

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 19
Issue 1 *March*

Article 7

March 1983

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 19, no.1, March 1983, p.45-52

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A Short Story Prelude to Jude the Obscure: More Light on the Genesis of Hardy's Last Novel

by PATRICIA ALDEN

WE NOW have two major studies of the Fitzwilliam holograph of *Jude the Obscure*. In "The Genesis of *Jude the Obscure*" (1960), John Paterson argues that the novel underwent a "basic reorganization." Although it began as the story of a young man who failed "to make a place for himself in the academic world . . . the center of gravity shifted away from the university theme [and] moved in the direction of the marriage question."¹ This study has given implicit support to those who see *Jude* as a hopelessly fractured work. Patricia Ingham, in "The Evolution of *Jude the Obscure*" (1976), has recovered an ur-version of the novel imbedded within the holograph; on the basis of her textual study, she argues that the marriage theme, which she expands to include the whole area of human sexual relations, was part of Hardy's novel from the beginning. Thus Sue Bridehead, the troubled Fawley history in marriage, and the idea of a family curse are all present in the earliest draft, with Phillotson being added later.

This information about the manuscript is in itself a significant contribution to Hardy studies. However, in correcting Paterson's assumptions about the compositional process, Ingham moves to a conclusion from which I must dissent. She argues sensibly that "there was no simple split between academic aspiration theme and marriage theme," but then asserts that "from the beginning the first was the less important." The relationship between the sexes constitutes the "obsessive core" of the novel. "To this was added a more superficial and rather immature treatment of the man's academic aspirations and their frustration."² This disparaging judgment which accords the university theme only second-class status ignores other evidence about the evolution of *Jude the Obscure* and elevates one aspect of Hardy's imaginative power at the expense of others.

In his "Preface to the First Edition" of *Jude*, Hardy mentions that "the scheme [for the novel] was jotted down in 1890, from notes made in 1887 and onwards. . . . the narrative was written in outline in 1892

1. John Paterson, "The Genesis of *Jude the Obscure*," *Studies in Philology*, LVII (1960), 87-98.

2. Patricia Ingham, "The Evolution of *Jude the Obscure*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. XXVII (1976), 27-37, 159-69. I quote from the last two pages of the article.

and the spring of 1893 [and] onwards into the next year. . . .”³ One of the “notes” is recorded as a diary entry in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, largely written by Hardy although published under his wife’s name. The entry is for April 28, 1888: “A short story of a young man—‘who could not go to Oxford’—His struggles and ultimate failure. Suicide. [Probably the germ of *Jude the Obscure*.] There is something [in this] the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them—though I was not altogether hindered going, at least to Cambridge, and could have gone up easily at five-and-twenty.”⁴ This “germ,” with the bracketed material as well as the diary entry composed by Hardy, suggests that the theme of frustrated academic ambitions provided the original spark of inspiration for the novel. However, the theme was first developed in a short story, “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions,” which Hardy sent off for magazine publication in August, 1888. While some Hardy scholars have briefly noted the connection between the short story and the novel,⁵ none have documented the several motifs and phrases used in both fictions. Given these points of connection, what is still more interesting is the entirely different conception of the protagonists, both young men who could not go to Oxford. I shall compare story and novel and offer an explanation for this difference.

IF WE begin with the “germ,” we cannot fail to note Hardy’s curious way of both revealing and obscuring a personal connection to the “story of a young man—‘who could not go to Oxford.’” Then begins a distancing process (in itself an implicit recognition of connection) in which Hardy claims that, unlike the young man of the story, he might have gone up to Cambridge.⁶ Considering how exceptionally reticent Hardy was and how emphatically he was to insist, later on, that there was “not a scrap of personal detail” in *Jude*,⁷ it is noteworthy that Hardy saw fit to include the “germ” in *The Life*, standing in mild contradiction to his

3. Thomas Hardy, “Preface” to *Jude the Obscure*, V of The Mellstock Edition of *The Works of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1920), v. Hereafter references to this edition will appear in the text.

4. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy: 1840–1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962, rpt. 1975), pp. 207–08.

5. For instance, in his *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography* (London: Longman, 1972), J. I. M. Stewart simply notes that “‘A Tragedy of Two Ambitions’ has the interest of looking forward to *Jude the Obscure*” (p. 151).

