"There Is Not a Scrap of Personal Detail in It": Thomas Hardy's Use of Personal Detail in *Jude the Obscure*

Barbara Richter

Thomas Hardy, says the editor of his letters, was a man who "seldom offered his friends any peeps through his windows" (1) in his correspondence. He seemed also to want to discourage the readers of his novels from linking his private life with his work. Asked whether *Jude the Obscure* was autobiographical, he directed his second wife to reply that "there is not a scrap of personal detail in it, it having the least to do with his life of all his books" (2). Yet there is an abundance of material in the circumstances of Hardy's life, in his notebooks and letters, and the quasi-autobiographical *Early Life* (prepared by his second wife under his direction) that assuredly shaped the feelings from which the novel emerged. It is the purpose of this paper to explore that material.

What Hardy says of the history of *Jude the Obscure* in his Preface to the 1896 edition is not complete. The death of a woman in 1896, he asserts, suggested some details from which he made notes the following year and jotted down a scheme three years later. He revisited the scenes in October two years after that and outlined the narrative by the spring of 1893. With the exception of a few chapters he wrote the book from August 1893 to the end of 1894. Unfortunately for those interested in Hardy's method of composition and in the relationship between his life and work, there is as much self-revelation in this account as there would be in a train schedule. It is clear that the process of composition involved more complex and more emotional material than he was willing to acknowledge. One finds it in his life and developing attitudes prior to writing the book and in his decisions during the time he was at work on the book.

The experiences and attitude of mind that produced *Jude the Obscure* go all the way back to Hardy's youth. He seems to have been greatly impressed then with adversity, struggle, futility, and disillusion. *The Early Life* describes how once on his way to school he met a boy who studied as he drove the bread cart of a widow. This seems a striking example of man seeking to rise by self-education at the same time he is doing other work. The boy asked to borrow Hardy's Latin grammar (3). Hardy does not say whether he lent his book or not. He apparently lost track of the boy, but he must have dwelled on the incident. Jude too studies as he drives a cart and grapples with forces that seek to grind him down. *The Early Life* also recounts Hardy's memory as a boy of lying on the ground overcome with the thought of the ponderous futility of life (4). He uses this memory and this sense in the scene in *Jude the Obscure* at the end of Chapter Two. After he is beaten by Farmer Troutham, Jude is prostrated by his sense of the utter hopelessness of his situation.
There is evidence in his notebooks that Hard’s young manhood was plagued by the sort of bitterness and futility Jude suffered. In the spring of his thirtieth year he writes: “A sweet face is a page of sadness to a man over thirty, the material of a corpse” (5). Jude is not quite thirty when he dies. Hardy’s mother seems to have contributed to his pessimism and fatalistic philosophy. In the fall of the same year he records “Mother’s notion (and also mine) that a figure stands in our van with arm uplifted, to knock us back from any pleasant prospect we indulge in as probable” (6). Sue Bridehead uses a similar figure at the end of Jude the Obscure, a fact that invites speculation about how much Hardy’s mother influenced his concept of spiritual love. At the end of 1870 Hardy adds a note that suggests both his last novel, Jude the Obscure, and his first, Desperate Remedies, written twenty years earlier:

In a worldly sense it is a matter for regret that a child who has to earn a living should be born of a noble nature. Social greatness requires bitterness to inflate and float it, and a high soul may bring a man to the workhouse (7).

Jude’s high soul brings his entire family along with him to ruin. His bitterness comes ironically on the day of his death. In 1871 Hardy is still thinking of aspiration and disillusion: “A mistake often made in foretelling a young man’s career—that a given amount of brain, power will result in a proportionate success—so many units, so much product” (8). Jude drastically altered his goal three times, each time discovering that the new object too was denied him, despite his ability.

Hardy’s work as an architect provided him with context, information, and feelings for writing Jude the Obscure. He creates a strong symbol: a young stone mason restoring old churches who struggles but cannot fulfill his own aspirations to a higher life. Evelyn Hardy notes that Hardy’s mind gravitated from church or churchyard scenes to contemplation of death (9). Jude’s death at the end of his story is bitter emphasis of his fate. Hardy too had taken part in church restoration. He regretted the part he had played in it, but what went on in the name of restoration often amused him. His Notebook for May 1886 records the ironic fact of an ad in the newspaper to sell two tables of the Ten Commandments (10).

Between 1887—1890 Hardy read much on the controversial topics he treated in Jude the Obscure: Milton on divorce and Weisman on heredity as well as Latin, English, French, German, and Spanish satire. In addition, the divorce suit of Captain O’Shea against his wife on the grounds of adultery with Parnell, the Irish Political leader, which was settled in 1889, filled the newspapers of that period with discussions of the question of marriage (11).

