

Patriotism and Internationalism of Thomas Hardy's War Poems

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I.

From the early stage of his career, Thomas Hardy had shown a strong interest in the Napoleonic Wars. According to the description in his biography, Hardy's interest in the Napoleonic Wars was aroused after he from a closet found a magazine called *A History of Wars*, which his grandfather subscribed (*Life* 21). His interest was further fostered by the fact that his distant relative Captain Thomas Hardy was on Nelson's flag-ship. Also he made an "extensive acquaintance" with a retired veteran and heard many anecdotes from his grandmother, who survived the Napoleonic Era (*Life* 24). Even at the time he wrote *The Trumpet Major*, there remained a memory of the Napoleonic Era around Dorset in such a form as dumb show (Firor 299-302), through which Hardy could share with the local people the memory of the Napoleonic Wars. There was even a rumor that some people actually saw Napoleon secretly land the coast of Dorset and make a plan of invading.

Hardy then from 1878 to 79 went to the British Library to make an extensive research, which led him to write such works as a series of the Napoleonic poems, *The Trumpet Major* and *The Dynasts*. Especially the circumstances in which *The Dynasts* was written should be mentioned here with regard to the theme of this paper. The writing of *The Dynasts*, a work which, as its subtitle "An Epic-Drama of the War with Napoleon" suggests, is a grand epic on Napoleon's rise and fall, was greatly influenced by the outbreak of the Boer War and the First World War. Whereas Thomas Hardy the novelist is definitely Victorian, Thomas

Hardy the poet survived until after the First World War, and therefore shares the experience and recognition of the Boer War and the First World War with the war poets. In that sense, “he was their [the war poets’] ancestor, they were his heir” (Hynes 259). Especially those two wars which he witnessed during his lifetime stirred him greatly; his poems on those two wars show his ambivalent attitudes and feelings towards war, although most of them are not regarded as the first-rate. This paper aims to take a glimpse at Hardy’s attitudes towards war probing his poems featuring the wars; the Napoleonic Wars, the Boer War and the First World War.

II.

When he was carrying on research, Hardy made a series of poems on the Napoleonic Wars, which he intended to have made a series of ballads. Most of them are, naturally as a result of his research, based on the legend or tales that Hardy collected in and out of Dorset. For example, the idea of “Valenciennes,” which treats a deafened war veteran, may come from the interview with an old veteran at Chelsea Hospital. J.O. Bailey inferred that Hardy might have combined this pensioner’s deafness with some other soldier’s tale. Another poem, “The Alarm,” which has a headnote “Traditional” and a dedication to “One of the Writer’s Family Who Was a Volunteer during the War with Napoleon,” is based on his grandmother’s narration. It is possible to detect here the sources of what Samuel Hynes calls Hardy’s “war-in-the-head” (Hynes 247). Hardy had never been to the battlefield, so most of his war poems, *The Dynasts* being an exception, are naturally set at “home,” which means that his poems take the form of either the narrative by a retired veteran or the description of people at home.

As a result, most of Hardy’s Napoleonic poems feature a nameless ordinary farmer. Yet in his works, the nameless farmers play an important role in preventing Napoleon’s landing on England. In other words, his works well illustrate his

concern: Hardy “constantly in his fiction pivots a disaster upon little, unnoticed incident” (Bailey 72). Therefore although it is true, as Bailey states, that the above - mentioned poem, “The Alarm” should be read in conjunction with a short story, “A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred Four” in that both depict Dorset people facing the fear of being invaded by Napoleon (288), with regard to the plot, “A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred Four” has more similarity with “A Peasant’s Confession.”

“A Peasant’s Confession” is based on his reading of Thiers’ *Histoire de l’Empire*. Thiers casts a question as to what happened to a messenger from Napoleon’s Army who was sent to Marshal the Marquis de Grouchy: Hardy’s invention of the story, partly inspired by the description of Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, was an attempt to answer this unsolved question. In “A Peasant’s Confession,” the narrator farmer in Belgium confesses that he, being afraid of Grouchy destroying his farm, fought against Grouchy’s horseman, who was carrying a message from the emperor, and finally killed him. First, the narrator, a peasant, starts the story with a bird’s eye view, and hence, uses the pronoun “we” to denote the people there in general:

Three nights ere this, with columned corps he’d crossed
 The Sambre at Charleroi,
 To move on Brussels, where the English host
 Dallied in Parc and Bois.

