

CHAPTER - VII

An Estimate of Hardy's Evolutionary Meliorism

I

The evolutionary ideas of Hardy has never been given a serious attention in the author's life-time, or later. Although much has been said on Hardy's story-telling technique, interest in humble rustic life, treatment of Nature and, of course, sombre view of life, the idea of evolutionary meliorism underlying his writings has seldom interested the critics and reviewers. Presuming that the present dissertation can claim to have justified the need of giving some attention to Hardy's evolutionism as the idea unifying the various pieces of his compositions, an attempt will be made to weigh its worth and judge its relevance in present times. The object is to see if the Victorian author, called a pessimist, could really offer any remedy, agreeable to the rational thinking of the present century, for the miseries of life. But, before any such attempt is made, it is reasonable to enquire if Hardy himself held fast to the idea till the end of his literary career, or allowed it to drift away after nourishing it for a period.

We may refer in this connection to E. Blunden's account of Hardy's conversation with Professor Albert Cook around 1920. Blunden writes,

"Professor Albert Cock, who visited him ... was speaking of the optimism found in the closing chorus of the Dynasts and he was naturally praising that finale. But Hardy 'shook his head, as he replied, I shouldn't write that now'. 'Not write those lines of hope again, why not?' I eagerly questioned. Came the brief, the pregnant, the unanswerable reply : 'The Treaty of Versailles'."

Then Blunden comments, "But should we ever take a detached saying of Hardy's as comprehending all that he had in his mind? It was never his instinct to abandon all hope, and, whatever the broad aspect of history, past and future, might seem to him, he was not going to say that he or anybody else could calculate the chances of good or evil with certainty. ... While Hardy was impressed with the gathering phenomena of grim things to come, he remained sedulous in the minor affairs of life; and he balanced his dismay at certain immense historical generalities with a living respect for man as a modest, enduring, trusting wayfarer"¹. Blunden, therefore, refuses to believe that Hardy could give way to despair, abandoning all his faith in man, and it is hard not to agree with him².

But E.F. Hardy writes in the Life

"It may be said here that the War destroyed all Hardy's belief in the gradual ennoblement of man, a belief he had held for many years, as is shown by poems like The Sick Battle God and others. He said he would probably not have ended the Dynasts as he did end it, if he ~~would~~ ^{had} foreseen what was going to happen within a few years.

"Moreover, the war gave the coup de-grace to any conception he may have nourished of a fundamental ultimate wisdom at the back of things. With his view on necessitation, or at most a very limited free-will, events seemed to show him that a fancy he had often held and expressed that the never-ending push of the Universe was an unpurposive and irresponsible groping in the direction of the least resistance, might possibly be the real truth"².

F.E. Hardy seems quite convinced of the utter dismay that the war caused to the poet-novelist, but she does not tell us if this mood of despondency proved enduring and too hard for him to outgrow. She does, however, tell us that in the poem A Philosophical Fantasy, published in the Fortnightly Review in 1927 "a ray of hope is shown for the future of mankind"³. The year of the publication of the poem is important, for it is much later than the year of the said conversation with Albert Cook which makes the author of the Life believe that Hardy abandoned his hope of amelioration.

The opposite views of Blunden and F.E. Hardy on Hardy's abandoning his hope of amelioration are quoted in order to show the difficulty in reaching a conclusion as to whether Hardy nourished his hope of amelioration till the end of his career. It seems more reasonable to say that, though often weakened by circumstances, his hope had the power of reviving itself, and because of his boundless love of mankind

and his earnest desire to see it delivered from miseries, he would never completely abandon the ideas sustaining his hope. As to the war, he sincerely wished the warring nations to show one another that spirit of understanding and respect which is necessary to prevent war, and the Treaty of Versailles disappointed him, for ^{in it} he may have seen ~~in it~~, like many others of his time, the want of that spirit and also the possibility of another war. Still he would not abandon all hope; for, quite contrary to the general opinion that he had a liking for the gloomy side of life, his yearning for a ray of hope amidst the gloom is obvious enough, and it is rather the intensity of his longing for light that made the life of the suffering men and women appear to him darker and more piteous than what it really is.

