[Thomas Hardy, Claire Tomalin, Penguin, 486 pages]

Making Much of Thomas Hardy's Well-Beloved

By James Bowman

THE POSTHUMOUS reputation of the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) has continued to grow since his death almost 80 years ago. Nowadays, the author of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure* is in the popular view a bona fide Victorian G.O.M. (Grand Old Man) right up there with Dickens and Thackeray. Meanwhile, to the cognoscenti and literary critics who still look down their noses a bit at the novels, he is known as the first great poet of the 20th century and, if the late Donald Davie is to be believed, the most influential of them all.

According to Claire Tomalin, the central event in Thomas Hardy's life was the death of his first wife, the former Emma Gifford, in November 1912: "This is the moment when Thomas Hardy became a great poet." Hardy was 72 years old at the time and already celebrated throughout the English-speaking world as both a novelist and a poet, and yet, in Tomalin's reading, "it was the death of Emma that proved to be his best inspiration."

This is not an observation that is original to her, but in her new biography, *Thomas Hardy*, she is determined to make more of it than anyone else has. As a result, her book is more a biography of a marriage than a man — as were her earlier accounts of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, Dora Jordan and King William IV, and Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens.

The trouble is that she has little to work with—except, of course, for the "Poems of 1912-13," about which she has some interesting things to say. But even these works that were written around the time of Emma's death don't have much to tell us about the marriage. The marriage has even less to tell us about the poems.

Like most married couples of the Victorian era, Thomas and Emma did not talk or write about their relationship, even to intimates, and poor Miss Tomalin is reduced to picking up what she can from a stray remark or, often, what was not found where it would be expected. Tomalin's interpretation often seems strained. Of Emma's diary of their honeymoon trip to Paris, for instance, she writes: "Emma was a naïve diarist, responsive to what she saw and fluent in a scatter-brained way. She makes you smile, sympathetically … but from our point of view she fails to seize her great opportunity—she might have been honeymooning with anyone, Hardy's presence being barely mentioned."

How inconsiderate of Emma not to have thought, in the course of observing French manners in the 1870s, of the difficulties her reticence about her marriage would cause her husband's biographer in the next century. Just look at what it makes her do when she comes to the point of having to describe the wedding:

> [I]f Emma looked beautiful with the soft, sunny light on her wedding dress, if she even wore a special dress, these things went unrecorded. Their happiness at being together at last after four and a half years of being in love and apart must be assumed. … Whether both of them, having defied their parents, had regretful thoughts for them on the day, and whether lovemaking, at last licensed, was awkward for them, as for most newly married innocents, we shall never know.

Indeed! Her guesses on the matter are, presumably, as good as mine. My heart goes out to her in her struggles with the mystery of the Hardys' marital intimacy. For instance, she tells us that 1899 was the year when the bicycle journeys Emma shared with "Tom" must have brought them closer together than ever. One long ride in August of that year "suggests camaraderie and shared enjoyment." But then on the same page, 1899 is mentioned as the year when Emma moved into her own bedroom in the attic.

At any rate, it's pretty hard for her to convince the reader that her scenes of bicycle rides offer many insights on the great poet.

The one thing we do know for certain is that Emma was bitter about the fact that, when Hardy was writing *Jude the Obscure* (1895), he sought the advice of his friend and admirer, the aristocratic Florence Henniker, rather than her own. She regarded this as revealing his potential unfaithfulness.

When the novel was attacked on publication as "Jude the Obscene," it must have given her a certain satisfaction, and probably a grievance for life. Soon she was observing that, in spite of what were regarded as her husband's "advanced" views, his interest in her pet cause of women's suffrage "was 'nil' and that he cared only about the women he invented."

At any rate, it suited Hardy himself to believe that he had wronged his wife; though he thought this only after her death when he imagined his misdeed as a precondition for falling in love with her again—the moment she was unobtainable. Such a romantic story! No wonder Miss Tomalin invests all her biographical capital in it.

It may even be true. But I would have preferred if she had evinced just a bit of skepticism here, as she occasionally does elsewhere. At one point she mentions the scene in *Jude* in which we find the hero "looking through his straw hat as the sun shines through it and thinking, 'If only he could prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man'." This is exactly how Hardy describes his own experience as a boy in his memoirs. Tomalin wonders at it:

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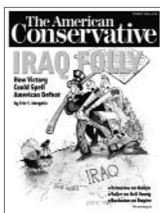

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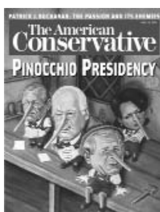

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"The oddity is that he transposes the thought of a boy who had no conscious reason to be unhappy or to fear growing up into the mind of one who was already unhappy and had good reason to approach adult life with small enthusiasm. Hardy appears to be reinventing his childhood and making it worse."

Characteristically, she speculates about what specific sorrow might have caused this, but she acknowledges that "a retrospective blight cast across his life is a very Hardyesque possibility."

Just so. Nothing odd about it, really. He seems to have always re-imagined his life as worse than it was. Why should we suppose that his marriage was any exception? The idea of the boy who doesn't want to grow up sounds oddly up-to-date in our era of perpetual adolescence and may not be unrelated to those "advanced" views of his in novels that an unkind reader might characterize as enshrinements of adolescent self-pity.