6. In *Young Thomas Hardy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), Robert Gittings argues that it was exceedingly unlikely that Hardy could have gone to university at any time. His father could not have afforded the fees, and Hardy would have had to compete, like Jude, for the few, highly competitive fellowships which went by and large to the sons of the well-to-do middle class (p. 46). Gittings stresses that Hardy, in *The Life*, was “improving” on his history in various ways, and that Hardy suggests more than once that a variety of career possibilities were open to him. There is, too, an oral tradition that in his late teens or early twenties, Hardy applied to the Theological Seminary at Salisbury with an eye to entering the Church as a licentiate and was rejected either because of his humble origins or his lack of formal education. On this point see J. O. Bailey, “Ancestral Voices in *Jude the Obscure*” in *The Classic British Novel*, eds. H. M. Harper, Jr. and Charles Edge (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 152, and Gittings, p. 46.

7. F. E. Hardy, p. 392.

other statements. We know that there was much more than a “scrap” of autobiographical material in the novel. The evidence has been assembled by many scholars and is ably gathered in J. O. Bailey’s “Ancestral Voices in *Jude the Obscure*.”⁸ Setting aside the much vexed issue of how Sue and Jude as a couple are related to Hardy’s personal life, there is considerable evidence of autobiographical involvement with Jude the poor man and Oxford aspirant. My point in mentioning this is to develop two arguments: first, that Hardy was imaginatively engaged with the theme of academic ambitions; and second, that because the material was uncomfortable, even distressing, he wanted to obscure any personal connection to it, entirely transforming his experience in his fiction.

The first working out of the “germ” recorded in *The Life* is the short story “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions,” eventually included in *Life’s Little Ironies*. That it was a story which Hardy took some pride in, we may infer from the fact that he includes a letter from his friend Edmund Gosse, praising the story, in his biography.⁹ The tale opens with two brothers “engaged in the untutored reading of Greek and Latin. . . . immersed in a chapter of the idiomatic and difficult Epistle to the Hebrews.”¹⁰ Their sister attempts to distract them and lure them outside, but they rebuff her. Despite their dedication, the brothers are despondent because their father has drunk up all the money their dead mother had put by for their university education. The elder, Joshua, is ambitious, class-conscious, and bitter that the customary avenue to the Church (and to higher social position) is barred: “It drives me mad when I think of it. . . . here we work and work in our own bungling way, and the utmost we can hope for is a term of years as national schoolmasters, and possible admission to a Theological college, and ordination as despised licentiates” (85). His milder brother offers “feeble consolation”: “We can preach the Gospel as well without a hood,” to which Joshua replies, “Preach the Gospel—true. . . . But we can’t rise!” (85).

The brothers eventually do pursue this second-class avenue to the Church. Joshua is humiliated when his disreputable father shows up at school to cadge a drink, and manages to get him to emigrate to Canada so that the other family members will be free to make their way. Just at the moment when Joshua promises to be hugely successful as a preacher and when his sister is to marry a gentleman, the father returns, threatening to blight their prospects once again. The brothers meet him in a deserted place in order to persuade him to leave, but the father is so

8. See reference in note 6.

9. F. E. Hardy, p. 215: “Among the letters received by Hardy for the New Year (1889) was one from Mr. Gosse, who wrote thanking him for *A Tragedy of Two Ambitions*, which he thought one of the most thrilling and most complete stories Hardy had written. . . .”

10. Thomas Hardy, “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions” in *Life’s Little Ironies*, XIV of *The Mellstock Edition of The Works of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 83. Hereafter, references to this edition will appear in the text.

drunk that he falls into a stream. Cornelius moves to save him, but Joshua restrains him just long enough to let the father drown. Their careers flourish, but in the end each brother regrets having entered the Church, and each confesses that he has thought of drowning himself in the same stream.

Our first reaction might simply be to dismiss the story as a heavy-handed satire of a particularly ugly sort of ambition. Because it represents the first treatment of a theme which appears in *Jude*, it deserves careful consideration. Both story and novel take seriously the situation of the intelligent, industrious, scholarly poor man barred from the prestigious university he aspires to enter. Joshua's character is presented with cool understanding, his intense ambition colored by the fact that he cares for his brother and sister as well as himself. He is the driving force in the family, the son who has inherited the mother's desire that her children make something of themselves. It is he who pays for Rosa's schooling in Europe for two years, and his success makes Cornelius's way easier. A man of "limited sympathies," Joshua is intensely shamed, in the manner of one of Gissing's genteel characters, by his father's disreputable poverty and drunkenness. But if the son's revulsion is not attractive, neither is it inhuman; Hardy is careful to keep us from sympathizing with the father and engineers the climax so as to keep us from judging Joshua altogether harshly. The old man plays a trick on his unsuspecting son, forcing him to drink straight gin; hence Joshua is in a "stupefied reverie" at the moment his father falls into the weir. And though Joshua is the first to say, "Wait a moment," Cornelius equally hesitates to act to save his father. After a moment, the brothers "almost simultaneously" step forward, but they are too late.

