UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

THE ENGLISH NOVELISTS

General Editor:

HERBERT VAN THAL

THOMAS HARDY

Uniform with this Volume:

THE BRONTËS by Phyllis Bentley.

SAMUEL BUTLER by G. D. H. Cole.

HENRY FIELDING by Elizabeth Jenkins.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON by Lettice Cooper.

RUDYARD KIPLING by Rupert Croft-Cooke.

BULWER-LYTTON by The Earl of Lytton, K.G.

ARNOLD BENNETT by Walter Allen.

SIR WALTER SCOTT by Dame Una Pope-Hennessy.

MRS. GASKELL by Yvonne french.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE by Beatrice Curtis Brown.

MARIA EDGEWORTH by P. H. Newby.

GEORGE BORROW by Martin Armstrong.

MRS. EWING, MRS. MOLES WORTH, AND MRS. HODGSON BURNETT by Marghanita Laski.

H. G. WELLS, by Norman Nicholson.

D. H. LAWRENCE by Anthony West.

JANE AUSTEN by Margaret Kennedy.

THOMAS HARDY

by

DESMOND HAWKINS

LONDON
ARTHUR BARKER LTD.

First published 1950

Printed in Great Britain by
THE CAMPFIELD PRESS, ST. ALBANS
FOR ARTHUR BARKER LTD., 30 MUSEUM STREET, LONDON, VV.C.I

TO BARBARA

" If they won't bring tea, let's discuss something."

TCHEKOV: *The Three Sisters.*

PREFACE

IN criticizing a novelist, the first thing to do is to read all his novels. The next is to decide how many of them, and which, will be familiar to one's readers. I have assumed that those who look at my book will have at any rate a working knowledge of *Tess* and *Jude*, and an acquaintance perhaps with *The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders, Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*—or some of them. Those are to my mind the essential Hardy, though I expect his admirers would urge the addition of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Trumpet-Major;* and I would not be one to demur at that.

Where reference is made to a book with which the reader is not familiar, the Appendix may be helpful: in it I have given a short synopsis of each of Hardy's novels, in chronological order.

CHAPTER I

" The truly great stand upon no middle ledge; they are either famous or unknown " (Desperate Remedies).

DRURY LANE has seen many notable performances, but if I could revisit the theatre on any one night in its illustrious past I should not hesitate over my choice: the clock would go back eighty years and I should take my seat in readiness for the curtain to go up on " The Forty Thieves." It is perhaps a whimsical choice because I do not know who played the leading parts or how the pantomime was received. Indeed such things are irrelevant. My Latest is limited to the most minor and non-speaking parts. Somewhere in that stage army of small-timers and walkers-on at Drury Lane in 1867—among the lesser Thieves perhaps, for not all the Forty can have been stars—I should seek a young fresh-faced man of light build. He was not an actor, and so far as I know he made only one other appearance on the professional stage during his long life. The limelight he sought was not quite the kind that shines on pantomimes, for he was an architect by profession and his private ambitions were literary. He had tried his hand at verse-making without success. He was now playing his insignificant part in " The Forty Thieves " in order to gain some practical insight into the craft of playwriting. I imagine the programme did not mention his name so I hasten to make amends for the management's lapse—or rather, its loss of an opportunity. The unprofessional actor and would-be dramatist was Thomas Hardy.

He was at this time a young man at the age—twenty-seven—when the exuberance of youth finds it increasingly hard to smother the desire to find some sort of self-classification. Hardy urgently wanted to " be something." He had tried without success to make his mark as a poet and if literary London was disinclined to accept him as a poet, then he must be something else. Hardy has left no recorded reflections on his experience in " The Forty Thieves ", but his flirtation with the stage was brief and unproductive. He at once turned to novel-writing, an alternative path to literary fame which perhaps suggested itself when he attended Charles Dickens's readings at the Hanover Square Rooms. In five months he wrote his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*—a work which was never published and was later destroyed at the author's request.

In later years Hardy came to regard novel-writing largely as a livelihood. Like any manufacturer he learnt his mailant, catered for it, made concessions to its demands. At the outset, however, he was far more anxious simply to justify his existence as an author by appearing in print regardless of profit or loss. He had come to London from Dorset with the inner conviction that his destiny would carry him out of the architectural profession to some form of literary career. His first attempts as a poet had not been encouraging, and when he sent the manuscript of *The Poor Man and the Lady* to Macmillan his hopefulness was beginning to be dulled by resignation. At twenty-seven one at least begins to perceive that opportunity is not timeless.

John Morley read the novel for Macmillan and gave it an encouraging refusal. It passed next to Chapman & Hall, where George Meredith gave it a discouraging acceptance. It is indeed one of life's little ironies that Hardy's first two

readers should have been Morley and Meredith, that both discerned the potential talent in an immature work, and that neither managed to secure this formidable new recruit.

Hardy called on Meredith and was sufficiently impressed to withdraw the novel and to start work on a second with a more complicated plot of the kind which Meredith appeared to recommend; but when this second venture—*Desperate Remedies*—was completed it was not sent to Meredith or to Morley. Instead Hardy offered it to a publisher named Tinsley.

The part played by Tinsley in Hardy's career is intriguing. He seems to have been a shrewd matter-of-fact tradesman of the bouncing sort, without a trace of the cultural elegance of the more reputable publishers. In approaching him Hardy perhaps sought a plain straightforward business proposition instead of the cautious counsel of wise elders; if so, he got wnat he wanted. Tinsley offered to publish the book but was disinclined to accept the financial loss that would probably result. Hardy was therefore required to invest seventy-five pounds in the venture, which meant gambling a large slice of his life's savings. He took the plunge, however, and *Desperate Remedies* duly appeared in 1871.

An ambition was realized. Thomas Hardy was now visible on the literary horizon—though with little of profit or credit to himself. The sales of *Desperate Remedies* brought the author only sixty pounds to offset his initial outlay of seventy-five pounds, so Hardy found himself fifteen pounds the poorer for his " success "; and fear of harmful repercussions in the architectural profession if his other interest became known had led him to publish anonymously, so his name remained as obscure as before. Most significant of the reviews was *The Spectator's,* which attacked him savagely for " immorality "

—a charge which Hardy was often to face in the future. His offence on this occasion was to ask the Victorian public to believe that a member of the landed gentry could bear an illegitimate child.

In spite of this depressing debut Hardy penevered, switching to a style much better suited to his talents, and now wrote *Under the Greenwood Tree.* This he offered to Macmillan, apparently with little confidence, for he was unnecessarily discouraged by the publisher's reception of it and promptly put the manuscript aside and " abandoned " literature. The jovial Tinsley was disregarded this time —perhaps because his less critical amenability cost money.

But Tinsley, as one may well imagine, was just the kind of man to pop up uninvited. In 1872, he chanced to meet Hardy in a London street, teased him a little and proceeded to buy *Under the Greenwood Tree* and to commission a new story by Hardy *(A Pair of Blue Eyes)* for serial publication in a magazine. This accidental encounter was the turning-point in Hardy's career. Leslie Stephen, who was then editing *The Cornhilly* was quick to realize that Tinsley had made an important discovery. Hardy's next commission was a serial for *The Cornhill* It was called *Far From the Madding Crowd,* and with its publication there was no further doubt that a new novelist of the first rank had arrived.

CHAPTER II

"Where nothing particular is going on, one incident makes a drama." {The Hand of Ethelberta.)

NONE of Hardy's first three novels is insignificant. *Desperate Remedies* has numerous felicities of description and phrasing in its uneven, stumbling development. *Under the Greenwood Tree* remains endearing as a first sketch of rustic character and dialect humour. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* foreshadows much of Hardy's later development: the heroine, Elfride, is an innocent and immature Tess, Henry Knight is likewise a sort of preface to Angel Clare, and the oLici* lover—Stephen Smith—introduces that theme of the self-improved provincial betraying his kindred for the sake of London ambitions, which is one of Hardy's central preoccupations. Nevertheless, I pass over them quickly for the moment because it seems to me that *Far From the Madding Crowd* marks the point where Hardy struck the true vein of his talent. It is the first of his books in which he reached out to the stark, almost posed grandeur of classic tragedy; it makes no important concessions to the literary fashions of its time; and at every turn it shows signs of a mature writer at the full extent of his powers. In addition it has an extra claim on our attention, for *in* it Hardy for the first time used the word " Wessex" in the special sense which it has since acquired.

Before 1874 Wessex was an ancient Saxon Kingdom, **and** nothing more. Thanks to Hardy the word in its most

popular sense now signifies the English Middle West —roughly speaking, Dorset and the counties to its north and west—coloured with the slightly fabulous tints of Hardy's imagination. How many writers have left their mark so firmly on the national map? Within two years of Hardy's reintroduction of" Wessex," another writer had adopted the word and it quickly passed into general currency. In fact Hardy thus coined his own epitaph: he is, and will always be, " the Wessex novelist and poet."

This does not mean that Hardy passed all his days in Dorset writing chronicles of peasant life. It is amusing to recall that when *Far From the Madding Crowd* appeared in book form, Hardy—newly married—was living at Surbiton. He liked leisurely European tours and he was a frequent attendant at fashionable London parties—perhaps from a feeling that a novelist should be well informed about the fashions and opinions of " society." Moreover he made spirited attempts in his writing to escape from Wessex. The novel which followed *Far From the Madding Crowd* was a lively comedy of manners in a setting of London high-life — *The Hand of Ethelberta.* There are even moments when one suspects that Hardy was not quite the orthodox and observant countryman that he is usually said to be. He writes learnedly about the great bustard and the cream-coloured courser, but he speaks of " swallows " when he means " martins "—a mistake that Shakespeare did not make, in his reference to the " temple-haunting martlet "—and his attack on the sport of the gun in *Tess* is to my ear essentially urban in tone.

Nevertheless Hardy is beyond question the greatest delineator in prose of rural England, and it is in terms of Wessex that we must assess what is most valuable and singular in his genius. Like the D'Urbervilles his was a

family which had declined from the high fortunes of earlier days. After a visit to the D'Urberville country in 1888 Hardy noted " the decline and fall of the Hardys much in evidence hereabout"; and he recalled how his mother had drawn Irs attention, as a child, to a man " walking beside a horse and common spring trap who represented what was once the leading branch of the family. So we go down, down, down."

Looking now at the figure of that man " walking beside a horse and common spring trap " we easily recognize Tess's father; and he is not the only *dramatis persona* to be glimpsed by Hardy at a tender age. In an interview recorded in 1892 Hardy said, " Girls resembling the three dairymaids in *Tess* used to get me to write their love-letters for them when I was a little boy. I suppose that unconsciously I absorbed a good deal of their mode of life and speech." Incidentally Richardson, whose Pamela might be described as an earlier Tess, corseted with Puritan doctrine, performed the same office of scribe to lovesick dairymaids with similar profit to our literature. Hardy gained something else from the village girls: in a barn at the back of Kingston Maurward he used to sit listening to their singing of old ballads. Some of the ballads appear, in snatches, in his novels. More important, the spirit of balladry permeates much of his work: Hardy rivals the old singers in the art of taking stock situations and simple characters and charging them with a haunting nostalgic poetry. The disappointments of love, the cruelties of fate; the stern outline of prison and gallows—these are the tradi-; tional ingredients of the dairymaid's ballad, and they are the mainsprings of Hardy's novels in much the same blend of narrative crudeness and instinctive lyrical feeling. How easily *Far From the Madding Crowd* could be sung in a dozen

verses entitled " The Three Lovers," with *The Return of the Native* for an encore as " The Egdon Tragedie," rounded off by " Tess, the Milkmaid's Lament "—a Hanging Ballad. At his best Hardy drew from primitive sources which were at that point of ultimate decay where they so often, as their final flowering, find a sublimated expression in the work of a sophisticated artist.

The Wessex of settled peasant communities with their long memories and distinctive customs was breaking up in Hardy's time. Its legends, its ballads and its dialects were the murmuring background to which he was most deeply attuned. " I hear of a girl of Maiden Newton," he noted, " who was shod by contract like a horse, at so much a year." Oddities such as that, anecdotes, fabulous events and rustic turns of phrase found a natural and enduring place in his mind as he grew up in " one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premisses, and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein."

That passage from *The Woodlanders* perfectly describes the Wessex scene as a setting for a Hardy novel. It is the world which Hardy knew as the son of a village master-mason, and which he was later to immortalize. The " decline and fall " of the Hardys, incidentally, had not descended below the level of a sturdy respectability in the case of the novelist's family, for Thomas's father was a master-tradesman and he was in decently thriving circumstances when Thomas was born on June 2, 1840, at Bockhampton—the first of four

children. The Hardys were a musical family, in great demand as instrumentalists for both church-music and dancing, and Thomas duly fiddled in the best family tradition. On one occasion he was stopped, after three-quarters of an hour's uninterrupted playing at a dance, " lest he should burst a blood-vessel/' In later life he recorded a feeling that he " should prefer to be a cathedral organist to anything in the world." He loved music with an intensity rivalling Pepys's, and there are many scenes of traditional music-making in his books—in *Under the Greenwood Tree,* in *Tess,* in *The Hand ofEthelberta* and in *Life's Little Ironies,* to mention four. The sound of a fiddle and the words of a ballad provide much of the evocative atmosphere of Hardy's Wessex.

So far I have confined myself to a consideration of the natural heritage with which Hardy was endowed by place and ancestry. There is still to be added the development of his individual personality. He was, like D. H. Lawrence, the bright provincial boy who climbed the academic professional ladder and made his way alone to London. Again like Lawrence, who resembles him in many ways, he had an uncommon personal fastidiousness. He hated being touched. He refused to be weighed, considering it unlucky. He held the belief that human sensibility had by some freak developed beyond the limits appropriate to that mould of frailty, grossness and mortality in which man was created. Sue, in *Jnde the Obscure,* embodies this aspect of Hardy's personality, and while I sympathize with those who regard Sue as just about the nastiest little bitch in English literature, there is no doubt that she is one of the key characters of Hardy's invention. She is neither observed nor plagiarized but created. Moreover, she is a creation which Hardy cherished, for he roundly asserted that " there is nothing perverted or depraved

in Sue's nature . . . (she) is a type of woman which has always had an attraction for me."

Before he settled to a literary career Hardy worked, as pupil or assistant, in the offices of various architects. In his leisure he studied Latin and Greek and read extensively. We may picture him as a studious and solitary young man, drawn to London by his ambitions but disturbed by the weakening of his ties with his native place.

" What had seemed usual . . . when he lived there," he wrote of Pierston, in *The Well-Beloved,* " always looked quaint and odd after his later impressions." As Pierston was a young genius with modest Dorset origins, we may assume that the passage is not without autobiographical overtones. No doubt Hardy, like Pierston, also had at some time among his circle a Nichola Pine-Avon to reproach him for choosing to " live with barbarians in the midst of the London season." To have one foot in Wessex and the other in London meant a precarious balance, and there were times when Hardy noticeably wobbled. Pierston is by no means the only one of Hardy's heroes to suffer the characteristic pain of the exile —the fear of having betrayed his native soil and become estranged from his own people. Ethelberta experiences "that old sense of disloyalty to her class and kin"; and Stephen Smith, the young architect in *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* is a morbid embodiment of the same theme. If we are to find any element of self-portraiture in Hardy's novels, I suggest it will be in these ambitious young professionals who sever their natural ties for reasons of intellectual pride or social necessity, and yet are troubled by their action and wish to be reunited.

What Hardy gained from " Wessex " is obvious enough. What he brought to it, with his " London ideas," is not so

plain to see. His philosophy, his cult of modernism, his rebellion against accepted social forms, are not unqualified benefits; but at least it is safe to assert that without them he would hardly be more than a homespun regional writer of secondary importance.

Sometimes he sickened of London and the great world, sometimes he grew weary of being type-cast as a " rustic " novelist: nevertheless it is precisely this interplay between two sources of inspiration which made possible the creation of Tess and Jude. His feet are rooted in the soil of Wessex, his vision extends far beyond—that is the measure of Hardy's greatness.

CHAPTER III

" *This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences."* (A notebook entry, quoted in *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy,* by Florence Emily Hardy.)

IT may be argued that " ideas " are a kind of measles that few artists can escape. The spotty appearance doesn't go very deep, fortunately, and eventually fades. We must be clear, though, about what we mean by " ideas." There are small self-contained crusades and hobby horses, of only topical interest; there are self-conscious ideas about style which may leave a slight mark in local excrescences and gradually eroded gargoyles; and there are those deep tides of conceptual opinion which can impose a new bias on a whole generation. Possibly no form of ideas enriches a work of art with anything of absolute value, and yet it is impossible to divorce the works of Richardson or Wordsworth or Dickens from the views they held. Richardson is a particularly good example because there can be no topic so dead and moth-eaten as the rights and wrongs of duelling; but a passionate dislike of duelling was assuredly a necessary ingredient in the creation of Sir Charles Grandison. In the same way there would have been no *Jude the Obscure* and probably no *Tess* if Hardy had not acquired the sense of what he called " the ache of modernism." Indeed, a Hardy without " ideas " would have written nothing better than *The Trumpet-Major*—which is a very sobering thought when one becomes impatient with his " ideas."

To my mind, the prime intellectual clue to Hardy is not in *Tess* or *Jude* but in that infuriatingly botched masterpiece, *The Return of the Native.* It is here that we get the full echo of that " modernism " which Hardy found so seductive, in a long passage which reflects the philosophical climate of the age in which Hardy's basic ideas were formed.

