

**‘VOICES HAUNTING US, DAUNTING US, TAUNTING US’: THE
ANGLO-BOER WAR POEMS OF THOMAS HARDY**

Geoffrey Haresnape, University of Cape Town

Hostilities in the Anglo-Boer War commenced on 12 October 1899 when the Transvaal Government, receiving no answer from Great Britain to an ultimatum, sent forces across the borders of their Republic. In the last quarter of that year the war was characterized by extensive battles for the control of Natal and by some hostilities in the Cape. What amounted to a general lack of success by the British to make headway against the Boer invaders reached a nadir when the Commander in Chief of the British Army, Sir Redvers Buller, was repulsed on 15 December near Colenso on the Tugela River.

It was during this period - exactly a century ago - that Thomas Hardy wrote eleven ‘War Poems’ subsequently used to open his major 1901 collection, *Poems of the Past and Present*. ‘Drummer Hodge’ is the best known of the eleven and seems to have taken on a life of its own in the pages of anthologies. But the other ten have many merits. They deserve wider recognition than they enjoy in the canon [no pun intended] of war poetry in English.

For many years it has been the common wisdom to regard Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg *et al.* as the first modern English poets to arrive at an understanding of how National Powers manipulate their citizens into military service and of how combatants are disempowered - despite apparent evidence to the contrary. This was an understanding which combined cynicism [‘those who die as cattle’] with an enlargement of sensibility [‘the pity of war.’] Prior to the work of these poets, war poems were supposed to promote attitudes which were either jingoistic or naively self-sacrificial. In neither case was any criticism of war offered.

Thomas Hardy’s ‘War Poems’ appeared a good fifteen to twenty years before the genre is popularly supposed to have developed. It is my contention that they show all the essential characteristics of verses which critique war. The critique is developed in a number of ways ranging from the moral questionability of a so-called Christian British Empire seeking to

subjugate a smaller people to deeply felt portrayals of individuals - serving soldiers, their wives, parents and lovers - for whom war is an existential rather than a theoretical matter. In particular Hardy concerns himself with death in action, a misfortune which was covered in the official mind by the formulation 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.' In Hardy's mind, those so killed suffered dislocation and loss, an experience light years away from the satisfying closure conjured up by the Latin tag.

*

Hardy's eleven 'War Poems' are preceded in *Poems of the Past and Present* by only one poem, ostensibly in memory of the figure who had stood at the apex of the Imperial hierarchy and had symbolically presided over the British war effort in South Africa. 'V.R. 1819-1901' is a rather unenthusiastic meditation on the reign of someone whom he later described in a letter to Lytton Strachey as 'a most uninteresting woman' [Seymour-Smith, 1994:640].

Three of the eleven 'War Poems' are based upon Hardy's experience of watching the departure of troops from Southampton on the afternoon of 20 October 1899. 'Embarcation' [sic] and 'Departure' reflect two different aspects of the general scene. Hardy had expected that afternoon to say good-bye to a friend, Major Henniker, who was due to leave for South Africa-but in the event Henniker did not leave until the following day. This did not, however, prevent Hardy from writing 'The Colonel's Soliloquy' in which he imaginatively enters the situation of an older, professional soldier - such as Henniker was - leaving home yet again in order to face the danger and loneliness of war.

As his ship moves away from the quayside, the colonel re-evaluates his life. The fact that he is ageing is no small part of his awareness. 'And what my mirror shows me in the morning/Has more of blotch and wrinkle than of bloom' [Poems, p. 87]. He is less able now than before to enter into the fervour of the patriotic crowd's shouts of farewell. Instead he focuses upon his wife 'waving from the wharfside, palely grieving' and reflects that - this

time - he may not be so lucky as to survive his tour of duty: 'when/The Girl you leave behind you is a grandmother,/Things may not be as then.'

*

Another three of the eleven 'War Poems' are empathetic identifications with wives and sweethearts of departing, absent or returning soldiers. In 'The Going of the Battery' the wives spiritedly attempt to reject the pessimistic counsel that death in South Africa is likely to separate them permanently from their spouses. 'Some Hand will guard their ways' [Poems, p. 89] they cry. However, 'in the night-time when life beats are low,' the wives admit that they hear 'voices haunting us, daunting us, taunting us.' These are voices which hint at 'other and graver things.'