The yestertide we’d heard the gloomy gun
 Growl through the long-sunned day
 From Quatre-Bras and Ligny; till the dun
 Twilight suppressed the fray . . . (*Poems* 31)

In these second and third stanzas, he narrates Napoleon’s advancement in Europe in a historical mode; that is to say, he gives the reader the information which he must have obtained from later history, for he could not have known the geography

of Europe in detail. Then his point of view focused on “we,” or people in general in that part of Belgium.

As the narrative goes on, he focuses on his family and himself, shifting the use of pronoun from “we” to “my,” or limits the range of “we” to his family:

And at next noon-time Grouchy slowly passed
 With thirty thousand men:
 We hoped thenceforth no army, small or vast,
 Would trouble us again.

My hut lay deeply in a vale recessed,
 And never a soul seemed nigh
 When, reassured at length, we went to rest?
 My children, wife, and I. (*Poems* 31)

Here it becomes clear that the narrator’s interest lies mainly in his family (“children, wife, and I”) and his house (“My hut”).

Then a conversation took place between “a horseman” and himself, which at first was written in free indirect speech: “Had I seen Grouchy? Yes? Which track took he? / Could I lead thither on? / Fulfilment would ensure gold pieces three, / Perchance more gifts anon” (*Poems* 32). Then he broods on what would happen if Grouchy is informed by the messenger. What he first thought of was his own property, the farm: “I mused: ‘If Grouchy thus instructed be / and thus be told, / The clash comes sheer hereon; /My farm is stript. While, as for gifts of gold, / Money the French have none’” (*Poems* 32). After narrating how he killed the messenger, this narrator concludes this story with his relief: “Safe was my stock; my capple cow unslain” (*Poems* 35). It is obvious that his priority lies in his own farm not in the nation’s destiny.

In this sense, as stated earlier in this paper, this poem shares something with a

short story "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four." In this story, the motive of a young shepherd, who contributed to preventing Napoleon's invasion, lies more in defending his own farm, rather than in defending the whole country: "As soon as I was old enough I used to help him [his father], mostly in the way of keeping an eye upon the ewes while he was gone home to rest. This is what I was doing in a particular month in either the year four or five. . ." ("A Tradition" 39). Both these works show that although they, a narrator farmer in "The Peasant's Confession" and a shepherd's son in the latter work, only desire to save their own property such as farm or the cattle, they somehow succeeded in expelling Napoleon and a horseman. To them, their personal property and the nation's destiny stand equal.

To the narrator of "The Alarm," the situation is not so simple. This poem depicts a volunteer, perhaps modeled on his grandfather, in a dilemma. He found the beacon lighted, which was to be lit when Napoleon landed. He headed towards the beach, but on his way there, he was wondering if he should stay at home with his wife, or should head to the beach in order to complete his mission. He finally entrusted his destiny to a bird:

He slowed; he stopped; he paltered
 Awhile with self, and faltered,
 "Why courting misadventure shoreward roam?
 To Molly, surely! Seek the woods with her till times have altered;
 Charity favours home.

"Else, my denying
 He'd come, she'll read as lying –
 Think the Barrow-Beacon must have met my eyes –
 That my words were not unawareness, but deceit of her, while vying
 In deeds that jeopardize."

.....

While he stood thinking,
 A little bird, perched drinking
 Among the crowfoot tufts the river bore,
 Was tangled in their stingy arms and fluttered, almost sinking
 Near him, upon the moor.

.....

“O Lord, direct me! . . .
 Doth Duty now expect me
 To march a-coast, or guard my weak ones near?
 Give this bird a flight according, that I thence learn to elect me
 The southward of the rear.” (*Poems* 37-8)

In this work, he hesitates between two choices: to save his family (“guard my weak ones near”) or to show his loyalty to the nation (“march a-coast”). To go back and stay with his wife is an enactment of his personal concern and desire, as the pronoun “my” suggests, while to go to the coast and join other men is a nationalistic act.

