

# THE VARIED HUES OF PESSIMISM

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THE most casual glance at contemporary literature might safely warrant the inference that our generation does not accept the universe. We are all pessimists and cynics nowadays, for optimism has been abandoned to the service clubs, and your intellectual will defend to the last his inalienable right to be unhappy. Since the romantic movement, it has been the foible of intellectuals to believe that they direct the life and thought of mankind at large, and of late years they have outdone one another in gaily or sadly cynical estimates of the value of existence. Meanwhile mankind at large goes on existing much as it always did, and more or less indifferent, as it always has been, to its philosophic mentors. Even the despairing intellectuals, whose creed should forbid them to draw another breath, seem to flourish and prosper on their way to a green old age. In fact, as a generation we are akin to those persons who haunt psychiatrists with the complaint that they are abnormally high-strung and suffer accordingly; like Mrs. Gummidge, they "feel it more", and, also like Mrs. Gummidge, they are not a little complacent in their misery. To say that a good deal of our pessimism is a fad, like the Byronism of a century ago, is not of course to deny sincerity to numerous leading exponents of it. There is no need of recalling the familiar signposts, which range from *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* to the last lyric of the "O-God-the-pain girls," from Mr. Huxley's annual bursts of simian laughter to the sober honesty with which Mr. Krutch reads the obsequies of love and greatness.

Pessimistic views of life are not a new phenomenon of the twentieth century, but in one respect at least our pessimism is peculiar, and that is its calm certitude. Others in times past may have despaired, but our despair is built upon a rock, our truth is ultimate truth. While our simple-minded ancestors solved the insoluble with one pious ejaculation, "God!" we, with our special illumination, ejaculate "Science!", and oddly enough, though we are so realistic in our thinking, we are content to acknowledge the inscrutable ways of glands, ganglia, and electrons. Science, we are told, has shattered for ever the illusions which

supported life and art in the last two thousand years. Love has been confined within the realm of physiology; tragedy can no longer be written, for tragedy implies the capacity for greatness, and man is. . . . But to learn what man is, we may go to an eminent scientific philosopher<sup>1</sup>:

In the visible world the Milky Way is a tiny fragment. Within this fragment the solar system is an infinitesimal speck, and of this speck our planet is a microscopic dot. On this dot tiny lumps of impure carbon and water crawl about for a few years, until they dissolve into the elements of which they are compounded.

Of late years the scientists have certainly come into their own. They call the tune and we dance obediently—though we regard the Fundamentalist acceptance of the Bible as uncritical. We smile when Mr. Roarke Bradford makes the negro conceive God as a southern colonel, and yet remain sober when Dr. Barnes calls for a definition of God in the light of modern astro-physics.

It is our firm scientific hold upon final truth which distinguishes our *Weltanschauung* from that of the Victorians, who strangely deluded themselves into thinking that they had some glimpses of the final truths of science. Only the very young persist in the sport of baiting the Victorians nowadays: but, since we have risen on stepping-stones of our dead elders to higher things, it is an axiom of contemporary criticism that the Victorian view of life was an optimistic hallucination, and the permanent value of the few Victorians who can be valued at all is measured by the degree to which they approximate to truth, that is, to contemporary pessimism. So Meredith is dead, and Hardy is canonized. When the Victorians were dealing in milk and honey, so run a hundred articles, Hardy was manifesting the modern spirit in his representations of life dominated by scientific determinism; his grim irony undermined the complacent sentimentalities of the age; he faced squarely the unpleasant facts the Victorians covered up.

One may cherish extreme admiration for Hardy without indulging in indiscriminate eulogy, and it is possible to praise his great virtues without dispraising a great age. In the first place, one would like to understand the popular dogma concerning Victorian optimism. If an age is to be judged by the temper of its chief writers, is optimism the obvious term for the age which contained Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Darwin, Samuel Butler, George Eliot, John Morley, Leslie Stephen, "B. V.", Gissing, and others *ad lib.*? Was the essential Dickens an optimist, or Thackeray,

1. Mr. Bertrand Russell

or even Tennyson? Browning, one infers from modern references, never thought or wrote anything except "God's in his heaven, All's right with the world"; such rose-pink ebullitions as *The Ring and the Book* need not to be taken into account. Or, if science is our touchstone, here is a Victorian utterance to put beside Mr. Russell's modern *credo*.

