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GOD'S UNDERTAKER

How Thomas Hardy became everyone's favorite misanthrope.

By Adam Kirsch

Hardy found that he could express his atheistic views more frankly in poetry than he could in the more popular forum of his novels.

One Sunday morning in the middle of the nineteenth century, at a church in the Dorset village of Stinsford, a boy named Thomas Hardy had an experience that, more than sixty years later, he remembered as causing him "much mental distress." As the boy watched the priest deliver the sermon, Hardy recalled in his autobiography, "some mischievous movement of his mind set him imagining that the vicar was preaching mockingly, and he began trying to trace a humorous twitch in the corners of Mr. S—'s mouth, as if he could hardly keep a serious countenance. Once having imagined this the impish boy found to his consternation that he could not dismiss the idea."

If the Reverend Arthur Shirley, whose name Hardy courteously omitted, had noticed his young parishioner's amusement, he would not have recognized it for what it was: the first scratching of the seismograph that, within the boy's lifetime, would register the death of God. Hardy's "merriment," as he quietly but unmistakably shows, was the product of his dawning sense that nobody, not even the priest, could possibly take the church service seriously. There seems to be a straight line, if not a short one, from Hardy's "consternation" to the madness of the stranger who, in Nietzsche's famous parable, barges into churches to sing a requiem: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?"

In another country, or with another temperament, the boy who laughed in church might have developed into a prophet who, like his German contemporary, went sneeringly without honor. But Thomas Hardy managed to spend a lifetime attacking and deriding the established values of Victorian England, only to end up as the establishment's favorite writer. In 1895, when he published his great novel "Jude the Obscure," with its punishing assault on conventional views of marriage, sex, and class, the newspapers reacted almost as furiously as they had to the trial of Oscar Wilde a few months earlier. "HARDY THE DEGENERATE," ran the headline in the *World;* the *Pall Mall Gazette* went with the inevitable "JUDE THE OBSCENE." Yet when he died, thirty-three years later—after embarking on a second career as a poet, and creating a body of work at least as important as his fiction—all was more than forgiven. Contrary to his own wishes, he was given a state funeral at Westminster Abbey, where his ten pallbearers included the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the heads of Cambridge and Oxford colleges, as well as Rudyard Kipling and A. E. Housman. But even then Hardy managed to elude the clutches of the great and the good: his body had already been cremated, and the coffin carried with such pomp contained nothing but a handful of ashes.

Not everyone was blind to the doubtful taste of giving such an outspoken atheist a Christian burial. Claire Tomalin, in the epilogue to her new biography, "Thomas Hardy" (Penguin; $35), quotes a letter that the beleaguered Dean of Westminster wrote to Hardy's local vicar, R. G. Bartelot, after receiving "furious protests" against the burial, "on the ground that his teaching was antichristian." Could Bartelot reassure the Dean of Hardy's "essential Christianity"? He could. "At heart," the vicar replied, he was "a Christian and a Churchman." It makes you wonder whether either of these clergymen had ever opened one of Hardy's books—for instance, his 1909 collection of poems, "Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses," with its ode "To Sincerity":

> Life may be sad past saying,
> Its greens for ever graying,
> Its faiths to dust decaying;
> And youth may have foreknown it,
> And riper seasons shown it,
> But custom cries: "Disown it:
> "Say ye rejoice, though grieving,
> Believe, while unbelieving,
> Behold, without perceiving!"

Hardy knew his countrymen's capacity for respectable self-delusion, for the kind of mendacity that considers God's foe "essentially Christian." Indeed, he was not so much interested in persuading honest believers to abandon their beliefs as in shaming an already agnostic century into admitting the depths of its uncertainty. His novels, and especially his poems, describe a world from which God has already absconded, and for good. Because this is still the world we inhabit today, he remains one of the most vital and relevant of English writers—more modern, in some ways, than the modernists who succeeded and disdained him.

