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Self-Revelation in Hardy's Early Love Poems

A. F. Cassis

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There is much concealed autobiography in Victorian poetry. I say concealed because much of the poetry is written in monologues in the first person; and, in spite of the speaker expounding a philosophy or experience which is characteristic of the poet's, it is difficult to determine where the fictitious ends and the real begins. This philosophy or experience is usually present, because of the writer's tendency towards self-revelation when using the monologue as medium. In most of these monologues, as Kristian Smidt notes, "the point of view is made quite clear at the outset by the title or the things mentioned in the speech itself."

Hardy, with his habitual reticence and shyness, cautions the reader against reading a personal experience behind his poems. In the Preface to *Wessex Poems*—his first volume of verse—he says: "The pieces are to a large degree dramatic or personative in description." He repeats the same word of caution in the Preface to *Poems of the Past and the Present*, and, in the Preface to *Time's Laughingstocks*, he points out that the "sense of disconnection" in the lyrics is "immaterial when it is borne in mind that they are to be regarded, in the main, as dramatic monologues by different characters." Hardy may be quite justified in his word of caution for, like Browning, he uses love as the pervading motive of a great bulk of his poetry and creates a gallery of characters and scenes which cannot be wholly interpreted in terms of personal experience. However, when in 1919, Hardy was asked whether *Jude the Obscure* could furnish one with biographical detail, the second Mrs. Hardy replied on his behalf: "To your inquiry if *Jude the Obscure* is autobiographical, I have to answer that there is not a scrap of personal detail in it, it having the least to do with his own life of all his books . . . . Speaking generally, *there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of Mr. Hardy's poetry than in all the novels*" (my italics).

The number of dated poems Hardy wrote before 1870 is

twenty-eight, of which fourteen are love poems. Of these love poems, “The Dawn After the Dance” is written to commemorate an incident; four, including the series of four sonnets “She, To Him” are spoken by a woman. The remaining nine are spoken by the masculine technical “I” or persona of the monologue, and cling together with the unity and veracity of a profoundly real experience. The emotion of love expressed is not simply personal as is the case in love poetry generally, but seems to be a record of personal experience.

In dealing with these early poems, we must always bear in mind Hardy’s romantic temperament and disposition which, more often than not, critics have ignored in their obsession to analyze his tragic vision of life and his “philosophy” of the Immanent Will. This romantic disposition manifested itself in his love for solitude, his interest and delight in nature, his nostalgia, his love for the “picturesque appeal of the past,” in the idyllic romantic love of his early novels, and his own sensitivity and fertile imagination. Hardy carried this romantic disposition into manhood as a result of “his lateness in virility, while mentally precocious”; or, as he humorously put it, he “was a child till he was sixteen, a youth till he was five-and-twenty, and a young man till he was nearly fifty.” In other words, he was predisposed to form the emotional and romantic attachments of a youth when he was in his twenties.

Hardy maintains a complete silence over his emotional life during his stay in London between 1862-1867. In March 1865 we get a glimpse of his insight and penetration into a woman’s mind and heart when he makes this entry into his notebook: “The woman at a first interview will know as much of the man as he will know of her on the wedding morning; whilst she will know as little of him then as he knew of her when they first shook hands. Her knowledge will have come upon her like a flood, and have as gradually soaked away.” In that same year, on his birthday, he made the following entry: “Walked about by moonlight in the evening. Wondered what woman, if any, I should be thinking about in five years’ time.” And yet, in a poem called “Revulsion” dated 1866, he says:

4 Florence Emily Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1928), 42.
5 *Ibid.,* 65, both quotations.
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Winning love we win the risk of losing,
And losing love is as one’s life were riven
It cuts like contumely and keen ill-using
To cede what was superfluously given.

Let me then never feel the fateful thrilling
That devastates the love-worn wooer’s frame,
The hot ado of fevered hopes, the chilling
That agonizes disappointed aim!

So may I live no junctive law fulfilling,
And my heart’s tablet bear no woman’s name.

