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A Sun for His Soul: Worth, Wonder, and Warmth in Hardy's Lyrics?

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A GOOD NUMBER of Hardy's lyrics centre on small marks, objects, or moments that carry great human significance—no matter that the marks be but "two letters" or "the shingled pattern" of a piece of wood; no matter that the object be no more than "a drinking-glass" or a "box for tinder"; and no matter that the moment be merely a "tired" traveller's pause to lean back against "a stunted handpost just on the crest" of a hill "in the solitude of the moor."[1] As Hardy himself put it, "an object or mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious Nature. Hence clouds, mists, and mountains are unimportant beside the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand" (*Life and Work* 120). Assertions like that not only belie Hardy's ostensible pessimism (actually an inveterate and unflinching realism), but also convey his high valuation of man's physical presence in the universe.

From this humanist point of view, the apparent mocking bathos in the closing lines of "At a Lunar Eclipse" (*CPW* 1: 149), the satirizing of human ingenuity and enterprise, has in fact an undertone of affirmation, of celebration. The sigh of dismay at the trivial, unremarkable impression mankind seems to make on the cosmos issues from the outraged speaker's deep-seated conviction that mankind is not less, but infinitely more, impressive than the ineffectual and inadequate stars can give him credit for:

> And can immense Mortality but throw
> So small a shade, and Heaven's high human scheme
> Be hemmed within the coasts yon arc implies?
>
> Is such the stellar gauge of earthly show,
> Nation at war with nation, brains that teem,
> Heroes, and women fairer than the skies?

Consequently, while some earlier critics have condemned and construed Hardy's view of man's physical presence in the universe as rigidly narrow, diminishing the complex data of human experience (Blackmur 22–23; Hynes 50), other critics have more recently redressed that reductive reading by emphasizing a humanist and existentialist perspective (Brooks 20, 316–18; McCarthy). Or, as

1. "Her Initials" and "The Workbox" (*CPW* 1: 15; 2: 117); "Under the Waterfall" and "Old Furniture" (*CPW* 2: 45, 277); "Near Lanivet, 1872" (*CPW* 2: 168), but see also "Best Times" and "That Moment" (*CPW* 2: 467; 3: 141).

Paul Zietlow puts it, Hardy "defined and completed his humanity through poetry by asserting his independent identity against the tendencies of things . . . against change, chance, and oblivion" (178).

What these recent critics are responding to and articulating is a source of consoling knowledge that affirms the significance of the human and the individual. As I shall attempt to argue, certain of Hardy's lyrics are characterized by speakers who make assertions within the terms of a humanist framework and see man as more than merely an unimportant object in the insentient universe. They assume that man is also an intelligent observer who is aware of and can evaluate his own cosmic presence. And my chief concern is to delineate three modes of consciousness in an indifferent, cold, and mechanical universe—three humanist tones: of worth, wonder, and warmth.

I

To Hardy's humanist speaker, the very process itself of discerning a significant moment—a moment of worth, wonder, or emotional warmth—is a source of solace, however limited. Indeed, in Hardy's humanist poems the speaker's position is essentially one of *assertive* acceptance of limitations. As Richard Hoffpauir has observed, "limits, boundaries, and order are important for Hardy. They not only help men assert their significance and provisional meaning against an indifferent universe, but also prevent men from losing control of their own humanity" (541). The humanist speaker, in fact, claims those limitations as part of his inner world by the stance he adopts towards them. He consciously chooses to recognize the harsh facts of terrestrial existence and, while making that frank recognition, regards those limitations as a crucial personal factor which concerns him in a unique way. This decision enables the speaker not only to see things differently, but also to discover human and personal significance in the world. For by finding such significance in a fundamentally indifferent, meaningless universe, the speaker asserts his essence as a human being. In the closing scene of *The Woodlanders,* for example, when Marty South visits Giles Winterborne's grave and pays him homage, she thinks of him both as a unique person and as a human being: "'none can plant as you planted . . . none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven. . . . But no, no, my love, I never can forget 'ee; for you was a good man, and did good things!'" (Ch. 48, 338–39). As Hardy observed in one of his biographical journals, "the most prosaic man becomes a poem when you stand by his grave at his funeral & think of him" (29 May 1872; *Personal Notebooks* 10).