No one who knew Hardy as a child in the tiny village of Higher Bockhampton suspected that he would grow up to be a writer, much less a great writer. For one thing, he did not belong to the class that almost always produced great writers in England—the professional or clerical middle class, which could afford to send its sons to university. According to tradition, the family name had been the more aristocratic "le Hardy" centuries before, and Hardys had once been notable landowners in Dorset. But, like the ancient d'Urbervilles, in "Tess," who have degenerated into poor Durbeyfields, the Hardys had come down in the world. Hardy always took care to point out that his father and grandfather were not laborers but master masons, skilled craftsmen with employees of their own. Still, his father did business in a very small way, and his mother, Jemima, had been a domestic servant before she got pregnant and married in a hurry—the wedding took place just over five months before Thomas was born, on June 2, 1840. The Hardys were the kind of people that Jane Austen would never have allowed into her parlor.

Given this background, Hardy's career could easily be read as a great Victorian success story, a parable of self-help in a functioning meritocracy. It is a story that Tomalin tells briskly and accessibly, though, as she acknowledges, it has been told many times before—most comprehensively by Michael Millgate, whose standard biography was reissued in an expanded edition in 2004. (It will be told again next month, when Yale publishes "Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life," by Ralph Pite—a more literary alternative to Tomalin, who uses Hardy's work mainly to illustrate his life.) The story was first told by Hardy himself, in two autobiographical volumes that were edited by his second wife, Florence, and published under her name. For most of the events of his early life, it is Hardy's version that all biographers have to follow.

Tomalin, like Hardy, sees his mother as the most important influence on the withdrawn and bookish boy. Thanks to Jemima, who dominated her charming, unambitious, music-loving husband, Thomas was sent to the best school in the neighborhood, in the nearby county town of Dorchester. By the age of sixteen, he had received a grounding in Latin and mathematics—if not quite enough to qualify for admission to Oxford or Cambridge, which the family could not have afforded in any case. Instead, Jemima arranged to have her son apprenticed to a local architect. If she had her way, he would be not a mere builder, like his father, but a professional man.

Though Hardy succeeded beyond his mother's imaginings, it didn't happen quickly. In all areas except the intellectual, he conceded, he was a late bloomer: "a child till he was sixteen, a youth till he was five-and-twenty, and a young man till he was nearly fifty." It was not until the age of thirty-two that he decisively gave up architecture for a literary career. From 1856 to 1872, he made his living as an assistant architect, first in Dorchester and then in London. The future atheist developed something of a specialty in church restoration, during a period when ancient churches across England were being repaired, and often ruined, at a furious pace.

It was on one such job, in the Cornish village of St. Juliot in 1870, that he met the woman who became his first wife, Emma Gifford. Emma was the sister-in-law of the local rector, whose decaying church Hardy had been sent to examine, and she seems to have struck Hardy as embodying the wildness and beauty of the remote coast. That is the impression he gives in an unusually joyful poem he wrote the same year, which refers to Cornwall by an antique, Arthurian name: "When I came back from Lyonnesse / With magic in my eyes, / All marked with mute surmise / My radiance rare and fathomless."

The lines are poignant in retrospect, since the romance Hardy embarked on so happily was to end in one of the unhappiest marriages in literary history. Much of Tomalin's book is devoted to sorting out the rights and wrongs of the Hardy marriage, and no one has done it more judiciously or convincingly. The problem, simply put, was that Hardy outgrew his wife, whose charming lightness of spirit eventually came to seem more like ditziness, or worse. Visitors who wrote down their impressions of Max Gate, the rather ugly house Hardy built for himself outside Dorchester, tended to agree that Emma came across as ridiculous. There was "something intolerable," wrote one guest quoted by Millgate, about Hardy being forced "to live day & night with the absurd, inconsequent, huffy, rambling old lady." No wonder Hardy started to spend more and more time with his aristocratic female admirers, or that Emma, in response, turned against her husband and all his works. By the time she died, in 1912, Emma was insulting Hardy in front of friends, pressing Bibles on him in order to save his lost soul, and even remarking that he looked "extremely like Crippen," the notorious wife-murderer.

In the intoxicated summer of 1870, however, the match seemed an ideal one to both Thomas and Emma. She was decidedly a step up for him socially, while he might have been her last chance to escape spinsterhood. But Hardy was poor, and Emma's relatives snobbish, and the marriage didn't happen for another four years. Not by coincidence, it was during those years of suspense that Hardy made himself into a professional writer. He had been writing poems all through the eighteen-sixties, but he did not manage to get any of them published and soon gave up trying. The major poems of his twenties—"Hap," "Neutral Tones," "She, to Him"—were not published until 1898, in his first poetry collection, "Wessex Poems and Other Verses."