We can see that Hardy is at pains to forestall a quick judgment of Joshua Halborough. Using the meek Cornelius (who in some ways adumbrates Jude) as a foil, Hardy captures our interest in Joshua's driving ambition and suggests that it will be needed if he is to overcome the obstacles he faces. Joshua has a jaundiced view of English society, but one quite possibly close to Hardy's own: "To succeed in the Church, people must believe in you, first of all as a gentleman, secondly as a man of means, thirdly as a scholar, fourthly as a preacher, fifthly, perhaps, as a Christian,—but always first as a gentleman, with all their heart and soul and strength" (93). It is true that all of Joshua's efforts are framed by an irony explicitly stated at the end of the story when Cornelius tells his brother that they ought to have learned from their study of Hebrews to endure the cross and despise their shame. His idealism stands as a criticism of Joshua's use of the Church for personal advancement. However, Cornelius the idealist is weak and vacillating, and nothing suggests that Joshua has miscalculated what advancement will take; it is one of "life's little ironies" that enduring the cross doesn't get you any further in the Church than in the world.

Joshua and Cornelius represent two possible responses which a poor student might have in a highly stratified society. The older brother recognizes that his wish to develop himself and to contribute to the world in any significant way is likely to be thwarted. He resents the class structure and at the same time is determined to use it in a calculating way, to take advantage of every opportunity, and to hide his inglorious origins. Cornelius represents the antithetical response of diffident retreat; he expects to be accorded second-rate status and is resigned to make what he can of that. His aspiration withers as it meets obstacles, and his humility at the end is also a kind of impotency. Like his brother, he has considered suicide more than once.

Jude, of course, is an immensely more complete figure than either of the brothers, but he does share their difficult situation and his development is, in part, a response to that situation. While he has some of the critical consciousness of Joshua, he has more of the temperament and idealism of Cornelius. In effect, Joshua is what Jude fears he might be or become, and to avoid that, he abandons his ambition.

The following two passages, the first from the short story and the second from the novel, present two autodidacts, one worldly-wise and embittered, the other naive.

"I am just now going right through Pusey's *Library of the Fathers*."

"You'll be a bishop, Joshua, before you have done!"

"Ah!" said the other bitterly, shaking his head. "Perhaps I might have been—I might have been! But where is my D.D. or LL.D.; and how be a bishop without that kind of appendage? . . . To hail Oxford or Cambridge as *alma mater* is not for me. . . ." (90)

"I know something of the Fathers, and something of Roman and English history."

"These things are only a beginning. . . . Hence I must next concentrate all my energies on settling in Christminster. . . . I'll be D.D. before I have done. . . . I can work hard. I have staying power in abundance. . . . Yes, Christminster shall be my *Alma Mater*. . . ." (40-41)

Jude at first doesn't question the nobility of his aspirations to become a D.D. with Christminster as *Alma Mater*, unlike Joshua, who from the beginning is engaged in some self-deception.

"There's a fine work for any man of energy in the Church, . . ." he said fervidly. "Torrents of infidelity to be stemmed, new views of old subjects to be expounded, truths in spirit to be substituted for truths in the letter. . . ." He lapsed into reverie with the vision of his career, persuading himself that it was ardour for Christianity which spurred him on, and not pride of place. (89)

However, when Jude is rejected by Christminster, he begins to question his motives. "The old fancy which had led on to the culminating vision of the bishopric had not been an ethical or theological enthusiasm at all, but a mundane ambition masquerading in a surplice. . . . There were thousands of young men on the same self-seeking track at the present moment" (157). Suspecting that he harbors a self-serving ambition like Joshua's, he embraces as "a purgatorial course" that secondary avenue

to the Church as a licentiate, the same which the Halborough brothers are obliged to pursue. Eventually he discovers what Joshua has already suspected: that the dogmas of the Church, the "truths of the letter," are outmoded and need to be replaced by "truths of the spirit." This perception is embodied in the epigraph to *Jude the Obscure*; "The letter killeth." Another one of the ironies of the short story is that, having won his place, Joshua discovers that "a social regenerator has a better chance outside [the Church], where he is unhampered by dogma and tradition. As for me, I would rather have gone on mending mills, with my crust of bread and liberty" (112). Thus he ends where Jude begins anew in "Part Fourth."

