

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Number 10

(NEW SERIES—2007)

ADDENDUM NUMBER 2 TO “A LETTER OF LAMENTATION TO AMERICA: THE UNITED STATES IS NO LONGER A SERIOUS NATION”



“The Oxen”

By

Thomas Hardy

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
“Now they are all on their knees,”
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
“Come; see the oxen kneel

“In the lonely barton by yonder comb
Our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

[1916]

Note to the reader:

That Hardy wrote this poem in the very midst of the World War I years—a time that swept conventional faith away for many—gives meaning to the ninth line and part of the tenth, “So fair a fancy few would weave / In these years!” A line that’s gorgeous with its three alliterated “f” words followed by the two “w” words, the whole of that followed by the lovely assonance inside “few, ” “weave,” “these,” and “years”—with all this wonder and dexterity in its *own* “weaving,” the line is also the fulcrum of the poem, or hinge. *Before* it are childhood, the past, memory, legend, and belief; *after* it are the war (“*these* years”), loss, adulthood, the *absence* of “fancy” and, by extension, of faith. As far as “non-god” is concerned, or as far as loss of belief is concerned, the key word is “Hoping.” I myself can’t accept the idea that Hardy is in any way “wishing” or “hoping” that faith will somehow actually return—he’s far, far too deep and penetrating and absolutely unsentimental a thinker for *that* to be the case. On the other hand, it’s indisputable that the meaning of “Hoping” remains of key importance to the whole poem. I myself think of it as meaning that Hardy respects and even reveres what once *was*—and that he’d love as much as anyone to have a *glimpse* of it, knowing now that’s gone.

—EL