IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH:
THE MODERNIST POEMS OF THOMAS HARDY

Mehmet Akif BALKAYA

Abstract
This paper aims to analyse Thomas Hardy's four poems: “Hap” (1898), “The Impercipient” (1898), “the Darkling Thrush” (1900), and “After a Journey” (1913) by putting forward that Hardy is a modern poet who is in search of finding the truth that he is alien to although those around him already know the truth that he cannot grasp. Such a questioning of the existence of the truth makes him a pessimist that is revealed almost in all his poems. The struggle of the poet to understand what the others know (the believers, the birds) is revealed through the four selected poems. The confusion, uncertainty and the complexity of the modern world make Hardy confused, doubter, unbeliever and pessimist. Therefore, his confusion, doubts and pessimism for the uncertain and changing world represented in his poems, in a way, makes him modern as studied in this paper. In “the Impercipient”, and “Hap”, Hardy cannot understand and find the existence of a god but wonders how the others believe in him. In his poems, Hardy idealizes or praises neither nature nor god as the Romantics did. Hardy's pessimism as a writer of naturalist movement makes him different from the Romantics and the Victorian poets.

Key Words: Victorian poetry, Modernism, Thomas Hardy, Pessimism, Modern Poetry, Romantic Poetry, Confusion.

1. Introduction
Thomas Hardy, born in Dorset in 1840 and died in 1928, is known to be both a Victorian novelist and a modern poet because of the mode and the themes he used in his novels and poems. After his last novel Jude the Obscure (1895), Hardy mainly wrote poems. Thomas Hardy "... had published fourteen novels and over forty short stories when Wessex Poems appeared in 1898. From that point till his death nearly thirty years later, Hardy abandoned the writing of fiction ... but published another seven individual books of poetry" (Webb, 2007: 20).

The effects of Darwinism, industrialism and urbanization seem to have great effects on Hardy’s novels and poems since such changes in England had influences on the society, literature and culture. Because of such developments, Hardy “knew that a way of life was vanishing in his time ... [and] he was on the side of the steam-engines” (Klingopulos, 1976: 407). In time, Hardy rejected believing in Christianity and he supposed that time and chance are the great factors that contribute to man’s life. Ernest Brennecke argues that Hardy formed “a consistent world-view through the notions of Chance and Time, Circumstances, Fate, Nature, Providence, Nemesis and Will tinged with metaphysical idealism” (Brennecke, 1924: 49).

Because of the harsh criticism of his novels, Hardy turned to poetry after Jude the Obscure. As Irving Howe has put it, “the best of his poems embody a vision both hard and...
fraternal; which derives from brooding upon the most terrible facts of existence while refusing the sentimentalism of despair" (1967: 167). Although despair surrounded him, Hardy did not give up writing. Regarding his assertive personality, J. Middleton Murry remarks, “The contagion of the world’s slow stain had not touched him” (Murry, 1949: 215). On existence, Hardy was a pessimist and he did not desire to know more as recorded by Florence Emily Hardy, his second wife:

Reflecting on his experiences of the world so far as he had got, he came to the conclusion that he did not wish to grow up. Other boys were always talking of when they would be men; he did not want at all to be a man, or to possess things, but to remain as he was, in the same spot, and to know no more people than he already knew (about half a dozen). (1962, 16)

Hardy’s experiences in life brought him into a kind of pessimism as he did not ask for knowing more about anything. However, another change was in science in the late nineteenth century. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution influenced writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Regarding the influence of Charles Darwin, Andrzej Diniejko states: “Hardy had been brought up as a Christian, but by the age of 27 he had lost his faith, mainly under the influence of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, and he never regained it” (Diniejko, 2014). Such an influence contributed to the growth of the movement of “naturalism” which applies detailed realism to suggest that heredity, environment and social conditions are forces in shaping the human character. The naturalist elements are realized in Hardy’s such novels as *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Hardy is one of the authors in the canon of the 19th and 20th centuries English Literature.