Instead, he turned his efforts to fiction, and by early 1868 he had completed a draft of his first novel, "The Poor Man and the Lady." The manuscript does not survive, leaving biographers to speculate about what seems to have been a heavy-handed satire on fashionable London. Decades later, Hardy called it a "striking socialistic novel." It was too strikingly socialistic, at any rate, for any publisher's taste. George Meredith, acting as an adviser for Chapman and Hall, told Hardy not to "nail his colours to the mast" quite so irrevocably in his maiden effort. He took the advice to heart, waiting until his very last novel, "Jude," to scarify English hypocrisy.

The rejections were, however, couched in encouraging terms and Hardy started on a new novel that would be, if anything, too flagrantly commercial: the sensationalistic "Desperate Remedies." It is a measure of Hardy's determination to get into print that he agreed to pay his publishers, the downmarket Tinsley Brothers, a seventy-five-pound guarantee against costs. The book sold moderately, Hardy got back most of his money, and Tinsley offered to pay thirty pounds for his next novel, "Under the Greenwood Tree." This affectionate comedy of village life was Hardy's first real success. It was popular enough for Tinsley to ask Hardy to produce a magazine serial, which was how a Victorian novelist could earn real money. At last, Hardy had the confidence to quit architecture. For the rest of his life, he lived by his pen.

By his mid-thirties, then, Hardy was a celebrated writer, earning a good living, published in the best magazines, and married to the woman he loved. Considering where he had started in life, he must have realized that he was outstandingly successful. Yet, as Hardy grew older, it was failure that increasingly occupied his thoughts and inspired his best writing. Tomalin tries to account for this by suggesting that "the wounds inflicted by life never quite healed over in Hardy." But such bland psychologizing misses the essential point: Hardy's pessimism was not a helpless reaction to traumas but the cast of his sensibility, that indispensable and unaccountable lens through which every artist makes sense of the world. In the early eighteen-eighties, Hardy produced a series of minor novels for which he was well paid but which are seldom read today: "Two on a Tower," "The Trumpet-Major," "A Laodicean." It was not until "The Mayor of Casterbridge," published in 1886, that he embarked on the string of major novels—including "The Woodlanders," "Tess of the d'Urbervilles," and, finally, "Jude the Obscure"—on which his fame mainly rests. And these books take place in a world of shocking and harrowing bleakness.

The name of this world, of course, is Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon term for southwest England that Hardy was largely responsible for popularizing. One of the pleasures of Hardy's novels, which makes them so lovely in spite of their harshness, is his reconstruction of the folkways and landscapes of Dorset and surroundings, whose place-names he translated into Wessex equivalents: Dorchester becomes Casterbridge, and so on. Soon, tourists came looking for these places—a book called "The Wessex of Thomas Hardy" appeared as early as 1902. Hardy prided himself on his accuracy as a historian of his native place. "At the dates represented in the various narrations," he insisted, "things were like that in Wessex: the inhabitants lived in certain ways, engaged in certain occupations, kept alive certain customs, just as they are shown doing in these pages." By the end of Hardy's long life, many of these ways—the folk magic, the bawdy parades, the ballads, the harvest-home dinners—had disappeared. When "Far from the Madding Crowd" was published, the reviewer for the *Spectator* recognized that Hardy was writing about a world from which his readers were already exiled: "A book like this is, in relation to many of the scenes it describes, the nearest equivalent to actual experience which a great many of us are ever likely to boast of."

That is still a large part of Hardy's appeal as a novelist. The sheep farm in "Far from the Madding Crowd," the apple orchard in "The Woodlanders," the dairy in "Tess" are miniature Edens, where agricultural labor feels like a kind of pagan meditation. Yet Eden was not more rudely violated by the serpent than Wessex is, repeatedly, by its creator. Michael Henchard, in "The Mayor of Casterbridge," gets drunk and sells his wife to a stranger, setting off a chain of punishments that continues for a quarter century. Old Mrs. Yeobright, in "The Return of the Native," treks miles through the August heat to try to reconcile with her son, is turned away by his adulterous wife, and then dies of heatstroke on the way home—for good measure, she also gets bitten by a snake. Tess murders her seducer with a carving knife in their rented room. Most notoriously of all, Jude's uncanny son, known only as Father Time, hangs himself and his little brother and sister, leaving behind a note: "Done because we are too menny."