Both novel and short story, according to their different scope, give us a subtle study of the aspiring poor student who aims at an Oxford degree and a career in the Church. Each is blocked by poverty and the class structure and also by his inward response to those social realities. Each experiences shaming and self-doubt; each is further troubled by the religious dogma of the Church. But the outward success and the outward failure alike end in guilt and disillusionment. In both fictions Hardy insists on the self-defeating character of ambition, exploring the double-bind in which the poor student is caught. If he is to succeed, he must be ambitious, selfish, guilty of denying his past. If he fails to act energetically, he will go nowhere. Hardy had been an ambitious, scholarly, poor man and had, to all appearances, negotiated this double-bind successfully. But he was clearly "the one to show" the anxieties, frustrations, and self-doubt which beset such a man; and he did so in both short story and novel. Neither work reflects his lived experience, but both might reflect the complementary dangers he saw: the disillusion of failure and the disillusion of success purchased at too high a price.

ONE SCENE in particular in *Jude the Obscure* captures Hardy's subtle understanding of the psychological contradictions experienced by the poor student. After much hesitation Jude finally brings himself to act on his dream of entering Christminster. Not knowing even how to apply, he writes letters of inquiry to five college heads.

When the letters were posted Jude mentally began to criticize them; he wished they had not been sent. "It is just one of those intrusive, vulgar, pushing, applications which are so common in these days," he thought. "Why couldn't I know better than address utter strangers in such a way? I may be an imposter, an idle scamp, a man with a bad character, for all that they know to the contrary. . . . Perhaps that's what I am!" (139)

Jude's earlier confidence that his aspirations are appropriate and even noble is shaken at this first, tentative contact with the social order. This modest expression of interest in improving himself suddenly seems to him "intrusive, vulgar, pushing." Seeking to become one of the elite, he imaginatively identifies with them and thus is brought to condemn his

own action—to judge it by their lights. Because his application to the university may be one of many from men as poor as he, Jude imagines that it is therefore “common,” that is to say, ignoble. Overwhelmed by this self-doubt, he ends by convincing himself that he is actually unworthy of admission: “I may be an imposter. . . . Perhaps that’s what I am!”

Evidently the letter is received much as Jude had imagined; only one college head replies, recommending that “you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade. . . .” At first Jude’s sense of justice is outraged, and he chalks a quotation from Job on the college wall: “I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these?” But by the next morning “he laugh[s] at his self-conceit” and acknowledges the “wisdom” of the letter. Rather than protesting, Jude accepts the master’s judgment on his dream. Believing that he is a worthless “fool,” Jude goes off to get drunk in a disreputable tavern where he incongruously tries to prove his superiority by reciting the creed in Latin before a stupefied audience. Jude’s self-destructive behavior is evidently related to the sense of inferiority the class system engenders. If he tries to improve his position, he becomes anxious that he is “pushy” and unworthy; if he accepts his position, he loses all self-respect. Because his anger is both inner-directed and outer-directed, he does not know whom to blame for his failure.

WHAT can we learn from noting the connections and differences between the short story and novel? First, taken with the “germ” from *The Life*, it seems clear that Hardy was very much interested in the situation of “a young man who could not go to Oxford,” and that he twice developed this “germ” into a “tragedy of unfulfilled aims,” as he called *Jude the Obscure*.¹¹ It seems reasonable to think that some personal experience informs Hardy’s interest in this material. Secondly, taking the two fictions together, we can see more clearly the double-bind which frustrated the poor scholar. Whether goaded into ruthless ambition or diffidence and self-doubt, he is doomed to defeat. This material is as much a part of the “obsessive core” of *Jude the Obscure* as the material on sexual relationships. Far from offering a “superficial and rather immature treatment of the [poor] man’s academic aspirations and their frustration,” as Ingham argues, *Jude* is informed by Hardy’s sensitive, unsentimental understanding of the poor man’s objective experience and his inner conflict in responding to that experience. If we relegate this theme to secondary importance and dismiss its power, we are going to misread Hardy and misjudge his importance. Yes, he has a wonderful

11. “Preface” to *Jude the Obscure*, p. v.

grasp of the inherently frustrating character of human sexuality, of the interplay between distance and desire. But he was also able to place these private relationships within the wider social context of men's and women's working lives, within the context of their other aims and ideals, conditioned by their opportunities. A great part of Jude's psychological complexity springs from his situation as an aspiring poor student; indeed, it may be this aspiration for personal development—rather than sexual attraction—to which Hardy referred when he wrote that his novel was concerned with “the strongest passion known to humanity.”¹² Certainly “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions” might lead one to think so.

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12. “Preface” to *Jude the Obscure*, p. vi.