CHAPTER V

THE CONCLUDING NOTE
I

The Charge of Metaphysical Pessimism Considered

Having discussed Hardy's thought at length as issuing from his novels in the preceding pages of this thesis, it is now the proper time to consider the charge of pessimism which has so persistently been levelled against him since he started writing about a hundred years ago. The voices that recite it are too numerous to be quoted or catalogued here. Walter Allen represents them all when he states categorically of Hardy: "That he was a pessimist seems to me to need no proof." Mr. Allen is, in a way, quite right if by pessimism is meant the repudiation of any rosy view of life which might flatter our traditional hopes and beliefs, and promise the happiness usually desired by the human consciousness, either here or hereafter, either to us or at least to our descendants in some future age when all will be well with this world.

The character of life as it is did not satisfy Hardy and would not satisfy anyone awakened to the painful awareness of the cosmic predicament of man. To say that it is somehow satisfactory contrary to our concrete experience would amount to the exercise of cowardly self-deception, and no one in our own age
would seriously blame Hardy for not doing it.

"He accepts science, and feels its spell, but joylessly." 2 It was therefore impossible for him to have a hope in the heaven hereafter where those who die here are supposed to transmigrate. Even in the hours of darkest despair or desperate need he refused to tell himself a lie and take such a 'leap of faith'. It is clear from the following dialogue between Tess and Angel at Stonehenge in the closing scene of the novel where she was apprehending arrest and death-sentence:

"...Tell me now, Angel, do you think we shall meet again after we are dead? I want to know."

He kissed her to avoid a reply at such a time.

'O, Angel - I fear that means no!' said she, with a suppressed sob. 'And I wanted so to see you again - so much, so much! What - not even you and I, Angel, who love each other so well?'

Like a greater than himself, to the critical question at the critical time he did not answer; and they were again silent." 3

Hardy likewise refused to subscribe to any kind of evolutionary hope in the manner of Spencer and his followers. W. R. Rutland is quite right in maintaining that "his writings had never held out any very cheerful prospect for the future." 4

(1) The Pagan zest for life and joy in what it offers,
(2) the Christian hope in the eternity behind the stream of time or heaven above the earth, and (3) the evolutionary idealism of one kind or the other that wishfully pictures a 'future' which
will have outgrown the terrestrial ills and evils we now suffer from - any one of these views, the Western mind seems to be thinking, might acquit an author safely of the charge of pessimism if he exhibits it together with the darker side of life. Hardy rejects all these three forms of optimism.

But it is wrong to assume that the rejection of optimism implies the adoption of pessimism. The sane and scientific philosophy has to dismiss both alike as essentially anthropomorphic and mistaken in that one reads a beneficent purpose, the other maleficient one, in a world which is never made for us and where objectively speaking there is no purpose at all in any human sense. It is the just and balanced view of Voltaire's Turkish Dervish in Candide, or Optimism who tells Candide tossed about between Pangloss's optimism of pre-established harmony and Martin's dark pessimism, that the quest of purpose, good or evil, in the universe which hurries along in its inscrutable movement, is an exercise in futility, and likens man's fate on the earth to that of rats on board a ship which is never designed for them.

"'Does it matter', said the dervish, 'whether there is good or evil? When His Highness sends a ship to Egypt, does he worry whether the mice on board are comfortable or not?'

'Then what must we do?' asked Pangloss.

'Keep quiet', said the dervish.'
The dervish 'slammed the door' of discussion in the faces of both
Pangloss and Martin, the optimist and the pessimist respectively,
and his silence is a superior wisdom to one's hope and the other's
fear.

Bertrand Russell expresses the same view, when he writes:

"From a scientific point of view, optimism and pessimism
are alike objectionable: optimism assumes, or attempts
to prove, that the universe exists to please us, and
pessimism that it exists to displease us. Scientifically,
there is no evidence that it is concerned with us
either one way or the other. The belief in either pessimism
or optimism is a matter of temperament, not of rea-
son, but the optimistic temperament has been much
commoner among Western philosophers."