> " The view of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilizations, must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitution of the advanced races that its facial expression will become accepted as a new artistic departure. People already feel that a man who lives without disturbing a curve of feature, or setting a mark of mental concern anywhere upon himself, is too far removed from modern perceptiveness to be a modern type. Physically beautiful men—the glory of the race when it was young—are almost an anachronism now; and we may wonder whether, at some time or other, physically beautiful women may not be an anachronism likewise."

Tins is a pretty naive view of history, founded apparently on a single cliche about " the glory that was Greece" But when a writer starts bandying phrases like " the race when it was young " there is usually worse to follow—and Hardy duly goes in head first to the tune of " the Hellenic idea of life . . . that old-fashioned revelling in the general situation." And then, of course, " a long line of disillusive centuries."

It is perhaps beside the point to argue that " the view of life as a thing to be put up with " was more congenial to orthodox Jewry or mediaeval Christendom than to typical " modern types " who believe in Progress and idealized love and social Utopias. Hardy is arguing, with whatever false instances, that the terms of life remain constant down the centuries; that they were once acceptable to and enjoyed by men; but that they are no longer so, because of our evolutionary development.

The " new artistic departure " of Hardy, " the mark of mental concern " on his characters, springs from this doctrine

that the evolutionary development of a higher and finer-consciousness will only increase the disproportion between human aspirations and their possible modes of fruition in terms of our sublunary existence. Life may have been fun " when the race was young," but we are too perceptive and sensitive and modern to go through the same old hoops with the pristine gusto. The " disillusive centuries " have wiped the bland symmetrical grin off our thoughtful faces and " marked them with mental concern."

That Hardy should be influenced by the Victorian tide of Evolutionary speculations is only to be expected. What is interesting is his individual response to those speculations, for it is this which gives to his work its characteristic flavour. Granted that Man is " evolving "—and Hardy seems not to have questioned that seriously—it yet remains to be shown that this development is a good thing. To this point Hardy directed his doubts, his misgivings, and found there the motive and the cause for the " pessimism " which became his trade mark. Like a stockbreeder confronted with an " improved strain " bred for better looks and finer points, he asks, " Will the winter winds be any the less cold because of this? Will your fine new creature survive on the poor grazing where its rugged ancestors picked a living? May you not have sacrificed stamina and zest to an ideal of comeliness for which Nature provides no adequate pasture? "

With the next step in this course of reasoning, Hardy was confronted with the appalling thought that the evolutionary development of Man might be no orderly progressive sequence at all but an unsuspected and freakish motion carrying him ever farther away from his proper context—a sort of psychic elephantiasis dislocating and distorting the pattern of normal health. This vision of horror broods

over *Jude the Obscure* and finds its full expression in the mind of Sue.

> " Vague and quaint imaginings had haunted Sue, in the days when her intellect scintillated like a star, that the world resembled a stanza or melody composed in a dream; it was wonderfully excellent to the half-aroused intelligence, but hopelessly absurd at the full waking; that the First tause worked automatically like a somnambulist, and not reflectively like a sage; that at the framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a development of emotional pcrceptivencss among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity."

The diffident fantastical manner is not very deceiving, I think, for the substance of those " quaint imaginings " leads remorselessly to her later cry of anguish:

> " Perhaps the world is not illuminated enough for such experiments as ours! Who were we, to think we could act as pioneers!' "

Who were we, O educated and intelligent humanity. . . . The cry is echoed by Angel Clare, likewise marooned on a little island of spiritual pride. Its meaning is plain enough, but if we take it literally we must say that Hardy never faced the full implications of what he wrote—to the extent that he never led a reactionary flight from intelligence and sensibility back to the pristine pleasures of the obtuse and beautiful Hellenes. As a thinker he simply dug in his heels with the stoical pride of a born heretic: he was what he was, and if the gods did not like it they must lump it. As a novelist he used his own " Evolutionary " avenue to come to the classic terms of tragedy. The Hardy protagonist, with" his " evolving " sensibility, is a dynamic force in a static creation and must therefore sooner or later bruise his shins on the divine furniture. A remorseless Fate overthrows the hero by way of his virtues. Angel is destroyed by his quixotic idealism, Tess by her innocence, Sue and Jude by self-mortification, Clym by denying the normal pattern of his life.

interesting sidelights on the manner of his growth. But before we examine the larger originalities of character and situation let us look at single details, where the mark of the innovator is often easier to recognize. We need not detain ourselves, though, with those innovations which come simply with the calendar and are correspondingly trivial. I fancy Mrs. Charmond's cigarette may be the first to be smoked by a lady in English fiction, but it had to happen sooner or later.

The same goes for Miss Power's private telegraph in *A Laodicean.* Both are new bits of social furniture that Hardy happened to inventory, and have no further significance. What is far more interesting about Miss Power is her ability to say to her lover, " I would give a great deal to possess real logical dogmatism." I cannot believe that any heroine before her uttered such a sentiment. Partly it may be due to an immature stiffness of phrasing; but Hardy was not immature when he wrote *Tcss*—and he then rounded off the lyrical description of Tess's entry into her new life at Talbothays with this comment:

> " probably the half-unconscious rhapsody was a Fctichistic utterance in a Monotheistic setting."

No wonder Henry James attacked *Tcss* for " the abomination of the language"! But setting aside the obvious uncouthncss—and I admit I have chosen extreme examples—it is plain that Hardy was applying to fiction the scientific speculation of his time. He tries to stand back from Tess with the detachment of an anthropologist. At the worst he sticks intellectual labels of the crudest sort on belief and behaviour. In happier moments his use of what one might call the long scientific perspective produces an effect of new and vivid power. I recall here the moment in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* when Henry Knight, clinging to the cliff-edge in peril

of his life, is confronted with a trilobite. The cosmic pathos of human life, its momentary triviality in the vast passage of Time, is suddenly illuminated with a terrifying light by the macabre intervention of the fossil. It is a stroke which would have delighted the Elizabethans, who loved rare images of mortality; and it could hardly have occurred to any writer before Hardy.

In short, Hardy is continually trying to interpret life in terms of the scientific theorizing of his generation. Sometimes he gets no further than a bit of fashionable pigeonholing, as in the *Tcss* example. Occasionally he brings off a real success, a new style of treatment which is vivid and arresting, as in the instance I have given from *A Pair of Blue Eyes.*

Constantly he is trying to look at life from the outside, with an anthropologist's detachment, with the long perspective of the geologist. The temper of his mind reflects an age of doubt and questioning in which the accepted pattern of society had lost its firm definition and Man, the individual, was seen as a lonely protagonist uncertain of the terms of his existence. It is with an odd mixture of compassion and detachment that Hardy approaches his characters, like a lover disinclined to tolerate any familiarity. He discards the social certainty of Jane Austen, the zestful humanity of Dickens, for landscapes of place and time in which the figures of men and women differ from their surroundings in degree almost, rather than in kind: so that Henry Knight appears as an improved but still very vulnerable sort of trilobite, and the features of Clym Yeobright are not so much more than an echo of the features of Egdon Heath.

It follows that the landscape, being more durable and assured than the brief traffic of human affairs, is of increased

importance to Hardy. Man's place on earth may have been made very uncomfortable and enigmatic by the Victorian scientists, but earth itself is our visible, real and only drama —and in it we poor humans have, at the worst, some part to play. It is no accident that Hardy's greatest creation follow when he has secured the mastery of a particular landscape. His characters rise then and body out like evocations from the earth.

He is the first novelist, for example, to notice the sound of an earthworm drawing a leaf into the ground. Likewise none of his predecessors needed to describe the physical presence of the sun with such exactitude as to write:

> " The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression."

Anyone with an ear for prose will recognize there a modernity of style which must have sounded oddly to Hardy's contemporaries. To us it is of a piece with the great landscape passages in which Egdon Heath and Blackmore Vale and the woodlands of the Hintocks feed the central drama as prime actors, instead of being dismissed as conventional lath-and-canvas scenery.

The final sort of innovation to which I want to draw attention here is best exemplified in a sentence from *The Well-Beloved:*

> "He was the Wandering Jew of the love-world."

" The love-world." An odd phrase, and an ugly one—but new in Hardy's generation, I think. What did he mean by it? Love in its many moods—sacred, profane, exotic, comic and sentimental—is a perennial theme in the novel, as in the theatre; but even so we must give some new value to " the love-world " as Hardy treated it. It is not merely that the dramatic core of almost all his novels *(The Mayor of*

Casterbridge is the striking exception) is made up of the passion uniting a man and a woman, though that fact has some significance. One must concede that Hardy was a box-office writer and knew better than to disdain the charms of an orthodox love-interest. To pick three examples, Grace Mclbury (in *The Woodlanders),* Fancy (in *Under the Greenwood Tree)* and Anne Garland (in *The Trumpet-Major)* are not much more than routine heroines, sweet and coy Little dears in gingham, Victorian calendar-faces appropriately tinted with the vague pinks of Romance. To speak of them as "creations" is to misunderstand the meaning of the word. They are lay-figures borrowed for the occasion from the public stock. Hardy simply gave them a name and an address and then had to propel them round the floor somehow. However, in the midst of this ungrateful exercise—and this is my point—Hardy found that their legs did not work. They made him stumble. They got under his feet and tripped him up. Consequently, in varying degrees, he invented ways of animating them. In *The Trumpet-Major* he never got away from the good old box-office formula: " Will John or Bob marry the lovely heroine? "—but at any rate he laboured to give her a certain sprightliness. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* he apparently takes a very forgivable dislike to Fancy, involves her in a curious diversion with the vicar, and then becomes half-hearted and returns her to honest Dick and the expected but now rather dubious wedding bells. In *The Woodlanders* his demands of Grace Melbury stretch the very limited possibilities of this sort of heroine to breaking-point: so that in the end greatness is fairly thrust upon her, or upon her wreckage. I think, for example, of her venomous outburst to Mrs. Charmond—"He's had you"—which by its bluntness breaks in pieces the earlier picture of her.

Even at his more orthodox, then, Hardy was not content to limit his heroines—as Dickens had done—to the simple provision of a thread of love-interest. He had no other theme to which his delicious Dolly Vardens could be pleasantly subsidiary: no roast beef to precede the strawberries an4 cream. He therefore did what no major English novelist since Richardson had done—he made a " world " of " love." Indeed, before he had finished he almost made a religion of it, with Jude for saint, Sue as high-priestess, Tess the victim on the altar, and Angel Clare as sidesman.

To me this is his greatest innovation, that he discovered and charted the desert island of sex in the ocean of social confusion. Where Jane Austen was concerned with alliances within a social pattern, Hardy's lovers are the castaways of a great social shipwreck. The men—Angel, Jude, Clym—are sensitive misfits with no settled occupation, intellectual vagrants separated from any abiding context. And they turn, high-souled and idealistic, to women in search of a key to the meaning and values of life. They are all " wandering Jews of the love-world," burdened with a sort of nameless guilt, desperately in search of the True and the Good outside the social pattern. As such they are the fathers of what we have come to speak of as " the sex-novel."

In English fiction there is a tradition of comic exuberance and realistic irony which consorts with a reasonably settled social pattern and established beliefs. Smollett, Fielding, Sterne and Dickens adorn that great tradition, and Jane Austen is not alien to it. But there is another heritage, that of a nervous highly individualized sensibility in retreat from the social scene. For the sake of clarity we may burlesque them a little as, on the one hand, a genial Tory clubman, fond of the spectacle of society but not blind to its absurdities and

its scandals: and on the other, a shipwrecked nonconformist mariner, reading an old Bible—or writing a new one—and treasuring a pin-up girl as his only other memento of civilization. Of the latter, Richardson is the prime example among novelistr, Hardy the greatest modern example, and D. H. Lawrence his most brilliant disciple—a very John of Patmos.

In practice these cleavages and distinctions are never quite so defined as a critic may make them appear to be. There are passages of sheer Dickens in Hardy (I will quote *one* later from *The Trumpet-Major)* just as there are literal echoes of Richardson in Jane Austen. But the progressive transformation of the " love-interest " in Hardy's novels is indisputable and far-reaching. Consider for a moment one of the earliest of Hardy's love-scenes, between Fancy and Dick in *Under the Greenwood Tree:*

> '" Come here, sir;—say you forgive me;—and then you shall kiss me, you never have yet when I have worn curls, you know. Yes, in the very middle of my mouth, where you want to so much,—yes, you may.'
>
> " Dick followed her into the inner corner, where he was not slow in availing himself of the privilege offered.
>
> " Now that's a treat for you, isn't it ?' she continued."

The pretty, simpering, shallow coquetry fits in well enough with the tradition of the pastoral heroine. It even has an insipid charm, I daresay, in a repulsive sort of way. What is more, Dolly Vardcn might have got away with it triumphantly. But I confess it sets my teeth *on* edge because I am aware of the shadow of Sue Bridchead behind Fancy's artless prattling. " In the very middle of my mouth, where you want to so much "—how innocently Hardy accepted the Victorian formula of the heroine as a particularly luscious kind of strawberry. " Now that's a treat for you, isn't it? " And yet by the time he had finished *Jude* how completely and utterly, impossible he had made it for that sort of dialogue

ever to be written again. The stride from Fancy to Sue is a big stride. In many ways they are the same woman, but how prodigiously Hardy has deepened her and what profound discoveries he has made in her character! In *Under the Greenwood Tree* the whole issue is screened by Hardy's dominant interest in the rustic scene and by his immaturity as a novelist. The plot, as such, is very lightly sketched. In his later work he concentrated more and more *on* " the love-world " to a degree that brought him into conflict with public opinion and obliges us to regard him, for good or ill, as the originator of the modern sex-novel in which love itself becomes " a world."

CHAPTER V

" *For the present, circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial."* (Hardy, in a letter to Leslie Stephen.)

IN all, Hardy published fourteen novels and three volumes of short stories. The first, *Desperate Remedies,* appeared in 1871: the last, *Jude the Obscure,* in 1896. Novel-writing, therefore, occupied a surprisingly small part of his long life. It was begun as one possible avenue in his general search for literary fame, it was continued as a livelihood, and it was later abandoned with no sign of reluctance.

The chronology of his novels is curious. One of his worst —*The Well-Beloved*—which might on internal evidence be relegated to his *juvenilia,* was in fact *one* of his latest productions. Incredible though it may seem, *The Well-Beloved* appeared between *Tcss and Jude.* We may perhaps presume, though, that it was hurriedly vamped up for publication from an earlier draft; as Hardy remarked in a letter, " It was sketched many years before, when I was comparatively a young man." It would be interesting to know how much was " sketched " and how much was newly written after *Tess.* In any case it is odd enough that it did not seem incongruous to Hardy to issue *The Well-Beloved* at the height of his powers. The story, I may add, presents a hero who woos the daughter, and then the grand-daughter, of his first love; a ludicrous fantastic plot which makes it fascinating to speculate on the possibility that Hardy may have been inspired

by an equally weird courtship which happened during his lifetime. For, as if to prove that truth can compete with the wildest fiction, in 1873 Baron Corneille du Fleurant married the grand-daughter of the girl who had jilted him forty-one years before. So curious a match may have come to Hardy's notice, though I have found no evidence for my conjecture. In any case he sketched *The Well-Beloved* when he was " comparatively a young man "—probably therefore between 1874 and 1880 (i.e. after his earliest publications and before he was forty)—and in 1892, with some revision or possibly wholesale re-writing, he published it to the great confusion of those who like to see an intelligible pattern of orderly development.

We may choose, with some good reason, to dismiss *The Well-Beloved* as a freak, a hangover from the days of apprenticeship; but even so it is difficult to find any sustained correspondence between the comparative merits of the other novels and their dates of publication. *Under the Greenwood Tree* is patently an early work: *Tess* and *Jude* equally clearly are late, belonging to full maturity. Beyond that, it would be a hard task to put the rest in any convincing arrangement of probable order. Is *A Laodicean* the work of a beginner, or not? Was *Two on a Tower* written before *The Return of the Native* or after it? I doubt if anyone, not first knowing the facts, could answer correctly such questions as that. The truth is that Hardy's technical progress was like the homing of a drunk—a great deal of tacking, wavering and back-pedalling, but with a final irresistible urge in the forward direction. He himself classified his novels under three headings—Novels of Character and Environment, Novels of Ingenuity, and Romances and Fantasies. The first group embraces the essential Hardy, the second contains Ins attempts at complicated

and rather melodramatic plots, the third is a miscellany of lightweights, misfits and tentative sketches in which Hardy never quite got into his full stride.

The three sorts of novel came from Hardy's pen indiscriminately, not as chronological groups, so they will not fit into a neat theory that Hardy discarded an early " ingenious " style for the *Trumpet-Major* sort of Romance, and from that developed the mature Wessex novel of Character and Environment. It would be pleasant to believe but it doesn't fit the facts. Hardy's was a conspicuously intuitive genius, not much given to reflection on its achievements and failures. One feels that his greatest moments frequently thwarted his conscious intentions, instead of proceeding from them. And who could say that he learnt much, from one book to the next ?

When D. H. Lawrence claimed that the critic's duty was to " save the tale from the artist" he offered a very heady drink to the vanity of critics. It is so easy to be clever after the last brush-stroke is made, when the final proportions are settled—not so easy when the work is still plastic and fluid, the vital decisions still to be made. Perhaps the very essence of genius is an ability to move beyond the range of conscious intentions, to grasp obscurely some part of the tale which has always to be " saved " by those who come after. Certainly I would say that a great novelist sometimes directs his characters by the keenness of his insight, and by contrast is sometimes possessed, and as it were guided, by the latent potentialities of those characters. And where the latter course is largely or frequently dominant, we get the rather romantic, rather poetic sort of novel that Hardy wrote, and from which some elements of the tale do have to be " saved " because they are not explicitly realized by their creator.