It is, for instance, a humanist orientation that enables the aged speaker in "Life Laughs Onward" (*CPW* 2: 201) to acknowledge and accept life's limiting transience, and find what is most of value in the present, a creative process in which he gains a consoling insight into his own mental and emotional state:

> Rambling I looked for an old abode
> Where, years back, one had lived I knew;
> Its site a dwelling duly showed,
> But it was new.

I went where, not so long ago,
The sod had riven two breasts asunder;
Daisies throve gaily there, as though
No grave were under.

I walked along a terrace where
Loud children gambolled in the sun;
The figure that had once sat there
Was missed by none.

Life laughed and moved on unsubdued,
I saw that Old succumbed to Young:
'Twas well. My too regretful mood
Died on my tongue.

The theme of human transience in the face of the permanence of Nature is a traditional one, and it conventionally leads to self-pity and a search for consoling spiritual or material absolutes. But this humanist speaker avoids conventional attitudes, complaints, and platitudes about man's lot, even while he retains the discomforts of that lot. He can concede that the passage of time was in some ways "well." What consoles and cheers this Hardyan speaker is not some absolute or external knowledge about this or any other world, but the discovery of a worthwhile correspondence between the condition of this world and his own new, self-accepting "mood." In the process of learning firsthand that time is a function of experience, and not the other way round, he has created an emotional space for himself in the here and now.

In other words, Hardy's imagination attributes to objects and occasions an affirmative import that coexists in a state of tension of opposition to an equally valid negative import, a tension continuous with that complex flux of experience involving the incongruous presence of two incompatible processes of being, cosmic and ethical, that one finds in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: "the inherent will to enjoy, and the circumstantial will against enjoyment" (Ch. 43, 395). The achievement of this affirmative "undervision"[2] Hardy clearly conceived of as a humanist source of solace, when he wrote this:

> Thought of the determination to enjoy. We see it in all nature, from the leaf on the tree to the titled lady at the ball. . . . It is achieved, of a sort, under superhuman difficulties. Like pent-up water it will find a chink of possibility somewhere. Even the most oppressed of men and animals find it, so that out of a thousand there is hardly one who has not a sun of some sort for his soul.
>
> (*Life and Work* 222)

Similarly, in his humanist lyrics Hardy dramatizes a way to confront "the Worst" that is *positive*, where some of the emphasis is on the moral courage required to stand by one's conviction, and some is on the progressive optimism of nineteenth-century positivism.[3] That is, the humanist position in certain of

2. By this Hardyesque term, I mean a property that belongs to Hardy's poetry by virtue of his calling as poet: a courageous and purposeful insight into both the fulfilment and the suffering inherent in human affairs. Undervision involves a mental and moral potential one may exercise, a faculty one may possess, and a perspective one may consider things from. But see my "Hardy's Poetic Undervision" and "Darkness Visible."

3. According to Comte's *Positive Philosophy,* which at one time Hardy frequently read and took notes from, the third stage in the growth of the human intellect is called the Positive stage (see *Literary Notebooks* 1: 322).

Hardy's lyrics is self-affirmative, and, in the face of terrestrial conditions, the humanist speaker knows that what he or she affirms can be only subjective and relative, "an attitude or value or moment of time brought into being by man's moral consciousness and creative imagination" (Benvenuto 43). Affirmative undervision means a perspective on reality that does not turn away from absolute causes to the negation of such causes, but rather attempts to see and explain "all facts in relation simply to each other, and in relation to more general facts" (Willey 199). Only by assertively accepting that there can be *no* definitive source of solace or compensation for the meaningless mutability and limitation in the world can the humanist speaker avoid feeling degraded or self-deluded. On the contrary, his asserting of his uniquely individual humanity in the midst of limitation, loss, and incoherence leaves us with a feeling of exaltation and with a realistic sense of expanded human possibilities.