And then comes the thought of this universal matrix itself anteceding alike creation and evolution, whichever be assumed, and infinitely transcending both, alike in extent and duration; since both, if conceived at all, must be conceived as having had beginnings, while Space had no beginning. The thought of this blank form of existence which, explored in all directions as far as imagination can reach, has, beyond that, an unexplored region compared with which the part which imagination has traversed is but infinitesimal—the thought of a Space compared with which our immeasurable sidereal system dwindles to a point, is a thought too overwhelming to be dwelt upon. Of late years the consciousness that, without origin or cause, infinite Space has ever existed and must ever exist, produces in me a feeling from which I shrink.

There is perhaps a difference. Where Spencer shrinks from contemplating the littleness of man, the modern almost gloats. Even the spectres of science are, when grown familiar, less potent to spoil our dinner than the ghost of Banquo, though one can imagine Spencer (or Pascal) really suffering.

But our concern here is with two "pessimists", of whom one lived and died a Victorian, while the other survived until yesterday as an interpreter of the modern mind, namely, Arnold and Hardy. Born in different strata of the middle class, they both escaped from its limitations and incurred its obloquy. Both were almost equally great in prose and poetry, though Hardy's fiction was much closer in spirit to his poetry than Arnold's criticism was to his. Having failed in his later novels to please a backward public, Hardy spent the rest of his life in writing poetry to please himself. Arnold's poetry, mainly the work of early manhood, had small success, and he gave himself more and more in prose to the successful but thankless task of pulling out a few stops in that powerful but narrow-toned organ, the modern Englishman. The sources of their pessimism were partly "scientific", partly temperamental, and some of the poetic expressions of it are worth comparison.

The two are not unlike in poetic style. Neither is a spontaneous singer, full of liquid melody. Their poems are almost all ground out line by line, and seldom possess the fluency, the

unconscious ease, of, say, two poets whom Hardy greatly admired and Arnold disliked, Shelley and Swinburne. One is continually aware of difficulties of expression met and perhaps only partly overcome, of rhymes that draw too much attention to themselves, of harsh discords, of unflexible stiffness. But, in view of their matter, neither would be improved by the traditional post-romantic graces of diction and rhythm; much of the poetry of both, quite appropriately, seems to have grown like stubborn flowers between rocks, and one watches the strong stem force the rocks apart. At the same time Hardy is not, as he has often been called, one of the modern poetic realists, for his style is as self-conscious and artificial as Tennyson's, though in a different way.

It is often said that the Victorians exaggerated their spiritual troubles, that they mistook a conflict between science and theology for one between science and religion. Whatever truth may be in the charge, Hardy, the modern, is at one with Arnold, the Victorian, in the nature of his disillusionment and in the expression of it. Here are a few lines from *God's Funeral*:

So, toward our myth's oblivion,  
Darkling, and languid-lipped, we creep and grope  
Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon,  
Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.

How sweet it was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely at the eventide  
And feel a blest assurance He was there!

It would be impertinent to quote *Dover Beach*, yet *Dover Beach* was published in 1867, and *God's Funeral* is dated 1908-10. Another stanza of the latter is:

I could not buoy their faith: and yet  
Many I had known: with all I sympathized;  
And though struck speechless, I did not forget  
That what was mourned for, I, too, long had prized.

And lines from *The Impercipient* may be added:

That with this bright believing band  
I have no claim to be,  
That faiths by which my comrades stand  
Seem fantasies to me,  
And mirage mists their Shining Land,  
Is a strange destiny.

Then compare Arnold's familiar words in the *Grande Chartreuse* (1855):

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere yet to rest my head,  
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.  
Their faith, my tears, the world deride;  
I come to shed them at their side.