About this time he began to develop ideas for character and plot. Fragments of a description of Arabella appear in his Notebook for 1887: “Rachel H. and her rich colour and vanity, and frailty and clever artificial dimple making” (12). Arabella, who seduces Jude and entraps him in a marriage that imposes the first barrier to his hopes, is also a vivid, vain, flirtatious woman who practices making artificial dimples. In 1888 Hardy jots down the nucleus of a plot:

A short story of a young man “who could not go to Oxford”. His struggles and ultimate failure. There is something in this the world ought to be shown and I am the one to show it to them—though I was not altogether hindered in going at least to Cambridge, and could have gone up easily at five and twenty (13).

A year later, on the occasion of Browning’s death, he enters a dramatic line from Sordello that is central to the accumulating tragedy in his novel: “Incidents in the development of a soul! Little else is worth study” (14). Jude begins life with aspirations of a fine, noble future. He ends cursing the day he was born. What wrought that change constitutes the core of Hardy’s indictment of the universe.
Hardy’s other literary work prepared him to write *Jude the Obscure*. *Tess*, in *Tess of the Durbervilles*, the book he wrote immediately before *Jude the Obscure*, is a parallel in reverse to Jude. Like her he struggles to realize the best of what is in him in defiance of laws of nature and society that tear down his energies. Comparing the two novels, William Rutland notes that the thought of *Jude the Obscure* came first and took longer (15). “Thoughts of Phena”, which Hardy wrote in 1890, is addressed to a cousin who had recently died. There has been conjecture that it was this cousin that he meant in his reference to the death of a woman in the Preface to *Jude*, and that this woman and the poem contributed to his development of Sue Bridehead (16).

In his Preface Hardy mentions revisiting scenes of the novel. The use of this particular word strengthens the impression that some important emotional part of *Jude the Obscure* was autobiographical. Jude’s surname is Fawley. In 1892 Hardy visited Great Fawley, the town in Berkshire from which his maternal grandmother, Mary Head, had come (17) and in the summer of 1893 he visited Oxford. He himself had worked at Radcliffe Chapel there as assistant to Arthur Bloomfield. He declared that Christminster was imaginary, not Oxford, but there is in existence a sheet of paper in his handwriting with place names from *Jude the Obscure*, the words “approximates to”, and names from Oxford (19). Carl Weber indicates that Hardy borrowed the comparison of Oxford to the Heavenly Jerusalem from Rebekah Owen (19). Salisbury Training College, the school from which Sue Bridehead escapes in Hardy’s novel was the school where Hardy’s two sisters studied (20).

A large and interesting part of the explanation of why and how Hardy wrote *Jude the Obscure* lies in the long-term development of his attitude toward some controversial subjects treated in the book: sex, suffering, nature, marriage, honesty and pessimism. His thinking on these subjects seems to have come to a head during the time he wrote *Jude the Obscure*. In the preface to the 1896 edition, he speaks of his novel as a book addressed to men and women of mature age which attempted to “deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity, and to point, without a mincing of words, the tragedy of unfulfilled aims” (21). He says he was not aware of anything in it to which exception could be taken. Elsewhere he called *Jude the Obscure* a book “sent out to those into whose soul the iron has entered and entered deeply at some time in their lives” (22).

He felt that writing honestly about sex was difficult but necessary. In the years before writing *Jude the Obscure* he was troubled by how hard it was to write what he called “sincere” fiction. He grants that “it is possible to gain not wisdom but indeed harm from the most elevating works of imagination” because “the eye sees what it brings with it the means of seeing” (23). But he protests against the emasculation of literature as an attempt to protect the young by giving them a false view of life, saying that the passions ought to be presented in literature exactly as they exist in life. He emphasizes that Athenian and Elizabethan masterpieces “reflected life, revealed life, criticized life”. He points out that since life is a physiological fact, to portray it honestly means to portray the relations between the sexes, not to substitute the false coloring of “they married and were happy ever after” for the catastrophes stemming from sexual relations: “the crash of broken commandments is as necessary an accompaniment to the catastrophe of a tragedy as the noise of drum and cymbals to a triumphal march”. He complains that there seems to be an arbitrary law that the first, third, and seventh commandment never be broken, the ninth only gingerly, the sixth only as much as necessary, and the rest indiscriminately but in a genteel manner (24). After writing *Jude the Obscure* Hardy insisted that it was an honest and moral book: “delicacy or indelicacy in a writer is according to his object... In writing *Jude* my mind was fixed on the end” (25).