The curiosity of Hardy's departure from fiction is resolved

if we allow that he doubted whether the novel could encompass what he wanted to put in it, and that he had many uncertainties about what a novel ought to be. Looked at in this way, Hardy's progress as a novelist is reasonably comprehensible as a series of fluctuations between the resolve to be " merely a good hand at a serial " and the desire to formulate in his novel-writing the *motifs* and individual feeling and personal philosophy which later informed his poetry. He justly said of himself, " I was quick to bloom; late to ripen." His first three novels are essays in three different styles. *Desperate Remedies* catered for the taste which likes an elaborate story with sensational climaxes, dramatic secrets and deeds of violence: *Under the Greenwood Tree* exploited the Wessex rustic scene, adding only a slender thread of conventional love-interest: *A Pair of Blue Eyes* abandoned both the melodramatic plot and rustic humours for a first excursion into the moral dramas of the love-world. A weird trio from which anything might follow.

Their successor, *Far From the Madding Crowd,* gave Hardy his first taste of what he might achieve. In it he blended the best ingredients of the three previous books. The plot is strong without being artificially intricate. The rustic characters, relieved of primary responsibility as actors and grouped as a sort of Greek chorus, foreshadow Hardy's later use of this device but were never to be surpassed in any subsequent work. The five sufferers in the toils of love —Bathsheba and Fanny, Boldwood and Gabriel and Troy— are powerfully and convincingly drawn, beyond anything envisaged in *A Pair of Blue Eyes.*

And what happened then? Afraid of being " type-cast" as a rural novelist Hardy returned to compete with fashionable fiction on its own ground. In *The Hand of Ethelberta* he

spun another artificial " ingenious " plot and packed off his Wessex heroine to queen it over the high-life of London Town. It must be regarded as a private joke of Hardy's, I think. The writing is often sprightly, there are some nice intellectual passages about the art and craft of fiction, the machinery creaks with improbabilities, and the plot finally breaks its back in attempting an eleventh-hour twist. Was this what the public wanted, perhaps ? Was this the contemporary idea of what a novel should be ?

Hardy must have thought so momentarily, but he quickly changed his mind. Two years later—in 1878—he came forward with *The Return of the Native,* not quite so perfect in its accomplishment as *Far From the Madding Crowd,* but the first of his novels to give confident articulate expression to the philosophy of his maturity. In the portrayal of Egdon Heath and the characterization of Clym, Hardy invented the pattern of his abiding greatness. Even so he botched the conclusion for the sake of serial publication, and never bothered subsequently to put it right. The footnote in the definitive edition which invites readers " of an austere artistic code " to restore the author's original conception by assuming a different ending and ignoring " certain circumstances of serial publication ", is surely one of the oddest things to be found in the work of any writer.

The Return of the Native made Hardy's reputation secure. After seven industrious years he was established as a " good hand at a serial " with great prospects before him, but another seven years passed without any important development in Hardy's work. Perhaps his first zest had spent itself, and the trade of serial-writing became a burden. *The Trumpet-Major* has charm (so has *Quality Street),* but one looks in vain for any kinship with that earlier and more subtle soldier, Sergeant

Troy. *A Laodicean* is notable only as the low-water mark of Hardy's career. He was ill during the writing of it and dictated some of the book from his sick-bed. It must have taxed the stamina of the author as grievously as it now does that of the reader. With *Two on a Tower*—that strange starlit groping after two of his most intangible characters—Hardy reached what may well have seemed to be a dead-end. For four years he published nothing.

In 1886 came the book which appears to me to mark the turning-point in Hardy's career as a novelist. He had behind him nine novels, fifteen years of writing, a couple of masterpieces, a series of experiments in different styles. His present frame of mind was hardly propitious, for he could refer contemptuously to his novel-writing as " mere journeywork." The need to earn a living, to study the requirement of serial-writing, seemed to confuse his judgment. " Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work," he had written to Leslie Stephen in a forlorn mood. That day was not yet. As he set to work on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* he was convinced he was spoiling it by introducing an incident into each part of its serial form. But an incident there had to be, by all the laws of serial-writing. And then there was the perennial question of " probability" (which does admittedly rear its ugly head all too often in Hardy's novels). " I fear it | *The Mayor of Casterbridge]* will not be so good as I meant," Hardy wrote in January, 1886, adding hopefully, " but, after all, it is not improbabilities of incident but improbabilities of character that matter."

In spite of his fears, Hardy reached a degree of perfection in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* which he seldom equalled and, it may be argued, never surpassed. Opinions will always

differ slightly in comparing his principal novels, but no one will dispute the inclusion of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* among them. In some ways, it stands apart from everything else he wrote: its drama is not confined to the " love-world " so narrowly, and its central character is a man no longer young but of elemental virility and crude power. Hardy is not greatly interested in people of over thirty, except as supporting " character " parts. That is a weakness, a severe limitation, no doubt, but the evidence is overwhelming. Think of any random half-dozen of his novels, recall the central characters, and set down their probable ages. I have not made a detailed check, but I shall be surprised if the average is much over twenty-five. Often the woman, rather than the man, is the leading character; usually too the men (except the stock villains) are sensitive theorizing misfits or gently submissive and dumbly loyal sheepdogs. Henchard, Mayor of Casterbridge, stands alone in the Hardy portrait-gallery, a worldly success with a rough gusto, a middle-aged John Bull of uncontrollable temper and violent passions. The characters surrounding him, moreover, are varied and well-defmed, and the drama is rich in incident and moves with sure strength to its climax.

Here at last Hardy might have felt that he had found the true scope of his remarkable talents and had addressed them to their right occasion. Alas, he was never again simultaneously at the full stretch of his powers and in sufficient control of their deployment. Apart from *The Well-Beloved,* only three more novels followed and none of them really consolidates what had been achieved in *The Mayor of Casterbridge. The Woodlandcrs,* for all its exquisite poetry, is a return to Hardy's earlier style of pastoral romance with weak central characters. *Tess* and *Jude* both have an amplitude of

conception and a flashing erratic majesty of execution which command one's respect—but who can fail to wonder" why Hardy abandoned the chorus of rustic gossips who added such depth and richness to the Casterbridge drama? Who can avoid speculating on what might have been added to the portrayal of Alec D'Urberville, if he had been drawn with some touches of the magnanimity, the roundness and the human insight that made Henchard a vital and substantial creation? Who even can escape the reflection that, while Henchard goes down with the wild magnificent obstinacy of a bull in the open arena, Angel and Jude come perilously near to being a couple of damp pillows in small back bedrooms? One has to concede that life must have been a great disappointment to them. One concedes nothing to Henchard: his destruction is plain, unmitigated, irretrievable.

CHAPTER VI

" How admirable are Blackmore and Hardy! But these writers only rise to their great strokes; they do not write continuously well." (Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a letter to Robert Bridges, October, 1886.)

A T this point we can begin to sort out Hardy's greatest achievements and examine them in detail. Let us examine, too, his defects, in so far as it is worth while clearing them out of the way or setting them in an intelligible relationship to his positive qualities. The more technical points—his plots, his use of humour, his handling of dialect speech and so on—can come later. First I want to propose a coherent grouping of the novels and define their salient characteristics.

The three novels of" Ingenuity " *(Desperate Remedies, The Hand of Ethelberta* and *A Laodicean)* need not detain us long. They come nearest to fitting Hardy's description of " mere journeywork," designs adapted to a current specification and not suited to his talents. They contain some passages in the true Hardy manner, and one can detect in them the first stirring of some of his later themes, but on the whole they offer us little more than an occasional illustration of his literary method. The last and worst of the three was published in 1881, so we can say that Hardy positively discarded this sort of story as unprofitable. The exact mechanism of an elaborate plot was conspicuously alien to Hardy, and his attempts at portraying " villainy " remained disastrous to **the**

end. Here at least he did in some measure learn from experience. In his later books he avoided, whenever possible, any precise commitment to the literal fabric of his plots. The cogs and the wheels of events, the exact hows and whens are hidden or assumed or blurred. And Alec D'Urberville is mercifully his only subsequent attempt at black villainy.

Of the remaining novels, *Two on a Tower* and *The Well-Beloved* are side-issues in the dramatization of the " love-world "; their protagonists are too preposterous, too stiff and inhuman, to rouse the fires of Hardy's imagination. Whatever is good in them can be found much better done elsewhere. *The Trumpet-Major* is likewise of secondary importance—a set of charming decorations to a trite theme.

Eight novels remain to be considered, of which six must rank among the masterpieces of modern fiction. With that great half-dozen I am grouping *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* because in them we can discern the first sketchy beginnings of Hardy's greatness. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* the wonderful murmuring chorus of Dorset voices is boldly defined and already rich in phrasing and atmosphere, although Hardy is plainly anxious about the viability of Tranter Reuben and the rest as primary characters (and indeed never again did he give his rustics so much prominence). He seems here to excuse them nervously as " quaint characters" with " simple and honest hearts." Nevertheless we recognize with joy the sure intonation and mellow undertones of lines like " Wives be such a provoking class of society, because though they be never right, they be never more than half wrong "; or again, " that fiddle cost thirty shillens, and good words besides." Such homely turns of phrase as that, such shafts of russet autumn humour, are the unobtrusive bass-notes that give ultimate depth to

the great chords of tragedy. Not until *Far From the Madding Crowd* did Hardy find the right perspective, but the springs of invention are clear and vigorous from the outset. Also in *Under the Greenwood Tree* Hardy gives us a taste of the slow visual opening which came to perfection in *The Return of the Native.* And in the character of Fancy, as I have already suggested, there are hints of the last of Hardy's heroines—Sue in *Jude the Obscure.*

A Pair of Blue Eyes is a less endearing and less successful work. The plot comes unstuck from the landscape and the rustic figures, and the impetus of the story is so completely exhausted before its ending that Hardy resorts to not very ingenious tricks in order to ring down the curtain with a sufficient flourish. Its general level of achievement puts it in the same class as *Two on a Tower* but I am giving it greater prominence because it is the complement of *Far From the Madding Crowd,* the first assertion of the other side of his genius. Elfride is a genteel prototype of Tess as surely as Henry Knight is a spiritual cousin of Angel Clare. And in the wild bundle of far-fetched improbabilities which is labelled " Mrs. Jcthway " Hardy first reached the ballad-like finger of fate, the silent accuser, the shadow of retribution, which glides through his later work. She is the first really recalcitrant sign of the problems that await a poet who works in the conventions of realistic prose. One feels she must have been mistakenly dropped on the roadside by a company touring Cornwall with *The Duchess of Maif.*

From these origins, from *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *Far From the Madding Crowd,* Hardy's career proceeds with tolerable logic. It was keyed to the needs of serial-writing, it stuck to fairly conventional forms, it wavered and wobbled sometimes, but on at least six occasions it carried him to heights

of poetic tragedy which turn one's mind to the Elizabethan dramatists for a means of comparison. To the Elizabethans, and particularly to Webster; for we may say of Hardy, as of Webster, that he was intoxicated with the poetry of tragedy. Both have a rather bungling clumsy way with its mechanics, both are in some degree deficient in that subtler sense of character which makes great blows unnecessary, except as final chords. But once they have reached "the motive and the cue for passion " they conjure up the majestic darkening scene of human defeat with superb flights of imagery. The critical reader will find it hard to be convinced by Tess's murder of Alec, and I always wonder if poor Giles need have got so wet that he had to die. But we must admit that it was easier for the Elizabethans than for Hardy. They had the pretty solid convention that in moments of stress cold-blooded characters send out to the chemist for a shot of poison, while the hot-blooded sort instinctively reach for a rapier and have a go at someone. Hardy had to make do with bread-knives, streams, rain and ill health to heap up his corpses, and it is hardly surprising that the manipulation sometimes lacks that quickness of the hand which should deceive the eye. Nevertheless, if we are captious on this point we miss what Hardy has to offer. His chosen genre is grand tragedy, the epic combat between man and a hostile Universe. In those terms it is a poetic conception, in which the realistic context of social life has little value except as the instrument of Fate. His greatest characters, Tess, Henchard, Bathsheba, Jude, are noble heretics, victims of some fine excess in their native qualities, bemused by a too bountiful endowment of nature; and their final overthrow proceeds, not from men—who are but tools—but from the very gods themselves. For this reason some of Hardy's apparent defects

are no more than evidence of his integrity, of his refusal to allow the poetic nature of his theme to be compromised by the trivialities of a literal realism. " My art," he wrote, " is to intensify the expression of things . . . so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible."

To the realist the " heart and inner meaning " are an objective to be approached obliquely, by the metaphor of the outward and visible flesh, the surface of things: for such writers the small gesture vibrates with an inward eloquence. That was not Hardy's way. True, he has his full share of British phlegm, mistrusting flamboyancies and operatic flights of passion, but within those limits he constructs his tragedies on epic lines. Everything is bent to his one great purpose, everything is concentrated on the " heart and inner meaning," and no competing consideration is allowed to impede his rising up to the pitch of poetic intensity. Consider the moment when Henchard is confronted with his own effigy floating like a corpse in the river, a drowning guy thrown down by his enemies; or Fitzpiers's vision of the village girls at their midnight revels in the woods; or the weird gambling scene on Egdon Heath when Wildeve and Diggory Venn gather glow-worms for light to finish their grim contest. These are visionary, elemental scenes to which time and place and human contingencies are largely irrelevant. They translate into prose the majesty and amplitude of dramatic blank verse, not so much delineating particular biographies as measuring life itself.

It is for these moments of imaginative incandescence—for these and his superb sense of landscape—that we value Hardy most highly. His construction of a story, his devising of the dramatic situations with a sustaining narrative thread, is not remarkable; usually rather crude and without much

enterprise beyond the invention of artificial twists. Here Hardy's technical equipment is akin to that of the traditional folk-balladist. His character-drawing is similarly limited and unexciting—on the whole he is content with half a dozen serviceable types who crop up again and again with only minor variations.

In these two weaknesses in what are normally the main armament of a novelist we may have a clue to Hardy's decision to abandon fiction and concentrate on verse-writing. The medium of the novel had to be subdued to meet his unusual needs, and he often found it intractable.

There is a good example of this in the famous scene of Tess's arrest at Stonehenge—a scene which is often criticized, and with good reason, because Hardy seems to drag in Stonehenge as a handy backcloth which caught his fancy.

> " They had proceeded thus gropingly two or three miles further when on a sudden Clare became conscious of some vast erection close in his front, rising sheer from the grass. They had almost struck themselves against it.
>
> " ' What monstrous place is this?' said Angel.
>
> " ' It hums,' said she. ' Hearken ! '
>
> " He listened. The wind, playing upon the edifice, produced a booming tunc, like the note of some gigantic one-stringed harp. No other sound came from it, and lifting his hand and advancing a step or two, Clare felt the vertical surface of the structure. It seemed to be of solid stone, without joint or moulding. Carrying his fingers onward he found that what he had come in contact with was a colossal rectangular pillar; by stretching out his left hand he could feel a similar one adjoining. At an indefinite height overhead something made the black sky blacker, which had the semblance of a vast architrave uniting the pillars horizontally. They carefully entered beneath and between; the surfaces echoed their soft rustle; but they seemed to be still out of doors. The place was roofless. . . . The couple advanced further into this pavilion of the night till they stood in its midst.
>
> " ' It is Stonehenge! ' said Clare.
>
> " ' The heathen temple, you mean?'
>
> " ' **Yes.** Older than the centuries; older than the D'Urbervilles! **Well,** what shall we do, darling? We may find shelter further on.'

" But Tess, really tired by this time, flung herself upon an oblong slab. . . .

" ' I don't want to go any further, Angel,' she said. . . . ' One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home. . . . I like very much to be here. . . . It is so solemn and lonely.' "

It is fairly poor stuff admittedly, and yet how revealing it is! The inscrutable time-worn monoliths, the air of ancient pagan majesty and the pervading sense of irreparable ruin and obliteration lingering in symbols of great dignity—here is the abiding *tnise-en-scene* for every last act of Hardy's imagination. The empty scene, the eloquent landscape and the noble overthrow combine as the goal to which his characters are inexorably carried by the tides of human destiny. It is a pity, perhaps, that Hardy showed his hand so plainly by driving Tess to Salisbury Plain, but it helps us to recognize the sort of climax to which he was attracted.

In *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders,* Hardy reaches his climax by a heroine whose aspirations lead her to choose the glamorous, more polished, but evil-living suitor in preference to the manly, loyal and dumb rustic. I group these two together as having his most humdrum plots and —to offset that—his fullest and richest drawing of Wessex life. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* stands apart in many ways, as I have already said, but there is a kinship with *The Return of the Native:* both are " Egdon " novels, and Eustacia has a temperamental affinity with Henchard. *Tess* and *fude* pair off more markedly. They are Hardy's full and final expression of the " love-world "—tragedies of marriage in which his personal viewpoint is made explicit—and in both he abandoned the chorus of Wessex characters whose mixture of poetry and matter-of-factness add poignant witness to his earlier tragedies.

Grouped in this way, the novels show at any rate some

interesting patterns of development in certain directions. The Wessex chorus, originated in *Under the Greenwood Tree,* becomes an integral part of the great tragedies until Hardy discards it from his final works. The construction of plots, at first based on melodramatic ingenuity, is gradually simplified to a three- or four-cornered love tangle which provides Hardy with a very broad and adaptable base on which to erect the special situations and climaxes of his major novels. His character-drawing soon discards all but a very few types. High-life is obviously beyond his range, he is no novelist of manners or fine social nuances and he is little interested in the social context or social relationships of his main characters. For the most part he is content with a reticent manly countryman, an intellectual idealist, a rather gentlemanly villain who combines glamour, weakness and evil in roughly equal parts, a serene and long-suffering feminine victim, and a more dashing and spirited character whose vitality has a tincture of rebelliousness.