This note of wistful regret for a vanished faith recurs again and again in Arnold, and in late as well as early poems of Hardy. While sincerity and depth of emotion may give universality to such a theme, the theme itself decidedly belongs rather to 1855 than to 1910. There is no space for piling up evidence, but surely one may wonder at the critical judgments which apply patronizing epithets to Arnold's religious utterances, and at the same time treat Hardy as our contemporary. If the one represents a phase of the Victorian mind, so does the other; for, though Hardy lived more than a generation beyond Arnold, and though his poetry covers more than half a century, it is not easy to trace changes in his "metaphysical" poetry. Some of the darker tenets of his speculative creed had got into his poems before they got into his novels, and the colossal *Dynasts* only expands the text of some of the earliest poems, for instance, *Hap* (1866):

If but some vengeful god would call to me  
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,  
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,  
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,  
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;  
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I  
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,  
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?  
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan . . .  
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown  
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

We speak glibly of the faded paganism, the self-conscious posing of the early Swinburne or the Henley of *Invictus*. But are Hardy's similar deliverances, for all his high integrity, likely to wear better in the eyes of a generation not under his personal spell?

Bereft of traditional faith in Providence, both poets feel with a new poignancy the pain and suffering of humanity, and, unable

to look to heaven for help, they try to find it on earth. The old, comfortable formulas have lost their power to heal. We recall *Dover Beach* again, with its sense of a world that

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain,

or

The millions suffer still, and grieve;  
And what can helpers heal  
With old-world cures men half believe  
For woes they wholly feel?

Hardy's pictures of the human lot are even darker—

Fair growths, foul cankers, right enmeshed with wrong,  
Strange orchestras of victim-shriek and song,  
And curious blends of ache and ecstasy—

and they often add the last refinement of pessimism, the notion of a world "God-forgotten", made by "some Vast Imbecility", and left to drift, or even tortured by

the dreaming, dark, dumb Thing  
That turns the handle of this idle Show.

He has questioned, and "panted for response",

But none replies;  
No warnings loom, nor whisperings  
To open out my limitings,  
And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls, he lies.

Man must, then, look to himself:

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.

And Arnold's Empedocles proclaims

Once read thy own breast right,  
And thou hast done with fears!  
Man gets no other light,  
Search he a thousand years.

Sink in thyself! there ask what ails thee, at that shrine!

With Empedocles, too, Hardy would say

Yea, I take myself to witness,  
That I have loved no darkness,  
Sophisticated no truth,  
Nursed no delusion,  
Allow'd no fear:

In poetry of such texture gleams of joy are few and faint. Hardy's *Darkling Thrush* (1900) recalls the early years of the century, when the poets of what seemed a new dawn sang to the skylark and cuckoo a song of gladness. Perhaps Hardy's nearest approach to joy is a poem that, from another author, would be called sad:

Let me enjoy the earth no less  
Because the all-enacting Might  
That fashioned forth its loveliness  
Had other aims than my delight.

And some day hence, towards Paradise  
And all its blest—if such should be—  
I will lift glad, afar-off eyes,  
Though it contain no place for me.

For Arnold, too, the romantic joy in nature has become impossible. He looks back wistfully to Wordsworth:

The complaining millions of men  
Darken in labour and pain;  
But he was a priest to us all  
Of the wonder and bloom of the world,  
Which we saw with his eyes, and were glad.  
He is dead, and the fruit-bearing day  
Of his race is past on the earth;  
And darkness returns to our eyes.

So, in many poems, Arnold, like his Empedocles, mourns the loss of natural joy in mountain and sea; he has become only "a naked, eternally restless mind", and the only healing power he finds in the visible world is the calm, ordered procession of the stars.