As this paper asserts that Hardy is a modernist poet, it is appropriate to briefly explain modernism in literature. The term modern derives its name from the Latin ‘modo’, meaning ‘today’. The early 20th century was associated with new technology in industry, capitalism, individualism and humanism. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot are the forerunners of this movement in poetry. However, Thomas Hardy’s poems are analysed under the title of “Modern” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, edited by Neil Corcoran. Also, in his article “The Hardy Tradition in Modern English Poetry”, Samuel Hynes states that Hardy’s poetry is “explicitly English, descriptive, lyrical, and formally regular and whole” and that he is the “principal progenitor of the tradition in this century” (1980, 175). Similarly, Donald Davie praises Thomas Hardy by stating that “in British poetry of the last fifty years (as not in American) the most far-reaching influence, for good and ill, has been not Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound, not Lawrence, but Hardy” (1972, 3). Hardy’s difference, both in his poems and his novels, is observed by his original way of narrating the psychology of his characters. Regarding Hardy’s difference, T. S. Eliot states: “[t]he work of the late Thomas Hardy represents an interesting example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhampered by any ideas, or even by what sometimes acts as a partial restraint upon inferior writers, the desire to please a large public” (1934, 54). Hardy did not think on pleasing the public; that is one of the reasons why he left writing novels when he was belittled by scholars because of heresy and his portrayal of the outcast characters in *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

The modern poet T. S. Eliot explains a feature of modernist poetry by stating that “poets in our civilization … must be difficult [since] our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity” (Eliot, 1934: 2330). Also, this variety and complexity, according to Eliot, “playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results” (2330).
Therefore, the poet becomes comprehensive and indirect “in order to force ... language into his meaning” (Eliot, 1934: 2330). Regarding Eliot’s definition, Thomas Hardy can be said to represent the complexity of his time in his poems “Hap”, “the Darkling Thrush”, “The Impercipient” and “After a Journey”. Through the poet’s sensibility, complex results are revealed as a consequence of the time he lives in.

One by one Thomas Hardy’s four poems are analysed within this paper: “Hap” (1898), “The Impercipient” (1898), “the Darkling Thrush” (1900), and “After a Journey” (1913) to assert that Hardy is in search of finding the truth that he is alien to although those around him already know the truth that he cannot grasp. The radical and questioning way of Thomas Hardy about his ideas on god, nature and universe in his poetry, and the way he describes nature and the rapidly changing world together with the changing culture because of industrialism, Darwinism and capitalism in his poems differ from those of the previous poets. In “the Impercipient”, and “Hap”, Hardy cannot grasp the existence of a god but wonders how the others believe in him. In his poems, Hardy idealizes or praises neither nature nor god. This paper puts forth that Thomas Hardy is alienated as a result of the confusion created by not comprehending what the others “darkling thrush”, “comrades” do know and are aware of.

2. The Darkling Thrush (1900)

The Darkling Thrush (1900) opens with the description of a chaotic and gloomy atmosphere:

I leant upon a coppice gate
When frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter’s dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.

Neither the winter, nor the nature is idealized, and the poem has a dark tone. Even the sun is assimilated to a “weakening eye” which has almost no power to warm up the nature. It is realized that the beliefs of the Romantics are taken away since nature would be idealized in their poems. The imagery in this poem is totally different from that of the Romantics. The nature, represented in the poem, has darkness in it since it is like a ghost as the line “when frost was spectre-gray” suggests. In that sense, the idea of death is clear through the representation of the dark sunset, and midwinter. Also, the second stanza refreshes and strengthens this idea of death:

The land’s sharp features seemed to be
The Century’s corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death lament (9-12).

This description is unlike that of the romantics; the images are used in a negative way. The wind is not praised; but is assimilated to a laments that laments on the last century. Therefore, the end of the century is characterized with death. Thus, such descriptions of nature; and the dark tone make the poet different from the previous poets. Hardy’s concept of reality and nature is not a usual one when compared to the works of his contemporaries.

As in the Darkling Thrush, the concept of reality varies from person to person because reality is subjective. Before Hardy, the Romantics represented the birds, and things in
nature as idealized and beautiful but in his poem “the Darkling Thrush”, the concept of nature changes as the bird is an old, and dirty one. The speaker describes the bird as such:

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

Neither the bird, nor the wind is magnified; however, the bird sings joyfully as it is unaware of its mortality; therefore, that may be the reason why the persona cannot grasp why the bird is joyful. The speaker tries to find out the truth lying behind the happiness of the little, dirty bird as he cannot understand why the thrush sings:

O little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around (25-28).

For the speaker, there is no reason for singing. In a way, the speaker can understand the laments of the wind but cannot understand the singing of the bird because there seems to be nothing, for the poet, that could cause one to be happy. However, at the end of the poem, that the speaker says: “Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware (31-32)” reveals that the truth behind the hope of the bird, as a metaphor, implies that the meaning and truth behind the world may or may not have a meaning. Also, the hope known by the bird is unknown by the speaker. The consciousness of the speaker seems not to be capable of knowing the meaning of and/or the hope in the universe and existence.