In his twenty-five years of fiction-writing Hardy at least succeeded in developing by degrees a type of novel which remains distinctively his own. The vivid and sensitive delineation of the Wessex scene, the powerful infusion of poetic drama into what might have been prosaic and commonplace chronicles, the intuitive sureness and delicacy of touch with which he can at his best lay bare the core of human passion—these are the hallmarks of his work. Picking up a Hardy novel we know what to expect—and we know we cannot find it elsewhere. I have already indicated the main ingredients in the distinctive Hardy " atmosphere ": let us now examine the novels in closer detail.

CHAPTER VII

What rambling old canticle is it you say, hostler? Let's have it again—a good saying well spit out is a Christmas fire to my withered heart." [The Hand of Ethelberta.)

IN any discussion of character-drawing one must have a clear understanding of how the criterion of " truth to life " is to be rightly applied. It is hardly enough, for example, to observe that the speech of Joseph Poorgrass is more realistic than that of Tess. Such a judgment entirely begs the question of what the novelist is trying to do and leads eventually to the complaint that Danish princes never spoke in blank verse. Which is, to put it mildly, ludicrous.

The two governing ideas which define the distinction one must make are verisimilitude and plausibility. It is sufficient for Hardy's purpose that Tess should be plausible, that she should not outrage our sense of what is possible. On the other hand, the only value of Joseph Poorgrass is his intensely accurate reproduction of every minute inflection and turn of phrase in a typical Wessex labourer. They are two different and complementary kinds of character and they must be judged by different standards.

Strictly, the main characters—Tess, Jude, Henchard and the rest—are not in any ordinary sense human beings. They are not recorded from life but invented from the novelist's experience of life. They contain, as it were, more of life than is normally the lot of any one person. They are great vessels of human passion and suffering, intensified,

emphasized and made articulate in a more than human degree. They are portraits rather than photographs. And in carrying expression to this pitch the novelist's interest in sheer verisimilitude is a negative one: he is merely concerned not to overstrain the proportions and texture of his portrait to the point where the general illusion is weakened. Nothing would be gained by coarsening Tess's speech and reducing her range of articulate self-expression: but alternatively something would be lost if it were so daintily refined that she sounded like a young lady from a Streatham tennis club and not a dairymaid at all. In this sort of character-drawing there has to be a carefully balanced compromise between the visionary conception and its literal setting.

Side by side with these quasi-mythological figures that the novelist invents out of himself there will be others which he has observed, has more or less faithfully reproduced from living models. I do not want to make too sharp a contrast here—obviously the most literal portrait has elements of invention, just as the freest invention contains fragments of the author's reminiscences. But there are the two sorts of initiative—from within and from without—and the interplay between the two gives a poetic depth and richness. The invented character is tested and trimmed, is indeed proved and ultimately enhanced, by being set in the most realistic and "earthiest" company. And in return the humble commonplaces of ordinary life acquire a dignity and a sort of poignant wit from the passage through them of one of the great kings or queens of tragedy.

In his use of the Wessex chorus Hardy exploited this literary counterpoint to the full. The mere presence of Mother Cuxsom, Joseph Poorgrass, old Haymoss and the rest spreads an air of authenticity which radiates kindly over

the awkward machinery of some of Hardy's plots and often subdues the creaking of the cog-wheels to a convincingly lifelike murmur. Their voices are the ground-bass of human existence, strengthening and pointing the individual tragic melody. Mostly they remain in the background, but occasionally a voice swells out in dirge-like comment—as in Mother Cuxsom's lament on the death of Mrs. Henchard:

> " ' All her shining keys will be took from her, and her cupboards opened; and little things 'a didn't wish seen, anybody will see; and her wishes and ways will all be as nothing! ' "

The solemn biblical cadences give eloquence and authority to the speaker, and the humble details augment the feeling of helpless pathos. In the same way, but now on a grander scale, the awkwardly contrived death of Giles Winterborne is redeemed and metamorphosed by the plainsong of Marty's grief:

> " Passing the graveyard they observed as they talked a motionless figure standing by the gate.
>
> " ' I think it was Marty South/ said the hollow-turner parenthetically.
>
> " ' I think 'twas; 'a was always a lonely maid/ said Upjohn. And they passed on homeward, and thought of the matter no more.
>
> " It was Marty, as they had supposed. That evening had been the particular one of the week upon which Grace and herself had been accustomed to privately deposit flowers on Giles's grave, and this was the first occasion since his death eight months earlier on which Grace had failed to keep her appointment. Marty had waited in the road just outside Melbury's, where her fellow-pilgrim was wont to join her, till she was weary. . . . It got later, and Marty continued her walk till she reached the churchyard gate; but still no Grace. . . . She then heard the footsteps of Melbury's men, who presently passed on their return from the search. In the silence of the night Marty could not help hearing fragments of their conversation, from which she acquired a general idea of what had occurred, and that Grace was by that time in the arms of another man than Giles.
>
> " Immediately they had dropped down the hill she entered the churchyard, going to a secluded corner behind the bushes, where rose the unadorned stone that marked the last bed of Giles Winterborne. . . . She stooped down and cleared away the withered flowers that Grace and herself had laid there the previous week, and put her fresh ones in their place.

" ' Now, my own, own love,' she whispered, ' you **are** mine, **and** on'y mine; for she has forgot 'ee at last, although for her you died! But I—whenever I get up I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee again. Whenever I plant the young larches I'll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring, I'll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven! . . . But no, no, my love, I never can forget 'ec; for you was a good man, and did good things!' "

In such scenes as these the whole unchanging firmament of Wessex life seems to proclaim its kinship with the individual comet whose course Hardy is tracing. And the figure of the comet is no bad metaphor for the way ward, ominous, brilliant flight of Hardy's principal characters—rebels and idealists swerving out of the settled orbits of rural convention. Hardy's peasants, on the other hand, are grounded in a grimly humorous acceptance of life. "We be bruckle folk here," says Christopher Coney, " the best o' us hardly honest sometimes, what with hard winters, and so many mouths to fill, and God-a'mighty sending his little taties so terrible small to fill 'em with."

Theirs is a realism divested of all illusion—resigned even to the terrible smallness of " taties," and sly with the typical peasant cunning which has learnt the wisdom of being beneath the notice of the great ones, the gods and the emperors and the tax-gatherers.

" ' And what do this comet mean? ' asked Haymoss. ' That some great tumult is going to happen, or that we shall die of a famine? '

" * Famine—no!' said Nat Chapman. ' That only touches such as we, and the Lord only consarns himself with born gentlemen. It isn't to be supposed that a strange fiery lantern like that would be lighted up for folks with ten or a dozen shillings a week and their gristing, and a load o' thorn faggots when we can get 'em.' "

What a perfect disclaimer of any desire to play the leading role in a tragedy—it is almost as if he felt Hardy eyeing him. " I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." One recalls the drab and shabby countryman at cattle-auctions, so

studiously seeming as if he had not got two halfpennies for a penny, and bidding pound after pound like the slow drawing of stubborn teeth. The deliberate protective unpretentiousness!

" The Lord only consarns himself with born gentlemen " —and humble folk do well to keep out of the way of the Lord, for he is the lighter-up of strange fiery lanterns, the bringer of famine and tumult. See what happened to Giles, who overlooked Marty for that college-educated girl; to Jude, who set his proud heart on Christminster; to Tess, who scorned to be D'Urbervillc's mistress and thought herself good enough to be the wife of a minister's son; to the great Mayor of Casterbridge himself. All lifted up their eyes when the gods seemed to beckon and all were hurled down to destruction. No, the peasant is not deceived by sunny skies. He protests his lack of courage, of wit, of merit. " We be bruckle folk here, the best o' us hardly honest sometimes." Better to pass by unnoticed and be content with no greater bounty than " a load o' thorn faggots when we can get 'em."

This cautious pessimistic humility runs through Hardy's work as the normal level of life, the unobtrusive zero from which his bolder characters start counting. It sets a homely landscape in relation to which the vertiginous towers of human pride take on keener definition and poignancy. The fret and heartbreak and ruin of Giles's long devotion to Grace Melbury is suddenly flooded with the pathos it has all through just failed to achieve, when Upjohn delivers his disquisition on the five climates of courtship:

> " ' What women do know nowadays!' observed the hollow-turner. ' You can't deceive 'em as you could in my time.'
>
> " ' What they knowed then was not small,' said John Upjohn. ' Always a good deal more than the men! Why, when I went courting my wife that is now, the skilfulness that she would show in keeping me on her

pretty side as she walked was beyond all belief. Perhaps you've noticed that she's got a pretty side to her face as well as a plain one?'

" ' I can't say I've noticed it particular much,' said the hollow-turner blandly.

' Well,' continued Upjohn, not disconcerted, ' she has. All women under the sun be prettier one side than t'other. And, as I was saying, the pains she would take to make me walk on the pretty side were unending! I warrant that whether we were going with the sun or against the sun, uphill or downhill, in wind or in lewth, that wart of hers was always towards the hedge, and that dimple towards me. There was I, too simple to see her wheelings and turnings; and she so artful, though two years younger, that she could lead me with a cotton thread, like a blind ram; for that was in the third climate of our courtship. . . . No: I don't think the women have got cleverer, for they was never otherwise.'

" ' How many climates may there be in courtship, Mr. Upjohn?' inquired a youth. . . .

'*' Five—from the coolest to the hottest—leastwise there was five in mine.'

" ' Can ye give us the chronicle of'em, Mr. Upjohn? '

" ' Yes, I could. I could certainly. But 'tis quite unnecessary. They'll come to ye by nater, young man, too soon for your good.' "

At first glance this may seem to ridicule the romantic story of the unhappy lovers by its richly prosaic realism, but in fact it reconciles their little individual world with the eternal and the universal. Hardy has been showing them to us in a highly specialized and subjective light; now he by implication restores to them their common humanity.

So far I have kept the word " Shakespearean " out of this chapter—not without difficulty—but it has got to come sooner or later. And it is here, I think, in this subtle reciprocity between the heroic and the common, that we have the most valid comparison of Hardy with Shakespeare. Both of them have an uncanny sense of the aptness of homely phrasing and rustic humour, and both of them use these elements to add the long perspective of anonymous history to their individual portraits. The long perspective—the recognition that life is a landscape with figures, that time itself is timeless, that every moment partakes of eternity. If we try to discover why,

for example, Marlowe, **for all** his matchless **poetry, is less than** Shakespeare we must surely find that Persepolis is so much farther away than Elsinore or the sea-coast of Bohemia, so much farther removed from our native climate. There is in Shakespeare an all-embracing geniality of spirit which garnishes his boldest invention with the colloquial intimate local detail that the Flemish painters loved to use. However exalted or historical his characters may be they yet have their affiliations with the folk-life of England, bearing the imprint of rustic thought and speech.

By this blending of styles, of coarse and fine, Shakespeare prevents his high creations from becoming rarefied and cut off from the roots of common life; and in so doing he brings us into the warm presence of immediate humanity, to the slippered ease of the fireside where the mask of studied behaviour is thrown off and thought and speech are unaffected. By single words and occasional phrases and homely sayings he incorporates in his visionary empire a subcontinent of what, for want of a better word, I must call " low life."

Amid so much straining and dressing-up these momentary glimpses of unbuttoned men in shirtsleeves, unconcerned and startlingly familiar, are a great refreshment. Sometimes they serve as comic relief, in an interlude that entices our credence toward the horrors and marvels that follow. Duncan's castle might show some cardboard patches if the porter were not there to convince us of the solidity of the door—and of himself. And Hardy uses his great skill in that sort of portrait in a very similar way. The scene at the maltster's in *Far From the Madding Crowd,* for example, is a comic interlude and nothing more. It is a bran-tub of Wessex humour. The story of the simpleton and the owl is still told with enormous relish as **a** true tale in many a village

from Selborne only a few weeks ago. But what a wonderful interlude it is, ripe and flavoursome as the legendary Blue Vinny itself, and so close to life that the words sound in your ears as you read:

> " ' I used to go to his house a-courting my first wife, Charlotte, who was his dairymaid. Well, a very good-hearted man were Farmer Everdene, and I being a respectable young fellow was allowed to call and see her and drink as much ale as I liked, but not to carry away any —outside my skin I mane, of course.'
>
> " ' Ay, ay, Jan Coggan; wc know yer mailing.'
>
> " ' And so you see 'twas beautiful ale, and I wished to value his kindness as much as I could, and not to be so ill-mannered as to drink only a thimbleful, which would have been insulting the man's generosity——'
>
> " ' True, Master Coggan, 'twould so,' corroborated Mark Clark.
>
> " ' —And so I used to cat a lot of salt fish afore going, and then by the time I got there I were as dry as a lime-basket—so thorough dry that that ale would slip down—ah, 'twould slip down sweet! Happy times! Heavenly times! Such lovely drunks as I used to have at that house! You can mind, Jacob? You used to go wi' me sometimes.'
>
> " ' I can—I can,' said Jacob. ' That one, too, that we had at Buck's Head on a White Monday was a pretty tipple.'
>
> " ' 'Twas. But for a wet of the better class, that brought you no nearer the horned man than you were afore you begun, there was none like those in Farmer Everdene's kitchen. Not a single damn allowed; no, not a bare poor one, even at the most cheerful moment when all were blindest, though the good old word of sin thrown in here and there at such times is a great relief to a merry soul.'
>
> " ' True,' said the maltster. * Nater requires her swearing at the regular times, or she's not herself; and unholy exclamations is a necessity of life
>
> " ' But Charlotte,' continued Coggan—' not a word of the sort would Charlotte allow, nor the smallest item of taking in vain. . . . Ay, poor Charlotte, I wonder if she had the good fortune to get into Heaven when 'a died! But 'a was never much in luck's way, and perhaps 'a went downwards after all, poor soul.' "

It is true that we learn a little of Bathsheba from the gossiping and we keep a desultory watch on Gabriel throughout the scene, but what matters is that the two of them are caught up in the finest sustained passage of dialect writing ever achieved by an English novelist—and they are enriched and stabilized by the contact. The fact that they move in

the world of Joseph Poorgrass and Jan Coggan is their strongest pledge of fidelity.

In *Tess* and *injude* Hardy virtually abandoned his Wessex chorus. One is aware of them only just off-stage at RoUiver's and at Chasetown in *Tess,* but there is not even that degree of proximity in *Jude.* One can understand perhaps that Hardy wanted to purify and simplify his style so as to concentrate completely on the great dramas he was about to undertake; and Wessex humours were not in key with the bitterly argumentative tone he was developing. Nevertheless his rustic chorus had been the ballast of his ship, and she rides less steadily without it. There will always be arguments about the precise stature of Hardy as a novelist, about his plots and his style, about Tess's virtue and Judc's deserts: but no one whose ears serve for more than to keep the flies off will ever gainsay that our literature would be much the poorer without those affectionate thumbnail sketches in which Hardy 30 perfectly catches the mind and manner of the Wessex countryman.

CHAPTER VIII

" *A high degree of probability was not attempted in the arrangement of the incidents. . . . The characters themselves, however, were meant to be consistent and human"* (Preface to *The Hand of Ethelberta.)*

THE strength of some novelists lies in their plots, in their story-telling powers. Others depend more on the ability to make articulate a certain kind of experience, to grasp the essential implications of a particular situation. At the widest difference of emphasis we get the anecdote in contrast with the portrait; and this distinction between " plot" and " situation " is useful provided we do not lose sight of the fact that events and characters can never be wholly separated. Every novelist has to gear them together in some sort of ratio. He may, like Wilkie Collins, use his characters merely as counters in the intricate manoeuvring of his plot; or he may, like D. H. Lawrence, discover enormous significance in the simple spectacle of two people stooking corn. Nevertheless events, however much they seem to dwarf the actors, must leave their imprint on those who are involved; and conversely the most absorbing personality can hardly express its nature in an eventless vacuum. The pace and ingenuity of *The Moonstone* fail to quench one's interest in sergeant Cuff and the tract-distributing poor relation; while in *Women in Love* Gerald Crich has occasionally to do something in order to go on talking.

Within these limits, it is easy enough to see that, in *Pamela* or *Tristram Shandy* or *Heart of Darkness,* one is hardly impelled from page to page by a keen desire to discover " what happened next" in the sense that one is thus drawn forward in *Barnaby Rudge* or *Moll Flanders.* It is perfectly possible, therefore, for a novelist to achieve his aim without any great command of the elements of " suspense " and " surprise "; but let us not, because of that, under-rate these things or misunderstand them. They mean much more than the superficially clever ingenuities which stimulate us once and once only—like a puzzle which is worthless when we know the answer. If I may borrow a classic example from the theatre, where this is brilliantly apparent, the screen scene in *The School for Scandal* is as highly charged with dramatic suspense as ever it was, although every schoolboy knows by heart what Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are going to say. At that level of technical accomplishment the reader's foreknowledge is a side-issue of the most trivial sort. However much first acquaintance may have given way to familiarity, even where you know the plot backwards, there is still no diminution in the pleasure aroused by the tautness and shapeliness and narrative impetus of a well-constructed story. These are the formal elements of the writer's craft, exciting an appropriate cormoisseurship by their fineness of proportion and decorative taste and original devising. As an extreme if minor example I instance Wilkie Collins's *Mr. Lepel and the Housekeeper* in which he first discloses his plot—which in his case amounts to putting every one of his cards on the table—and then invests it with such a brilliant and ingenious form that you almost forget the author has already told you every step of what is to follow. I do not know a neater example of the fact that a good plot depends very little on real surprise, for

Collins deliberately throws away that supposed advantage at the outset.