Hardy and Arnold approach each other, too, in an emotion which inspires a good deal of their most enduring poetry, a kind of melancholy which is more universal than that of religious disillusionment. It is, indeed, one of the most ancient of poetic themes, the sense of the past, of the long tale of man on earth, birth, and love, and death, generation after generation, century after century. It is partly immense pity, *lacrimae rerum*, partly a melancholy that may almost attain joy in the contemplation of the mere facts of man's continued life, his individual littleness

and frailty, and the eternal perpetuation of the race. Arnold's rendering of it is coloured naturally by his classic and scholarly lore—"Sophocles long ago heard it on the Aegean"; Tiresias "Revolving inly the doom of Thebes"; Rebekah "when she sate At eve by the palm-shaded well"; Philomela, "Eternal Passion! Eternal Pain!" Hardy, too, sees the endless River of Time, which is none the less broad and deep because it flows mainly through Dorset—the Mellstock Quire, The Roman Road, Drummer Hodge, and above all, of course, "In the Time of the Breaking of Nations".

There is no room, however, to mention more than some of the obvious and central parallelisms in theme or mood in the two poets. One might take them for granted, it if were not for the curious readiness of critics to regard Arnold as a pious, preaching Victorian, and Hardy as a sceptic in the van of modern thought. The state of mind out of which grow Hardy's poems of religious disillusionment is not that of a modern, who seldom has any convictions to lose, and, if he has, loses them as imperceptibly as a cat its fur. For, though his gifts of imagination and irony and pity may raise Hardy's thinking to finer issues, the actual substance and quality of that thinking, it must be said, is so far from philosophic sophistication as to be almost crude. It belongs partly to a particular age, but still more to a particular stratum of thought inhabited in our age as well as earlier by many whose lowest manifestations might be called Hyde Park atheism. Hardy's thought took its permanent shape at a time when Swinburne stood on tiptoe to denounce "the supreme evil, God", and a good many of Hardy's own complaints against heaven are those of a self-educated Victorian boy who has drawn too much of his mental diet from the Rationalist Press Association. For in some essential ways Hardy's thought did not grow at all, and he carried through his later writings the doctrine, equally shallow and dogmatic, of his boyhood. His metaphysic, superbly imaginative when fate remains a vague, overshadowing presence, does, when it becomes arbitrary and dogmatic, really deserve Mr. Chesterton's somewhat harsh phrase, "a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot." The theology of an indifferent or malevolent deity has no inherent superiority over that of a benevolent one, and is equally "dated."

It is a familiar fact of literary history that an artist who gives himself to supporting or attacking a particular religious or social creed is building on sand, and the fatal lack of disinterestedness is only partially atoned for by other saving qualities. When Arnold and Hardy are compared in this respect, Arnold is surely the gainer.



If Arnold could not have written *The Dynasts* (a work more praised than read), neither could he have stooped, as Hardy so often does, to cheap satire of clerics and marriage which is unworthy of a great man, and marks a self-conscious, self-emancipated bourgeois. Between these extremes, Hardy has a theology of his own, less philosophic than the one whose place it takes, and not likely to be so long-lived, while Arnold attaches himself to no set of religious beliefs, but interprets the deep, broad facts of disillusioned melancholy. The creed which underlies much of Hardy can hardly fail to suffer as the creed of *Paradise Lost* has suffered.

Hardy's view of man is, of course, part of his metaphysical creed. Arnold, if he lacks the poetic powers of his admired ancients, has much of their purpose, and not a little of their clear vision. Hardy, with all his sincerity and magnanimity, cannot see man truly for tears. If intense pity is one great source of his strength, it is also a source of weakness, for he slips undeniably into the pit-fall of the humanitarian, sentimentality, a kind of inverted sentimentality which has infected much contemporary writing. The poems furnish many examples, and, of course, there are *Tess* and *Jude*, both sincerely and sometimes beautifully wrought, and yet as sentimental in their way as *Pollyanna*. Hardy, as a truth-seeker, resented the charge of pessimism, but his defence reveals his obliquity of vision. In his longest preface he quotes his own line,

If way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst,

and proceeds: "That is to say, by the exploration of reality, and its frank recognition stage by stage along the survey, with an eye to the best consummation possible: briefly, evolutionary meliorism. But it is called pessimism nevertheless; under which word, expressed with condemnatory emphasis, it is regarded by many as some pernicious new thing (though so old as to underlie the Gospel scheme, and even to permeate the Greek drama) . . . ."