3. Hap

The confusion and the complexity of the modern world is represented throughout the poem “Hap”, which means chance as Hardy supposes that sufferings and the tragedies of the people are not to be what a creator would let. The poem tells the speaker’s inability to find a powerful God, who shapes human destiny. The speaker decides that it is chance, not God, that controls our lives. The universe and the human destiny is ruled by chance since the sorrows and pains of humankind cannot, according to the poet, be what a god would aim to if s/he created a world.

The poem “Hap” is written in sonnet form in iambic pentameter, and it has three stanzas, which start with the words: “If ... Then ... But”. In the first stanza, the speaker says:

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!”

“If-Then” prepositions present an imaginary situation in which the world is governed by a powerful yet angry Creator, yet such an imaginary situation comes to an end through the “But” preposition of the poem. The god is personified as the speaker imagines him speaking and laughing at the sufferings of the speaker; therefore, he imagines the god as a revengeful one whose happiness lies at the misery of the speaker. Then the speaker
Poets before Hardy did not represent god as a vengeful and man-hater. For The metaphysicals, Neoclassicals and the Romantics God is merciful who created the nature and mankind. But they did not portray god as the one who would laugh at the miseries of mankind. Instead, it is after World War I, that many people and poets questioned deeply the existence of God. For that reason, Hardy is very different and new in his depiction of God. In the second stanza, the speaker says that he would be glad to know that there is “a Powerfuller than I” and then he would understand his suffering and “the tears [he] shed” was controlled by god (7-8). But at the end of the poem, he says “But not so.”; that is, there is no god to control us; instead it is “Crass Casualty [that] obstructs the sun and rain, / and dicing Time for gladness casts a moan …” (11-12). That is, “by accident” as “crass Casualty” implies, and by “chance” as “dicing Time” suggests, the speaker has a painful life which is assimilated to his “pilgrimage as pain” (14). The speaker is not given “blisses” but “pain” by “These purblind Doomsters”; therefore, there is no plan behind his suffering, it is only his bad chance that provides him suffering and pain. As aforementioned, in this poem, the representation of god as a vengeful one who is happy to see man in pain is new and uncommon as one thinks of the period.

The persona of the poem is regretful as he is angry with an unknown powerful deity. It seems that Hardy ask the questions: “Who/what and where is the God?” since human being looks for God as s/he idealizes such a power. The persona of the poem suggests that if there was a cruel God, then he would resign himself to the cruelties of life since he would know that would be what God wanted to. The writer concludes that there is not even an evil god let alone a good one. Then, he would be glad to know that there is a planner behind his fate even if it was an evil one but there is not even such a god; it is merely chance that controls the life of man. In that way, Hardy, with his ideas and beliefs, is totally different from his contemporaries.

4. After a Journey (1913)

Hardy’s third poem to be analysed in terms of its difference as a modernist poet is “After a Journey”. After his wife Emma’s death in 1912, “… the great poems of 1912 to 1913 were written … after Hardy had visited St. Juliot, Cornwall, where he first met Emma” (“Biography: Thomas Hardy.”). In the poems related to death of or separation from the lover, the speaker would console himself that the lovers would unite someday again and praise the beloved. Hardy’s “After a Journey” is not such a poem since the poet refers not to a union in another world. However, the dead lover is not portrayed as an angel.

The speaker, Hardy himself, addresses to the dead beloved as calling her “the voiceless ghost” (1) as the speaker “come[s] to view a voiceless ghost; / … / Up the cliff, down, till” he is “lonely, lost” (1-3). The speaker does not know where to meet the ghost as he says “Where you will next be there’s no knowing” (5). Then, the speaker describes his ex-wife as such: “With your nut-coloured hair, / And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going” (7-8). The poet-speaker, then, visits the places that they went together before as he imagines that she is “leading [him] on / To the spots [they]”. Therefore, the sadness of the poet is reflected throughout the tone of the poem; in other words, the loss of the poet’s wife is immediately realized. However, the poet imagines the lost wife:

Yes: I have re-entered your olden haunts at last;
Through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you;
What have you now found to say of our past –
In Search of the Truth: The Modernist Poems of Thomas Hardy

Viewed across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?
Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?
Things were not lastly as firstly well
With us twain, you tell?
But all’s closed now, despite Time’s derision. (9-16)

The speaker goes to the places they often used to go in the past; however, such an imagining does not bring gay thoughts as the speaker feels a kind of guilt. He wonders how Emma “now found to say of [their] past” as she, for the speaker, “view[s] across the dark space” (11-12).