Hardy's position as considered in the first and second chapters
of this thesis is similar. To repeat what is already discussed
earlier in the words of Hardy himself: "It must be obvious that
there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism,
or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics
- which is truth."" His metaphysical position, as far as the nat-
ure of the world excluding human consciousness is concerned, is
naturalistic which means neutralistic but not pessimistic. The
cruelties of the world are born of Nature's indifference, not
hostility to man, of the want of any purpose, not of a bad
purpose. It is, however, natural that to the stubborn optimism
of the Western temperament even Neutralism appears to be a form
of pessimism in so far as it as pitilessly contradicts optimism.
There is a sense in which pessimism signifies not a belief in a bad universe, but a feeling of unrelieved despair. Hardy, accordingly, might be regarded as a pessimist if we consider exclusively his earlier experience of anguish and despair which occurred when the naturalistic world-view rudely shocked his profound "churchy" piety and made him an atheist against his temperamental inclination to believe in God. This sense of shock and grief is manifest in the characters of the second group who, as discussed in the second chapter, unable to bear absolute loneliness, heretically rave and rage against an evil God they conjure up for their belief. But as for himself Hardy had recovered sanity which the shock had shaken for the time being, and accepted without betaking to 'bad faith' the world as it is.

His view of man is not naturalistic. David Cecil writes: "Though he may have disbelieved in the ultimate significance of the spirit, his imagination continued to express itself in spiritual terms." This, however, would seem puzzling only to those who seek to describe Hardy as an absolute Naturalist as much in his view of Nature as of man. As for Hardy he has exhibited his convictions articulately enough, and if man in his fiction appears to be a spirit so long as he lives opposed to the whole of inanimate universe, not a mere by-product of matter, it is because Hardy has conceived him as such and distinguished himself
in so doing like all existential thinkers from the naturalists on the one hand and idealists on the other. Hardy regards man as free from Nature's domain, free to transform his feelings and urges into a better shape suitable to the neutral world by the power of will, free to act as he chooses in the light of wise judgement. It is for man to decide whether to work out a concrete ethical harmony with his world as opposed to the metaphysicians' mere conceptual harmony in the abstract beyond experience, or to worsen further the relationship of 'divorce' between the two, whether to revolt in vain or to resign meaningfully, to die a prisoner in the gaol or to convert the solitary confinement into serene hermitage, to languish dissatisfied in the desert desiring in vain flowers and foliage or to make the desert itself a spot of chastened beauty by desiring no more than its dry sands. Hardy realized that if Nature is deaf to human cries, the wisdom lies in ceasing to cry and terminating ridiculous 'Quixotic strife' with it; if it is just the neutral condition of our conscious being, we must match with it the neutrality of our attitude; if the enlightened vision of the world shocks to anguish our traditional emotions, we must, instead of blinding ourselves to truth, substitute for them new emotions which might happily coincide with it; if misery is the lot of mortal beings, we must kill its sorrow by closer and constant acquaintance with it and learn to laugh at it. Hardy thus shows, unlike anguished
existentialists, that the strife of existence can be transformed into triumphant peace, and the absurd into harmony. Hardy's metaphysical ethics of affirmative resignation which paves the way towards the establishment of harmony as discussed at length in the second chapter, is clearly melioristic, for it seeks to improve man's relationship with the world. It is not pessimistic because the durable mood in the characters affirmatively resigned to the world and its ways is not that of despair or disturbance but of tranquillity which deepens positively into a sort of 'introvertive' mysticism. In the realm of feeling as surely as in the domain of metaphysics Hardy rises like a true philosopher above the childish optimism and equally childish pessimism. Hope is never valuable in itself. It is valuable only because it might create and maintain a satisfactory state of mind in man. But hope which is a means can be safely dispensed with if even without its aid a more satisfactory state of consciousness which is an end can be realized. Hardy's want of hope and faith does not ruffle his serenity, and therefore it does not matter. It is not pessimism.

II

Hardy vis-a-vis Gautam Buddha: A Brief Comparative Study

In all this Hardy resembles more the Oriental philosophers who treat philosophy seriously as a practical way leading beyond
the sorrow and suffering of life, than the Western metaphysicians who, inspired merely by the sense of wonder play the speculative game just for intellectual pleasure. He may fitly and briefly be compared with the Buddha who, as Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes, "typifies for all time the soul of the East with its intense repose, dreamy gentleness, tender calm and deep love."9

Hardy's vision of existence was profoundly tragic, though not, as we have frequently stressed, pessimistic. The spectacle of life feeding on life, of mutual butchery in the survival struggle, struck him with deep sorrow. John Cowper Powys writes:

"He saw the ivy killing the tree, he saw weasel killing the rabbit, he saw the trees strangling each other as they contended for light and air, he saw the sportsman wounding the pheasant, and the collector bringing down a rare migratory bird. And he saw the cruelties that are an essential part of Nature's life and have nothing to do with man. He saw the children of the earth feeding upon each other. He saw the dark unseen tragedies that go on all the while in these peaceful places. Instead of a "Presence that disturbs us with the joy of elevated thoughts", he felt a blind irrational "Immanent will" driving vegetation to strangle vegetation, beast to destroy beast, bird to prey upon bird, insect to torture insect. And as he brooded upon all this, the mindless and meaningless Chance that governs the destiny of living things took to itself demonic lineaments and became something much more sinister than mere "crass casualty", became in fact the dominant pressure of a super-mundane Mischief, that with an ironic and goblinish malice persecutes the luckless children of its wanton creation."10

Hardy's casual reference to what Powys calls "super-mundane Mischief" is just an instance of "the willing suspension of dis-
belief" when it is not an instance of heresy committed by the second group of his characters, his perception otherwise is strikingly similar to that of Prince Siddhartha, the early Buddha, as stated in Edwin Arnold’s classic The Light of Asia:

"All things spoke peace and plenty, and the Prince saw and rejoiced. But, looking deep, he saw how the swart peasant sweated for his wage, toiling for leave to live; and how he urged the great-eyed oxen through the flaming hours, goading their velvet flanks; then marked he, too, how lizard fed on ant, and snake on him, and kites on both; and how the fish-hawk robbed the fish-tiger of that which it had seized; the shrike chasing the bulbul, which did chase the jewelled butterflies; till everywhere each slew a slayer and in turn was slain, life living upon death. So the fair show veiled one vast, savage, grim conspiracy of mutual murder, from worm to man, who himself kills his fellow; seeing which — the hungry ploughman and his labouring kine, their dewlaps blistered with the bitter yoke, the rage to live which makes all living strife — the Prince Siddhartha sighed. "Is this," he said, "that happy earth they brought me forth to see? How salt with sweat the peasant’s bread! how hard the oxen’s service! in the brake how fierce the war of weak and strong! ’tis air what plots; no refuge even in water. Go aside a space, and let me muse on what you show.""

The Buddha after the mystic enlightenment of Nirvana had absolutely overcome the will to live. It was a characteristic which even Schopenhauer envied but could not achieve. No sorrow of life or shadow of death could disturb the Buddha’s profound serenity. He was released from all that keeps the mind of man in
bondage to misery. Yet his tender heart bled in disinterested concern for all those who suffer and want happiness after the heart's desire, die and crave to breathe for ever. The basic feature of his ethics is, therefore, all-embracing compassion. The Buddha asked his disciples to sing the message of love for all creatures:

"Creatures without feet have my love,  
And likewise those that have two feet,  
And those that have four feet I love,  
And those too that have many feet."¹²

And again:

"(1) All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death.  
Likening others to oneself, one should neither slay nor cause to slay. (129)"¹³

Hardy had in the manner of the Oriental saviour largely subdued, if not perfectly overcome, the will to live. Yet he was not indifferent to the torture of 'the will to live' in all its infinite manifestations. His compassion is not dissimilar to the Buddha's. What is called Hardy's pessimism, according to F. Manning, "springs from his sympathy with mankind, from the depth and richness of his emotional nature."¹⁴ It is, in the words of J. C. Powys, "not a matter of personal nerves or personal misfortune but a matter of indignant sympathy with a suffering world."¹⁵ W. L. Phelps writes: "His intense love for bird and beast is well-known; many a stray cat and hurt dog have found in him a protector
and a refuge. We have already discussed Hardy's compassion at length in the previous chapter. It need not be repeated here.

The Buddha was an atheist. He refused to indulge in the idle metaphysical speculations regarding the ultimate nature of things, or give a consistent monistic interpretation of existence. He concentrated his attention on ethics — on how to live in peace with the world, and how to achieve mutual peace and love among the creatures of the earth who are as it is at strife. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes:

"In much of the literature of doubt and disbelief the name of the Buddha is mentioned with respect. The humanists honour him as one of the earliest protagonists of their cause — the happiness, the dignity, and the mental integrity of mankind. Those who declare that men cannot know reality, and others who affirm that there is no reality to know, use his name. Intellectual agnostics who flirt with a vague transcendentalism quote his example. Social idealists, ethical mystics, rationalist prophets are all attracted by his teaching and utilise it in their defence."