Where does Hardy stand in this matter of plots? He is not very resourceful, not very inventive, and he has nothing of what—thinking of Collins—one might call the watchmakers delicate touch with finely adjusted mechanisms. I would class him with Dostoievsky as by temperament a novelist of situation, and only by force of circumstance a novelist of plot. Serial-writing has so entirely gone out of vogue that the modern reader is apt to forget that *The Possessed* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* were—like *Pickwick Papers*—conceived in magazine instalments. Victorian taste for this style of presentation must be considered an important influence in the history of fiction, for it undoubtedly imposed an emphasis on strong plots with an evenly spaced sequence of fairly sensational climaxes. Dickens was most happily suited to such conditions, for his fertility of invention and his gift for flamboyantly graphic characterizations gave him all the equipment he needed. Dostoievsky, too, profited, I think, from the structural discipline—the narrative shapeliness—which the convention pressed on him. To me *The Possessed* is a perfect example of how much may be gained and how little lost by serial-writing. Hardy, on the contrary, always had reason to be anxious about his ability to become " a good hand at a serial His style is so often circuitous and wandering. His instinct is to deepen rather than to advance. And when he is obliged to advance he is apt either to tiptoe furtively past the reader's sentries without giving the password, or to close his eyes and make a wild rush. There comes the moment when he wants to achieve a certain effect. The plot jerks and jolts suddenly, and in his impatience Hardy omits to chart any probable,

logical course of events by which he could have reached his destination. Anyone who has tried to write a novel will be quick to discern these moments and to find them endearing, for it is always pleasant to share one's weaknesses with the masters! But they remain a defect, and in some cases they are a very disturbing defect.

Occasionally Hardy is just downright careless. The stories in *Life's Little Ironies* show two examples of slipshod contradiction which remain uncorrected. Sophy, in *The Sons Veto,* is first presented to us as having " nut-brown hair " as her most important and distinguishing characteristic. Indeed, Hardy goes out of his way to draw attention to it. Yet on the very next page it becomes " black hair." Again in *An Imaginative Woman,* in the same volume, Mrs. Marchmill is the mother of three children when she starts writing verses and chooses her *nom de plume.* After collecting her poems in volume form—and this likewise occurs *on* the following page—she " discovered she was going to have a third child."

More often he simply takes no interest in probabilities. There is, for example, the incredible telegraph which Paula, in *A Laodicean,* has installed at her home in Somerset. This instrument fascinated Hardy, and it will fascinate the modern reader. In order to engage a London actress for a local performance Paula sends a message on her telegraph at some time after 10 a.m. The reply comes at about 11 a.m. No less than *seven* more telegrams pass between Paula and London—and the actress catches the midday train! Whenever I reflect on this astounding burst of speed I find myself hoping that Macmillan's present a marked copy of *A Laodicean* annually to the Postmaster General.

Mrs. Jethway, in *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* is another character

who has moments of a delicacy ill-suited to critical examination. She knows the contents of Elfride's letters to Stephen without apparently having found any opportunity of reading it; and merely on the strength of having seen them alight at St. Launce's (i.e. Launceston) from a train which is declared to have stopped at Bristol and Plymouth, she announces correctly that they went to London on the previous day with the intention of marrying, but returned without doing so. Making every allowance for a woman's intuition, this is nevertheless a pretty formidable piece of " psychic " knowledge. Still more preposterous is the whole business of Stephen's secret visits to his parents whom he is supposed not to have seen since he was nine: in spite of which he is thoroughly " at home " with them and we are told that his mother and Stephen " were always contending." Turning next to *The Hand of Ethelberta* we find that Ethelberta's stratagem is supposed to be compelled by the poverty of her family. It is therefore worth noting that her father is said to be well paid as a butler, her two eldest brothers are able-bodied workmen, Picotee is a wage-earner, Ethelberta herself is doing quite nicely and two other sisters are experienced domestics. Not a wealthy family, it is true, but immeasurably better off than ten or fifteen years previously when they were all children. In short, they have come through the phase of poverty which accompanies the rearing of numerous children and reached the peak of prosperity when there is a large group of unmarried wage-earners and few dependants.

It may be said that the instances I have given of Hardy's carelessness and imprecision are confined to minor points of detail, of background information and lesser subsidiary events. I would not dispute that, but I suggest that they are

symptomatic of a generally blurred outline. He is usually master of the central occasion, but his control of surrounding circumstances is weak. His principal characters are apt to terminate abruptly with a ragged edge. They have no real social context. We get no gossip about them, no intersection of other views. Hardy seems afraid to let them out of his sight, to release them from the apron-strings of his own style of presentation. And the events which impel them come too often from the shadows, from the obscurity of hints and garbled facts and shapeless improbabilities that lurk outside the pool of limelight in which hero and heroine stand like statues. The decisive interruptions come stumbling into the light as if shoved clumsily and unexpectedly while they waited in the wings. Arabella returns to Jude like a novice on roller-skates, and the reappearance of the furmity-woman in Casterbridge strikes as many false notes as a Zulu playing bagpipes.

At this point, lest I seem merely captious, let me again make it clear that what I am criticizing in Hardy is not his conduct on the battlefields of his imagination but the preliminary manoeuvre by which he deploys his forces. And I take it that this is what moved Gerard Manley Hopkins to complain that Hardy did not write " continuously well." He has his great victories, his moments of imperishable triumph, but—to continue the metaphor—he is often caught flat-footed in a skirmish, he blunders into ambushes, he lacks precise intelligence of the terrain, he has not much tactical subtlety.

The ingredients of his plots are fairly unexciting. His men are mostly ambitious young architects, stolidly languishing country swains, gentlemen prigs, silver-tongued adventurers. His women — with few exceptions — are pleasant but

undistinguished variations on the stock heroine or not very convincing *jemmes fatales.* Taken in a bunch they show surprisingly little individuality. Which is Giles and which is Gabriel? Is the girl in the corner Grace Melbury or Anne Garland or Fancy or Elfride? Men and women alike are young and romantic, following the old, old trail to the fairyland where princes and princesses live happily ever after. Hardy works hard to bar the way by killing, jilting and generally thwarting his lovers, but the distant sound of wedding bells plays a compelling part in the bulk of his novels. Not many of his characters reach the altar before the end of the story, it is true, and when they do so it is often done in secrecy and usually disastrous in outcome. But Hardy's energies are largely occupied in that progress and he gives us very little sustained portrayal of other human preoccupations or other types of people. There is a complete and almost schizophrenic division between the rustic background chorus and the little group of " interesting " principals. Almost alone among novelists Hardy created no worthwhile secondary character of seasoned maturity, none with the warm flavour of a life fulfilled, and none salted with any destructive evil or with the sordid ignobility of gradual erosion.

Age did not interest him. His older characters are perfunctory, mere pawns, of interest only by virtue of their being somebody's father or aunt or mother, as the case may be. The possible entry into a Hardy novel of a Miss Bates, a Stefan Trofimovitch, an Almayer, an Uncle Toby, is quite unthinkable. He has a penchant for fledglings. His equivalent to Madame Bovary is, significantly, Eustacia Vye.

This aspect of Hardy is of such cardinal importance that

I shall devote the next chapter to a fuller study of it. I introduce it now as the main limiting factor in his invention of plots. Just as Restoration comedy turns almost exclusively on the question of who will cuckold whom and when and how, so Hardy is very largely bound by the problem of who will nearly marry, or almost but not quite marry, or at last after many tribulations marry, whom. Most of the stock devices for handling this problem appear in his novels: misunderstanding and temperamental incompatibility *in jude* and *Two on a Tower,* the conflict of love and principles in *Tess* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* the triangle with two likeable rivals in *The Trumpet-Major an& The Mayor of Casterbridge,* the triangle with one unpleasant rival in *Tess* and *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders.* And then there are experiments—the addition of a third rival in *Far From the Madding Crowd,* the substitution of a bore for a cad in *A Laodicean,* and so on. In addition, there are injections of melodrama designed to infuse some extra liveliness, but for the most part Hardy's plots remain weak and desultory. The action of *Jude the Obscure* is little more than a fitful and improbable interruption of Jude's and Sue's *tete-a-tete* on the difficulties of marriage. And where can one find plots more trite and wearisome than those of *The Trumpet-Major, The Woodlanders, The Return of the Native?* Will Anne marry John or Bob? Will Grace marry Giles or Fitzpiers? Will Eustacia marry Clym and give up her infatuation for Wildeve? These questions occupy a great deal of Hardy's time and attention, but they are not very interesting questions—and still less so because Anne and Grace and Clym are extremely ordinary characters without any real strength of definition. No wonder Hardy is often at odds with the course of the **plot he** has **elected to follow! He rings the**

changes valiantly and of course so deepens his stories in his later work that their simple outline is of small importance. But his is, always, a very simple outline, a crude fragment of balladry, an old jingle of unhappy love and sudden death, with a verse or two of melodramatic claptrap about prisons and gallows and journeys across the sea; and altogether it is not very adequate to bear the weight that Hardy puts on it. His puppets attempt to go through their conventional motions and he drives and pushes and forces them out of the usual grooves into new attitudes and original gestures. Sometimes we recognize them as puppets, sometimes we realize that they are dancing to a new sort of tune. The result is uneven and jerky. Hardy botches his work, where things do not fit. Like a composer creating an opera out of a weak libretto he halts the action to accommodate a tremendous duet, interpolates irrelevant but wonderful passages, invests some commonplace traffic with a wholly unexpected poetry that transforms it. Consistency of texture, exact proportion, the neat dove-tailing of incidents, these are missing from the finished work—and let us not pretend otherwise. The compensations are great enough, in all conscience, to overshadow every blemish.

CHAPTER IX

" *The immortal puzzle—given the man and woman, how to find a basis for their sexual relation."* (Preface to *The Woodlanders.)*

THE " love-world " was the theatre in which Hardy found his dramas. To his " imperfect chronicles of human passion " he added a new gamut of feeling and sensibility, and it is this which lifts his lovers so far above the mediocrities of their novelettish stories. The path of true love may run a familiar course in Hardy's novels, but as he treads it he has some new and searching observations to make on " the basis of sexual relations." In many ways he is, as I have already suggested, the father of the modern sex-novel —using the emotions of sex as a vocabulary for expressing man's relations to society, to himself, and to the universe. There are other vocabularies, other notations of personality, that will do equally well, and it is too big a question to enquire now why writers in any particular period choose one or another. I think we can say, though, that the sex-novel is the special medium of a disrupted and incoherent society in which religion has lost its primary sanctions and the patterns of public life are fragmentary and ill-defined. When each ego starts to go adrift on its individual raft sex becomes the most relevant idiom of common experience. Aware of his intellectual loneliness in an age of doubt, Hardy found that most of the inner nature of people could be brought to expression in a chronicle of human passion **and their**

innate quality could be refracted through their sexual relations.

Imagine the story of Tess told by Defoe, the story of Jude told by Dickens, and you will see at once how much would be lost of the particular truths of the inner nature with which Hardy was concerned. He sees his characters as engaged in a moral conflict widi the powers of destiny which is epitomized in their love-world. Allow Tess a shade of earthy cynicism, a little more coarseness of moral fibre, and she might have brushed off Alec and jollied Angel out of his scruples. Let Fitzpiers be seen from a different point of view and he could be a successful doctor with some youthful infidelities forgotten in the background. Their actual ruin is so complete and irrevocable only because it is on the crucial ground where, in Hardy's view, men and women stake everything. Needless to say, that conception of sex is only one point of view. It is recent, historically—a product of Romanticism. It is, I suppose, as true or as false as you choose to believe. The point is that novelists and dramatists must have some generally acceptable symbol of " the crucial ground where men and women stake everything," and when the organization of social life offers no such symbol the artist must discover a more subjective one.

This is by way of introduction—and at least I am trying not to trail my coat. What is now necessary is to examine Hardy's ideas about sex and to discover their dramatic implications. In a letter to Stevenson, Henry James observed of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that " the pretence of sexuality is only equalled by the absence of it." By describing James and Stevenson as " the Polonius and the Osric of novelists" Hardy certainly had his revenge (and incidentally damaged the legend that he was a simple and humourless man) but

there is nevertheless a great deal of truth in James's comment. Hardy's early reputation as an immoral writer was not based on anything vividly sensual in his novels. He did not " sing the body electric," as Whitman did. I can think of only three passages in the whole of his work that can be said to glow with the warm vigour and unabashed beauty of physical passion, and of these one is not overtly sexual. That one is Troy's exhibition of swordsmanship to Bathsheba—a magnificent scene which contains no sexual allusion but is unmistakably the exact parallel of a bird's nuptial display; and after the mock-combat, the display of plumage and so on, Bathsheba is duly won. Then there is Fitzpicrs's moonlit revelry with Suke, in *The Woodlanders,* discreetly done but not without gusto. And lastly that wonderful early scene between Jude and Arabella when she puts an egg between her breasts and deliberately excites his desire. But these incidents are exceptional and, if Hardy was moderately compassionate to Suke, there is no doubt about his dislike of Arabella: as the representative of gross appetite she is the arch-villainess in his scheme of sexual relations.

A cynical view of Hardy would argue that he was in favour of long engagements. The consummation of marriage, however devoutly to be wished for, is apt to mark an end of the search for " a basis of sexual relations," and thenceforward the higher sensibility has to reconcile itself to the unsatisfactory conditions of human life. " A man checks all a woman's finer sentiments towards him by marrying her," Hardy wrote in *The Hand of Ethelberta.* Perhaps he was being witty. He was certainly being sententious when in *Far From the Madding Crowd* he interpolated this typical notebook *pensee:*

> " Marriage transforms a distraction into a support, the power of which should be, and happily often is, in direct proportion to the degree of imbecility it supplants."

Maybe neither is to be taken too seriously, but what are we to make of Pierston's extraordinary proposal to Marcia Bencomb, in *The Well-Beloved?*—

> " ' My queenly love,' he burst out; ' instead of going to your aunt's, will you come and marry me? . . . Think what a short way out of your difficulty this would be/ he continued. ' No bother about aunts, no fetching home by an angry father.'
>
> " It seemed to decide her. She yielded to his embrace."

It is better to marry than—endure " bother with aunts " ! And one recalls other Hardy characters who marry in this Gadarene fashion, possessed and rushing blindly. In general his weddings are not conspicuously happy affairs. They are sometimes clandestine (as Bathshcba's with Troy, Viviette's with Swithin in *Two on a Tower),* sometimes they end in a fiasco (Troy, Elfride Swancourt and Thomasin Yeobright are three who go to be married and return unwed) and sometimes they are maimed rites (as Cytherca with Springrove in *Desperate Remedies,* or Gabriel with Bathsheba —dull-toned postscripts to violent death and widowhood) or bitter-tasting gestures of contempt and disgust (as when three of his heroines—Viviette, Elfride and Ethelberta—turn from their romantic loves to cast themselves away on unglamorous " noble lords "). Even the names of his heroines are, in a sense, names not of wives but of sweethearts—bizarre, far-fetched, romantic names of the sort that chorus-girls love to invent, mysterious and exotic—Cytherea, Viviette, Eustacia, Elfride, Marcia. These hardly suggest themselves as home-makers and breeders of children. They are not practical choices but sirens of a more ethereal and ideal world.

And in this, I think, we have the key to Hardy's conception of sex, as a mode of entry into a more sublime world where the higher sensibility finds its true object. The hallmark of his heroes and heroines is a decision—or at least a willingness

to decide—to reject the practical choice, to rebel against the normal pattern, to fight their way out past the walls of society to some new form of life intuitively recognized and now visibly embodied in the loved one. Consider Bathsheba, that prosperous but vulnerable lady-farmer: how practical for her to marry the solid honest bailiff, Gabriel Oak, or the worthy neighbour, Farmer Boldwood. Either could guarantee her a steady return on her property, a shelter from the storms of life, and a grateful kindliness of nature. What could be better? Nothing, unless some generous excess of spirit drives you to seek the lambent flame of life itself; in which case, you may find it in a penniless sword-flashing soldier who proceeds to ruin you. Eustacia, the girl-Bovary smouldering and suffocating on Egdon, with her pitiful, dangerous, childish dream of the splendours of Weymouth —she too has the same spirit. She is over-invented, grotesquely larger than life, and yet drawn with the bold strokes of a great artist. " In heaven she will probably sit between the Heloises and the Cleopatras." And with her, among those who aspired and suffered at a higher rate than the gods permit, will be Jude and Angel Clare and Clym Yeobright—that trio of idealists who flouted the conventions of their day for the most high-minded reasons.

In a famous passage on the function of the novel, D. H. Lawrence wrote, " It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead." This is precisely what Hardy succeeds in doing in his major characterizations. Instead of studying the accepted pattern of life, or satirizing it, he breaks away and posits the individual rebel searching for a basis on which to create a fresh pattern. His sympathies are with the misfit, with him

or her who can echo his own cry, " This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences." But at least the " higher existences" can recognize each other and glimpse the happiness that is denied to them. I think of Tess's precarious delight in Angel; of Jude's vision of Christminster, of his despairing words to Sue: " Perhaps I spoilt one of the highest and purest loves that ever existed between man and woman/'

It follows that marriage, as a social contract, is—in the words of Sue—" a hopelessly vulgar institution." The special communion between lovers which she represents, is a sort of heretic's bulwark against society, a refugee relationship. Theirs is a private world, detached from the social context —if you like, a kind of sexual nihilism to which Hardy was eventually driven. The argument appears earlier, in *Tess,* when Hardy begins to attack marriage as "an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature " and refers to " the flimsy fact of Angel, in a season of impulse, writing his name in a church-book beside hers."