II

Now, an appraisal of Hardy's melioristic claim in the context of his evolutionary view. To speak the truth, the Victorian critics and reviewers hardly acknowledged his claim. They hailed him as a fine story-teller with a first-hand knowledge of Wessex topography and the rustics, a gift for reproducing the pastoral atmosphere, some idea of the contemporary social changes and current issues like Marriage Bill, a sense of humour and an infinite sympathy for the distressed; but when it came to the appraisal of his concept of the Immanent Will or his melioristic claim, they simply put it aside with a grin. Miss Helen Garwood brought out her doctoral dissertation

Hardy's Novels as an Illustration of Schopenhauer's Will in Hardy's lifetime and sent him a copy of it. Later, Edmund Blunden published his critique on the Dynasts (1937). J. O. Bailey's Hardy and the Cosmic Mind was published in 1956. All these authors dealt with Hardy's idea of the First Cause or Immanent Will in their respective ways, but little was done to review Hardy's melioristic claim in the context of his idea of the evolution of the Will, and Hardy's claim as a meliorist has remained unsettled.

The indifference of the critics and reviewers is not hard to understand. The English are practical rather than visionary. Besides, materialism received a fresh lease of life in the Victorian Age. James and Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism was much to the Victorian liking. T.H. Huxley's Agnosticism which dismissed God as Unknowable and turned all attention to man and nature and used cosmodycy instead of theodicy to explain the miseries of life was agreeable to them because of its practical nature. Darwin's Evolution of Species by means of Natural Selection took no time in gaining the popular approval because of the tangible proofs it was founded upon. In literature, Swinburne's blasphemy was liked by the Victorians because of its zeal and spirit of revolt. Fitzgerald won their heart by his manly pessimism. Carlyle's censure and Thackeray's satire were confined to the social and political spheres, and they understood them. They accepted the pessimism of Francis Thomson's City of Dreadful Night as a matter of temperament and personal experience. Tennyson was

popular with the Victorians, because he sang of the triumph of science and its infallibility as a guide to national progress. Matthew Arnold gave them an uneasy feeling, but they listened to him with that reverence which a thinker's scholarship generally commands. Browning was warmly received for what is called his robust optimism, and Meredith for his simple faith in God as a benevolent power. With varying degrees of admiration and enthusiasm the Victorians heard the thinkers and writers of their age. They readily placed Hardy in the rank of the greatest novelists of their time, but they did not understand how to judge the worth of the poet-novelist's concept of the Will, except by describing it as something un-English and transplanted from the Greece of the 4th century B.C. (Euripides) or from the 19th Century Germany (Schopenhauer). They wondered how one of their contemporaries could use such enigmatic phrases as the "misery of existence", "evolution of the Will", "deliverance from the hobble of being alive" or "peace of non-existence". Never before had the English authors produced such unintelligible ideas, and the Victorians with their preference for the plain and practical suggestion did not find anything worthwhile in Hardy's idea of deliverance from the misery of existence through the extinction of life. His meliorism seemed no more intelligible than his concept of the Will. To be a meliorist you must write like Dickens, suggesting practical measures of reforms that can be materialised by Parliamentary Bill. But, if you profess deliverance by extinction of life and annihilation of the world, and yet claim to be a meliorist, you simply baffle us. Such was the victorian reaction to Hardy's claim as a meliorist.

Hardy's responsibility for the matter was not any less. The idea of the will and its evolution is naturally complex, and while the metaphysicians tried to make the idea as intelligible as possible Hardy went the opposite way, making the idea still more complex by personifying the will and ascribing the seemingly endless series of mischances and accidents in the lives of his men and women to it. Consequently, Hardy's Will appeared to the readers, ^{to be} merely a substitute for God — omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal and absolute like Him, but with all His noble attributes replaced by the evil ones. The Will appeared to be a malevolent Power that creates only in order to destroy, and holds forth the prospect of happiness only to lure man on to further miseries. This Power being omnipresent and eternal, the miseries of mankind were supposed to prove interminable, and irremediable. What more was needed to show that Hardy was a pessimist? What we gather from the contemporary views about Hardy's ideas and attitude makes us feel that this was the Victorian appraisal of Hardy's attitude towards the world and life.

What make Hardy's claim as a meliorist seem untenable are, perhaps, his view of the miseries of life and that of the extinction of the world at the culmination of the evolutionary process. In reality, however, neither interferes with his melioristic ideas and has nothing to make his claim unreasonable. Hardy's stress on the miseries of life does not contradict his melioristic ideas; for, as discussed earlier, a gloomy view can change into a melioristic

one by discovering the means of amelioration. In a sense, pessimism is nearer than optimism to the melioristic vision (see Ch. II). Hardy himself understood it and, therefore, little objected to the critics calling him a pessimist, though he had put forth his claim as a meliorist. He said to William Archer, "People call me a pessimist; and if it is pessimism to think, with Sophocles, that not to have been born is best, then I do not reject the designation. I never could understand why the word 'pessimism' should be such a rag to many worthy people"⁴. Hardy did not see how his being a pessimist could prevent his becoming a meliorist. There is, indeed, no cogent reason to believe that his picture of sorrows and sufferings, however harrowing, contradicts his claim as a meliorist.

