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Hardy, Donne, and the Tolling Bell

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That John Donne influenced the poetry of Thomas Hardy has long been known. Hardy himself acknowledged his indebtedness,[1] and more than one reader of his poetry has noted similarities to Donne's in idea, tone, and style. But the parallels so far cited have all been tentative or general in nature—echoes of Donne's manner rather than genuine sources.[2] There is, however, at least one clear instance of Hardy's direct dependence on Donne—Donne the prose writer, not Donne the poet—though, curiously enough, it has gone unnoticed in the principal biographies and critical studies of Hardy and even in the two major handbook commentaries on his poetry.[3] This is the short poem " Drawing Details in an Old Church," from *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922).[4] A comparison of the poem with the relevant Donne passage not only illuminates both, but may also serve as a modest contribution to that inquiry into sources and influences that one recent critic has called a major need in Hardy scholarship.[5]

Reminiscent of Hardy himself in his days as apprentice architect, the speaker in "Drawing Details" is sketching the interior of a rural Gothic church when its bell begins to toll overhead:

> I hear the bell-rope sawing,
> And the oil-less axle grind,
> As I sit alone here drawing
> What some Gothic brain designed;
> And I catch the toll that follows
> From the lagging bell,
> Ere it spreads to hills and hollows
> Where people dwell. (ll. 1-8)

Aware that the bell is tolling someone's death, the speaker nevertheless makes no effort to find out whose. He simply does not care; and he knows that no one will care about his own death later on.

I ask not whom it tolls for,
Incurious who he be;
So, some morrow, when those knolls for
One unguessed, sound out for me,
A stranger, loitering under
  In nave or choir,
May think, too, "Whose, I wonder?"
  But not inquire. (ll. 9-16)

In having his speaker reflect on the significance of a death knell, and especially in giving him the words "I ask not whom it tolls for" (l. 9), Hardy is obviously making explicit reference to Donne's familiar Meditation XVII, from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, written during the winter of 1623-24 as Donne lay recuperating from a serious illness.

> Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.[6]

More than time and place separate Hardy's sketcher from the convalescent Donne; the philosophical distance is profound. Living at a time when the modern scientific and mechanistic view of the universe was beginning to make itself felt, Donne frequently registered misgivings about the effects of the "new philosophy" and remained instinctively committed to the divine symmetry of the traditional Christian worldview and the theology deriving from it. His very illness, transformed and universalized in the *Devotions*, became a Christian allegory—the disease itself representing the destructive power of sin among men; his recovery, the redemption won for men by Christ; the danger of relapse, man's inherent tendency to fall from grace. In Meditation XVII his mind, set in motion by the sound of the passing-bell, reached beyond the isolation of his sickroom to an awareness of his oneness, not only with that dead man, but with all men. It was a oneness based, not on a spirit of purely natural benevolence or humanitarianism, nor simply on the

familiar Christian concept of the brotherhood of men under the common fatherhood of God, but specifically on the Pauline doctrine of the supernatural unity of all believers in and through the grace of Christ, the head of that "mystical" body of which they are members. The passing-bell thus signalled for Donne a moral lesson which, in full Christian perspective, touched every member of the human community: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

For Hardy, writing after three hundred years of the "new philosophy," the moral and theological absolutes of Christianity were empty abstractions. The old supernatural sanctions for human brotherhood having, to his mind, long since proved illusory, there was now only that tenuous unity among men that comes from their awareness of being isolated fellow-sharers of a blighted existence. And it is isolation, on several different levels at once, that is the theme of "Drawing Details in an Old Church." There is, first, the physical isolation of the speaker as he sits "alone" in the church at some distance from the "hills and hollows / Where people dwell." Next, there is the alienation of the speaker and, by implication, of the entire modern age from God and the age of faith symbolized by the Gothic church itself. The grinding and sawing noises made by the bell-rope and the "oil-less axle" convey ideas of decrepitude and disuse, perhaps even of deliberate neglect; and the fact that the sound of the bell comes "lagging" behind reinforces the overall impression of religious obsolescence. It is significant, too, that the speaker has come to the church, as to a museum, only in order to draw—in much the same way as the cathedral in another Hardy poem, "In St. Paul's a While Ago," has contemporary interest only for the curious who come to gawk at its statuary.[7]

The suggestiveness of phrasing in the first stanza, appropriate for the setting of scene and situation, yields in the second to plain statement of the speaker's ultimate isolation. Already shown to be separated from God, from the climate of faith, and from fellow-men physically, he now reveals his spiritual estrangement from them as well by not bothering to inquire about the ringing of the church bell. Ironically enough, this reaction conforms precisely to Donne's injunction never to send to know for whom the bell tolls. But Donne did not need to inquire. With his sense of human fellowship, his conviction that whatever concerns one member of the body concerns every other member, he knew perfectly well that the bell was tolling for himself. The speaker in the poem, on the other hand, is simply indifferent, "incurious." Moreover, his indifference is not peculiar to him but is representative of a general and apparently irreversible condition. For the "stranger" (not even drawing but only "loitering" in the church) who will hear the speaker's own death knell at some future time will display as little concern then as the

speaker himself is displaying now. In short, Donne's belief in human solidarity has given way to a sense of hopeless fragmentation. One man's temporary confinement to a sickroom has grown into universal and permanent isolation.