What has happened to Hardy in one year, during his stay in London, to make him not only stop wondering at the woman he would think of in five years, but also wish his “heart’s tablet” to bear no woman’s name?

If we turn to his early love poems and arrange them by date of composition in the following order,

“Amabel” 1865
“Her Definition” 1866
“In Vision I Roamed” 1866 (with subtitle: To . . .)
“Postponement” 1866
“At a Bridal” 1866
“Revulsion” 1866
“Neutral Tones” 1867
“1967” 1867
“At Waking” 1869
“Her Initials” 1869

we shall find that they deal with a hopeless love which is soon abandoned because of the social disparity between the technical “I” of the monologue and the lady concerned. The first note of hopelessness in love is sounded in “Amabel”:

“I said (the while I sighed
That love like ours had died),
Fond things I’ll no more tell
To Amabel,
But leave her to her fate” (6)

But the pangs of unrequited love lead to sleeplessness and the “winged Fancy” of the romantic lover wanders to dwell on the image of the beloved in the summer of 1866. In “Her Definition” he says:

6 Quotations from Hardy’s poems are from The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (London, 1952), 11, hereafter cited in my text.
I lingered through the night to break of day,  
Nor once did sleep extend a wing to me  
Intently busied with a vast array  
Of epithets that should outfigure thee. (204)

“The poor device of homely wording” holds as “freight / The sweetest image outside Paradise.” The Universe may be “taci-turn and drear” but once “Fancy’s silken leash” is broken, “the silk grief that you were far away / Grew pleasant thankfulness that you were near” (7). But the joys of dwelling on the beloved’s image and the dreams of romantic love are cut short in “Postponement”:

“I planned her a nest in a leafless tree,  
But the passers eyed and twitted me,  
And said: ‘How reckless a bird is he,  
Cheerily mating!’

“Fear-filled, I stayed me till summer-tide,  
In lewth of leaves to throne her bride;  
But alas! her love for me waned and died,  
Wearily waiting.

“Ah, had I been like some I see,  
Born to an evergreen nesting-tree,  
None had eyed and twitted me,  
Cheerily mating!” (8)

C. M. Bowra wrongly assumes that Hardy is simply speaking about birds in this poem when he says that one of the main features of Hardy’s familiar full manner is present in this poem — “the respect for humble creatures as if they had the feelings and dignity of human beings”7 (my italics). Hardy is speaking of a human experience, for the words “evergreen nesting-tree” mean money, as he pointed out to Vere Collins.8 In other words, the beloved’s love died waiting for the persona who had to postpone his “mating” because of his “leafless tree” — impecuniosity — and because of his “whole life’s circumstance on hap of birth” (789), i.e., his not being born “to an evergreen nesting-tree.”

Solace and happiness in love are lost because the beloved is of a higher social standing than the technical “I” of the monologue, has to “wed as slave to Mode’s decree” (8) because of her “custom-straitened views” (6), and, consequently “lives so matched should misconpose, / Each mourn the double

7 The Lyrical Poetry of Thomas Hardy (Nottingham, 1946), 5.  
8 Talks With Hardy at Max Gate (London, 1928), 23.
waste” (8). Here we have two themes that figure prominently in Hardy's works: social disparity between lovers and mismat­ting, the former in his earlier works particularly, the latter most vocal in his later works.

The immediate result of such frustration in love is a distrust of love in “Revulsion,” a wish that he would

... never feel the fateful thrilling
That devastates the love-worn wooer’s frame
To hot ado of fevered hopes, the chilling
That agonizes disappointed aim! (11)

and the rather violent reaction to the experience of love that his “heart’s tablet bear no woman’s name.” A year later, in “Neutral Tones,” we get a calmer and more considered reaction to the experience of disappointed love. The technical “I” has learned “keen lessons that love deceives, / And wrings with wrong” (9). This may be what reason can draw out of it; but feeling treasures the experience even though all is up. In “1967” the technical “I” sees that no matter what “new” crops up in “five-score summers,” all that would be left of him and her would be “a pinch of dust or two”; even then, “I would only ask thereof / That thy worm should be my worm, Love!” (204). This is an example of what David Cecil calls “the poetic strain in Hardy’s creative imagination . . . of the romantic type . . . showing itself most typically . . . in some vivid particularity of detail”9 — this time a single macabre fact. Two years later, in the poem “At Waking,”

An insight that would not die
Killed her old endowment
Of charm that had capped all nigh
Which vanished to none
Like the gilt of a cloud,
And showed her but one
Of the common crowd.