What, then, remains to contradict his claim is the view of the extinction of the world at the end of the evolutionary process. It is, perhaps, his idea of the deliverance from the miseries of life by the extinction of life that counts most with Hardy's readers and critics in rejecting his claim. The contention that the only way of removing the defect of a thing is to remove the thing itself is not generally accepted as a convincing one. It seems rather absurd when the thing concerned is Life itself — the very existence of beings. There is no denying that in the ordinary context it is rather absurd, but in the context in which Hardy makes this proposition it does not seem so. What, if Life is viewed as a blunder of the First Cause? Von Hartmann holds that in such a context the extinction of Life is

the only remedy : "Life is a mistake and, therefore, must be eradicated he declared, and with it all desire, all emotion, and all thinking. In other words, the universe ends with nirvāna; it ends with complete nothingness, through which consciousness ceases and existence is abolished"⁵. Hardy's view of creation as mistake of the First Cause is expressed in his poetry and notes (see Ch V). What we learn from them ~~is~~ is that like Hartmann, Hardy viewed the creation of Life as an error of the First Cause, and believed that, the tendency to erradicate error being inherent in the very process of evolution, the initial error of creating Life will be remedied through the extinction of Life. It is difficult to see any inconsistency between Hardy's premise and inference. It may be argued that the very idea of creation as an error is indicative of Hardy's pessimism; but even in that case, the idea of the error being corrected justifies his melioristic claim.

In fact, Hardy's view of the extinction of Life is no better a ground than his view of the blindness of the Will to reject his claim as a meliorist. The future of the world is ⁱnconjecturable; it is difficult to predict what awaits this planet of ours — whether it will exist or perish after millions of years. Neither religion, nor metaphysics, nor science speaks of the everlastingness of the earth. Science which is supposed to construct its hypothesis on sufficient proof and reason suggests that not only the earth but also the whole of the vast solar system may someday come to dissolve.

It is, indeed, hard to find a system of thought that speaks of the eternalness of the earth. But that has not prevented men from entertaining melioristic ideas. There are the devout who believe in a noble purpose behind Creation and urges men to commend themselves to divine mercy; yet they recommend a set of moral practices to mitigate the ills of life. There are, on the other hand, the non-believers of our time, for instance, the Existentialists, who under the impact of World War II, have suffered disillusionment, discern no noble purpose behind Creation and are haunted by the "waste-land feeling". But their want of belief has not led them to resignation or a passive acceptance of life; they have a definite view of human responsibility for bettering the present state of things. It can, therefore, be said that the melioristic ideas are independent of the views about the beginning of the world and its destiny. A writer may avoid all conjectures and speculations about how the world came to exist and what will ultimately happen to it, and yet be a meliorist. If however, he professes these views and also claims to be a meliorist, we can reasonably expect him to be consistent throughout. Hardy professes these views and is quite consistent. According to him, Creation is an error and this error will be remedied through the extinction of Life at the final stage of evolution. Amelioration under these circumstances means only hastening the remedy of the error by working, under the guidance of reason and spirit of benevolence, to ^ucase individuals' disillusionment about life. The wish not to live will grow out of this disillusionment and gradually spread in an increasingly greater number of individuals, making the extinction of the

world of beings possible. Before the final deliverance from the misery of existence through the extinction of Life, amelioration of human condition will show itself in the lessening of man's struggle and strife, rivalry and competition. The gradual lessening of miseries will culminate in the attainment of peace. This is Hardy's evolutionary meliorism in its outline, and neither the idea of the blindness of the Will nor that of the extinction of Life can make it unsound.

III

Hardy was an imaginative writer, not a metaphysician. His writings are the records of his impressions of world and life. The ideas, views and attitudes of his own time and of the past may have influenced his thoughts, but the things that chiefly inform his impressions are his own prepossessions, inclinations and interests. This is true not only of Hardy but also of the other poets and novelists. In considering the vision that a writer reproduces, it is, therefore, senseless to judge if it is right or wrong, and the really important thing is to see if the writer has succeeded in presenting it consistently and convincingly. We have seen that Hardy's vision is consistent; let us now see if it is convincing, too.