II

Some of Hardy's most characteristic and memorable poems are those which dramatize an affirmative undervision, the product of a perceiving mind that is owned by an observer who is aware of the intrinsic significance of being human in the world; that is, an observer who assertively accepts the limitations of his human condition by finding solace within his own individual humanity, acting outside the generally accepted ethical attitudes and assumptions of his community. And in drawing on his own essence as a human being, such a humanist speaker in Hardy's poems exercises one or more of three basic capacities or instincts: for discovering "the indestructible essence of human worth and dignity" (Zabel 37), for discerning beauty and wonder even amid ugliness and banality, and for disseminating emotional warmth, tenderness, and lovingkindness in an uncaring universe.

In "Life and Death at Sunrise" (*CPW* 3: 40), for instance, the sight of two country figures meeting in the landscape includes auditory and tactual evidence as well as visual, so that the whole scene becomes an objective correlative highly charged with intuitions about life and death. The poem successfully knits together several sense perceptions into an interrelation that suggests the wider contexts of society and Nature, and that also establishes the complexity and worthwhileness of human existence. What the poem embodies and enacts is the human mind's capacity for discovering worth and coherence amid the meaninglessness of mere matter in motion:

> A waggon creaks up from the fog
> With a laboured leisurely jog;
> Then a horseman from off the hill-tip
> Comes clapping down into the dip;
> While woodlarks, finches, sparrows, try to entune at one time,
> And cocks and hens and cows and bulls take up the chime.
> . . .
> 'And what have you got covered there?'
> He nods to the waggon and mare.
> 'Oh, a coffin for old John Thinn:
> We are just going to put him in.'

'—So he's gone at last. He always had a good constitution.'
'—He was ninety-odd. He could call up the French Revolution.'

Hardy presents a similar quest for significance in "The Last Signal" (*CPW* 2: 212), dramatizing as it does the mind of the speaker who seeks to know the meaning of

The sudden shine sent from the livid east scene;
It meant the west mirrored by the coffin of my friend there,
Turning to the road from his green,

To take his last journey forth—he who in his prime
Trudged so many a time from that gate athwart the land!
Thus a farewell to me he signalled on his grave-way,
As with a wave of his hand.

The imagery here, both dimensional (east/west) and catoptric ("mirrored"), is not merely a straightforward and scientific explanation. One can feel the speaker's exaltation at discovering value and meaning in the midst of life's futile labour and mortality, "amid the shadow of that livid sad east." The climax comes when the speaker simultaneously exercises his individual capacity for human warmth in an impersonal universe; the flash of sunlight he takes as a friend's simple gesture of farewell. And the friendship and fellow-feeling that the poem celebrates, as Peter Mitchell astutely points out, "does not transform the ominous landscape with which the poem opens: it provides a point of light within it. . . . Hardy's restraint in this is part and parcel of his affirmation of ordinary experience" (140). In full possession of the knowledge that life can be absurd, ugly, and cruel, the humanist speaker puts meaning, beauty, and kindness into certain moments that have reality and value, despite the antagonistic and irrational forces that limit human experience. Paradoxically, the ephemerality of such affirmative moments enhances the experience by making them, in a sense, eternal. And few poems of Hardy's demonstrate more strikingly the enduring springs of such an affirmative undervision than "Transformations" (*CPW* 2: 211) and "The Darkling Thrush" (*CPW* 1: 187).[4] Let us take each poem in turn.

III

FOUR STATEMENTS OF speculation and pseudo-facts—the systematic correlation of human character traits and vegetation—make up the first two stanzas of "Transformations." The poem ends when the speaker abruptly concludes that the personages he has been identifying in the churchyard are not dead and buried, but actually still alive:

4. Instincts for human warmth—tenderness, courtesy, compassion, love—as well as for sympathetic and humane understanding of others are affirmed in poems as diverse as "A Broken Appointment," "The Burghers," "A Wife and Another," and "Great Things" (*CPW* 1: 172, 31, 318; 2: 214).