And again:

"He concentrates his teaching on moral discipline and would not enter into metaphysical discussions with the crowd of contemporary sophists. Whether the world was infinite in space or limited, whether it had an origin in time or not, whether the person who had attained truth had or had not individuality, or would or would not live after death, the Buddha would not discuss. Dislike of mere speculation is the distinguishing mark of the Buddha's teaching."
The Buddha resembles existentialists in never affirming what is beyond verification, in never attempting to imprison theoretically the diversity and contradictions of existence within a well-conceived scheme of philosophy either to satisfy inquisitive reason or to answer wishful teleological quest. He rises superior to them in his sane resolution of the absurd into an ethical harmony, and dissolution of despair and anguish into ineffable serenity of soul that no misfortune or mishap could ruffle.

We have discussed in the first chapter that Hardy also discarded as superstitious the certitudes of theology. He was sceptical about even the conclusions his contemporary philosophers had inferentially arrived at, had refused to essay in his own way the understanding of the ultimate stuff of reality, and plainly admitted "that possibly there exists no comprehension" of the universe in its totality and essentiality. He had also like the great Buddha concentrated his attention on the province of existence torn in the absurd strife, on the problems of how to realise the ethical harmony with the world and escape to the extent possible the pains of living, and how the mass of humanity in their private spheres of mutual relationships must comfort one another in the tedious, even torturesome journey forced unasked on them from the cradle to the grave.

The Buddha found nothing attractive in the ephemeral
pleasures of the world and looked upon them with the well-consolidated mood of detachment and disinterestedness.

"(5) Come, look at this world resembling a painted royal chariot. The foolish are sunk in it; for the wise there is no attachment for it. (171)"19

Attachment with the world and the desires for its pleasures are, in fact, the root cause of sorrow and despair. Therefore,

"(5) He who overcomes in this world this fierce craving, difficult to subdue, sorrows fall off from him like water drops from a lotus leaf. (356)"20

When all cravings are eradicated from the mind the resulting state of consciousness or superconsciousness is called Nirvana. It is above pains and pleasures known to us and more satisfying in its deep mystical tranquillity than the happiness of the usual human definition. The Buddha's conclusion is:

"(6) There is no fire like passion, no ill like hatred, there is no sorrow like this physical existence....... there is no happiness higher than tranquillity. (202)"21

In all this Hardy surely resembles the Buddha. It has been frequently stressed in the foregoing pages of this thesis that he was a sort of recluse, a hermit withdrawn deep within the self in a serenity he himself could not befittingly describe or denominate. He was never seriously interested in the objects of the world, and was indifferent alike to the pleasures of the
world and pains which might attend on the desires for pleasures. Arguing to answer the charge of pessimism on him Hardy told G. K. Chesterton that "I could never get over the idea that it would be better for us to be without both the pleasures and pains; and that the best experience would be some sort of sleep." Hardy displays here his characteristic terminological inexactitude, for the experience of consciousness cleansed of its content of restless desires which make for pain and pleasure, is never the same as sleep wherein there is no consciousness at all. Clym's tranquil and well-content consciousness contrasted with Eustacia's depressed state of disappointed ambition in *The Return of the Native* as discussed at length in the second chapter, is certainly not a sleep, and should be described more positively. It is unruffled equanimity which surely and discernibly deepens into the Buddhist sort of 'introvertive' mysticism. Hardy was always poor at naming what he spontaneously showed so unmistakably.

The Buddha said: "(6) As a solid rock is not shaken by wind, so wise men are not moved amid blame and praise. (81)" Hardy's equanimity as manifest in his characters such as Clym, Oak, Elizabeth-Jane, was rarely disturbed by others' opinions about him. We have already quoted him earlier as saying in response to the praises which his friends and sympathetic
critics had sent him: "As I have told you before, I read those things said about me by generous friends as if they were concerning some person whom I but vaguely know and whom they have mistaken for me."24 H. M. Tomlinson testifies: "Once I began to move uneasily at his recital of the course of one outrageous attack, but Hardy's face did not lose its good humour, nor his voice its gentleness. He was talking only of men in the abstract, and this part of the evidence. I should doubt that Hardy was ever made angry, except by cruelty to the lowly and unimportant."25 The self of such an 'introvertive' recluse as Hardy rarely if ever floats to the surface of his being to be exposed to the unsettling attacks of praise and blame that so easily elate or deject those extrovertive minds who can as rarely if ever manage to dive into the safer depths of consciousness.

All this, of course, does not mean that Hardy was as perfect as the Buddha. What is exhibited as sure tendencies in one are consummate realizations in the other. The difference between the two appears to be that between a child and a fully grown man, of the degree of growth and maturity rather than one of kind. One seems yet to be travelling without knowing it on the darkened path towards the goal of mystic illumination where the other has consciously reached and settled. The spot where Hardy has arrived in his journey, however, seems to be dimly delivered from complete darkness by the distant rays of the serene
effulgence.