Hardy saw men and women struggling and suffering and also growing disillusioned about life, and our own observation of the life of the world leads to the same inference. We see people becoming more and more disillusioned about life, viewing happiness as something

unreal and unattainable. To them love and marriage mean nothing, and war is a bloody business bringing nations untold miseries. Strife, competition, clash and conflict have increased and, consequently, bitterness and weariness have become part of man's existence. Our own experience corroborates Hardy's vision of widespread strife and growing disillusionment and makes it sufficiently convincing.

had not been

Hardy felt that amelioration ~~was not~~ achieved to the desired extent and the reason was the want of sympathy and compassion among the suffering individuals. Disillusionment was still confined to the individual's own life, ending in frustration and bitterness, and not followed by the desire to work for spreading consciousness in mankind. Hardy found that while reason had been working to make the individuals free from the illusion of the Will, the altruistic spirit had been failing in urging them to work to the end of amelioration by promoting consciousness among the fellow-sufferers. This explains why there is not much evidence in Hardy's writings of the progress of ameliorative work. Hardy's writings bear out our own observation of real life. There is nothing straining credibility in Hardy's fictions. His view of the growing disillusionment under the guidance of reason and of the want of sufficient initiative to unite the spirit of love and compassion to the functioning of reason and thereby change all bitterneess caused by disillusionment into the determination to mitigate the miseries of life does not contradict our own experience. Again, his wish to see people use their innate nobility and goodness to accelerate the amelioration of the existing condition is the wish of all who refuse to abandon all hope about the future of mankind. Hardy's ideas

are, therefore, no idiosyncrasy; they are sufficiently practical and convincing.

IV

Hardy's ameliorative ideas are unique, logical and positive. The Victorian literature shows two opposite moods — complacency and resignation. Side by side with the exaltation of the material prosperity of the nation, there is resentment at circumstances and growing ills of the society. The latter gave rise to a mood of bitterness and melancholy. One of the books hailed by the Victorians was the *Rubāiyāt* of Omar Khayyam, the 12th century Persian poet, rendered into English by Fitzgerald (1859). It gave the sombre thoughts of the Power that holds man responsible for the actions of a nature, not determined by himself. There is, therefore, no hope of divine mercy:

And that inverted bowl they call the sky,
Whereunder crawling coop'ed we live and die
Lift not your hands to It for help, for It
As impotently moves as you or I⁶.

This view of the Power does much to make human attempts seem futile and life meaningless. Intertwined with these thoughts and feelings is the hedonistic desire to snatch the utmost of pleasurable sensation from the passing moments, "the desire to enjoy while it is day the fleeting loveliness of the light". Whatever this hedonism may be worth, it has much in it to turn one's eyes from one's fellowmen and the ills of life demanding remedy.

The sense of resignation engendered by the Rubaiyat is reinforced by another powerful work, The City of Dreadful Night by James Thomson, appearing in the National Reformer, March-May, 1874. The trend towards pessimism evident in Thomson's earlier work, The Doom of a City (1857) seizes hold of the poet's heart in The City of Dreadful Night. Here, a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance in which everything is to be endured, nothing to be done. The poem ending with the description of the great statue of Melancholia brooding over the City as the emblem of despair, remains one of the most brilliant piece of pessimistic literature.

While these minor poets were expressing unreservedly their pessimistic attitude towards life, the more important ones were trying to find some anodyne for their melancholy and despair. Owing to his scepticism Arthur Clough lost that joy and hope which come from the belief in Providence. He accepted the Carlylean counsel "to do the duty that lies nearest thee", though he could suggest no criterion by which duty was to be recognised. Carlylean Gospel of Work did not satisfy Mathew^t Arnold and, in his doubt and disbelief, he tried to preserve a stoic resignation and a serene acquiescence, looking not for joy but peace. But he could not always maintain that serene frame of mind, and in his poems "there is a despair as desolating as James Thomson's". Thus a spirit of pessimism was instilled into Victorian poetry by the major and minor poets of the day, and a different note is struck^k in Hardy's poetry.

Hardy was undoubtedly affected by the pessimistic spirit of his age, and that to a very great extent, but he overcame^a it. It is, indeed, heartening to hear, in the midst of Victorian sighs and moaning, a voice singing out,

And Right shall disestablish Wrong
The Great Adjustment is taking place⁷.