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.

These grasses must be made
Of her who often prayed,
Last century, for repose;
And the fair girl long ago
Whom I vainly tried to know
May be entering this rose.

So, they are not underground,
But as nerves and veins abound
In the growths of upper air,
And they feel the sun and rain,
And the energy again
That made them what they were!

Here the demonstrative adjectives ("this," "these") vividly dramatize the judicious movements of the speaker's attention, until—after gradual, appreciative rumination, a process of accumulating specific correspondences that smack of individual personalities—the speaker pronounces his triumphant conclusion ("So"). That is, his mind moves deliberately towards a goal which he believes is highly meaningful to him—to be aware of the existence of human worth and personal force in the world. Words like "portion"[5] and "grandsire," together with the intimation of eternally affectionate security in the metaphor "bosomed," suggest the dignity of the dead to the speaker. But this reverence is curbed by a reality external to the speaker: in the first two stanzas, he subordinates his fancy to the nineteenth-century scientific concept of the migration of molecules from one organism to another (Levere 193).

Nevertheless, this concept is not what the form and technique of the poem are emphasizing. After the end-stopped, terminal assonance of "repose," "ago," "know," and "rose," Hardy sweeps up the significance of the sound at the start of the next stanza with "So," as the climactic inference suddenly dawns on the speaker, inverting and arresting the first metrical foot before letting the speaker present his jubilant denial ("Só, they are nót"). Having based his observations on an independent standard of reality, the speaker asserts confidently ("So . . . !") a conclusion he believes is universally valid, as the appearance of the generalizing article (in lines 15–17) implies. Because the speaker's estimate of the significance of his goal is guided by a scientific explanation, he himself knows the value of what he believes. And the concluding stanza of the poem amounts to a claim that his vision is true; the exuberant anaphora ("And . . . / And . . .") and the sure-footed monosyllabic last line constitute nothing less than a human

5. The recognizably biblical flavor of this word invokes solemn associations of destiny and divine power: see Ps. 73. 26 and Job 20. 29.

act of self-accreditation.

Unlike the nescient widow in "Bereft" (*CPW* 1: 263), for instance, who takes upon herself the full weight of an unremitting grief by narrowing her solitary life to monotonous and inert waiting, the speaker here draws a totally unqualified inference in an attempt to negate the fact of the evanescence and extinction of the human personality. And with an equally unqualified aggressiveness, by the force of his imagination, he tries to withhold from death the humane values he seeks to keep alive within himself—senses of dignity, vivacity, humility, and beauty which are of the essence of his humanity. That resounding lack of qualification has been misconstrued by at least one critic as a final declaration of sentimental and gratuitous optimism (Richardson 125). But what "Transformations" enacts and articulates is not visionary delusion or even hope; it is a robust imaginative energy.

Far subtler in its affirmation of the instincts for human dignity, wonder, and warmth is the ostensibly occasional poem "The Darkling Thrush." First, "darkling" means not simply "in the dark," but the emotional experience of that dark. The word has connotations, if not specifically of "despair and the burden of the past" (Johnson), then more generally of the stealing in of a mournful heavy-heartedness. Then, the artificed title encapsulates the overall structure and mood of the poem. The title dynamically counterpoints the speaker's observation of the sprightly bird reduced to frailty by seasonal vicissitude with the same speaker's assertive interpretation of the bird's song as joyful. This oxymoronic effect of the title, suggestive of the diminution of the zest and potential for growth, is enforced by the allusiveness of the literary epithet. Yet, while "darkling" may well recall and rely on the rich experience of English culture embodied in great works of poetry,[6] the intertextual resonance also registers the ironical waning of the significance of all that accumulated experience, the recent demise of an entire era of human achievement and failure, since Hardy first entitled the poem "By the Century's Deathbed." For the central tension Hardy dramatizes in the poem is that between traditional and individual quests for significance. Everything is seen through the eyes of the speaker; and it is he alone who interprets as an expression of joy the sound the bird makes. Hardy uses the literary allusion to suggest an ultimate bleakness and meaninglessness that is the precise objective context in which the humanist speaker creates significance out of his own humanity.[7]

After taking "a full look at the Worst," at the scenic desolation and cultural exhaustion, the speaker is understandably dumbstruck by the bird's singing:

6. E.g., *King Lear* (1.4.200), *Paradise Lost* (3.39), "Ode to a Nightingale" (line 51), and "Dover Beach" (line 35). But see Allingham.

