—Isaac Glandfield Last—drilled him in Latin (as an “extra” subject). In 1854 he was reading *Breviarium historiae Romanae* of Eutropius, which described, in ten books, Roman history from the foundation of the city to the accession of Valens; he was studying French in Cassell's *Manual of the French Language*; he was analyzing mathematical problems and conic sections. Within two years he owned three volumes of *The Popular Educator*, printed by “that genius in home-education, John Cassell.” And in July 1856, Hardy entered a three-year apprenticeship to the Dorchester architect, John Hicks.

From his sixteenth year onward, the drilling that Hardy compelled himself to undergo in subjects other than architecture had serious implications. Hardy admired Hicks fully as much for having been “exceptionally well educated for an ordinary country architect,” for having read some Greek, for having a smattering of Hebrew, as for his architectural skills. Hardy enjoyed the company of Henry Bastow, a fellow pupil who “had been well educated at a good school in or near London and who, having a liking for the classical tongues, regretted

his recent necessity of breaking off his studies to take up architecture."² Hardy, stimulated by both Hicks and Bastow, determined to improve himself. He dedicated the hours from five to eight in the morning—before he arrived at work—to reading. (In the summer months, he rose at four.) He read Virgil, Horace, and Ovid; and Greek, too, for at least three years concentrating on his painstaking translation of the *Iliad*. He exploited the nearby presence of William Barnes, the well-loved poet and philologist of Dorchester, and frequently asked him “to decide some knotty point in dispute between him and his fellow-pupil.”³

To compete with young men of superior learning, Hardy read, as well as he could, the difficult Greek of the Griesbach text of the *New Testament* and developed convictions on the necessity of adult baptism. He was attempting to read the *Agamemnon* or the *Oedipus* in the late 1850s until Horace Moule, who was rapidly developing into his closest friend, advised him to concentrate on his architectural prospects.

Hardy’s total formal education did not exceed half a dozen years. The rest was acquired by diligent study on his own account, entered into voluntarily and pursued with amazing concentration at a time when most youths his age found social activities more attractive, and certainly less demanding.

He was dismayed by the characteristic literary production—the novel—of the second half of the nineteenth century. This genre was not a truly respectable art form, and perhaps in his mind could never become one. Hardy, late in life, remembered with pride how even in his twenties, “he had some views of his own” and how he had preferred Scott the poet to Scott the novelist. He never ceased to regret that the author of “the most Homeric poem in the English Language—‘Marmion’—should later have declined on prose fiction.”⁴ The key word that Hardy used is *declined*. The novel—in Hardy’s eyes—was inferior to poetry.

A notorious statement of Hardy now needs to be reconsidered. He made it after the first installment of *Far from the Madding Crowd* appeared in *Cornhill Magazine* (January 1874) but before he had completed the manuscript. As a consequence he was under enormous pressure to finish in order to meet publishing deadlines. He was being urged by Leslie Stephen, editor of *Cornhill*, to watch out for plot details that might offend female subscribers and to be particularly wary of the way in which he proposed to treat the seduction of Fanny Robin. It was not the first time he had received such advice, and it was not the first time he found himself forced to write against time.⁵ But Hardy did not care much for a reputation as a novelist in lieu of being able to follow the pursuit of poetry, as he wrote in the *Life*;⁶ though the wording is clumsy, his meaning is unmistakable. He wrote to Leslie Stephen on 18 February 1874: “The truth is that I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for sake of others which shall please those who

2. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 27.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

4. *Life*, p. 49.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

read it in numbers [i.e., as a serialized novel in a periodical]. Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial."⁷

The hammering-out of Hardy's literary aesthetic was a lifelong affair. The literary notes that Professor Lennart Bjork edited and published in a two-volume edition in 1974 provide an astonishing record of Hardy's devoted reading of serious literature, the best that has been thought and said in the history of mankind. A note in the *Life*, dated December 31, 1887, celebrates both the publication of *The Woodlanders*, a novel which, as Hardy wrote, enabled him to hold his own in fiction, and the reading that he had done during the year:

- "Milton, Dante, Calderon, Goethe.
- "Homer, Virgil, Molière, Scott.
- "The Cid, Nibelungen, Crusoe, Don Quixote.
- "Aristophanes, Theocritus, Boccaccio.
- "Canterbury Tales, Shakespeare's Sonnets, Lycidas.
- "Malory, Vicar of Wakefield, Ode to West Wind, Ode to Grecian Urn.
- "Christabel, Wye above Tintern.
- "Chapman's Iliad, Lord Derby's ditto, Worsley's Odyssey."⁸

That is not all the reading Hardy did in 1887; but it was all he cared to remember, it was all he recorded; not a single original work by a Victorian made the list.