Hardy's singularity among the Victorian writers does not however consist in his being the only writer urging people to cherish hope about the future; Meredith, too, did it, and perhaps in a more charming way. But, while Meredith merely wanted people not to moan over the dark side of life, but fight it with "blood and brain and spirit", Hardy tried to present an idea of the cause of the ills and also of the way to combat them. Meredith's appeal is winning, perhaps more so than Hardy's, and the reason is the author's hearty cheerfulness. Hardy's appeal is as much to the head as to the heart, and, as a result, it has provoked a lot of criticism and censure. Comments, both favourable and adverse, have been made about Hardy's ideas, and the easy appeal of Meredith's writings is wanting in Hardy's. But Hardy is perhaps the only Victorian writer to present through poetry and novels a consistent view about the possibility of amelioration. This gives him a unique position among the Victorian writers.

Secondly, Hardy's ideas are rational. They may seem fantastical if his Immanent Will is viewed as something super-natural and ~~the~~ dawning of consciousness on the Unconscious as an occultation;

but, viewed as Hardy would have us view them, it is difficult to see anything illogical about them. Life's miseries are, indeed, owing to the working of the Immanent Will, or the Will to live or to live more fully. And the way to amelioration through the dawning of consciousness on the Immanent Will, is just bettering the present state of things through the spread of reason and intelligence and love and compassion in mankind. Who would refuse to believe in the power of intelligence and love? There is actually little irrationality about Hardy's ideas of the cause of the ills and their remedy, and if we find Hardy's ideas mere poetic fancy, the reason is, perhaps, that we are unwilling to interpret Hardy's ideas from the author's viewpoint.

Thirdly, Hardy's ideas are positive. He does not speak of the everlastingness of the world, nor of the coming of happiness in the final stage of the world's evolution; on the contrary, he describes happiness as an illusion, and the last stage of the world's evolution as passing into nothingness. But even with this vision in his mind he finds much in human life worth-doing. Miserable as this life is, it is not meaningless. Man's struggle is not futile, nor is his suffering pointless. Through struggle and suffering man co-operates with the First Cause, World-ground or Immanent Will, in its evolution. Consciousness coming through the sufferings of one generation reinforces the struggle with passion in the succeeding generation and thus helps the furtherance of the world's deliverance from the working of the Will. Man's moral responsibility consists in working

to spread consciousness and enabling more and more individuals to see through the illusion of the Will. Thus Hardy gives a definite goal and purpose to human endeavour and makes life's struggles and sufferings meaningful. Religion gives a justification to human sufferings by the prospect of happiness in the life beyond^d death. Hardy suggests no such prospect, for what awaits mankind is, according to him, not happiness but peace. But, since this peace is not for the individuals themselves, but for all — the whole of mankind, the attainment of peace through human effort proves a worthy goal of life, and to work for it makes the otherwise passive suffering an active endeavour for the world's deliverance.

What is specially noticeable about Hardy's idea of deliverance is that he has made it chiefly dependent on man. The deliverance is to come not as a supernatural occurrence through divine intervention, but as the natural result of man's persistent, courageous struggle, by the exercise of all his gifts — intellectual, moral and emotional. In a note, dated April 13, 1909, Hardy wrote, "On Man : Save his own soul he hath no star"⁸. The view of amelioration by human means which informs the whole of Hardy's writings is epitomized in this note. The editor's comment on the note that Isaiah had said before him : 'Mine own arm brought salvation unto me' shows that Hardy grasped the truth that revealed itself to the Jewish prophet. Religious belief changes, but the truth is eternal and awaits the discovery by the discerning

mind. Hardy discovered the truth and his writings are a testimony to it. In his melioristic vision he rejected all belief in the supernatural and regarded human powers and resources as the only important thing.

All these aspects of Hardy's ideas — their unique, logical positive character and their human relevance, should be considered in judging the worth of Hardy's evolutionary meliorism. Interpreted in the right way, Hardy's views are sure to interest us. Shorn of all belief in the benevolent Being, we are eagerly looking for some human means of amelioration, and in Hardy we are sure to discover a soul, very much like ourselves, refusing to yield to despair and struggling to discover some human means of alleviating the miseries of life.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. Thomas Hardy. E. Blunden ch VII.
2. Life. F.E. Hardy p. 368.
3. Ibid., p. 436.
4. Thomas Hardy. E. Blunden ch V
5. A History of Modern Philosophy. F. Myer ch 27
6. Ruba'iyat. Fitz Gerald's Translation. Verse LII
7. There Seemed A Strangeness. Human Shows, Far Phantasies etc
8. Life. F.E. Hardy p 345