7. As John Bayley puts it, "the poem works by conscientiously invoking all those images and then dissipating them, as if accidentally, in the unexpectedness of its own being. The true contrast in the poem is between the ghost bird of literature and the actual thrush of Hardy's observation" (500, col. 3).

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

Here Hardy takes scrupulous pains to present the event as the converse opposite to all that precedes it in the poem—through imagery ("arose" counters "leant" and "outleant"), through diction ("full-hearted" and "illimited" offset "shrunken" and "fervourless"), and through rhythm (the resilient iambic pulse of that first line and surging enjambements that culminate in the intensive prefix "be-" sustaining the emphasis on the emotional abandon).[8] In other words, the third stanza violates the speaker's assumption of a decorum between setting and action; the bird's singing, as understood by him, is out of place and logically unaccountable, and he is forced to make sense of it *for himself.*

Consequently, in the first three stanzas, the landscape-setting of bitter waste, decrepitude, and defunctive sterility; the appalling physical state of the bird; the transcendent quality of the bird's song—all these images coalesce into an objective equivalent for the speaker's mental and emotional state in the final stanza, where he explicitly asserts his essence as a human being by affirming his instincts for dignity, solidarity, beauty, and wonder:

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

The poem records, but without grandiosely proclaiming, the speaker's capacity for conceiving ("I could think") of another's mode of consciousness, a capacity that was unexpectedly discovered. And that capacity is sufficient to vindicate the humanist speaker's existence as a quest for value and coherence. The speaker's very perception of the bird's sound as "ecstatic" and "happy" singing, against the desolation and fervourlessness of the indifferent universe, is already the expression of a cosmic achievement; and the appropriate attitude is one neither of optimism, arrogance, nor despair, but of a humanist acceptance, with which "men [might] look at true things, / And unilluded view things, / And count to bear undue things" ("To Sincerity" *CPW* 1: 336). Only because the humanist speaker is content to recognize "the Worst" is he content to assert, as courageously as he can, the limitations of his humanity as it confronts a vastly powerful cosmic process. He knows that by boldly and reasonably affirming his essential

8. For a fine analysis of Hardy's "consummate trick of assonance" in this stanza, see Lock 129–30.

humanity in spite of what is accidental and irrational ("undue") inside and outside himself,

> The real might mend the seeming,
> Facts better their foredeeming,
> And Life its disesteeming.

In "The Darkling Thrush" the humanist speaker's response is one of quiet courage and assertiveness because he lives in the present, without myths and inherited consolations. The one thing in the entire scene that corresponds to this speaker's moral being is the song of the thrush, an impulse most decidedly not from a vernal wood, but from a dark coppice. Having critically observed the indifferent, meaningless world about him, and conscious of the vulnerability of the thrush, the speaker interprets the singing as the bird's deliberate and solitary affirmation of the precious essence of itself under extreme conditions. In making this interpretation, the speaker enacts what he himself has "chosen" to do; and even though his own affirmation can itself have no ultimate effect on the conditions of his existence, the very act of affirming himself brings him a form of consolation, while enlarging the reader's sense of what is humanly possible. However, not only does he *not* need the consolation of some absolute truth, but he would reject any notion of it as a denial of his life. Instead, this humanist speaker claims freedom to create value and coherence for himself in a space beyond cosmic and/or ethical processes. Accordingly, the world he inhabits remains mysterious and a cause for anxiety; but, insofar as there is meaning, it is to be discovered personally, here and now, in the midst of despair. If there is a sin against his individual humanity, it is less despair about this life than "some blessed Hope" in another. From the delighted assurance he attributes to the bird the speaker distances himself, aware as he is that the source of his own solace lies within his individual humanity.[9]