However, in fact, his choice is not between to stay or to go. It is to fight now (at the beach) or later (at home). In either case, his purpose is still clear. He wants to save his family, which desire is in this war related to the nation, for if they succeeded in defending the nation, consequently their family and they themselves are secured. In these poems, the local community is represented as a microscope of the whole nation.

Another important feature of Hardy’s war poems is the ambivalence in his attitudes towards the war. In “Valenciennes,” a soldier looks back on his

experience at Valenciennes, where he was seriously wounded and deafened due to bombing. He now lives ready for "Heaven wi' its jasper walls" (*Poems* 21). Bailey concludes that this soldier is "feeling alive only in his memory of glorious excitement" and through him, "subtly, Hardy criticizes war as an evil in which the common soldier is a dupe" (63). This analysis in fact left ambivalence. In one sense, it is true that this poem criticizes the war as a barbarous violence by focusing on a veteran soldier, who fought without knowing for what, and was badly injured as a "dupe." On the other hand, as Bailey's analysis reveals, this poem depicts a soldier who somehow glorifies his war experiences. This soldier himself admits that "at times I'm sort o' glad / I fout at Valencieën" (*Poems* 20). It is undeniable that the war gave him, at one moment, "glorious excitement." It can therefore be concluded that this poem in fact shows an ambivalent attitudes towards war: to glorify it while accusing it.

We need not conclude hastily that Hardy glorifies war. For example, another poem, "San Sebastian" discloses a futility and brutality of war. The narrator soldier is, due to his brutal act at San Sebastian ("And having her helpless and alone / I wreaked my will on her." (*Poems* 22)), suffering from the sense of guilt which is marked in her daughter's eyes as "a God-set brand like Cain's" (*Poems* 23). This causality seems also to work on the narrator of "The Peasant's Confession." He is, due to his killing Grouchy, betrayed by his children, whose "eye askance / My [His] slowly dwindling store, / And crave my [his] mite" (*Poems* 35). These descriptions reveal vanity and futility of the war. Yet at the same time, by depicting each person's acts and feelings in detail, the tragedy of war is somehow dwindled into the tragedy of one person. In other words, here again, as shown in the analysis of "The Peasant's Confession," or "The Alarm," war is described as a personal experience.

So far the discussion of Hardy's poems on the Napoleonic Wars reveals the following themes: the representation of the local community as a microscope of the whole nation and Hardy's ambivalent attitudes towards the war, both of which

share the recognition of war as a personal experience. Yet his later poems, the poems on the Boer War, entitled “War Poem” and included in *Poems of Past and Present*, and those on the First World War, entitled “Poems on War and Patriotism” and included in *Moments of Vision*, assume a slightly different tone.

III.

When the Boer War broke out in 1899, Hardy went to Southampton by bicycle to see the troops embark for South Africa. Some of the poems, inspired by his witnessing the troops embark, share Hardy’s concern about the ordinary people involved in the nationalistic affair, but with a slight shift on emphasis perhaps because of the difference in the situation and in the place where the war takes place. In both the Boer War and the First World War, Britain was not a battlefield. The soldiers were forced to leave their family at home to fight, and in some cases die, in an alien land.

First of all, this difference is reflected in the soldiers’ role. In the Napoleonic Wars, as discussed above, the farmers or soldiers who try to defend their own personal property eventually work to defend the whole nation. In other words, their purpose is clear: to save their own property, including their family. However, in the Boer War, the cause itself is doubted. The Boer War broke out as the consequence of Britain’s imperialistic endeavor, toward which Hardy cast a doubt. This doubt is the theme of “A Christmas Ghost-Story.”

South of the Line, inland from far Durban,
A mouldering soldier lies – your countryman.

.....

“And what of logic or of truth appears
 In tacking ‘Anno Domani’ to the years?
 Near twenty-hundred liveried thus have hied,
 But tarries yet the Cause for which He died.” (*Poems* 90)

This criticism is also seen in “Embarcation” as well. In “Embarcation,” Hardy overlaps the past battle with the present embarking soldiers, describing that “none dubious of the cause, none murmuring” (*Poems* 86). As Bailey points out, “[t]hat Hardy parallels the South African war with the invasions of Vespasian and Cerdic indicates that he was dubious of the cause and perhaps thought the men should have murmured” (116). From these poems, it is obvious that Hardy thought that one of the problems of this war was that the cause had not been justified enough. At the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the narrator of “Valenciennes” defends the Duke of York: “As for the Duke o’ Yark in war, / There may be volk whose judgment o’ en is mean; / But this I say – he was not far / From great at Valencieën” (*Poems* 20). That is to say, this narrator respects the commander and although “‘Twas said that we’d no business there,” he feels now that “at times I’m sort o’ glad I fout at Valencieën” (*Poems* 20). On the other hand, the soldiers fighting at the Boer War and the First World War work only as puppets.