One may possibly admit truth in these words as they stand; but the moment one brings into juxtaposition Hardy's most serious work and the Greek drama (let alone the Gospel), the great gulf between them is obvious. *Tess* and *Antigone*, *Jude* and *Oedipus*! Or take the notorious last words of *Tess*: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with *Tess*." The idea of God's "ending his sport" with a human being would, of course, have been inconceivable to Aeschylus, though Hardy's words imply, along with those quoted above, a curious reading of Greek tragedy, a substitution of his own senti-

mentalism, in fact, for the humanistic ethic of the Greeks. Perhaps only in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* does Hardy achieve anything like Greek tragedy in spirit, and even there Hardy's malignant deity has his sport. But Henchard's tragedy, like that of Greek protagonists, arises mainly from the war in himself, and he is a heroic character; Hardy's other victims of chance and circumstance are pathetic, not tragic.

While Arnold was not a creator of character, he was not sentimental, and he was truly humanistic in his view of life. He censured his own *Empedocles* for the faults which he would have found in excess in *Tess* and *Jude* and other novels and poems. The world of Hardy's novels and poems is a world of undisciplined instinct and emotion, of more or less primitive beings whose only solace, and that an imperfect and gnawing one, is found in tempestuous love. They suffer and cause suffering, and sometimes attain momentary joy, but of the will, of self-responsibility, we hear little. Like most humanitarians, Hardy throws responsibility upon the universe, and his hope, apart from "loving-kindness", lies apparently in the still vaguer hope that the purposeless Will of the universe may in time be informed by Consciousness—a somewhat speculative contribution to "evolutionary meliorism", and essentially different from Aeschylus's conception of a progressive deity. Arnold, on the other hand, rests his faith on man's desire to rise above his lower self, on his capacity, however stumbling, for self-direction—

Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,  
And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good.

While the characters of Hardy's prose and poetry have hardly any reflective inner life, any guide except impulse, Arnold's most moving lines are his appeals to that inner life of discipline and self-dependence, and to that calm possession of the soul which, if seldom achieved, must yet always be the goal and the reward of such discipline.

It follows that Arnold's poetry is richer and more substantial than Hardy's. Arnold's has both the breadth and the centrality which belong to a permanently humanistic ethic; the range of his themes is wider, and their significance is more powerfully rendered. To say so is not to forget Hardy's many fine lyrics; yet, as one turns over his pages, one cannot deny that a large proportion of his work lacks significance, lacks substance and variety. It also lacks unity, and Hardy's own explanation, in a preface of 1901, is hardly convincing:

Moreover, that portion which may be regarded as individual comprises a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances, and at various dates. It will probably be found, therefore, to possess little cohesion of thought or harmony of colouring. I do not greatly regret this. Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.

Such an avowal can scarcely be called anything but a repudiation of a major poet's function, and it is in the most complete contrast to Arnold's unceasing search for totality, for "dominion over experience". The fine dignity of Hardy as man and artist, coupled with his longevity and continued production, combined to envelop him in a partly adventitious aura, to encourage praise which was rather piety than criticism. As that aura recedes, criticism will be more critical, and it will recognize, along with great virtues, some great defects. That is only to say that he was not, as obituaries said, the greatest writer of the nineteenth century, and one of the greatest writers in English history. His lyrical work, despite its great bulk, leaves a final impression of thinness, meagreness, low vitality, of innumerable little incidents not rendered really significant or salient. All but eight or ten lyrics, perhaps, are slight; they do not make an immortal stab, they do not remain as monuments in one's memory like Arnold's *Buried Life*, *Dover Beach*, *A Southern Night*, and many other poems. Even Hardy's metaphysic, if one must continue to use an unsatisfactory word, cannot give coherence and strength to his mass of incident and minute observation; while Arnold's best work, large in bulk, has an organic unity and wholeness, and these qualities are not due to his dealing in easy formulas, but to the sad lucidity of soul with which he seeks for truth, and to the sad but stubborn refusal to surrender to a disintegrated world. But our mood to-day is to acquiesce.