The poem 'A Wife in London' deals with the much-feared worst scenario. Hardy uses a London pea-souper as a symbolic backdrop to the existential angst of a woman who receives a telegram stating that her husband 'has fallen - in the far South Land' [Poems, p. 91]. Her immediate numbed reaction is brilliantly realized in its understatement. Even more true to reality - and typically Hardyan - is the sequel on the following day when the postman delivers to the woman a letter written in the hand of him 'whom the worm now knows.' With lacerating irony, the last stanza tells of the husband's joyful state when he was writing - all unaware that his death was imminent:

Fresh - firm - penned in highest feather -
Page full of his hoped return,
And of home-planned jaunts by brake and burn
In the summer weather
And of new love that they would learn.'

'Song of the Soldiers' Wives and Sweethearts' concerns the expected return of troops to England. It derives its poignancy from Hardy's skilful evocation of joy mixed with uncertainty. The women long for the moment when they will be able to see their men and 'clasp them joyfully' [Poems, p. 96]. But there are interrogatives in the poem which offset

the pure delight of anticipated reunion. Will the men return 'no more to go away from us/And stay from us?' And were those who told the women that they and their lovers 'should meet no more' entirely wrong?

*

In yet another three of the eleven 'War Poems' Hardy employs the mode of an implied narrator. Both 'Drummer Hodge' [which was first published under the title 'The Dead Drummer'] and 'A Christmas Ghost Story' concern individual servants of the Crown who have been killed in action. Like Drummer Hodge's, the corpse of the unnamed soldier of 'A Christmas Ghost Story' will decay in African earth, somewhere 'south of the line, inland far from Durban' [Poems, p.90].

It is, however, his 'puzzled phantom' which asks the question Hardy himself was asking: 'I would know/By whom and when the...Law/Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,/Was ruled to be inept and set aside?' This amounted to patent criticism of a so-called Christian British Empire engaged on a Crusade against the evil Boer.

The timing of the poem's first publication in the Westminster Gazette - on the eve of Christmas 1899 - added to the critical thrust. This led to further ironies. It was on Christmas Day itself, a feast to celebrate peace on earth and goodwill to men, that the London Daily Chronicle published an editorial which attacked the poem as pacifist. Hardy was so little daunted by this that he added a further four lines to be included in the 1901 version of the poem - lines by which its criticism of the Empire's pretensions to represent Christianity became even more trenchant.

In 'The Sick Battle God,' his third poem to use the mode of implied narrator, Hardy moves attention from the ignored God of Peace to the allegedly ailing God of Battles. He notes that in early times 'when men found joy in war,/A God of Battles sped each mortal jar' [Poems, p. 98]. Rhythmic, alliterative language is used to convey the past power of that God:

On bruise and blood-hole, scar and seam,
On blade and bolt, he flung his fulgid beam:
His haloes rayed the very gore,
And corpses wore his glory beam.

Some say, however, that the God of Battles has latterly gone into a decline as 'modern meditation broke his spell'. But Hardy does not buy everything he hears. Though nations may not admit to it, they still, in some way or another, worship this 'lurid Deity.' The Anglo-Boer conflict proves that 'wars arise, though zest [for the God of Battles] grows cold.' At such a time the image of the God of Battles is revived 'as in ancient mould/...bepatched with paint and lath.' This God of Battles is that much more terrible than the earlier ones because he is both decrepit and diseased.

*

The remaining two of the eleven 'War Poems' introduce a first person persona. By entering the poems as 'I,' Hardy is able to achieve both confessional immediacy and dramatic effect. 'At the War Office, London' is occasioned by the publication of official lists of the killed and wounded after the repulse of the British Army in Natal. The 'I' is in accord with his countrymen in being shocked 'by hourly posted sheets of scheduled slaughter' [Poems, p. 90]. But the 'I' differs from them in that he did not share their jingoistic complacency during the months that led up to the ultimatum being delivered to the Boers: 'Last year I called this world of gaingivings/The darkest thinkable.' To the 'I' it seemed a time when the land was charged 'with circumstance that brings/The tragedy of things.'

Perhaps the most complex of the eleven 'War Poems' is 'The Souls of the Slain' which makes notable use of the 'I' persona. An important trope is that of the poet as nature lover and visionary. He is alone and benighted on a cliff top at Portland Bill, a Dorset promontory which overlooks a turbulent tidal race. When 'the spirit' is on him, he becomes aware of a great flight 'of sprites without mould' [Poems, p. 93] who whirr in from the south to settle upon the bluff.

Quickly he comes to understand that they are 'the souls of the felled' who have been drawn homeward, winging their way up the Atlantic from South Africa in a kind of spirit migration. These souls enter into conversation with 'a senior soul-flame' which has approached from the northward. During this exchange, the myth of war as something glorious is exploded. The spirits of the deceased are told many uncomfortable truths about their role as soldiers and the ways in which they will be remembered by their nearest and dearest. Deflated, they exclaim:

- 'Alas! then it seems that our glory
Weighs less in their thought
Than our old homely acts,
And the long-ago commonplace facts
Of our lives - held by us as scarce part of our story
And rated as nought.'