After Emma dies, Thomas Hardy feels unwell since he has not been good to her for the last years before her death. He imagines the waterfall as he says, he “Knew when [they] haunted [t]here together, / The waterfall ... / ... / And the cave just under ...” (17-21) sad thoughts are brought into his mind as he walks around the places they went together. The speaker, falling into the memories of past, realizes that she was “fourty years ago ... all aglow” (22-23); that is, she was full of spirit as she was young; but now she is “the thin ghost that” the speaker “now frailly follow[s]!” (24). The reason why Hardy calls Emma “the thin ghost” is that she was desperately ill and was alone on her death bed.

In the last stanza, that it is night and close to dawn is realized as the lines “for the stars close their shutters and the dawn whitens hazily” (28). Similar to the other poems, in “After a Journey”, nature, and the birds in it are not praised as the dawn and sunrise are regarded to “whiten hazily”; that is, not clear or shining as a Romantic would describe. However, the speaker sees no beauty in the birds’ awakening or the seals’ flopping in the water as he says “The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily” (26). The speaker confesses that life looks gloomy as he remarks “Trust me, I mind not, though Life lours” (29) and states that he still wants to be there as he says

... bring me here again!
I am just the same as when
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers(31-33).

The speaker concludes that although life is gloomy, he still wishes to be at the places he went together with the memories of his dead wife. Through his memory, Hardy aims to restore Emma to life.

5. The Impercipient

The last poem to be discussed is “The Impercipient”, published in Wessex Poems and Other Verses in 1898. As the title suggests, the speaker is unable to comprehend and perceive what is realized by others; the condition of not knowing is revealed through the title. In other words, “the Impercipient” puts forth the condition of not knowing and perceiving. In the first stanza, the speaker announces that he is an outcast as people believe in God and he declares that his friends believe in faith which seems fantasy to him. Also, “their Shining Land / Is a drear destiny” (5-6) to the speaker so it seems that people, described in the first stanza, are in a church or in a similar holy place, and they pray but the speaker does not perceive the reason why they do so. Therefore, the speaker asks three unanswered questions beginning with “why”:

Why thus my soul should be consigned
To infelicity,
Why always I must feel as blind
To sights my brethren see, 
Why joys they've found I cannot find, 
Abides a mystery. (7-12)

The speaker feels unhappy and feels “blind” to what is realized by his friends; and cannot comprehend why the others are joyful. Therefore, such unanswered questions become mystery to the speaker. The poet seeks to understand what is known and perceived by the others, yet he cannot understand how the others know the existence of a super divine power which leads to a kind of confusion for the speaker. The efforts to understand what is known by the believers lead to a raise in the level of confusion of the speaker.

In the third stanza, the speaker declares that his heart cannot perceive the ease that the Christians feel. He says that he is “like a gazer” because of his lack of faith. The fifth and last stanzas clarify the disbelief of god of the speaker and he states that “I would bear my shortcoming / With meet tranquillity,” (25-26). That is, his acceptance of his disbelief makes him feel relieved in peace. The poem ends all of a sudden in furiousness: “Enough ... / Rest shall we” (31-32). The poem is like the representation of the feelings of an unbeliever: “Since heart of mine knows not that ease / Which they know...” (13-14). That he speaks out his disbelief and that he writes his poems as if he was speaking or asking questions to an unknown power (as in “Hap” and “the Impercipient”) makes Hardy specific and distinctive and differs his poetry from the Romantics and the Victorians.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the radical and questioning way of Thomas Hardy about his ideas on god, and fate in his poetry, and the way he describes nature and the rapidly changing world in his poems differ from those of the previous poets; namely, the Romantic and the Victorians. In “Hap”, the persona of the poem is like a protestor as he expostulates on chance that governs life. The poet cannot find a reasonable answer to his questions regarding the existence of God as shown and analysed in “Hap” and “the Impercipient”. However, “After a Journey” is the representation of an interior journey in which past becomes a ghost. However, the speaker talks in the present tense for dramatic effect. As G. D. Klingopulos puts it, “[w]hen his poetry and prose are considered together, he appears one of the most important mediators of continuity between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries” (1976: 419). Hardy, the “mediator” seems not to grasp what is known by the others, be it birds or believers. His sceptical approach to such a truth seems to be a result of the changing economy – due to industrialism – and worldview – due to the effects of science and Darwinism. Although Hardy was a Victorian novelist, he is considered to be a modern poet in search of the truth because of the confusion and the complexity of the modern world. This case is represented in his four analysed poems. A kind confusion comes to light as the speaker of the studied poems desires to understand what is known by the others. Therefore, the speaker – Hardy himself in this case – is alienated as a result of the confusion created by not comprehending what the others “darkling thrush”, “comrades” do know and are aware of.

References


International Journal of Language Academy
Volume 4/4 Winter 2016 p. 318/325