The four truths which the Buddha realized were: "(13) Suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the noble eightfold path which leads to the cessation of suffering. (91)" Desire is the origin of suffering and renunciation of all desires makes for the cessation of suffering. That far the Buddha and Hardy seem to be at one. But it is not so easy to achieve the renunciation of desires as it is to understand that desires cause sorrow. The Buddha therefore enjoins constant striving of the will to uproot them according to the noble eightfold path of ethical discipline which consists of right views, right aspirations, right speech, right actions, right living, right exertion, right recollection, and right meditation. Hardy has no idea of any such regular discipline which could deepen further his consciousness towards the mystic repose and consolidate his achievement.

The concept of 'sadhana' or discipline in a long-drawn endeavour to create and maintain a tranquil state of mind seems to be as alien to Hardy as it has been to the Western thinkers in general. Angel Clare's difficulty in Tess of the D'Urbervilles that he could not resist disturbance in spite of his sincere wish to be at peace, is obviously Hardy's own to certain extent:
"'This is the chief thing: be not perturbed', said the Pagan moralist. That was Clare's own opinion. But he was perturbed. 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid', said the Nazarene. Clare chimed in cordially; but his heart was troubled all the same. How he would have liked to confront those two great thinkers, and earnestly appeal to them as fellow-man to fellow-men, and ask them to tell him their method.'"27

It is difficult to guess how the Pagan moralist would have answered Clare if the two had ever met. But an ancient Indian thinker would have answered, if asked, that a mere adoption of a moral maxim is not enough. Patient effort of years is required before the theoretical wisdom is successfully translated into action and behaviour by the ethical will. That is the right method. Arjuna's complaint in the Bhagavad Geeta that it is as difficult to control the restless mind and shape it to the sort of repose we aspire for as it is to chain wind, is not dissimilar to Angel's. Krishna, the Lord of the Geeta, answers Arjuna:

"Doubtless, O mighty-armed, the mind is restless and hard to control; but by practice and non-attachment, O son of Kunti, it can be controlled."28

That is where all ancient Indian thinkers, theist or atheist, orthodox or heterodox, are at one. Hardy has shown detachment from the world which accounts for his inward serenity. But he does not know 'abhyasa' or tireless practice according to any regular discipline. He has tended positively towards the Buddhist kind of 'introvertive' mysticism. He would have become like the
great Buddha an accomplished mystic of this kind if he had laid down before him and followed systematically a path of 'sadhana' somewhat similar to the 'noble eightfold path'.

Like all esoteric schools of Indian mysticism the Buddha believed in the cycle of reincarnations. But this faith, or may be it was knowledge, was not a form of optimism. If death ended life, it could be looked upon as a deliverance from the pains which we would not be able to escape while living. But births and deaths in a never ending series of lives meant everlasting swinging on the waves of time. It is far more disheartening than one limited span of conscious being. Only Nirvana and the ethical discipline leading towards it, according to the Buddha, could bring liberation from the cycle. Hardy's faith in death as the full stop to the flux of conscious existence seems comparatively more heartening to those who find life's struggle tedious and painful.

III
The Charge of Social Pessimism
Considered

Hardy was not like Swift a hater of man as a basically bad and selfish creature. Nor like Sartre as discussed in the first section of the previous chapter did he think that the basic
form of social relationship is irretrievable hatred. Albert Schweitzer wrote: "To the question whether I am a pessimist or an optimist, I answer that my knowledge is pessimistic, but my willing and hoping are optimistic." Hardy's answer regarding the human affairs could not have been different. Better and fuller awareness of the human predicament in the gratuitous universe, Hardy hoped, would inspire mutual love and sympathy which might mitigate the hatred and exploitation that prevail today, and rectify in certain positive measure the remediable evils of human creation. There is no reason to believe that the social absurd will someday be absolutely resolved into social harmony. But it is quite reasonable to hope that its strife and pain will reduce in degree as the realization of the entire human responsibility as the basis of ethics dawns upon and is accepted by more and more people. Hardy's revolt, determined to ameliorate the human situation in the society, is decidedly affirmative and moderately optimistic. It makes nonsense of the charge that he was a pessimist in the social sense.

To conclude in brief, twin principles of Hardy's melioristic ethics can be derived distinctly from the study of his novels: (1) resignation to the neutral world, and (2) compassion to all creatures. They are both quite affirmative, and absolve him
effectively from the charge of pessimism in a way unsuspected by his critics.