There had been a time, indeed, when Hardy rebelled against being classified as a rural novelist by critics and reviewers whom he regarded as insensitive, obtuse, and even cruel. He took to heart the kind of remark made by *The Academy's* reviewer of *Far from the Madding Crowd* who wrote that Hardy had attempted too much and had contemplated "his shepherds and rural people with the eye of a philosopher." Hardy was always too willing to be upset by even the slightest adverse criticism. His fulminations against critics became a more bitter and unattractive aspect of his personality as he grew older; they did not soften with the gaining of popular success; his anger seemed to Hardy's friends to be disproportionate to the offence committed by a small number of reviews. The crucial moment in Hardy's development as an artist determined to break out of the narrow category to which he believed contemporary reviews had relegated him seems to have taken place in the mid-1870s. *The Hand of Ethelberta*, his first novel written in an "untried direction," inspired several reviews that urged Hardy to "get back to his sheepfolds." An outraged Hardy may well have been correct in suspecting class bias among the members of the London intelligentsia.

He turned to the editor, Leslie Stephen. He respected Stephen highly, though he knew that Stephen, too, had thought of him as a chronicler of country life, as someone who could write authoritatively "of Hodge & his ways."⁹ Hardy was determined to do something different, though he was uncertain what it might be.

7. *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, I, 1870-1892, ed. Richard L. Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 28.

8. *Life*, pp. 203-04.

9. *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Lennart A. Bjork (Goteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1974), I (Text), xvii.

He detested the conventional novel of manners that others were writing, seemingly without effort, for an audience of readers who did not wish for anything disturbing or intellectually provocative. Hardy asked Stephen which literary critics he should read. Stephen's advice confirmed what Hardy already believed, namely, that "the less authors read of criticism the better."¹⁰ Stephen urged him to read the great writers: Shakespeare, Goethe, Scott, etc., those "who give ideas & don't prescribe rules." He told Hardy that the only modern critics worth reading were Sainte-Beuve and "Mat. Arnold" ("in a smaller way"), and he added, *à propos* of critics in general, "We are generally a poor lot, terribly afraid of not being in the fashion."

After having written five novels in five years, Hardy was entitled to the year's rest that he took after the completion of *The Hand of Ethelberta*. 1876 amounted to a sabbatical: he did not begin writing *The Return of the Native* until the following year. During 1876 he began recording a series of literary notes designed to enlarge his knowledge of literature—the *best literature*—and to provide himself with a firmer base for the writing of his more serious novels.

Hardy's admiration for, and love of, the literature of the past was genuine. His use of the quotation, "The President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess," taken from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and used at a crucial moment in the final pages of his great novel, gave rise to countless assessments of his personal philosophy as bleak, or at the very least pessimistic; though he denied necessarily believing the sense of what he quoted, Hardy's viewpoint was much closer to the classical Greek understanding of our relationship to the gods than it was to Church of England doctrine. In 1919 he quoted Sir George Douglas's remark that his poems in *Poems of the Past and the Present* were "Aeschylean" and that they differed strikingly from Wordsworth's view of Nature. When the Balliol Players came down to Max Gate from Oxford and gave a performance of *The Oresteia* (under the title "The Curse of the House of Atreus"), Hardy wrote himself down as "a lifelong admirer of Greek Tragedy."¹¹ The example of Sophocles writing into his ninetieth year reminded him that he himself had much left to do. Sophocles had not been satisfied with what Nature offered man, nor was Hardy. He quoted, with grim satisfaction, the line from *Oedipus Tyrannus*, "And if there be a woe surpassing woes it hath become a portion of Oedipus." To Hardy that line suggested the "deeper deep" of Tennyson, a capacity of great spirits for feeling greater pain than the ordinary mind may imagine.¹² He took advantage of the rare occasions when he might watch a Greek play in production; in 1912, on a very brief visit to London, he went to Covent Garden to see *Oedipus*. When he sought to justify his strict observance of the unities in *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*, he cited the example of the Greek dramatists, "notably Euripides,"¹³ and he admitted that the Chanters in his play really played "the part of a Greek Chorus to some extent." On June 29, 1926, he "welcomed" again the

10. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

11. *Life*, p. 425.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 423.