IV

IN HARDY'S HUMANIST lyrics, then, solace comes from a speaker's personal affirmation of a relative valuation made in the face of an uncaring, nonmoral universe. Taking a stand against the cosmos, mankind asserts his values and intentions, fragile and limiting though they be. Consequently, the "figure [that] stands in our van with arm uplifted, to knock us back from any pleasant prospect we indulge in as probable"—the Bunyanesque metaphor for inexorable circumstance that Hardy shared with his mother (*Personal Notebooks* 6–7)—has to contend with the fact of what Delmore Schwartz calls "human choice, responsibility, and freedom, the irreparable character of human acts and the undeniable necessity of seeing life from the inside of the human psyche rather than from the astronomical-biological perspective of nineteenth century science" (127).

The typical speaker in Hardy's humanist lyrics has decisively and assertively

9. As Patricia O'Neill points out, the poem ultimately differentiates between the thrush's experience and that of the speaker (138). Cf. Lock 139.

accepted that his existence is little and limited, but takes keen delight in what he has; he chooses to make

> The most I can
> Of what remains to us amid this brake
> Cimmerian
> Through which we grope, and from whose thorns we ache,
> While still we scan
> Round our frail faltering progress for some path or plan.
> ("To Meet, or Otherwise" *CPW* 2: 16)

Hardy's humanist speaker's chief asset is his mind (i.e., intellect, imagination, intuition), which he regards as a cosmic achievement engendering an attitude of patiently courageous assertiveness, an irrepressible intentionality, a leaning mentally towards the goal of finding meaning and value in the universe.[10] For instance, the speaker in "Drinking Song," stripped of all Western philosophy, one of mankind's supreme achievements, confidently finds solace—in the way that Marty South finds it at the end of *The Woodlanders* (quoted earlier)—in the exercise of his moral being: "We'll do a good deed nevertheless!" (*CPW* 3: 250).

Just what the humanist speaker courageously accepts is spelled out by the dying deity at the end of "A Plaint to Man" (*CPW* 2: 33):

> The truth should be told, and the fact be faced
> That had best been faced in earlier years:
>
> The fact of life with dependence placed
> On the human heart's resource alone,
> In brotherhood bonded close and graced
>
> With loving-kindness fully blown,
> And visioned help unsought, unknown.

Hardy means the repetition of "the fact" to register and establish the historical and irrevocable occurrence of human existence in "this wailful world" (line 17), without the possibility of protection or solace beyond what mankind is emotionally capable of supplying. And to create a sense of men being confronted with that unavoidable, intransigent reality, Hardy couches this definitive, monolithic "truth" in an oracular, verbless utterance. To accept the limitation ("alone") does not reduce or debase the quality of life. On the contrary, the act of "dependence" forces men to invest all their innermost energies in achieving their common humanity, affirms man's unique potentiality and sole responsibility for fellow-feeling, and brings into splendid flower the crowning moral value known to Hardy as "loving-kindness," which is, as the dominant rhyme suggests, the reward for such confident and concentrated attention. In order "to open out [his]

10. The distinctive awareness inherent in Hardyan courage comes out clearly in one of his unpublished notes: "Imagine you have to walk [a] chalk line drawn across an open down. Browning walked it, knowing no more. But a yard to the left of the same line the down is cut by a vertical cliff five hundred feet deep. I know it is there, but walk the line just the same" (Millgate 409). The physical activity may be the same, but the human experience is quite different.

limitings" ("The Sign-Seeker" *CPW* 1: 67), the humanist speaker creates significance from his intrinsic human capacity for moral worth, imaginative wonder, and emotional warmth. He does so most successfully whenever he owns and confronts the limitations he was born to, including the ultimate limitation—mortality, the world's and his own.

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