One of Hardy’s proposed solutions to terminate war is to have an idea of internationalism. Once Hardy wrote to Mrs. Henniker about his poems on the South African War “of which I am [he is] happy to say that not a single one is Jingo or Imperial” (*Letters* 2:277). He further commented that although the editor of *The Cornhill Magazine* asked him for another poem, he “cannot rise to war any more” (*Letters* 2:277). In these poems, instead of being Jingoistic or Imperialistic, he proposes his view on internationalism. In “Departure” he writes as follows:

“When shall the saner softer polities
 Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land

And patriotism, grown Godlike, scorn to stand
 Bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas?" (*Poems* 87)

This patriotism to "circle earth and seas" prevails in his war poems. A poem entitled "A Christmas Ghost-Story" and his response towards the editorial in *The Daily Chronicle*, who attacked his pacifistic view of this poem, give us clear examples of this internationalism.¹ In his response, Hardy states that "His [a ghost's] views are no longer local; nations are all one to him; his country is not bounded by seas, but is co-extensive with the globe itself, if it does not even include all the inhabited planets of the sky" (Orel 203). His letter to John Galsworthy on April 20, 1923 further enhances this idea: "The exchange of international thought is the only possible salvation for the world: & though I was decidedly pessimistic when I wrote at the beginning of the South African War that I hoped to see patriotism not confined to realms but circling the earth, I still maintain that such sentiments ought to prevail" (*Letters* 6:192).

This internationalism is also described in the poems on the First World War, "His Country" being the most notable example: "He travels southward, and looks around; / and cannot discover the boundary / of his native country; / or where his duties to his fellow-creatures end; nor who are his enemies" (*Poems* 539-40). From this description, it is clear that Hardy thinks that to think the whole globe as one's own country reduces the conflict with each other, and thus war is no more.

What can be inferred from this definition of internationalism is that Hardy thinks that the internationalism arises from individual's feelings or thought, and therefore, the solution to the conflict of two nations lies in each person's state of mind. This thought is clearly represented in "In Time of 'The Breaking of the Nation.'" In this poem, it is not the national affair but their own story that the lovers care: "Yonder a maid and her wight / Come whispering by: / War's annals will cloud into night / Ere their story die" (*Poems* 543). As the tragedy of war is reduced to the personal tragedy, the solution to the conflict is assigned to each person's effort and each

person's state of mind.

However, his internationalism will be challenged in some ways. First of all, it is still based on an attachment or loyalty to one's home country. As Hynes points out, Hardy "began, characteristically, in Wessex," and in these poems he "stressed their localness" (Hynes 249). As the narrator of the poem "Song of the Soldiers' Wives and Sweethearts" joyously repeats "At last! In sight of home again, / Of home again" (*Poems* 96), the binary opposition of home and foreign lands is kept, the former being exalted. Thus arises the tragedy of "Drummer Hodge," the most memorable poem on the Boer War:

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
 Uncoffined – just as found:
 His landmark is a kopje-crest
 That breaks the veldt around;
 And foreign constellations west
 Each night above his mound. (*Poems* 90)

This is "a poem that exhibits Hardy's withering irony about the pretensions of Imperial Britain in its colonial excursions as they affect the lower classes. . . . Hodge whose name evokes British agricultural labors, provides an example of how England is able to carry its imperial burden only at great cost to its uneducated, laboring class." (Riquelme 211). Besides, it is true that "[t]o home-loving Hardy . . . , Hodge's eternal hole in the loam ('uncoffined') of an alien land added insult. An archetypal feeling thus runs through the poem that the soul must wander lost forever when the body lies in an 'unknown plain' under 'strange-eyed constellations'" (Bailey 121). As both critics point out, the foreignness is emphasized by his use of such Dutch words as "kopje," "veldt," and "karoo." In short, the tragedy of the hodge is, in one sense, he dies not knowing for what, but in another sense, his tragedy lies in the fact that he dies in a completely alien country

unregarded.