In addition to wanting to write honestly about sex, Hardy strove to reflect all of nature, including its defects, and to use this reflection to voice man’s inmost thoughts. He
wanted "to look nature's defects in the face and to transcribe them" (26), to make "these defects the basis of a hitherto unperceived beauty, by irradiating them with 'the light that never was' on their surface, but is seen to be latent in them by the spiritual eye" (27). He felt that the "ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own (28). For him art was "good art only inasmuch as it corroborates something in our mental or emotional makeup, expresses for us something of the yearnings and aspirations that struggle for voice within us" (29).

Hardy felt strongly about the suffering marriage can bring. He rejected the idea that he planned Jude the Obscure as a tract against marriage. Moral good is effected, he declared, by something "being obviously written as merely a faithful description of such doings by an unbiased person (30). In a letter to Edmund Gosse he denied that Jude the Obscure was "a manifesto on the marriage question although of course it involves it", insisting that "it is concerned first with the labor of a poor student to get a university degree" (31). He did, however, believe that marriage should be dissolvable at the wish of either party: "the English marriage laws are, to the eyes of anybody who looks around, the gratuitous cause of at least half the misery of the community" (32).

Hardy was deeply attracted to pessimism. This mood in him is linked with his compassion for all kinds and degrees of pain, especially for mental anguish. In his notebooks he questions whether there has ever been any great poetry that was not "pessimistic", and he quotes extensively from the Bible discrediting the idea that it could not be pessimism since it offers a remedy. The remedy, he says, "tarries long" (33). He denies that nature can be vindicated with the explanation that she is practicing a morality unknown to man. Pain exists, he says: no secret morality beyond man's understanding can remove it or make it pleasure for those who suffer. They are its intractable estimators (34). The best literature, "the highest flights of the pen", he felt, "are often, indeed mostly, the excursions and revelations of souls unconcerned to life" (35).

During the actual time of composition, three additional things influenced Hardy. He reorganized his basic concept of the novel; he used the novel to express his views on the need for sex education; and he developed confidence in his ability to do a difficult characterization like that of Sue Bridehead.

Hardy assured his publisher before beginning the novel that what he had in mind "would not bring a blush to a schoolgirl's cheek". After the first installment of the serial, however, he offered to withdraw it from publication. The process of composition forced him to reorganize his initial concept, as John Paterson shows in detail (36). The characters took things into their own hands, says Hardy. He had intended to write a critical examination of the educational system, and he found it turning into an examination of the sacrament and institution of marriage. In the original draft Sue motivates Jude's passion for education; in the published serial Phillotson serves this purpose, Phillotson blocks Jude's happiness with Sue, foreshadows his failure and illustrates what Hardy considered the dubious blessings of marriage. The original theme of "struggles and ultimate failure" began turning into an attack on the stringency of marriage laws and the narrow Christianity responsible for them. Jude's original name was Jack, a name common enough in England to suggest universality. The irony of the story is heightened when it becomes Jude, the forgotten apostle and the apostle of the impossible. Jude was to have spent only a month in Marygreen when the story opens. The longer stay emphasizes the harshness of his fate. Sue was to have been adopted by a provost at Christminster. There is greater irony and even fatalistic treachery in her marriage to Phillotson, Jude's former teacher and benefactor.

In 1894 while still at work on Jude the Obscure Hardy wrote "The Tree of Knowledge". In it he advocates sex education in the form of a "plain handbook" for young girls and for boys also, a clear reference to Jude's seduction by Arabella (which was certainly already written by this time). He insists that "innocent youths should, I
think, also receive the same instruction: for (if I may say a word out of my part) it has never struck me that the spider is invariably male and the fly invariably female” (37).

Hardy explained to Edmund Gosse that he had always had an attraction for the kind of character Sue was but had never attempted a portrayal because of the difficulty of the task. He emphasized that “there is nothing perverted or depraved in Sue’s nature. The abnormalism consists in disproportion not in inversion, her sexual instinct being healthy as far as it goes, but unusually weak and fastidious” (38). He thought of her as the prototype of the modern woman at the end of the nineteenth century, a creature of nature caught in the conflict between mind and instinct.

Although Jude the Obscure could hardly have been written by a happily married man, there is controversy about whether Sue was drawn from Hardy’s first wife. Carl Weber bases his objection to Douglas Brown’s claim in Thomas Hardy that Sue was drawn in part from the first Mrs. Hardy on a strong conviction that there was no “brief return of happiness” for the Hardy’s in 1895 (34). It is clear that Hardy felt some deep emotion, contrition or possibly even guilt, over Jude the Obscure. In answer to a question from Vere Collins as to why he stopped writing novels after Jude the Obscure, he declared “I never cared very much about writing novels. And I should not have—” (40). Then he paused and changed the subject. Most of Hardy’s poems, according to Collins, deal with “love and marriage”, but the second largest category is “illmating and disharmony” (41). It is ironic that what will not bear exposure in prose can be so clearly expressed in poetry. As Hardy commented, Galileo could probably have gotten away with his theories even in the seventeenth century if he had written them in verse. Some biographers believe that Hardy perceived that his first wife was at times unbalanced (42). Indeed, if he knew, his awareness may have nurtured his great sense of compassion.