All aspects of "Drawing Details" are skillfully arranged to yield a tone of quiet "unhope" tinged with characteristically Hardyan nostalgia. The predominantly monosyllabic diction and heavy use of assonance throughout the poem, together with the alternating masculine and feminine rhymes in the first eight lines and the general iambic regularity of the first ten, all serve to duplicate the sound and rhythm of a tolling bell and fix them in the reader's aural memory. The two shorter lines at the end of each stanza contribute an echo-like effect to the sound. As an appropriate counterpoise to this balanced cadence, the halting movement of lines 11-15, metrically irregular and punctuated by frequent grammatical pauses, suggests the mood of wistful regret with which the speaker views the loss of old certainties and supports. The regret is intensified by the open r sounds at the end of the last four lines and by the suggestive suspension achieved by the metrical shortening of lines 14 and 16. But in the final line regret blends with resignation (and with the re-emergent sound of the tolling bell) in the return to metrical regularity and in the force of the climactic identical rhyme of "choir"-"inquire."

"Drawing Details" illustrates what Samuel Hynes calls Hardy's "antinomial set of mind"[8]—his fondness for juxtaposing two contrasting views of the same scene, event, or situation as a way of making an ironic comment about mutability. In this case, however, antinomial irony lies outside the poem proper or, to put it more accurately, is only half-suggested by the poem itself. To be sure, the poem depicts two separate situations—the speaker's and the stranger's reactions to hearing a passing-bell. But the reactions are the same. Ironic resonance emerges only from the contrast between these two scenes taken together and the Donne Meditation to which they clearly point. What results, then, is one of the few Hardy poems directly traceable to a literary source and dependent on familiarity with that source for full emotional effect. Moreover, Hardy's typical reliance on the function of memory for shaping ironic contrasts here takes an uncharacteristic turn. In "Drawing Details" the mind that does the remembering (of another and earlier bell-tolling) is not the speaker's, as is usually the case in Hardy's poems, but the reader's.

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Notes

[1] In his copy of Samuel C. Chew's *Thomas Hardy: Poet and Novelist* (1921 edition), Hardy wrote: "In this & similar criticisms it is curious that the influence of Donne is not mentioned." (Cited in J. O. Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970], p. 211). F. B. Pinion also notes Hardy's claim to affinity with Donne (*A Hardy Companion* [New York, 1968], p. 126). On the basis of a Donne-like conceit in an 1866 Hardy poem, Robert Gittings suggests that Donne was an early influence (*Young Thomas Hardy* [Boston, 1975], p. 89).

[2] Samuel C. Chew traces Hardy's literary ancestry back to the Metaphysical poets, especially Donne, but draws no specific comparisons (*Thomas Hardy: Poet and Novelist* [1921; rpt. New York: Knopf, 1964], pp. 10-11). Pinion particularizes Hardy's affinity to Donne only to the extent of identifying their common "rejection of sensuousness and traditional imagery," "modern scientific outlook," and "style close to speech idiom and uncompromisingly controlled" (*A Hardy Companion*, p. 126). In *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1977), Pinion points out suggestive concrete parallels to Donne in specific Hardy poems (pp. 70, 127, 191), as do Bailey (*Handbook*, pp. 211, 530, 611) and Gittings (*Young Thomas Hardy*, pp. 80, 89). But all three stop short of claiming Donne as Hardy's source.

[3] Bailey and Pinion, cited above.

[4] *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (New York, 1978), no. 655 [p. 690].

[5] Frank R. Giordano, Jr., "Thomas Hardy," in *Guide to the Year's Work in Victorian Poetry and Prose*, ed. Richard C. Tobias, Supplement to *Victorian Poetry* 12 (Spring 1974), 64.

[6] *Devotions, by John Donne, D.D., Dean of St. Paul's. With Two Sermons . . . To Which Is Prefixed His Life, by Izaak Walton* (London, 1840), p. 100.

[7] *Complete Poems*, no. 683 [p. 716].

[8] *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 44. David Perkins has recently issued a useful warning against over-stressing Hardy's "antinomianism" (*A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976], pp. 153-54). But Hynes's point has not lost its validity.