This is pretty feeble casuistry, of course. There is also no foundation in " Nature " (whatever that may mean) for the arbitrary law which says " Thou shalt not kill." And it is going beyond the limits of ingenuousness to suggest that the ceremony of marriage consists of nothing more than the signing of the register, and that anyway men must be spared the consequences of their seasons of impulse. But in *The Well-Beloved* Hardy developed in a fanciful way the idea that one could love, not a person, but an ideal that might transfer itself from one person to another, vacating one body and entering a second. Clearly it would be difficult to devise a marriage-contract with an entity so tenuous and mobile as that. And indeed precisely because they seek to escape the

common destiny, because they hold aloof from the social pattern, Hardy's lovers are ideal and tenuous and mobile. His characters seek in their lovers what they have not found in life—and I suppose that is the philosophy of Romance. But here the stakes are correspondingly higher because of the high-souled disgust with which the protagonists turn from life to the search in love for an ideal.

And love fails them, as it has failed the great heretics of the past. Like Henchard, they raise their eyes too high and damnation is their reward. I say " damnation " deliberately because I think of Hardy as one of the great singers of the wrath of God, although he is glibly labelled as an atheist because the agnostic jargon of his time colours a handful of often-quoted allusions to the First Cause, the Immortals, and so on. Hardy warned against a too literal reading of these passages, and I believe that warning has more significance than it is usually allowed. To curse God is also an act of faith, as much as to worship Him. Hardy had a more exact acquaintance with the Bible, and was more certainly influenced by it, than any novelist writing to-day. "It is a passage in Hosca which came to my mind," he writes in *The Hand ofEthclberta*—and one recalls how often and how aptly some such quotation " comes to his mind." There is a passage in *The Well-Beloved* which offsets the more usual versions of Hardy's cosmogony and perhaps indicates a tendency of his mind that has been undervalued:

> " The church of the island had risen near the . . . Pagan temple, and a Christian emanation from the former might be wrathfully tormenting him through the very false gods to whom he had devoted himself both in his craft, like Demetrius of Ephesus, and in his heart. Perhaps Divine punishment for his idolatries had come."

There is the same undercurrent in *Jude,* a fascinated expectation that the heretic must surfer an orthodox retribution. I

do not want to exaggerate this, for there can be no doubt that Hardy's sympathies are with the heretic, with the proud pioneer of higher sensibility who rejects the accepted ways of life—and yet in some corner of his heart he seems to desire to see his protagonists damned. It is almost as if damnation were the one certain proof of God's existence.

Certainly Pierston's suspicion, in *The Well-Beloved*, that his new ideas are " false gods" and " idolatries" and must therefore fail, echoes in the major works. And the fact that those ideas are idealistic and noble exalts their overthrow to the level of tragedy—in Hardy's own definition " the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE." The voice of Sue comes back again, crying, " Perhaps the world is not illuminated enough for such experiments as ours " ; and Angel's failure to apply his emancipated notions to the hard fact of Tess's past is underlined with a sort of scornful despair:

> " With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five and twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings."

An *avant-garde* humanism is not enough—either because " this planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences " or because the wrath of God is visited on intellectual pride. The language is different but the tragic drama is the same in either case.

CHAPTER X

We ought to have lived in mental communion, and no more!' (Jude the Obscure.)

A WORLD peopled by men and women of the stamp of Angel and Tess, Jude and Sue, Clym Yeobright (I'm not sure about Eustacia), Grace Melbury and Giles Winterborne, Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak, ought to be a happy and good world. At any rate Hardy implies that it ought to. What is it, then, that destroys them? What other force, countering their virtue and idealism, prevents the world from being sufficiently " illuminated "? What is Hardy's conception of evil? In what way does the malignancy of fate operate on the well-meaning?

" If we are happy as we are," Sue asks, " what does it matter to anybody? " The same thought must often have occurred to Tess. Clym too wants to efface himself from the world and do good in obscurity. There is a persistent Crusoeism in Hardy's characters, a desire to subtract themselves from the social context. They are apt to be armchair saints, like Angel, like Jude and Sue, hoping to arrive at the Holy City without getting their boots muddy, having no real point of entry into the world that confronts them. The men in particular suffer from a sort of functional sterility.

What is the force that bears down on them, then, and prevents them from remaining " happy as they are "? Nearly always it is a sense of guilt or self-condemnation occasioned by some disastrous impulse—Henchard's sale of his wife, Jude's ugly marriage to Arabella, Tess's seduction, the wayward selection of the wrong husbands by Bathsheba and Grace. These actions put them at the mercy of society in

some degree, and yet they are not crimes nor sins but follies of faulty judgment. Henchard, in his drunkenness, was not expecting to be taken seriously, Tess foresaw no danger, Jude was dazzled by physical desire—Hardy pleads for them all, earnestly and pityingly. And because of his great capacity for pity he blurs the outline of his tragedies and garbles the figures of his villains, or of all of them except one, if I may be allowed to class Henchard with Fitzpiers and Troy and D'Urberville.

They are to me his least convincing, most uneven but most interesting characters, those villains. Fitzpiers and Troy accumulate a natural humanity until their villainy is unmasked, and then they are despatched on a rake's progress with such terrific acceleration that they lose shape and substance. Alec D'Urberville is a muddle of useful improbabilities from start to finish—a character whose *necessity* Hardy understood but not his nature. Henchard alone could well be beginning where the others leave off. Like them he is a strongly male, masterful character, and like them he yields to a black-hearted impulse and wrongs the loyalty of a guileless woman. But only in the portrait of Henchard do we get any really disciplined conception of what the consequences might be; and of course that is only possible because Hardy does not first spend two hundred pages making us fall in love with Mrs. Henchard, and is therefore not obliged to mete out instant and sensational justice.

In the other cases—Fitzpiers, Troy, D'Urberville, Arabella, Wildeve—Hardy's interest is primarily instrumental. He wants a villain, he wants someone to make up a threesome for a triangle—and the upshot is that they are not drawn with much inner consistency. Troy and Fitzpiers are wonderful facades of glittering evil with great promise of depth, but

they dwindle away; Wildeve is kept on a very tight rein, D'Urberville is a caricature and Arabella quickly degenerates into a monster. What I said earlier of D'Urberville is in varying degree true of them all—that Hardy understood their necessity rather than their nature. And since they are the other side, the dark side, of the search for " a basis for sexual relations," it is important to discover in what way they were relevant to Hardy's purposes and to what extent they were distorted by the barrage of extenuation he put up on behalf of their victims.

In *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders* the situation is simple. There is no " new" morality, no Victorian " modernism." Troy and Fitzpiers are symbols of adventurous manhood, Troy the soldier skilled in the dangers of sword and cannon, Fitzpiers the scholar experimenting in books and knowledge—men of address and polish and decisive will. They stand in contrast to the stolid countrymen (Giles and Gabriel) who have sobered and tamed their manhood by excessive respectfulness. They are vividly masculine and dangerous. It is a fineness of perception, a strength of desire, that makes the women choose these rootless destroyers. That is the tragedy—stark, grand and nobly conducted.

The Return of the Native is more complicated. It is Hardy's first attempt to deviate from the orthodox pattern of tragedy. It is also his first attempt to use his " modern " philosophy as a modifying force. In a moment of naive confession Hardy remarked, " I got to like the character of Clym before I had done with him. I think he is the nicest of all my heroes, and *not a bit* like me." Each reader must make what he will of that, but it is noteworthy that Clym is the first of the priggish idealists—the prototype of Angel and Jude—and it is in contrast with his rather *castrato* aura that the evil brilliance of

sex begins to glow menacingly bright. Hardy's attitude to Wildeve and Eustacia is ambiguous—he half admires them, as he half admires the spell that bound Troy and Bathsheba. On the whole he is content to accept it at the end as a grand passion, but his main concern nevertheless is to excite pity for Clym. He is very indulgent to Clym. It could be said, I think, that Clym has neither judgment nor resolution: that his marriage was a silly infatuation, his career a farce of half-baked idealisms, his treatment of Eustacia a hopeless vacillation. And all that, because it is so essentially human, is to be pitied. But Hardy cannot pity without justifying, excusing, exonerating; and the tragedy is consequently weakened and belittled by his itch to argue with and resist the operation of the laws of human conduct.

In *Tess* Hardy created his most distinctive tragedy, and it is here that we find his strength and his weakness most markedly displayed. The marriage of Tess and Angel succeeds, where the portrait of Clym failed, in presenting Hardy's " modern " conception of human relationships in an intensely dramatic form. This symbolical marriage of Wessex blood and London ideas champions the philosophy that chastity is of the spirit and not of the body, that the inner world of love is the newly discovered continent of the modern soul, that marriages are made in Heaven, and that it ought not to matter to anybody " if we are happy as we are." This is " the basis of their sexual relations " on which a triumphant Angel and Tess would stand. The fact that they fail is due to some old-fashioned residue in Angel's doctrines and to the highly equivocal spell that D'Urberville exerts on Tess. It is a very odd story and I hope I shall not be thought presumptuous if I suggest that Hardy only imperfectly understood it. It is a great story and the glory is his for the writing of it, but his

constant pleading is maddeningly loose and illogical, and he makes a travesty of D'Urberville. If there is any justification for a critic's attempting to " save the tale from the artist " it will rest on those two points.

It is worth recalling first that to Victorian morality *Tess* was dynamite. It was rejected by *Murray's Magazine* and by *Macmillan s Magazine.* To achieve serial publication Hardy had to bowdlerize it *(Jude* suffered similarly later). For example, the editor of *The Graphic*—in which *Tess* ultimately appeared—took exception to the scene where Angel carries Tess and the three dairymaids in his arms across a flooded lane. He suggested that, for family reading, it would be more decorous to put them in a wheelbarrow. Hardy duly accepted the suggestion and provided a wheelbarrow.

With this in mind it is easy to see that much of Hardy's special pleading was addressed to a hostile audience, and some of its significance may therefore be dismissed as ephemeral. Not all, though, for there is no escaping Hardy's conviction that Tess suffered only because men (and gods) are not sufficiently liberal-minded. She is, in his own words, " a pure woman," and if he regarded her tragedy as " inevitable " he did so only in a pragmatic way—life being what it is—and not from any sense of ultimate and unimpugnable necessity.

There is a moment when Hardy toys with the idea that Tess's noble ancestors, in their season of pomp and pride, may have used the village maidens as brutally as she is used; so that her own plight amounts to what is commonly called " poetic justice." And in an outburst of characteristic generosity he exclaims, " Though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature." The

sentiment, as I say, is generous; but it proceeds from pert and callow thinking, for how are we—at a stroke—to liberate ourselves from the total human heritage? It would be better to say that the sins of the fathers are indeed sins *because* they visit themselves on the children—that, in other words, it is of the nature of evil to have evil consequences. To believe otherwise is to believe that the individual can be isolated from his or her context of time and place and inheritance. And Tess herself gives the lie to that when she reproaches her mother for failing to warn her. " Why didn't you tell me? " But if her destiny could be in some way reprieved of every consequence of that neglect, the very word " neglect " would be rendered meaningless. I do not want to get into deeper philosophical water than is necessary, but it is surely clear enough that to divorce our actions from their consequences is to rob them of moral significance. The essence of Tragedy is not that the wicked man is punished for his wickedness but that a potentially noble character is eroded by way of some unguarded frailty.

However, in the warmth of his pity, Hardy wants both to prove Tess in the fiery furnace and at the same time extinguish the flames: forgetting that sin must ruin the noble person, whereas it merely depraves the ignoble. If Tess were cynical enough to shrug aside her seduction as a juvenile mistake, or cheerfully wanton enough to laugh it off as a tumble in the long grass, she would not be Tess. And to contend that she surfers merely in the cause of a worthless social convention is to belittle her tragedy.

In this division between his sympathy and his tragic conception Hardy resorts to ambiguities and evasions in the attempt to maintain a consistent appearance. Tess, he says, " had been *made* to break **an accepted social law." And then**

again she had been " temporarily blinded by his ardent manners." She had been " stirred to a confused surrender." Or to quote her own words, " My eyes were dazed by yoU for a little, and that was all." Hardy is not exactly eager t0 assess the measure of her own contribution to her downfall

He is—perhaps inescapably—more explicit about her reticence in not telling Angel until after their marriage. " Her instinct of self-preservation was stronger than her candour." She is in the same case as Elfride in *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* but with vastly greater stakes, and she makes the same fatal error of subordinating candour to self-preservation. Indeed her whole tragedy is contained in these two or three very human passages. She was dazed for a little and stirred into a confused surrender, and when the moment came to face the consequence of that her instinct of self-preservation was stronger than her candour. Had she been a grosser character she would have survived; because she was not she lives in our minds as one of the great modern figures oi tragedy.

The facts, the dramatic history and the accumulating momentum of disaster, are chronicled with great power; but the inner necessity of the tragedy is so resisted by Hardy that at times it appears cryptically through a sort of censorship and the portrait of D'Urberville surfers so much that it remains fragmentary. *On* Tess's later relationship with her lover, during their stay at Bournemouth, Hardy imposes a complete black-out. One assumes that D'Urberville would not keep a mistress who sulked and brooded all the time. One assumes that Tess accounted to herself in some form for this final surrender. And one assumes also, alas, that Hardy's silence on the subject is purely defensive, that he is averting his eyes. The nearest we get to an explicit statement is in

the sombre admission that " a consciousness that in a physical sense this man alone [i.e. D'Urberville] was her husband seemed to weigh on her more and more."

The " physical sense," the hard truth of the flesh, begins to override the spirit—begins to override her spiritual chastity and her " ideal" marriage with Angel. The urge to present the real and the ideal in sharp opposition was always strong in Hardy: it reflected the poignant irony of life which was to him the distinctive flavour of human affairs, and he made it the deliberate theme of *Tess* and *Jude.* And so, we are left to suppose, there grows in the depths of Tess's mind the realization that D'Urberville has somehow set his seal on her eternally. On this, the keystone of her tragedy, Hardy is curiously silent, but there is one other clue in a very extraordinary speech earlier in the book, when D'Urberville climbs on to a hayrick beside Tess and she first hits him in the face with a glove and then exclaims, " Now, punish me, whip me, crush me, you need not mind those people under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim/'

It is a very remarkable speech, and it recalls to my mind T. E. Lawrence's account of his terrifying abasement before the Arab who flogged him. One feels that it is quite unpremeditated, as if it proceeded from some deeper level of the mind than Hardy fully understood. And it reveals that her love for Angel has that secret maternal contempt, which one glimpses from time to time, because he has not got the key to those impulses in her which she herself is unable to control and which D'Urberville alone can arouse. It is the cry of a passionate woman to her lover—to her demon lover, if you like. It is exactly right and it throws a flood of light on Tess and D'Urberville; but I do not believe Hardy thought of it

as anything but proof that the docility of the rabbit demonstrates the wickedness of the weasel. And D'Urberville is left unfinished, a stagey Sir Jasper.

With this I come to the last phase of Hardy's sex-drama. So far his heroines have chosen men with the power to arouse or to satisfy some strong hidden impulse in them—something stronger than a well-intentioned idealism—and without caring that this power is allied to an irresponsibility of character. Tragedy has come from that. The only reprieve has been for those who suppressed their sex and cynically married a title. There can be little doubt of where Hardy's sympathies lay. He hurries Troy and Fitzpiers to perdition, he hardly allows his pen more than a nodding acquaintance with Wildeve and he censors D'Urberville so drastically that he is scarcely intelligible.

In his last novel, *Jude the Obscure,* Hardy openly attempted to escape from the domination of sexual power *to* a plane of mental communion. He revised the leading roles, substituting Jude for Tess, Arabella for D'Urberville, Sue for Angel. Jude, like Tess, is seduced (there is no other word for his marriage to Arabella) and then forms a highly intellectualized " ideal " relationship with Sue. In the end the message " to those into whose soul the iron has entered " is that once again the real overcomes the ideal. Jude is seduced afresh by Arabella and moreover persuades Sue to give up the platonic ideal for an orthodox union. But Sue remains as one of the most distinctive and absorbing of Hardy's creations, if only because of the high esteem in which he himself held her. " There is nothing perverted or depraved in Sue's nature," he insisted. " Her sexual instinct [is] healthy as far as it goes, but unusually weak and fastidious. . . . Sue is a type of woman which has always had an attraction for me."

The attraction is not always easy to share. Her " curious unconsciousness of gender" leads to this shallow, self-centred and heartless confession of an earlier relationship for which " fastidious" does not seem to me to be quite the word:

> " ' We shared a sitting-room for fifteen months. . . . He said I was breaking his heart by holding out against him so long at such close quarters. . . . I might play that game once too often, he said. . . . I hope he died of consumption and not of me entirely.' "

Hardy explains that she puts on a flippancy to hide her real feelings. One has therefore to take her real feelings on trust, but there is no doubt about the flippancy. In the letter to Jude announcing that her marriage to the unhappy clergyman, Phillotson, is being " accelerated," she adds, " as the railway companies say of their trains." Considering all the circumstances this is flippancy indeed! But the marriage is pretty flippant too as she neither loves Phillotson nor intends to consummate their union. No wonder the poor fellow moans, " What do I care about J. S. Mill? I only want to lead a quiet life! " But the simple and natural desires of Phillotson fall rather beneath the notice of Sue's " fastidiousness." Evidently she is, in her own eyes, a very important person, but one is nevertheless impelled to wonder why she enters into these exhausting and unsatisfactory relationships. The answer she gives—" My curiosity to hunt up a new sensation always leads me into these scrapes " —remains an enigma. One does not know whether it is " flippant " or just plainly outrageous.