She seemed but a sample
Of earth’s poor average kind,
Lit up by no ample
Enrichments of mien or mind. (208)

Hardy’s persona finds it difficult to accept that the “prize” he drew was a “blank.” But “Time, the magician”10 heals all

9 Cecil, 51.
In her accurate and critical biography of Thomas Hardy, Evelyn Hardy cautiously makes the following observations about Hardy's early poems: "the line 'A whole life's circumstance on hap of birth' implies unhappiness connected with love for some aristocratic girl." Again, reviewing the "group of negative love poems," she makes the guarded statement that "something acting like a catalyst had brought about an essential testing and change in Thomas Hardy's thoughtful soul."\(^\text{11}\)

These monologues are so related that they form, as it were, a beginning, a middle, and an end of a love story. There is nothing caustic or light about them. In "Her Initials," the technical "I" is a poet — a fact which makes one's mind revert at once to Hardy who wanted to be considered as a poet and who looked upon novel writing, even at the height of his fame as a novelist, as "mere journey work." The poet and the technical "I" or persona are so completely one. It is most likely that Hardy is drawing on his own experience. When he wrote these poems, Hardy had little or no experience yet as a poet and so fell back on his own experience which is more convincing and easier to embody in words than somebody else's. Poor and uncertain of his career, Hardy was in no position to get married during his residence in London between 1862-1867. He had no alternative but to postpone any proposal for marriage he would have liked to make. In doing this, his beloved, of a higher social standing, "wed as slave to Mode's decree." Had Hardy been of a higher social standing than the son of a master-mason, were he rich enough, he would not have been frustrated in love. "His finest poems," says C. Day Lewis, "are deeply, nakedly personal."\(^\text{12}\) Even as an elderly experienced


poet, Hardy had none of T. S. Eliot's severe screening of personality or Donne's subtlety.

The similarity between the technical "I" of the monologues and Hardy is too striking to be merely coincidental. His "recognition of love as the supreme interest in life" and his abjuration of love in the poems mentioned leave one with the conviction that his personal experience lies behind these early love poems.


THOMAS HARDY

By IRENE COOPER WILLIS

[Editor's note: During the first years of World War I Miss Willis, recently deceased literary executrix of Thomas Hardy, completed a 32-page typescript on his life and ideas. Discouraged by the "uncertain times," she did not offer it for publication to the British magazines but sent it for safekeeping (she had been bombed out of one domicile) to the Colby College Library, where it has been on file in our special Hardy collection. Much of what Miss Willis wrote then was in the nature of revelation. However, in the intervening years other scholars have turned her materials into common knowledge. There are still enough segments valuable for their insight or bias which merit publication. These are hereby presented.]

AFTER THOMAS HARDY died in 1928, his widow, the second Mrs. Hardy, published a two-volume Life of him. This had been in preparation for many years, and those who were in Mrs. Hardy's confidence knew that the greater part of it had been written by Hardy himself. He had started to write it soon after his second marriage in 1914; Mrs. Hardy typed it and Hardy afterwards destroyed the manuscript in order to conceal his authorship. He did not complete the work. The record of the last years was compiled by Mrs. Hardy from Hardy's diary notes and her own diary of the weeks before his death.

The Life is on this account an interesting document, despite being one of the most unrevealing of biographies. Hardy had greatly objected to any suggestion of writing an autobiography or any reminiscences, and it is stated several times in the Life that he was not interested in himself. But he was evidently sufficiently interested in himself to determine how far public