It is a tribute to Hardy's powers that catastrophes on such a scale do not plunge his novels into melodrama or absurdity. Rather, we accept them, as we do in the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare, as the symbolic casualties inflicted on humanity by a cosmos that is fundamentally cruel. This resort to the cosmic is part of what makes Hardy's books feel more like dramas than novels. Indeed, if Hardy found it possible to stop writing fiction in the middle of his life and at the height of his powers—a renunciation unimaginable from, say, Henry James—it is partly because he was never truly committed to the novel as a form, the way James or Flaubert were. As he acknowledged in his autobiography, "It was not as if he had been a writer of novels proper, and as more specifically understood, that is, stories of modern artificial life and manners showing a certain smartness of treatment. He had mostly aimed, and mostly succeeded, to keep his narratives close to natural life, and as near to poetry in their subject as the conditions would allow, and had often regretted that those conditions would not let him keep them nearer still."

Here, as throughout his autobiography, Hardy is writing to convince the reader that his identity as a poet predated his occupation as a novelist. But he is also expressing an important truth about his work and his sensibility. The virtues of his novels are not the ones we commonly look for in fiction. What one remembers is not dialogue or the evolution of character but brilliantly orchestrated scenes, detached and nearly emblematic in their simplicity. Henry Knight clinging to a cliff face in "A Pair of Blue Eyes," and being rescued by Elfride Swancourt, who rips up her petticoats to make a rope; Angel Clare carrying Tess through the river; even Arabella Donn shocking Jude out of his reveries by throwing a pig's penis at him: these are the coups de théâtre in which the whole life of Hardy's novels is condensed. Not coincidentally, they are also moments of intensely sublimated sexuality. Victorian readers may have insisted, as Tomalin says, on "romance without sex," but Hardy, one of the most genuinely erotic of novelists, didn't need to portray sex to make the reader swoon. He could do it with a sword blade, as when Sergeant Troy woos Bathsheba Everdene by demonstrating his prowess:

> In an instant the atmosphere was transformed to Bathsheba's eyes. Beams of light caught from the low sun's rays, above, around, in front of her, well-nigh shut out earth and heaven—all emitted in the marvellous evolutions of Troy's reflecting blade, which seemed everywhere at once, and yet nowhere specially. These circling gleams were accompanied by a keen rush that was almost a whistling—also springing from all sides of her at once. In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand.

Even as a novelist, then, Hardy was a poet, using image and metaphor to unify stories that he knew were deformed by pressure to get a sensational twist into each installment of the serial. So it makes sense that, after writing "Tess" and "Jude," he would turn, or return, to verse. Those novels contained as much of his view of life as he could put into prose; to go any further into his dark places, he recognized, would mean leaving the novel-reading public behind.

Indeed, Hardy could not have written a novel as reckless of taboos, as defiantly uningratiating, as "Jude the Obscure" if he had not already begun to bid farewell, inwardly, to his novelist's career. For more than twenty years, he had dutifully neutered his novels at the behest of editors like the Reverend Dr. Donald Macleod, who published "The Trumpet-Major" in *Good Words*, but only after warning Hardy to avoid "anything—direct or indirect—which a healthy *Parson* like myself would not care to read to his bairns at the fireside." Even a sophisticated man of letters like Leslie Stephen, the editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*, criticized Hardy for allowing his heroines to get involved with scoundrels. When Hardy pointed out that in fact women often do marry the wrong man, Stephen replied, "Not in magazines."

In "Jude," Hardy attacked this kind of repression and evasion with the fictional equivalent of a sledgehammer. Indeed, as Tomalin writes, "Reading *Jude* is like being hit in the face over and over again," as we witness the slow death of each of Jude Fawley's hopes and ideals. He studies hard for years, hoping to overcome poverty and work his way into Christminster, the novel's version of Oxford, but he is casually rejected. He loses his rigid self-control only once, when he gives in to the village seductress Arabella, but this minor slip dooms him to marry a woman he has already begun to loathe. When Arabella leaves for Australia, Jude is free to pursue Sue Bridehead, his cousin and soul mate. But they harbor neuroses about sex and marriage too powerful to overcome, and their experiment in free love ends in horror. At every turn, the institutions of Victorian society—marriage, family, church, university—thwart human happiness, as if they had been designed by a misanthropic god.