Having listened to 'the senior soul-flame,' the spirits mount again into the air and divide into two groups. Those 'of bitter traditions' who cannot accept the realities proffered to them, are driven out to sea again and plunge headlong into the anonymity of the tidal race. On the other hand those 'whose record was lovely and true' are able to bear 'northward for home.' The 'I' persona recounts that they 'passed on, rushingly, / Like the Pentecost Wind.'

The image structures of the poem suggest that the home for which they are heading is not the national 'home' of jingoistic rhetoric, but a dwelling on an altogether different plane. Hardy appears here to depart from his more usual agnostic stance and offers the possibility of a spiritual interpretation of the poem.

*

In the parlance of post-colonial criticism, late Victorian London has to be the metropolitan centre, while the Colonies and Boer Republics of South Africa have to be the periphery. By writing poems about a colonial war in the language of the colonizer, Hardy might at first

sight seem to be part of the imperial enterprise. I would, however, argue that the critique of war which occurs in these poems also has the effect of re-positioning him in the post-colonial pattern.

Hardy makes no pretence in these 'War Poems' to familiarity with South Africa. The brief references to 'Durban', to a 'kopje-crest,' to the 'veldt,' to the 'Bush' and to the 'Karoo' are all that pass specifically or easily as descriptions of the country. He is just as readily prepared to inscribe it as a periphery to his experience. It is 'the far South Land,' the place of 'far battle, beyond the South sea,' or 'earth's nether bord/Under Capricorn.'

His imagination, however, and his powers of empathy are such that he cannot turn the Boer into the demonic 'Other.' Moreover, he is able to work his way into the skins of members of the colonizing class who are compelled - out of a sense of duty or as a result of propaganda - to travel south and to undergo the displacement which is part of the post-colonial experience for any settler; e.g., Drummer Hodge 'never knew-/Fresh from his Wessex home-/The meaning of the broad Karoo.' The same was true of many other ordinary men [and some women] crowding the troopships whose 'broad bottoms rip the bearing brine-/All smalling slowly to the grey sea-line' [Poems, p. 86.]

One major gap in Hardy's 'War Poems' results from his failure to give any consideration to indigenous South Africans who had the misfortune to be doubly colonized - both by the Brits and by the Boers who were the ostensible immediate targets of British Imperialism. But Hardy's sturdy provincial loyalties [the poet William Barnes, a close friend, wrote only in a broad Dorsetshire dialect] and identification with the working classes positioned him well to mount a critique of Imperialism at home.

In siding with the disempowered and in criticizing the mind-set of his own society even at the risk of being politically incorrect Hardy knew that he was not going to gain easy popularity with the British Establishment. At that time it was powerful enough to elicit militaristic verses from Kipling and even the independent Swinburne. But he had the

honesty to admit in a letter to a woman friend: 'This Imperial idea is, I fear, leading us into strange waters' [Seymour-Smith, 1994:639].

True to Hardy's surmise, contemporary criticism punished him for having the temerity to chart this insight in *Poems of the Past and Present*. The *Saturday Review* complained that he danced 'in hobnails' and was 'inharmonious' [Seymour-Smith, 1994:647]. T.H. Warren, later Professor of Poetry at Oxford, chided him in a *Spectator* review for his 'coarseness.' Apropos of this review, Hardy's biographer notes: 'Warren, interestingly, was also upset because the Boer War had not stirred the author to "enthusiasm" and because his loyalty to "the great and good" Queen was "strangely expressed" [Seymour-Smith, 1994:648].

For us, however, there is the advantage of hindsight.

Although Hardy did not travel to the colonial locale himself, he can now be viewed [to quote from Memmi's schema] rather like 'a colonizer who refuses.' He sensed deeply that jingoism was at best a futile dream, at worst a dangerous and wicked lie. More importantly, he had the courage to say so. In a certain way, we may see him as anticipating the type of writer exemplified by Salman Rushdie who unmask the centre by 'writing back' to it from the centre.

Like Hardy, we are fin de siècle people, though of a later century. For those of us with attentive ears, the voices contained in his 'War Poems' will still declare themselves with vigour and variety. They will be voices 'haunting us, daunting us, taunting us' when we are tempted to succumb to the group thinking that leads to group conflict or to follow uncritically all the mandates -irrespective of their individual merits - of a present power.

WORKS CITED

- Gibson, J [ed]. 1976. *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan.
Seymour-Smith, M. 1994. *Hardy*. London: Bloomsbury.