The impact of this madly egocentric little sensation-hunter on Jude is not very savoury. Very few novels seem to me to be truly and accurately described as obscene, but I think *Jude* is one that qualifies for the description. Snatches of conversation between Jude and Sue come back to one's

mind with **a** repellent flavour clinging to them. There is the voice of Sue saying with awful complacency, " O I seem so bad—upsetting men's courses like this " ; saying coquettishly, " They say you and I ought to marry . . . there, now I have told you, and I wish I hadn't." She is so adept at telling and then " wishing she hadn't."

Hers is the simple technique of putting out a fire by throwing petrol on it. And then Jude's voice—" Your will is law to me. . . . Crucify me, if you will." In neither of them is there any real humility; in its place they achieve only a horrible self-degradation, at once grovelling and sanctimonious.

In Hardy's eyes, however, Sue remains " ethereal, fine-nerved and sensitive," the incarnation of the " highest and purest love between man and woman." She is the liberator from those dark uncomprehended impulses that wrecked her predecessors. Hand in hand with Jude, she and he arc the orphans of the storm of sex, a couple of castaways with no external relationships, no social tics, no friends—mere splinters in the body of the nation. By creating them Hardy made a final denial of life, of the " real," of the flesh, in the name of an ideal sensibility which it is beyond the power of this earth to accommodate. " I resolved to trust you to set my wishes above your gratification," Sue says to Jude; and of course Jude betrays that trust. The supreme sexual relationship was planned to eliminate sex; but, as that proves impossible, the immortal puzzle remains. One even wonders if Hardy could have had anything further to say, after *Jude.* The isolation and the despair of the two " lovers " are complete, and as the forces of destruction gather about them the rock-like dignity of Hardy's spirit infuses them with a melancholy majesty. **What had before been almost**

nauseating is in the end cleansed by an overwhelming sense of pity. And again one feels that Hardy wrote better than he knew. The crass mental pride of Jude and Sue, their confusion of ideas and their warped self-absorption only add to the horror of the grinding and powdering and scattering of their wills by the vast weight of human circumstance. One begins by almost wishing them ill; one ends dumb-founded and overawed by the measure of their ruin. And it is a sentence from *A Pair of Blue Eyes*—the first of Hardy's sex-dramas—that comes to my mind as their suitably ironical epitaph—" where the lover or husband is not fastidious, and refined, and of a deep nature, things seem to go on better, I fancy."

CHAPTER XI

THIS study of Hardy's novels would be incomplete without some comment on his prose-style. To some authoritative judges—notably Henry James and George Moore—it appears a very villainous style. Others praise his wonderful evocations of particular landscapes and scenes—for example, the description of Egdon Heath with which *The Return of the Native* opens or the sketches of Casterbridge in *The Mayor of Casterbridge.* It is perhaps impossible to reconcile these opposing views entirely for no one admires all styles, unless—as Wilde pointed out—he happens to be an auctioneer. But we can go some way toward finding a balance by allowing that Hardy's style is impure—and where critics then disagree is over the importance or unimportance they attach to his impurities.

He is a wordy writer, moving slowly and needing plenty of elbow-room. He writes a stiff and ungainly sentence every so often. He is sometimes flat-footed, and sometimes fatally attracted by jargon. And he loves to drag in an antiquarian titbit without much concern for its relevance. In any anthology of humdrum verbosity Hardy would be an important contributor. " She blinked away an excess of eye-moisture " is an obvious gem. So is " standing before the aforesaid officiator." In *Jude,* where his phrasing should be mature and resourceful, he writes " Arabella was not worth a great deal as a specimen of womankind "—which would hardly add lustre to a schoolboy's essay. *The Well-Beloved* yields " It was their first meeting under the solar rays "

(i.e. in the daytime). And from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* I choose " His occult breathings to her might be solvable by his course in that respect."

His dialogue is weak, and tends to become stilted when lovers are alone together. " Who can forbid your indulgence in any whim? You have all my heart yet, I believe." That is hardly the language of newly-weds. Nor is Viviette's comment to Swithin—" This opportunity should therefore not be passed over." The melodrama of *A Laodicean* is rich in absurdities, from De Stancy's " I have unconsciously adopted Radical notions to obliterate disappointed hereditary instincts" to the cumbersome rigmarole of " It is necessary that it should be recorded, for one's own memory is a treacherous book of reference, should verification be required at a time of delirium, disease or death."

From these examples it can be seen that Hardy's besetting sin is an unmitigated solemnity. Apart from an occasional rather wintry humour he is an extremely serious-minded man, to the point of dourness. His language lacks subtlety; his manner is unpolished and direct, with no apparent stylishness. Such and such happened, he says, in this way or that. And he leaves it thus, without suggesting any confidential intimacy with the reader. Where he offers an interpretation it is normally cold and reserved and formal in a completely objective way. His characteristic approach is legalistic, cautious, devoid of gusto, sprinkled with quasi-scientific terms and sententious conclusions. And the result is often lumpy, like badly cooked porridge.

On the whole, though, the single sentence is no fit index of Hardy's powers. He is a slowly soaring writer with a lumbering take-off, gathering momentum gradually through the length of a paragraph. Without the wit or the finesse

to strike quickly he has instead a slowly smouldering animation which crackles and blazes fitfully and then lapses into smokiness. His description of the burning couch-heap in *Desperate Remedies* is both a good sample of his earliest flights and a fanciful image of his style:

> " Farmers and horticulturists well know that it is in the nature of a heap of couch-grass, when kindled in calm weather, to smoulder for many days, and even weeks, until the whole mass is reduced to a powdery charcoal ash, displaying the while scarcely a sign of combustion beyond the volcano-like smoke from its summit; but the continuance of this quiet process is throughout its length at the mercy of one particular whim of Nature: that is, a sudden breeze, by which the heap is liable to be fanned into a-flame so brisk as to consume the whole in an hour or two.
>
> " Had the farmer narrowly watched the pile when he went to close the door, he would have seen, besides the familiar twine of smoke from its summit, a quivering of the air around the mass, showing that a considerable heat had arisen inside.
>
> " As the railway-porter turned the corner of the row of houses adjoining the Three Tranters, a brisk new wind greeted his face, and spread past him into the village. He walked along the high-road till he came to a gate, about three hundred yards from the inn. Over the gate could be discerned the situation of the building he had just quitted. He carelessly turned his head in passing, and saw behind him a clear red glow indicating the position of the couch-heap: a glow without a flame, increasing and diminishing in brightness as the breeze quickened or fell, like the coal of a newly-lighted cigar. If those cottages had been his, he thought, he should not care to have a fire so near them as that—and the wind rising. But the cottages not being his, he went on his way to the station, where he was about to resume duty for the night, The road was now quite deserted: till four o'clock the next morning, when the carters would go by to the stables, there was little probability of any human being passing the Three Tranters Inn.
>
> '* By eleven, everybody in the house was asleep. It truly seemed as if the treacherous element knew there had arisen a grand opportunity for devastation.
>
> " At a quarter past eleven a slight stealthy crackle made itself heard amid the increasing moans of the night wind; the heap glowed brighter still, and burst into a flame; the flame sank, another breeze entered it, sustained it, and it grew to be first continuous and weak, then continuous and strong."

When the flames break through the rubbish there is suddenly warmth and light. And at his best Hardy can then turn a

phrase with a poet's deadly accurate precision of words. There is, for example, the sudden *bravura* of his description of harvest weather in *The Mayor of Casterbridge:*

> " No sooner had the sickles begun to play than the atmosphere suddenly felt as if cress would grow in it without other nourishment. It rubbed people's checks like damp flannel when they walked abroad. There was a gusty, high, warm wind; isolated raindrops starred the window-panes at remote distances: the sunlight would flap out like a quickly opened fan, throw the pattern of the window on the floor of the room in a milky, colourless shine, and withdraw as suddenly as it had appeared."

The original form of that passage appears in Hardy's notebooks, in these words:

> " A gusty wind makes the raindrops hit the windows in stars, and the sunshine flaps open and shut like a fan, flinging into the room a tin-coloured light."

A comparison of the two versions should dispose of any idea that Hardy's prose was as artless as he sometimes chose to have it appear. The final development of that notebook entry is not showy, but the lengthened cadences have a muscular tension and pitch which make them arresting.

Occasionally he lingers over a deliberate set-piece. His celebration of the old-fashioned settle, in *The Return of the Native,* is closely akin to the sort of prose cadenza that Dickens perfected:

> " [The settle] is, to the hearths of old cavernous fireplaces, what the east belt of trees is to the exposed country estate, or the north wall to the garden. Outside the settle candles gutter, locks of hair wave, young women shiver, and old men sneeze. Inside is Paradise. Not a symptom of a draught disturbs the air ; the sitters' backs are as warm as their faces, and songs and old tales are drawn from the occupants by the comfortable heat, like fruit from melon-plants in a frame."

Hardy is not often as genial as that. In his case it is on the whole a derivative mood, I think. One begins to hear the echoes unmistakeably. The heartier moments of *The Trumpet-Major,* for instance, are pure Dickens:

> " Then there was a welcoming of Captain Bob by pulling out his arms like drawers and shutting them again, smacking him on the back as if

> **he were** choking, holding him at arm's length **as if** he **were** of too **large** type to read close."

And so on. This is pastiche merely. Hardy's excellence of phrasing is better expressed in that mordant reference to the special doorway by which corpses leave the workhouse—a " species of Traitor's Gate translated to another sphere." The sudden unexpected image bestows a grim and pitiful dignity on the passing of Fanny Robin, recognizing her as " sister under the skin " of the great heroines of history. It is a wonderful stroke, instinct with compassion and yet controlled by a rigorous irony. Irony is Hardy's natural preference to the less oblique forms of humour. His manner is dry, his mode of comic expression a slightly caricatured scholarlincss and over-precision. There arc one or two straightforward wisecracks (as, for example, Casterbridge's two styles of dress—" the simple and the mistaken ") and sometimes he throws off a spark of wit (as when he describes the parish-clerk in *Desperate Remedies* as " a kind of bowdlerized rake ") but for the most part Hardy's humour is in this form:

> " Men of the stamp to whom labour suggests nothing worse than a wrestle with gravitation, and pleasure nothing better than a renunciation of the same."

But any sense of humour is a side-issue in Hardy's work. Where his prose rises to real stature is in the broadly panoramic passages—the concrete visual landscapes, and the extensive summaries of incident and personality which may be counted as correlative panoramas of the dramatic scene. Hardy warms to his work most surely when he can preserve a distance between himself and his object. Dialogue imposes a close-up view of the speakers, and that is perhaps why he is seldom happy with it. He wants a longer range, a wider and more compendious horizon. His opening chapters are so often outstandingly successful because he is able to outline

a scene at leisure, pinpoint one or two characters from afar and survey them speculatively. The objective static view, the landscape with figures—these inspire so much of Hardy's best prose. He is a true contemplative, first observing and selecting detail, and then letting his mind play over and above it in a mood of reflection and speculation; until mood and object fuse in a moment of insight. In illustration of this there are many passages that clamour to be quoted. Each reader will doubtless have his own favourites—the journeying of the carrier's wagon to the Hintocks at the start of *The Woodlanders* perhaps, or the distant view of the bonfire on Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* or the superb landscape of Blackmore Vale in *Tess of the D'Urhervilles.* Hardy abounds in such passages—and not only in his major novels. *The Hand ofEthelherta* has presumably lost whatever hold it may once have had on public esteem, but it deserves to be remembered if only for this description of Knollsea:

> " Knollsea was a seaside village lying snug within two headlands as between a finger and thumb. Everybody in the parish who was not a boatman was a quarrier, unless he were the gentleman who owned half the property and had been a quarryman, or the other gentleman who owned the other half, and had been to sea.
>
> " The knowledge of the inhabitants was of the same special sort as their pursuits. The quarrymen in white fustian understood practical geology, the laws and accidents of dips, faults, and cleavage, far better than the ways of the world and mammon; the seafaring men in Guernsey frocks had a clearer notion of Alexandria, Constantinople, the Cape, and the Indies than of any inland town in their own country. This, for them, consisted of a busy portion, the Channel, where they lived and laboured, and a dull portion, the vague unexplored miles of interior at the back of the ports, which they seldom thought of.
>
> " Some wives of the village, it is true, had learned to let lodgings, and others to keep shops. The doors of these latter places were formed of an upper hatch, usually kept open, and a lower hatch, with a bell attached, usually kept shut. Whenever a stranger went in, he would hear a whispering of astonishment from a back room, after which a woman came forward, looking suspiciously at him as an intruder, and advancing slowly enough to allow her mouth to get clear of the meal she was

partaking of. Meanwhile the people in the back room would stop their krives and forks in absorbed curiosity as to the reason of the stranger's entry, who by this time feels ashamed of his unwarrantable intrusion into this hermit's cell, and thinks he must take his hat off. The woman is quite alarmed at seeing that he is not one of the fifteen native women and children who patronize her, and nervously puts her hand to the side of her face, which she carries slanting. The visitor finds himself saying what he wants in an apologetic tone, when the woman tells him that they did keep that article once, but do not now; that nobody does, and probably never will again; and as he turns away she looks relieved that the dilemma of having to provide for a stranger has passed off with no worse mishap than disappointing him."

On this ground Hardy is hard to beat. If his style is admittedly dull-toned, it is so with the sobriety of mellowness. Where he is caught up in the ungrateful journeywork of unfolding his plot he is often content with the most humdrum and roughly finished means, but whenever a point of vantage offers him sufficient range a tide of animation makes its weight felt in the accumulating momentum of his sentences. The scene, the people and the dramatic detail fall into place unobtrusively but surely, with just an occasional high light confidently picked out. His is not a stylish style, but it is sinewy and durable and it can focus a strong concentration offerees on the object. After all, fluency and elegance are not the only virtues. Indeed, can there not be too much of a good thing? Hardy certainly thought so, for he proclaimed his literary faith in plain and forthright terms when he wrote:

" The whole secret of a living style, and the difference between it and a dead style, lies in not having too much style."

That is worth pondering.

CHAPTER XII

" *His gloom was not that of the hypochondriac, but the legitimate gloom which has its origin in a syllogism" (Desperate Remedies.)*

THE publication of *Jude the Obscure* marked Hardy's completion of a quarter of a century of novel-writing. His decision to break off at this point seems in retrospect to have a dramatic propriety. It is always easy though to discern something prophetic and harmonious in any pattern of events, once they have been enacted; and I doubt if there would have been much consternation in 1900 if Macmillan's had announced a new Hardy novel, nor do I foresee anything worse than some eating of critics' words if an unpublished successor to *Jude* should be discovered next year.

Let us then keep this matter in perspective. There is no single absolute reason why Hardy should have abandoned fiction when he was at the height of his success and with years of literary and imaginative vigour still ahead of him. It is true that *Tess* and *Jude* provoked hostile criticism and that Hardy was sensitive to attacks on his moral decency. A notebook entry in 1892 vividly records his wounded feelings after reading a reviewer's comments on *Tess:*

> [4i] If this sort of thing continues, no more novel-writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at."

That sort of thing, however, can hardly be counted decisive. Doubtless many " fools " have made a similar impulsive comment and yet stood up again—as on this occasion Hardy did. Moreover, Hardy was not denied

success, nor devoid of admirers and champions, nor subjected to official persecution. He had his critics, as the saying is, and that was all. To suggest that this alone would silence him is to propose a very odd view of his character.

I think we shall come nearer the truth if we forget his critics and concentrate on Hardy himself. I have said that there is a dramatic propriety about his sudden abdication. In other words, even if one concedes that it was not inevitable, it was at any rate a logical and culminating decision. It leaves us with curiously little of surprise or regret. Obviously Hardy could have gone on repeating himself to the limits of senility, but the gain would have been small for he is not a writer who is deficient in bulk. Conceivably he might have achieved some transformation of his powers and broken into new country: such a possibility exists, but it is the most tenuous of speculations. Setting aside these fancies we may well feel that the twenty-five years, which began with *Desperate Remedies* and ended with *Jude the Obscure,* exhausted Hardy's interest in and aptitude for the medium of prose fiction.

By instinct and choice a poet, he came to novel-writing only by a process of elimination. He was reluctant to regard it as more than a bread-winning occupation. He felt himself cramped—and indeed was cramped—by the conventions of libraries. Are there many things in our literary history more pathetic than the spectacle of Hardy writing to his friends to explain how his stories really should have ended but for the insipid tyranny of magazine editors and circulation libraries? This, more than hostile criticism, must have embittered him.

Yet even in the most favourable circumstances Hardy could scarcely have found his entire pretext within the novel, for he was ill-suited to take advantage of some of its technical

resources and correspondingly unable to find in it an outlet for the gifts he possessed. Set him beside a born novelist, like Dickens or Jane Austen or Fielding, and he immediately looks ill at ease. He has a poet's flair for seizing the dramatic essence of a situation, for penetrating the particular and local and irradiating them with glimpses of a vast panorama of human destiny beyond, but he lacks all facility in tracing the workings of his creatures. His dialogue, except in dialect, is stilted and clumsy. His characterization proceeds at best by fits and starts.

Let me reinforce that, and put it beyond doubt, by referring to one of his very greatest books, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. I have in mind the passage where Elizabeth-Jane makes two appalling discoveries about her father—that he sold her mother to a sailor when she herself was a baby, and that Lucetta has been her father's mistress. Everything in the drawing of Elizabeth-Jane's character so far suggests that these discoveries must be inexpressibly painful to her. We await their effect on her, the scene that must follow between her and Henchard.