Balliol Players to Max Gate, and they acted for him the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. Time was running out: but not before the Balliol Players materialized at his home, one last time, to perform *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides on July 6, 1927. (Hardy died on January 11, 1928.)

So continuing and pervasive was this interest that Hardy wrote, of a line repeated by the Chorus in the *Agamemnon*, "Ælinon, Ælinon! but may the good prevail," that it formed the refrain of "all really true literature."¹⁴

These examples of Hardy's faithfulness to the literary idols he had learned to worship in his youth are easily multiplied. He was not restricted in his enthusiasms to Greek drama, or even to Greek literature as a whole. Carl Weber once compiled a list of Hardy's quotations from English authors, most of whom preceded the nineteenth century: "For a man who 'took no courses,' who never attended a university (if we disregard the night classes in French, attended for a short while at the University of London), Hardy's mastery of English literature is astounding. 'How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?'"¹⁵ Hardy was well-acquainted with the best French writers of his day and agreed with Leslie Stephen about the perfection of George Sand's prose. He was an eclectic reader.

Hardy's lists of what he had read resolutely excluded anything second- or third-rate. Hardy believed that reading the classics constituted a good in itself. He recognized that "the various kinds of best poetry are not reducible to a common standard," as he wrote to the editor of *The Fortnightly Review* who had asked him to select the one passage in all poetry which seemed to him the finest. (He quoted I Corinthians 15:41, "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another of the stars.") He believed that a reader's response varied "with the time and mood, and according to the class of poetry that is for the nonce nearest to the tone of our situation."¹⁶

Nevertheless, he believed that the classics were not all that dependent on personal bias or the momentary circumstances of history. They grappled with serious questions, particularly the ones which sought to define man's relationship to higher powers in the universe. They embodied a faith in absolute virtues of courage, idealism, and beauty. They encouraged honesty with one's self no less than with others. And they illustrated a command over the recalcitrance of language. The masterpieces of literature expressed the most subtle thoughts that the mind of man was capable of conceiving. Whenever necessary, they transgressed the Rules with "a grace beyond the reach of art."

Hardy proposed for himself a standard so high, so demanding, that we must wonder how and why he was capable of releasing for publication anything he had written. If he believed that the novel passed muster only if it lay nearest to the epic, dramatic, or narrative masterpieces of the past—and he said as much in

14. Thomas Hardy's *Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 131.

15. Carl J. Weber, *Hardy of Wessex: His Life and Literary Career* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1940; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1962), p. 246.

16. *Personal Writings*, pp. 106–07.

“The Profitable Reading of Fiction,” published in the New York periodical *Forum*, March 1888—most fiction, which lay a goodly distance from those masterpieces, was hardly worth considering. If he was contemptuous of the coincidences, marvelous juxtapositions, catastrophes, and conversions of bad people into good people at a stroke (“and vice versa”),¹⁷ he could only urge the reader who sought enjoyment not to be too critical; he was keenly conscious of the commercially inspired tricks of the trade in his own fiction. And, as important as any consideration, if he thought of the late Victorian novel as a fatally flawed genre—“neither mature in its artistic aspect, nor in its ethical or philosophical aspect; neither in form nor in substance”¹⁸—he might throw some of the blame on an audience of callow readers (the majority of them female) or on the periodical and lending-library system which discouraged writers of fiction from telling the truth about life. The one thing he could not do was pretend that he himself was not writing for that audience and not earning substantial sums of money from that system.

Hence it is understandable that Hardy wanted to shake free from the obligation to satisfy Mrs. Grundy, and that, as soon as financial independence became a reality, he would renounce an unsatisfactory and immature art form. The act whereby he renounced the writing of novels in the mid-1890s required a courage that had taken him more than a quarter-century to work up, but it was an inevitable decision. He had lost what little faith he had in the serviceability of the novel as a medium for conveying artistic truth, and he wanted to turn not only to the poems that would fill eight volumes, ending with *Winter Words*, but to the grand project he had been contemplating for a very long period of time indeed, the treatment in verse of the Napoleonic Wars. His study of French had begun at the age of fifteen; he was soon reading the historian Thiers and the poet Hugo who treated Napoleon as a dynast, subject to the workings of a grand and perhaps indifferent Fate. By 1868—less than a year after he had completed the writing of *The Poor Man and the Lady*, his first novel, the one that both Alexander Macmillan and Frederic Chapman of Chapman and Hall rejected—he was trying to write a narrative poem about the Battle of the Nile, when Napoleon and Nelson first confronted each other, and had drawn up an outline of what was needed for the completion of the poem, an outline that Hardy eventually lost.