Hardy’s conception of Sue may have been influenced by his friendship with Mrs. Arthur Henkiker. He first met her during Whitsuntide (May 19-25), the time at which he was working on Jude the Obscure and he commented in his diary on her charm and intuition. Her friendship helped him greatly at a hard, bitter time of his life and may help explain both Jude the Obscure and a number of poems. At her death he entered a short note “after a friendship of thirty years” (43). His collaboration with her on a short story, “The Spectre of the Real” (44), makes notably ironic a letter to Hardy from his first wife. She says, “My work, unlike your work of writing, does not occupy my true mind much. ... Your novel seems sometimes like a child, all your own and none of me” (45). The first Mrs. Hardy made a pretense of literary aspirations and might have deeply resented her husband’s collaboration with someone else. In 1904 Mrs. Henniker brought a woman to visit Hardy who later became his second wife, Florence Emily Dugdale. It was she who declared that Sue Bridehead was drawn in part from Mrs. Henniker (46).

As his editor indicates, Thomas Hardy’s personality did not easily lend itself to self revelation. Contrary to what Hardy said, what emerges from a investigation of Jude the Obscure is an expression of personal detail. The imagination does not work alone. Hardy did reveal himself in his novel, but he was not happy with it. Both his attitude toward himself and his compassionate awareness of the rights of others help explain this tension. He is essentially a moralist. The poet in him cries over the pain and yearns for the beauty. But the moralist has the last word. And his morality is of a high quality, well worth respect. Yet it is not the most significant factor. What is interesting—and useful—for the student of literature is that the details of his life shaped a powerful feeling, a feeling so strong that Hardy, sensitive, compassionate Victorian moralist, felt constrained to deny “any scrap of personal detail” in his novel relating to his life. This conflict between his need to express and his need to deny explains much of the intensity and poignancy in Jude the Obscure. It is entirely consistent with Hardy’s sense that art transcends pain, transmutes it ultimately into beauty.
FOOTNOTES


(3) Florence Emily Hardy, p.274.


(6) Thomas Hardy, Notebooks, p.32.

(7) Thomas Hardy, Notebooks, p.31.

(8) Thomas Hardy, Notebooks, p.33.

(9) Evelyn Hardy, p.109.

(10) Thomas Hardy, Notebooks, p.63.

(11) Evelyn Hardy, p.243.

(12) Florence Emily Hardy, p.206.

(13) Florence Emily Hardy, p.207.

(14) Evelyn Hardy, p.245.

(15) William Rutland, Thomas Hardy, A Study of His Writings and Their Background (1938; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell), p. 239.

(16) Evelyn Hardy, p.244.

(17) Evelyn Hardy, p.242.

(18) Rutland, p.247.

(19) Thomas Hardy, Letters, p.47.


(22) Florence Emily Hardy, p.271.


(24) Thomas Hardy, Life and Art, p.77.

(25) Evelyn Hardy, p.244.

(26) Thomas Hardy, Notebooks, p.87.

(27) Florence Emily Hardy, p.151.

(28) Florence Emily Hardy, p.167.

(29) Thomas Hardy, Notebooks, p.92.
(30) Thomas Hardy, *Letters*, pp. 46–47.

(31) Florence Emily Hardy, p.271.

(32) Thomas Hardy, *Life and Art*, p.120.

(33) Thomas Hardy, *Notebooks*, p.68.

(34) Thomas Hardy, *Life and Art*, p.131.

(35) Thomas Hardy, *Life and Art*, p.130.


(37) Thomas Hardy, *Life and Art*, p.118.

(38) Florence Emily Hardy, p.272.


(41) Collins, p.42.

(42) Evelyn Hardy, p.242.


(44) Ibid. The poems attributed by Purdy to Mrs. Henniker’s influence are many: “A Broken Engagement”, “A Thunderstorm in Town” (by Hardy’s own word), “At an Inn”, “In Death Divided”, “He Wonders About Himself”, “The Coming of the End” (stanza 4), “The Month’s Calendar”, “Last Love Word”, “Alike and Unalike”, “The Recalcitrants” (which was Hardy’s suggestion for a title to the serial version of *Jude the Obscure*). The novel retained the title of “Hearts Insurgent”, since that was already in type by the time the printer received the suggestion), “Come Not; Yet Come”, “The Division”, and “Wessex Heights”.

(45) Thomas Hardy, *Notebooks*, p. 48.

(46) Purdy, p.345.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