Another opposition is that of the ordinary people and the “war-lords.” His works on the Napoleonic Wars such as *The Trumpet Major* and *The Dynasts* set up the opposition between “the dull peoples,” the nameless ordinary people, and “the dynasts,” the historical people whose names are recorded in the national history (*Dynasts* 3,7,9). The tragedy of the ordinary people who die without enough cause leads Hardy to think of their role as puppets. Puppets are, of course, manipulated by puppet-users, who are, in his poems, called “war-lords.” Bailey states as follows analyzing “The Pity of It” in the “Poems on War and Patriotism”: “The theme of ‘The Pity of It’ is that the *peoples* of Germany and England were not responsible for the war; the common soldiers were puppets of the war-lords” (Bailey 420, original emphasis). This opposition between sympathy with “puppets” and antipathy against “the war-lords” casts doubt on the reality of his idea of internationalism.

If we compare his idea with Olive Schreiner’s proposal on the South African War, it will become much clearer that his idea is challenged by the difficulty of embracing completely alien people. Schreiner, who harshly criticized the Boer War, especially the policy of Cecil Rhodes, wrote to express her protest a political allegory, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. In this novella, Peter Halket, a trooper who joined the Boer War, first thinks of making money and establishing fame at South Africa, exploiting from the native people. However, after he met a Christ-like figure, he changes his mind and in the end, he was shot to death for his act to save the native Africans. Although the plot of this story sounds tragic, the last scene has some sense of hope: “one hour after Peter Halket had stood outside the tent looking up, he was lying under the little tree, with the red sand trodden down over him, in which a black man and a white man’s blood were mingled” (259). Then in the end, “The morning sun was lighting up the straggling branches of the tall trees that had overshadowed the camp; and fell on the little stunted tree, with its white stem an outstretched arms; and on the stones beneath it” (264).

What Schreiner is proposing here is the importance of mingling different races, the white and the black, although it will be literally a bleeding deed. The sun that lights up the trees suggests a hope for the future of the South Africa after Peter Halket's sacrificial act. On the other hand, although Hardy proposes the internationalism to include the whole globe, his poems seem to lack a concrete proposal to accept completely alien people.

IV.

Some critics suggest that some of his poems other than those collected under the title of "War Poems" already foreshadow unimaginable brutality of the forthcoming war. For example, John R. Reed concludes that "The Man He Killed" foreshadows Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting" (Reed 147). It is true that both of the poems share the feel of pity towards the enemy. In the former, the narrator imagines the would-be encounter with the enemy as a fellow-creature in a different situation, and in the latter, the enemy's monologue arouses the feel of pity in the reader. Yet the comparison of these two poems discloses their difference: Hardy's war is still "war-in-the-head." In his poem, the narrator thinks of their meeting at the pub, while the encounter in "Strange Meeting" takes place in "Hell" and is tainted with blood.

Although what makes Hardy's poems so fascinating to the war poets is "the use of a rural community to represent the nation in its opposition to an outside threat" (Featherstone 29), his poems show, perhaps contrary to his intention, the difficulty of imagining and embracing "an outside threat." Apparently his attitudes towards war seem to have changed as time went on; in the poems which deal with the Napoleonic Wars, there is a slight tone of glorifying war, while in the later poems, the tragic aspects of war is criticized and lamented. Yet fundamentally his attitudes, or more precisely recognition, remained the same: recognition of war as

a personal or communal experience. Therefore his proposal on internationalism to embrace even the enemy sounds optimistic; his war is no more or no less than “war-in-the-head.” It is ironical that this ideological limitation of his war poems still did not limit their appeal as literary works.

Note

- 1 The writer of an editorial in *The Daily Chronicle* criticized that a soldier in “A Christmas Ghost-Story” is “Mr. Hardy’s soldier, and not one of the Dublin Fusiliers who cried amidst the storm of bullets at Tugela, ‘Let us make a name for ourselves!’” (*Personal Writings* 203).

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