The Dynasts was Hardy’s most ambitious project. It has failings, and most readers would not rank it with the *Iliad* or the *Eddas* or *Paradise Lost*, epic poems that are mentioned by Hardy in his Preface to *The Dynasts*. But Hardy was fully justified in being proud that he, for the first time in English literature, had brought to the attention of a large audience the role played by “English influence and action throughout the struggle” against Napoleon.¹⁹ He had ensured accuracy by extensive and painstaking research, much of it conducted at the British Museum. He thought he had invented a new genre, a drama that was intended simply for mental performance and not for the stage; he called it an “Epic-Drama.” He used

17. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

a surprisingly large number of verse schemes, over thirty, in fact, as if to stress the versatility of the medium in which he wrote. Above all, he was reversing the direction that Sir Walter Scott had followed; he had renounced the novel; nobody could say that he had *declined* as an artist by writing an Epic-Drama; his deepest conviction was that the epic and the drama were both superior to the novel as art forms.

The critics treated *The Dynasts* roughly. Hardy had failed to set earlier adverse reviews in perspective; we know that he always had friendly readers and reviews for even his poorest novels. But *The Dynasts* was a special case; the project had gestated longer than any other work of his creative life; and he had gambled everything on its finding a sympathetic audience.

Readers familiar with Hardy's *Life* will recall that when Hardy read a slating review of *Desperate Remedies* in *The Spectator*, while sitting on a stile leading to the eweleaze he had to cross on his way home to Bockhampton, "he wished that he were dead."²⁰ In 1871—the year that that happened—Hardy was concerned about his career as a commercial novelist, which had hardly begun; but he was still in the business of architecture, and he had secure employment. In early 1904, however, when the first reviews appeared, Hardy was not worrying about his finances but about his place in the long and distinguished roster of English poets. The harshness of the reviews—which attacked the very concept of the epic-drama, his shift from prose fiction to "the prose of the novelist cut into lengths," his invention of the Spirits as dramatic characters, and his emphasis on the Immanent Will—stunned him in a way that is still not fully appreciated by his biographers. His bid for immortality had been rejected. He would never be counted among the truly great.

The critics were not kind, at least not those who wrote for *The Academy*, *The Bookman*, *The Spectator*, *The Nation*, *The Monthly Review*, *The Critic*, *The Athenaeum*, *The Literary World*, *The Dial*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Kindly words from his personal friends—Edmund Gosse, Siegfried Sassoon, Walter de la Mare, and A. M. Broadley, among others—did not compensate for the puzzled, indifferent, or downright hostile notices that appeared in 1904, continuing right through 1906, when Part Second appeared, and 1908, when Part Third was printed. But the worst, most damaging blow of all was struck by "the Thunderer," *The Times*, which Hardy respected. Its reviewer, Arthur Bingham Walkley, was only in his fourth year at *The Times*, but he was to write many of its best reviews for another two decades before he died in 1926. Walkley was a pioneer in fighting for an improved understanding of Ibsen's dramas; he had already acquired a considerable following for his reviews in various literary periodicals. He was a dandy of sorts and affected French dress; his manners were elegant, and his witticisms were widely quoted. He published books based on his impressionistic doctrine that the major aim of a play was to give pleasure "through the senses." The first thing that he picked up in his reading of Hardy's *magnum opus* was an inflammatory comment in Hardy's Preface, that this epic-

20. *Life*, p. 84.

drama was not intended for the theatre. Hardy went on: "Some critics have averred that to declare a drama as being not for the stage is to make an announcement whose subject and predicate cancel each other. The question seems to be an unimportant matter of terminology." Hardy deplored the limitations inherent in "the material possibilities of stagery" and "the careless mechanism of human speech." He even wondered "whether mental performance alone may not eventually be the fate of all drama other than that of contemporary or frivolous life," and he asked the reader to remember, with nostalgia, "the triumphs of the Hellenic and Elizabethan theatre in exhibiting scenes laid 'far in the Unapparent' . . ."²¹ Hardy was propagandizing on behalf of "a monotonic delivery of speeches, with dreamy conventional gestures, something in the manner traditionally maintained by the old Christmas mummers." That tradition of acting, as he ruefully admitted in other contexts, had lost favor even in Dorsetshire.