This, after all, is the problem with Hardy's novels; Claire Tomalin wrestles with it as everyone must. Critics, she acknowledges, have been "disturbed" by them because Hardy "seemed to suggest that human beings might be brought down by malignant forces at work in the world, using their power to turn things to evil." Now, where might the critics have got an idea like that? Maybe from that famous moment at the end of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* when, after the death of his heroine, Hardy comments that "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in the Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess." To her credit, Miss Tomalin doesn't buy Hardy's own explanation of the line:

> When he was attacked for it, he explained that "the forces opposed to the heroine were allegorized as a personality and that this was 'not unusual in imaginative prose or poetry." To suggest that readers should see that "the President of the Immortals" is meant only to symbolize the forces of society that brought Tess down will not do as a defense. There is something more there, something that makes sport with her sufferings, and making sport with suffering is cruelty.

It is one of the few times that this biographer is prepared to level such a charge against the poet. There should be more. More often she apologizes for the almost unbelievable letter of consolation that Hardy sent to his friend, the novelist H. Rider Haggard, on the death of his ten-year-old son, which expressed "sympathy with you in your bereavement. Though, to be candid, I think the death of a child is never really to be regretted, when one reflects on what he has escaped."

Here, as in so many other places, we ought to be able to see that there was always something of the village atheist about Hardy, and he delighted in shocking others with his "free-thinking" ways. This game works best when there is not too much in the way of political radicalism or the more dangerous sorts of free-thinking which this biography and others fault him for avoiding. No, if you really want to shock people, keep up the normal appearances of life, go to church and vote Conservative, as Hardy did, while advertising your belief that "philosophers seem to start wrong; they cannot get away from a prepossession that the world must somehow have been made to be a comfortable place for man"—or that "this planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences [meaning humans]. … Other planets may, though one can hardly see how." The really remarkable thing is that such celebrity posturing as the great World-Sufferer should prove not inconsistent with the production of some truly great poetry. Now there's a mystery that a biographer ought to be able to get her teeth into. ■

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La Belle France

"Last Chance For France" cries the London *Spectator* in a cover story, which means that *tout va bien* in the land of cheese. The Anglo-Saxons have been predicting the end of France since time immemorial, but if I were a Brit I'd worry more about what is taking place in my own back yard and leave the French to their mistresses, their wonderful culture, and the fact that France is a far more civilized country to live in than old Blighty.

I was recently in Washington for a speech, and ended it by saying that the next time someone says something rude about the French they should be reminded that at least the Frogs executed their Fifth Columnists after the war, which is more than we Americans are about to do to the neocons. It got a good laugh.

The French, whether one likes them or not—and I do—run rings around the rest of us where social interaction is concerned. To be French is to be well educated and civilized. Two summers ago, in a camp near St. Tropez where I had gone jogging, I watched and listened to teenage boys playing a soccer match. What struck me was the lack of swear words between 15-year-olds giving it their all. Compare this with an English pick-up game in Hyde Park, where the F-word is the only word one hears, or its equivalent basketball game in Central Park—and weep.

Better yet, as Theodore Dalrymple writes in the *Spectator*, "mass public drunkenness as the highest form of entertainment seems scarcely to exist." French everyday culture is less crass and vulgar than ours and certainly superior to that of Blair's Britain. People still take three-hour lunches, especially in small towns; women do not walk around with bottles of water attached to their mouths; and television programs tend to cover books and the arts more than the sexual antics of Britney Spears or Paris Hilton.

The French trains not only run on time, they also go very, very fast. The TGV takes me from Lausanne to Paris in two and a half hours, is extremely comfortable and clean, and serves a perfectly good meal. Compare that with the D.C. shuttle and shed a tear.

I remember when I was living in Flambertin des Creppières, a small hamlet west of Paris with an admittedly pretentious name, listening to two butchers argue about Camus. They had both obviously read him, but it was their evocation of the other writers to whom they compared him that left me breathless. After they finished their wine, they shook hands and went back to slicing up chickens and lambs.

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And there's something else, uniquely French where women are concerned. French women are as promiscuous as, say, Americans, Germans, or Italians, but with a difference. Not one lady in a hundred would quit the husband she deceives for the lover whom she adores. That to me is what being civilized is all about.

Which brings me to the French mistress, *la régulière*, as she's called. The Frenchman informs her of everything, state secrets and all. There exists between the sexes a habitual communication. The French mistress speaks, reflects, and decides on everything, from the most frivolous to the most important. But when was the last time you read of a political scandal where the ex-mistress had spilled the beans? It has never happened. When the present presidential frontrunner, Nicolas Sarkozy, broke up with his wife a couple of years ago, she was photographed by *Paris Match* with her alleged lover. Sarko stayed put with his mistress. Both women stayed as quiet as an Indian tomb. The French press didn't even try to ask what was going on. It was none of their business, and 60 million French knew it. Giscard, Mitterand, and Chirac, the last three presidents, have had more mistresses between them than the Clintons have billionaire Hollywood friends, yet none of them have ever talked, written, or gossiped about their relationships with *le numero un*.

Yes, France is in deep economic and Muslim trouble, but that's the fault of politically correct politicians. My friend Jean-Marie Le Pen is running for the last time, but he will not make it because of the united front against him by the rest of the hypocrites running for president. Ségolène Royal is shallow, a populist and a phony. Sarkozy I trust less than I can throw him as he's very small in stature. Bayrou is an unknown quantity who will keep things as they are, and they are not very good where the country's finances are concerned.

Le Pen is the only man who can stop the onslaught of Muslim immigration, but it is not to be. (He will, of course, one day when the you-know-what hits the fan, be called a visionary and a great Frenchman). *A toute de suite*, as they say. ■

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