And nothing happens. She merely observes primly, " He did treat my mother badly once, it seems, in a moment of intoxication." *Onccl*—with effects that lasted for twenty years! From her tone she might be mentioning the discovery of a small wart on his arm. As for the affair with Lucetta, Hardy dismisses poor Elizabeth-Jane with the comment that " Owing to her early troubles with her mother, a semblance of irregularity had terrors for her." Not only is this frigidly off-hand, it is completely untrue. Elizabeth-Jane has had no "'early troubles" with her mother for the very good reason that she was never aware of any irregularity about the " marriage " between Mrs. Henchard and the sailor.

No, what we have here is a typical Hardy " blind spot." His plot has begun to move swiftly. As usual he is finding it difficult to handle. Elizabeth-Jane is not immediately relevant at this moment, so he brushes her off with a few curt and very ill-chosen words. He simply does not " see " her. And time and again one notices this perfunctory dropping of a character in moments of technical difficulty. It is like listening to a pianist who at crucial moments strikes a dead note.

Having drifted into fiction Hardy stuck to it, as a serviceable instrument ready to his hand—serviceable rather than attractive or apt. And when it offered no further service he put it aside, not being infatuated with it. With *Jude* he reached a final statement of the psychological and philosophical drama which had animated his major characters. At that level he had uttered himself, fully and completely, to the limit where self-parody replaces creativeness. Moreover, the yeasty ideas of his formative years—evolution, the new morality and so forth—had spent their first force. The novel no longer recommended itself to him as a vehicle of social doctrine.

What remained? The mere drudgery of book-writing was no longer a financial necessity. The elimination of dialect scenes from his last works indicates that he had no desire to continue as a genre-painter of Wessex life. His feeling for words, for particular scenes, for the overtones and undertones of life—these belonged equally, more than equally, to his poetry. And to poetry he turned for the remainder of his life.

It is tempting to ask if he would have been a greater poet, had he felt able to follow his vocation from the outset. It is of course possible, though it is equally possible that his later verse was enriched by his long apprenticeship to the discipline

of prose. I prefer to dwell on the positive gain which proceeded from his deflection, by chance and circumstance, into fiction. From Fielding to Dickens the English novel had been largely a novel of society. Its area was contained within the existing social order, which was conceived as a field for comedy or satire or moral indignation. It was ill-fitted to accommodate the spirit of tragedy or the loneliness of the individual soul. It belonged, as it were, indoors and among company. Hardy, by contrast, makes the reader much more conscious of life than of lives. He largely ignores the rich diversity of living characters and concentrates on the eternal human dilemmas. Consider the wonderful particularity of Mr. Micawber, Uriah Heep, Fagin—and set them beside Clym, Angel and Jude. The Hardy characters are no more than slight variations on a theme. In any social setting, in high life or low, they are awkward and ill at ease. Like Pamela and Grandison—and Hamlet—they are not socially drawn portraits but embodiments of a feeling about life, vehicles of poetic insight. In terms of the current social order they are rebels. Henchard speaks for them when he cries, " I—Cain—go alone as I deserve—an outcast and a vagabond"

To call Hardy the last of the Victorians—as he is sometimes called—is to miss this vital point. He was not a satirist nor an angry liberal-minded reformer. His inner drama was not found within the beliefs and taboos and customs of the social world of his time. That scene was too confused and chaotic and he looked beyond it to a vaster landscape where man is always alone with his destiny. The idiom of that vaster landscape is tragedy, just as the idiom of the other is comedy. The whole bias of Hardy's visionary imagination is by its nature rightly and inevitably disposed towards tragic themes

and occasions. His greatest novels are graphs of suffering and of the pity that suffering inspires in a generous mind. And really everything else is subordinate to that, everything is bent to uncover and irradiate those moments when human pride and stubborn hope break under the strain of what Hardy called " the plight of being alive."

Whether or not one calls this " gloom is a matter of personal taste. To my mind Hardy had a surer grasp of the elements of tragedy than any other English novelist of the last century. He never weakened into pathos, he was not perverted into cruelty. And by the happy circumstance of his origins he drew his inspiration from a tradition rich in imaginative simplicity. The rural scene of his native countryside gave him the ingredients of tragic drama already tinged with the instinctive poetry of the ballad. The folk-art and dialect speech of the countryside formed a sort of reservoir of strong natural passions and lyrical expression which had been very little used—except in terms of burlesque—since the Elizabethans. The literature of polite society, even in its transpontine moments, had no direct need of such things. Hardy by contrast is closely and patently rooted in the speech and song of the peasantry. The glamour of the nomadic red-coat, the pervasive image of the county jail and the small stark tragedies of dairymaids are as familiar to him as the flavoursome humours of taproom speech. His lifetime spanned the decline and break-up of that strong rural tradition which had conserved so much of our cultural heritage, and it is he who has given that tradition its fullest expression. In the last analysis Hardy and Wessex are inseparable.

Therein lies the key to his achievement as a novelist. He created a coherent and distinctive world out of the latent and imperfectly formulated feelings that surrounded him. He

constructed in words an image of the Wessex landscape, of its people and its atmosphere, its speech and its legends, informed with an order and a permanence that did not before exist. And upon that world of his creation he concentrated a contemplative genius of a high order. His way of seeing is not the orthodox novelist's way of seeing and it often translates clumsily into terms of fiction; but it is an unique and prophetic vision. Stayed with his intuitive power, Bathsheba and Tess and Henchard rise up and possess our minds as great symbols of human passion and tragic ruin. Fleeting minor figures of village girls, betrayed in love or cast aside—Marty South and Fanny Robin—are touched with an unforgettable and moving dignity. The streets of Casterbridge, the waste of Egdon, the woodlands of the Hintocks become arenas of the human spirit, suddenly charged with great elemental issues. The murmuring voices of little groups of local country folk infuse the atmosphere with an instinctive lyrical feeling. The whole scene is impregnated through and through with the perceptive sensibility of a great artist who speaks for those " into whose souls the iron has entered."

For that reason we must return, generation after generation, to experience and interpret and appraise the books which Hardy, in a modest preface, described as " these imperfect little dramas of country life and passions."

APPPENDIX

Assuming that very few readers arc likely to have the whole of Hardy's fiction so freshly in mind as I necessarily have, I add these potted accounts of his works in the hope that they will provide an aid to memory and perhaps serve in some cases as a useful background to my quotations and references.

Desperate Remedies

Published 1871. Principal characters: Cytherca Graye; her brother, Owen; her hero-suitor and ultimate husband, Edward Sprin grove; her employer, Miss Aldclyife; Clerk Crickctt, a Wesscx prototype; and the villain of the piece, Aeneas Manston. An involved " novel of ingenuity," with a melodramatic secret allying Manston to the wealthy land-owner, Miss Aldclyffe. A night fire, murder and dark plotting lead to a happy conclusion. Interesting sketches of Weymouth and the life of a young architect. In much of the action the only discernible motive is a desire to make Hardy's task easier. By no means the worst of Hardy's novels. Worth reading for some fine passages which survive the absurdities of the plot—notably the fire, some of Manston's portrayal, a boat-trip in Weymouth Bay, the rustic characters, and a night scene between Cytherea and Miss Aldclyffe.

Under the Greenwood Tree

Published 1872. Principal characters: Tranter Reuben and the Mellstock worthies; the two lovers, Fancy and Dick. The most endearing of Hardy's pictures of Wessex village

life. The plot is a very slight and not particularly satisfactory romance, but the detail of rustic speech and character is finely observed. Hardy fans rightly cherish this as the dawn chorus of his Wessex worthies.

A Pair of Blue Eyes

Published 1873. Principal characters: Elfride Swancourt and her father; their servant, William Worm; her rival suitors, Stephen Smith and Henry Knight; her eventual husband, Lord Luxellian; and a local fury who pursues her with a doomful countenance, Mrs. Jethway. Origin of the psychological elements in Hardy's novels—Stephen, the humble Wessex architect's assistant who betrays his kindred for the sake of " London ideas "; Elfride, who deceives her lover about her past and loses him by doing so. Henry Knight could be described as a descendant of Sir Charles Grandison and Mr. Knightlcy, and a forerunner of Angel Clare. This is Hardy's first expedition into the real jungle-country of sex and marriage.

Far From the Madding Crowd

Published 1874. His first great achievement. Principal characters: Bathsheba Everdene; her neighbour, Farmer Boldwood; her bailiff, suitor and ultimate husband, Gabriel Oak; her unhappy destiny and first husband, Sergeant Troy; Troy's subsidiary victim, Fanny Robin; Bathsheba's maid, Liddy. And not forgetting the rustic chorus, Joseph Poor-grass, the Maltster, Laban Tall, Jan Coggan and the rest. Bathsheba is a well-to-do farmer. Gabriel Oak becomes her bailiff, proves himself sturdy and reliant but lacks the audacity to woo her. Because of a silly prank she feels obliged to accept the attention of Boldwood, a rigid, honest, worthy but unlovable character. Troy, a dashing soldier without

substance or principles, sweeps Bathsheba off her feet and marries her—in spite of his promise to Fanny Robin, whom he has seduced. As a husband Troy soon runs amok, the death of Fanny brings her revenge, and a very powerful climax leaves Gabriel as the only survivor of Bathsheba's three lovers.

The Hand of Ethelberta

Published 1876. The silliest and most interesting of Hardy's failures. Principal characters: Ethelberta Chickerel, a spirited Wessex girl, who is " disloyal to her class and kin " for the unselfish reason that she wants to help her family financially and therefore poses as a " lady " and succeeds in hoaxing London society; Picotee, her sister, and a horde of brothers and other sisters; her humble and unsuccessful suitor, Christopher Julian; and her eventual husband, Lord Mountclere. Hardy seems to have convinced himself that a successful novelist ought to attend " high-life " parties, and presumably felt obliged to make some use of his experience. He was avowedly seeking to escape the Wessex label when he wrote this, and adopted what he considered an appropriate style for the occasion. Characters appear with Restoration names—Neigh, Ladywell, Mrs. Menlove—and there are witticisms, social satire and disquisitions on the Art of Fiction. An extraordinary medley of good and bad.

The Return of the Native

Published 1878. Principal characters: Clym Ycobright, a modern idealist who marries Eustacia Vye, who has a secret amour with Damon Wildeve, who in turn has married —at the second attempt—Clym's cousin, Thomasin. And, to round off these romances, Thomasin finally marries the travelling reddle-man, Diggory Venn, after Wildeve has

been drowned with Eustacia. The plot is probably as weak as it sounds, but the book is memorable for other reasons —for Hardy's personal ideas about Clym, for the poetic insight of some individual scenes, for the rustic chorus —Granfer Cantle, Christian, Timothy Fairway—and, above all, for the magnificent evocation of Egdon Heath. The people are happily subsidiary to the atmosphere of the place.

The Trumpet-Major

Published 1880. An historical romance of the Napoleonic war. Principal characters: John Loveday, the trumpet-major; Bob Loveday, his sailor brother; Miller Loveday, their father; Anne Garland, the girl the two brothers love; Festus Merriman, a boorish rival; Matilda Johnson, an inconvenient actress from Bob's past. A pleasant reconstruction of Weymouth when George III paid a visit and Bonaparte was across the Channel. A few vivid scenes, some good humour, and a magazine plot which fitfully acquires touches of Hardyesque dignity. Beloved of Hardy fans for reasons which, I am sure, seem reasonable to Hardy fans.

A Laodicean

Published 1881. Hardy's worst effort. Paula Power, the heroine, having inherited the ancient mansion of the De Stancy's from her wealthy engineer father, lives there with her friend, Charlotte De Stancy, poor descendant of the venerable family. Paula has building plans, so along comes the familiar young architect hero, George Somerset. To confuse the course of true love Hardy produces some of the dreariest villains ever known—Havill, a jealous and envious architect, Captain William De Stancy (Charlotte's brother), who hopes to marry Paula and recover the ancestral mansion,

and an oddity called Dare who turns out to be De Stancy's bastard son. Some melodramatic moments over an architectural competition between Havill and Somerset are followed by a wearisome European tour, during which Hardy demonstrates his familiarity with the Continent, and Dare pops in and out with forged telegrams and faked photographs like a character in an Aldwych farce. Sorry stuff that deserves to be quickly forgotten.

Two on a Tower

Published 1882. Principal characters: Lady Viviettc Constantine; Swithin St. Cleeve; Tabitha Lark; Mr. Torkingham and some rustics, Sammy Blorc, Haymoss, etc.

A protracted love-duel between the " aristocrat " Viviette, and the humble self-trained young astronomer, Swithin. Hardy's first novel, unpublished and later destroyed, was entitled *The Poor Man and the Lady.* The theme obviously attracted him as it appears in several of his novels, notably in this one. Viviette finances Swithin's astronomy and, believing herself a widow, marries him secretly. Some confusion over the date of her husband's death—he is in darkest Africa—cancels the marriage. Viviette recovers her self-possession, decides not to marry Swithin again and chooses another aristocrat instead. The whole thing lacks conviction and the writing is often feeble, but it is a failure of the fruitful sort. It is to *Jude* what *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is to *Tess*—a very imperfect first glimpse of promising country. One is aware that much more is at stake between Swithin and Viviettc than Hardy is yet able to discover.

The Mayor of Casterhridge

Published 1886. Principal characters: Michael Henchard, Mayor of Casterbridge; his wife, Susan; their daughter,

Elizabeth-Jane; Donald Farfrae, manager of Henchard's business and later his successful competitor; Lucetta Templeman, an old " flame" of Henchard's; Mother. Cuxsom, Christopher Coney and the other cronies of the Three Mariners.

The most successfully elaborate of Hardy's plots. Having sold his wife and baby in a drunken fit at Weyhill Fair (an act based on a true story) Henchard takes the pledge and rises to become Mayor of Casterbridge. He owes marriage to Lucetta and is considering it when wife and daughter return. He goes through another form of marriage with his wife who then conveniently dies and leaves behind the inconvenient knowledge that the daughter is not the original baby but the child of the man who paid Henchard for his wife at the Fair. Henchard quarrels meanwhile with Farfrae, who has been courting Elizabeth-Jane, and Farfrae starts in business on his own account. Lucetta, inheriting wealth, moves to Casterbridge in order to accomplish her marriage with Henchard, but soon transfers her attention to Farfrae. Henchard's prosperity and ease of mind are steadily crumbling away as Farfrae rises, and the exposure of his misdeed at Weyhill Fair accelerates his ruin. The inexorable beating down of Henchard, until he is like a great shattered castle eroded by time and the elements, is one of Hardy's supreme achievements.

The Woodlanders

Published 1887. Principal characters: Grace Melbury; her father; her husband, Fitzpiers; Suke Damson, a mistress of Fitzpiers; Giles Winterborne; Marty South; Crcedle, Giles's servant; Farmer Cawtree; Mrs. Charmond, a wealthy passion flower.

The plot is a variant of *Far From the Madding Crowd,* with

Grace in the place of Bathsheba and Giles as another Gabriel Oak. Instead of marrying the solid golden-hearted countryman, Grace chooses Fitzpiers. And Fitzpiers is first carelessly unfaithful with the jolly wanton, Suke, and then develops a consuming passion of the grander sort for Mrs. Charmond. Giles's death robs Grace of any second thoughts and puts an end to the dumb hope of poor Marty.

Grace is on a smaller scale than Bathsheba, but the woodland scene is beautifully animated and rich.

Wessex Tales

Published 1888. Short stories. Mostly routine rustic anecdotes, but "Fellow Townsmen" is an important exception.

A Group of Noble Dames

Published 1891. A related group of short stories of small merit—a collection of plot-formulas of varying ingenuity.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Published 1891. Principal characters: Tess; Angel Clare; Alec D'Urberville. Tess is seduced by Alec, and omits to mention the fact to Angel until their wedding-night. Angel goes abroad and fails to make his intentions clear to Tess, who again becomes involved with Alec. Angel returns and discovers them together. Tess murders Alec, flees with Angel, is arrested and hanged.

The Well-Beloved

Published 1892. Principal characters: Jocclyn Pierston; Nichola Pine-Avon; Marcia Bencomb; Avice Cato. The weird adventures in the "love-world of a sculptor, born

on the Isle of Portland, who finds his ideal love successively in three generations of a neighbouring Portland family. One of the curiosities of English literature, since no comparable writer can offer anything more ridiculous.

Life's Little Ironies

Published 1894. Hardy's best collection of short stories. " On the Western Circuit" has a familiar plot but is a fine example of Hardy's plain workmanlike prose. " The Fiddler of the Reels " has merits that are often lacking in his novels.

Jude the Obscure

Published 1896. Principal characters: Jude Fawley; Sue Bridehcad; Arabella; Phillotson.

Jude, carnally attracted to Arabella, marries her and regrets doing so. Sue, a platonic lover, inspires Ins idealism, but she marries Phillotson, a harmless clergyman who is not unreasonably bewildered by her frigidity. She deserts Phillotson for a sexless union with Jude, but Jude fails to live up to this exacting standard. He persuades Sue into a normal union and is also unable to resist the old appeal of Arabella when she reappears. His ideals of scholarly wisdom and emotional high-mindedness arc torn from his grasp by his own frailties, and the spark of original spirit in him is crushed and extinguished. This is Hardy's bitterest and most argumentative book, and a summary of its ostensible plot does little to convey its character.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Two volumes by Hardy's widow—*The Early Life* and *The Later Years* (Macmillan)—are indispensable to all students of Hardy's life and works. In addition to purely biographical material they include extracts from Hardy's notebooks and correspondence. For permission to make use of this material I am indebted to the Trustees of the Hardy Estate and Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

INDEX