Walkley rose to the challenge, or, more precisely, he responded to what he considered to be a series of slurs on Victorian and Edwardian concepts of acting and staging. If Napoleon and Pitt and Nelson were no more than puppets, creatures under the direction of the Immanent Will, Walkley suggested, the epic-drama might as well be staged as a puppet show.

Hardy could not remain silent, though he well knew, from past experience, that an author is always at a disadvantage when he takes issue with a reviewer. In a letter written to the editor of *The Times*, Hardy declared that Walkley was "as absolute as the gravedigger in *Hamlet*"; he could not resist attacking as pretentious Walkley's use of French phrases in his review; and he argued that Walkley's doctrinaire hostility to closet drama would rule out Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron's *Cain*, among many other "unactable play-like poems," as a waste of means. Hardy invited Walkley to consider *The Dynasts* as a kind of poem—or drama, as you will—that Shelley or Byron might have sympathized with, and understood.

Walkley, delighted to have drawn blood (many of his reviews, after all, were those of a provocateur attacking English philistinism), avoided Hardy's invitation in a rejoinder that was published in *The Times* on February 12, a week after Hardy's letter appeared. The new article was entitled "*The Dynasts* and the Puppets." Walkley declared, with good humor and a slyness that Hardy could only interpret as meant to be offensive, that he, for one, "was dying to see the show."

Walkley's provocation was irresistible: Hardy wrote another letter to *The Times*, and this time let his anger show. He refused to be distracted by Walkley's chitchat about "the quaint and unexpected channel of real performance by means of fantoccini, Chinese shadows, and other startling apparatus." All of this seemed to Hardy to be beside the point: "The real offence of *The Dynasts* lies, not in its form as such, but in the philosophy which gave rise to the form." Hardy then hammered away at his enemy: "This is revealed by symptoms in various

21. *Personal Writings*, p. 42.

quarters, even (if I am not mistaken) by your critic's own faint tendency to harden his heart against the 'Immanent Will.'" Hardy insisted that this concept was "almost as old as civilization" and that St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Calvin had understood it. "It was formerly taught by Evangelical divines of the finest character and conduct."²² He drew back only a little, and only at the end of his letter, when he added the sentence, "Nevertheless, as was said in the Preface, I have used the philosophy as a plausible theory only."²³

Hardy provoked Walkley (and all lovers of a conventional theatre) by elevating his novel concept of epic-drama to a height where it became possible to dispense "with the theatre altogether."²⁴ Walkley, with his talk of puppets, had deliberately trivialized Hardy's work. Equally irritating to Hardy, there seemed to be hostility to the philosophy underlying the poem (though Walkley had carefully avoided saying that the Immanent Will represented Hardy's personal convictions about the nature of the universe). While Walkley was able to sustain a cool mocking tone, Hardy, embittered by years of resentment at unfriendly reviews, finally lost his temper.

I interpret this cross fire as a crucial development in Hardy's life and far more than a vigorous colloquy between Hardy, an aging creative artist, and a well-respected dramatic critic fifteen years younger than himself. *The Dynasts* is not only the longest work that Hardy ever undertook; it was the last long work of his life, though he continued to write for another twenty years. Its timeliness was not recognized until the Great War, when excerpts were abridged for the stage and produced by Granville-Barker at the Kingsway Theatre, the version running seventy-two performances; its literary importance was not adequately measured until Hardy earned his Order of Merit (primarily for this work) and the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters at Oxford in 1920; and its influence on younger writers was not appreciated even by Hardy until 106 authors sent him, in 1921, an address that concluded, "We thank you, Sir, for all that you have written . . . but most of all, perhaps, for *The Dynasts*." But by then it was too late. The recognition that he had fought for, honorably, by the creation of a work, epic in scope and in several respects unprecedented in the history of English poetry, had been denied him when it counted most. He was never to forget or forgive those who had rushed to print to deny him the reward—the meed—that he had sought. And Walkley's use of gentle mocking humor in the pages of the newspaper that Hardy knew everybody of any consequence read was a devastating blow: Hardy did not appreciate that kind of humor, used at his expense, to deride his best effort, his poem, his version of an *epic*, which traditionally rested at the top of all the literary genres.