It is no wonder that the Church of England's newspaper called the book "a shameful nightmare, which one only wishes to forget as quickly and as completely as possible"; or that the public, inflamed by the scandal, made it a best-seller. For the cautious and private Hardy, notoriety of the kind that would have delighted Zola or Shaw was agonizing. He could see the funny side when an outraged Australian reader burned a copy of "Jude" and mailed him the ashes. But he was genuinely pained, Tomalin writes, to notice that "some of his acquaintances turned away rather than speak to him." In 1896, a year after "Jude" was published, he noted, "Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone."

For the rest of his life, then, Hardy set to writing poetry with the grateful fervor of an escaped prisoner; his "Collected Poems" fill more than eight hundred pages. His sheer productivity, and the eccentricities of his verse style, at first made his poetry easier to mock than appreciate. One reviewer of "Wessex Poems" wondered "why he did not . . . burn the verse" instead of publishing it, and modernist critics generally treated it with condescension. But today Hardy's poetry is beloved for precisely the qualities that once made it unfashionable: its profusion and formal variety, its homely, surprising diction, its interest in narrative, and, above all, its unchallengeable sincerity. Unlike the poetry of Yeats or Eliot, Hardy's poems emerge naturally from the occasions of his life. He can be provoked to verse an old Wessex legend or the latest bulletins from the Boer War, a fleeting memory of an old romance or the sinking of the Titanic.

No matter what the subject, Hardy devoted his poetry to laying out his magnificently sombre, completely disillusioned view of the world. The central fact of that world was the disappearance of God, and with it any reason for believing in providence or justice. Hardy's most famous poem on this theme is "God's Funeral," which describes a procession carrying the corpse of the "man-projected Figure . . . whom we can no longer keep alive." Yet this poem is perhaps too monumental, too self-consciously a "statement," to capture the complex flavor of Hardy's godlessness. For it is not only the absence of God that Hardy reckons with; it is the way that absence changes how we think about ethics, mortality, and value, the way it challenges all our traditions and aspirations.

It is only against this anti-theological background that Hardy's famous poems of mourning for his wife take on their full significance. Tomalin begins her biography with a prologue about these "Poems of 1912-13," making the striking but misleading argument that Emma's death was "when Thomas Hardy became a great poet." Not only is this not true on the merits—he had already written masterpieces like "I Look Into My Glass," "A Wasted Illness," and the "In Tenebris" sequence—but it is also a simplistic account of the way life is transmuted into art. For what makes the "Poems of 1912-13" so haunting is that Hardy's imagery of ghosts and revenants is itself haunted by his conviction, demonstrated in so many earlier poems, that there is no such thing as an immortal soul. He knows that seeing Emma again is impossible, which is why his poems about seeing her again are so charged with hopeless longing, as in "The Voice":

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view
you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the
town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I
knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

He asks even though he knows the answer—has given it himself, in “Your Last Drive,” when he has Emma remind him, “I shall not know / How many times you visit me there, / Or what your thoughts are. . . . And I shall not care.” Yet, in the awful paradox of grief, it is Emma who tells him that she cannot tell him anything. She has been resurrected, in his poems, just long enough to confirm that she will not be resurrected.

It is this readiness to confront bitter facts, and to make their bitterness sweet through his art, that makes Hardy not just a great writer but a wise and trustworthy one. Poetry has had plenty of mystics and experimenters since Hardy’s death; even before he died, he saw that the modernists were turning toward the forbidden magics of vitalism, occultism, and nihilism. “At present,” he wrote in 1922, “when belief in witches of Endor is displacing the Darwinian theory and ‘the truth that shall make you free,’ men’s minds appear . . . to be moving backwards rather than on.” But almost a century later, when Yeats’s visions and Eliot’s piety and Pound’s politics seem to belong to a troubled past, it is Hardy’s sad Victorian rationalism that still has the power to convince, and to console. ♦

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