Within a few years Hardy's mood, always serious when devoted to professional matters, was to turn even more stark. The slaughter of soldiers, innocent civilians, and some of his Dorset friends (particularly Frank George, his second cousin's son, killed at Gallipoli) stirred dark thoughts and confirmed a shift to

22. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

genuine pessimism of the kind that Hardy had claimed, for something like half a century, belonged only to his fictional characters and not to himself. We are all familiar with Hardy's poem "Channel Firing," which—even before the Great War began—spoke of

"All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. . . ."

But what happened in the trenches of Belgium and France exceeded by a wide margin anything that he had been capable of imagining. Long before the War ended Hardy was describing it as "butchery," and in a letter to Florence Henniker (May 20, 1917) he was writing that it had taken "all enterprize" out of him. He turned down an invitation from Sir James Barrie to accompany him on a tour of the Front in France because "old men cannot be young men."²⁵ He thought often, and bleakly, of "the machine-made horrors of the present war,"²⁶ and by the end of 1917 he had lost all resiliency. "I don't know," he wrote Sir Henry Newbolt, "that I have ever parted from an old year with less reluctance than from this."²⁷ Nor did he entertain much hope that peace would bring an end to German militarism or that the Treaty of Versailles would guarantee the Armistice.

This gloominess about the future prospects of the human race was expressed in such poems as "Christmas: 1924," "The Wood Fire," "We Are Getting to the End," and "He Resolves to Say No More." Two matters relevant to Hardy's final evaluation of his lifetime's accomplishments took place during the same years, and perhaps not unexpectedly, for the aging process was taking its inevitable toll.

First must be listed Hardy's recognition of the fact that even before the end of the Great War he had devoted more years to the writing and publishing of poetry than he had given over to the writing of prose fiction. The art of poetry was his most important concern; practicing the craft was what he enjoyed most; and yet, in the mind of the reading public, and partly as a consequence of ill-informed criticism, his verse would always be considered a "bye-product." This was, understandably, a matter of considerable chagrin to Hardy.

The second factor had to do with Hardy's growing unhappiness with the general mediocrity of younger poets (some of whom were willfully obscure and, as a consequence, uninteresting) and the deterioration of reading tastes and standards. The "huge tragedy" of the war was partly responsible but could not be accounted the primary cause. It is not necessary to assume that Hardy was expressing more than a passing mood when he wrote to Sir Henry Newbolt, on December 30, 1918, "I confess that I take a smaller interest in the human race since this outburst than I did before";²⁸ even so, Hardy's conviction that something had permanently changed for the worse hardened during his final decade. In his preface to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922) Hardy listed several reasons that the world seemed about to be entering "a new Dark Age": "the

25. *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, V, 1914–1919, ed. Richard L. Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 220.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

28. *Letters*, V, 289.

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 stunting of wisdom, 'a degrading thirst after outrageous simulation' (to quote Wordsworth . . .)."²⁹ This restless searching for an explanation, this relentless enumeration of possible reasons for the parlous state of English letters (more particularly, English poetry) in the third decade of the twentieth century, must strike all lovers of Hardy's work as very sad. The human race, he wrote in a letter to *The Times* (printed on March 5, 1927), was "still practically barbarian." The gathering gloom in his heart was clearly related to his dislike of conundrums in Charlotte Mew's poetry, his suspicion of Amy Lowell's concept of "polyphonic prose," his anger at the introduction of advertisements pushing "best sellers" ("the *worst* sellers," he wrote to Samuel Bensusan in 1919, "are usually the best literature"³⁰), his contempt of "rhymeless, rhythmless poets"³¹ who had come to prominence by the 1920s, and his hatred of American journalism as defiling the well of "pure English."³²

Toward the close of his life he had only the unhappiest opinion of the future prospects of mankind. That opinion was associated with a realization that all his poetry (including *The Dynasts*) would never be enjoyed and valued more than his novels; and, even worse, that English poets no longer repaired to classical standards, no longer understood what constituted permanent excellence in art, no longer sought to emulate the cadences of the Greeks, the Elizabethans, the King James version of the Testaments, or the best of the Romantic poets.

Looking back on fifty years of literary endeavor, Hardy was fully entitled to say that he had accomplished his goals. But when he added that he did not know whether it had been worth doing, he was confessing, with deep regret, that he did not feel the full or unalloyed satisfaction of Edward Gibbon in 1787.

29. *Personal Writings*, p. 56.

30. *Letters*, V, 305.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 333.